

Chapter 1 - Outpourings

Dreams were her salvation and sleep a luxury. Nevertheless she woke at the first ring; on the second ring she chose to join the world; and on the third, not fully awake but ready for action, she answered flatly, "Doctor Tan. I'm here." Out of habit, she shuffled to a sitting position and looked for the ward-room light out in the corridor. The strip under the door wasn't there. She needed it to lift her mind fully into consciousness. A blown fuse?

Then she had it.

There was no corridor and there was no halogen strip. No worry about fuses. There was no hospital ward. She was no longer Dr Tan on call for the night shift. She was no longer actively Dr Tan at all. But it seemed sleeplessness was still an option.

How come? Who was she now? What could she be?

"I was told this was the number for the emergency plumber." The light baritone on the other end of the phone pulled at her thoughts.

Kai Tan weighed this possibility and knew it to be true. Here was a soul in need of rescue at an hour she knew well, using skills she had recently mastered. She licked her dry lips and forced moisture into her mouth, elbowed her way to the headboard and tried to gain her bearings. The wall clock was reflected in the wardrobe mirror opposite. Two dot dot thirty nine. The world and time was disturbed. It pretty much meant working at twenty to three on an early spring night time. Perfect.

She reviewed her existing plans: she'd been booked for an early job across the city. That meant a five thirty start anyway. Now she'd have to go directly from whatever emergency this was to the booking. It would be quite difficult to be fully alert without a little helper. Good to have a reason.

"You still there?" the man asked.

"That's right," she croaked positively. "Yes, that's me, the emergency plumber." There was just the gentle hum of her air purifier, and no coughing of patients, shuffling of ill people dragging drips to the toilet, the hushed tones of nurses swapping gossip at dimmed stations. "Let me get my pad and I'll take your details. Give me a moment." She leant across the bed and used the ambient light from her mobile to find her book on Proust, open with its spine in the air; then she opened a drawer to rummage for a pen.

"I was expecting a man," said the voice, unsure.

"Ah, all the men are asleep at this time in the morning, sunshine, so I'll sort you out. Promise. Just give me a quick idea of your problem, let me know where you live, and I'll be around; that's as long as you're within five miles of the city centre. That's the deal."

Kai put the mobile on speakerphone and, having found a pen, tore the back cover from her novel. She clicked on the reading lamp and waited to write. She could hear scuffling on the other end of the line, as though the phone was being scraped along clothing. There was the faint sound of a door opening, then a child's high-pitched crying, more muffling, plus indistinct yet heated exchanges, and ever more scraping sounds. Throughout the talk and disturbances, the child's cry remained a constant.

"Hello," Kai said. "Do you still need me?" She wrote a question mark and sketched three neat lines.

The caller came back on the line. "I was just speaking to my wife. She thought she might be able to plug the leak with some plastic bags, and, I'm embarrassed to say, socks. We're getting desperate here. We just want the water to stop."

"So, you've got a leak," said Kai. "Before we get to the details, have you turned your water supply off? There's usually a stop tap. You need to turn the water off at source."

"What? There's no tap I know of, unless I've forgotten. We've been in the house four days, it's all new. I'm in my daughter's room where the water's pouring out the wall. I put up a shelf yesterday. She's screaming like she has for the last hour; it's non-stop. We went in to see if we could soothe her and that's when we noticed the water. You can't miss it now. She won't stop screaming – the water won't stop pouring. I'm losing my mind. My wife's lost hers. The shelf's dropped an inch. Sodden ... What's her name? ... Beatrix Potter books. All the bedding's soaked. Every pan's full of water, and we keep emptying them in relays. The carpet's sodden ..."

"Listen to me, I hear you," Kai interrupted. "Every word. We'll take it one step at a time." She stopped talking and forced herself to listen carefully to the noise of the child screaming in the background. Then it was there, in her mind, as clear as a bell. "Tell you what, give me your address right now."

The caller gave her the location in a breathless ramble, then Kai heard scuffling sounds again. A woman's sobs added to the unhappy mix in the background, which turned to 'Give her to me' and 'stopcock', then there was more scuffling and a few choice swear words.

"Right, I've got it." She read back the details to double check, which the caller confirmed. "See you shortly. Pip." She released the man and shook her head. It was funny how you picked up and used words and phrases, she thought. *Pip*, no shorter than bye, but it seemed that way.

Kai pulled on her jeans and a fleece over her T-shirt, slipped her boots on without socks, gathered her van keys, and tapped all of her pockets – a force of habit. She padded down the small set of steps to the living room-diner and picked up her smaller bag of tools, leaving the larger, heavier canvas bag she'd set out for her early morning job as she didn't have the time to haul it. She'd pick it up later. She had no choice but to come all the way back across the city. Instead she made her way quickly to the left-hand locker by the entrance and took out her medical kit. The right-hand locker door opened in sympathy. She paused. Far back in the recess, behind a false panel, there were the little helpers. Maybe she could take one in case she was feeling too groggy. They were just there within an easy arms' reach.

To take her mind off the craving, she made a call and then moved as quickly as possible to get to her vehicle.

She was out of breath when she got to her half-on-the-pavement parked van, already planning her route. She felt no guilt as she opened the side door, tossed in her kits and slammed it shut. For once, the guy across the new build had left enough room for her to go straight out of the cul-de-sac. The diesel engine rattled the night air as she set off on her business.

There were many pleasures in being a plumber she'd decided, not long after taking up her new profession. One of them was driving a van. The view was higher up than in a regular car, so you felt like the king of the road, and could look down and into other people's vehicles while they picked their noses or fought with packets of crisps in their laps. This van had eight point

three cubic metres of space, so much more than her old Roadster. You could also get three people in the front, which made it a much more chummy proposition for travel. Not that she'd enjoyed this feature as yet.

She slowed for the speed cameras on Queen Elizabeth Way, but drove as fast as she dared the rest of the time, constantly vigilant for the police; she switched on her radar sensor. Its constant whine sat well with the repetition of the Philip Glass pumping into the cabin from the audio.

As she rounded corners, stray pieces of pipe and a couple of pressure fittings rattled around in the passenger side footwell, a bit like she herself in her new life. All the fixings and fittings - all the excess padding of her existence - had been stripped away, leaving her loose and jangling. If she'd placed a helper under her tongue, that would have glued her to reality. The chemical would have tightened up the loose connections and made her feel involved. It always had and always would.

She shook her head and said aloud, "No. No." The metal clanged to mock her.

Must concentrate on driving. Must attain as much speed as possible. Must get to the destination as quickly as possible. Must, must, must. Must concentrate.

Which was the fastest route?

She lived far out on the north-western edge of the city and the clients were close to the centre on the north-east. The outer city ring road would have been quickest, but a half mile section was out for refurbishment with a new junction and there were diversions and lights. She'd been caught out many times in the last month as commute pain morphed from one absurdity to another. Her instinct told her it was too volatile.

As the crow flew, it'd be longer to go through the centre, but she could cut through the wasteland, speed through the back roads and shoot out the other side. She'd certainly be moving all the time and not stood waiting. She'd be in control.

Plus, the old industrial heartland resonated with her. It had a lawlessness about it she enjoyed. Good, that was decided.

The parts rattled again. She didn't want to pull over and stow them. That would waste valuable minutes. She'd have to endure the annoyance. Time, that was a constant pressure whilst she'd been doctoring. Constant and relentless. What were the options? You could move faster or work longer hours. That was about it. This is why the helpers helped, at least in the short term.

Constant pressure.

She knew a lot about pressure; the scientific side, its practical application within the human body, and about metal pipework.

She was under pressure now - self-inflicted.

She was getting closer to her destination and further from the little helpers. The one a gain, and the other a loss.

Thankfully, no-one could measure the way she felt.

She had to put distance between her feelings and the desire for a little helper. Technical ruminations worked well. Nothing better. A patient at death's door with a difficult problem. That focussed the mind. It led to the need for help, and took the mind off the cravings when a little helper ran out. What a mess. What a mess she was. She blinked her tired, sandy eyes.

Technicalities. She could think about these. She would force herself to think of these things. Back to basics.

At its heart, pressure was how much force was applied over a given area. To calculate, one simply divided the one by the other. In Kai's head, equations and units and conversion tables vied for attention, robbing her focus on driving. In the real world, pressure systems worked all the time, from the circulatory system in animals to hydraulics in aircraft. But when these went wrong ... It was the problems that required the greatest skills to resolve. She considered: snags happened when other forces worked in opposition or when there was drop in pressure - a leak, or rarely: turbulence. Or too much, with sudden explosions. Kai mulled this over as she took a corner a little too fast. Moments later she reversed up a one-way to shave off a minute's journey time. And also as a means to keep her mind from missing the little helpers.

Keep the mind and body moving like an object in orbit. Organised free fall so one didn't crash to the surface. Constantly, constantly thinking, moving, dodging.

When she pulled off the artery of the dual carriageway and entered the outskirts of the industrial zone and then the wasteland, she marvelled at how the centre of a city could become red brick dust, roadways and huge architectural remnants. A once thriving heartland of human endeavour turned to desert.

She turned the full beams on and drove as fast as she dared, trying hard not to clip corners and keeping an eye out for stray bits of rock.

It felt good, breaking the rules. Every centre of habitation should have a place where anything went. Untrammelled with rules and regulations. Where one could pit one's wits against others or nature, or the elements, or oneself. Without fear of social recourse. Take risks and live. Free.

Ahead of her, an old warehouse loomed on the left hand side. In the scarce moonlight, it looked like a monster about to devour the roundabout she was approaching at a great rate. Behind the hulk of the building, she could see the glow of flyover lighting. Mercifully, she could as yet not see the actual ribbon of concrete, so her imagination could run full pelt around the unfolding environment.

She cruised alongside the low wall running alongside the warehouse and she slowed on approaching the roundabout. Kai was aware that she'd had her speed thrills because once she made her left turn she'd have to pick her way nimbly through multiple lane splits. Then she'd to take the correct flyover to connect with the through road to the north east of the city.

Nearly there.

She turned left and passed the bellmouth for the warehouse when the dark shapes darted in front of her. Despite her attempts to chivvy herself along - beating her own internal drums with gusto - she stood on the brakes. There was a clonk and donk as the geometry of the van was thrown into slight disarray and came into alignment once more. The something had just been crushed under the nearside front wheel.

If it was rubble, a lot of damage could have been done.

Great. An incident. Just when she least needed it. Well even if the vehicle was half driveable, then she'd have to limp along. There'd be no later appointment, only expense. But she had to get to that couple's house. As soon as possible.

Damn.

It would have been wiser to take the pedestrian route with all its known faults.

Damn and double damn.

She was going to carry on and hope there was no scraping sound and that the wheels actually turned.

And then she heard it. There above the strings of the recording, above the idling engine, above the whine of the radar detector.

A miaow. A plaintive, unmistakable miaow.

"For fuck's sake, I haven't time for this," she said as she threw off her seatbelt. She bent herself into a U and scrabbled around amongst the pipework in a frenzy of swearing and clinking metal. She knew there was an inspection torch. It was definitely there. She'd deliberately left it out. There. Once she had it, she threw open the cab door and rushed to the front to investigate what had happened.

A sorry sight greeted her.

The cat was burst. A bag of fur, grizzled from black to grey as the tyre had rolled over it. Entrails and glutinous sheen. Organic playdough all spilled out and artfully splattered.

So the miaow was its ghostly echo?

There was movement by the bloodied tyre. Kai approached the second cat. It lay down in front of the wheel and yawned.

"Was he your pal? I'm sorry I ran over him, I really am, but you've got to scarper from under the wheel or you'll be next." She raised her hands to scare the cat away. "I've got to go. I need to go now. Shoo. Shoo!"

The cat yawned and then nuzzled the tyre. Kai placed a boot under its belly and pushed it out of the way. The feline miaowed again and circled the tyre, before settling once more, this time alternately licking its paws and the tyre.

"Suit yourself."

Kai moved to the driver's side of her van and found the door closed. She didn't recall having shut it. Wind? There was none. Upon trying the handle, she found it was locked. "Shit." At a trot, she transited to the passenger door and tried that, also locked. "Fuck." She looked down at the cat which had changed its position and was looking up at her with bright, clear eyes. Its body was sprawled at its fullest extent. It was beautifully tawny.

"What are we going to do? Find a brick and smash the window? It'll have to be that, I'm afraid." Kai ran across to the wall and pushed at the brick work. She kicked with her foot and one dislodged. She picked it up and readied herself to smash in the passenger window when the cat mind again and a revelatory thought informed her of another option.

She tried the side door. With a satisfying click and a whoosh as the handle raised the door release and the panel slid on its runners, the van was mercifully breached. She tossed the brick behind her, bent her head and clambered aboard. She turned one eighty and with a grunt slid the door shut from the inside. At the very last moment, the cat leapt aboard.

"Looks like you're coming for a trip. Behave or you'll be joining your friend by design, not by accident. I'm warning you."

She clambered across the seats and contorted herself into the driver's seat; she placed the van in first, tore off the handbrake and whipped through the gears in even more agitation than before. They sped past the bellmouth of the road to the warehouse and in seconds were at the conglomeration of roads. The course through the lanes was completely clear and in short order, she was on track.

The cat leapt onto the passenger seat and miaowed again.

"Yes, I'll put my seatbelt on. Don't nag. Please."

She drove with the repetition of the Glass pushing her to make up for lost time. She bit her bottom lip as she ran a series of red lights, and she even made the van pull to sixty in a twenty zone. All the while she was alert for any patrols. On an impulse when she reached the outskirts of the new residential area and its warren of new-builds, she reached out and patted the cat's head. The creature acquiesced and then pushed its small skull up to match her greeting. Kai moved her fingers down to the cat's neck. No collar.

"You and your deceased pal must be miles away from home. Many more bricks than saucers of milk. She turned her head to regard her new companion. "Plenty of vermin though, hey?"

The cat purred.

Where had she been in her thoughts? She didn't like the idea of not completing a whole train of thought. That's where misdiagnoses occurred. You had to follow the trail all the damned way. Red riding hood went in the house - she didn't wait outside with the goodies, did she?

Make the force apply to a small area and you get a large pressure, or, alternatively, use the same area and apply more force to it. Tonight, she was hoping the latter would be true; with her as the force there should be a greater pressure. The area was the family she was about to visit.

When she arrived at the estate where she'd been directed, she searched for road signs and house numbers. It was a nice area with plenty of clipped bushes, block paving and named houses. As a new-build warren with everyone wanting their own identity, it would take too long to find the place without help. She spoke the address hastily, yet clearly into her phone, and let the GPS highlight her position and that of her target. She thanked the heavens when the map showed two pins side-by-side. She was only twenty metres away.

There was a nasty *thud* as the van mounted the curb alongside the house. She wanted to leave the drive free. The detached house had its lights on and she saw a flicker from a shape upstairs.

"Stay or go, but know it's a long trek back," she told the puss. "Pips." She loitered for a second. "If you're still here when I get back. That's your new name - deal?"

The cat said nothing, only looked at her with implacable eyes.

As soon as the door opened, she edged her way inside and moved up the staircase, speaking as she went. Water was running down the stairs and she could hear the cry of the child above.

"Where's the room with your daughter? I'm Kai of course. We spoke about your leak." The man who'd let her in followed on behind, playing catch up.

She didn't wait for a reply, and instead turned the corner of the stairs and followed the crying until she got to the source of the screaming. She snatched the door open to reveal a woman clutching a baby to her chest, rocking it this way and that, in the gloom. The woman was perched on the edge of a bed and water poured from a light fitting to the side of her. It looked macabre in the light cast from the hallway. The child's high pitched whimpering was constant, much more piercing than on the phone, as though the child was drawing breath at the same time as it was emitting its warning. The woman sobbed into the child's nightclothes.

Kai walked swiftly to the woman and bent down. "I'm here now. My name's Kai. How long has your child been crying like this?"

"She just won't stop. I tried liquidol pain-killer. Then this. An hour, maybe an hour and a half. It started as a small leak. Now it's huge. She hates it."

"Why are you in here with the water? Did you try another room?" Kai asked gently. She reached out and took hold of the baby's floppy bare arm.

"She wants to be in here. It doesn't make any sense." The woman made a wailing noise of her own in frustration.

Kai placed her bag on the bed and opened it up. She reached inside and unzipped a small pocket. "I want to have a little look at her, is that alright? Can I try something with a torch? "

"You must think I'm a bad mother. You come here to fix a leak and get all this drama," said the woman.

"Not at all. Here we go."

Kai flicked on the torch and passed the light briefly in front of the child's eyes. The wailing increased in intensity. She moved it again more slowly - away and back with the same result. Kai tossed the torch in the bag and took out a digital thermometer. She placed the point in the baby's ear and took the reading. It was thirty eight degrees.

"Can I take her for a minute?" Kai sat down next to the mother on the sodden bed.

She gave up her wailing infant with a sob. Kai angled the child to take advantage of the better outside hall light and gently pulled the nightclothes to examine her back. Kai ran her fingers along the child's neck and felt over her head. She smoothed the soft hair down softly. She returned the child and pinched her ear lobe with her nails.

"I'm confused about what's going on here," said the man with his hands on his hips, shouting above the din. "I thought you said you were here to fix the leak. What's all this about? Are you a plumber or not? We can't stand much more of this. It's upsetting Mathilde. "

"Listen; I was a doctor until a year ago, but that's not important. You've got to get ready for the ambulance. This might be meningitis. But please don't mention me, you understand. I just mend pipes - non human plumbing. Different pressures. Plumbing - at least for another four years. Do you understand? For your child, get ready to go now - the water's nothing. I left my lights flashing on hazard so they'll find your house quicker."

The man paused, then brought out his mobile.

"I rang before I got here. Every minute can count."

After she turned the stop tap off, Kai hid round the corner of the house and let the paramedics enter to deal with the child. Satisfied the way was clear, she sprinted across to her van. She'd learnt her lesson and left the driver's door ajar just in case. When she climbed into the driver's seat, she glanced across to see if the cat was still aboard. There was no sign.

She gave a little sigh. The slightest of releases.

Then when she was out of the estate, there was a distinctive sound from the back.

"Pips, you're coming home with me. You lucky tab."

