

**SHE'S OUT**

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Her original script for the much-acclaimed *Prime Suspect* won awards from BAFTA, Emmy, British Broadcasting and Royal Television Society, as well as the 1993 Edgar Allan Poe Award. Lynda has written and produced over 170 hours of international television.

Lynda is one of only three screenwriters to have been made an honorary fellow of the British Film Institute and was awarded the BAFTA Dennis Potter Best Writer Award in 2000. In 2008, she was awarded a CBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours List for services to Literature, Drama and Charity.

If you would like to hear from Lynda, please sign up at [www.bit.ly/LyndaLaPlanteClub](http://www.bit.ly/LyndaLaPlanteClub) or you can visit [www.lyndalaplante.com](http://www.lyndalaplante.com) for further information. You can also follow Lynda on Facebook and Twitter @LaPlanteLynda.

Lynda  
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# CHAPTER 1

The date was ringed with a fine red biro circle, March 15, 1994. It was the only mark on the cheap calendar pinned to the wall in her cell. There were no photographs, no memorabilia, not even a picture cut out of a magazine. She had always been in a cell by herself. The prison authorities had discussed the possibility of her sharing with another inmate but it had been decided it was preferable to leave Dorothy Rawlins as she had requested—alone.

Rawlins had been a model prisoner from the day she had arrived. She seemed to settle into a solitary existence immediately. At first she spoke little and was always polite to both prisoners and prison officers. She rarely smiled, she never wrote letters, but read for hours on end alone in her cell, and ate alone. After six months she began to work in the prison library; a year later she became a trusty. Gradually the women began to refer to Rawlins during recreational periods, asking her opinion on their marriages, their relationships. They trusted her opinions and her advice but she made no one a close friend. She wrote their letters, she taught some of the inmates to read and write, she was always patient, always calm and, above all, she would always listen. If you had a problem, Dolly Rawlins would sort it out for you. Over the following years she became a dominant and highly respected figure within the prison hierarchy.

The women would often whisper about her to the new inmates, embroidering her past, which made her even more of a queen-like figurehead. Dorothy Rawlins was in Holloway for murder. She had shot her husband, the infamous Harry Rawlins, at point-blank range. The murder took on a macabre undertone as throughout the years the often repeated story was embellished, but no one ever discussed the murder to her face. It was as if she had an invisible barrier around her own emotions. Kindly toward anyone who needed comfort, she seemed never to need anything herself.

So the rumors continued: stories passed from one inmate to another that Rawlins had also been a part of a big diamond raid. Although she had never

been charged and no evidence had ever been brought forward at her trial to implicate her, the idea that she had instigated the raid, and got away with it, accentuated her mystique. More important was the rumor that she had also got away with the diamonds. The diamonds, some said, were valued at one million, then two million. The robbery had been a terrifying, brutal raid and a young, beautiful girl called Shirley Miller had been shot and killed. It was never discovered that Shirley Miller had been one of the women who took part in the infamous robbery at the Strand underpass.

Four years into her sentence, Rawlins began to write letters to request a better baby wing at Holloway. She began to work with the young mothers and children. The result was that she became even more of a "Mama" figure. There was nothing she would not do for these young women, and it was on Rawlins's shoulders that they sobbed their hearts out when their babies were taken from them. Rawlins seemed to have an intuitive understanding, talking for hour upon hour with these distressed girls. She also had the same quiet patience with the drug offenders.

Five years into her sentence, Dolly Rawlins proved an invaluable inmate. She kept a photo album of the prisoners who had left, their letters to her, and especially the photographs of their children. But only the calendar was pinned to the chipboard on the wall of her cell. Nothing ever took precedence over the years of waiting.

She would always receive letters when the girls left Holloway. It was as if they needed her strength on the outside, but usually the letters came only for a couple of weeks then stopped. She was never hurt by the sudden silence, the lack of continued contact, because there were always the new inmates who needed her. She was a heroine, and the whispers about her criminal past only grew. Sometimes she would smile as if enjoying the notoriety, encouraging the stories with little hints that maybe, just maybe, she knew more about the diamond raid than she would ever admit. She was also aware by now that the mystery surrounding her past enhanced her position within the prison pecking order, allowing her to remain top dog without fighting or arguments.

After seven years, Rawlins was the "Big Mama"—and it was always Dolly who broke up the fights, Dolly who was called on to settle arguments, Dolly who received the small gifts, the extra cigarettes. The prison officers referred to her as a model prisoner, and she was consequently given a lot of freedom by the authorities. She organized and instigated further education, drug rehabilitation sessions and, with a year to go before she was released, Holloway

opened an entire new mother-and-baby wing, with a bright, toy-filled nursery. This was where she spent most of her time, helping the staff care for the children. For Dolly, who had no visitors, no one on the outside to care for or about her, the babies became her main focus—and began to shape a future dream for when she would finally be free.

Dolly Rawlins did have those diamonds waiting and, if they had been worth two million when she was sentenced, she calculated they now had to be worth double. Alone in her cell she would dream about just what she was going to do with all that money. Fencing them would bring the value down to around two million. She would have to give a cut to Audrey, Shirley Miller's mother, and a cut to Jimmy Donaldson, the man holding them for her. She would then have enough to open some kind of home, buy a small terraced house for herself, maybe in Islington or an area close to the prison, so she could come and visit the girls she knew would still need her. She contemplated opening the home specifically for the children of pregnant prisoners, who, she knew, would have their babies taken away. Then they would at least know their babies were in good care, as many of the girls were single parents and their babies might otherwise be put up for adoption.

This daydreaming occupied Dolly for hours on end. She kept her idea to herself, afraid that if she mentioned it to anyone they would know for sure she had considerable finances. She did have several thousand pounds in a bank account set up for her by her lawyer and she calculated that with that, a government grant and the money from the gems the home could be up and running within a year of her release. She even thought about offering a sanctuary for some of the drug addicts who needed a secure place to stay when they were released. And, a number of the women inside were battered wives: perhaps she could allocate a couple of rooms for them. The daydreaming relieved the tension. It was like a comforter, a warm secret that enveloped her and helped her sleep. But the dream would soon be a reality as the months disappeared into weeks, and then days. As the ringed date was drawing closer and closer, she could hardly contain herself: at last she would have a reason to live. Being so close to newborn babies had opened up the terrible, secret pain of her own childlessness. But soon she would have a houseful of children who needed her. Then she could truly call herself "Mama."

They all knew she would soon be leaving. They whispered in corners as they made cards and small gifts. Even the prison officers were sad that they would lose such a valuable inmate, not that any of them had ever had much interaction with her on a personal level. She rarely made conversation with

them unless it was strictly necessary, and some of them resented the fact that she seemed to have more power over the inmates than they did. A few years back, Rawlins had struck a prison officer, slapped her face, and warned her to stay away from a certain prisoner. She had been given extra days and been locked up in her cell. The result had been that Rawlins was fêted when she was eventually unlocked and the officer, a thickset, dark-haired woman called Barbara Hunter, never spoke to or looked at Rawlins again. The animosity between Hunter and Rawlins remained throughout the years. Hunter had tried on numerous occasions to needle Dolly, as if to prove to the Governor that the model prisoner 45688 was in reality an evil manipulator. But Dolly never rose to the bait, just looked at her with ice-cold eyes, and it was that blank-eyed stare that, Hunter suspected, concealed a deep hatred, not just of herself, but of all the prison officers.

Finally the day came, March 15, and Dolly carefully packed her few possessions from her cell. She had already given away all her personal effects: a radio, some tapes, skin cream, books and packets of cigarettes. She had lost a considerable amount of weight, and the suit she had worn the day she arrived hung on her like a rag as she waited for the call to the probation room for the usual chat with the Governor before she would finally be free. The years she had spent banged up had made her face sallow and drawn; her gray hair was cut short in an unflattering style.

As she sat, hands folded on her lap, until they called her to go into the first meeting, she appeared as calm as always but her heart was beating rapidly. She would soon be out. Soon be free. It would soon be over.

The old Victorian Grange Manor House was in a sorry state of disrepair, although at a distance it still looked impressive. The once splendid grounds, orchards and stables were all in need of serious attention. The grass was overgrown and weeds sprouted up through the gravel driveway. A swimming pool with a torn tarpaulin was filled with stagnant water, and even the old sign "Grange Health Farm" was broken and peeling like the paint on all the woodwork of the house. The once handsome stained-glass double-fronted door had boards covering the broken panes, many of the windows had cracks and some of the tiles from the roof lay shattered on the ground below. The double chimney-breasts were tilting dangerously. The house seemed fit only for demolition, while the once vast acreage that had belonged to the manor had been sold off years before to local farmers, and the dense,



dark wood that fringed the lawns had begun to creep nearer with brambles and twisted shrubs.

A motorway had been built close to the edge of the lane leading to the manor, cutting off the house from the main road. Now the only access was down a small slip road that had been left, like the house, to rot, with deep potholes that made any journey hazardous. The rusted, wrought-iron gates were hanging off their hinges, and the chain threaded through them with the big padlock hung limply as if no one would want to enter anyway.

The Range Rover bumped and banged along the lane as it made its slow journey toward the house, the hedges either side hiding the fields and grazing cows.

Ester Freeman swore as the Range Rover hit a deep rut; it was even worse than the last time she'd been there. She was a handsome woman in her late forties. Five feet six and slender, she was a smart dresser, who always wore designer labels, and there was an elegance to her that belied the inner toughness that even her well-modulated voice sometimes couldn't disguise. Now, with her dark hair scraped back from her face and her teeth clenched, she looked anything but ladylike. She continued to swear as the Range Rover splashed through yet another water-filled pothole on its lurching course down the lane.

Sitting beside Ester, Julia Lawson looked equally unhappy. She was much younger than Ester and taller, almost six feet, with a strong, rangy body made to seem even more mannish by her jeans and leather jacket. She wore beat-up cowboy boots and a worn denim shirt, and there was an habitual arrogance to her expression that sometimes made her seem attractive, at other times plain. She had a deep, melodic, cultured voice, and was swearing fruitily as they bounced along. "Jesus Christ, Ester, slow down. You're chucking everything over the back of the car!"

Ester paid no attention as she heaved on the handbrake, jumped out and crossed to the wrought-iron gates. She didn't bother with a key to open the padlock—she just wrenched it loose and pushed back the old gates.

As they drove up the Manor House driveway, Julia laughed. "My God, I think it needs a demolition crew."

"Oh shut up," Ester snapped as they veered round a pothole.

"You know, I don't think they'll find it."

"They'll find it, I gave them each a map. Don't be so negative. She's out today, Julia. Come on, move it!"

Julia followed Ester slowly out of the car and looked around, shaking her head. She stepped back as a front doorstep crumbled beneath her boot. "You know, it looks unsafe."

"It's been standing for over a hundred years so it's not likely to fall down now. Get the bags out."

Julia looked back to the piles of suitcases and bulging black bin liners in the back of the Range Rover and ignored her request, following Ester into the manor.

The hallway was dark and forbidding: the William Morris wallpaper hung in damp speckled flaps from the carved cornices and there were stacks of old newspapers and broken bottles everywhere. The old wooden reception desk was dusty, the key-rack behind it devoid of keys.

Their feet echoed in the marble hall as Ester opened one door after another, the smell of must and mildew hanging in the air.

"You'll never get it ready in time, Ester."

Ester marched into the drawing room, shouting over her shoulder, "Oh yes I will, if everybody helps out."

Julia picked up the dust-covered telephone with a look of surprise. "Well I never. The phone's connected."

Ester stood looking around the drawing room: old-fashioned sofas and wing-backed chairs, threadbare carpet and china cabinets. The massive open stone fireplace was still filled with cinders. "I had it connected," she snapped as she began to draw back the draped velvet curtains, turning her face away as years of dust spiraled down. Even when Ester had occupied the place, no one had ever been that interested in dusting.

The Grange Health Farm had been defunct when Ester bought the manor with all its contents, but she had no plans to refurbish the old house as it was a perfect cover for her real profession. All Ester had done was spread a few floral displays around the main rooms and bring in fourteen girls, a chef, a domestic and two muscle-bound blokes in case of trouble. The Grange Health Farm reopened, catering to clients who wanted a massage and a sauna, but if they wanted a little bit more physical contact, Ester provided that too . . . at a price.

"We should have started weeks ago," Julia said as she lolled in the doorway, looking around with undisguised distaste.

"Well, I didn't, so we're gonna have to work like the clappers." Ester looked up to the chandelier, trying the light switch. Two of the eighteen bulbs flickered on.

"Bravo, the electricity's on as well," laughed Julia.

Ester glared around the room. "We'll clean this room, the dining room and a few bedrooms. Then that's it, we won't need to do any more."

"Really?" Julia smiled.

Ester pushed past her, wiping her dusty hands on a handkerchief, and Julia followed her back into the hall, watching as she banged open shutters.

The dining room was in the same condition but with empty bottles and glasses scattered on the table and smashed on the floor. Ester was flicking on lights, dragging back curtains with manic energy. But she seemed to deflate when she saw the wrecked kitchen, broken crockery and more smashed bottles. "Shit! I'd forgotten how bad it was."

"I hadn't. I told you this was a crazy idea from the start."

Ester crossed to the back door. She unlocked it, pushing it open to get the stench of old wine and rotten food out of the kitchen.

"Must have been some party," Julia mused.

"It was," Ester said, as she looked at the big black rubbish bags bursting at the seams.

"Surprised the rats haven't been in here."

"They have," Ester said as she spotted the droppings.

She hadn't realized just how bad the place was. When she and Julia had visited a few weeks earlier, there had been no electricity and they had arrived at dusk. Ester sighed: it had been some party all right. There used to be one every night but she had not been able to see the last one through to the end. She had been arrested along with her girls. She reckoned most of the damage had been done by the few who were left behind or who had come back when they knew she had been sentenced to grab whatever they could. A lot of the rooms looked as if they had been stripped of anything of value.

She had not bothered to come to see the damage before; she knew the bank held the deeds as collateral for her debts. She had dismissed the place from her mind until she got the news that Dolly Rawlins was going to be released. Then she had begun thinking—and thinking fast: just how could she use the old Grange Manor House to her benefit? But only if she could get it ready in time.

Julia strolled to the back door and looked out into the stable yard. The old doors were hanging off their hinges and even more rubbish and rubble had piled up.

Ester began banging open one bedroom door after another. Every room stank of mildew, and most of the beds hadn't been touched since the

occupants had rolled out of them. In a few rooms clothes and dirty underwear lay discarded on the floor.

Julia started to walk up the old wide staircase, when Ester appeared at the top. "Go and get the cases."

"You're not serious, are you, Ester? This is madness."

"No, it isn't. I've already laid out cash for a bloody Roller and a chauffeur. There are caterers, florists . . . so we'll just have to get stuck in while we wait for the others to give us a hand."

Julia sat on the stairs and began to roll a cigarette. "So, you gonna tell me who you've invited to this celebration?"

Ester looked down at her. Sometimes she wanted to slap her—she could be so laid-back.

"You don't know them all. There's Connie Stevens, Kathleen O'Reilly, and I've asked that little black girl, Angela, to act as a maid."

Julia laughed. "She's gonna be wearing a pinny and a little hat, is she?"

Ester pursed her lips. "Don't start with the sarcasm. We need them, and they all knew Dolly."

Julia looked up at her. "They all inside with her like us?"

"Not Angela, but the others. And I don't want you to start yelling—but Gloria Radford's coming."

Julia stood up. "You joking?"

"No, I'm not."

"Well, count me out. I can't stand that demented cow. I spent two years in a cell with her and I'm not going to spend any more time with her if I can help it. What the hell did you rope her into it for?"

"Because we might need her, and she knows Dolly."

Julia turned and began to march down the stairs in a fury. "She reads aloud from the newspapers, she drove me crazy, I nearly killed her. I'm out of here."

"Fine, you go. I don't give a shit, but it's a long walk to the station."

Julia looked up. "Gloria Radford on board and this is a fiasco before we even start. She's cheap, she's coarse, she's got the mental age of a ten-year-old."

"What makes you so special, Doctor? We needed as many of us as I could get, Julia, especially ones that were as desperate as us. Now, are you staying or are you going?"

Julia lit her roll-up and shrugged. "I'm leaving."

Ester moved down the stairs. "Fine, you fuck off, then, and don't think you'll get a cut of anything I get. You walk out now, and I'll never see you again. I mean it, we're through."

Julia hesitated, looked back at Ester standing at the top of the stairs. Her face, her dark eyes, now blazing with anger, made her heart jump. Despite everything she'd said, she knew she'd be staying. She couldn't stand the thought of never seeing or touching Ester again.

She dropped her roll-up and ground it into the floor with her boot. "I'll get the cases but just don't ask me to be nice to that midget."

Ester smiled, and headed back to the bedroom. "The only person you've got to be nice to is Dolly Rawlins."

Julia got to the front door. "What if she doesn't come, Ester? *Ester?*"

Ester reappeared, leaning on the banister rail. "Oh, she'll come, Julia, I know it. She'll be here. She's got nobody else."

Julia gave a small nod and walked out to the car. She began to collect all the cases and bin liners, then paused a moment as she looked over the grounds. There was a sweet peacefulness to the place. She was suddenly reminded of her childhood, of the garden at her old family home. She had been given her own pony and suddenly she remembered cantering across the fields. She had been happy then . . . it seemed a lifetime ago.

The bedroom Ester chose for Dolly was spacious, with a double bed and white dressing table. Even though the carpet was stained, the curtains didn't look too bad, and with a good polish and Hoover, a few bowls of flowers, it would be good enough. After all, she had spent the last eight years in a cell. This would be like a palace in comparison.

Julia appeared at the door. "You know, we could call the local job center if they've got one here, get a bunch of kids to start helping us. What do you think?"

Ester was dragging off the dirty bedlinen. "Go and call them. We'll have to pay them, though. How are you off for cash?"

"I've got a few quid."

Ester suddenly gave a beaming smile. "We'll be rich soon, Julia. We'll never have to scabble around for another cent."

"You hope."

"Why are you always so negative? I know she's got those diamonds, I know it . . ."

"Maybe she has, maybe she hasn't. And maybe, just maybe, she won't want us to have a cut of them."

Ester gathered the dirty sheets in her arms. "There'll be no maybes. I've worked over more people than you've had hot dinners, and I'll work her over. I promise you, we'll get to those diamonds, two million quid's worth, Julia. Just thinking about it gives me an orgasm."

Julia laughed. "I'll go call a job center. This our bedroom, is it?"

"No, this one's for Dolly."

Ester patted the bed, then sat down and smiled, thinking of how rich she was going to be.

Mike Withey looked over the newspaper cuttings. They were yellow with age, some torn from constantly being unfolded, and one had a picture of Shirley Miller, Mike's sister. It was a photograph from some job she had done as a model, posed and airbrushed. The same photograph was in a big silver frame on the sideboard, this time in color. Blonde hair, wide blue eyes that always appeared to follow you around the room, as if she was trying to tell you something. She had been twenty-one years old when she had been shot, and even now Mike was still unable to believe that his little blue-eyed sweetheart sister had been involved in a robbery. He had been stationed in Germany when he received the hysterical call from his mother, Audrey. It had been hard to make out what she was saying, as she alternated between sobs and rantings, but there was one name he would never forget, one sentence. "It was Dolly Rawlins, it was her, it was all her fault."

The following year Mike married Susan, the daughter of a sergeant major. His mother was not invited to the wedding. Their first son was born before he left Germany and his second child was on the way when he was given a posting to Ireland. By this stage he was a sergeant, but he didn't tell Audrey about his promotion. Susan was worried about him being stationed in Ireland and since she was heavily pregnant with a toddler to look after and all her friends were in Germany, she persuaded Mike to quit the Army. He was reluctant at first, having signed up at seventeen: it was the only life he knew. It had been his salvation, it had educated him and, most importantly, given him a direction and discipline lacking in his own home.

Mike's second son was born on the day he found out that he had been accepted by the Metropolitan Police, and with an excellent recommendation from his CO, it was felt that Mike Withey was a recruit worth keeping an eye on. He proved them right: he was intelligent, hard-working, intuitive and well liked. Mike became a "high-flyer," never missing an opportunity to further his career prospects. No sooner was a new course pinned up on the board than he would be the first to apply. It was the many courses, the week-ends away at special training colleges that made Susan, now coping with two toddlers, suggest that Mike should contact his mother again, not just for company but because she hoped Audrey could give her a hand or even

babysit. Mike's refusal resulted in a big argument. Susie felt his boys had a right to know their grandmother as her own parents were still in Germany.

Mike took a few more weeks to mull it over. He supposed he could have been honest with Susan about his younger brother Gregg, who had been in trouble with the law, but he didn't want her knowing that his sister was Shirley Ann Miller, killed in an abortive robbery. It had been easy for him to conceal it because they all had different fathers, different surnames, though he was unsure if his mother had actually ever been married.

Audrey was working on the fruit and veg stall when Mike turned up as a customer, asking for a pound of Granny Smiths. She was just as he remembered her, all wrapped up, fur-lined boots, headscarf, woolen mittens with their fingers cut off.

"Well, hello, stranger. You want three or four? If it's four it'll be over the pound." She took each apple, dropping it into the open brown-paper bag, trying not to cry, not to show Mike how desperately pleased she was to see him. She wanted to shout out to the other stallholders, "This is my son. I told yer he'd come back, didn't I?" but she had always been a tough one, and never showed her feelings. It had taken years of practice—but get kicked hard enough and in the end it comes naturally. She didn't even touch his hand, just twisted the paper bag at the corners. "There you go, love. Fancy a cuppa, do you?"

He had not expected to feel so much, to hurt inside so much as he followed her into the same council flat in which he had been brought up. No recriminations, no questions, talking nineteen to the dozen about people she thought he might remember: who had died on the market stalls, who had got married, who had been banged up. She never stopped talking as she chucked off her coat, kicked off the boots and busied herself making tea.

She still chattered on, shouting to him from the kitchen, as he saw all his postcards, the photo of his wedding, his boys, laid out on top of the mantelshelf, pinned into the sides of the fake gilt mirror. There had been a few changes: new furniture, curtains, wallpaper and some awful pictures from one of the stalls.

"Gregg's doin' a stint on one of the oil rigs," Audrey shouted. "He's trying to go on the straight an' narrow, there's a postcard from him on the mantel."

Mike picked up the card of two kittens in a basket and turned it over. His brother's childish scrawl said he was having a great time and earning a fortune, saving up for a motorbike. The postmark was dated more than eight months ago. He replaced the card and stared at himself in the mirror.

It was then that he saw her. The thick silver frame, placed in the center of the sideboard, a small posy of flowers in a tiny vase in front of it. She was even more beautiful than he remembered. It was one of the pictures taken when she was trying to be a model, very glamorous. Shirley's smile went straight to his heart.

"It's her birthday tomorrow," said Audrey, "and you've not seen her grave."

"I'm on duty tomorrow, Mum."

She held on to his hand. "We can go now."

Audrey hung on to his arm. It was dusk, the graveyard empty. Shirley was buried alongside her husband Terry Miller. The white stone was plain and simple, but the ornate flowers in a green vase were still fresh. "Tomorrow she'll have a bouquet. They do it up for me on the flower stall, never charge me neither." Her voice was soft as she stared at the headstone. "She came to me straight after it had happened."

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

She remained focused on her daughter's name. "That bitch—that bitch Dolly Rawlins came to see me and I've never forgiven myself for letting her take me in her arms."

"We should go, Mum."

She turned on him, hands clenched at her sides. "She was behind that robbery, she organized the whole thing. They never got the diamonds . . ."

Mike stepped forward, not wanting to hear any more, but there was no stopping her. "No, you listen. That bitch held me in her arms and I let her, let her use me just like she used my Shirley. She had them, she had the bloody things."

"What?"

"The diamonds! She had them—got me to—she got me to give 'em to a fence, said she would see I was looked after, see I'd never want for anythin'."

Mike's heart began to thud. He was unable to comprehend what he was hearing, as Audrey's voice became twisted with bitterness. "I *did* it, I bloody did it. She got me so I couldn't say nothin', couldn't do anything, and then . . . she fuckin' shot her husband."

Mike took her to a pub, gave her a brandy, and watched as she chain-smoked one cigarette after another. "No mention of the diamonds at her trial—they never had any evidence that put her in the frame. She got done for manslaughter."



Mike was sweating. "You ever tell anybody what you did?"

"What you think?" she snapped back at him. "She got me involved, didn't she? I could have been done for fencin' them, helpin' her. No, I never told anybody."

"Did you get paid?"

She stubbed out her cigarette. "No. Payday is when the bitch comes out. Bitch thinks she's gonna walk out to a fortune."

Mike gripped Audrey's hand. "Listen to me! *Look at me!* You know what I am. You know what it means for you to tell me all this?"

Audrey lit another cigarette. "What you gonna do, Mike, arrest your own mother?"

He ran his fingers through his hair; he could feel the sweat trickling down from his armpits. "You got to promise me you will never, *never* tell a soul about those diamonds. You got to swear on my kids' lives. You don't touch them—don't even think about them."

"She'll be out one day. Then what?"

Mike licked his lips.

"She as good as killed Shirley," Audrey continued. "I had to identify her, watch them pull the sheet down from her face."

"*Stop it!* Look, I promise I'll take care of you. You won't need any more dough—but I'm asking you, Mum, don't screw it up for me, please."

She stared at him, then leaned forward and touched his blond hair—the same texture, same color as Shirley's. "I'll make a deal with you, love. If you make that bitch pay for what she done to my baby, you get her locked up—"

"Mum, she *is* away, she's in the nick right now."

Audrey prodded his hand with her finger. "But when she comes out she'll be rich and free. I don't care about the money, all I want is . . ."

Audrey never said the word "revenge" but it hung in the air between them. So Mike made a promise. It felt empty to him but he had no option. He promised that, when Dolly Rawlins came out of Holloway, he would get her back for her part in the diamond robbery.

Five years later, the promise came back to haunt him, because his mother had never forgotten it. She called him and asked him to come round. As if unconcerned, Audrey was tut-tutting over some character's downfall on the TV, then offhandedly suggested he look in the left-hand drawer of the side table. Every single newspaper article about the diamond robbery was

there, along with calendars with dates marked one year, two years, three years in thick red-tipped pen. He flicked through the news-clippings and his eye was drawn to a photograph, taken at some West End nightclub. He had never seen Dolly Rawlins, wouldn't know her if he was to come face to face with her in the street, but he instantly knew which one she was: she had to be the blonde, hard-faced woman sitting at the center of the large round table. She had a champagne glass in her hand, a half-smile on her face, but there was something about her eyes: unsmiling, hard, cold eyes . . . The handsome man seated next to her had an almost angry expression, as if annoyed by the intrusion of the photographer. Mike recognized his brother-in-law, dead before Shirley. Terry Miller had always looked like he never had a care in the world: his wide smile was relaxed, one arm resting along the cushioned booth seat as if protecting his pretty, innocent, child-like wife. Shirley Miller.

The TV was turned off and Audrey turned to Mike. She was crying, clutching a sodden tissue in her hand. She pointed to the photo of Dorothy Rawlins. "You never seen her, have you, love?"

Beneath her picture was a smaller one with the heading: "Gangland Boss Murdered by his Wife." Harry Rawlins had been a handsome, elegant, if cruel-faced man, and his picture made him look like a movie star. Dolly's hard gaze made them seem an unlikely couple but they had been married twenty years none the less. Harry Rawlins was one of the most notorious gangsters in London, a man who had never been caught, never spent a day behind bars, and yet had been questioned by the police so many times he was a familiar face to most of the Met officers. He had lived a charmed life until his wife shot him. The newspaper article stated that Dorothy Rawlins had shot and killed her husband when she had discovered that he had a mistress and a child. There was no mention that he had planned a robbery in which Shirley Miller's husband had been burned to death. They had nicknamed Dolly the "Black Widow" because throughout her trial she had always been dressed in black.

Audrey prodded Dolly's face in the paper. "Nine years. Nine years. Well, she'll be out any day now," she said, wiping her eyes.

Audrey had never told Mike that she had been pregnant when Dolly had come to see her and had lost the baby. She blamed that on Dolly Rawlins as well. Dolly had not sat down but stood in the small hallway, her head slightly bowed, her voice a low whisper. "I'm sorry about Shirley. I am deeply sorry for Shirley."

Audrey had been unable to reply, she was in such a state.

"Nothing will make up to you for her loss, I know that."

Still Audrey couldn't speak. Then Dolly had lifted her head, her pale washed-out eyes brimming with tears. "You'll get a cut of the diamonds, that I promise you. Just hand them over to Jimmy Donaldson. Jimmy'll keep them safe. When this is all over, I'll see you're taken care of, Audrey."

But that hadn't been the end of it. Everything had changed when Audrey read in the paper that a small-time fence called Jimmy Donaldson had been arrested for dealing in stolen property. Audrey had then done something she would never have believed herself capable of. She had done it all by herself and, having done it, she had been terrified. But the weeks passed and gradually she grew more and more confident that what she had done was right.

But now she was scared, really scared, and she didn't know if she should tell Mike or not, because Dolly Rawlins was coming out and she would come out looking for her, Audrey was sure of that.

Mike was feeling uneasy. It was back again, that constant undercurrent of guilt whenever he was with his mother. He had made that promise, but how could he keep it? He held on to his temper. "Mum, there is nothing I can do—"

"You're a ruddy police officer, aren't you? Re-arrest her. She did that robbery, Mike—I know it, you know it. She as good as killed our Shirley, never mind her bloody husband."

The tears started again. He was due at his station in half an hour; he wished he'd never called in. "Look, Mum, the problem will be if it implicates you—and it could."

Audrey clung to him. "I've got an offer. Friend's got a villa in Spain. I can stay as long as I like. That way I can keep out of it."

"Look, I'll see what I can do, okay?"

Audrey kissed him. "Just let her sleep in peace, let my little girl sleep in peace."

Mike turned on the ignition of the car but the last thing he felt like doing was going into the station. He checked his watch again and then drove to Thornton Avenue in Chiswick. He worried that he was making a mistake, this was a stupid move, but he needed to get his head straightened out. He parked the car and walked up the scruffy path. He was about to ring the front doorbell when he heard someone calling his name.

Angela was running up the road, waving, with a big wide smile. "Mike, Mike . . ."

Mike turned as she threw herself into his arms.

"I knew you'd come and see me again, I just knew it."

He walked hand in hand with her to his car, already wanting to kick himself for coming to her place.

"I've missed you," she said, hanging on to his arm.

Mike released his hand. "Look, I shouldn't have come, Angela. It was just . . . I'm sorry."

"Oh, please stay, please. Me mum's down at the center, there's no one in the house, and, please, I got something to tell you, please . . ."

Mike locked the car and followed Angela into her mother's ground-floor flat. It was dark and scruffy and kids' pushchairs and toys littered every inch of the floor. Angela guided him toward the small back bedroom, and all the time he kept on saying to himself that he was dumb, he was stupid to start this up again. Angela began to undress as soon as she shut the door but he shook his head. "No, I can't stay, Angela, I'm on duty in an hour. I just . . ."

She slumped onto the bed. "I been waitin' for you to call for weeks. You know the way I feel about you. Why did you come here, then?"

He shook his head. He was feeling even worse. "I dunno, I was over at my mum's place and she starts doing my head in over my sister, and I just . . ." She wrapped her arms around him, kissing his face. "No, don't, Angela, I shouldn't have come."

She broke away. "Well, get out, I don't care, I'm goin' away anyway."

"Where you goin'?"

"Friend's place, just a few days, bit of work."

Mike looked at her, shaking his head. "What kind of work?"

Angela plucked at her short skirt.

"You're not going back on the game, are you?"

"No, *I am not*," she shrieked.

Mike sat on the bed and rested his head against the wall. He closed his eyes.

"I was never on the game and you know it. You of all people should know it. I just worked as her maid, Mike."

"This Ester Freeman, is it?" he asked.

Angela crawled onto the bed to sit next to him. Mike had been on the Vice Squad when Ester Freeman had been busted for running a brothel.

Angela was one of the girls who had been arrested along with twelve other women but they had all, including Ester, insisted that little Angela was not on the game, just serving drinks. Mike and Angela, who was then only fifteen, had begun an affair, a stupid, on-off scene that he constantly tried to break. He never saw her more than once a month, sometimes twice, over the years, but he was very fond of her. He even gave her money sometimes but he had no intention of ever leaving his wife. If it hadn't been for him, she might have been sent to an approved school, but that was just an excuse. The sex was good and he simply refused to admit that that was what he used Angela for.

"Ester called yesterday. Wants me to go to her old manor house."

"Oh yeah? She back running another brothel?"

"No way. She's holding some kind of party, for a woman called . . ."

Angela frowned as she tried to remember, and then grinned. "Oh, I dunno, but she was in Holloway wiv her, shot her old man, you know. She was famous. He was a big-time villain. Anyway, she's comin' out of the nick and Ester is arranging a group of old friends to sort of welcome her, you know, give a party, and she wants me to act as a waitress."

Mike fingered the knot in his tie. His mouth was dry. It couldn't be, could it? "Dolly Rawlins? Is that who it is?"

"Yeah, she was in Holloway with Ester."

Mike started undoing the buttons of her shirt. "Who else is going?"

"I dunno, but it'll be some kind of scam, you can bet on it. I got to wear a black dress an' apron. Ester never did nothin' for nobody without there being something in it for her. She's a hard cow but I need the cash. Said she'll pay me fifty quid."

Mike eased off Angela's shirt, reaching round to the clasp of her lacey bra. "She say anything else about Dolly Rawlins?"

Two young prisoners peeked into Dolly Rawlins's cell, looking at the small neatly packed brown suitcase, a coat placed alongside it. Apart from these two items the cell was empty.

Footsteps echoed on the stone-flagged floor. The two girls scuttled back down the corridor as Rawlins, with a prison officer, walked toward her cell. But whatever they were expecting to see, they were disappointed. The infamous Dolly Rawlins seemed pale and worn out. The officer stood outside the cell waiting for Dolly to get her case and coat.

The corridors were strangely silent. Nearly all of the women were waiting, hiding, whispering.

The tannoy repeated a message that Rawlins, prisoner 45688, was to go to landing B. They all knew that was the check-out landing. She was almost out.

The coat was too large now she had lost so much weight, but it was good quality and she had always liked the best. She did up each button slowly and then reached for her case. None of the girls had spoken to her or said goodbye, but she refused to show that she was hurt. She looked to the officer and gave a brief nod. She was ready.

As Dolly headed toward landing B, the singing began, low at first, then rising to a bellow as every woman joined in.

“Goodbye, Dolly!”

They bellowed and stamped their feet, they called out her name and clapped their hands. “Goodbye, Dolly, you must leave us . . .” They screeched out their thank yous for the cigarettes, for her radio, her cassettes, for every item she had passed around. Some of the girls were sobbing, openly showing how much they would miss “Big Mama.” One old prisoner shouted at the top of her voice, “Don’t turn back, Dolly, don’t look back, keep on walking out, gel . . .”

She could feel the tears welling up, her mouth trembling, but she held on, waving like the Queen as they walked onto the landings. They continued to sing, their voices echoing as she was ushered along the corridor toward the Governor’s office. It wouldn’t be long now.

Mike thumbed through the files and then sat, drumming his fingers on the mug shot of Dorothy Rawlins. He had read enough about Dolly Rawlins and her husband to know that if the diamonds existed she would go after them. He thought about Angela on her way to Ester Freeman. He wondered about a lot of things, trying to think if there was any possibility of doing something for his sister, for his mother—if he could get Dolly Rawlins back inside.

Mike was just starting to go through Harry Rawlins’s files when he received a phone call—nothing to do with Dolly Rawlins, nothing to do with his mother or his sister. It was from Brixton Prison: a boy called Francis Lloyd wanted to give some information.

A lot of police officers had their private snitches in the prisons. Lloyd was a youngster Mike had arrested during a burglary eighteen months ago. He had been sentenced to two years because of a previous conviction. He was a

likable kid, and Mike had even got to know his mum and dad, so he returned the call—and for the second time in one day he heard the name Dolly Rawlins. Francis had some information but he didn't want to talk about it over the phone.

Governor Ellis rose to her feet from behind the desk as Dolly Rawlins was ushered into her bright, friendly office. She offered tea, a usual ritual when a long-serving prisoner was leaving. Mrs. Ellis was a good governor, well-liked by the inmates for her fairness and, in many instances, even for her kindness and understanding. Rawlins, however, seemed never to have needed her kindness and, as she passed Dolly her tea in a floral china cup, Mrs. Ellis couldn't help but detect an open antagonism.

She eased the conversation round, discussing openings and contacts should Dolly feel in need of assistance outside, making sure she was fully aware that she would, because of the nature of her crime, be on parole for the rest of her life. When she asked if Dolly had any plans for the future she received only a quiet, "Yes, I have plans, thank you."

"Well, rest assured there is a network of people who will give you every assistance to readjust to being outside. Eight years—it should have been nine but as you know, you're being released early for good behavior—is a long time, and you will find many changes."

"I'm sure I will," Dolly replied, returning the half-empty cup to the tray.

Barbara Hunter remained with her back to the door, staring at Rawlins, whose calm composure annoyed the hell out of her. She listened as Mrs. Ellis passed over leaflets and phone numbers should Rawlins require them. She kept her eyes on Rawlins's face, wanting to see some kind of reaction, but Dolly remained impassive.

"You have been of invaluable help with many of the young offenders and especially with the mother-and-baby wing. I really appreciate all your hard work and I wish you every success in the future."

Dolly leaned forward and asked, bluntly, if she could leave.

"Why, of course you can, Dorothy." Mrs. Ellis smiled.

"Anything I say now, it can't change that, can it?" Dolly seemed tense.

"No, Dorothy, you are free to go."

"Good. Well, there is something I would like to say. That woman . . ." Dolly turned an icy stare on Barbara Hunter who straightened quickly. "You know what she is. I've got no quarrel with anyone's sexual preferences so don't get me wrong, Mrs. Ellis, but that woman should not be allowed near the young

girls comin' in. She shouldn't be allowed to get her dirty hands on any single kid in this place, but she does, and you all know it. She messes with the most vulnerable, especially when they've just had their babies taken from them. You got any decency inside you, Mrs. Ellis, you should get rid of her."

Mrs. Ellis stood up, flushing, as Dolly sprang to her feet, adding, "I know where she lives."

Mrs. Ellis snapped, "Are you making threats, Mrs. Rawlins?"

"No, just stating a fact. I'll be sending her a postcard. Can I go now?"

Mrs. Ellis pursed her lips and gave a nod as Hunter opened the office door. Dolly walked out, past Hunter, and never looked back. Two more officers were waiting outside for her as the door closed.

Mrs. Ellis sat down and drew the file of prisoner 45688, Dorothy Rawlins, toward her. She opened it and stared at the police file photographs, then slapped the file closed. "I think we'll be seeing Dorothy Rawlins again before too long."

Hunter agreed. "I've never trusted her. She's devious, and a liar."

Mrs. Ellis stared at Hunter. "Is she?" she said softly.

"Jimmy Donaldson was in the canteen two nights ago and I was next to him, I couldn't help but hear." Francis Lloyd looked right and left, lowering his voice. "He said that he was holding diamonds for Rawlins, that you lot copped him for peanuts compared to what he'd got stashed at his place. Diamonds . . ."

Mike leaned back in the chair. "You sure about this, Francis?"

"Yes, on my life. Diamonds, he was braggin' about them, honest. Said he'd held on to them for eight years—diamond robbery, I swear that's what he said."

Mike leaned forward and pushed two packs of Silk Cut cigarettes forward. They'd been opened and there was a ten quid note tucked in each of them.

"Thanks, thanks a lot."

On his way back to the station, Mike went over everything he had picked up and started to piece it together. By the time he'd parked his car in the underground car park at the station he was feeling more positive, and even thinking that maybe, just maybe, he would be able to get Dolly Rawlins put back inside. He couldn't wait to see his mother's face when he told her, but he had to go by the book and first run it by his governor.



Detective Chief Inspector Ronald Craigh was a sharp officer, a high-flyer with a good team around him. His other sidekick was Detective Inspector John Palmer, steady, cool-headed and a personal friend. The pair of them often joked about Mike being over-eager but that was not a stroke against him—far from it. Craigh listened attentively as Mike discussed the information he had received that day.

“I have a good reliable informant who told me Rawlins is going to a big manor house. There’s a bunch of ex-cons waiting for her. I then get a tip-off from my informant in Brixton nick.”

Craigh leaned forward. “Hang about, son, this informant . . . are they in my file?”

“Yes, it’s Francis Lloyd—he’s in Brixton.” Mike made no mention of Angela. She was not on the governor’s informant list. He presented the old files on the diamond robbery, explaining how Dorothy Rawlins would be out any minute and would, he estimated, go for the diamonds.

“Well, that’ll be tough, won’t it?” Craigh smiled. “If Jimmy Donaldson is holdin’ them for her and he’s banged up, how’s she gonna get to them?”

Mike paced up and down. “What if we were to bring him out, talk it over with him, see what he has to say? I mean, we might be able to have a word with his probation officer or the Governor at Brixton, see if we couldn’t get him shipped to a cushy open prison.”

“No way,” Craigh said.

Palmer held up his hand. “We might be able to swing something that’ll make him play ball with us.”

Craigh shook his head again. “Come on, you know we got no pull to move any friggin’ prisoner anywhere—and if we get him out, then what?”

“We get the diamonds,” Mike said, grinning like a Cheshire cat. “One, there’s still a whopper of a reward out for them, two, we clean up that robbery—nobody was pulled in for it. What if it was Rawlins all along? We’ll find out if she contacts Donaldson. It’ll be proof she knows about the diamonds.”

Craigh was still iffy about it. “According to the old files, it was suspected that Harry Rawlins was behind it—”

“She shot him,” Mike interrupted.

“I know she did. What I’m saying is there was never any evidence to connect her to that blag.”

“There will be if she goes for those diamonds.”

Craig sucked on his teeth and then picked up all the old files. "Okay, I'll run it by the Super, see what he's got to say about it."

Mike followed him to the door. "She's out today, Gov."

Craig opened his office door. "I know that, son, just don't start jumping over hurdles until we know what the fuck we're gonna do."

Mike looked glumly at Palmer as Craig slammed the door. "It's just that she's out, and she might call Donaldson, find out he's in the nick and . . ."

"Maybe she knows already," Palmer said, doodling on a notepad.

"Just sit tight. If the Super gives the go-ahead, we'll see what they decide. In the meantime . . ."

Mike sighed. He had a load of reports to complete so he took himself off to the incident room. As he reached his desk, his phone rang. It was Craig. They were going to talk to Donaldson, if he wanted to come along. Mike grinned; it was going down faster than he'd thought.

Ester ordered the six boys from the job center to collect every bottle and piece of broken glass before they started to Hoover and dust. A florist's van had arrived with two massive floral displays that were propped up in the hall. Julia was using a stiff brush to sweep the front steps when she saw the taxi at the open manor gates. "Someone's coming now," she called out.

The taxi drove slowly down the drive, skirted the deep hole in the gravel and stopped by the front steps. Kathleen O'Reilly peered from the back seat. She had boxes and cases and numerous plastic bags. "Hi. You moving in or on the move, Kathleen?" asked Julia.

Kathleen opened the car door. "They're all me worldly possessions. I had to do a bit of a moonlight but Ester said I could doss down here for a few days. Will you give the driver a fiver? I'm flat broke."

Kathleen: overweight, wearing a dreadful assortment of ill-matched clothes—a cotton skirt with two hand-knitted sweaters on top of a bright yellow blouse. She had red hair spilling over a wide moon face and her false teeth, yellow with tobacco stains, needed bleaching. But she had a marvelous, generous feel to her, an open Irish nature. Julia delved into her pocket to pay off the driver as Kathleen hauled out her belongings. "They said this was closed down," she bellowed as she staggered into the hallway. Kathleen dumped her bags in the hall and looked around. "Holy Mother of God, what a dump! Is that chandelier safe, Julia?"

Julia dropped one of Kathleen's cases. "Ask Ester—she's running the show."

At that moment Ester came down the stairs. "You made it here, then?"

"Well, of course I did." Kathleen embraced her. "I was glad you called, darlin'. I was in shit up to me armpits, I can tell you, with not a roof over my head. So . . . is she here, then?"

Julia turned, listening.

"Not yet, and I hope she won't be for a few hours. We've got to get the place ready."

Kathleen plodded to the stairs. "Well, let me unpack me gear, darlin', and I'll give you a hand."

Ester instructed Kathleen to use one of the second-landing bedrooms and went into the kitchen, squeezing past the boys as they scrubbed the floor. Julia picked up the broom again, trying to remember what Kathleen had been in prison for, but her attention was diverted by yet another car making its slow progress down the driveway.

Connie Stevens sat next to the railway-station attendant, a nice man who, seeing Connie outside the small local station waiting for a taxi, had offered her a lift. Men did that kind of thing for Connie: she had such a helpless Marilyn Monroe quality to her, they went weak at the knees. She even had a soft breathy voice, hair dyed blonde to match her heroine's, and recent plastic surgery that gave a dimple to her chin, tightened her jaw and removed the lines from her baby eyes. She worked hard to retain her curvaceous figure as she was already in her mid-thirties—not that she ever admitted it to anyone: she had been twenty-five for the past ten years.

Julia watched as the man, red-faced, struggled to remove an enormous case on wheels from the boot of his car.

"Thank you, I really appreciate this so much," Connie cooed. The station attendant returned to his car, and, embarrassed by Julia's obvious amusement, drove out as fast as he could, crashing into the pothole as he went.

Ester leaned out of an upstairs window. "Hi, Connie, come on in. Kathleen's already arrived."

Connie dragged her case toward the steps. Julia tossed away the broom and took her case by the handle. "Here, lemme help, Princess."

Connie gave a breathy "aweee" as she looked at the hall. "It's changed so much since I was last here."

Ester jumped down the stairs and embraced Connie warmly, then held her at arm's length to admire her new face. "You look good—*really* good. Just drag your case upstairs and get into some old gear. We've got to clear the place up and make it ready for Dolly."

"How many more are coming?" asked Kathleen. "I mean, are we gonna cut it between us all?"

"I don't know. Like I said, Ester's in charge, ask her. She hasn't told me what she plans on doing."

Kathleen moved closer. "They're worth millions, the diamonds, everyone used to talk about them. Are you certain she'll be coming?"

Julia picked up the broom and started sweeping the steps again. "Ester seems to think so, that's why she's got us all here."

Kathleen started hovering with venom. She certainly hoped this wasn't all a waste of time. She was in deep trouble: her three kids had been taken into care and she needed money, a lot of it, and fast. Dolly Rawlins's diamonds would be her only way out of the mess she had got herself into.

Way down the lane, Gloria Radford threw up her hands in fury. She'd been down one dead end after another, up onto the motorway three times, and still not found the Manor House. She got out of her dilapidated Mini Traveler and headed toward a man on a tractor in the middle of a field. "Oi, mate, can you direct me to the Grange Manor House?"

The old farmhand turned in surprise as Gloria, small, plump and wearing spike-heeled shoes and skin-tight black pants, waved from the field gates. Her make-up was plastered on thick: lip gloss-smudged teeth, mascara-clogged lashes with bright blue eye-shadow on the lids—she was like someone from the late Sixties stuck in a time-warp. Gloria Radford waved the hand-drawn map Ester had sent her. The old boy wheeled his tractor toward her.

"Down there." He pointed.

"I been down there and I been back up there and I keep gettin' back on the bleedin' motorway."

"Ay, yes, they cut off the access road. Just keep on this slip road and you'll get to it. The manor's off to the right."

Gloria stepped over the clods of earth and headed back to her Mini. The farmhand remained watching as she reversed straight into a pothole and let rip with a stream of expletives.

Ester was now checking the cutlery. Some of it was quite good but it all needed cleaning, as did every plate and cup and saucer. Kathleen was on duty in the dining room, dusting the chairs, when the crate of wine was delivered. She was ready for a drink and about to open a bottle when they

all heard the tooting of a car horn and the sound of Gloria Radford arriving, towed in by a tractor.

They all stood crowded on the doorstep, watching the spectacle. Julia turned to Ester. "Subtle as ever. I suppose you wanted the entire village to know we were here."

"Me bleedin' back end's fucked!" yelled Gloria, as she heaved out a case.

Julia winced as Gloria negotiated some complicated financial arrangement with the old man on his tractor to tow the car to the nearest garage. She was so loud and brassy that she was almost comical: her fake-fur leopard coat slung round her shoulders, her too-tight puce wrap-around skirt. "Er, Ester, you got a few quid I can bung 'im?"

Julia saw Ester purse her lips and join Gloria at the tractor.

Ester paid ten quid to the tractor driver and directed him to the nearest garage that would be able to repair the Mini.

Gloria banged into the hallway. "Cor blimey, this is the old doss-house, is it? Hey, Kathleen, how are you doin', kid?" Kathleen said she was doing fine, then Gloria pointed at Connie. "I know you, don't I?"

Connie shook her head. "I don't think so, I'm Connie."

"You one of Ester's tarts, then, are you?"

Connie's jaw dropped. "No, I am not."

Gloria seemed unaware of how furious Connie was. She turned to Julia. "I didn't know you was on this caper, Doc."

"Likewise," said Julia sarcastically.

"You sure you got Dolly comin'? I mean, I come a hell of a long way to get here, you know." Julia had to turn away because she wanted to laugh out loud.

Ester clenched her fists: Gloria had only been there two minutes and she was getting under her skin already. "She'll be here, Gloria. Just get some old gear on and start helping us, we've got a lot to do."

"Right, you tell me what you want done, sweet face. I'm ready, I'm willin' and nobody ever said Gloria Radford wasn't able."

Ester looked at her watch. She thought she should have received a call from Dolly by now but she said nothing, just hoped to God she had played her cards right. She had laid out a lot of cash already and if wily old Dolly Rawlins copped out, she was in trouble. All the women she had chosen were desperate for cash, but Ester more than any of them.

Dolly was out. She had walked out a free woman two hours ago. The fear crept up unexpectedly. Suddenly she felt alone. She stood on the pavement as her heart began to race and her mouth went bone dry. She was out—and there was no one to meet her, no one to wrap their arms around her, no place to go. She saw the white Rolls Corniche; it was hard to miss, parked outside the prison gates. She stepped back, afraid for a moment, when a uniformed chauffeur got out and looked over.

“Excuse me, are you Mrs. Rawlins, Mrs. Dolly Rawlins?”

Dolly frowned, gave a small nod, and he smiled warmly, walking toward her. “Your car, Mrs. Rawlins.”

“I never ordered it.”

He touched her elbow gently. “Well, my docket says you did, Mrs. Rawlins, so, where would you like to go?”

Nonplussed, she allowed herself to be ushered toward the Rolls. He opened the door with a flourish. “Anywhere you want. It’s hired for the entire day, Mrs. Rawlins.”

“Who by?” she asked suspiciously.

“You, and it’s paid for, so why not? Get in, Mrs. Rawlins.” Dolly looked at the prison, then back to the car. On the back seat was a small bouquet of roses, a bottle of champagne, and an invitation. “I don’t understand, who did this?”

The chauffeur eased her in and shut the door. Dolly opened the invitation.

*Dear Dolly,*

*Some of your friends have arranged a “SHE’S OUT” party. Take a drive around London and then call us. Here’s to your successful future, and hoping you will join us for a slap-up dinner and a knees-up,*

*Ester*

Dolly read and reread the invitation. She knew Ester Freeman but she’d not been that friendly with her.

“Where would you like to go, Mrs. Rawlins?”

She leaned back, still nonplussed. “Oh, just drive around, will you? So I can see the sights.”

“Right you are.”

She saw the portable phone positioned by his seat. She leaned forward and picked up the phone.

“Call any place you want, Mrs. Rawlins.”

She turned the phone over in her hand, never having seen one before, and then she smiled softly. “My husband would have loved one of these,” she whispered.