

# Dance Your Way to Psychic SEX

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## CHAPTER ONE

### **Psychic Dancing**

Henrietta wishes for an empty lift. Her wish is granted, which is just as well. She hates sharing boxes with strangers.

She is propping Patrick's viola between her feet and leaning back with a sigh, when she sees the woman outside. But the doors are closing, so she's safe. Or she would be, if the woman didn't prise herself in with the tip of her umbrella.

The woman is in her thirties, oddly-dressed, breathing too loudly and smelling of garlic. "Phew," she says, looking straight at Henrietta, who fails to avoid eye contact. "Nearly missed it."

Henrietta looks at the floor.

Some people can make casual conversation without feeling as though their insides are dissolving in battery acid, but not Henrietta. She's afraid. Of unexpected contact and other people's smiles.

She says nothing.

“Where are you going?” says the woman, her Lancashire accent soft with polite dilution, but harsh with rude intent.

Henrietta stays silent.

“Are you a magician?” says the woman.

Henrietta twitches and frowns, but doesn’t raise her head.

“Haha, no, I’m always doing that,” says the woman. “It’s my boyfriend. He’s a magician, you see. But no, what I meant to say was, are you a musician?”

They’ve arrived at track level. Henrietta barges past the woman and out onto the platform.

“You *are* in a hurry. I was only asking...”

Henrietta hurries away.

She shouldn’t feel guilty. She’s done nothing wrong. Why does she feel so awful? It’s not *fair*.

On the train, she carries the viola awkwardly as she looks for a seat. Several heads, shoulders, knees and toes are at risk, but people pull them in when they hear her huffing. So when she sees two hands sticking out into the aisle, she huffs a little louder and assumes they’ll disappear. They don’t. She clears her throat instead.

They belong to two men sitting opposite each other, who are waving their arms in some kind of odd synchronised semaphore. Two limbs pointing straight up, and two barring Henrietta’s way.

“Excuse me,” she says.

The man facing her smiles. He lifts the offending arm over his head. His companion follows suit in perfect reflection, his eyes fixed in a trancelike gaze. Henrietta frowns and moves on.

There’s a spare table near the door of the next carriage. Its neighbours are also empty. Good. She removes some estate agents’ papers and places them on the surface in front of her. She adjusts them slightly, their bottom edges aligned and parallel with the table. With a pen either side and a

## PSYCHIC DANCING

bottle of water dead centre above, the effect should be complete. But her throat is constricting as she takes in the subtly tapered shape of the table. Her symmetry is reflecting in the wrong axis, and everything is tilted to one side.

She shifts everything to line up with the aisle-side table edge instead. But the space above and below is not equal, and if she adjusts her things accordingly she'll no longer be able to reach them comfortably. And the bottle. It's laughing at her now, highlighting her symmetrical errors. It could go on one side instead of at the top of the sheet of paper, but it would get in the way of one of her pens and create an unsatisfactory weighting of objects on the right hand side.

She wants to balance the bottle on her head, its pressure drilling down into her core and keeping her balanced, but she can't do that either.

She puts it back in the bag. She takes a sheet of paper and places it on the other side of the table. She puts both pens in the middle of the table, one either side of an imaginary dividing line. It would appear that she now has an imaginary friend, working opposite, but that's no bad thing. It might deter invaders.

And now she can look outside, where the red majesty of Mancunian brick lifts her shoulders tall. A dignified city.

She isn't sitting by the window. She never does, she can't. The heat and the light would fall on one side only and age her unevenly, creating a banana-like curl in her core.

If she could, she'd sit on the floor in the aisle.

If she had a car she would want to sit between the two front seats and drive down the middle of the road. It would all be too uneven. But in her previous life, cars were not allowed, and traffic scares her silly. It goes too fast.

It's a shame about the people though. Trains are so full of people.

There's one of them now, standing next to her. She doesn't look up

but she can feel them, watching, too close. She waits as long as she can bear, but the person doesn't move. She turns to look, and finds the woman from the lift.

That whole episode was bad enough, but to have ended up on the same train? What are the odds? Of course, it would depend how many trains there were, how frequent, how many were about to leave, how many passengers arrive early for their trains... but once you nailed all the variables, converted them into constants... a relatively simple sum...

The woman from the lift wears a red skirt – long and full and clashing with both her bushy auburn hair and the stripy hat which holds it down. In her hands she carries an enormous bag, which she clutches in front of her as though restraining a recalcitrant child.

“Hello!” she says, her eyes radiating mischief along crow's-foot lines.

Henrietta is terrified. “Can I help you?” she says.

The woman recoils. “Yes miss, sorry to bother you miss.”

Henrietta feels guilty again. The woman gestures at the papers. “Moving house?”

Henrietta covers them with one arm and then feels silly. “Well, I...”

The woman's smile brims with either saintliness or evil. She leans in close, making Henrietta grimace at the proximity of their two female bodies, the other one stinking of sweat.

“I'm so nosy,” says the woman. “It's terrible.”

And now she's moving Patrick's viola and sitting opposite, putting her bag down on Henrietta's table, on her papers, in her way.

Henrietta has to move her arm and sit back. She's never seen a carpet bag before. She's never even wondered what one might be, but it's a bag made from carpet between them both now. Over its top is the woman's eye, winking. Henrietta looks down into her lap and refuses to raise her head. The front of her neck is contracted, the rear taut. She wants to

bend it back the other way. She wants to move the bag and straighten her papers. The woman sends out waves of discomfort like a too-hot sun, and Henrietta sweats.

It's a Monday in mid-July. After only one year of hunching nightly over her computer on a bare-legged council estate, she's saved enough for a good solid house. She's heading there now, to a shiny new future. She has the summer for settling in, then her new job – with a reputable IT firm – starts at the beginning of September.

But this woman is shoving the bag to one side, disturbing Henrietta's papers, leaning forward and *slapping the back of Henrietta's hand* while saying "Now now, don't be shy, people should talk to each other when they can, shouldn't they?"

Henrietta raises her head, her enraged look the one which would reduce dear Patrick to a quivering jelly and have him disarmed in an instant. But with this combination of a slap, a crazy smile and an odour of incense... somehow this woman takes the bite from Henrietta's teeth before she can even speak.

"I'm with The Spirit, you know," she says, leaning in with her many smells and smiling a manic smile.

"Oh," says Henrietta.

She doesn't understand, and she doesn't want to.

She tries to resist, but she can't. She has to tidy the table. She pulls the sheets of A4 free, pushes the bag towards the window. She has to lean over to retrieve the paper from the other side. The woman sits back with an expression of mock surprise and Henrietta breathes heavily. She will pretend the rest of the table doesn't exist. She will create an island of symmetry. She taps the papers together with smart little raps before placing them carefully, and straightening the pens. She breathes a little easier.

"I'm Tawny," says the woman. "Who are you?"

“Um. Henrietta.”

“What were you doing in Manchester?”

Henrietta looks over at Patrick’s viola, which she has just had restrung, but she has no intention of telling this woman her business.

“You look very clever,” says Tawny. “I bet you’re clever. What do you do?”

“I really don’t think it’s any ...”

Tawny cuts in. “Oh well, never mind. I’m a sex counsellor myself.”

Henrietta blushes. She can’t imagine wanting to do such a job, never mind announce it with no sign of embarrassment to a stranger on a train.

“Do you have anyone?” says Tawny, staring her in the eye. “Anyone at home?”

Henrietta feels accused, as though she has to defend herself.

“I’ve got Patrick,” she says.

“Oh, lovely,” says Tawny. “Where is he now?”

“Out. In the countryside.”

“And you weren’t invited?”

Henrietta feels slightly sick.

“Sorry,” says Tawny. “Ignore me. I can be a bit idiotic sometimes. You, though... You’re someone who would always get things right. Yes. You’re very intelligent, I can tell.”

Henrietta blushes again.

“In fact,” continues Tawny, “you seem just the right sort of... No, I shouldn’t.”

“What?”

“You could have hidden talents... No, I’ve said enough.”

“Hidden talents?”

“Well,” says Tawny. “The human race is *evolving*. We don’t need our bodies so much any more, but our minds are different. If you use your

brain on a daily basis...” She looks at Henrietta expectantly.

“Do you?” says Tawny.

She can’t ignore a direct question. And she’s proud of her career, pleased with her new job. “Yes,” she says. “I’m a software engineer. I design and implement complex IT systems. It’s very... brain intensive.”

Tawny looks thoughtful, and Henrietta holds her breath. Despite herself, she’s intrigued.

Finally Tawny speaks. “If you’re focused enough, you can make people move...” She pauses, changing her voice to a whisper. “*With only the power of your mind.*”

Tawny is raising one hand in the air. Without thinking Henrietta raises her own, and Tawny smiles.

“You’re already connected,” she says. “You know what to do.”

Tawny wiggles her fingers slightly. “You can feel the tingling, can’t you?”

It’s true, she can.

“Now,” says Tawny. “Imagine tiny threads that join us together. Concentrate hard, and then start moving your hand. If you have the talent, mine will follow.”

She knows it’s ridiculous. She doesn’t want anything to do with this woman, but Henrietta finds herself moving slowly to the right.

“Yes,” says Tawny. “You can do it.” Her hand is moving too, in perfect synchronisation.

Henrietta describes a circle, as does Tawny. She tries a figure of eight. Tawny follows, and Henrietta smiles. It feels good.

But then she blinks, moving outside herself and the situation. This is silly. Tawny is just copying her. So she jerks her hand sharply up, but Tawny’s is pulled along too. And then Tawny speaks. Her eyes are wide, and Henrietta can see sweat on her brow. “It’s a little scary,” she says. “Maybe we should...”

Tawny's awe reflects Henrietta's own shock, and her doubts disappear. "It's OK," she says. "It's fine. It feels... right. Can we try a little more?"

"OK," says Tawny.

As Henrietta's confidence increases, the movements become faster and more complicated, but remain together. It's mesmerising, and Henrietta doesn't want to stop. It's like playing an instrument.

After a while, Tawny laughs and pulls her hand quickly towards her as though snapping it free from its bonds. Henrietta feels a sharp tug, and then lowers her own arm disappointedly.

"How did that feel?" says Tawny.

"Um. Surprising," says Henrietta. "Rather incredible."

"You're talented," says Tawny. "I knew you would be."

"But... I mean, how...?"

Tawny raises a finger to her lips. "I'll answer all your questions. But first... well, no, maybe not."

"What? What is it?"

"The next stage. It's a bit soon, but... you've done the hard part. Reception should be trivial for someone like you."

"Reception?" says Henrietta. Her voice is breathy and awed, and she blushes.

"We turn it around," says Tawny. "I transmit and you receive."

"You can do it too?" Henrietta is disappointed.

"Yes, but I didn't pick it up so quickly," says Tawny.

Henrietta knows she is clever, that her brain is capable of more than most. Why not this?

"Shall we give it a go?" says Tawny.

Henrietta hesitates.

"You just need to focus on the force between us," says Tawny.

"Imagine me pulling you along. And remember..."

"Yes?"

“People only stare because they’re impressed.”

A woman across the aisle – the neighbouring tables have filled up – looks sharply away. But Henrietta feels the kind of excitement she used to in class, waiting for her A\*. When she knows she can shine, she’s happy to have an audience.

“Shut everything out,” says Tawny. “Feel my influence and feel your hand. Happy, warm and light.”

Henrietta has seen it work. She believes in it now. She feels good. Tawny begins very slowly, and at first Henrietta is unsure. But with apparently no input from her, her hand starts to move.

It’s wonderful. It seems... like something familiar, but she can’t think what. There’s euphoria, and a feeling of connection as together they execute the strange slow movements. Henrietta is barely aware of time passing or of anything else – only that she is disappointed when Tawny stops and the dance ends.

“Wow,” says Henrietta.

Tawny looks her in the eye, and the discomfort starts to return.

Henrietta shakes her head.

“So,” she says. “What... I mean, how... What *is* this? I mean, what have we been doing?”

“Well...” says Tawny, and she reaches into a pocket, removing a small paperback with a shiny cover and the title, ‘*That Book*’.

“What we’ve been doing, it’s called Psychic Dancing. It’s about people connecting, tapping into the positive power of The Spirit and using it to heal each other.”

“The Spirit?” says Henrietta.

“Some people regard it as deeply religious.”

Henrietta snatches her hands and places them out of sight on her lap, as though using the table-top to shield herself from malignant rays. “I thought this was about intelligence.” She realises now what she was

reminded of, and she's scared.

"Intelligence, spirituality, whatever," says Tawny. "They're the same thing."

"Rubbish," says Henrietta. Now that the strange trance is broken, she's disoriented. The dance changed Tawny from disconcerting crazy-lady to reassuring presence, but now Henrietta finds her more upsetting than ever.

"Hey, fear is a natural reaction. But you've found something incredible. Open up."

How had Henrietta not spotted it before? The eyes. The look. Even the turn of phrase. Henrietta's been here before, and she's not going back. Trickery and brainwashing, all of it. "I'd rather be closed, thank you."

Tawny shrugs. "OK."

Henrietta stares out of the window. The view is bleak. The grass on the embankment is more dead than alive, and the few buildings that loom into sight are grey featureless boxes. But she snaps her head back when Tawny leans over and grabs a sheet of paper.

"Hebden Bridge," says Tawny. "Factory Close. Is it a good property? I've heard..."

Not only is Tawny interfering with private property, she has knocked a pen out of line.

"It's none of your business."

"But it's such a co—"

What Henrietta does next is so inappropriate and yet so deeply ingrained from daily interactions with Patrick that she doesn't even pause to think. She places a finger to her lips and looks hard into Tawny's eyes.

"Shh," she says.

"But..."

"No. Be quiet. That's enough."

She snatches the paper back, biting hard on her lip in a furious attempt to quell her blushes. The train is slowing to a stop.

“Have you considered anger management?” says Tawny.

Henrietta checks the name of the station. Hebden Bridge, finally.

“This is my stop,” she says, picking her things up and moving out into the aisle. “I have to leave.”

But why is Tawny rising too? And coming closer?

Henrietta has a trigger, a force field. When her defences are penetrated a string is pulled tight through all her joints, and nothing will bend. Instant plank.

You can't hug an ironing board, but that doesn't stop Tawny. Henrietta braces herself and stares over Tawny's shoulder until her tormentor backs away and Henrietta can leave the train. Except that now the hug wall has been breached, Henrietta's poise is leaking away. She's reduced to one of those pathetic stumbling creatures from school. The kind who would drop all their books in the corridor, shedding pencils and sharpeners in their wake as they bent to pick things up.

They annoyed Henrietta, those girls, because she was one of them.

She pulls too hard when Tawny passes her the viola, and bangs it against the seat behind, and drops her briefcase, and bumps into the person queuing in front of her, and for the rest of the journey from carriage to platform she's a shambling twitch-ridden wreck.

But finally she's off the train, and watching it pull away.

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She is shaking. But the vaulted ceiling of the station rises lofty above her head, reassuring her with solid iron. On the left as on the right. As it should be. As things *will* be from now on.

She sets off towards the exit, the viola case thumping against her right

DANCE YOUR WAY TO PSYCHIC SEX

thigh. Without thinking, she bangs the heel of her other hand on her left leg. Balancing. Evening. Making good.

Now she can go home, make a cup of tea in her lovely new kitchen, sit down and enjoy some peace. It's a sunny day in July and her future is lined up ahead, ordered and cool and neat. She has walls that are white and a lawn that is green. Everything will be fine.

But life trips you up. It waits around the corner giggling, ready to put your knickers on display for the world to see. And today's life messenger? Who has been sent to stick a foot into Henrietta's carefully chosen path?

“Hello again!”

It's Tawny.



## CHAPTER TWO

### The Spirit

Extract from *That Book*, Chapter One

*The Spirit is all around us. Whether a hum in your ears, a whine in your brain or a shudder in the ground of your chosen path, it is there.*

*The Spirit contains our thoughts, feelings and desires. It is the psychic existence we have in common. The more we use it the more powerful it becomes. Open yourself. Feel it.*

*As our abilities strengthen, we will create a shared and public consciousness so vast that when we raise our hands in the air, close our eyes and ask questions of The Spirit, we will receive answers beyond our wildest dreams. Answers created by a combined intelligence and awareness that lifts us far higher than the measly sum of our parts.*

## DANCE YOUR WAY TO PSYCHIC SEX

*This potential that we have can cause fear, and resistance. But we do not need to hide from one another. The more we open, the more we benefit. Distrust only creates an answering fear in the hearts of those you doubt. As you lose the desire to disappear, so you gain the ability to share.*

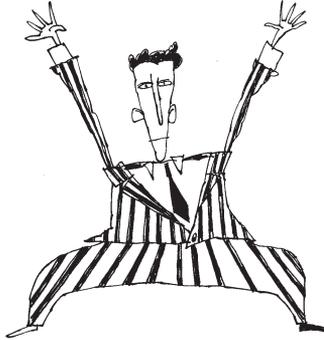
*Psychic Dancing can change your life.*

*Your curiosity is not idle. A small quiet voice at the back of your head is already telling the truth.*

*You can do it.*

*You are eager to know more, because you believe you can do this.*

*And you are right.*



### CHAPTER THREE

#### **Welcome to Factory Close**

Henrietta feels all wrong. Eager to escape, and unsure how.

Leo is in his shed, talking to himself in the mirror. “Thank you,” he says. “You’re doing well. Can you feel my pulse start to slow?”

Denzel is in a café, looking for somebody to have sex with. His leg is jiggling involuntarily.

Maddy is Googling Henrietta.

Belle is in front of another mirror, nude apart from a flat cap. According to her magazine anyone can look good naked, as long as they wear a hat.

Grandad is decomposing. He doesn’t have much else to do.

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Henrietta doesn’t have much to do but stare at Tawny.

“Hello,” she says.

Escape is in her sights. Just a few dozen paces along the platform, out onto the road and she’ll be free.

“Of course, you never actually said goodbye,” says Tawny. “Maybe we should be polite and say that first, and *then* say hello,”

“Goodbye,” says Henrietta.

“Hello!” says Tawny.

“Hello. And Goodbye.” Henrietta gestures towards liberation, but Tawny opens her mouth. Henrietta can sense an excuse coming, a protest, another poor reason to extend their acquaintance. The pigeons coo mockingly and drop more dirt on the filthy great mess of the suddenly-uglified station.

“I’m late,” says Henrietta. “I have to go.”

Tawny gives up the fight. Her shoulders shrug, her face falls in, and she speaks with regret, but closure. “OK then. Nice to meet you. Goodbye.”

Henrietta can’t believe it was that easy. Tawny holds a hand out and they shake, solemnly. That’s good, thinks Henrietta. No more hugs.

“Goodbye,” she says.

Tawny gets on a bus, which drives away while Henrietta stands by to watch. Just to be sure. She has no need for buses herself; she can walk. It’s a nice day, after all.

Or maybe not. A raindrop lands on Henrietta’s head and she’s forced to acknowledge the clouds at one side of the sky, pushing the sun away. But she fishes her umbrella from her bag and sets off to walk all the same. And as she walks, she thinks.

She didn’t like Psychic Dancing. It felt the wrong kind of good. How did it work? It felt so real, but then...

She replays the scene in her head. Tawny’s hands moved, and Henrietta’s followed. But didn’t she just watch Tawny and copy her

movements? Yes, of course she did. And Tawny did the same. She was clearly a fraud.

Hebden Bridge is squeezed tight between Pennine hills and feels very old. The pavements are either narrow or non-existent, and the roads which slope between high stone walls suggest flat-capped boys on bikes. Henrietta follows the main road down into town, with valley slopes rising close on each side and houses piled up high, their gardens steep and improbable.

With houses placed directly onto the street and a frequent absence of nets, Henrietta can look straight in to middle class interiors. Magnolia walls, big mirrors and pine furniture. Bookshelves used as décor and flanking authentic fire surrounds from an Original Fireplace shop.

She peers at the people trudging past through the rain. Camouflaged by umbrellas it's hard to tell which are the lesbians. This town is apparently famous for them.

Off to one side is a flight of steps, embedded in the hillside. She feels an urge to explore, if only she didn't want to get home for Patrick. But immediately ahead of her, in front of the Picture House, are two people whose arms move slowly in the air. Psychic Dancing.

Henrietta pauses and stares. Even walking past them she might somehow be polluted. The rain is only a drizzle and she has a little spare time after all, so she doubles back to the stairs. They rise so fast she's quickly out of breath. Encased between walls they lead straight up, with occasional exits for precarious snickets branching off at one side.

Eventually she finds herself a few hundred feet higher up, on a street whose angle is so severe the parked cars look desperate; barely clinging on. The houses clamber above one another like turtles leaving a pond. She climbs further, to where she has a good view out over the three sheer valleys which meet in the centre of the town. Down there is a tiny dead-end street which for two days already has been her home.

Henrietta chose this town before she visited. She had a romantic image of rolling countryside and rich green hills, and had assumed she could find herself a nice little semi in a quiet outskirt. She didn't expect old twisty houses, no proper streets, and the only flat surfaces in the centre of town. She prefers things boxed off and new. But when she found Factory Close, a newbuilt street on the site of a former cotton works, she was happy.

She climbs down the streets to land on the main road, across from a stark church hall. Behind this are the smaller residential streets. Back-to-back terraces with no gardens next to converted mills whose high walls echo the sounds of children playing. They sound like urchins with hoops and no shoes, but they are modern kids with wheels in their trainers. And here, tucked in by the river, next to old yellow walls almost black with pollution, is stone so clean it looks unreal, with gardens all drive and no lawn.

If she walked to the end of the street she could cross the river and visit the cricket club on its banks, or climb a muddy path up to more jumbled houses on the other side of the valley. But instead she turns off, into Factory Close.

One small Victorian town house has survived the changes and sits incongruously at the end of the street, with an overgrown front garden and darkened walls. But beyond that is Henrietta's little oasis of order. Four semi-detached houses fill the rest of the cul de sac, two on each side, with their straight lines and clean walls creating instant calm.

Henrietta's house is next to the old dirt-grimed throwback on the corner. But a high stone wall, a driveway and a path separate the two properties, so she needn't acknowledge its existence. She moved in two days ago, but this is the first time she's been out and come back. She props the viola in the vestibule, and hangs up her coat. Carefully. Tidily. *Start as you mean to go on.*

WELCOME TO FACTORY CLOSE

She struggles to identify the emotion that slows her steps to a trudge as she moves through the house. She's alone at last, in her lovely cool pale new home.

But... it's not quite right. There's some nugget of... *something*. Something undesirable, some kernel of nonsense buried deep in Henrietta's soul. Something not to be encouraged.

The thought is too sacrilegious for her to acknowledge, so she pushes it down. But it's buoyant, and pops up a little to the left. That woman. The Psychic Dancing.

*Adventure.*

Her hands fly involuntarily to her ears. *Lalala*, she thinks, and refuses to listen. To this deep and disreputable need for excitement, for chaos, for... an alliance with that awful woman?

What?

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Depressed by her own ambivalence, even the cup of tea she looked forward to seems pointless and difficult now. She sighs and slumps to the floor, gluing herself to the facing wall with a marble-eyed stare.

Until something happens.

Henrietta hates unexplained noise. From dripping taps to engines idling, she likes to know the source of all that she can hear.

It sounds like someone shouting. It sounds like Tawny.

But how can it be Tawny? How can that woman have followed her here, when Tawny was on the bus and Henrietta was on foot? She runs up the stairs to look out of the landing window and prove herself wrong, because it makes no sense, it's ridiculous, it's...

It's Tawny. Outside, in the back garden of the old house next door. Standing with her arms in the air and shouting, "I FEEL JOY!"

Henrietta opens the window. "What are you doing?"

"Feeling joyful!" says Tawny. "Do you feel it too?"

"No," says Henrietta. "I feel... angry."

"I feel joy at your anger!" says Tawny. "Shall I come round?"

Tawny is climbing the high wall between the two properties, and Henrietta looks frantically to check whether anyone can see. Within a moment Tawny has her finger held firm on Henrietta's doorbell. The terrible racket sends Henrietta rushing down to open the door with explosive force, spluttering her anger into one vitriolic ejaculation.

"You!" she says.

"Me!" says Tawny. Then, "I'll come in then, shall I?" and she marches into the sitting room.

"Are you following me?" says Henrietta, following her. "What are you doing here?"

"Welcoming my new neighbour," says Tawny.

"Your new neighbour?"

"Yes," says Tawny. "Didn't I mention? I live next door. Welcome to Factory Close."

"No."

"Nice to see you again," says Tawny.

"But what...?"

"Don't worry," says Tawny. "I understand. You're scared. Everybody likes certainty, we're all afraid of the new. Why do you think the world stayed flat for so long?"

Several thoughts are fighting for supremacy. Henrietta's not scared of progress. She wouldn't have been one of those idiots who denied the earth was round. And she isn't upset about the stupid hand dancing thing.

She just wants this woman out of her house.

But Tawny has her head on one side, brown eyes warm on Henrietta's face, and her sympathy is beguiling. She reaches out as she says, "It's

hard, isn't it, moving house? It's supposed to be exciting, new beginnings and all that, but change is always upsetting, even when it's good. You feel so tired, and so lost..."

She's talking nonsense again. Henrietta is *delighted* to be in her new house. It's exactly what she wanted, and *why* is she crying?

She tries to stop, but then finds herself in Tawny's arms. Her body stays rigid because that's how she is, but Tawny's soft giving mass finds its way into Henrietta's chinks. Together they're a large warm cuddle lump, and Henrietta sobs quietly into Tawny's shoulder.

Finally she draws away.

"Sorry," she says, dabbing at Tawny's jumper. "You're a bit wet."

"It's nothing," says Tawny. "It's fine."

Henrietta smiles wetly. They could be friends. Maybe they can be friends.

And then the doorbell rings. As soon as Henrietta hears it, she checks her watch.

Patrick.

It's unlike her to lose track of a schedule like this, and now here he is, and she hasn't got him a snack ready, and this woman is still here. He's been away for the weekend, and this is the first time he'll see the house. It was supposed to be a special moment between them both.

She opens the door and there he is, the minibus which dropped him off pulling away behind him.

"Patrick!" says Henrietta.

"Hello!" says Patrick.

"So you're Patrick," says Tawny. "That's funny, I was expecting..."

"Patrick," says Henrietta. "This is, um, Tawny. She lives next door. She's just going."

"Hello Tawny!" says Patrick.

"Hello Patrick," says Tawny.

Henrietta holds the door open for Tawny to leave, but instead Tawny follows them both back inside.

“How was your day?” says Henrietta.

“Fine,” says Patrick. “Can I see my room?”

“Take your coat off first please, honey,” says Henrietta distractedly.

“He’s so cute,” says Tawny as Patrick obediently sheds his jacket.

“Ye-es,” says Henrietta. “Thank you.”

Patrick dives straight into the house, darting in and out of all the rooms. Henrietta is torn between following him and keeping an eye on Tawny, whom she doesn’t trust and wants to go away.

Patrick quickly reappears.

“Wow Mum, this house is big. Compared to the flat I mean. It’s not big like Jason Carlton’s house, but it’s not bad. Can I see my room now? Did you unpack all my things? Did you leave all my aeroplanes and soldiers in their boxes like I said?”

She wants to see his face when he walks into his bedroom, but she’s too slow. He’s up the stairs in seconds, and as she hovers in the hallway with Tawny grinning at her elbow, she can already hear his voice.

“Shelves! Wicked! I can line them all up in their platoons and everything.”

“How old is he?” says Tawny.

“Seven,” says Henrietta.

“Wicked,” says Tawny.

Henrietta looks at her sharply. “Well,” she says. “I should really...”

“He’s full of energy, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” says Henrietta.

He’s confident, energetic and gregarious. He makes friends easily and had no qualms about going off for the weekend with a new youth club and a group of children he’d never met. It’s strange to think that it was Henrietta’s previously-cloistered life which equipped Patrick with the

social confidence which makes him so unlike her. But they have plenty in common, too.

She was so pleased when she discovered the local church was running a play-scheme throughout the summer, and even more so when they told her about this residential weekend. It was the perfect thing. Something to keep Patrick happy and give her a chance to prepare the house, ready for his first viewing. She loves him absolutely, but since leaving Swindon she has struggled with being his sole carer. She had become so used to communal childcare, it's been a shock to live in the real world, where people are less keen to look after each other's children.

She needs space and likes things to be just so, but twenty-four-hour childcare creates days and situations that are unpredictable and hard to orchestrate. To have found not only a perfect house but also a job that didn't start until the end of the summer and paid enough to allow a break in income, that was ideal. The only problem was the prospect of having sole responsibility for her son during the six weeks of summer holidays, but then she found the summer-long play-scheme and both mother and son were delighted.

There's a thunderous thumping as Patrick comes back down the stairs. "Can I have a magic kit?"

"A magic kit?"

"Yeah, there's this magician on the play-scheme and he says I've got an *aura* and *potential* and he's showed me some tricks and I might be *psychic* and we did this clever dancing thing and I want to be a magician and can I Mum, do you think? Can I?"

"A magician?" says Tawny. "I know a couple of magicians. What was he called?"

"Have you eaten?" says Henrietta. "Did you get to bed at a reasonable—"

"Gandalf the Great," says Patrick. "You know, like in *Lord of the*

*Rings!*”

“What a coincidence,” says Tawny, smiling.

“What?” says Patrick.

“He’s my boyfriend,” says Tawny.

“What time tomorrow are you—” says Henrietta.

“He picked me out, just me, nobody else, and got me to be his assistant. And I made some pendulums move, with my mind. I was the only one who could do it, it was brilliant! Will I see him again?”

“Of course,” says Tawny. “He loves kids.”

“Wow,” says Patrick. “It’s such a *coincidence*, Mum, don’t you think? Gandalf’s girlfriend lives next door!”

“This is only to be expected,” says Tawny, looking smug.

Henrietta has been opening and shutting her mouth as her head moves from Tawny to Patrick and back again. “What?”

“When people start connecting through The Spirit. Coincidences are common amongst those of higher evolutionary status. We’re drawn to one another.”

“Actually,” says Henrietta, “Coincidences would be much more coincidental if they didn’t happen. And nobody thinks of all the times their paths cross with people they *don’t* know. And it was a local train...”

She would happily give a full lecture on statistics and probability, but she’s interrupted by a loud crash outside.

She knew it. Despite the surveyor’s reassurances, she’s been waiting for something to go wrong. The house is falling down. She rushes outside and onto the drive, and this is where she finds the metal poles which have just been dropped there by a large delivery truck.

Henrietta’s panicked expression and vaguely twitching hands aren’t enough to stop another load, and the noise as they land is immense.

“What the...? What’s going on?” she says as the mechanical arm swings back for more.

“Oh dear,” says Tawny. “I was hoping you wouldn’t mind. I don’t have a drive, you see, and you don’t have a car... Unless *you* ordered a marquee too?”

“A marquee?” says Henrietta.

“Yes,” says Tawny. “For the centre. My Psychic Dancing centre. In the back garden.”

Henrietta stares, and says nothing.

A man comes out of the house across the road. Good looking, long hair.

“Leo!” says Tawny.

He glances over, and Henrietta catches a glimpse of penetrating eyes.

“You’ll be wanting to meet Leo, Patrick,” says Tawny. “He knows Gandalf too. Leo! Come and meet your new neighbours!”

But Leo has turned away, is ignoring them and getting into his car.

“Leo, what’s wrong?” says Tawny again.

He checks his mirrors and drives away, barely acknowledging their presence.

But Henrietta is distracted by the truck, which is unloading something that looks like a Portaloo.

“What’s Psychic Dancing?” says Patrick.

“It’s a new kind of magic, and it’s going to change the world,” says Tawny.

“Wicked,” says Patrick. “Can I do it?”

“No,” says Henrietta.

“Actually, children are particularly good at it,” says Tawny. “And I could probably use some help over there...”

Henrietta feels guilty about having sent Patrick away as soon as they arrived in town. She feels simultaneously jealous, that other people have been entertaining him so well and that his focus is now on Tawny. She

feels surrounded by malevolent forces. She needs to take action, make something happen, stop all this chaos from spoiling her perfect new life.

“Wow,” says Patrick. “Can I try it, Mum? Can I join Tawny’s club? Can we have a marquee too?”

“No we *can’t*,” says Henrietta. “And *you...*” She turns to Tawny. “You can take your book and your dancing and your stupid marquee, you can stop trying to corrupt my son, and you can *damn well get off my property!*”

Tawny raises an eyebrow, and smiles.