

Wilma

‘Wilma Harcus?’

‘You’re looking at her,’ Wilma replied, covering her nipples with spread fingers. Clamping a leopard print hand towel to her crotch, she demanded, ‘What do you want?’

Averting his eyes, the taller of the two policemen, a lantern-jawed loon with cauliflower ears, answered, ‘We’re trying to establish the whereabouts of your neighbour, Mrs Laird.’

‘Why do you want to know?’ Wilma asked, water running off her hair and dripping down her back.

‘I’m not at liberty to say.’

‘Well, you’ve got me out the shower,’ she complained. ‘So, whatever it is, you’ll have to come back.’ Taking a step into the hallway, she made to kick the door shut.

‘Hang on!’ The second copper, a well-built lad with a broken nose, shot out a restraining hand. ‘It’s important we speak to Mrs Laird, if only to satisfy ourselves that she’s safe and well.’

‘Why wouldn’t she be?’

‘Do you know where she is?’ he pressed.

‘Out,’ Wilma snapped, shaking with cold by now.

‘Is it work-related? I believe you are business partners.’

‘Work?’ Wilma echoed. ‘On a Friday night?’ Leaping at the opportunity to put the woolly suits in their place, she fibbed, ‘Us private investigators are not so hard up we have to work around the clock.’ Then, following the two constables’ eyes, she realised the towel had slipped, and hastily put it back.

‘She’s on a social visit, then, is she?’ the taller policeman fished.

‘My colleague has a dinner appointment,’ Wilma pronounced in her poshest voice.

‘Who with?’

‘Even if I knew, it’s not something I would be willing to share.’

‘What about the venue?’

‘That neither.’

‘Look, Mrs Harcus,’ the second copper said. ‘This isn’t the time to go coy on us. We have reason to believe Mrs Laird’s life may be in danger.’

Wilma’s mind whirled. Where was Maggie? And who was she with? Then the penny dropped. If it was who Wilma thought it was, Maggie was indeed in danger. And if anything happened to her, it would be all Wilma’s fault.

Forgetting her nakedness, she threw up her hands. ‘Why didn’t you fucking say that in the first place?’

Four Weeks Earlier

'What's up?' Wilma demanded, breezing through the back door. 'You've a face on you like a slapped arse.'

Maggie carried on loading Colin's sweaty rugby kit into the washing machine. 'Money worries.'

Wilma groaned. 'Join the club. What is it this time?'

'I've direct debits coming up,' she replied, raising a tousled head of titian curls. 'And Harlaw Insurance invoice isn't due for settlement until the twentieth.'

'But the Milne fee note. Surely that will—'

Maggie cut her short. 'Scott Milne hasn't paid our bill.'

'Bastard! I'll go up there, and...'

'What?' Maggie challenged. 'Give him one of your boxing gym moves?'

'No. But didn't we get a result?' Scott's wife, Debbie, had disappeared a few months previously and he'd hired the two women's detective agency, Marcus & Laird, to investigate.

We? Maggie's green eyes flashed. Acting on a hunch, she had found Scott Milne's missing wife single-handed. 'Might have slipped his mind,' she replied. 'Things will be strained at home. They'll still be having counselling. And—'

'Counselling my arse. No reason for him not to cough up.'

'He's maybe a bit late,' Maggie reasoned, 'but he's not that late.'

'Regardless. Fella was all over us when we found the wife. High time he paid his dues.'

We, again. Maggie thought indignantly. But tempted as she was to take her business partner up on the subject, it was early in the day. And, besides, there was no arguing with Wilma. 'I suppose you'll be wanting tea?'

Wilma cocked her blonde head. 'If you've nothing stronger.'

Maggie filled the kettle, pulled a couple of mugs from a cupboard and stooped into the fridge for milk.

‘What’s the upshot?’ Wilma pressed.

‘If I can’t raise some cash in the next couple of days, there’s not enough in the bank to meet the direct debits.’ Dropping a teabag into each mug, she splashed in milk and topped up with boiling water. ‘And if the situation persists, I’ll default on the mortgage.’ A shiver ran down her spine. Keeping her kids safe and a roof over their heads was her number one priority.

‘What are you going to do?’

Sticking the milk back in the fridge, Maggie fished out the teabags and dropped them in the bin. ‘No idea.’ She carried the tea through to the dining-room and set the mugs on the table.

Wilma followed. ‘How much are we talking about?’ she asked, lowering her ample rear onto a spindly Ercol chair.

‘Couple of grand,’ Maggie replied, taking the seat opposite.

Wilma reached for a mug and took a slurp. She did a quick mental calculation. ‘I’ve a bittie put by.’

Maggie sighed. ‘Thanks, but no thanks.’

‘Mum?’ Her son Colin stuck his head round the door.

Brightening, she turned. ‘You’re up early.’

‘Wanted to catch you before you went out. I need forty pounds for new rugby boots.’ He eyeballed her companion. ‘Hi, Wilma.’

‘Morning, pal.’

‘But...’ Maggie protested.

With a perplexed look, Colin added, ‘I told you last week, remember?’

Maggie didn’t remember. But, then, she always had such a lot on her mind.

‘The ones I’m wearing are falling apart.’

She felt a rush of love. Poor kid. Still, ‘Forty pounds?’ she queried.

‘They’re the cheapest I could find in my size.’

Followed by an overwhelming sense of guilt. Why did her kids

always have to wear cut-price stuff when other people's children flashed big-name products? If she hadn't been left a widow... She banished the thought. 'Does it have to be today?'

'If I'm to get them at that price. Sale ends tonight.'

Sighing, she fetched her handbag from the sideboard and dipped into her purse. 'I'm short,' she said, colour rising in her neck. 'Take this for now,' thrusting three ten pound notes into his hand. 'When I'm done with Wilma, I'll put the rest in your account.'

'Here,' Wilma stuck a podgy hand down her cleavage and rummaged in her bra. 'Be my guest,' she grinned, palming Colin a warm note. 'You crack on. Your mum and I will sort it out.'

Maggie didn't say a word. She should have felt grateful, but deep down she resented Wilma's constant interference.

'Thanks.' Pocketing the cash, Colin backed out the door.