



HARD CHANGE

DAWN REEVES

Prologue

Saturday 13th November, 10pm

He carries the girl as if he's a fire-fighter; one arm under her knees, the other under her armpits. Her head is slumped against his chest; her neck and face are hidden by thick, straightened hair. The narrow Fold he emerges from is no more than an unlit alleyway. It's about thirty metres before he'll hit one of the roads that lead off the High Street, where there'll be lights and people milling around the edges of the ritual chaos of Saturday night.

There's a brief clatter as a mobile falls out of the girl's thin jacket pocket onto the road. A navy, sequinned ballet pump dangles from one foot, the other is bare. The skin on the front of her foot shines in the white of the streetlight. As he turns out of St Mary's Fold and into Silver Street, he sees three lads coming towards him.

They are loudly drunk, but maybe they'll offer to help? He slows, catches one of them sniggering at him, but is unsurprised that they say nothing and wander off for a piss. Almost there now. He bends slowly, back and knees engaged to put her down on the ground. Her head rolls back onto the paving slab with a gentle thud. He stands up, looks about, then takes a few steps back, as if he might leave her there, but this time he lifts her over his shoulder, like a dad giving a kid a sack-

of-potatoes ride. There's a skinny arse and two translucent stick legs on show. Now he moves quickly away from the lamppost and towards a big, green tub bin. His free arm lifts the lid and it takes only a forward shrug of his shoulder and she falls in. She's on a bed of broken glass and cans. Blood and ketchup seep out from the polystyrene takeaway box that is her pillow. "Night, night," he says. The smell of the bin, like a cheap burger frying on a misty, damp night, makes him feel hungry. In the distance he sees a refuse truck, but he isn't sure whether it's coming towards him or not. He walks off in the direction of the High Street and Mr Sizzle.

Chapter 1: Jessica

Saturday 13th November, 10.30pm

Deputy Commander Jessica Reid breathes in through her nose and out through her mouth, pulling her stomach muscles tight, rolling her shoulders down her back, enjoying the calm. It's an hour since she finished her shift and she's grateful that the universe has given her time and space to deforest three weeks' worth of paper. The City Centre is quiet, but before making tracks for home she wants to eyeball a group of young men who've been hanging around the Chickenshack takeaway opposite the Library. This is not something she would normally bother with, but she thinks she's recognised one of the bored teens on the CCTV. It's not procedure, she'll be alone, but she's off-duty and it's only a ten-minute recce. From there she can cut back through the pedestrianised shops, take a left up to the High Street and circle back to pick up her car.

The youths have been flagged by the Anti-Social Behaviour Team three weekends running. Jess thinks they're moth boys, drawn to the zing of the neon light and the warm glass of the shop front. Or they could be vampire kids, only seen drifting through the city at night, looking for trouble with the potential to take blood. They aren't a known gang. There are no specific incidents to report, but it could be a sign of something significant emerging. Even if it's not, Jess has to

take account of the public intimidation and the small businessman whose takeaway could be losing money.

Helpfully, she's not in uniform tonight. She tightens the belt of her thick, charcoal cardigan, wraps a black woollen scarf round her neck, and heads out, glad of the warmth of the soft fibres. It's clear to her that the gang is a diversion. She knows she's avoiding going home. Stewart is finally moving his stuff out this weekend. It ought to be a relief, but it's taken so long to get to this point that her skin flares irritably at the thought of the kitchen cupboards still full of his body-building protein tubs.

"Excuse me, please, lads."

She's been walking faster than she thought, past the gang's outliers, until she's blocked by two six-footers with their backs to her. There is no movement. She remains calm and has another go.

"Excuse me lads. Can I get through?"

"Miss wants chicken," one smirks. The two taller ones turn round.

"I'd like to get through, please."

"This is our side, man." Another points menacingly at the pavement.

They seem to be looking at a youth wearing a village-green, upside-down golf visor, twisted backwards on top of a black balaclava. She knows better than to laugh. This young man wants to be taken seriously, right down to his matching green laces. Jess sees how desperately he's trying to distinguish himself through the tiny details important only to him and his mates. She holds her ground and returns the look directly. These lads have managed to create a nasty vibe that this part of the City Centre could do without – and they're well aware of the tension they're cooking up.

Her colleagues don't see the subtleties. A collective mistake had been made with a group of goths who had moved into the market square a few months back. While she was on annual leave, her Chief and the Council Leader had imposed a Section 30 dispersal order. It was a press-driven reaction that had seriously antagonised a whole range of young people into occupying public places. Jess was angry that it had undermined her longer term strategy to build community trust and astonished that they didn't know goths are congenitally passive and just want to hang out with their darkly dressed friends. The goths were never going to be the problem, but maybe this gang is part of the backlash? She suspects not. Hiding your face with a balaclava isn't a new trend. There's more going on here.

“Run away.” One youth leans in from behind her, almost spitting in her ear.

“Run and cry, old bitch lady.” She feels the tip of a baseball hat on her neck. Stay calm, she tells herself. Stay calm. He won’t touch you.

Strictly speaking this has escalated into an unsafe situation and she should call for back-up, but she knows what she’s doing; procedure won’t help her here.

Intuition and experience tell her to concentrate on the leader. Where is he emotionally? What will he respond to?

“I’d like to get home.”

She meets his eyes through the gap in his headgear. She adds weight to her shoulders, making them low and heavy, conveying the look of a proper mum, maybe a mum like his, who tries hard, who won’t be pushed around, but who is tired to the bone.

The rest of the group watches for maybe another thirty seconds. Their silence causes a shift. Gaining their attention, maintaining discipline, seems to be what he’s after.

“Old teacher lady can walk.” He gives his permission, turning his visor round to the front. As Jess weaves quickly through the rest of the group, her bleeper goes. She releases her shoulders, breathing deeply. That was close, but she refuses to resort to getting her badge out. Her instant reflection on the incident is that

someone was missing. On the CCTV there was one particular boy in a distinctive black hoodie with P.I.M.P. written on it in gold. These kids don't realise how much their fashion choices help the police. Maybe she knows him? There'd be time to get someone onto them on Monday, but, relieved for now, she picks up the call from her DI, Alan Jones.

"Ma'am? If you're still hanging around, looking for action, we may have a major incident. Possible homicide. A girl's body found by the bin men. It's the corner of Silver Street and an alley round the back, St Mary's Fold. Where are you?"

"Up by the Library..."

Jonesy is new on the murder squad and she can hear him controlling the excitement in his voice, but as far as she's concerned he's got it completely wrong. Jess isn't interested in that kind of action these days. Most of her colleagues, and her soon-to-be-ex-husband, can't understand why she likes going to meetings, but when she hears herself arguing about the importance of tackling underlying causes her voice has an authenticity and confidence that resonates in her core. Outside the dire plodding realm of enforcement, outside the confines of a command and control culture, Jess revels in the nuances of meaning and implications. She delights in debate and is jealous of the freedom other public servants have to sidestep the corporate line. Her school friend, Anne-

Marie, who works for the City Council, relishes her ability to question and challenge decisions, but the wilfulness with which Anne-Marie often refuses to comply would mean the end of a police career.

It's true that the Council and the other public agencies could also drive Jess mad. Talking about getting to the heart of tackling crime is one thing, but solving it is another and resolving it for good – that's what they all seem to struggle with. The lack of black or white, the reality of complexity, keeps Jess motivated. Still, thinking about Stewart, she returns to her phone call. "I'm probably ahead of you. I'll be there in five minutes," she tells Jonesy.

As she turns into Silver Street, she sees a refuse truck and two men standing with their backs to the bin, partially obscuring it.

"Evening lads. I'm Deputy Commander Jessica Reid." She flashes her badge.

"Thanks for your help. How did you find her?"

"Standard practice to bang on the side of the bins," one of them grunts, "but I thought summat didn't sound right – odd like. Summat big in there."

"You've got good ears, then. Must've been a shock?"

"Never seen a dead body," he says shakily, "I could do with a drink."

The squad car and ambulance draw up behind her. It's been a long time since she's pulled on a pair of sterilised gloves. She opens the bin lid. Poor kid. The girl looks more grey and green than a freshly dead body should. Maybe it's just the light? Jess moves around to view her from another angle. There's no colour in her face, but the effect of the white light and the bin lid doesn't help. Feeling an emotional rush, she focuses on the other contents of the bin. There's something domestic about the scene. A two-litre milk carton, empty cans of pop, sweet wrappers and rotting food. It's not unlike her bin at home.

Jess scans the girl's body. The sole of her bare foot is black and grazed. It's not been the night the girl must have imagined when she neatly painted her toes a metallic pink. Her vest-style T-shirt dress has ridden up on the left. A thick black belt with a fake gold buckle is no longer around her hips, but up under her breast. "We're securing the scene, Ma'am." One of the sergeants makes her jump.

Finally, Jess get's to the girl's eyes. She's always relieved when they are shut, but the panda-sized smudges of mascara suggest she's been crying.

"Good. Thanks." Jess pulls out a hanky from her bag and blows her nose hard.

That's weird. From behind the white tissue, out of the corner of her eye, she thinks she sees a slight movement. It may have been nothing more than a tear on her own eyelash that she's hastily flicked away. She bends down. Could it have

been a shadow? Maybe a rat running under the bin? Or a rat in the bin with her?

No. She looks at the girls arm. It definitely twitched.

“Wait,” she shouts. “Get the medics over here now. She’s alive.”

Chapter 2: Anne-Marie

Saturday 13th November, 10.45pm

“What’s your poison?” The barman winks at her. Anne-Marie marvels at the under-lit glass shelf full of coloured spirit bottles hovering magically in front of her. She’s seduced again by the glittering array of poisons on offer, wondering whether it’s just her who’s forgotten what’s poisonous and what isn’t these days. The young man is just playing with an old phrase. There’s no hidden wisdom or warning of imminent death, it’s just marketing – and that goes for the wink, too. She arches him an eyebrow to stop right there.

“I’ll have a Dirty Black Russian.”

With the soft crack of the ice in the sweet coffee liquid and the anticipation of a vodka and coke kick, she licks her lips and returns to Bob. They’ve set up camp in a boutique hotel, enjoyed medium rare steaks with the perfect combination of blood red and charcoal, and polished off two bottles of velvety Shiraz. The Lovell Bar is in late-night mode; muted lighting and space to slink into one of the low leather sofas.

“You look fantastic,” Bob says. He’s tall and solid. His stubble is just the right side of coarse sandpaper.

“Why don’t we get a room?” It’s their fourth anniversary and she wants the excitement of the first few months back.

“Are you going to switch your phone off, then?” he taunts.

They both know that she can’t do that. She’s a senior manager and this weekend the emergency phone is in her bag.

“Why would that matter?” She tries to keep her voice light, but the reminder of the phone grates. She’s at the beck and call of the Council Leader.

“We wouldn’t want to get interrupted,” Bob says, feeling her thigh through her thin knit black dress.

“Exactly,” she says getting a shot of desire. A room would avoid any chance of an interruption from her teenage son Adam. She knocks back her drink and wrinkles her nose at him, thinking about the king-size bed and stiff sheets.

“Steady love,” he cautions.

“Come on, why don’t we let our hair down?”

It’s a joke. Bob shaves what hair he has left and hers is cut short and tucked behind her ears.

“OK, but we’re not teenagers and with the prices of these rooms I want to be able to make the most of it.”

“Don’t you think we deserve this?” She skates fast across the deep ravine of their pay differential. “It’s the one decent place left in town. Use it or lose it.”

His smile is wry. “Job done, then, is it? That’s the night-time economy sorted?”

She opts for a distraction rather than a fight. “Can you imagine any of our new councillors in a wine bar?”

While it’s easy to picture Council Leader Davina Clarke in a classy place like this, Bob doubts that most of the older councillors would drag themselves into the town centre for a show at the Palace, despite the secure parking and extensive CCTV. He’s convinced the coalition won’t last long enough in a place like this to do any real damage. Local politics isn’t everyone’s idea of an aphrodisiac, but it works for them.

As the emergency phone rings, Anne-Marie’s legs automatically spiral upwards until her knees lock and she’s on a firm footing. It’s a dog and bone alright. Delving in her bag and mouthing an apology to Bob, she misses the call. The tone of Davina’s message is measured.

“I do apologise for calling you so late. I’ve heard from the police that a girl’s body has been found in one of our commercial waste bins. It’s dreadful, of

course, but nothing we can do now. We'll need a statement, though, and we don't want any negative impact on our plans for the City Centre. We must avoid anything sensational. I'll leave it with you, talk to your comms team, make sure the story is right and brief me on Monday morning."

Anne-Marie's body straightens, her brain refocuses. Celebration and sex are cancelled; her night out is over.

"The City Centre clean-up team have found a girl's body in a 660 tub."

"Come again?" Bob doesn't comprehend.

"Big, metal, commercial waste bin, green lid."

"Is she dead?"

Anne-Marie lowers her voice. "Sounds like it. Davina had her respectful voice on."

"Lucky it was the weekend or she'd have been in the compactor, through the transfer station and straight to landfill, or," he says shaking his head, "in a waste container on her way to India."

"Christ on a bloody bike," is all Anne-Marie can manage.

They are shocked into a cold pragmatism.

"How the hell did she end up in one of our bins in the first place?"

"How the hell should I know?" she flashes back.

Her Regeneration and Planning Department had taken flack for putting those bins just out of sight in dark corners, where the street drinkers and junkies hang out, but that was only after they'd taken flack for putting the bins on the High Street, making the City Centre look like a dump. The lurid headlines are all too predictable: 'Feral Youth Out Of Control... Underage Drinking... Alcopop Town... Moral Outrage'. The Council didn't tip the alcohol down that girl's throat, but the article will end with a lazy refrain, that the Council ought to do something. It's just sport for the *Post*.

"There's a poor, daft kid in a bin. A kid who hasn't got a clue; who's got the whole world telling her that getting pissed is cool and will get you a shag.

It's not like when we were young," Bob grunts.

"I was drinking when I was 14," she says. "Weren't you?"

Anne-Marie's internal organs contract as she visualises her teenage self, swaggering uncontrollably around town. The red monkey boots she used to love hadn't stopped her tripping over a curb, twisting her ankle and head-butting a shop door. She remembers being too drunk to move.

"No, actually, I wasn't. These kids need to be told when to stop and we need to do more."

"Not now Bob..."

As the shock subsides, apprehension invades her brain space. Davina's message was odd. She was flagging the potential impact on a plan Anne-Marie has heard nothing about and talking as if they could control the way this story unfolds – and how did she know about the girl's body being found so quickly?

Bob reacts angrily. "I'm trying to stop landlords fuelling the underage hordes. The police waste half their resources trying to contain the chaos and A&E are patching them up and sending them out ready for another go next week. It's got to stop."

They are on different tracks.

"I hope there's no video footage." Anne-Marie is thinking of an incident with a cat in a bin that went viral.

"Hold on love, we've both just made a massive leap there. We don't know the story. We've assumed she was out drinking. It's not that easy to get into one of those tubs."

Anne-Marie looks down uneasily at the chocolate rug, trying to think creatively. Maybe they could say something like, 'Council Clean-up Teams Help Tackle Anti-social drinking' or 'Bin Man Saves Trashed Teen From

Masher'? Not the best lines she's ever come up with, but they're a starting point.

She knows from the way Bob has slapped his hand on his knee, elbow jutting out towards her, that he's about to start arguing, arguing for more enforcement, more regulation. Being his boss means constantly negotiating boundaries, but with a Council Leader clearly wanting light touch policy and a local economy in free fall, she sees sketchy fault lines begin to darken. Bob has a point, but he needs to evolve as much as public services do.

"There's a dead girl in a bin. We don't even know how old she is... was."

Anne-Marie nods, sobered but in need of a final drink alone to focus her thoughts.

"I'm sorry, love. Let's leave it for tonight shall we? I'll get a cab home. I need to work tomorrow."

They kiss briefly and Bob heads off. Staring into the warm brandy glass she plays with the swirling liquid, seeing the colours of a dying fire, but realising there's a risk those embers could catch and she will find herself fighting on a new front. Her approach has always been, 'Don't spin the story, start it.' This story is off and running, but she'll do what she can to tell it her way, for her

reasons. As she empties her glass a phone rings somewhere in the bar. She rises quickly and heads for home.

Chapter 3: Barrington

Monday 15th November, 7.05am

It's a 'clean' day if, on the final four-mile cycle around the ring road, it's possible to reach 18mph, maintain good cadence and time it to perfection, to ensure that you can sail through five sets of traffic lights, turn up the final hill and coast into town without putting your feet down. Of the last 90 days, 76 have been clean. His aim is a clean ride followed by a clear run at the day, which means avoiding any interaction with his colleagues at least until 10am. If he could make it through the entire day without distractions that would be a rare treat. Focus is everything.

To keep his interest he's made the ring road stretch into a series of time trials. On Mondays the traffic is always heavier. Today there is light drizzle, the tarmac is wet so he must adapt his speed for safety, and there are Council workers cutting the verges – minor obstructions, but seconds count. There is a grounds maintenance vehicle picking up the cuttings from the verges. The car in front sees it late and pulls out sharply, causing Barrington to swerve into the fast lane. The car behind him is too busy hitting the horn and doesn't break hard enough. It catches the back wheel of his racing bike. Lightning reaction and upper body strength allow him to jump the front wheel up onto the central reservation, but he's no BMX specialist so he's over in a second. Thigh and shoulder hit the grass.

He hauls the rest of the bike out of the way of the cars streaming past as his head bounces down. A woman in a passing car is staring. He looks away.

Shaking slightly, he checks the bike and gets straight back on before the anger kicks in. Bright blood is seeping through his lycra shorts and he feels the heat of his shoulder swelling. He hits the next three sets of lights. The bike is performing well as he presses on up the hill. The heart rate monitor on his handle bars is still functioning and he's glad to see it climbing. He feels the familiar pinch in his quad muscle, eases out of his seat and undertakes two cars before he hits the brow.

He's in the office at 7.28am, though. That's good. There's a basement shower room, which he hates, particularly when other people are using it. Today he's alone and enjoys soaping up, running his hands over his thighs, reaching down to his lower calf muscles. Blasting the blood away now with cold water, he decides the cut is more of a graze and that a cold pack on his shoulder will sort it out.

Standing tall, running the fresh lime-smelling soap over his chest, taut stomach, the lower back and buttocks, he washes away the sweat, the ride, the accident and half a sniff of the smell of last night. The drain blocks and his feet are swimming in dirty water. He's argued that it's a public health building and requires a deep clean, but there's no money, so the hygiene standards remain poor.

In his locker he has a suit bag with two identical suits and three shirts, delivered straight from the dry cleaners. His wife, Corinne, loves to see him dressed for work in these sharp midnight blue suits with a fine pin stripe. He puts on the light blue cotton shirt, navy tie and black loafers. No need to check himself in the mirror, but he manages a smile at the sharpness of his collar. Corinne says that as the only black man in the building people will notice what he's wearing. Maybe she's right, but he also likes wearing a suit. It's certainly better than the white coat he continued to wear long after every other doctor had stopped. That white coat had established an appropriate distance between him and his needy patients, but when expectations changed his colleagues were clear it signalled that he lacked the skills to talk to people in a way that made them feel better. Yes, he thinks, a suit is the perfect uniform for his public health role.

On his desk is the action plan for tackling alcohol misuse in the city. He grips a red pen in his hands like a scalpel, taking the knife to the 65 pages with relish. Alcohol is the single most serious issue facing the city and this plan is drivel. He cuts through to the appendices for the numbers. How many drinkers are there in A&E, in GPs' surgeries, in police cells, in the bail hostel, in rehab, in divorce proceedings, in car crashes, on the streets, round the back of the bike sheds? The

city is host to 42,000 harmful and hazardous drinkers and 6,200 dependent drinkers aged 15 to 64. The numbers illustrate why this is the issue Barrington has to focus on. The numbers are his allies. They are entirely themselves, straightforward, their meaning fixed. It's a minority view, but to Barrington a trajectory is a work of art.

His five-year-old son, Nelson, is learning fast. Only yesterday he'd pleaded, "Dad, Dad, can we count the money in the box again?" It's not Barrington's favourite pastime as his hands smell unpleasant afterwards, but he'd relented. Numbers connect them. Numbers make patterns and the patterns reveal a story truer than any of the frankly questionable and unsubstantiated opinion he's currently reading.

No, today isn't going to be good. This is a critical issue; complex, dense and professionally challenging. It's the only thing that matters. What is Anil thinking? Barrington has briefed his policy officer, Anil, on the priority level for this piece of work, so he knows what is expected. Barrington puts down the pen and turns to his screen. He's learned that his emails don't always have the desired effect, but not having to speak to his colleagues is time-efficient.

Anil

The report is unacceptable. I will take it forward myself.

I refer you to the article in today's paper: Trashed Teen Fights For Life – body of young woman etc. She had almost 0.40% alcohol in her bloodstream. She should be dead.

Barrington

Chapter 4: Anne-Marie

Monday 15th November, 5.30pm

Andrea, the mouth of the Highlands Estate, and Carol, the elbow grease, have bullied the young barman to open up early.

“Let’s start as we mean to go on,” says Andrea.

“Whether we win this award or not, let’s drink to a great night out, to the community and our hard graft,” Carol joins in.

The Highlands, though, is Anne-Marie’s estate. From a grubby-kneed kid who knew the occupants of every house, to a power suit, managing the services that matter, she’s the artery. Getting nominated for this award is the first time in years that the estate has been in the news for the right reasons. It was a simple economic equation and a silver tongue that convinced the judges to hold the Regeneration Awards here. The Football Club were happy to show off their new Drummond Stand and Hospitality Suite for a reduced rate and it had proved to be more of a draw than she’d expected. Bob thinks that it’s sealed the club’s fate: build a new stand and you’re doomed to relegation. The evening has to go well, especially after the incident on Saturday. The Council Leader, Davina Clarke, will be here later and wants to talk budgets.

While the community reps get her a drink, she checks the article in today's *Post* to assess the damage. The Council has a bright, competent comms manager who has used Anne-Marie's 'Bin Man Saves Trashed Teen' line to good effect. The girl in the bin is alive, it's gruesome, but maybe she was over-reacting. Is it such a big story? The final paragraph reads:

The Chief Executive of Alcohol Concern, Ed Forby, said today, "The harm caused by alcohol has already reached epidemic proportions. We're asking everyone, especially policy-makers and those with responsibility for our health and well-being, to take action." The City Council, who have a duty to ensure our well-being and are the Licensing Authority, were unavailable for comment.

Literacy is no barrier to success in the world of local news. They were available, she thinks, but it suited the *Post* not to call and get a proper quote. Her PA phones and she steps away from the bar.

"I've had to swop tomorrow's meetings around. Jess Reid wants to see you urgently about the incident." Anne-Marie rolls her eyes.

"Your management team is starting at 8.30am." She expects to pre-load on the coffee, if the pesky machine is still working, that is.

“You’ve got the meeting with the solicitors about the disciplinary hearing at 11am.” That gives her about three minutes to cadge a quick fag from her mate Ken in the Keepers’ Office.

“Then 12.30pm is the Shared Services Project board.” Which means lunch will be a few biscuits left over from the previous meeting, if she’s lucky.

“At 2pm you have the Homes and Communities Agency, transition funding arrangements.” She’ll have to strangle their two key officers if the last session is anything to go by.

“You’re chairing the Skills Strategy at 3.30pm.” Then she’ll have to strangle herself.

“And you can fit Jess Reid in between 5pm and Planning Committee at 7pm.”
Jesus.

“Can you tell Jess I’ll actually be dead by then. I’ll speak to her first thing Wednesday.”

Andrea shouts across to let her know they are waiting.

“Not thirsty then?”

The Regeneration Awards gang have been waiting to conclude their toast.

Andrea raises her glass. “To us, to you, boss, and to Sandra...”

She's glad they've mentioned Sandra. She's the best manager Anne-Marie's got. It would be rude not to join the toast, but it's early even by her standards.

"...who has given us so much. Like that attractive high-vis jacket..." Vital for the night-time patrols she has going on the Estate.

"...and those classy, green, triple-thick rubber gloves." No-one can pick up used johnnies and junky needles on the estate without them.

"And without Sandra, our back passages would still be a dirty hellhole."

"Speak for yourself." Anne-Marie is drawn back in. Simple alley-gating schemes, they work every time.

The group are naively enjoying themselves, but surely they must've listened to the news recently? There's no money left. The days are gone when they could make the Highlands liveable with a targeted project or two; when there was government money to employ intelligent operators like Sandra.

Andrea ploughs on. "And if you hadn't bullied me into volunteering, I'd have had nothing to say at that job interview. I wouldn't even have a job and we wouldn't be here."

They raise their glasses again, but Anne-Marie has slipped back into her own world. The Highlands team and all the local services will be lucky to exist

unless she can get them mainstreamed into Council budgets. Hosting this event has cost a few hundred quid, but that's small beer if she can shift the neighbourhood work onto the priorities list and park it safely – well, for now, at least – in black and white in a departmental budget line.

“You got us those skips.” Carol's gaze seems to drift off to a past memory.

“Those skips were rubbish... in the end.” It ought to have got a laugh, but Carol's voice tails off to nothing and no-one replies. Seconds pass, holding them still. Anne-Marie sees the silence become a shadow at the bar. She looks at Andrea's face. They all seem to know what Carol's talking about. “To our absent friends.”

“What is it about bloody men and bins in this city?” Andrea scowls at Colin, one of their community wardens.

“We'll enjoy it for her, won't we?” Carol says.

She sees pain on their faces. Not knowing what it is raises her anxiety levels, but if it's another girl in a bin this is back to being a major problem again.

The reason she doesn't know what they're talking about had been spelt out pretty clearly by Andrea a few weeks back when Anne-Marie had been trying to talk to the women about boosting the local economy. “Do you actually know what the local economy is like?” Andrea had interjected. “A couple of

betting shops, two knock-off pubs, a so-called supermarket that sells orange food and tins of foreign lager, and a loan shark who's got the place sewn up. You're well out of touch." Anne-Marie had had to accept that it was true. Although living on the estate makes her sound edgy to her leafy suburb-dwelling colleagues, in reality her house is a grand, old terraced house perched on the hill above the Highlands. Anywhere else it would cost a fortune.

Colin breaks the mood of the group. "Don't forget the free swimming tickets and the Friday kids' disco. I'll drink to that. Before I got this job, before all this," he raises his pint gently, "the house next door to me was empty for five years. The housing manager told me there's a waiting list now for the Highlands." Middle-class officers in the Council refused to believe that a kids' disco and a trip to the seaside could be enough to make a family move house, but it was true.

"Yeah, and I'm still waiting to be re-housed somewhere else," Andrea jeers.

Anne-Marie focuses on the reference to the woman and the skip. There had been stabbings, but no murders on the estate. Never, in fact. Whatever it is, she doesn't need anything spoiling the reputation of this work, especially now. That could be why they are keeping so quiet. She reminds herself that

these women aren't stupid. They out-smarted her at school and would do so again given half the chance. Anne-Marie decides to talk to Colin about it later.

Seeing Colin, she remembers back to a tired Friday night mixing Rioja and Night Nurse. She'd sat with misery at the kitchen table, looking through a pile of returned CRB checks for the Community Wardens' Service. The service had been politically kicked in all directions since the beginning. One minute the councillors loved the wardens, then they were a liability and they wanted shot of them. Then it was Police Community Support Officers who found favour, or rather that's what the Home Office had given them money for. She'd had a skirmish with the Police Chief, who'd argued that the extra external resources could have been better spent elsewhere. He'd meant paying their overtime bill and he'd held sway, saying, "Give me one constable who can make an actual arrest rather than three PCSOs and a load of wardens and I'll be happy. They create so much bureaucracy that our constables never leave their desks."

Anne-Marie had quickly mobilised local support, leaned slightly on Jess to persuade the Chief to re-think and they'd managed to employ a small

number of Community Wardens. They turned out to be the best investment the public purse could have made in keeping people safe. Now, though, it wasn't clear where it would go next.

Looking at the returned CRB checks, she'd read story after story about the lives of local people, tarred with the black end of a bureaucratic brush for minor offences, tagged in key worker reports for teenage misdemeanours, scarred for life by petty crimes. Colin was a classic case. He was now a happily married man with a young family and youth work qualifications. He was an enthusiastic volunteer in the community, who'd been involved in starting a gardening project and, as a former West Midlands hammer-throwing champion, he was perfect. Except for the criminal record he'd dragged around his neck since the age of 14. In a fight at school he'd belted a teacher with a bag. The zip had cut the teacher's face. That's not great, she'd thought, but she'd looked at the risk assessment forms and the box marked 'Suitable for employment?' and she'd ticked 'yes'. For ten years Anne-Marie has constantly feared she might drown in the waves of initiatives. It's been invigorating, but the waters are still now, on the surface that is - there's just a powerful current swirling below, threatening to pull them under.