

Pocket Money

Chapter 1

The grey path swam in and out of focus, she just needed to get to the other side of the park. Amy started to swallow more frequently, her mouth dry from smoking weed. A scented aftertaste like a sickly violet sweet, mingled with the dryness. Clinging to a tree trunk, Amy rested her forehead on the cool bark, sweat trickling down her back although the late autumn afternoon was turning chilly. The musty woodland smell filled her nostrils. Not far and she'd be home. Home? The image of her room in the hostel filled her with dread, it was so small that if she stood next to her single bed, she could touch both walls without her feet leaving the sticky vinyl floor. Amy avoided using the shared bathroom unless she was desperate.

Something glinted in the late evening sun. Amy screwed her eyes up to see what was concealed in the bushes. Unsteadily she walked forwards and it became clearer, something red contrasted against the green foliage. Shading her eyes with her hand to stop the glare of the watery sun, she couldn't see anyone else. She picked up the object, it was a red purse with an 'S' shape metal clasp, like one she'd had as a child for her pocket money. The one her mum used to empty when she was heading to the 'offie' for some vodka. She tucked herself further into the bushes, her dirty fingernails fumbling with the clip. The purse sprung open and revealed a roll of notes fastened with an elastic band, it reminded her of a mini Swiss roll. She had no idea how much was there, over £100 she guessed. She shoved the money into the pocket of her jeans. Enough to pay for some more grass, maybe she could get something even stronger? The familiar rush of excitement coursed through her, knowing this lucky find could score some good fixes. She might be able to do some sales herself and make the cash last longer. The only other thing in the purse was a brass front door key on a ring with the letter J, but no other clues as to who owned it. Anonymous, perfect, no need to feel guilty. It was a gift! She tossed the empty purse further into the woods and tucked the key into her other pocket with no idea why.

As Amy stumbled away, she took a look back to where she had found the purse. Then she saw it.

A tartan 'old lady' shopping trolley lying on its side, one silver wheel protruding like an arm waving from the sea. Her eyes followed the outline of the trolley; ghostly white fingers, wrapped around the handle. A blue headscarf lay in the grass, like a small pond in a forest. Amy froze, she had to go back, turning she hesitatingly made her way. The weed was wearing off, was she hallucinating? She felt the key in her pocket and realised this was real. As she approached the old lady's body lying on the earth, her open handbag by her side, Amy started shaking. The woman wore a grubby cream raincoat, her grey hair flat against her head, stuck down by the seeping red liquid that spilt onto the ground.

Lifeless.

Picking up the bag, Amy rifled through it, her shaking hands making the task more difficult; an unused handkerchief, cough sweets smelling of menthol, hair grips, a rain hat, old receipts, used tissues, a sugar pink lipstick, and finally a credit card wallet. No purse, Amy had already emptied that. She pulled out a green card, the name 'Joan Batchelor' alongside a photo of a woman that she guessed was now dead. It was a bus pass. She turned the card over, 44 Parkside Drive, just across the park.

Amy tossed the handbag and contents down beside the body. She had to get away. She staggered to the edge of the playing field, the nausea welled up and the next thing she knew she was retching next to the park bench. Two young boys passed, one clutching a muddy football, "Oh My God" said the fair haired boy, "Gross! I think she's had a few too many wines." "Nah" said the slightly taller one, "Can't you smell the weed? She's a nitty." They started kicking the ball across the park and didn't look back at Amy.

Her head was thumping, her mind was racing. Should she go to the address? There might be a husband, Mr Batchelor, waiting for Joan and whatever the contents of her shopping trolley were? Should she go to the police station? If she did, could she get away with not mentioning the purse? Maybe she should ring Pete, her support worker, he'd got her the place at the hostel. All Amy really wanted to do was lay down and go to sleep. She wiped the tears away from her watery eyes and pushed her greasy hair off her face. She decided she'd walk to Parkside Drive before heading back to her room, see what the house looked like and then decide what to do next.

1930s semi-detached metro-style houses lined both sides of Parkside Drive, lime trees evenly planted by the kerbs creating an avenue with a canopy of leaves. Although originally built in the same style, modernisations, extensions and new windows gave each house its own unique stamp. The lime tree roots fought for position and moisture as many front gardens had been slabbed over, the gnarled roots erupting from the pavements, leaving a cracked and uneven surface. Amy stumbled a couple of times as she made her way up and down the road. As she passed number 44 for the third time, she found herself walking down the path to the front door, the original garage tucked down behind the house, not wide enough for modern cars. Rose bushes and hedges framed an overgrown front lawn. She noticed net curtains at the window, she hadn't seen any others in the street. Raising a hand to knock on the front door with a stained glass window, Amy wanted to peel off the loose black paint, like chipped nail varnish. This was definitely one of the houses that had retained its original character. She knocked twice, not too loudly as she didn't want any nosy neighbours looking out. She waited a short while then, checking the street in both directions, pulled the key out from deep within her jeans' pocket. The key slipped into the Yale lock and the door opened easily. Amy inhaled a familiar smell, nicotine. She stepped in and silently closed the front door.

"Hello!" she whispered into the dark, gloomy hallway. It was silent apart from the gentle tick-tock. She crept into the kitchen, a large clock confirmed the ticking noise and that it was nearly 6 o'clock. Amy had no idea what her plan would be if there was someone in the house, she didn't make plans. A further check confirmed no-one in the lounge or dining room. She made her way up the creaking stairs, partially covered with threadbare floral carpet, held in place with rods. She checked all three bedrooms and the bathroom, no sign of life. Picking up a photo in a white and gold frame, she saw a younger Joan with a kindly looking man, probably her husband Amy thought. They looked like they were on a night out, both raising a glass to the camera. Amy decided as it was an old photo, Joan was a widow. Mr Batchelor would have cut the front lawn if he was still around!

The double bed was made but Amy could see the indent on the pillow and thought it was probably only a few hours ago Joan had got up for the day and gone about her business. Overwhelmed with tiredness, she went into the back bedroom, untied her muddy trainers and climbed under the blanket and bedspread fully clothed. She'd have a sleep and then decide what to do next, maybe make a plan?

Amy woke with a start, the room was in complete darkness. Where was she? No idea on time or day, she felt confused. Her eyes adjusted and she could make out the door onto the landing. Amy's mouth was dry, her tummy grumbling. She went into the bathroom and pulled the light chord, a

fluorescent tube flickered into life. She'd never seen a pink bathroom suite before. As she sat on the toilet she rubbed her feet on the bath mat with roses and green leaves matching the fluffy toilet seat cover. The image of Joan and the blood spilling from her brains replaced the roses. Amy shuddered. As she pulled up her jeans and wiped her hands on the small rough towel, she saw the roll of money on the lino floor, it must have fallen out of her jeans as she'd sat down. Scooping up the cash, Amy went back into the bedroom, drew the curtains and switched on the bedside lamp. The elastic band pinged off the roll and the notes unfurled on the bed. Amy gulped, she hadn't spotted these were £50 notes. She started counting, there were twenty of them. Amy's hand covered her mouth, she wanted to squeal, laugh, to dance around the bedroom. At the same time she wondered why Joan had been walking across the park with a £1000 in a purse, what was Joan going to do with it? Amy had never seen £1000 before, she'd only seen dealers with bundles of cash.

Growing up in East London with just her Mum, she'd never known her Dad, he did a runner when he found out her Mum was pregnant. Gran helped out as much as she could, but as Mum's alcohol dependency worsened, bills went unpaid, there was no food, and stale bottles of milk sat on the kitchen worktop. Amy had been put into care when she was eight, her Mum had died less than a year later. Foster homes, care homes, different schools and social workers had led to her becoming homeless at 18. A life on the streets followed; drugs, hanging out with Meth drinkers and crack heads, petty crime of shoplifting gave her a police caution. She was 20 now and with the help of Pete, her care worker, she was starting to turn things around. A place at the hostel was the beginning, voluntary work for the local homeless charity was part of Amy's 'path to employment'. Other people could function normally by just smoking a bit of cannabis, she'd get there.

Amy split the cash into separate piles, placing them in various pockets and tucked £200 in her trainers. Turning off the lamp she made her way downstairs in the dark. The moonlight illuminated the kitchen and the clock showed it was 1.30am. Closing the blind, she switched on the light and looked in the fridge; bacon, cheese, eggs, ham, fresh milk, fruit, salad, vegetables. Amy started pulling things out, eating the ham from the packet, cutting off chunks of cheese, she was ravenous. She sat at the Formica kitchen table eating a peach, rubbing her belly. She could stay here a week and there would be enough food. Where had Joan been going with her shopping trolley, or where had she been? It wasn't like she needed any food, there was bread and crumpets, plenty of tins and pasta in the cupboards as well.

Amy needed to make a plan. She knew she should leave the house, but first a bath to help clear her mind. The debris of her feast lay on the table, she'd swigged the milk from the carton and left it on the worktop, nature or nurture? Running the hot water into the deep bath, steam started rising, she added bath salts, bubble bath and bath oil. There were several wrapped soaps in the bathroom cabinet, she sniffed a couple and opened the one she liked best. Freshly bathed and hair washed, she started looking in the drawers for clean clothes that might fit, she wasn't intending to stay, but brushed cotton pyjamas seemed her best option. She carried on looking for a hairdryer, she moved a blanket in the bottom of the wardrobe, realising there was a wooden box beneath, the same colour wood as the wardrobe and easily missed. Amy awkwardly dragged the box onto the floor. The large lock may have defeated her, but she eyed up the hinges at the back, the easy way in. Using a nail file from the dressing table, she sprung the lid.

There, neatly piled in bundles with elastic bands were thousands and thousands of pounds.

DCI John Henderson sat in his car sipping a flat white coffee from a paper cup, it should have been his weekend off to spend with his sons and he was meant to take them to football training this

morning, but a female's body had been found. No football for the boys or anyone else in this park today. The blue tent erected just near the woodland flapped in the light wind. It was a grey Saturday afternoon. His colleague Angela Moore walked to the car and climbed into the passenger seat.

"What have we got so far Ange?"

"An elderly woman, mid-late 70's, murdered by a single blow to the head. No formal ID yet but documents found near the body point to a Mrs Joan Batchelor, 44, Parkside Drive as the victim. No murder weapon found near the scene so far." Ange looked tired, John remembered her as a blonde, blue-eyed sergeant straight from Hendon. She was a good officer, ready for promotion, but was rather fond of too much red wine. He'd given up the booze after his divorce three years ago. It wasn't the cause of the split, but it certainly was a symptom.

"No purse or cash found at this stage, so likely possible motive theft, possibly a mugging that went wrong. The forensics don't think she put up a fight but pathology should let us know more." John nodded.

"Any next of kin to Mrs B that we know about?"

"Yes we've run a check, she's a widow. But there's a son, Luke Batchelor, name ring a bell?" John sipped his now almost cold coffee. "We're trying to find his current location" Ange continued, "Last known address was in Luton and prior to that, a guest of Her Majesty's Pleasure."

"Aah yes, of course," John crushed the empty coffee cup and opened the car door, "biggest drugs haul in the county some years ago. I didn't know he'd been released. OK, I'll take a look. Keep the park closed and let's get more manpower to find the weapon, it's probably been left in the park somewhere."

Opening Chapter of a crime thriller – 2472 words excluding title