

**Tainted Love**  
a novel  
by Anna Chilver

**Prologue**

It was the end of the summer, a hot spell when the days burned up the grass on the hillside and the nights had us sweating in our stone houses as though they were stacks of glass boxes. I turned and turned, unable to sleep, and the cotton sheets stuck to my body and bound my legs. I thought of Peter sleeping in the open, of him and his dad night-running under the stars, creating coolness in their wake, a coolness that would have dissipated by the time the coffee was on, and the bus passed the end of our street taking folk to work.

I wished I could run like Peter.

I closed my eyes and fell into an uneasy sleep.

In my sleep I was visited by a man and a boy. The boy was tall and good-looking, about my age or older. He sat on the end of my bed and looked at me but said nothing.

The man roamed about the room. Neither seemed aware of the presence of the other. The man had brown trousers fastened with a belt and a short sleeved check shirt which only just stretched across his belly and left a triangle of exposed flesh. He seemed agitated.

I lay in bed and looked from one to the other.

'Who are you?' I said.

The boy still said nothing. His eyes were dark and glinted with reflections of the street light outside my window.

The man stopped next to my bed and stood over me. He said 'I just want you to know, it's not what I wanted. I didn't choose this.'

'What?' I was alarmed and struggled into sitting position. 'What are you talking about?'

'I'm your mother's nightmare. But it's not my choice or hers. If we could, we would separate. She would come back to you.'

'My mother?' I was fully awake now. 'What have you got to do with my mother? Why are you here?'

'She sends a message,' said the man. 'She wants you to know that she loves you.'

I leaped out of bed and flew at him, beating against his chest with my fists.

'Get out! Get out of my room. Get out of this house and don't ever come back.'

His chest was huge and solid and I felt like a child.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'Truly.'

He turned and walked out of the room.

The boy hadn't moved.

'Well?' I said.

He smiled and I felt pain rush through me. I ran to the window and threw it open wide. In the garden the night stocks were trembling and the hawthorn tree whispered a warning.

I looked back and he had gone.