

The Cleaner

Mark Warren

The haul was astonishing. Kaz couldn't remember when a stash of this size had last been discovered. The room must have been nearly 10 metres long. Flowers adorned the entire length creating a kaleidoscope of shapes and colour. There were tall ones, small ones, singles and doubles, spiky ones and fragrant ones. All illegal contraband since the passing of the Oxygenation Law.

Subtle fragrances interwove as she walked the length of the room. Either side were table tops lined with newspaper and engulfed in plant life. Her half-memories of flowers before they were outlawed were smothered by the experience. She let her fingers brush against the leaves as she walked. Colleagues hurried around documenting the finds, calculating the kilograms of oxygen per year that could have been emitted from the flora.

Through the leaves and petals she read a faded headline on a yellowy-brown newspaper crusted on the table top beside her: "Oxygen up \$1000 per kilogram—crisis in government as fat-cats line their pockets." After oxygen had become a commodity to be traded, the companies that manufactured it, together with the government, won a string of court cases that resulted in people requiring a licence to own or grow any oxygenating plant. Gardens had disappeared under swathes of concrete. Ordinary people were no longer able to afford plants and the price of oxygen rose relentlessly.

Kaz meandered with the path to return to the entrance. She wondered how it had all remained secret until now. Kaz sighed. She felt privileged and sad to be the last to see it.

The room had emptied of people and only she and the contraband remained. She took a last look before flicking the switch on her shoulder, pointing the nozzle and pulling the trigger. Nothing cleanses like fire.