

## The Key

It was that first autumn morning when the damp hang in the air, the falling leaves carried a gentle but ice-cold wind, and Jan had that familiar feeling of dread. *This* time she had lost the house key.

That feeling of dread was not because she had lost the key but in anticipation of what Dave would say when he found out. She knew she could be careless, she knew she always got things wrong, she knew that Dave would shout at her.

Jan sat on the damp step to the front door, opened her large brown handbag and tipped out its contents. With a clatter, lipstick, mirror, hairbrush, loose coins, sunglasses (sunglasses??). But no key.

She definitely had the key when she left the bank, she must have dropped it on the way home. Now there was only one thing to do - retrace her steps all the way back into town.

Her coat! Had she missed a pocket? Phone, credit cards, the passport she'd just used to provide ID to the bank, the five hundred pounds she'd drawn for the holiday. But no key.

She had wanted to go to France. Dave knew that going to France was an excuse to see Mitzi, her sister. He wasn't keen on Mitzi. It wasn't personal, he wasn't keen on any of her friends or relatives. So not France but Spain. Horrible hot, smelly Spain. Dave had got his way. As usual.

It was also she who was responsible for providing spending money. It had taken all three cleaning jobs to save those five hundred pounds.

Now she walked slowly, staring at the pavement. She thought of little Ben, he would do the same, staring at the ground: an interesting twig, a fascinating pebble, an amazing snail... A tear. She missed little Ben. At least *that* wasn't her fault, the inquest had returned a verdict of *Death by Misadventure*.

At the end of the lane, the main road. A Funeral Directors, a closed-down coffee shop, no sign of the key. Past the school, the pedestrian crossing, eyes down. But no key.

Left into the narrow alley. Nothing. Into the park, the muddy track by the river. Nothing. Out of the park, under the underpass...no key. Hope was waning.

It had taken thirty five minutes to walk into town, now it would take the same thirty five minutes to walk back, and it was now raining steadily.

The walk distorted time, that aching feeling, waves of hopelessness. The High Street...the park...the underpass. Nothing.

Nearly home now, just the pedestrian crossing and a couple of streets to go.

HOOT!

Jan was standing still, in the middle of the pedestrian crossing, *willing* the key to appear between the black-and-white stripes, and she was holding up the traffic. In particular, she was holding up a black cab.

Very slowly, Jan walked over to the cab and, wearily, the cabbie wound down the window.

"Where to luv?"

"Heathrow".

"Hop in then, don't just stand there getting wet! Going somewhere nice?"