FERAL

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This book was written in my 80th year and naturally embodies some of my lifetime's interests and experiences. It is set in the Peak District of Derbyshire. I grew up in the village of Romiley, just outside Derbyshire, and I went to school at Hyde County Grammar School, whose intake area included the village of Tintwistle mentioned in the book. My friends, David Walburn, Paul Smith, Noel Yarwood, and I went on tramping trips to the Peak District in our oilskin bicycle capes, hob-nailed leather boots and uncomfortable triangular-metal-framed rucksacks. I spoke very much as the locals of Derbyshire still do. As a boy I roamed the local hills with my dog. I have seldom been without a dog in my life. Bruce, Bilbo, Meg, Sophie, Max, Nelson, Alex, Bonnie and Buddy have been my friends. My best friend, Quentin Grady, who sadly died of cancer many years before his time, was a man of remarkable intellect and compassion. He is dimly discernible in the character of David Button and he would have understood all the big words in my book. I would like to thank my friend, Mairi Fitzsimons, who looked at the first draft of this book with a different perspective, and suggested many ways in which it could be improved and made more accessible to my readers. To enjoy this book you have, I'm afraid, to accept the notion that a dog can be given enhanced intelligence and the ability to think as a human.

TOM PEARCE, TOM PEARCE, LEND ME YOUR GREY MARE.

IT WAS A pokey little cottage, the last one on the street that ran through the little village of Wensthorpe in the Peak District of Derbyshire. Centuries ago, poor people didn't have front gardens and the back garden was for growing potatoes, and before America was discovered, turnips, broad beans and nettles. Originally the cottage would have had only two rooms – the bedroom where the whole family slept, watched each other have sex, and had babies; and the other room where they did everything else, such as cook, eat, drink, wash, and stare at each other on wet days. The lack of privacy had not stopped generations of Entwhistles being conceived and born there, and often prematurely dying there. It must have been something in the water that ensured the continuing fertility. It was only the prevalent childhood diseases that kept the local population stable. The all-important little peat or coal stove would have boiled the kettle, heated the pot, and helped dry the clothes on the rack above it. You drew water from the well in the yard, and you would do well to boil it before drinking. If you wanted to empty your bowels or bladder, you used the privy which was essentially a plank over a large wooden bucket. It wasn't a pretty little picture book cottage. It was a cold, damp, nasty little Derbyshire millstone grit cottage.

Sometime last century it was modernised. A bathroom cum indoor loo was tacked onto the bedroom and a kitchen onto the other room. The place was wired for electricity and plumbed for water and sewerage. Now it could be put on the market as a charming, bijou, olde-worlde, character cottage with all mod cons.

The present owner and occupier was David Button, a recently retired antiquarian-book-shop owner. His was not a trade that produced millionaires and Moorside Cottage had been barely within his means. David lived alone. His wife, Neeve, (her parents preferred the English spelling) had died recently of pancreatic cancer and they had in fact divorced some years earlier. David was a highly intelligent, empathetic man. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of those subjects that interested him – ancient history, folklore, numismatics, archaeology, and a good understanding of most everything else. He was a kind if somewhat neglectful father and a loving and considerate husband. What was there not to like about him? Not a lot, unless you were a person of only average intellect who found his intensity, enthusiasm for his own interests, and his erudite language daunting. He was blissfully unaware of this. He didn't speak down to people. He treated them all as his intellectual equal, which of course they weren't and they knew it.

His marriage had never been a success. Because he was a near genius polymath didn't mean that he did not have a healthy sexual appetite. Logic should have dictated that he chose a mate of comparable intellect. When as a young man he chose a red-haired, busty, Irish Catholic girl, logic took a back seat. Neeve found his atheism disturbing although he never tried to make her abandon her Catholicism. They soon discovered that apart from an enjoyment of sex they had little in common. Contraception being an anathema to Neeve, she soon fell pregnant. She gave birth to Patricia, who was to be their only child. With her subsequent pregnancies Neeve suffered a series of stillbirths.

The doctors couldn't explain why, but speculated that their first child had set up some kind of antagonistic incompatibility between David's sperm and her eggs.

Patricia grew up to be a reasonably attractive, averagely bright young woman. She had avoided the religious tyranny of her mother's upbringing, but had inherited Neeve's red hair. As David Button's own mother had been a redhead, Patricia's colour scheme came as no surprise. David knew that he had probably fancied Neeve because subconsciously she reminded him of his own mother. Their only daughter, Patricia, and her husband, Neil, had thus far failed to provide David with a grandchild and heir to his non-existent fortune. David thought it extremely ironic that you could have such a thing as inheritable infertility. Neil's ancestry was Jamaican which David approved of as it lessened the chance of his prospective grandchildren suffering from skin cancer in a warming Britain. However those grandchildren were slow coming and Patricia and Neil were now resorting to in vitro fertilization. According to Patricia, you could count Neil's viable sperm on the fingers of one hand.

David had put his mark on Moorside Cottage. The living-room was filled with all the ancient books he had failed to sell and was loathe to part with, on the subjects of folk-lore, archaeology, and ancient history. The front door was graced with a somewhat kitschy brass door knocker in the form of a Celtic Green Man, his features intertwined with oak twigs. In the wee pebbled front garden, which was barely a metre short of the road, was a large boulder into which were set the pommel, grip, guards and first five centimetres of a sword. David was fully aware that there were no more centimetres lower down and that the sword, as it was, was bonded to its rock with very firm epoxy resin. Every boy in the village had tried to draw Excalibur from stone. Next to the rock was a small metal bowl which David used to feed scraps to the local fox. Until recently, Davis had been President of the Derbyshire Bronze Age Society

and he was still a very active member. It was also rumoured that he was a member of the Modern Druids of Britain.

Not too many kilometres away from David's cottage, a tall, elderly lady in a nightgown and gumboots lay dead on the ground bespattered with bird shit and a great cloud of white feathers. Her throat was ripped open and major blood vessels severed. There was blood copiously sprayed on everything including the shotgun next to her. Sooner or later, she would be found and the police would be informed.

The police station in Sheffield was a bit more than a little room with a couple of bobbies. It was a multi-storey building, headquarters of the South Yorkshire Police. On the third floor you will find an office bearing the name plate: D.S.I. Widecombe & D. S. Fair. If a stranger opened the door and went inside, he would see a tall, beefy, blonde man and a slim South Asian woman. He would instantly assume that the man was Widecombe and the woman Fair. He would be wrong. The slim Asian woman was Detective Inspector Sharda Widecombe and her partner was Detective Sergeant Dennis Fair.

Thirty-two-year-old Detective Inspector Widecombe's parents were both Sikhs. Her father, Gundeep Singh, was a doctor. Her mother, Aasa, was a housewife. Gundeep was employed by the Chelmsford Medical Centre. He had become aware that speaking with a pronounced Punjabi accent, wearing a turban, and having a full beard were not entirely conducive to easy relations with his patients, the majority of whom were elderly English ladies. He worked on his accent, removed his turban, cut his hair, and trimmed his beard. This is not at all uncommon among modern young Sikhs in in Britain, but thirty years ago it was a bit radical. He was, however, conservative enough to put his turban back on when he went to the temple. His wife continued to wear her sari on almost all occasions.

They naturally sent their daughter, Sharda, to an all-girls school, Chelmsford County Girls High School. She grew up speaking Essex

English surrounded by school mates of every ethnicity. Socially Sharda could play the Sikh when required but actually there was very little Sikh about her. She continued to look Indian of course and she never forgot the Punjabi she learned at home. In fact, her ability to speak it was a useful card to play in pursuing her police career. Sharda was very bright and excelled in her schoolwork, but she also enjoyed the sporting and social life of the school. She was in the soccer team, eventually becoming its captain. She was even approached after a school match by a scout from the Chelsea City Women's Soccer Club. She knew she would be the only Asian girl in the squad, and it wasn't that she didn't fancy a 'Bend It Like Beckham' moment, but she knew a career in football was not what she wanted. Gundeep had encouraged his daughter to try everything, as he was aware it would all look good on her resumé. She was on the school debating team, participated enthusiastically in the science fair, and was a member of the karate club.

Sharda Kaur at the age of 15 was a pain in the butt. I mean, what girl of 15, awash with hormones, and intent on rebellion against school and parental controls, isn't? In Sharda's case the situation was exacerbated by the views of her Indian parents. Her father, quite naturally, would have wanted her to follow in his steps as a doctor, and his wife was equally adamant that Sharda should make a good marriage to a nice Indian professional of their choosing, and both Gundeep and Aasa pictured their daughter then producing an unending line of little brown grandchildren. Neither of them had really thought through the implications of Sharda both pursuing a successful career as a doctor and at the same time becoming the progenitrix of a new dynasty.

Back home in India, family fertility was locked in place by social custom. Parents chose a husband. The daughter had no choice but to marry. Motherhood was the only career option and each extra child was a blessing. At least that was the case in a prosperous Indian family. As

in any country, an extra mouth to feed in a poor family was more of a curse than a blessing.

Sharda wasn't going to have a bar of any of their plans. At the age of 15 she had friends of every ethnicity, but those friends all had one thing in common. They wanted to fit in. If one of them wanted to dabble in cigarettes, alcohol, or party drugs, they all did. If her friends had boyfriends, then Sharda would too. Her naïve parents had thought they could shield their daughter from sexual involvement and preserve her for her arranged husband by sending her to an all-girls' school. How wrong they were. Boys ten kilometres downwind could scent such a concentration of female hormones as readily as a male moth can scent from miles away the wingless female wafting her enticing aroma molecule by molecule on the breeze.

Sharda gradually wore her parents' resistance down. First a sleep-over at a girlfriend's house, then a co-production of Les Misérables with the local boys' school. Then the occasional party loosely chaperoned by parents, and the school prom impossibly supervised by teachers. By the time she was 16, Sharda had a regular boyfriend, Brian Widecombe, a nice young man from the boys' school. The Singhs admitted that her choice could have been worse, especially when they learnt that Brian had plans on going to university and reading law. Her mother was not however emotionally prepared to find a packet of condoms in Sharda's bedside cabinet. Mrs Kaur found it very awkward to raise the matter with her daughter, but summoned up the courage.

"Sharda, I found some condoms in your bedroom."

"Mum! How could you? You aren't supposed to be rooting around in my things. I'm not a kid. I'm 16. I have a life."

"You won't have a life if people learn you are sleeping around."

"I am not sleeping around. I have one boyfriend. Who are these people? The nosey old biddies at the temple. My sex life is none of their business."

"But how will I find you a husband if you are not a virgin?"

"Jesus fucking Christ, Mum, why can't you get it? You are not going to find a husband for me, ever! I will marry who I want, when I like, and whatever he is. He could be white, Chinese, Nigerian or even a bloody Sikh."

Aasa never raised the subject again, but continued to harbour a secret disappointment. Sharda's next task was to equally disappoint her father. It is always a mistake for a parent to try and fulfil their own ambitions vicariously through their children. Gundeep saw his daughter studying medicine as a continuation of the family tradition. As a strong-minded, Western educated young woman, Sharda had different ideas. She insisted that she wanted, in fact, to become a police officer. On consideration, Gundeep and Aasa realised that this might in fact give her a distinct advantage in life. The competition to get into medical school was fierce, but to become a police officer for a bright young Asian woman would be a walk in the park. "Use your differences to your advantage," Gundeep advised.

Sharda took a BSc honours degree in criminology and forensic investigation at South Essex College, followed by an MSc in criminal psychology at the University of Portsmouth. It was here that she joined up with her old boyfriend, Brian Widecombe again. He was studying family law and family counselling. They decided to get married. Her parents somewhat disapproved at first, but warmed to the likeable young Englishman as a prospective son-in-law. They would have been happier if he had converted to Sikhism. When they married, it wasn't in the temple, Brian didn't convert to Sikhism, and Sharda took her husband's West Country surname.

All over Europe birth rates had been falling. It was a problem. Soon there would not be enough young people of working age to pay sufficient taxes to pay for the pensions of older people. It was a problem. Villages

in Italy and France were becoming depopulated and if you wanted to move there, the community would almost give you a house. Then there was the second problem of legal and illegal immigration, except it wasn't such a problem because it was inherently the answer to the first problem. It was almost as though nature disliked the idea of falling populations and had discovered a method to halt the decline.

Then nature had a second incentive in the form of hybrid vigour. If only you could get the incoming migrants to mate with the existing human stock you would have very healthy hybrid offspring. Of course colour, language, costume and in particular, religion, interposed barriers to such happy miscegenation. Send all the kids to the same school however, and in a couple of generations at most the barriers all come crashing down.

Detective Sergeant Dennis Fair was a big bloke, 6 foot 3 and beefy with it. He looked every inch, all 75 of them, the West Country yokel he in fact wasn't. Dennis was a year older than Sharda and unmarried. Despite his rugby player appearance, he was very bright with a keen sense of humour. He too was well educated, with a B.A. in English from University College London. His first job was as a secondary school teacher, but it didn't suit his temperament and he had retrained for the police force by taking a second degree, a BSc in criminology. Thus, he was somewhat behind Sharda both in police experience and in rank.

When everybody stopped laughing, or at least silently grinning, at the unfortunate police partnership name of Widecombe Fair, they naturally assumed that the Widecombe would be Dennis and the Fair Sharda. It was ironically the opposite way round. It was obvious that some devious wit in the higher echelons of the police force had paired them together in the first place because of the traditional juxtaposition of their surnames. Despite that, they formed a solid, harmonious partnership. The vagaries of promotion saw both of them now working together for the South Yorkshire Police in Sheffield. They both ruefully acknowledged