

## Mind Altering

I was driving along too fast with a slight headache, one eye on the clock and a kilo of stolen cocaine in my handbag. The late autumn day was wearing its sunlight self-consciously, like a maiden aunt in a mini-skirt, cautious wind-fingers tugging at the hemline of clouds which occasionally passed overhead as I sped on my way down the crowded suburban streets. I scarcely noticed the weather at all, apart from noting that the sudden changes from sun to shadow made driving quickly difficult, the sun was angling in through my windscreen and intermittently sending Morse Code flashes off the metal fixings on my bag.

So, how did I come to have stolen a kilo of cocaine? Well, it began with my boyfriend, a very young Brazilian catwalk model, of the unshaven, overslept type. Or... no. It *really* began with that trip I took to Nice last summer...

My foot inched towards the floor of the car, the engine of my old Peugeot starting to build to its familiar 'over forty' whine; the Christmas-tree shaped air-freshener which hung from the mirror swinging as though hurricane-struck. Down the High Street we sped, a new and slightly worrying metallic rattle adding a counterpoint to the engine song; dodging in and out of the thickening traffic, avoiding with difficulty the bumper-nudging antics of the pizza delivery boys just getting started on the tea-time run – the last thing I needed right now was a close encounter with an over-Mozarella'd teenager with a head full of anchovies and wrongly remembered addresses. Just drive, I told myself. Remember where you're going, and just drive, nothing else matters.

Apart, obviously, from that police car pulled up at the traffic lights.

I stopped alongside, eyes stapled to the road ahead. Surely he wouldn't notice me? Mid-thirties woman in a car not so much clapped out as a complete standing ovation? Had he registered me tanking along, five miles over the speed limit? *Don't notice me*, I sweated from every pore. *You can't see me*. My heart triple-beat in my ears as I fought to keep my eyes forward, but I couldn't bear the suspense, and risked a quick glance sideways, through the smeared window bearing the unfortunate remains of a late-night moth attack and the results of a chocolate-biscuit-fingered fumble. He was looking at me.

I tried a smile, but lopsided lipstick put on in a hurry had relocated my Angelina Jolie pout over most of my chin and I think I saw him shudder. My heart was scudding now. Could I beat him at the lights? Race off and lose him by some smart cornering past Marks and Spencer? He mouthed something at me, but it was lost in the underwater stipple-effect of the grease-smeared window; I pretended that I hadn't noticed and fastened my eyes back onto the traffic lights. Change, damn you! Come *on*...

That was it. Red flicked through to amber and I was gone, charging off across the junction with the Peugeot wailing and screaming around me like a haunting; diving and weaving along the main road towards my destination, the words beating through my head 'you're carrying cocaine, you've got drugs in the car'.

If only I hadn't got involved with Mario and his brothers! This could all have been avoided; if only I'd refused their offer of that villa in Sicily...

*Oh no.* The policeman was back. Right behind me, rotating blue light adding to the sunlight flickers strobing around inside the car like a migraine. My heart upped the tempo. *Breathe. Slowly. Now, stop the car.*

"Is there a problem, Officer?" Sweat was springing out of me, anxiety prickling at my armpits and spine.

"I happened to notice, Madam..."

Oh, this was bad. They only called you 'Madam' when it was bad. Otherwise it was 'love' or 'darling'; well, perhaps not 'darling'. Unless you were married to them, or dating them presumably. But 'Madam' was definitely bad.

I kept my eyes away from the bag.

"Your rear light isn't working. You want to get that seen to before the nights start drawing in."

Relief made the Lara Croft mouth perform an unsightly manoeuvre. "Yes. Yes, I will. Thank you." Even my lips were sweating and before he'd slapped the roof to send me on my way my leg had spasmed, jolting the car forward again, low-gear howling into the ongoing stream of cars.

Left. Then right. Second left, and a good long straight to build up some speed. *I'm carrying drugs. I'm going to sell them. Yes! Sell them...I'm a drug dealer!*

Cornering fast now, approaching the secondary school. Small knots of kids hanging around already; the younger ones looking uneasy in their unfamiliar smartness, the older teenagers lounging louchely along the pavement as though their limbs were only marginally attached to their torsos and their heads had some magnetic attraction to the ground.

Ah. Here. My target. Three boys clustered at the edge of the road, heads together, obviously up to no good. One bag, expensive, carelessly thrown against a lamp-post.

"Hello boys."

The eldest looked up first, squinting in the sunlight. Classrooms must all be darkened these days judging by the narrowed eyes and overgrown weediness of the kids. When he saw me, his eyes brightened, some of the workaday despair of being fifteen fell from his shoulders.

“Hey, Mum! You’re actually *early!*” He and his brothers grabbed at possessions. “What was it this time?”

“Kilo of stolen cocaine.”

A solemn nod and a check of the watch. “Pretty good. You were ten minutes earlier when you did the ‘I’ve got a body in the boot’, though.”

“Mm. But the ‘driving a stolen sports car’ never worked, did it?”

A knowing hand tapped at the Peugeot door, a flake of paint and several pounds of rust fell off. “Not surprising though. Imagination can only take you so far. What’s for tea?”

“Beans on toast.”

A sigh from all three. “Oh well. I suppose we can imagine fish and chips.”

I dropped the car into second gear, back to being an ordinary mother of three with an overactive storytelling gland, and we began our sedate passage home.