



THE
CRAVING

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In many ways, her Craving was an addiction like any other. She longed all day to feed it; she cried out for it during pain-drenched nights. Her body demanded it, however hard she tried to suppress the urges which, wave after devastating wave, threatened to overwhelm her.

Like any all-consuming addictions, it was eating away at her from within. More to the point, it was destroying others. Lives were being ruined as a result of her depravity. Addictions always have casualties: the marriage falling apart through drug-use, the victim of the mugger in search of easy cash to feed his habit; even friends and family put at risk from passive smoking. But her addiction was different, the danger to others more immediate and far more damaging.

For, since that night she had been down on her knees in her hallway, scrubbing away at the congealed tissue and fluids splattered over her carpet, she had longed for blood. Human blood. And her donors were far from willing.

#

Take Clive, for instance. He had been willing at first. Very willing, in fact. But that was before he had found out what she had in mind for him.

They had met last night in a club in Canterbury. She wasn't sure which one. She never went to the same place twice, so it was hard to remember the names of the pubs and clubs she had visited. It was somewhere near the train station. Two or three dance-floors, no CCTV as far as she could tell. He thought he had chosen her, of course, but he was mistaken. She had picked him out, flashed some flesh, gave him the Look, and waited for the inevitable.

He had had a few to drink, but not too many. She needed him sober enough to be able to walk back to her car without drawing attention to himself. She needed him to want her. She had tried in the past to choose men who hadn't been all wandering hands and clumsy chat-up lines, but she had to work a little harder to get them back to her place if they weren't desperate to get between her legs. Besides, it wasn't the same somehow. They tasted different if they were nice. And she felt even guiltier afterwards. So now she was after bad boys every time, however much they might irritate her in the short-term.

Clive was younger than most. By the look of him, he may well have been asked to show his ID to get into the club. She usually preferred older men, but on this occasion the place had been quiet (everyone was broke after Christmas), and he was the best of a not-too-promising bunch. It had to be tonight, she couldn't wait any longer than that. He would have to do.

Like several of his predecessors, he'd touched her up in the car, running his hand up her bare thigh as she drove him back to hers, his fingers brushing against the lacy material of her thong. He tried to probe further, but she closed her knees, trapping his hand.

"Later," she told him. She was in control. It was important that he understood that.

"I'll hold you to that," he grinned at her. She smiled back, without warmth. He thought she was sharing the joke, but all she could think of was his fresh warm blood trickling down her throat. Putting up with his clumsy advances was a small price to pay for a prize like that.

She parted her legs a fraction so she could change gear, releasing his hand, hoping he wouldn't see this as an invitation to renew his fumbling. He contented himself with stroking her thigh. She was becoming a little aroused now, but it was hard to say whether it was as an instinctive reaction to his hand on her body, or whether it was in anticipation of what was to come. Probably a combination of the two.

It took half an hour to drive home, all just within the speed limit to avoid any unwanted attention from the police. He was all over her the moment the ignition was off, pressing his lips against hers, all greedy tongue and exploratory hands. She responded for several seconds, just enough to keep him on the boil, but then put her hand against his chest and pushed him back a few inches.

"We don't want the neighbours complaining," she said playfully.

"I can't see what they'd complain about. They should be paying for the privilege of seeing you with your tits out."

"They're not out – yet," she pointed out. She didn't like it when they were crude, but she was very good at hiding the irritation from her voice. Besides, it made it that little bit easier to do what she was just about to do to him.

"Only a matter of time, though. It's the old Miller Magic. Never fails."

He leant over the driver's seat, and slapped her mini-skirted bottom as she got out of the car. "I'm gonna have me a slice of that ass when we get indoors!"

Okay, she thought, maybe it will be a LOT easier to do it now. Keep up the sexist clichés, Clive, and I might not even feel guilty at all this time round. She made a mental note never to pick up anyone younger than their mid-twenties again (and certainly not a teenager), if this is what the younger ones were like. She was only twenty seven herself, but she felt a generation removed from him.

They went inside. He groped her as she opened the door. Clumsy and a little rough. Selfish. There was nothing for her in that at all. Again, she had to mask her exasperation, as his shadow fell over the lock, making it difficult for her to slide the key into place. Any sexual urges she had felt in the car had long since vanished. She wasn't keen on being dry-humped in her own porch.

The light went on in next-door's front bedroom. She smiled to herself. They would have company soon. Let's see how Clive liked that. Angie would know how to dampen his ardour pretty damn quickly.

The key penetrated the lock. A quick turn, and the door was open. She made straight for the stairs. Sometimes, she would linger in the lounge for a while, enjoying the attention, prolonging the moment. Anticipation was a wonderful thing, and it was good for her confidence too. But not tonight. He was too selfish, too immature. She'd get him into the bedroom, and finish him off as soon as she could. But not in the way he would be expecting.

"Straight to the bedroom?" he asked, as he followed her up the stairs. "You dirty bitch!"

He really wasn't helping himself. Any remote chance he had had of a last minute reprieve had been well and truly dashed. But she gave him her sexiest smile. And imagined the taste of him

on her tongue.

She shed her clothes as she climbed the steps. She was naked by the time she entered the front bedroom. He took this as a sign she was eager for sex, rather than eager to be rid of him. He'd know soon enough, though. He threw off his tee-shirt at the top of the stairs, and nearly fell over trying to get his jeans off as he came through the door. They got snagged on his trainers, he tottered, and put his hand out to the bed to keep himself from falling over.

Whilst he was attempting to remember how to undress, she slid open the drawer of the wooden cabinet by the double-bed, and produced a pair of dark gun-metal hand-cuffs. "Play-time," she announced, as he finally succeeded in pulling his jeans free.

He sat there on the edge of the mattress, wearing just his socks and trainers, the first hint of uncertainty on his face. "That's not really my bag," he said. "Let's just fuck." The charmer.

"I'll make it your bag," she replied. She crawled seductively across the bed towards him. "I'm going to do things to you tonight that you're going to remember for the rest of your life."

She reached his side. She rubbed her hand-cuffs across his body, letting him feel the cold metal against his skin. He trembled, in a good way. So did she. She was close; so close. Soon, she would have his warm red liquid inside her, healing her, damping down the Craving until the next-time round. It was almost too much to bear.

She slipped the cuffs over his right wrist. She waited a second to see if there was any resistance. Nothing. He would be one of the easier ones; one or two of them had even wanted to use them on her. She locked the other metal bracelet around the ornate iron bed-head. She pushed him back on to the mattress, manoeuvred him onto his back, and then went fishing for the second pair of handcuffs in the top drawer so she could secure his left wrist, too. No sign of them. That was sloppy; she would have to be more careful in future. Putting one hand on the floor to steady herself, she leant over the edge of the bed to check out the contents of the bottom drawer.

She felt his free hand on her hip from behind her. It roved over her bottom, between her legs. She squirmed a little, as his finger slid inside her. She was ready, but not for this. She felt no desire for him at all now; his blood was all she wanted. She swatted his hand away.

She heard the front door open and close downstairs. She looked over her shoulder at Clive. She smiled at him to reassure him. He looked worried. Very worried. He had sobered up instantly, which was dangerous when he still had one hand free. The only consolation was that he was no longer trying to touch her with it.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

She went back to the drawer, desperate to secure his other wrist before Angie appeared. She knee-shuffled a couple of feet away from him in the process, just out of his reach on the bed. Better safe than sorry. Where were those other cuffs?

"There's someone there. You told me you live alone."

"I do. It's no-one. The cat."

“Cat’s don’t open doors. Okay, this is getting a bit freaky. Get the handcuffs off.”

“We can still play.”

“Get the cuffs off!” he shouted at her. He was starting to panic. It frightened her. But, somehow, it excited her at the same time.

She spotted the second pair of handcuffs on the floor, over in the corner where they had been discarded on their last outing. Too late for them now. It would be too dangerous getting them on his other wrist. They’d have to manage without them. Angie would know what to do. She always did. As always, she felt all the predatory power, all the control, seep out of her now her friend was on her way. Angie’s will was so much stronger than hers. She had played her part in getting him here, and her friend would take over now.

Angie entered the room, hiding something behind her back. Late forties, fifteen stone or so, shapeless brown hair-style; the type of woman you might see under normal circumstances without really noticing her. But Clive noticed her. He tried to cover himself up with the duvet, using his free hand, wrapping himself up like a human sausage roll.

Angie smirked.

“Oh, come on, Kate. You’ve usually got pretty good taste. But this one’s about twelve!”

“I’m nineteen,” snapped Clive. “Who the fuck are you? Get out of here, before I kick your ass.”

“Ah, the little boy sounds cross. I know what you’re thinking. Some woman bursts in on you, catches you in the act, takes a few photos and posts your knob all over YouTube. You wouldn’t want your mummy to see that, would you?”

“Don’t even think about it! Get out. While you can still walk.”

“Don’t worry. That’s not going to happen. No YouTube debut for your flacid little friend down there. What goes on in this room, stays in this room. Isn’t that right, Kate?”

Kate nodded in obedient agreement.

“You came too soon,” she told Angie. “I’ve only got one of his wrists cuffed.”

“Not to worry. So, what’s your name, little boy?”

“Fuck off.”

“What a pretty little name.”

She produced a syringe from behind her back. “But enough of this small-talk. Do you wanna play with your Auntie Angie?”

Clive went from nought-to-hysterical in an instant. He rattled his cuffs against the bedstead in a desperate attempt to free himself. Angie screamed in delight. “Look, he’s putting up a fight, bless him. This is gonna be fun. It’s boring when they just lie back and take it like a man.”

He rolled off the side of the bed to which he’d been handcuffed, determined to fight her off. Angie took a step backwards, to what she considered to be just out of arm’s reach. She got it

wrong. He grabbed her free wrist, pulling her towards him. Kate seized her friend's other arm – the one with the syringe – and frantically tried to pull her free.

Angie shook her off, and laughed all the more. She seemed totally unfazed by the fight he was putting up. “Are you two fighting over me? It’s nice to be wanted.”

Clive released her wrist, and made a grab for the syringe. She pulled her hand backwards, keeping it just out of range. She tried to step backwards out of harm's way, but Kate was inadvertently blocking her. He seized her left wrist again, to stop her from escaping out of his reach.

“Stalemate,” he said, daring her to contradict him.

“Oh, I don't think so.” She swung her free arm at him with all her strength, aiming for his bicep. He released her wrist instinctively, raising his arm to try to block her, but he was too slow. The syringe missed his arm completely and dug into his ribs. He howled in pain and surprise.

Angie took a couple of steps back from him, shunting Kate back against the wall behind her as she retreated.

“Will it work?” Kate asked nervously, as she struggled free. “Does it have to be in his arm?”

Angie shrugged. “Buggered if I know. Don't see why it shouldn't. Flesh is flesh.”

Clive's eyes started to glaze. He panicked still further. Time was short. He had to get out of here, before these two psychos did whatever it was they were planning on doing to him. He braced his feet against the floor, and pulled the bed towards him, heading for the door a step at a time.

“Should you stab him again?” Kate asked anxiously. “Stop him escaping?”

“He can't escape,” Angie said.

“He can. He's out the door already.”

“He might be,” her friend replied, “But the bed isn't going anywhere.”

Clive had made it out on to the landing, but the bed he was towing was braced against the inside of the doorway. He gave it a couple of despairing tugs, but the bed was twice the width of the doorway, and no amount of pulling and shoving was going to make a difference.

“He could still get out if he tipped it up on his side,” Kate argued. “It would go through that way.”

“Nice one, Kate,” Angie sighed. “Maybe we should help him carry it as well?”

With renewed hope, Clive started to tip the bed over on to its side. But the syringe was taking effect. His legs buckled, and he fought to stay on his feet. He tried again. This time, he managed to get the bed upright. He stood next to it for a few seconds, supporting its weight while he tried to marshal his strength for one last push. But then he was down, the bed toppling on top of him. He struggled to push it off him, without success. One last thrash of his protruding legs, and he was unconscious.

Kate giggled nervously, the predator in her long gone. "All I can see is a mattress with feet sticking out. It looks funny."

Angie raised her eyes. "Hilarious. Right, let's get him chained up properly, and then you can get my stuff in here. You'll need a drink after all that messing about."

Kate nodded, and left the room.

"We'll have to be quick, Babe," her friend hurried her along. "Hubby would sulk for days if he knew I've been leaving the house out after dark. You know what babies men can be!"

#

Kate awoke. She groped around the top of the bedside cabinet for her alarm clock, and found the light button. It was 3.52 am.

She usually spent an eternity getting to sleep, and would then wake up round about now, convulsed with stomach cramps after just an hour or two of rest. No stomach cramps now – she had "fed" - but she supposed her body-clock was telling her it was time to get up anyway. Insomnia is a hard habit to break.

She snuggled down beneath the duvet. It was warm and womblike. She closed her eyes, and willed herself to sleep, without success.

Her mind started wandering to the events of that evening. The "pull", the ride home, Clive's escape attempt. They would have to be more careful in future. What if he had grabbed the syringe off Angie, threatened to inject her unless she released him, threatened to hurt her friend unless she set him free? She would have had to let him go, she couldn't let Angie get hurt because of her. And then the police. A trial. People spitting at the police van; they did that with people like her, she had seen it on the news. And then prison. Forever. They'd have her down as a sex-offender, because she handcuffed her victims to the bed, but that wasn't what it was about. That wasn't what she wanted at all. Sure, she got a little horny sometimes in anticipation of what she was about to do, but she never let them inside her. That was the Rule (well, one of many, actually). Don't get too close, physically or emotionally. It was hard enough as it was, without complicating things still further by risking developing feelings for them. Besides, Angie would go mental if she caught her "in the act" with one of her conquests. She was quite possessive like that.

She thought of Clive downstairs. He should be unconscious. Angie knew her drugs, after all. But she always worried that one of them would wake up one night, screaming his head off in the early hours, struggling to get free. Angie said to finish them off if that ever happened, but she didn't know if she could. Yes, she'd been responsible for a dozen or so deaths in her time, but they'd always gone slowly, one fluid ounce at a time. No violence, apart from the thrashing around when they saw Angie with the needle. Could she actually finish them off if it came to it? Maybe. Maybe not.

And then there was the guilt. She felt no remorse at the time, of course. Just thirst. But once they were safely secured, and she had "fed", the remorse came flooding in, almost overwhelming her. How could she do this to another human being? How could she be so vile, so depraved, as to turn her spare bedroom into an abattoir, killing an innocent stranger just to feed her habit? But Angie would always talk her round, pointing out that she could no more

help herself than (cue any number of slightly clichéd analogies involving foxes and chickens, dogs and rabbits – and, rather inexplicably – a cartoon penguin and dancing, on one occasion).

She put on the light. Once she started dwelling on the guilt, there was no way she would be able to go back to sleep. She got out of bed, and slipped on her dressing-gown. There was actually no point in putting it on; she was only going to check on Clive, and as he should be very much unconscious then there was no real need to cover up her body first. But there was always that slim chance that he might be awake, and for reasons she never really understood she was reluctant to risk them seeing her naked once she had started feeding on them. It didn't seem right, somehow. Indecent. Unclean. Another Rule to comply with.

She went down to the first floor, and into the spare bedroom. She put the light on in the hallway, but not in the bedroom itself. The light was unlikely to wake him, but why risk it? He was still in bed, lying motionless on his back. At least he was getting a better night's sleep than she was. There was a cannula in his arm, a tube, a bag-on-a-stand by the side of his bed, which was half-full of blood. It always reminded her of a colostomy bag, but the liquid inside was of a different kind entirely.

By taking just a little blood at a time, she could support her habit for a week or two. Then he would die, as had all the others. She wasn't totally sure why. She assumed it was blood-loss, but always had her suspicions that Angie just upped their dosage of anaesthetic to finish them off, to force her to go and find someone new. Angie was very good at looking after them, of course. She dealt with all the drugs, and even gave them bed-baths and such-like to stop the room smelling of faeces and death. But it was the thrill of the kill that she loved. If it wasn't for the kick she got out of injecting them when they were thrashing about the bed in terror, Angie would have cashed in her chips long ago.

She swapped the bag for a fresh one, and took the used one back down to the kitchen. She washed her mug; it always had to be the blue coffee mug for this; nothing else would do. That was a Rule, too. She filled it almost to the brim with the still warm liquid inside the bag, and took a swig. She felt better straightaway. Calmer, more relaxed, at ease with the word. This was her anaesthetic, just as Clive had his which was keeping him manageable upstairs. As long as she had this, she could cope with the guilt, the nightmares, the fear of either being found out or being murdered in her bed by an escaped and vengeful victim.

She turned off the light in the kitchen, and made her way back upstairs to bed, sipping on her coffee mug of blood as she went. She was feeling tired now. It was time to close her eyes, and pray for dreamless sleep.

#

She awoke again at 5.34am, to the sound of smashing glass. Either someone was breaking in, or someone was breaking out. She didn't know which would be worse.

Being burgled was horrible. Her mother's house had been broken into when she was about nine (her father had been ordered to move out by then). It had been during the day when she was at school, but it had still screwed her up big-time when she got home. What if they came back that night? Without her Daddy there, anything could happen.

One worry she didn't have when she was nine, however, was that the burglars would find a half-drained man chained up in her bedroom. She had to deal with this somehow. Whatever happened, she couldn't let them make it to the spare bedroom. But how to stop them? She was less than nine stone (she always shed weight drastically between victims), and – despite being a blood-sucking monster – was very, very scared right now.

She looked round the bedroom for something to use as a weapon. A cheap little bedside light. Not much use. Hair straighteners? That was hardly likely to make them turn round and flee in terror. Not unless they had a thing about curly hair.

There was nothing. Nothing she could use at all.

She made her nervous way to the top of the stairs, and peered down them. Silence. It was too dark to see anything. She turned on the light. Let them know she was up here. Maybe they'd run away. Leave her safe and sound inside.

She went to the front window, and peered outside. Nothing there. And then the back. It was still dark out there; the sun hadn't risen yet. But there was movement, she was almost sure of it. Someone was standing by her kitchen window, trying to get in.

A fresh surge of panic. What to do? She could hardly call the police, not with Clive downstairs. Angie would love it if she did, she was such an adrenaline junky, but it would be far too –

Angie! Angie would know what to do. She always did.

She grabbed the phone by her bed, and hit speed-dial (it was the only number she had programmed in). It rang once, twice, three times. Pick up, pick up! He could be inside by now! The answer-machine kicked in. Angie's voice. Sorry we're not home right now. Please leave a message...

Maybe she'd pick up her mobile, if she'd left it on over-night. She rang the number. As she waited and prayed for Angie to answer, she went back to the back window. The burglar was still there, standing just a few feet from her kitchen window. He had a balaclava on. Dark clothes. He was fumbling in his pocket. Got out his phone. Surely he wouldn't be taking calls at a time like this?

"Hello?" It was Angie. Thank God. She was on the phone.

"Angie, come quickly, I'm being burgled. He's right outside. I can see him now."

The burglar looked up at her. Pulled off the balaclava. Gave her a wave. No. It couldn't be.

"Angie?"

"Give us a wave, Babe. It's kind of lonely out here."

"Is that you? Burgling me?"

"Sort of. Can you let me in? I've not got the key to your back door, and it's a bit tricky going round the front when I'm dressed like that bloke from the Black Magic adverts. Or was it Milk Tray?"

“What the fuck are you doing robbing me?” She’d sworn. She didn’t usually risk swearing at her friend. Angie didn’t like it, even if it was in jest. But if ever she was justified, it was right now. Breaking into her house while she was asleep! Angie knew how nervous she got at night-time, with strangers in the house.

“I’ll explain everything in a minute. Put the kettle on when you come down, Angel. All this house-breaking is thirsty work.”

#

They sat at the kitchen table, a coffee mug in front of each of them. Angie had the mug which she had bought for Kate, but which her friend had refused to use. She had designed it herself online. On one side, it said “Men Suck!”; on the other, “Vampires Swallow!” Kate’s mug was plain brown. No caption, no fuss. The blue one was just for blood, and she had to preserve her supply as long as she could. She would cheerfully have thrown away the vampire one, but Angie would be hurt. As long as she didn’t have to use it, she could live with it though.

“Okay, let’s hear it. Why are you smashing my windows in the early hours of the morning? Why are you smashing my windows at all?”

“Only one of them, Babe. Just a little break. I woke up early, couldn’t get back to sleep.”

“I know the feeling.”

“Trouble sleeping again?”

“Never mind that. Tell me why you’re smashing up my house.”

“Well, I had this idea. It’s getting harder for you to find men, right? You can’t go to the same place twice, and you’re having to go further and further afield to find your next little friend. So I thought, if it’s tricky for you to go and find them, why not bring them to you?”

“So you smashed my windows?”

“So I smashed your windows.”

Kate took a deep breath, and a swig of tea. She’d assumed that there had been some point to her friend’s bizarre behaviour, but you never really knew with Angie. She decided to persevere. “Why?”

“Because now you have an excuse to phone the double-glazing people and get someone to come out to fix the window. And when they come out, we stab them with a syringe and serve them up for your tea.”

“I’m not a cannibal, for fuck’s sake!”

Angie gave her a look. The look of a parent deciding whether to reprimand an errant child. Better not risk swearing again, Angie might say something next time. Better to bite her tongue, than that.

“Of course you’re not. Vampire, then.”

“I’m not a vampire either.”

“No? You won’t go out in the day-time. No mirrors up in here. Oh, and most of all, you chain men up and drink their blood. Sounds like a vampire to me!”

“I had chicken-Kiev for my tea.”

“Which is relevant why|?”

“I’m not afraid of garlic.”

Angie fell off her chair, snorting with laughter. Kate allowed herself a smile. She liked making people laugh. It was so much nicer than making them scream or beg for mercy. It was good to be normal once in a while. She waited as Angie retook her seat, dabbing the spilled tea from the table with the sleeves of her black jumper as she did so.

“Where were we?” Angie asked.

“You were telling me why I’m a cannibal.”

“Vampire.”

“Chicken-Kiev eating vampire.”

Angie chuckled again. “Okay, so maybe you’re not the same as other vampires. You’re a domestic vampire, who alternates between blood and oven-ready meals. But there’s no use you trying to change the subject. Give me one good reason why you can’t get a window man round for a nice bit of syringing.”

“I’ll give you three. In reverse order. One, I can’t afford to pay to have my windows repaired.”

“I thought of that,” Angie reassured her. “I was going to nick some of your stuff, so you could claim on the insurance. I’d give everything back, of course. The problem is that I couldn’t get in. I broke the window in the wrong place, so I couldn’t get near the lock. And you’ve not left the key in it anyway. And I’m not sure I could get my leg over the window-sill even if I’d got the window open. So it didn’t work out quite as well as I’d hoped.”

“I’m not insured.”

“Well take out insurance today, and I’ll rob you tomorrow instead.”

“It would be wrong. I’d get in trouble.”

“You can drain someone’s blood, but you can’t claim on your own insurance? That’s a crap reason. What’s the next one?”

“If they sent a man here to fix my windows and he went missing, where do you think the police would want to look first?”

“We’d say he never arrived here. That he must have had a car accident or something. They’ll believe that. Men drive like idiots.”

“And you think that would get me off the hook, do you? That they wouldn’t search this house, and find a bloke upstairs, chained to my bed?”

Angie nodded. “I do. The police are stupid. Flash your eyelashes at them, show them a little thigh (maybe your tits if you have to), and they’ll believe everything you say. I know I would. If I

was a bloke, I mean.”

“And if it’s a police-woman?”

“Same thing. You’d turn them, even if they were straight. You’re gorgeous, Angel.”

“You’re deranged.”

“And you’re a vampire. We make a good couple. Anything else?”

“How do you mean?”

“You got to “Second”. Just wondered if there was a “Third” before we call the glass people?”

“Okay, thirdly, I’ve already got someone upstairs already. You remember him. He tried to pull the bed down the stairs last night.”

“The delectable Clive, you cradle snatcher. So what? Look, if I’m hungry, and Hubby’s not around to cook for me (not that he’s ever out on his own, but you get the point), I phone for a take-away. Do I have just the one take-away menu? No. Do those menus just have one thing to eat on each of them? Do they fuck! Why restrict myself to sweet and sour when I can choose pizza or Indian or kebabs instead? Why should you be any different? I worry that you’re not getting the variety you should. Wouldn’t it be nice to sit here, thinking “do I fancy a wine-glass of Clarence or a mug of Clive this evening?”

“I don’t think we’re going to get a Clarence from the glass-shop.”

“An “Andy” then. You’re missing the point on purpose. It’s all about choice nowadays. Why should you be any different? Why have one piece of chicken, when you could have a whole bargain-bucket?”

Kate stared at her friend, trying to decide if she was serious. Angie smiled back at her. She resisted the temptation to get up and go back to bed. She’d never get back to sleep now anyway.

“So where would I sleep if both my beds have men in them?”

“Round mine. Trevor won’t mind. He likes you.” There was a slight edge to her voice for this last sentence. There had never been anything between her and Trevor, but Kate avoided eye contact anyway. She had enough to argue about without raking that up, too.

“So I just use my home as a larder?”

Angie nodded. She was relaxed again. “A man-larder. Genius, isn’t it?”

“And what if they wake up, and there’s no-one here to notice because we’re both round yours?”

“They won’t. I’ll give them an extra dose; make doubly sure they’re out for the count. They might not last as long that way, but so what? There are plenty more fish in the sea. We just grab another couple, and we’re up and running again. Even more choice that way. You could have two new ones to choose from every week.”

“Don’t you think the glass-shop might get suspicious after the first dozen or so go missing?”

“It doesn’t have to be windows. There’s all sorts of people we could phone. Insurance salesmen, gardeners, window-cleaners. Maybe you could even buy another bed, and have three of them on the go at once. We could have the bed-delivery people, too, that way.”

Kate got up. She’d had enough. She wasn’t totally sure if her friend was just saying all this to wind her up. The broken glass on her carpet suggested she was serious, but the plan was utterly suicidal! She’d be lucky to last a week before she was caught. She would just go to bed and pretend to sleep, until Angie had given up and gone back home. Hope that she’d forgotten the whole sorry idea by the time they next met up.

But maybe she’d stop in on Clive on the way up and have a quick sip of the red stuff as a belated night-cap. Angie’s ideas were, of course, wildly impractical (and bordering on the deranged!), but the thought of having two or three people here to feed from at once had made her very thirsty indeed.

#

She woke up at 10.00am. There were raised voices downstairs. Angie was complaining loudly (it was the only way she knew). Clive! He’d escaped! She leapt out of bed, and raced down the stairs to the spare bedroom. Clive’s door was shut, but Angie was still arguing downstairs. “No!” she was saying. “I’m not having this.”

What was going on?

She hurried down the stairs to the ground floor. Halfway down them, she realised the front-door was open. There was a middle-aged woman outside, holding a toolbox. Looking exasperated. She glanced up at Kate, just as Angie slammed the door on her.

“Was she looking for Clive” Kate asked. “Was that his mum? She knows he’s here, doesn’t she? They’ve found us.”

“Calm down, Angel,” Angie cooed, as if speaking to a baby. “It’s all right.”

“I don’t want to go to prison. I’d rather die than that.” She was on the verge of crumpling. This was the moment she had been dreading since she had brought her first victim back here. Exposure. Vilification. And spending the rest of her life in a high-security prison, with hardened women who would rip her to pieces as soon as look at her.

“There’s no need to start writing out your suicide note quite yet. She was here to fix your broken window. Can you believe the cheek of it? They sent round a woman! I specifically asked them to send round a man, quick as they could. And they send us some dyke with a strap-on tool-kit. I told her where to go. So there’s no need for you to worry your pretty little head about anything. She won’t be bothering us again. So get your arse back upstairs. You need your sleep. I’ll get the next one round here in time for lunch.”

#

Michael arrived just after noon. He saw the curtains twitch in the house next-door. That must have been one of the draw-backs of living in a quiet road like this; everyone wanting to know each-other’s business, even if it was something as dull as a window being repaired. Shame they hadn’t been quite so vigilant when it was smashed.

The woman who opened the door was blonde, mid-twenties, and drop-dead gorgeous. He sometimes had fantasies about being seduced by bored housewives in flimsy nighties when he called to fix their windows, but it had never happened. By and large, the housewives he visited would look quite stomach-churning in a see-through nightie, most of them being about twice his age, so maybe it was for the best. This one, unfortunately, was fully dressed.

She smiled at him. "You're here for the window? Thanks for coming out."

She stepped aside, making room for him to step into the hallway.

"It's in the kitchen. Straight through that door."

He walked along the hallway, and through the door at the far-end. The broken-window was on the opposite side of the kitchen table.

"I'll board it up. Keep you nice and secure. Depending on the glass, I should be able to get it replaced in the next few working days. Is that okay?"

She nodded. "Great. Thank you."

He returned to the van, fetched the board, and set to work. She offered him tea. He'd be finished by the time the kettle had boiled, but he accepted anyway. Any excuse to hang around for a little while longer. She was nice, as well as pretty. You don't often get both together. All the attractive women he had previously met had been absolute bitches.

"Kids?" he asked her.

"No," she said. "I'm not married."

"No, I mean, was it kids that broke your window? It wouldn't be burglars; they've smashed too far from the handle."

She shrugged. "I don't know. Some idiot or other. There are a lot of them around here, believe me."

Not married, then. He wanted to ask her whether she had a boyfriend, but it was hard to see how he could work that casually into the conversation. Maybe the indirect route.

"Thank God it's Saturday. You going out tonight?"

Before she could answer, there was the sound of a key in the lock. Bollocks. Here comes the boyfriend, he thought. She looks irritated, though. Maybe they're not getting on.

A woman walked in. Older than the first one by twenty years or so. On the chubby side. Clothes could do with a good ironing. Her mother, maybe?

"Hi, Kate," she said. "Who's this, then?"

"Some maniac broke my window. He's come to fix it for me."

The older woman held out a hand for him to shake. "Angie," she said. "And you are?"

"Michael. Mike."

"I'm not interrupting anything, am I, Kate?"

“Nothing at all.”

His face fell a little, in disappointment. She'd sounded dismissive. No point in asking her out. She was way out of his league anyway. He'd have better luck with her mum, but the thought didn't appeal at all!

He had finished boarding up the window. “It's a standard size,” he told her. “I can order it today. I'll give you a call on Monday to arrange a date for fitting.”

“There you go,” Angie nudged her friend. “You've finally got a date at last. She's been single forever. Can you believe that, Mike? She's very attractive, isn't she? Too good-looking to be on her own.”

Awkward. He was starting to wonder whether Angie might be Kate's partner. There was something in the tone of her voice, as if she was baiting her or something. Kate didn't look too comfortable. Maybe she'd had an affair, and Angie was just trying to humiliate her in front of a stranger. She looked the type.

“Very nice,” he mumbled, without making eye contact.

Another problem. He needed the toilet. He wasn't keen on staying here any longer than necessary. There was definitely something going on here, some undercurrent which he couldn't quite work out. He wasn't quite sure whether he could make it to his next call-out without putting his bladder under severe strain in the meantime, though. He decided to go for it. As long as he was in the toilet, Angie couldn't be putting him on the spot about whether he fancied Kate or not (which he very much did).

“Can I just use your toilet for a minute?” he asked.

“See,” Angie laughed. “I ask him whether he thinks you're attractive, and he's running upstairs for toilet tissue!”

Mike blushed. “I think I'd better go now.” If she wasn't a customer (or customer's mum?) he'd have told her what he thought of her, but the boss wouldn't like it if he started abusing customers, however much they deserved it.

“No, no, don't be silly. I was just teasing. You'll pay no attention when you get to know me a bit better. Come on, I'll show you where it is. Maybe use the en-suite in Kate's room. Kate, are you coming up there with us?”

“I don't think he needs any help, Angie. It's top of the stairs, first on the right.” She didn't sound happy at all. Angie was clearly winding her up about something, but he had no idea what. He'd nip upstairs, and get out of here as soon as he could. Her friend was making him nervous. Hopefully, she wouldn't be around when he came back to fit the glass.

As he walked towards the bottom of the stairs, Kate came rushing past him and took the steps two at a time. He heard a door slamming closed on the first floor. He reached the top of the stairs several seconds after her. She was standing by a door, her hand still on the handle, looking shaken.

“Sorry,” she said. “It's a mess in there. That's the bathroom, over there. Be quick.”

He did as he was told. Was it just him, or was everyone acting really weird in this house?

When he came out again, Angie had joined Kate. She looked like she was holding something behind her back. Kate had opened the door she'd been holding closed, and gave her friend a determined shove into the room. Angie went tumbling backwards, onto the bed. There was someone in it; he could see the shape of legs beneath the duvet, but not their top half. He had no idea if it was a man or a woman in there. As Angie got to her feet, Kate shut the door on her. He could hear Angie inside, howling with laughter. She was really strange. Maybe she had some sort of mental condition. Maybe they both did.

Kate took him gently but firmly by the arm, and escorted him downstairs to the front door, casting anxious glances over her shoulder until they were at the bottom of the steps. She opened the front door for him.

"I'm sorry about all that," she told him. "Angie's a bit – full-on, sometimes. She's keen to find me a boyfriend, but subtlety isn't one of her strong points. It can be so embarrassing when she's like that."

"She saw me as boyfriend material, then, did she?"

"She sees everyone as boyfriend material."

"Well I wish she'd tried a bit harder to fix us up, then," he said. He'd said it jokingly, giving her the chance to laugh it off if she wanted, and him the chance to retreat with his dignity intact if she wasn't interested. She looked into his eyes for a second or two. She was about to speak when she heard the bedroom door opening upstairs. Angie was on the loose again. She looked worried.

"You asked me if I'm going out tonight. I'll be at the "Board-room" in Canterbury. On my own. Maybe see you there."

And before he had the chance to answer, she'd steered him out of the front-door, and closed it behind him. She was almost as weird as Angie, though far less scary. But that made her more interesting, in a way. He couldn't wait to get to know her better tonight.

#

She sat at the bar, tight mini-skirt, legs crossed to show as much thigh as possible. Force of habit, now. It was the pose which hooked them in, time after time.

She shouldn't be here. She hadn't wanted to call Mike out in the first place, but Angie had talked her into it, just as Angie always talked her into it. "You're worried about burglars, right?" she'd asked. "Then it seems to me that you don't have much choice, Angel. If you leave that window broken, it's only a matter of time before someone spots it, and they'll be inside quicker than a junkie in a cannabis factory. Let me call someone out again. A man this time. I'll stay at home, if that's what you're worried about. And dose up Baby Clive before I go, so he won't cause you any embarrassment."

She might have known that Angie would turn up while Mike was still there. The temptation was just too much for her. But to bring the syringe with her! She just didn't seem to understand that you couldn't phone-a-victim from the local shop. Not without consequences. Or maybe she did understand, but just didn't care. The excitement was worth the risk to her. But then again, it wasn't Angie at risk here. Kate was the one the Police would arrest, she'd be the one to spend

the rest of her life behind bars, getting slashed across the face and worse by other inmates. Angie would probably be giving interviews to reporters, saying how shocked she was, and how Kate had always seemed like such a nice girl to her. She'd wallow in the limelight of being the ex-best-friend of a celebrity serial-killer.

If she hadn't shoved Angie into the spare bedroom when she came upstairs, who knows what would have happened? Once Mike had seen the syringe, there would have been no going back. But he wasn't handcuffed. She wasn't at all sure that the two of them would have been able to subdue him, not even with the syringe as a weapon. He did a physical job, after all. And besides, she'd liked him. He seemed nice. Men were usually only nice to her when they were trying to get her on her back.

Yet despite all that, she'd told him where she'd be tonight. She hadn't planned to go out. She'd gone out yesterday, and found Clive. She never did this twice in a row. Never two *months* in a row, unless she was desperate; the risks appalled her.

Why, she asked herself, did you tell him you'd be here? You can't have a relationship, you know that. Sooner or later, you'd have to bring him home, and then Angie would be there waiting for him. Sooner or later, you'd ask her to be there, even if she hadn't invited herself. The temptation would be too much. All that blood, seeping through his veins, through his jugular, just waiting to be tapped. Even if it was someone she knew, someone she cared for, she'd still drain them if the Craving was bad enough. But the guilt afterwards would be so much worse. She wasn't sure whether she'd be able to cope with that.

She looked at her watch. Quarter to ten. She'd been here for nearly an hour. Still no sign of him. Maybe that was for the best, though. She'd been that close to doing something really stupid. After everything that had happened at home that afternoon, was it any wonder that he hadn't turned up? He must have thought she was some kind of psychopath. Which was, of course, a pretty accurate assessment of her, in all the circumstances.

It would be a relief to go home. She didn't like these places. She came to them because it was the easiest place to meet men after dark. Ironically, it was the only safe place to meet them at night-time. Safe for her, of course. Not so much for them.

But still, she didn't like them. She had to sit here on her own, looking cool and confident (she found she only pulled control-freaks if she looked nervous and mousey). But she didn't feel like that. Tonight, she felt frightened, anxious and pumped full of self-loathing. The Craving usually eased her through the ordeal, but there was little of that tonight. She had someone tied up at home; she'd drunk before she came out. She was all on her own this time round, without even her addiction to buoy her up.

She picked up her handbag from the bar, and shuffled her bottom off the high barstool. She took one last look around the room. There was the long bar behind her, tables to her right, sofas to her left, and a packed dance-floor in front of her. She was only twenty seven, but still she felt old here. She'd have felt happier in a pub rather than a club, but people talk to you in pubs. Clubs were far more anonymous, because the loud music meant that the only conversation you could have was to shout in one another's ears. No-one else could hear you that way. Anonymous was good. Anonymous kept her out of prison.

She was just about to start walking towards the door, when she noticed someone looking at her from the sofas. He was maybe thirty, and just the type she went for. Good-looking, confident, not too old, not too young. In Goldilocks terms, he was just right. And on his own, by the look of it, which was important. No witnesses. But what to do? She didn't need anyone right now, not really (however much Angie had tried to convince her to the contrary). If it was bad enough worrying about one person chained up in her house, how much worse would it be with two?

The Craving stirred within her. "Why not?" it whispered. "Angie's already volunteered to help you farm them. You've done all the hard work already. It's time to claim your reward."

She switched on "the look" for him. Cool, confident, sexy. He smiled. She picked up her bag and walked across the dance-floor towards him, never breaking eye-contact. The look, the walk, the attitude, everything was perfect. He didn't stand a chance now the Craving was back to keep her company. She'd be drinking him before the night was out.

She stopped a few feet away from him. His eyes wandered over her body, feeding on it, just as she would soon be feeding on his.

She moved closer. "Kate," she said, her lips brushing his ear. Keep it short, to the point. Too much talking could spoil the moment.

He got to his feet. He opened his mouth to speak, but suddenly closed it again. He was looking at something over her shoulder. She was tempted to glance over her shoulder to see what he was looking at, but that would show a lack of confidence, a lack of focus. She had him. She intended to keep him. No distractions. She was in control.

"And you are?" she asked.

There was a hand on her shoulder. Some girl; tall, tarty, tits all over the place.

The girl lent into her, shouting in her ear. "Are you trying to get off with my boyfriend?"

Kate's confidence evaporated in a second. The girl had friends; two or three of them gathered behind her. Barely grown-ups. They all looked ready for a fight. She held her hands up to placate them.

"Sorry. My mistake."

"Too fucking right it was."

"I'll go. I thought he was - "

"Well he's not. So fuck off, you dirty slag."

"Deck her, Debs," said one of the friends. "Teach the old slapper some respect."

"Really, I'm going. I don't want any trouble."

Debs gave Kate an experimental shove. Kate staggered backwards a step or two, wobbling on her high-heels. She bumped into the man she had been trying to seduce. He pushed her back towards Debs, no doubt trying to get back into his girlfriend's good books. The two of them collided. Debs took a swing at her, which caught Kate across the face. It wasn't hard; more of

a slap than a punch. But she wasn't used to being struck. She felt like crying. This was getting out of control. Sooner or later, this would kick off, and they'd tear her to bloodied pieces between them.

"I'm going," she shouted over the music. "I'm sorry, okay? I'm going. I don't want any trouble."

And then the bouncers were there, one of them talking to the group of women, the other taking her by the arm and pulling her towards the door. They were throwing her out! She hadn't done anything, but they were still throwing her out. Never mind. She was getting out of here in one piece, which was the main thing. She wouldn't be coming back, not ever. It was a mistake coming out tonight. She already had someone at home. She should have stayed there, feeding in peace, rather than coming all this way to see a man who hadn't even had the decency to show up.

The doorman left her at the exit. She took a few seconds to compose herself. She felt like crying her eyes out, which at her age would be embarrassing to say the least. A few deep breaths, and she was ready to walk back to the car. She'd made it about ten yards, when she heard a shout behind her. Startled, she looked back towards the club. Debs was running towards her, her gobby friends in tow. Any doubts the girl might have had about whether or not to kick the crap out of her appeared to have been resolved. And the bouncer was nowhere to be seen.

She ran. Her high heels slowed her down. They were on her in seconds, pulling her down to the ground like a pack of wolves, punching her, kicking her, pulling her to pieces. She covered her head as best she could, curling into a foetal position as three of them set about her. One of them stamped on her left elbow, grinding it into the cold pavement. A kick to the forehead, just beneath her interlaced fingers, sent her into nauseous shock. This was it. This was where it was all going to end. They would beat her into a coma. And someone would go to her house, and find that man – whatever his name was – chained to her bed, and they'd lock her up forever. Better to just get it over with, here and now, once and for all. She uncovered her head, and waited for them to send her to the relief of oblivion. It was what she deserved after all, a tiny fraction of what she deserved after all she had done.

And then all of a sudden Mike was there.

#

He was late. Not deliberately; he'd never understood the playing-it-cool thing. He just had a habit of leaving everything to the last minute, and the train was pulling away from the platform as he pounded up the concrete stairs. He'd thought of running back home to collect his van, but it wouldn't have saved any time, and he wouldn't be able to have a drink all night. She was so attractive that it intimidated him a little, and he felt that a few drinks might help him relax a bit. A lot of drinks might have helped him relax even more, but he'd probably say or do something stupid (not for the first time), so best to stick to three and four to minimise the chances of being dumped on the first date.

Not that he was totally sure that this was a date. She'd told him where she would be tonight. That wasn't to say she'd be there alone. Girls never went to night-clubs on their own, in his experience, unless they were really desperate, and Kate wasn't desperate by any stretch of the imagination. At best, she would be surrounded by girlfriends when he arrived, which would

make it difficult to talk to her (he wasn't all that good in groups of strangers). At the worst, she'd have another bloke with her, in which case he'd stay for a couple of drinks and then find some excuse to slope off as soon as he could. He could always say he was on call for work tomorrow; it was an easy excuse for someone in his line of business.

No, scratch that; at the worst, Angie would be there too. In which case there was no point even staying for one drink, yet alone a few of them.

He arrived at "The Board-Room" about three quarters of an hour later than he'd intended, fearing that he'd missed his chance. More than likely she'd got bored of waiting for him, and moved on to somewhere else (if she'd even remembered inviting him in the first place). Should he look into a few other clubs in the area, to try to find her? That would look pretty desperate. But it was probably better to look sad and apologetic than to stand her up altogether.

As he was walking down the street, he could see three women giving someone a kicking on the pavement. Awkward. If they had been blokes, he would have waded straight in there, but it was different with women. It wasn't as if he could fight them, after all! He had visions of the three "ladies" turning on him, trying to kick the crap out of him, while their original victim hurried away unnoticed.

He hurried towards them, still uncertain precisely what he was going to do when he got there. Shout at them, maybe, hope he scared them away. Two blokes came out of the club and stood nearby, egging them on. He swore to himself. How much worse could things get? Maybe he should just fetch the bouncers and leave them to sort it out. Taking on five people was a bit much for him to tackle on his own.

The woman on the ground was holding her arms over her head, trying to shield her skull from flying feet. He had to help her, no matter what. They'd kill her if this carried on much longer. He wouldn't want that on his conscious.

And then she uncovered her head. Kate! It was Kate. The nearest girl – a brunette, barely out of her teens – took a step backwards, as if she was about to take a corner in a football match. Kate's blonde head remained motionless on the pavement, vulnerable and unprotected. One hard kick to the skull might be all it would take. Serious injury, brain damage, maybe even death.

"Kate!" he shouted. He barrelled into the girl as she was drawing back her leg, sending her flying backwards on to the ground. One of her friends started screaming at him, while the other went to her assistance to see if she was okay. The two men moved in. No point in reasoning with them; he could see that they weren't coming over for an intellectual debate. He took a swing at the first man, sending him staggering backwards into a wall, but the second man rushed him, bundling him to the pavement, throwing punches all the while.

He fought to regain his feet. He'd seen what these animals had done to Kate when she was down. He needed to be standing up, fending them off. It was the only slim chance he had of getting Kate and himself out of this mess in one piece.

The young brunette was up again, and all three girls descended upon him, screeching obscenities, demanding that "Chris" should "rip his fucking head off". He pushed his assailant away and half regained his feet, but the other bloke waded in, sending him down on his back

again. Two of them, with three frenzied women as back-up. This wasn't the night-out he'd planned.

Finally, the bouncers waded in. It took four of them, but between them they pulled the men off Mike, and pushed them to one side. Chris retaliated, but a punch to the head from a doorman (who looked about five stone heavier than him) persuaded him to stand where he was told. The women were rounded up with rather more difficulty, one of them slapping one of the bouncers across the face before her male friends calmed her down, fearing that they would bear the brunt of any repercussions.

"You're dead," the brunette shouted at Mike, as he went to Kate's motionless side. "And I hope I've killed that dirty old slag, too."

He put his hand on Kate's shoulder. She looked up at him. Her face was cut, and she didn't look totally with it to him. She seemed to be having trouble focussing.

"Call an ambulance," he told the bouncers.

"No," she shook her head. "I just want to go home."

"And the Police."

She was suddenly focussed. "No. No police, Mike. No police."

"They could've killed you."

"No police."

"She's the one who should be fucking locked up!" protested the brunette. "Dirty slag."

"I should be locked up," Kate nodded. Mike gave her a worried look. She must be getting hysterical.

"No police," she repeated, serious again.

He sighed. What to do? He was conscious that the people who had assaulted them were still hyped up. If the Police weren't coming, he and Kate would be in trouble the moment they tried to leave. It wasn't as if the bouncers were going to walk them safely back to her car (not that she could drive it anyway in this state).

A siren sounded in the distance. "No police!" Kate shouted at him again. She was worrying him; she wasn't acting rationally at all.

One of the blokes made a run for it, haring off down the street as if his life depended on it. His mate followed suit. The girls stood their ground for several seconds longer, hurling abuse after their fast-departing accomplices, but eventually gave it up as a lost cause and, high heels in hand, fled after them, swearing loudly and inventively as they went.

Kate attempted to struggle to her feet.

"You shouldn't move," he told her. "You might have broken something."

"I've got to go," she said. She clung to him for balance. It made him feel ashamed in the circumstances, but he felt a thrill at her body being pressed against his. I must be sick, he

thought to himself. She's half dead, and you're still fantasising about shagging her.

An ambulance entered the street. Kate sighed with relief.

"No police," Mike reassured her, as if speaking to a child awoken by nightmares.

"And no ambulance," she pouted. He stared at her. She allowed herself the tiniest of grins.

"Now you're taking the piss," he said.

#

She left Queen Elizabeth Queen Mother Hospital at five o'clock in the morning. She'd been diagnosed with two possible broken ribs, multiple bruising and concussion, but she'd refused to allow them to keep her in for observation. It was still dark outside. She had to get home before it was light. And she had to check that her special guest had not woken up and made a groggy break for it in her absence.

With Mike holding her arm as if she was his grandmother, and with an information sheet about head injuries clutched in her free hand, she made her way through the automatic doors into the car-park outside. A taxi was waiting for them there; "no extra charge after midnight". She would have liked to have picked up her car (well, Angie's car actually), but a taxi back to Canterbury would have cost a fortune, and there was no time. She needed to be home before sunrise. Angie could collect it later.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked anxiously. "You look awful."

"Flatterer."

"No, I just meant -"

"I know what you meant. I was just teasing."

"What happened? Why were they – doing that to you?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I just got up to leave, and she was in my face. And then they all followed me outside. You pretty much know the rest. You're a bit bruised yourself."

"Yeah, but you should see the other guys."

She gave a suppressed laugh. "Don't. It hurts."

"Sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. Sorry you had to get involved in this. I'm glad you did; I don't think I'd still be around if you hadn't shown up when you did. But you shouldn't have had to. It was my problem, not yours."

"It was my fault, though. I missed my train. I was late. If I'd have been there on time we might have been safely back home by now. At our own homes, I mean. I didn't mean to suggest -"

"If you don't stop apologising, I'm going to beat you up myself."

It was his turn to laugh. "I reckon I could take you. In a fight, I mean. I didn't mean -"

"You're doing it again."

“Sorry.”

She slapped his leg. “If you say that one more time!”

“If you’re going to smack me every time I apologise, we could be here for a long time. I’m starting to like it.”

The taxi pulled up outside her house. He looked at her with concern.

“Shall I come in?” he asked. “Just to check that you’re okay?”

“No.” She shook her head violently from side to side. “You can’t come in.”

“Just until you’re settled.”

“I said no.”

Her voice was sharper than she meant it to be. She touched his leg. “Sorry. It’s been a long day. I just want to go to bed.”

“Stop apologising,” he joked, but she didn’t laugh this time. She gave him a smile; small, but heartfelt. She glanced over towards Angie’s house. The bedroom light had just gone on. Kate got out of the car quickly.

“Take care of yourself,” he said.

“You, too,” she replied. She took another look at the house next door. “You’d better go now.”

“Are you sure you don’t want -”

She slammed the car-door, and gave him a wave goodbye. He waved back.

The taxi pulled away. Kate walked to her front-door. The key was barely in the lock when Angie appeared beside her. She was in her white dressing-gown, and her hair was all over the place.

“Where have you been?” Angie scolded. “I’ve been worried sick about you!”

“Hospital.”

“And you didn’t think to call me? I stayed awake until four o, clock, worrying about you! Anything could have happened. You could’ve been arrested; beaten up; dead. Why have you been in hospital? What’s the matter? Are those cuts on your face? Was that Mike in the taxi? What has he done to you?”

Kate opened the door and stepped inside. Angie went to follow her, but Kate shook her head.

“Tomorrow,” she told her. “We’ll talk tomorrow. I need to go to bed.”

“Now,” Angie insisted. “We talk now.”

Kate shut the door on her, and flipped up the catch to stop Angie using her key. As her friend was calling through the letter-box to her, she went to the back-door and put the key in the lock so Angie couldn’t use that door either. She’d pay dearly for this act of defiance in the morning, but she’d worry about that later. She was far too tired to cope with Angie right now.

“Go home!” she called out to Angie, as she passed the front door on her way to the stairs.

“You let me in this minute! I’ll not be treated like this!”

She climbed the stairs, checked in on Clive to check that he was still unconscious, and went to bed. As she had said to Mike, it had been a very long night.

#

She woke up to the sound of a ringing phone. She tried to ignore it, but as soon as the answer-machine kicked in, the caller rang off, and phoned again. There was only one person she knew with that persistence. Angie. It was pay-back time.

She got out of bed. Sharp pain to her ribs made her grimace. They’d told her at the hospital she’d be uncomfortable for four or five weeks, and then she’d be fine. No need to x-ray the ribs; the treatment would be the same whether she’d fractured them or not. She was pretty sure she had. They were agony.

She thought about disconnecting the phone, and going back to bed. No point really; she’d have to face the music sooner or later. Besides, Clive must be due for a top-up round about now. Angie was usually round twice a day for that, and the last time had been before she’d gone out last night to see Mike.

She looked at her alarm clock. Shit! Half past eleven. He should have been dosed up hours ago.

She hurried downstairs. The bedroom door was still shut; that was encouraging. She stood outside for a moment to compose herself, before entering the bedroom. Please let him still be in bed. He should be there – he was handcuffed after all – but sooner or later she knew that one of them would find a way to get free. She had no illusions about how this would end. Somehow, some day, one of them would escape. And there was no going back from that.

She pushed the door open and stepped into the room. Clive’s eyes were open. He was staring at her. He was frightened, she could see that just from the look on his face. And he looked so young, so very young.

He made a sound, a small, muffled sound, but that was all. He didn’t move a muscle. He just looked at her. Terrified. She was the worst thing in the world to him. She couldn’t blame him for that; she was the worst thing in the world to herself as well.

“I’m sorry,” she cried. “I didn’t want to do this to you. I can’t help it.”

He made that sound again, a sort of crumpled pleading noise. It was too much.

She fled, slamming the door on him and running back upstairs to her bedroom, ignoring the pain in her ribs. The phone rang again. She snatched it up.

“Angie, he’s awake.”

“Good morning, Princess,” Angie replied. “Hope I haven’t woken you up.”

“He’s awake. You need to get round here now.”

“Do I now? Why should I? You threw me out this morning. And you Window-Boy go. It’s funny how you expect me to jump when you click your fingers. Whenever it suits you. But what do you ever give me in return, though? What do I get out of this, eh?”

“More than me. Don’t pretend you don’t love it.”

“I could take it or leave it.”

“Angie, please. His eyes are open.”

“He’s chained up.”

“He could break the bed. Or cry for help. Please! This is freaking me out.”

“You owe me. Agreed?”

“Yes. Whatever. Just get round here as soon as you can. He was looking at me.”

“Give me five minutes.”

Kate dressed quickly and went downstairs. She scurried past the door to the spare-bedroom. She couldn’t bear to see him again, not until he was safely asleep. The expression on his face when he had looked at her was just too much. She was getting hungry, though; she needed to pay him a visit soon. But not now. Not until Angie had worked her magic.

Back down to the ground-floor. She took the door off the latch, so Angie could use her key, and then headed for the kitchen. She put the kettle on, and took a seat at the table, waiting for her nerves to settle, waiting for her friend to arrive. Her only friend, God help her.

The mobile rang. She checked out the screen, expecting it to be Angie again. It was a number she didn’t recognise. A Margate number by the look of it. She pressed the green button, and held it hesitantly to her ear.

“Hello?”

“Hello. Margate Police. Is this Katherine Pearce?”

She froze, then nodded, then realised that nodding wasn’t much use over the phone. “Yes,” she replied cautiously. “Is something the matter?”

“QEQM told us you were admitted last night with head injuries. I just wanted to pop over to take a statement. See whether there’s any action you want us to take?”

“How did you get my mobile number?”

“From the hospital. Are you free this afternoon? About three-ish? Or would you prefer a week-day?”

She heard the key in the lock. Angie. She got to her feet, and walked into the hallway, motioning to her that she was on the phone. She didn’t want her shouting out anything incriminating as she was speaking to the police officer.

“Is it him?” Angie asked. “Window-boy?”

“Today’s not convenient,” Kate said into the phone.

“Tomorrow, then?”

“I can’t do tomorrow either.”

“When then? I’ll need to see you this week. I’m off next week, and I need to get a report filled out before I go. How does Tuesday sound?”

Angie took the phone off her. Kate fought to keep hold of it, but it was hard to deny Angie when she was determined.

“Hello. Who is this?” Angie enquired.

“PC Marsh. Who am I talking to?”

“My name’s Angela. What do you want?”

“Can you put me back on to Miss Pearce, please?”

“You’re trying to arrange a date to come round to see her? What did she do?”

“I’m afraid I can’t discuss that with you.”

“How about Tuesday? Eleven o’clock? How does that sound?”

“I’d need Miss Pearce to confirm she’s happy with that.”

Angie held the phone out towards Kate. “Tell him you’re happy with that.”

“I’m happy with that,” Kate called out obediently towards her mobile. Angie put it back to her ear.

“That’s settled then. See you next Tuesday.”

She hung up. She smiled. Her mood appeared to have improved considerably since speaking with the police officer.

“What do you think?”

“Of what?” Kate asked, mystified.

“The police-man. When he comes round here.”

Kate stared at her. “You don’t mean...? Are you mad?”

“Never been saner. You agreed you’d like two of them upstairs.”

“Clive. I’d forgotten about Clive. Quick, Angie; he’s awake.”

“He’ll keep. What about it then? You’ve got a man knocking on your door the day after next. Practically begging to be syringed. What do you reckon? I’m game if you are.”

“Tell me you’re joking. Don’t you think he’d be missed? And how am I going to handcuff a police-man to my bed?”

“The same way as -”

There was a scream from upstairs. Clive was very much awake. Angie paused, deciding whether to continue the discussion or sedate the occupant of the spare bedroom first. The look of panic on Kate's face persuaded her that the noisy young man upstairs should be her first priority.

"Just think about it," she urged Kate, as she hurried from the room, syringe in hand. "That's all I'm asking. You'll thank me later, you just see if you don't."

#

Angie returned to the kitchen five minutes later.

"Problem solved. Where's my tea then, Babe?"

"On the side. Is everything okay? Is he – asleep again?"

"No. I thought I'd uncuff him, and take him on a tour round the house."

"Angie!"

"Yes, he's "asleep". Your Auntie Angie's worked her magic yet again. You going up to see him? You look awful. You'll feel better after a feed."

"Maybe in half an hour. Give him time to settle."

"You're such a chicken."

Angie retrieved her vampire mug from the work-surface, and took a seat at the table. She shuffled her chair over towards Kate, so she was just a foot or two away. "Come on then. What happened? Start with why you went out two nights in a row. You never do that."

"I went to a club in Canterbury. I just felt like getting out. I found a bloke. At least, I thought I had. His girlfriend wasn't so keen, though. She and her mates kicked the crap out of me outside. Mike happened to be walking past, and he dived in, but then these other blokes -"

Angie looked amused. "Mike happened to be walking past?"

Kate flushed. "Yes."

"Really?"

"It's not that much of a coincidence. Everyone goes clubbing in Canterbury now. Thanet's so quiet."

"Of course they do. Did he get a good kicking too?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"Angie! He saved me. They would have killed me if he hadn't have come along when he did. The bouncers disappeared, there was no sign of the police. There were five of them!"

"Window-boy saves the day."

Kate lapsed into silence. What was the point of saying any more when Angie was in this mood? "I'll go upstairs now. I haven't fed since I came home."

"Better feed the Beast quick then, Angel, before it feeds on you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Angie shrugged. "Bugged if I know."

Kate got to her feet, and headed for the stairs. Her heart sank within her as Angie followed her up. The conversation was obviously not so easily closed. They entered the spare bedroom together. Clive was motionless on the bed, his eyes mercifully closed again. He looked ill; very ill. It was no great surprise, of course. She was literally bleeding him dry. Some of them lasted a week if she was frugal. She'd be lucky if he lasted to Wednesday.

"Why didn't you invite him in?" Angie asked, as Kate filled her cup straight from the blood bag. The blue mug, of course. That was the Rule.

"Because I saw your light come on. I couldn't be arsed to get him out of his clothes, yet alone cuff him to a bed. I just wanted to go to sleep. You saw how tired I was last night."

"That's all? You didn't feel sorry for him?"

"No."

"Grateful to him? For saving you."

"No."

"You're not in love with him, then?"

"Fuck off. I've only just met him."

Angie stared at her. She didn't like being sworn at. She opened her mouth to say something, but then thought better of it. She didn't want to change the subject from Mike.

"So when's he coming back? You've got him on the hook. All you need to do now is scoop him up in your big old vampire net, and cuff him to the bed."

"I'm not a vampire, okay?"

"Course you're not, Babe. It's just an expression. When, though? My diary's pretty empty as usual. Apart from your police interview on Tuesday, we can pencil him in for any day you like."

Kate left the room, with Angie in tow. Would the woman never go home? She shrugged. "I don't know. Soon. I'm going back to bed, if that's okay? I feel shattered after last night."

Without waiting to see what her friend made of this, she climbed up the stairs to the top floor. She could hear Angie climbing the first couple of steps behind her, before coming to a halt. Please leave me alone, she thought. I love you dearly, but sometimes you can be the biggest pain in the arse imaginable.

"Bye then, Darlin'. I'll come round again later. See how you are. We can talk about Window-boy tonight."

She'd bought herself a few hours at least. She was not going to give Mike up, not after all he'd done for her. He had saved her life, no matter how much Angie scoffed at that. He'd waited with her for hours in hospital, when most men would have been off like a shot the moment they realised they weren't going to get a shag. And he hadn't tried it on in the cab (although, to be fair, he must have known that she wouldn't be up for it with two suspected broken ribs and concussion).

The door slammed downstairs. Angie had gone. Kate retraced her steps to the spare-bedroom. Despite her recent feed, the Craving was still there. Maybe just half a cup more, to help her sleep.

#

It was dark when she awoke. She'd slept all day. She switched the bedside lamp on. There was a bar of chocolate on her bedside cabinet, with a post-it sticker on it saying "Sorry". Cheapskate. She could at least have bought her a box of chocolate liqueurs.

There was a choking sound from downstairs. It sounded like a vomiting cat. Angie? No. If she was in the house, she'd be sitting on the bottom of the bed, waiting for her to wake up.

That just left Clive.

She was in her dressing-gown and down the stairs in an instant. She threw open the door. Clive was awake again, thin watery vomit all over his face, soaking into the bed-sheets. He was gagging on it. What were you supposed to do, first-aid-wise? Turn him on his side; put him in the recovery-position. Bit tricky, with handcuffs on both wrists.

He tried to speak, but gagged again. She couldn't bear to see him like this. She was well aware of the irony. She was happy to chain him up (well, maybe not happy, but willing to do it if it meant she could feed). She was more than willing to drain the blood from his veins to satisfy the Craving, killing him one fluid ounce at a time. But she couldn't cope with seeing him in physical pain. She was the same with regular food, in a way. She enjoyed eating meat and fish, but didn't like her food to look as if it had been skipping round a field or swimming in the ocean before ending up on her plate.

She left the room, closing the door behind her. He was still retching in there. She ran up the stairs, and grabbed the phone. She hated the idea of running to Angie yet again, but what else could she do? Angie would know what needed to be done. She was dependent upon her for just about everything. She was the addict, and Angie the dealer, sourcing men's blood for her. That was just the way it was.

Angie answered on the second ring. It was almost as if she was expecting the call. She'd be right over. It was like a doctor coming out on an urgent house-call. A thought occurred. Angie wanted Mike to come over, but knew that she wasn't keen on giving him up. What better way to get him here than to kill off her existing Feed? Angie knew full well that her morals would go out of the window if she was hungry enough. What better way to put Mike on the menu than to clear out the larder?

She heard a key in the lock downstairs. That woman was quick when she wanted to be! She must have been waiting for the call. This was planned. This was so planned. She had been

manipulated into this, just as Angie had manipulated her into just about everything else she regretted about her life.

She couldn't face going downstairs. It wasn't just that she dreaded seeing Clive again; it was not wanting to see Angie any sooner than she had to. Most of the time, she loved that woman to pieces, but at other times – which were more and more frequent of late – she'd have quite happily punched her face in. Not that she could, of course. Without Angie, she'd be well and truly stuffed. And her friend would slaughter her in a fight, anyway.

She waited. More choking. Angie's voice downstairs, soothing and reassuring (which almost made her laugh in the circumstances). And then silence. She waited, and then she waited some more. She resisted the urge to go and investigate. She didn't want to see what was down there.

Eventually, Angie entered the room. She held the blue mug out to Kate.

"I've brought you your supper. Last of the batch, I'm afraid."

"He's -?"

"Very much so. Still tastes delicious though, I bet. Now get that down you. You look like you need it."

"Thank you. For coming over."

"You didn't fancy coming downstairs and helping me out? Worried about breaking your nails?"

"I'm sorry."

Angie shrugged. "Not to worry. There's nothing you could have done. Besides, I've saved you the best job. I don't envy you having to wash his pillow-case."

Kate allowed herself a small smile.

"That's more like it," Angie approved. "It's not all bad, anyway. There's plenty more fish in the sea."

Kate stopped smiling. She knew what was coming.

"There's your Mike, for example. That bloke who you allegedly didn't feel sorry for yesterday. Window-boy. Plenty of delicious blood coursing through his veins, I bet."

Angie gave her a huge grin. They had been friends for a very long time, pretty much since they had first become neighbours. They knew each other intimately (more intimately than any man would ever know her, that was for sure!) Angie was well aware that she was starting to have feelings for Mike, even after such a short space of time. But more than that, she knew all about the Craving, and just what it did to her. Sooner or later, she'd give in to it, even if it meant sacrificing Mike in the process. And Angie would be there, syringe at the ready, when that happened.

#

Kate phoned the glazing company, and left a message on their out-of-hours answer-phone. She was due to have glass fitted. Could they send someone different from last time, please?

Not that there was anything wrong with the last person they'd sent. He'd been very polite, and good at his job. She'd recommend him to anyone. It was just that she'd prefer someone different this time round, if that was okay?

They phoned back on Monday morning. The glass would be ready to fit tomorrow. Had there been a problem with their fitter? No, she had stressed; no problem at all. As she'd said earlier, it was just that she'd rather have someone different this time. A lady, maybe.

Monday was a long day. All of her days were long, of course. She was stuck in the house. She could only go out at night. She'd tried going out in the daytime, but it hadn't worked out. Angie had joked that the sun burns vampires, and she'd end up in a puddle of sizzling flesh if she risked it, but it was as much a mental thing as a physical one. Being out before sunset induced panic attacks. She could sit in her garden for a while without too much discomfort, but the moment she was out in public she became convinced that everyone was staring at her; that they could all see how hideous she was, what a monster she had become. She didn't feel like that at night for some reason. Maybe it was down to her addiction. The Craving always seemed strongest at night-time, and it blotted everything else out. But during the day, she couldn't step past her front-gate without feeling short of breath, panicky, *overwhelmed*.

She wasn't entirely comfortable with people visiting her at home either, if the truth be told. But somehow, it wasn't as bad as being outside. Maybe it was because she was in her own little world. Somehow, everything felt safer when she was here. Not that she welcomed visitors, of course. But she was less concerned about them reading her blood-stained soul when she was at home, as she had other things to worry about. The risk of them finding her dinner handcuffed to the bed upstairs, for example.

It wasn't just the boredom that made Monday so long. It was the Craving. It had only been a day since she had fed, but she'd started feeling it already. Usually she could go a few days before it kicked in. She used to be able to go months. That worried her; it worried her a lot. She'd always had the Craving, ever since her teens, but she hadn't known what it was until Angie showed her. She'd been tested for everything imaginable. Her skin had looked like a pin-cushion, so often had her blood been tested. It was ironic that they had taken so much blood from her in their search for a diagnosis, when all she had wanted was for them to give her some of the red-stuff back.

The psychiatrists had come next. This was in her early twenties. She'd gone down to about seven stone by then. Her parents were convinced that she was bulimic. It led to arguments. They accused her of slowly killing herself, and she resented them for refusing to believe that this wasn't self-induced. She'd never got on with her father, for very good reason, but she'd been close to her mother up until then. But the constant lectures, the accusations, the fights were too much for her to cope with on top of everything else. Eventually, she'd moved out. That in itself caused friction, as her mother was determined that she should stay at home, and be looked after (whether she wanted to be looked after or not), but she wasn't sure she could cope with any more parental care. Her father seemed indifferent whether she stayed or left. To be fair, life was not much fun for any of them back then.

Her parents had money, and were keen to ensure she had somewhere decent to live, so she'd ended up here. Next to Angie. The best thing which could have happened to her, or the worst, depending on your point of view.

The psychiatric sessions went on for years. She'd had counselling. She'd had cognitive behaviour therapy. She'd had eye-movement-desensitisation-something-or-other. None of it worked. And after each session, she returned home in daylight, shaking like a malaria sufferer, doing her best to control the nausea with only limited success.

Her weight fell to a little over five stone. Back in hospital, tubes all over the place, more tests, and discharged home again. Three times. Five stone! She shuddered to think how close to death she must have been at that stage.

Angie had changed all that. Angie had found what was wrong with her, and had fixed it. That night the summer before last had saved her life. But maybe cost her soul, if there was such a thing.

After that first time, it had been a full three months before she'd done it again. She doubted that she would have found another man to feed from, but for Angie. She'd recovered after that first victim, piled on the pounds, back up to ten stone no less, even though she wasn't eating any more than previously. It was almost as if the blood she'd taken from him was medicinal. The shaking stopped, as did the nausea, the stomach cramps. Instant, miraculous recovery. So when she started deteriorating again, Angie urged her on. And volunteered to help her find a suitable candidate. She'd done as she was told. And the rest was history.

In the last year and a half, there had been seven of them, including Clive. She'd gone six months without a feed last summer, when her disgust at herself had become so overwhelming that she tried draining the blood from meat she'd bought at the butchers instead, but she'd given in to the Craving when it became unbearable. Her self-loathing may have been all-consuming, but even that had been swamped by her blood-lust in the end.

So there had been three victims in the first year, six months off to try to cure herself, and then four in the last six months. It was definitely worse since she'd started up again. The one before Clive – Mark, his name had been – had lasted a week and a half before he died. But she had gone looking for another Mark just a week afterwards. And now Angie was suggesting she should have two on the go at the same time, like some sick drinks-cabinet of involuntary blood-donors. Maybe she should hang them upside down above a bar, and install optics to pour herself a drink from them whenever she felt thirsty.

She shivered. She hoped it was the macabre thoughts she was having, rather than the full-scale shakes coming on already. Shivering with broken ribs wouldn't be any fun at all.

Maybe the worst part of all this was how dependent she was on Angie. Angie knew her secrets. She procured men for her. She disposed of the bodies on her own now, as she was fed up with Kate vomiting every time they had to bury one of them. If anything happened to her friend, she was well and truly stuffed. She would never be able to do this on her own, but the Craving would destroy her if she didn't.

But on the other hand, the thought of a life-time of this – the men, the pain, of Angie herself – was almost more than she could bear.

#

Tuesday was even worse than Monday. There was the police, for a start. And then there was Mike.

The police-man turned up promptly. To the minute. He said his name as he came in, but she was too nervous to remember it. Angie was here. Kate had told her that she wasn't in need of legal representation, especially from someone who had no legal qualifications at all, but Angie had insisted and she had as always given in.

She had told the officer that she had been assaulted but did not wish to press charges. He had been disappointed; there was a good chance that the incident would have been caught on the CCTV cameras outside the nightclub, or there could well be footage of her assailants running away afterwards. Was she sure she didn't want the girl to be cautioned, at the very least? No court proceedings that way. Just a slap on the wrist.

Angie had intervened at this stage – it was only a matter of time before she stuck her oar in – and had tried to convince her to prosecute. After what they did to you, they deserve everything they get. She told the officer – rather unhelpfully – that if it was down to her she'd go round their houses and rip their faces off, and didn't take kindly to him pointing out that she would be arrested if she did. Political correctness gone mad, she called it. Why shouldn't they get a good kicking after what they'd done?

She then asked whether he would be able to trace the men involved; let her know their addresses. Not that she was planning on doing anything to them; she'd just been joking about that. She just wanted to check that they weren't local, that was all.

It was a relief when the door-bell rang. It gave Kate the opportunity to leave them arguing away in the kitchen over whether data protection rules was political correctness gone mad, too. It was less of a relief when she opened the door. Mike was standing there, a sheepish grin on his face, like a teenager on a first date.

“Hi,” he said.

“What are you doing here?” Her voice was harsher than she intended. He couldn't be here. Not with Angie indoors. Not ever.

“I'm here to fix your window,” he replied, sounding a little hurt. “Are you okay? I've been worried about you.”

“Fine. I'm fine.”

She hesitated. What to do? She couldn't let him in, but she couldn't quite bring herself to send him away. He'd think she was mad, and she didn't want him thinking that about her. For some reason, his opinion mattered.

“Window-boy!”

Fuck. Angie was here. And she was adding insult to serious injury by patronising him as well.

“Come in, come in,” her friend bid him. “Don't just stand there; she doesn't bite. Well, she does sometimes, but none of her boyfriends seem to mind that much. She's got pretty teeth, don't you think?”

Mike shrugged, at a loss how to respond to this. He stepped inside, gave Kate a well-meaning smile, and followed Angie towards the kitchen. She closed the door, and hastened after them.

Mike put his toolbox by the broken window. He exchanged nods with the police officer. "Would you like to go through to the front-room?" he asked. "It's going to be cold in here when I take the board off."

"Front-room!" cackled Angie. "How cute is that?"

Mike shot her a poisoned look. Angie smiled sweetly back at him, or as sweetly as she knew how.

The police-man got to his feet, ready to leave. Kate panicked. She needed him to stay until Mike was finished. The moment Angie was alone with Mike, she'd jab him with a syringe. He didn't deserve that. He was nice. Much too nice for her.

"I've been thinking," Kate stammered. "About this caution you mentioned. Could you tell me more about it? Maybe I'll proceed after all."

Angie gave her a curious look. She then glanced over to Mike, and then back to Kate again. Realisation dawned. She gave a knowing smile.

"I don't think you should waste any more of this officer's time, Kate. He's no doubt got more serious crimes to investigate. There's been all those murders round here lately, after all."

Kate tensed. Her ribs screamed in protest. She clasped her hand to her chest.

"Those are dealt with by CID," the officer was saying. He hadn't noticed her discomfort. Mike had left the room again, presumably to fetch the glass. Angie was trying to shoot her knowing looks, but was being so obvious that a child could have read them. If the police-man saw them, he'd know something was up. There was too much going on. She couldn't cope with everyone at once.

The officer caught sight of Angie in mid-smirk. He looked irritated.

"Is there something the matter, ma'am?" he asked. It was clear from his tone that he'd taken Angie's expression to mean that she was ridiculing him. She grinned back at him, and shook her head. "No. Nothing the matter at all. You're doing a fine job here, Officer."

Mike came back in with the pane of glass.

"How long will you be?" Kate asked.

"I'll be in and out in a quarter of an hour, tops."

"Two minutes more like, if you're like most men," Angie quipped, earning herself a glare from everyone else in the room. She shrugged. "Oh, come on, you all know it's true. It's harsh, but it's fair."

The next fifteen minutes went by very slowly indeed. Kate kept asking questions about cautions, to keep the police officer there until Mike had finished. He was clearly starting to think that she was mentally sub-normal, as she quickly ran out of sensible questions, and took to asking the same questions twice in slightly different ways, or making random enquiries such as can people with cautions still leave the country to go on holiday if they want? The officer started checking out his wrist-watch when he thought she wasn't looking. He was fidgeting with his pen. It was only a matter of time before he gave up on her. And left Mike to Angie.

Eventually, and very much to her relief, Mike was finished.

“Well, I’ll be going.” He loitered, as if deciding whether to give her a peck on the cheek on his way out. If that was what he was thinking about, he decided against it. He headed for the kitchen door.

“Wait,” called out Angie. She turned to the police officer. “Did we mention that he was there when the incident took place? Wouldn’t you like to take a statement from him?”

The police-man looked at Mike, and then back at Kate. He raised an enquiring eyebrow. She shook her head. He got to his feet.

“I don’t think that will be necessary. It’s time I was off. If you change your mind – if you’d like to take things further – give me a call. I’ll take a statement from this gentleman here if you do.”

“Off you go, then,” said Angie, escorting him to the door. “Go and solve those murders you’ve been rattling on about.”

Mike continued to loiter. Kate gave him a smile. “Thanks. For the window. And for Saturday night.”

He looked embarrassed. Like a big kid. She liked that. He was sweet.

“I’ve got to be going. But call me, okay? Maybe we could go out on another – go out, again.”

He was going to say date. She’d have given anything to go out on a nice, normal date, like everyone else did. But how could she? It would only be a matter of time, and the Craving would take over. She didn’t want him to be around when that happened.

Angie was closing the door on the police officer. Kate sprung into life. “Come on,” she said. “I’ll see you out.”

“Going so soon?” Angie asked. “I thought you might want to stay for a cup of tea or something. You tradesmen like your cuppas, don’t you? You’re famous for it. Life’s one permanent tea-break, I bet.”

“I’ve got to be going.”

Kate gave Angie a look. Her friend grinned back at her. She stood aside. “Oh well, best not keep you. I’m sure you’ve got urgent work to attend to. There’s bound to be a broken greenhouse out there somewhere, just crying out for attention.”

“Goodbye Kate.”

“Goodbye.”

He left.

Angie followed him. Kate stepped outside to go after her, but thought better of it. She didn’t like it out there. Not with the sun up. He’d know what she was like if he saw her out there. He’d know, and he wouldn’t like what he saw at all.

Angie caught up with Mike as he was getting in his van. Kate could see her pointing at her house. Mike shook his head, and glanced at his watch. Angie kept talking.

“Angie!” Kate called, trying to conceal the panic. “Can you come here a minute?”

Angie waved her arm, signalling for Kate to join them. The bitch.

They carried on talking by the van. Angie pointed in her direction a couple of times. Kate took a couple of steps up the garden path, but came to a halt. She could go no further. She was stuck in limbo, not daring to go out, but too scared to go back in and leave Angie to her own devices.

Eventually, Mike gave her a wave, closed the door of his van, and drove away. Angie stood watching the van depart, and then retraced her steps, coming to a halt a few steps away.

“What was that about?” Kate asked through clenched teeth, only narrowly swallowing down the string of swear-words she would have used if speaking to anyone else. If she had a syringe handy, she would have been tempted to use it.

Angie smiled. “Don’t take that tone with me, young lady. You should be thanking me. I’ve just fixed you and Window-boy up on a date.”

#

If she’d had his mobile number, she would have cancelled. But all she had was his work number. It might have been awkward for him if she’d contacted his employers to ask them to tell him that their date was off. It would be more awkward for him if she handcuffed him to a bed and bled him until he died, of course, but she took the course of least resistance and decided to go with the flow for now. So the date was on, however much of a bad idea she knew it to be.

Angie had at least arranged for Mike to pick her up after dark. Had it been during the daytime, she would have refused to come out, no matter what. Better that he thought she was rude, than he saw all her Sin in the fresh light of day.

He picked her up at seven thirty. He’d booked a restaurant. He told her she looked as if she could do with a good meal inside her. She’d flushed with embarrassment; she’d weighed herself just that morning, and she was beginning to shed pounds already now that Clive was no longer serviceable. He panicked, thinking she had interpreted this as a personal remark about her weight. “It was just a joke,” he assured her. “Just a stupid joke. You don’t really look like you need feeding up. You’re perfect as you are.” She had laughed, told him that he was a charmer, and they had gone to the restaurant he’d chosen.

It was a Chinese restaurant, close to where she lived. Chinese staff, clean white table-cloths, light-pink napkins, plenty of choice for food. She had come here a couple of times with her parents when she was little, before her health had collapsed. She picked up the “as-much-as-you-can-eat” menu to tease him. He hurriedly swapped it for the “a-la-carte”. They chatted over the starters.

“Your next-door neighbour. Angie, is it? She’s very – very -”

“She’s very, all right!”

“I don’t think she likes me.”

“I don’t think she likes anyone.”

“She’s single, then?”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you? But she’s actually married to a really nice guy named Trevor. He’s totally under the thumb, of course. I feel sorry for him sometimes. I don’t know how he copes with living under the same roof as her.”

She stopped talking, feeling a little disloyal. Angie had done a lot for her. She shouldn’t really be slagging her off to a man she barely knew, however relaxed he made her feel.

“How are your ribs?” he asked.

“Delicious, thanks.”

“No, not the barbecue ribs. Your ribs. In your chest.”

“Have you been checking out my chest?”

“No, no. Of course not.”

“Well I’m asking for a refund on this Wonder-bra, then. I was sure you’d at least take a sneaky peek when you thought I wasn’t looking.”

He laughed. “I’m sorry,” he said. “About last weekend, I mean. I keep thinking, if I’d have got there ten minutes earlier, it might never have happened.”

“It’s for the best. If you’d arrived earlier, I would have seduced you, and taken you home, and I might never have realised how nice you are. It’s better this way, trust me. Better for both of us.”

“Nice is good? I thought you ladies prefer bad boys?”

“Only at bed-time.”

He opened his mouth to say something, thought better of it, closed it again. He offered her a prawn cracker instead.

They worked their way through five starters and a quarter of shredded duck. They talked. He insisted she order all the main courses herself, his included. Sweet and sour chicken, lemon chicken, chilli chicken. “Have you got something against chickens?” he asked her. “You seem to be trying to eat them off the face of the earth.” He started apologising again, and she had to reassure him that she didn’t have any eating disorders at all, and he could make as many poultry jokes as he wanted. She just liked chicken, that was all.

The Craving was there in the background the whole meal, of course. It didn’t matter how much she ate; it wouldn’t stop her wanting blood. But it seemed more subdued than when she was at home. Maybe it was because she was distracted; she wasn’t just sitting there, thinking about her spare bedroom all the time. She’d planned on making her excuses straight after the meal, and leaving before she became tempted to invite him back home, but she was enjoying herself. It’s there, she thought, but it’s under control. I can do this. It’s been the first time for a very long time that I’ve talked to anyone other than Angie – really talked to them – and it felt good. They were on equal terms. If anything, he was letting her take the lead. With Angie, she was always steam-rolled into doing whatever her friend wanted. Tonight, for one night only, she was a normal person, out on a regular date with a man she liked.

They finished their deserts, still chatting away to each other. She hadn't laughed this much in ages; she hadn't laughed this much ever. She ate as slowly as possible. She didn't want the evening to end. When it did, she'd have to go back to her house, her cell, and explain to Angie why she'd come back unaccompanied.

He paid. She protested, but was secretly relieved. Her parents paid her rent, and after she'd paid for food and utility bills there wasn't a great deal left over from her benefits. Just enough for drinks on her nights out, and to repay Angie for the sedatives she gave her gentlemen friends for her nights in.

They stood outside, by his van. "What now?" he asked.

"Are you trying to get me into bed?" she enquired. She would never have said that during the day, even in jest. But she was a different person when she was out after dark. More confident, self-assured. If only she could be like this all the time.

"No, I meant would you like to go to a pub, or would you like me to take you home?"

She had been joking about bed, but maybe now was time to get serious. She took a step closer to him, and looked him straight in the eye.

"Don't you want to sleep with me, then?"

She was acting like she did when she was looking for fresh blood in night-clubs. It made her uneasy. It wasn't like that, not this time. But it sounded like that. Maybe she was being too predatory. She might scare him away. Maybe she should back off a little.

"More than anything in the world," he replied.

"Maybe the Wonder-bra's worked after all," she quipped.

He held the van-door open while she got in. He went round to the driver's side, giving her a self-conscious wave on his way past the bonnet. He sat beside her. She pulled him towards her, giving him a long lingering kiss to show him she meant business.

"Your place or mine?" he asked.

"Yours," she told him. "Definitely yours."

#

Mike thought he'd died and gone to Heaven.

He liked Kate. He liked her a lot. They'd got on really well in the restaurant, and he was desperate for her to come out to a pub afterwards. He'd given her the option of going home; best not appear too pushy; too needy. But far, far better than the pub; they'd ended up here in his bedroom.

She stripped off her clothes like a lap-dancer; sexually confident, and in total control. He couldn't quite work her out. At her house, she had been so quiet, so vulnerable. But she was a different person now. Okay, she'd had a few drinks, but not so many as to lead to a complete personality change. She was definitely a lot stronger person when her friend wasn't around.

“Are you just going to stand there perving at me, or are you going to get your kit off, too?” she laughed.

He nodded vigorously. Within ten seconds, he was naked, and pulling her down on to his bed.

“Slowly,” she said. “I want to get my money’s worth!”

“Lucky me, if you’re paying me as well!”

They kissed, long and hard and lingering. His hands wandered over her body; her breasts, her hips, the inside of her thighs. His fingers brushed between her legs. Her mouth pressed harder against his, urging him on. She was ready for him already.

He eased inside her. Despite her earlier instruction to go slowly, she was thrusting against him, sinking him deeper inside her. She looked up at him, her expression urgent; predatory even. She gripped his bottom with both her hands, and pulled him ever further into her. She felt soft and warm and beautiful.

Her teeth brushed against his neck. And then she was biting him, not hard enough to break the skin, but hard enough to hurt a little. He was slightly taken aback at first; he hadn’t been given a hicky since he was about fifteen. But there was pleasure in the pain. It was worth the price of a little bruising tomorrow.

Her legs wrapped around him, her ankles meeting across the top of his thighs. He pressed her head into his neck, urging her to continue biting him. She was getting rougher, but the more she bit into him, the faster the adrenalin pulsed around his body. She gave a little groan as he slid in and out of her, then another, and another. She was close.

He upped the pace. He could restrain himself no longer. At one point, he slipped out, but he guided himself straight back into her again. Her groans were becoming more frequent, ever more urgent. He was thrusting closer and closer to orgasm. He held himself back for a few seconds, and then she was there, and he was there, and he was pumping inside of her and clinging on to her for all he was worth.

She went limp beneath him. She was flushed around the face and chest. She gave him a relaxed smile.

“Thank you,” he said.

“No, thank *you*,” she laughed. “That’s the first time I’ve done that in a very long time.”

“You – you haven’t had other boyfriends, then?” he asked. He blushed. It was a stupid question to ask someone as gorgeous as her. Worse still, it sounded needy. Please tell me I’m the only one, it said. As if!

“I didn’t say that,” she smiled. “There have been other men in my life. But they haven’t done that for me. And none of them have been around for very long, anyway. Gone within the week, as often as not.”

“That must be after they’ve met your friend, Angie,” he said, only half in jest. He withdrew, kissed her stomach and headed for the en-suite bathroom to fetch them both tissue to mop up.

“I think I scare them off when I get the handcuffs out,” she joked as he came back into the room.

“That wouldn’t scare me off.”

“No. No handcuffs for you.”

“Shame.”

A thought occurred.

“Are you -?”

“Am I what?”

“You know. On the pill. I didn’t use anything.”

“You’re okay. I can’t. I had all these health problems when I was younger. They told me that it was unlikely that I’d ever -.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No you’re not. Think of all that child maintenance you’ve just saved yourself. You can spend it on Chinese food instead. Chicken would be my recommendation. I don’t know if you noticed, but I’m rather partial to it.”

They got back in bed, Mike spooning Kate, taking the wet-patch like the gentleman he was. He could hear her breathing, sleepy and regular. It took him quite some time to nod off. He’d only met her a few times, but she was the one, he was sure of it. She was funny and clever and very, very pretty. If he could just stop her ripping his throat open during sex she’d be pretty much the perfect girlfriend.

Eventually, he fell asleep. But when he awoke, with daylight filtering cautiously through the blinds, he found that Kate had gone. No note. No sign that she had ever been there. Except, of course, for the dried-up wad of used toilet tissue on the bedside cabinet, and the purple bruising to his throat.

#

When Kate arrived home at four o’clock in the morning, she was feeling relaxed. She’d had the best time she could ever remember; her ribs had stood up better than expected to the battering they had taken (they were painful, but she was not in agony); she felt neither shaky nor nauseous from the Craving; and best still, the whole time she had been with Mike, she had hardly been tempted to drain him of blood at all.

Her good mood lasted until the taxi pulled up outside her house. With a sinking heart, she saw the light was on in her living room. Angie was waiting for her.

If she had had somewhere else to go, she would have asked the taxi-driver to keep going. But there was nowhere. Mike would be glad to have her back – maybe he hadn’t even noticed she’d gone yet – but he’d think it pretty odd if she moved in with him after just one date. And sooner or later, they’d have to leave his flat (even if only to go to hospital when the Craving

kicked in). And then he'd see her for what she really was. She couldn't have that. She'd have to face the music and get it over with.

She paid the driver, and walked down the pathway. Her front door opened when she was still a couple of yards away.

"Where have you been?" Angie demanded to know. "Quick, in my car. We've got about two hours before Trevor wakes up."

"It's four o'clock in the morning. I'm not going anywhere." A tinge of defiance. She felt just a little proud of herself.

"While you were off enjoying yourself with your new boyfriend, I was trying to bury the old one. Clive, is it? You remember Clive. Nice lad. Barely out of school. Choked on his own vomit. You were having an intimate little dinner somewhere, while I was dragging his corpse down your stairs all on my own, to make room for the next one. No need to thank me though."

"Angie, keep it down. People will hear."

"Have you got any idea how hard it is to get a twelve stone bloke in the boot of a car the size of mine? Have you? Especially when he's wrapped up in a winter duvet."

"Angie, please."

"And when I get there, I'm the one who has to bury him. Without anyone to help me. Because you're off fucking some bloke you've only just met, like some cheap slag. Well that's just brilliant. It's your mess, Kate. Yours, not mine. I'm sick of you taking me for granted. Well not this time. We've got a problem, and you can sort it out for once. Auntie Angie's on strike."

Kate fought down the panic. "Problem? What problem? Did someone see you with Clive?"

"You can see for yourself. Get in the car."

"What problem? You can't say there's a problem, and not tell me what it is."

"I can do what I like. Now get in the car and stop talking to me like that, or I'll go home and let you sort everything out on your own. You've been really rude to me since you met Window-Twat, and I'm not putting up with it any more, do you understand me?"

Angie glared at her, daring her to argue back. Kate held her gaze for a few seconds, but it was hopeless. She looked to the ground, like a naughty child. She shrugged. "Okay, you win. I'll get in the car."

"That's more like it," Angie nodded her approval. "Any more of that nonsense, and I was going to smack your legs and send you to bed without any supper."

Kate ignored the joke. She wasn't in the mood for laughing.

#

They drove out to woodland near Ashford. It was a three quarter of an hour drive, even at that time of night with no other traffic around. Angie was usually quite a reckless driver, but she had a body in her boot and it wasn't really the ideal time to be stopped by the police for speeding.

This was where they disposed of their bodies. There were six of them here, buried in shallow graves in the thickest part of the wood, furthest from the beaten track. Kate would have had trouble finding the spot in daylight, but Angie had no such difficulty. It was almost as if she'd been using the spot for years.

Angie had stayed silent in the car. It was a relief at first; the last thing Kate wanted was yet another bollocking for whatever it was that Angie was so agitated about. But after a while, she was longing for her friend to say something, partly to get it over with, and partly because she still didn't know why she was being dragged half way across the county in the middle of the night and it was starting to freak her out.

Every time she tried to speak, Angie shushed her. "You'll find out in a minute" she said. "Just shut up and let me concentrate on driving, or you can walk the rest of the way."

They finally reached the woods. Angie pulled into the layby they used for these outings. She always parked in exactly the same spot. Maybe she had her Rules, too.

"Fuck," she said.

"You're not my type," Kate quipped, hoping to diffuse the tension. She failed.

Angie glared at her as if she'd slapped her. "Oh, I know what your type is, young lady. Scummy blokes you can chain up and suck dry. I can't say I'm too disappointed not to fall into that category."

Kate shrugged defensively, unwilling to retaliate in case it provoked still more vitriol.

"What's the matter, then? Why the swearing?"

"I've forgotten my torch."

"We'll have to go back home then."

"We can't."

"Why not?"

"You'll see."

"Not without a torch, I won't."

Angie stropped out of the car. She waited by Kate's door, beckoning for her to get out. Kate stayed put. Her friend tutted loudly and opened the door for her.

"Are you coming, or what?"

"You've got to be joking. I can hardly see you. I'm not going in the woods in pitch darkness."

"Get out the car, or I'll drag you out."

"I'm not a child!"

"Well stop acting like one. Have you got your mobile phone?"

"Why?"

“We can use it for light.”

“Seriously? I’d have to keep pressing the button every few seconds. And it’s not exactly bright.”

Angie grabbed her by the arm, and pulled her out of the car. “Any more of that attitude, and I’ll bury you here with your boyfriends, do you understand me? I swear on my life, I will. Now stop whining, and come and look at your mess.”

Kate wanted to slap her. No, more than that, she wanted to cave her head in with a shovel. How dare she treat her like this? They were supposed to be friends. But she was treating her like an errant five year old, and wouldn’t even tell her what was going on! And the idea of wandering around in the woods with nothing but her mobile phone backlight to guide them was ridiculous to say the least. They’d never find the place where the bodies were buried, yet alone see anything when they got there.

“Light!” hissed Angie. “Now.”

She pressed the button, and the backlight came on. She glanced at the screen. Four fifty eight pm. She grew uneasy.

“Angie, we have to go back. It’s nearly five o’clock. What time does it get light?”

“How the fuck should I know? You’re never happy, are you? One minute, it’s too dark; the next, you’re worrying about the sun coming up. Well the sooner we find those bodies, the sooner you can go home. Come on, press your little button again, and let’s get going.”

It was futile to argue. Kate pressed the backlight button again and followed her friend. She could barely see her, even though she was only a few steps away. Maybe she’d give up in a few minutes, and they could hurry back home again before dawn.

Despite the darkness, Angie appeared to know where she was going. Time and time again, Kate felt branches against her face, making her jump, more through anxiety than discomfort. The phone was worse than useless, however much she turned the light on. On one occasion, she actually walked into the trunk of a tree. Maybe it would have been better if she could have afforded an iphone, so she could have played a video or something, but she only had a basic phone for calls and texts. She rarely left home, so there had been no need for anything more advanced. The only way to keep the light on was to press the button time and time again.

Angie forged ahead, almost at normal walking pace. Deeper and deeper into the woods. Kate remembered the scene in Snow White where the huntsman was leading the little girl into the forest to kill her. Surely Angie wasn’t that deranged? But she had threatened her earlier, when she was still in the car. What if she’d bullied her out here so she could murder her and bury her with her victims? The ultimate irony. And unlike Snow White, she wouldn’t have seven quirky dwarfs to bail her out at the last minute.

No. Angie wouldn’t do that. She was her friend. A really bossy, clingy control-freak of a friend, who deserved a good slap round the face, but a friend all the same. She hadn’t done anything to upset her enough to justify a fate like that. Nothing apart from refusing to chain Mike to a bed, but that was hardly grounds for her execution, even in Angie’s fucked-up world. There

had to be some other explanation. All the same, she wished she had something she could use as a weapon, just in case.

Angie stopped suddenly, and Kate bumped into her.

“We’re here.”

“We’re where? I can’t see a thing.”

“There. On the ground. Go and take a look.”

“You come with me.”

“Are you scared?”

“I’m alone in the pitch-black woods with a seething psychopath, at a spot where my six murder victims have been buried. Why would I be nervous?”

“If one of us is a psychopath, it sure as Hell’s not me! You’re the vampire, remember? You should thrive on darkness. Now get on with it, if you want to be back home before daylight.”

Kate took a couple of tentative steps forward, waving her left arm in front of her like a blind-man’s stick to clear any foliage in her path.

“On your knees,” Angie ordered.

“Do what?”

“On your knees.”

“Seriously? Angie, are we okay? You’re really starting to freak me out.”

She felt a hand on her shoulder, pushing her down into a kneeling position. She did as she was told. This really was starting to feel like an execution. She was out here in the woods, in the middle of nowhere. And Angie was being so hostile, so cold. She’d never seen her like this before (not that she could actually see her even now).

She turned the backlight of the phone back on, and held it face-down over the ground. It lit up a circle of grass maybe a couple of feet in diameter. There was nothing there. She looked up towards where her friend must be. “What is it? What am I looking for?”

“Did you just hear something?” Angie asked.

Kate held her breath, and listened. All she could hear was her own heart beating away in her chest. Surely it shouldn’t be that fast, that loud? What if she had a heart-attack? She’d never get to a hospital in time. She’d die here in the woods, surrounded by the bodies of the men she’d murdered. What a horrible way to go.

“What is it? What did you hear?”

“Did you know that there have been reports of some creature lumbering around out here after dark? Like a human, but big, and bad and ugly? Maybe it’s her. A hungry troll. Come to eat you.”

“Would you just fuck off and tell me what I’m looking for?”

“Sorry, couldn’t resist it.” Angie’s voice was softer now, a trace of humour having returned. For some reason, it made Kate feel more uneasy still. “You look so frightened. It was too good an opportunity to miss.”

“What am I supposed to be looking for?”

“There. A yard to your left. And a couple of yards to the left again. And about ten feet in front of that.”

Kate swept the phone over the ground like a mine-sweeper. Grass. Grass. More grass. But then, something else. Something bad.

She screamed.

There on the ground, a forearm was protruding through freshly churned earth. The flesh had been gnawed from it, like one of the barbecue spare ribs she had been munching on with Mike at the Chinese restaurant. Only the hand had been left untouched, giving it the appearance of a pale white glove.

She threw up over it. She always felt nauseous here; that was why Angie had started burying the bodies on her own. But this was worse than anything she had seen before.

She wiped the vomit from her face as best she could with the back of her hand. She wanted to run back to the car, but for some reason she felt compelled to stay, and find out just how bad this was. She probably wouldn’t find the car in the dark anyway. She got to her feet, skirted the arm which was pointing the way into the trees like some macabre sign-post, and dropped to her feet again. She couldn’t find anything at first, but after sweeping her free hand in a large circle across the grass, she felt something sticky poking up from the earth. She focused the phone on it. Even with the aid of a few seconds light, she wasn’t totally sure what it was. The remains of a foot, maybe? But chewed up. Horribly, horribly chewed up, so there was nothing left but bone and torn muscle.

The light went out on her phone. She swore. She tried again, without success. The battery had died. They were alone in the darkness with a half dozen partially excavated corpses. And the thing which freaked her out most was that Angie was laughing like the lunatic she was.

#

And then there was light. Bright light, right in her face, practically blinding her. She held an arm to shield her eyes from the beam. The light changed direction, illuminating Angie’s face from just beneath her chin, in the manner adopted by everyone who has ever told a horror story by a camp-fire.

“I am the troll of the forest! And this is where I feed!”

Kate stared back at her. She had a torch! She had made her tramp through the woods in pitch darkness, and all the while she had had a torch with her! “You bitch!”

“Sorry. I couldn’t resist it.”

“What have you done?” She gestured to the remains of her various victims, illuminated in the torchlight. “Was this part of your little joke, too?”

“What do you mean, what have I done? This wasn't me. Foxes, I suppose.”

“Couldn't you have buried them deeper?”

“That's easy for you to say, sitting at home with your feet up, with a nice glass of AB negative to wash down your fish and chips. I'm the one who has to drag the bodies through the pitch black woods and bury them on my own. Have you got the faintest idea how hard that is? By the time I've got them here, the last thing I want to do is dig a six foot grave, with a marble headstone, thank you very much.”

“I offered to help.”

“You kept chucking up. We can't have your DNA all over the place.”

“Can you even get DNA from vomit?”

“Kate, you're sort of missing the point here. We're surrounded by the half-exhumed bodies of your murder victims, and you're wanting to discuss the latest advances in forensic medicine.”

“I can't believe you had a torch on you all this time. I was terrified.”

Angie chuckled. “I was going to turn it on a few yards into the woods. I was furious with you in the car, but I'd calmed down by the time we got here. But then I thought, fuck it, she deserves this, leaving me to sort out her mess for her while she's off shagging Window-boy. And being so rude to me, as well. Back in the car. You deserved everything you got. You've got to admit it was funny, though.”

Kate wasn't going to admit anything. But now didn't seem to be the right time to have a “domestic” with her so-called friend. There were bodies all over the place. Angie played the torch over the grass, and she counted four of them. The other two were thankfully still under the ground. With all the churned up earth and half eaten limbs, it looked like a scene from a zombie film, where the zombies had given up half-way out of their graves and decided to stay put after all.

“What are we going to do?”

“We put them back again. Deeper this time. I've got a spade in the boot. Clive's keeping it company. We take turns to dig.”

“There's no time. It's nearly half five. We need to go home now.”

“And leave all these bodies all over the place? I don't think so. You're the one who's always telling me I take too many risks. Well not this time, I'm not. We've got to get this done tonight.”

“Angie, please. I can't do this now. We'll come back this evening. No-one'll find them here.”

“No way. We can't risk it. I'm not going to prison just because you're a freaky vampire who wets herself every time the sun comes up. You wait here. I'll go and get the spade.”

“Can you leave me the torch?”

“And you're afraid of the dark, too? You really are the crappiest vampire ever.”

Burying masticated bodies is never an easy task, but it is harder still with suspected broken ribs. At first, Kate tried to work through it, knowing that Angie would be in no mood for excuses. But within minutes, the sharp pain shooting through her chest had overwhelmed her, and she was in tears. She kept digging, as best she could. Angie chose to ignore her sobs at first, but after a while told her that she couldn't bear to hear her blubbing like a baby any more, and ordered her back to the car.

She sat in the passenger seat. It no longer seemed quite so dark. She wasn't sure whether it was because her eyes had grown accustomed to it, or whether sunrise was on its way. She wished she knew when dawn was due. Surely it was pretty late at this time of year? She could have Googled it if she'd had a decent phone, but her battery was dead anyway and the chances of having a signal out here seemed pretty remote.

The occasional car drove past. She felt self-conscious, sitting here by the side of the road in the woods. They were parked on the wrong side of the road, so that the headlights of the cars coming towards her shone into her face as they rounded the bend a few hundred yards further down the tarmac. Many were on full-beam, forcing her to shield her eyes. She hoped that Angie was far enough into the woods for the headlights not to pick her out.

She wondered what these drivers thought she was doing here. Maybe they assumed her driver had been caught short, and was relieving himself or herself in the woods. Maybe they assumed she was out dogging. She hoped not. She had no idea what she'd do if one of the drivers stopped and propositioned her. Lock the doors and hope he'd go away, she supposed. Or, if he wouldn't take no for an answer, bang on the horn until Angie came to send him packing. She was good at that sort of thing. Maybe she'd even have her syringe handy, in which case she could save herself a night out looking for her next victim.

It was nearly six o'clock. Angie had been out there for ages. Maybe she should go back and have another go at digging to speed things up? But it had taken her ten minutes to find her way back to the car, and even then she had hit the road about a hundred yards further along than she had been aiming for. She'd never find Angie without a landmark to aim for, not even with the torch. And if she did find her, she'd have to give up digging again after a minute or two, and then she'd get another mouthful for being weak and childish. Maybe it was best to stay in the car after all.

She had to be back home soon, though, no matter what. It would be daylight before long, she was sure of it. Dawn couldn't be much later than seven o'clock, surely, not even in January? It would take three quarters of an hour driving back (maybe less, as Angie could risk driving quicker with Clive safely out of the boot).

She cursed. Clive! Clive was still in the boot! When Angie eventually finished burying the others, she'd have to dig a hole for him, too. They would never get back in time. She'd be out here, in broad daylight. She felt her chest tighten. She tried to breathe deeply, before panic set in. She couldn't be left out here, in the middle of nowhere, with the sun up. She couldn't be.

She beeped the horn. Angie would hate that. She liked to be in control; she wouldn't want Kate dictating how fast she worked. It's your mess, she'd say, for the hundredth time. If you don't think I'm working fast enough, you come and do it yourself.

Maybe she should have left her the torch. She could've worked quicker if she could see what she was doing.

Another car came round the corner up ahead, just as she was beeping. It indicated to turn off the road. Shit! It was stopping! What if they were doggers, or rapists or murderers? Or all three. She beeped the horn again, holding it down longer this time, desperate for Angie to come to her aid.

The car stopped in front of her, bonnet to bonnet. The lights stayed on, blinding her. She heard a car door slam. She tried to slide over to the driver's seat, to put the keys in the ignition, ready to drive off if she had to. Where was Angie? She needed her back here, before something awful happened.

Someone was walking towards her. She was halfway over the gear-stick. She'd end up sitting on it if she wasn't careful. She arched her pelvis upwards and managed to squeeze over it onto the driver's side. Why did Angie drive such a stupid little car?

She could see the figure approaching the driver's side door, but couldn't make out any features yet. Maybe she could have done, if his stupid lights weren't shining in her face. She clicked one of the buttons on the car-keys. Had she locked the doors, or pressed the "unlock" button? She couldn't remember which was which in her panic.

He rapped on the window. She didn't look round. She just sat there, facing the front, praying that the door was locked. "Go away," she whispered to herself. "Go away."

"Could you open the door please, Miss."

She looked to her right. Her heart sank. It was a police-man. She had visions of Angie wading out of the woods with a shovel, caving in his head. She'd done something similar once before, after all, right back when all this had first began. She had beaten a man to death with a hammer. But not a police-man, Angie. You kill a police-man, and they'll do whatever it takes to find you. To find us.

"Miss?"

She opened the door. She tried to give a bright and breezy smile. She failed dismally.

"Did you want me?" he asked.

She looked confused. Maybe he was a dogger after all. But surely police-men didn't go in for that sort of thing. Not in uniform anyway.

"Want you?" she asked.

"You beeped me," he pointed out. "Quite insistently, the second time."

"Sorry," she said. "I've – I've been sick. Look, there's some on my coat."

"That's okay," he smiled. "There's no need to prove it."

"I just pulled over for a few minutes. I've not done anything wrong, have I?"

"No, no, of course not. You're feeling better now, though?"

“Yes. Much better, thanks. I’m sorry, this is going to sound like a really strange question, but do you happen to know when sunrise is?”

He gave her a quizzical look. She gave him a sheepish grin in return; it was all she could do, as she couldn’t really explain the question without making herself look even stranger than she must seem now. He looked at his watch. “I’m not sure. About an hour or so, I think.”

“Thank you. Thank you.”

“No problem. I’ll follow you up the road for a few miles. Make sure you’re okay.”

He slammed the door, and went back to his car. He reversed a few yards, to allow her room to pass him by. She sat there for a few seconds, thinking. What to do? If she stayed here, it would look really suspicious. But if she drove off, leaving Angie in the middle of the woods, she would go mental. Seriously bloody mental.

The police officer flashed his lights, signalling to her that he was ready to move off. She turned the key in the ignition. The engine came to life. She looked around. It definitely seemed lighter. She couldn’t stay here. It would kill her if the sun came up when she was so far from home.

The lights of the police car flashed again. He was impatient for her to be on her way.

Lights on. Indicate. Pull away.

She drove off, the police car carrying out a tight u-turn and following at a respectful distance behind her. She couldn’t see her; it was too dark, and she had to keep her eyes on the road. But she could sense Angie watching her in silence from the cover of the brooding trees. She had abandoned her friend and accomplice in the middle of nowhere. Angie was not going to be happy about that at all.

#

The police car followed her for about ten minutes. Surely he had to keep to the Ashford area, she thought? Surely he’d have to turn round and go back to his home town? Eventually, he did. That left Kate in a dilemma. Should she go back and face the music? Or should she drive home and worry about Angie later on?

If it was still dark, she’d have gone back in a shot. She hated the idea of leaving Angie in the woods on her own. But it was definitely getting lighter. Twilight, did they call it? Like that film? If she turned back now, she’d have no chance of getting home before sunrise.

She pulled over. She had to go back. She couldn’t leave Angie back there in the woods. Her friend would have come back for her, no question. She did a three point turn – not the brightest idea on an A-road, but she didn’t want to waste further time finding a junction. And headed back to the layby she’d left earlier.

There was no sign of Angie by the road-side when she got there. She wandered into the trees, calling her name, unwilling to lose sight of the road in case she got lost. She shouted out her name as loudly as she could. If the policeman came back now, he’d probably have her committed. No reply. No sign of her anywhere.

She went back to the road again. She sat in the car. She checked her watch. She turned the ignition on. Petrol was low. An eighth of a tank, maybe a little more. Was that enough to get

home without stopping to fill up? She didn't want to stop. For one thing, she probably smelled of sick. But far more importantly, time was ticking by. If she was going to have any hope at all of getting home before sunrise, she would have to leave now.

Maybe Angie's hitchhiked already, she thought. When I charge my phone back up, I'll probably find a message from her telling me not to worry, that she's on her way home already. Get yourself back home before it gets light, the message would say. I'm fine.

She had come back, after all. She'd waited here. She'd wandered around in the trees, calling out like an idiot, without so much as a whisper in reply. Angie must have gone home already. There was no point waiting around any longer. It was time for her to go home, too.

She set off again, desperately hoping that she wouldn't see the police-car from earlier. She drove as quickly as she could legally drive, conscious of the fact that she still had a dead body in the boot. She spent most of her time checking how light it was getting, whilst casting the occasional worried glance at the fuel gauge. Should she stop if it went down to zero, or should she keep going? She'd heard that you could keep going for miles on an "empty" tank, but what if she ran out of petrol? With a corpse in the back. Not something you can easily explain.

She drove back through Canterbury. She made it as far as the road running alongside the airport on the approach back to Ramsgate.

And then the sun came up.

#

It had been a long time since she had been out after sunrise. Back when she was at home, she hadn't had any choice; her parents had nagged her to get out and about, telling her she'd feel less depressed if she was active (which, to be fair, was what the psychiatrists had told them). And then there were the medical appointments – the never-ending medical appointments – to attend, all of which (save for the hypnotherapy they had briefly dabbled with) had been during the working day.

When she'd been out and about during the day-time in the past, she had felt so anxious that it made her physically sick on occasions. She didn't want people seeing her. She was a freak, a sickly deranged freak, and the thought of people seeing her made her want to run home, bury herself under the duvet and cry her eyes out. But she couldn't do that; it would upset her mother, and her father wouldn't approve. He was like Angie in some ways; totally intolerant of any sign of weakness. Well, like it or not, she was weak. That was the problem.

Since she'd moved into the house next to Angie's, she hadn't gone out during the day. Not once. And over time, her terror of daylight had changed. Now she drank blood. That was what she feared people would see in her when the sun came up. That was why she had to shut herself away from the world, a voluntary prisoner in her own four walls, watching the world go by with no-one to talk to except Angie. She'd even cut herself off from her parents since she'd started the blood thing. Too great a risk that they would hear or see something which would expose her for what she was. Better cut them off completely than risk them knowing the truth about her.

She'd been friendly with Trevor, Angie's husband, for a while. He was in a similar position to her in a way. He was wheel-chair-bound. Angie didn't like him going out without her, not even

to the pub at the end of the road. She worried about him being out on his own, she said, but Kate was sure it was just that Angie had to be in control of everyone all the time. He was like a life-sized doll she could dress up and plan his day.

She had worked when Kate had first moved into the road, so Trevor had been on his own all day. And even when Angie had been sacked on suspicion of stealing drugs at the hospital (nothing ever proved, of course), she'd go out a lot on her own. Ironically, she said she got bored being at home all day. She wouldn't take her husband with her, as she said it was too much trouble getting him in and out of the car. He was giving her back-ache. He'd be happier on his own at home, while she had some "me-time" of her own.

So he started visiting Kate for an hour or two a day when his wife was out. All completely innocent. He just came round for some conversation, a cup of tea, and a biscuit or two. That was before she had men chained to her bed, of course. She enjoyed the company. Even then, before Angie had started to grate upon her, it was nice to have someone else to chat to once in a while.

Angie hadn't seen it that way, though. She went mental when she found out about their "coffee-mornings". She didn't actually accuse them of having an affair, but she kept coming out with things which suggested that she was thinking it. "The moment my back's turned," she'd say, "you're round Kate's, getting your busted little legs under her table." She spoke to him like that all the time. No respect. No respect at all.

Trevor had backed down straight away. Kate hadn't been quite so much under her friend's thumb at that stage, so she would have been minded to carry on seeing Trevor, even if it was just once or twice a week. But he politely refused to come round again. Angie had been good to him, he explained. He didn't want to do anything which might upset her.

So she'd been on her own again, increasingly dependent on Angie as her only daytime contact with the outside world. Maybe that was why Angie had kicked up such a fuss about Trevor coming round. Maybe she knew full well that there was nothing going on, but as long as they were both isolated they'd both be emotionally dependent on her, and that was the way she liked it.

Kate still went out at night, of course. She needed some respite from being at home all the time. But there were only so many places you could go during the evenings when money was tight. She tried sitting in pubs, but it was difficult to nurse a drink through an hour or two, and she kept getting chatted up by teenagers who looked too young to be drinking in the first place. Besides, she was bored. Sitting in a pub on your own was even worse than sitting indoors on your own. At least when you were at home, no-one was thinking what a sad bitch she was.

And then the fateful night she had first went to a night-club on her own. She'd put it off for ages. She had to pay to get in, which meant there was even less money to spend on drinks when she got inside. And the drinks were more expensive, too. But she had been sent some birthday money by her parents, and she decided to give a club a try. She'd asked Angie to come with her, but she wouldn't leave Trevor alone at night. So she'd gone on her own.

She'd only been there half an hour, sitting on her own at a table near the dance-floor. Other people kept putting their empty glasses on the table while they went off to dance. In a way, she

was glad of that. It made it look as if there had been other people sitting with her. It made her feel slightly less of a sad loser.

And then Danny had chatted her up. He'd come over, sat in one of the chairs she'd pulled up to make people think there had been other people sitting at her table, and come up with some truly dreadful chat-up line or other. Something about her clothes looking good, but they'd look better on his bedroom floor. She'd laughed out of politeness. He took it as encouragement. He'd bought her a drink. And then another one. And then several more.

She couldn't remember much more about their time in the club together. She had danced at some stage, which was something she never did, even when she had been well. She had a vague recollection of spinning around on the dance-floor, and giving some bloke a mouthful when she saw him laughing at her. Danny had had a go at him, too. She'd liked that. Someone to look after her for a change.

They had had a slow dance at some stage. She suspected that it had not even been to a slow song. Everyone else was dancing around as the two of them smooched, Danny spooning her, his hands all over her body. It was nice to be wanted. She didn't want him to come back home with her, but she'd enjoy the moment while it lasted. It had to beat sitting on her own on her sofa again.

More alcohol, more bad chat-up lines, more wandering hands. And then he was leading her out of the club by the hand. She followed him without complaint. She didn't like him very much. But the more she drank, the less that seemed to matter. It was just one night, after all. It was company, even if not particularly pleasant company. What harm could it do?

He'd driven her home. She recalled being surprised that he was sober enough to steer in a straight line, if he'd been matching her drink for drink. She didn't know whether he was drink-driving, or whether he'd been knocking back non-alcoholic drinks while he was getting her steadily pissed. The former would be the least worrying of the two. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all. She felt that she should make her excuses and get out of the car, but they were in the middle of nowhere, and she wasn't sure she could stay upright, yet alone find her way home.

She'd had difficulty remembering her address when he asked her where they were going. "You'll know it when you see it," she told him, in that oh-so-knowledgeable way drunks adopt when they're giving instructions. "Angie lives next-door."

Maybe she'd started to sober up a little by the time they'd got back to her house, but she had full recall of the rest of the evening. He'd tried to push her back against the car to snog her. She didn't want to be pushed anywhere, especially not by him. The more he talked to her, the less she liked him. She'd started to realise what a twat he was.

"Stop it," she'd said. "I'm not some slapper you can take in the street."

He'd laughed, and carried right on. "Yes you are," he said. "Otherwise you wouldn't have got pissed and brought a total stranger home."

"Fuck off!" she shouted. The lights came on in Angie's bedroom. It gave her courage; she felt less alone knowing her friend was around.

She shouted at him again, and shoved him backwards. He laughed the first time, and pressed himself up against her again, but when she pushed him a second time he snapped. He slapped her hard across the face.

“You punch like a girl,” she goaded him, determined to hurt him, hoping that he would get back in his car and flounce away.

This time he punched her. Hard. To her left cheek. Had she not been pressed up against the car, she would have fallen down. She screeched at him, and lashed out at him with open palms, slapping him three or four times about the head. He grabbed her wrists and held them by her sides. And then he was dragging her towards her garden. She tried to pull away from him, but couldn't get enough purchase on the pavement with her high-heels on. Within seconds, she was through the garden-gate and he'd flung her down on to the damp grass.

“I've paid for this,” he told her coldly, as he unbuckled his black trousers. “It cost me thirty quid to get you pissed. Come on, tell me you want it.”

“Fuck off!”

“You said that already. Come on, admit it. Slags like you are always gagging for it. Well, you're gonna get it alright.”

She tried to get back up, but he launched himself on top of her, forcing her back down onto the lawn.

“Fuck off!” she screamed at him again.

He clamped her mouth closed with one hand, as he hitched up her skirt. He tried to pull her knickers down one-handed, but couldn't manage it. He took his hand away from her mouth so he could use both hands. She screamed. He punched her in the side. He pulled her knickers down mid-thigh, and clamped his palm back across her mouth again.

“You're gonna love this,” he whispered in her ear. “You'll never want another bloke again afterwards, I guarantee it.”

And then his face thudded into hers, cracking against her forehead and nose. For a moment, she thought he had deliberately head-butted her, but then she caught sight from the corner of her eye of someone standing above them. She panicked for an instant, not knowing what was going on. Had he arranged to meet someone here, someone who would be joining in? No, she'd been with him the whole time since giving him directions. No-one else knew he would be here.

What then? What was going on?

It happened again. His head was shunted into hers. The person behind him had struck him with something. His face rested over-intimately against hers. She screamed.

His eyes had gone blurred, senseless, as he stared at her from just an inch or two away. And then someone was rolling him off her. There was Angie; Angie with a claw-hammer. Angie had saved her.

Angie struck him again; a vicious blow to his head. And then again. And again. Her aim was good. Not once did she go below neck level.

Kate pulled up her knickers, and got unsteadily to her feet. She felt like crying, but the tears wouldn't come. He'd tried to rape her. The bastard had tried to rape her. And now he was dead. Good. He deserved it.

Angie struck him once more, and then gestured for her to help drag him inside.

"No," Kate shook her head. "I don't want him in my house."

"I've battered his skull to pieces," Angie replied. "I can't leave him out here. We need to work out what to do."

"Yours, then."

"Trevor wouldn't be terribly impressed if I bring a dead body home."

"Call the police. They can take him away."

"You're not listening to me. Caving the back of someone's head with a claw-hammer in isn't generally considered to be self-defence. I'm not going to prison for a wanker like that."

"They'll understand. You had to do it. He was - "

"I know what he was doing. And he got what was coming to him. But the police won't see it like that, trust me. Not when they see the state I've left him in. Now come on, someone might see us. You take his wrists, I'll take his ankles."

Kate did as she was told. They carried him the three yards or so to her front door (she had been so close to sanctuary when it happened). She fumbled the key in the lock, but Angie snatched it off her, and the door was open in seconds. They pulled him inside, and slammed the door after them once Angie had retrieved her hammer from the blood-soaked grass.

"We should phone the police," Kate persisted. "I don't want him in here."

Angie shook her head. "No way. We'd both be locked up. No doubt about it."

"But I didn't do anything!" Kate protested. "He was on top of me. I didn't kill him!"

Angie looked at her as if she had betrayed her. "Thanks for that, mate."

"I didn't mean – I wasn't saying – "

The tears came. Angie wrapped a meaty arm around her waist, and pulled her towards her, giving her a motherly kiss on the forehead.

"It's okay. I know what you meant. It's not my fault. It's not your fault. It's this dirty little bastard staining your hall-carpet. He's the one who should be apologising."

Kate looked at him. There was no doubt about it; he was dead all right. Angie was stronger than she looked. Part of his skull had caved in, with brain protruding from the gaping wound. He was covered with blood, as was Angie. Her carpet was stained red. She looked down at her own clothes. They were bloodied too, where his head had rubbed against her as she was carrying his corpse inside.

She felt a sudden surge of anger towards him. He would have raped her if Angie hadn't come to her assistance. He'd called her a slag, a slapper, told her he'd bought her, like some old

whore. He'd punched her. And now he'd bled all over her carpet. She liked her house clean, pristine, but he had violated it, just as he had intended to violate her. It was the final straw.

She grabbed the hammer from Angie and took a swing at his head. There was the sound of splintering bone, and a geyser of blood and brain matter erupted from his skull. She struck him a second time and a third. She collapsed on her knees beside him, huge sobs wracking her body. Angie knelt down beside her and put a motherly arm around her shoulders.

"No police," she cooed. "It would be a bit tricky explaining to them why his brains are splattered all over your garden and your hallway as well."

"No police," repeated Kate through her tears.

And in that moment, she was lost.

#

And now she was in the car, driving past the airport, the sun poking mischievously over the distant horizon through the chain-link fence to her left. And she felt as if she was going into nuclear meltdown. Pain stabbed through her head, as lights flashed across her field of vision. Her stomach cramped, released and cramped again, as if some unseen hand was trying to squeeze the juice from it. Waves of nausea hit her. For a moment, she thought she would need to pull over so that she could be sick in the road, but she didn't want to stop, not even for an instant. She just needed to get home as soon as she possibly could.

Despite the urgency, she braked. She could hardly see, and if she kept on doing seventy she'd end up off the road. She dropped down to forty miles per hour. The driver behind didn't like it; he beeped her, scolding her for what he considered to be driving which was far inferior to his own. Well, he could just fuck right off. She was ill. It was as much as she could do to drive in a straight line.

She felt her limbs starting to tighten, as another wave of nausea swept over her. This was ridiculous. She'd been sick before when she'd been out in the daylight, years ago when she was still at her parents, but never like this. And the sun had only been up for a minute or two. Surely her symptoms couldn't come on so quickly? It must be all in her mind. But it didn't feel that way. If it was all in her mind, no-one had explained that to the rest of her body.

She felt the need to vomit again, stronger this time. No time to stop (and if she tried she'd end up with the tailgater right up her arse). She threw up on the passenger seat, as quickly as she could so she could get her eyes back on the road. She looked up after just a second or two. Just in time; she was veering off the road towards the chain-link fence. Ironically, there was a no-stopping sign attached to it. She steered back on to the tarmac again.

The car behind overtook her, the driver's hand held down on the horn to show her quite how bad her driving was. Maybe he had a point this time, but he was still pissing her off big-time. She floored the accelerator, until she was driving just a few yards behind him. If he was going to have a go at her driving, she would give the wanker something to complain about.

He sped up. She sped up too. There was a roundabout up ahead. He drove across it. She followed him, without bothering to slow down to see what was coming. Fortunately, the roundabout was clear. She deserved a little luck after all she had been through tonight.

And then she remembered the body in her boot. She braked sharply, letting the car ahead get away. He'd learnt his lesson. She'd drive home as fast as she could, but without being reckless. No point in getting arrested now, not when she was so close to sanctuary.

She made it back to her own house without further incident. The final roundabouts and traffic lights were equally kind to her as the first had been. She threw up once more, this time slowing down to a crawl opposite the St Lawrence Tavern before retching. She could barely see at all by the time she pulled up outside her house. She parked the car a good two feet away from the pavement. It would have to do. She wasn't about to try again.

She rushed indoors, and slammed the door behind her. For a second, she thought of going back out again. Would the police knock on her door if the car was parked quite so badly? Or worse still, on Angie's door? Would they find Clive if they did? It didn't matter. She wasn't going out there again, whatever the consequences. It would kill her.

She wondered again if she'd gone mad. Her symptoms were so extreme. So immediate. It had never been this bad before, nothing like it. Was it some sort of chemical reaction, or was she just a desperate hypochondriac in need of a good talking to? There had to be a genuine physical reason for all this, surely? Even *her* mind couldn't do this much damage to her, however much it might want to punish her for what she had become.

The symptoms were like those from the Craving; her craving for blood. Only even worse. And at least the Craving came on gradually, insidiously, one painful day at a time. This time, out in the daylight, it had hit her like a truck. The moment the sun had peeped over on the horizon, she had been toast.

Maybe blood would help her, as it did with the Craving. Maybe it was her equivalent of morphine. But she had none in the house, and Clive was decomposing in the boot. Did corpses bleed? She wasn't sure. She'd never tried to tap them once they were dead. Not except the first one, that is. Danny. The man who'd tried to rape her in her own front garden.

That made her think of Angie again. Was she home yet? She wouldn't like it when she saw that she'd vomited over her upholstery. She should phone her; check she was okay. But not yet. She was still too ill for that. Compose herself, phone her friend, take her bollocking and then go to bed for the rest of the week.

It took her an hour to calm down enough to make the call. She put her mobile on charge, and waited for her breathing to return to something resembling normal pace. Just as she was psyching herself up to phone Angie, the phone rang. She hesitated before answering it. She was frightened. What if she was still in the woods in Ashford? What if she insisted on her driving back to collect her? How furious would she be when she refused to come out until darkness fell again?

She took the call. "Hello?" Relief. It was someone asking her to complete some survey or other. She hung up without giving them any explanation. She couldn't deal with cold-callers at a time like this.

Eventually, she phoned Angie's house. It seemed the safer option. If Angie answered, she was back home again. If she didn't, Kate would have more time to steel herself before phoning her on her mobile.

The phone rang just once. Trevor answered. He sounded worried.

“Kate, is that you?”

“Is Angie there?”

“I was hoping she was with you! She didn’t come home last night. I’ve phoned the hospitals, the police...”

“Please. Don’t phone the police. She wouldn’t want you to.”

“I’ve phoned them already. I didn’t know where she was. Have you seen her?”

“Yes. We were – we were – we went out last night.”

“All night? She would have told me.” He sounded upset. It occurred to her that Angie’s absence must look suspicious to him. Maybe he thought she was having an affair. No chance of that, of course. She really didn’t like men very much at all, and she was never very complimentary about lesbians either (even though Kate had caught her giving her some very dodgy looks at times, when Angie thought she wasn’t looking). Not that she could say any of this to Trevor, of course. Don’t worry, Trevor, your wife’s not having an affair, because she has a pathological hatred of men and she hasn’t come out of the Lesbian Closet yet.

“Do you know when she’ll be back?” he asked. He sounded like a child whose mother had left him home alone. She felt sorry for him, almost sorry enough to invite him round. Almost. She didn’t need any more questions which she didn’t know how to answer. She needed sleep. And if Angie would be cross now, how much worse would she be if she came back to find her and Trevor together?

“Soon,” she told him. “Any minute now, I expect.”

“She didn’t come back with you then?”

How could she answer that? She wasn’t feeling up to inventing stories, not that she could think of a story which would explain why they had stayed out all night and then come home separately. Unless one of them had pulled. Maybe that was what she should say? Not Angie, of course; she couldn’t tell Trevor his wife had pulled. She’d say that she had.

“I’ve pulled.”

“Sorry?”

“I’ve pulled. A man. He’s upstairs waiting for me. Gotta go. I can hear him calling me.”

“Bye, then. Let me know if you hear anything before I do.” He sounded so sad. He was looking for support from her, but she had none to give him.

“I’ve thrown up in your car. I’m really sorry. Ask her to call me when she gets in. It’ll be alright; she’ll be back soon.”

She put the phone down. She winced. “I’ve thrown up in your car”. What a stupid thing to say, especially at a time like this!

She started feeling nauseous again. She put the latch up on the door to stop Angie letting herself in uninvited when she got home, and made her way upstairs. She needed to sleep, to sleep until she felt better. She might be in bed for a very long time.

#

She stayed in bed until Thursday, only getting up when she had to. She ate little; she couldn't keep it down. She craved blood. She craved blood like she never had before.

The symptoms from her sunlight exposure were similar to those from the Craving she usually had, only worse. They had reduced to almost manageable proportions by the end of that first day, but then got worse again as the week wore on. Her desire for fresh blood became stronger and stronger. It kept her awake. Her sheets were soaked in sweat as she tossed and turned all day and night. She needed blood to make the pain go away, but could hardly make it out of bed, yet alone go in search of victims. Not that she would pull in this state anyway; it would be hard to attract men when she couldn't stop shivering. There was one man who would come round after just one telephone call, of course. But that wasn't a call she was willing to make yet.

Trevor phoned during the afternoon she first took to her bed. Angie was home. She was fuming. No, she didn't want to speak to Kate. And she'd be sending her the bill to have her car valeted. And that was it. She'd taken the door off the latch to encourage Angie to come round to see her. Even a bollocking had to be better than this withering silence. But she heard nothing more from Angie until the Thursday. And when she did, she realised that withering silence would actually have been far preferable after all.

She was woken by noises from downstairs. Someone was moving around down there. She listened for a full minute, not knowing what else to do. Could she phone Angie? Probably not a good move. The Police? No, worse idea still. She'd had enough contact with the police recently to last her a lifetime. It was time to keep her head down for a while. And not Mike either. She'd been ducking his calls all week. She couldn't trust herself with him at the moment. Not with the Craving this bad. If he came round now, Angie would be on him like a shot, and she was worried that she'd have neither the strength nor the will-power to save him from her.

The front door closed. Someone leaving? Or maybe someone else was coming in? She was tempted to stay in bed, hide under the covers and hope everything would be okay when she resurfaced. But she had to do something. Better to catch them unawares if they were still in the house. Maybe she could frighten them off that way. She didn't want them to find her in her bedroom. It might give them ideas. She'd already narrowly survived being raped in her own front garden by the hideous Danny, and she wasn't about to risk a repeat performance up here in her own bed. Especially not without Angie around to save her this time round.

Maybe Angie had seen them come in? Would she help if she had, or would she leave them to it? She'd help; surely she'd help. It doesn't matter how pissed off you are with your friends; you wouldn't leave them to face something like this on their own. Not even Angie would do that.

She got of bed, and pulled on her dressing-gown. She opened the door. She listened. No noise down there now. It gave her encouragement. Any more banging and she would have

been straight back into bed, whatever the consequences. Hopefully, whoever it was had gone away.

Down the stairs to the first floor. Past the room she kept for her special visitors (no-one in there now, worse luck). She stopped again at the top of the steps leading down to the ground floor. Still nothing. The front door was open a few inches, though. There had definitely been someone here.

She hurried down the stairs, and closed the front door as quietly as she could. She prayed she was locking the intruders out rather than shutting them in. She took a deep breath and poked her head round the door to the living room. The armchair had been moved so its back was to her. There was someone sitting in it; she could see the back of his head. She stifled a scream, and raced upstairs again.

She got as far as her bedroom door before she realised that he wasn't following her. What now? She couldn't stay up here forever. If whoever it was wanted to hurt her, he could have come up here while she was asleep. He wouldn't just be taking a nap in her armchair. But normal people didn't let themselves in to other people's homes and make themselves comfortable while they were sleeping upstairs. Besides, no normal person had the key to her house.

She ventured back down to the first floor again. More listening. Still no sound at all from downstairs. She took the last flight one step at a time, ready to hare back up to her bedroom if the intruder reappeared. She approached the living room door. She reached out for the handle. She could hear her own breathing, loud and laboured, whether from fear or from running up and down the stairs, it was difficult to say.

What if he was standing on the other side of the door when she opened it, ready to grab her, pull her into the room, do whatever it was to her he'd come to do? She needed an escape route. She should open the front door, so she had somewhere to flee.

The door was just a foot or two to her left. She turned round to open it. As she did so, someone rapped upon it. Her heart jumped, as if trying to leap free of her body. She could have cried with fear.

Her first urge was to run back upstairs again, but there was only so many times she could do that without being ridiculous. She ran to the back door instead. The key was missing from the lock. She cursed it and kicked it, but there was no way out there.

Back to the front door. There was another knock. Someone was waiting for her out there. Or waiting for the other man to let him in. She had no option but to open it, before the other man came out and cornered her. At least if she opened the front-door herself, she might have time for a scream before he was inside. Someone might hear, might come to her rescue. But then it was a very quiet road. She could be screaming for an hour before anyone thought to come to help her. Still, it was her only chance.

She wanted to open the door slowly, an inch at a time, fearing what was on the other side, but there was only one way to do this. Rip it open, like taking off a plaster. Get the bad stuff out of the way quickly, rather than prolonging the agony. And then scream, before the intruder forced his way in and did whatever it was he'd come to do to her.

She opened the door, her hands shaking on the door handle. There was a man outside, a man of about sixty. A man in a wheelchair. He gave her a friendly smile.

“Hello Kate,” he said.

It was Trevor. Angie’s husband.

“Can I come in?”

She stared at him, not knowing what to say. She felt a little better having him here, but she didn’t want him inside. She felt that whoever was in her living room had something to do with her special hobby. She couldn’t risk him finding out about that. And if it was an intruder, it would hardly be a fair fight between the two of them, not with him being in the wheelchair. She needed Angie here. Angie would know what to do; she always did.

“Where’s Angie?”

“That’s what I’ve come to talk to you about. Can I come in? I’m freezing my nuts off out here.”

He grinned, and waited for her to speak. She stared at him, not knowing what to say. “Could you wait there, a sec,” she eventually requested. “There’s something I have to do first.”

She left the front-door open, and stepped into the living room. “Milk and two sugars,” she could hear Trevor calling after her from outside. “If you’re offering.”

The man was still in the armchair; the back of his head was still very much where she had left it. It was leaning to one side a little, as if he was sleeping or deep in thought.

“Hello?” she called out.

“Hello!” Trevor called out from outside.

“Not you, Trevor.”

She took a few more steps towards the armchair. She could reach out and touch his head now, if she felt like it. But she didn’t feel like it. Not at all.

“Hello?” she said again, quieter this time, so Trevor wouldn’t hear her. “What are you doing in my house?”

No reply.

She walked around the armchair, one step at a time, keeping two or three feet from it at all times to give her space enough to run if he leapt up at her. He didn’t move a muscle. It was almost as if he –

She put a hand to her mouth.

As if he was dead. It was Clive. Poor, dead Clive. There was a length of string round his neck which had been threaded through a hole in the corner of an A4 sheet of paper, like some bizarre necklace. Angie had scribbled a message on it, untidy but just about decipherable. “Give me Mike,” it said.

The living room door started to open. Fuck! Trevor had let himself in. She shot across the room, and tried to close the door on him. It struck hard against the side of his wheel chair. He

was halfway through the door. She stood in front of him, barring the way.

“You can’t come in,” she said.

“Problem?”

“I have a man in here,” she told him, saying the first thing to come into her head.

“And? Is he shy?” Trevor asked.

“Naked.”

“In your living room?” Trevor asked in surprise. “The things you young people get up to! Are there any naked men in your kitchen, too?”

“No. No, the kitchen’s a nudity free-zone on Thursdays.”

“I’ll go in there, then. For that drink you promised me. Tell your young man that I’d love to meet him when he’s put his pants back on.”

He started wheeling himself backwards out of the room. “Watch out for carpet-burns,” he chuckled as he reversed into the hallway. “Don’t look so surprised. I was young once, you know.”

Kate closed the door after him. She raced back through the living room into the dining room, and closed the door which led through to the kitchen. What to do now? There was nothing much she could do, really. If she started trying to haul Clive’s corpse up the stairs, it might look ever so slightly suspicious.

She left the room through the living room door, not risking the dining room in case Trevor glanced through the door and caught sight of the dead body in the armchair.

She put the kettle on, and took a seat opposite Trevor. She tried to smile at him, but it didn’t quite work. “What’s up? It’s been a long time since you’ve been allowed round here.”

“I’d have come round more often if I knew all the fun you were having,” he joked. He lapsed into silence, which was most unlike him.

“How’s Angie?” she asked.

It was then that Trevor started crying.

#

It took a minute or two for Trevor to pull himself together. When he did, he was very apologetic. He hadn’t meant to cry like a big girl, he told her. Or a small girl, come to that. It was just that – that – he was so worried about his wife. You have every cause to be, Kate thought.

Had it been any other man in her kitchen this far into her Craving, she would have been worried for him. But Trevor was safe. He had been her friend for a long time. And Angie was hardly going to come around and jab him with a syringe. If anything, the Craving wasn’t so strong now he was around. It was there okay, but damped down. Maybe it was all in her mind after all.

“She’s been acting strangely for the last year or so,” he said. “We have separate bedrooms of course, but sometimes I can hear her moving round the house at night. I don’t sleep all that well; my back keeps me awake. So when she turns the light on in her room and starts banging round the house, it wakes me up. I hear her go out. One, two o’clock in the morning. And then come back an hour or two later. I don’t know whether she’s seeing someone, someone here on the estate. I wouldn’t blame her. There’s only so much I can do, if you get my drift. Sorry. Too much information, I see. But I just need to tell someone what it’s like; why I’m worried.

Then there was what happened a few days ago. She was out all night, and most of the day after. She’s never done that before. I can do most things for myself, but there’s some stuff I need help with. She didn’t tell me she was staying out, and she wouldn’t tell me where she’d been when she got back. And she was fuming. I’ve never seen her so cross, and I’ve seen her go into rages pretty regularly over the last fifteen years or so, I can tell you.”

“Has she calmed down now?” Kate asked, attempting to sound as casual as possible.

Trevor shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve hardly seen her. She’s acting really strange, to be honest. Even more so than usual. Just now, she insisted I go in my bedroom for half an hour, because she had something to do. And then when she let me out, she told me to come round here and see how you are. She’s never been happy about me visiting you, not for a long time. But this morning, she was positively insisting on it.”

“I bet she was.”

Trevor caught the undertone in her voice. He looked at her quizzically. “What’s going on, Kate? If anyone knows, you do.”

Kate shrugged. “I don’t know. Really I don’t.”

“Kate, please. I need to know. If she’s having an affair, I can live with it. I won’t say you told me. I just need to know how involved they are. I don’t want her to leave me.”

“She’d never leave you, Trevor! She loves you. And she’s not having an affair either. I swear to you. I’d know if she was. I don’t think she likes men very much. Apart from you. She’d never see anyone else.”

“Are you sure? Maybe I should check her for carpet-burns. Where should I look? You know about these things.”

She smiled. “I’m afraid the man I have in there isn’t energetic enough to give anyone carpet-burns right now.”

“The more fool him.”

She realised the kettle had been boiling for some time. She poured them each a cup of tea. She gave herself an extra sugar. She needed the energy.

“Something else,” Trevor ventured, as she settled back down again. “She’s making something in the cellar.”

“Making something? What?”

"I've got no idea. I just hear her banging away down there. She's taken the tool-box with her, and I haven't seen it since. She was hammering away for three hours yesterday. She's awful at DIY. Maybe she's just trying to work out how to put up a shelf."

"That is quite strange. It's empty, isn't it?"

"There's just the gardening stuff we couldn't fit in the shed. Heaven knows what she's up to. She's not herself anymore. She's cold. Distant. Not my old Angie anymore."

He took a thoughtful swig of tea. He glanced at his watch. "Gotta go," he told her. "She'll get moody if I'm round here too long. Twenty minutes, she said. Don't want to push my luck."

He wheeled himself to the front door. She followed along behind him. She was worried. If Angie started losing it, all three of them would be in serious trouble.

She gave him a peck on the cheek at the door.

"It was good to talk," he told her. "What with Angie being so distant lately, I hardly get to speak to anyone anymore. Even the postman's avoiding me because I keep him chatting when he wants to get on with his round. I guess we all get lonely sometimes."

"You know you're welcome here. Whenever you like," she said. "Just phone first, okay?"

"In case of shy naked men in your living room?" he asked.

"Exactly."

He took a deep breath, as if steeling himself before returning to his wife. And then he was gone, leaving her to the company of the dead-man in the armchair.

#

Angie stood on the landing outside Kate's room, listening to the rhythm of her breathing, making absolutely sure she was asleep before venturing inside. She had done this many times before. She liked watching her friend when she was sleeping. It was the one time her face looked relaxed and care-free.

It had been harder this week. Kate wasn't sleeping properly. A couple of times, she had turned over just as Angie was creeping into the room, and she had had to sidle out again, one agonisingly slow step after another. But this time, her breathing pattern was regular. She was sound asleep all right.

She walked into the room, and stood by the bed. There was just enough light coming through the venetian blinds for her to see around the room, now her eyes had become accustomed to the darkness. She leant over Kate. She hoped that she wouldn't wake up. It would give her the fright of her life if she saw Angie looming over when she opened her eyes. And she might change the locks, which would never do.

She had a pretty face. Really pretty. Her mouth was half open, in a little pout like models have in the glossy magazines, but her Kate didn't have to work at it like they did. Those lips. Made to be kissed. It was such a shame that Kate was straight. She was wasted on men. They didn't even come close to deserving her. Not that she was a lesbian herself, of course; the thought of women with women made her feel quite ill. It was just Kate she wanted.

There was one of Kate's men downstairs, of course. A dead one, with a message hung round his neck. She had been stupid bringing him round yesterday morning; anyone could have seen her. But she had been seething all week, and when she thought of the message she could send, she just had to do it straight away rather than waiting for night to fall. So she'd sent Trevor to his room, and had retrieved the corpse from the boot of her car. There was a quiet road, so no-one had seen her as far as she was aware. There had been no inquisitive police-men at her door since she'd done it, either. She was pretty sure she had got away with it, but it wouldn't do to risk it a second time, however much of a kick she would get out of a repeat performance. She'd take him back to hers after dark. But not until Kate had promised her Mike in his place.

She took hold of the top corner of the duvet, and slowly, ever so slowly pulled it up to reveal the top half of Kate's nude body. She drank it all in: her graceful shoulders; the curve of her shapely breasts; her flat stomach (a little too flat, it had to be said; she was shedding weight again now the Craving had set in). She could only see down to waist level, though. She wanted to see rather more. If she lifted the duvet up just a few inches higher, she would have it all.

Kate shivered in her sleep. Angie gently lowered the duvet, covering her up again. Best not to wake her up. She would have a lot of explaining to do if she was caught peeking under the covers. She didn't want her friend to think ill of her, to accuse her of ogling her in her sleep; she just wanted her to do as she was told for once.

She deserved a look, though, after all Kate had put her through this week. It had taken her ten hours to get home. Ten hours! She'd seen Kate talking to the police-man in the woods, and had prayed that she would keep calm. Angie knew how to keep a secret, but Kate was always so guilty, so wracked with self-loathing, that there was always a risk that she would confess everything just to get it all over with. The police man had got back in his car, apparently satisfied, and just as she was breathing a huge sigh of relief, Kate had turned her headlights on and driven off, the police car following her down the road. She had driven away. In Angie's car! Leaving her stranded in the middle of nowhere. She would never have done that before she'd met Mike. That man had changed her.

She waited for a while for her friend to come back, but there was no sign of her after nearly a quarter of an hour. She flagged down a car. It was going to Ashford. Wrong direction, but at least she'd be back in civilisation. She hadn't quite finished burying the bodies, but if Kate was fucking off home, then she didn't see why she should hang around doing her dirty work for her. Again!

She had her phone on her. She would phone Kate; demand she come back and collect her. But the call went straight to voicemail, and she remembered that Kate's battery was flat. Maybe she should have told her about the torch earlier.

She could have phoned Trevor. But she didn't want to tell him where she was. It was no business of his anyway. It had been a long time since she had felt any real feelings for him at all; he was more of a hindrance than anything. A hobby, at best. So no call for him. She would go in to Ashford, and call a taxi.

She tried to call Kate's home phone number, to leave a message for her, telling her what a bitch she'd been for leaving her best friend – her only friend, in fact - alone in the woods. But

she'd run out of credit. Great. That was all she needed. She hadn't brought her purse. She hadn't anticipated needing money to bury bodies in the woods. So she was stuck out here, with no obvious way to get home again.

It didn't help when she got into a row with the person who'd stopped to pick her up. She'd got into conversation with him. A bloke in his forties. An estate agent. She didn't have a very high opinion of estate agents. She told him why. He'd laughed it off at first, but she kept going, and in the end he pulled over and invited her to walk. She wasn't going to stay in his car after he'd treated her like that. Not if he'd begged her. If she'd had her syringe on her, he'd have been rather more polite, she was sure of that! Maybe she'd track him down later and ask him to come value Kate's house.

She'd walked into Ashford. She wasn't used to walking; she was a little on the large side, she had to admit, and it made her thighs chafe as they rubbed together. In Ashford, she'd tried to hitch a lift home, but no-one would stop for her. A couple of drivers waved at her, and one shouted "get a job" out of his car window, which was hardly original. She went to the railway station to explain her situation and try to arrange a train-ride home, but they weren't having any of it either. They wouldn't even let her use their phone.

There were taxis all over the place. She could easily have flagged one down and gone back home. But she'd started to fret about how much that would cost. It cost a fortune to get to Margate by taxi, so the fare for taking the forty or fifty mile journey from Ashford to Ramsgate would be extortionate. Why should she pay all that money when it wasn't even her fault she was here? Maybe it would be better if it took her hours to get home anyway. Then she could tell Kate how much trouble she had put her to. Make her feel guilty. Make her feel guilty enough, and she might even hand over Window-boy to make it up to her. She would get him one way or another, whatever it took. He was getting between her and her friend, and she wasn't having that.

She sat on the pavement outside Boots, resting her legs and trying to work out what to do. If she wasn't going to take a taxi, and she couldn't get the train, that only left hitching or walking. And there was no way she was going to walk. She'd have another go at hitching, but tell Kate she'd walked it. Get the best of both worlds.

Someone threw some change on the floor by her feet. They thought she was begging. "I'm not fucking homeless!" she screamed at them. "I bet I've got a better home than you, you twat!" They apologised and hurried on.

Despite her outburst, she pocketed the coins. At least she had the money for a phone call now. But not Trevor. And not Kate. She wasn't going to let her feel better about herself by letting her come to her rescue. Besides, she'd moan all the way back about having to come out in the sunlight, and she wasn't sure she could cope with much of that before her patience imploded.

Who did that leave, then? Not many people, actually. She didn't really have any friends as such. Only Kate. Other people found her too pushy, too controlling. Well, it was their own fault if they allowed her to boss them about. How was it her fault that none of them had enough backbone to stand up to her?

She tried hitch-hiking again, but driver after driver sped by without so much as a glance in her direction. After half an hour, it started raining. After another ten minutes, she gave up. All the Good Samaritans had died and gone to heaven. All those left were complete wankers. Not one of them stopped, not one of them. Even the women ignored her. The men would have stopped for Kate, she felt sure of that. Just because she was a little older, a little tubbier, it was no reason for them to leave her shivering on the pavement, wet through, miles from home. Men were such pigs.

Eventually, she gave up, and phoned Trevor. The man was worse than useless, though. He told her to take a taxi. No, she insisted, it would cost too much. Where are you, he wanted to know. None of your fucking business, she told him. It was best that he knew his place. She hung up on him. The one time she'd turned to him, and he had nothing to give. Selfish. Hopeless. Waste of space.

Just when she was giving up hope, she'd been offered a lift by a mother of three. There was a five year old in the front seat, so Angie had to squeeze between two toddlers in car-seats in the back. There was no room to move, but at least the woman was heading for Broadstairs, which was a lot closer to home than this God-forsaken shit-hole! She started to tell the lady that she didn't think a five year old should be in the front seat, that she thought it was against the law, but she remembered just in time that she had been thrown out of the last car for being quarrelsome, and – for once – opted to bite her tongue, however difficult that might be. It proved to be even more of a challenge when one of the toddlers kept rubbing his greasy little hand on her coat. Needy little bastard.

And now here she was in Kate's bedroom. She decided to sneak another look beneath the duvet. The least she deserved was a flash of gash after all Kate had put her through. But, almost as if she had read her mind, Kate groaned and turned over on to her left side, presenting her back to her. She could see the top couple of inches of her bottom now, but it wasn't really what she'd come here for. For a moment, she considered going round to the other side of the bed for another try, but she decided that she'd pushed her luck already. If Kate was getting restless, it was time to go. There would be plenty of other nights she could come and visit her.

Besides, she wanted to get back home and finish off the dungeon in her cellar before Trevor woke up. Kate would love it so much that she might even give her a voluntary flash of fanny out of gratitude. Now it was finished, it would add a whole new dimension to the games they could play with the men she brought home. And Mike would be first to try it out, whether Kate liked it or not.

#

Kate had had a bad night's sleep. It felt like she had been awake all night, though she supposed she must have dozed off from time to time. She ached throughout her entire body. Even her rib pain seemed worse, which was weird because it had started to improve in the last few days. She knew that, without blood to sustain her, she was falling to pieces. And the scary thing was that it was so much faster than it had ever been before.

Before putting on her dressing gown, she stepped on the scales. She'd lost two or three pounds since yesterday morning. She looked in the full-length mirror on the wall by the door of the en-suite bathroom. She looked gaunt. Her ribs were starting to show. Another week or two

of this and she'd be in hospital. Not that there was anything they could do for her. There was only one thing she could do to salvage her health, the thing she had been doing ever since that night that bastard had forced himself on her in her own front garden. She needed blood. And she needed it soon.

She went downstairs. The thought of breakfast made her feel sick, but she had to try to get some food into her, to reverse the weight-loss if she could. Maybe a slice or two of unbuttered toast? She could keep that down if she ate it slowly.

She stepped into the living room to check on Clive. It was silly, really. It wasn't as if he was going anywhere. But she just felt the need to do it. Maybe she was adopting it as part of her morning routine.

His hair had changed colour, from brown to almost blond. And big chunks of it were missing. The scalp below was rotting. The smell was awful. What was going on?

She approached nervously, as if he might jump up to startle her. What's the time, Mr Wolf? Dinner time! Well, breakfast time, anyway.

She sobbed when she saw his face. It wasn't Clive. It was Mark, the victim before him. Angie must have been here. She had actually swapped the bodies around. Which, bearing in mind that she hadn't had her car when they were last in the woods, meant that she had gone back there specially to dig up another corpse and bring it back here for her. She was getting out of control. The only saving grace was that she had taken Clive away. If she had started stacking them up on the armchair, like a macabre house of cards, it would have been worse still.

He had a message round his neck, scrawled on a piece of paper, this time attached tight to his throat with an elastic band. She must have run out of string. It said, "Plenty more where this came from. Say hi to Mike for me."

A can of air-freshener lay in his lap. She picked it up without touching his trousers. She sprayed it all over him. His arm was half-eaten. He must have been one of the unlucky ones who had been dug up by foxes (or whatever was rooting round in the woods in the middle of the night).

She stayed calm for once. She went into the kitchen and put the kettle on. She sat down at the kitchen table. Angie had been here in the night, wandering around downstairs, while she had been asleep in her bedroom, totally oblivious.

She thought of Mike. She liked him. She liked him a lot. She was a different person when she was with him. She was funny; she was confident; above all, she was normal. She didn't want to have to hurt him. She didn't want him chained to her bed while she drank him dry. But she needed blood. She would die without it, she was sure of that. And Angie seemed pretty determined that Mike should be her next donor.

If Angie could do this, what else was she capable of? She knew where Mike worked. She could call him up whenever she wanted. If she wanted him dead that much, she could do it, whether Kate helped her or not. Why hadn't she killed him already? Because Angie wanted her to do it, that was why. She wanted to crush her little rebellion, to prove to her that Angie's word was law. And the only way to do that was to make sure that it was Kate's decision to

bring Mike back here. It had to be her own name at the bottom of the death warrant for Angie to make her point.

The kettle boiled. She made herself a cup of tea. Brown mug. She couldn't face toast after all; it was making her nauseous just thinking about it. She was moving about the kitchen like an arthritic old lady, pain wracking her joints as she moved. This was no good. She couldn't go on like this. Something had to give.

She picked up her mobile, and sat back down at the table. Who to call: Mike or Angie? Dump Mike to save him, or sacrifice him to her friend to save herself? She hesitated. She didn't know. She put the phone back down. She went to pick up her mug, but misjudged it, knocking it to the floor. Watery brown liquid streaked across the floor-tiles, some of it making it as far as the kitchen cabinet next to the sink.

She cried. It was stupid; after everything she had been through, she was sobbing over spilt tea. But she couldn't help herself. She wept like a sinner at the end of the world.

Eventually, the tears dried up. She had nothing left to give. She craved blood; she had never craved it so much as now. It would make her feel better. It would make all the pain go away. It wasn't her fault; she was ill, after all.

She picked up the phone again, and dialled.

"Mike?"

"Kate? Where have you been? I've been calling you all week, but you've not picked up." He sounded hurt, offended. It made it easier somehow.

"I've been ill."

His tone changed instantly. He was concerned, apologetic. "Oh, I'm so sorry. Are you okay? Shall I come round?"

"No, no everything's okay. I just need another day or two of peace and quiet. How about Saturday night, though? I need to get out."

"Saturday's good for me." The way he said it, she knew that any time would be good for him. This would be the easiest one yet in a lot of ways. But in one way, it would be the hardest by some considerable distance.

"Shall I come round yours?"

"Yes. Just to pick me up. I need a change of scenery. We could go for a drink or something. And then back here afterwards. Say eight o'clock?"

"Shall I bring my toothbrush?" he laughed.

She tried to think of a jokey retort, but her mind wasn't working very well. She couldn't think of anything. "If you like," she said, somewhat lamely.

"You're sure you're alright, though? You don't want me to pop round during my lunch-hour today? Or between jobs? I don't mind."

"I'm fine. I'm going back to bed."

She disconnected him before he had the chance to reply, and turned off the phone. She would tell Angie later; she couldn't bear the thought of talking to her now, not after what she had just made her do. Poor Mike. He must think her very rude, cutting him off like that. But maybe it would be easier if they fell out during the evening. She should be abrupt with him, maybe even provoking an argument. That way, when she brought him back here, it might be ever so slightly easier when she chained him up and drained him.

#

Angie was predictably delighted with the news. She hugged her, stroked her hair, told her she was doing the right thing. The body in the armchair would be gone as soon as it was dark. She had somewhere to store him now, until she was next able to drive back to the woods. Somewhere special. She would tell Kate all about it once they had Mike safely upstairs on the bed. It would be a nice surprise for her when she saw what she had been working on for her.

"I'm not sure I've got the strength to do this," Kate said. She was starting to have second thoughts. Even when she was this desperate for blood, the thought of hurting Mike made her feel worse still. But Angie was not about to let her off the hook.

"Don't worry. I'll get you some blood. Just a little, to give you the strength to go out. You deserve it."

"Where would you get blood from?"

"Never you mind. Just be grateful that I can, that's all."

"Fresh blood?"

"So fresh it'll pinch your cute little ass before you drink it."

The day came. Saturday. Night followed, as expected. It was dark. It was nearly time for Mike to pick her up. Angie wanted her to change her plans, to get him indoors as soon as he called for her, but she refused. She wanted to go out with him first, to actually enjoy herself one last time, as far as she could in the circumstances. And then they would fall out, and she would bring him back here, and Angie could do with him as she pleased.

Whenever she went out in search of donors, she dressed to impress. It was partly because it gave her confidence; mini-skirts and low-cut tops were her suits of armour, protecting her against the outside world. When she was "Kate the Man-eater", she felt like she was someone else, someone strong. But not today. She pulled on her favourite "little black dress", and she felt nothing. She was still her usual self, mousey little Katherine Pearce who wouldn't do anything to anyone with someone to talk her into it. It didn't help that the dress felt a couple of sizes too big now. She pinched at the material, and found that she could hold a clump of it in her hand. She was wasting away. She was as depressed as if it had been flab she was holding.

She still felt nauseous. Her body seemed to be stiffening up, as if her joints were seizing up. The cramps were worse than ever, so that it was an effort just to stand up straight. She felt feverish. She was sweating, but had covered that up as best she could with make-up. It wouldn't be a good look when it started streaking down her face tonight.

"This isn't going to work," she said. "I can hardly walk. I look a right state."

“Then invite him straight in. Get it over with quickly. Get him upstairs, and I’ll jab him in the bum before you’ve even got your knickers off.”

“No. I’m going out first. We’ve talked about this already.”

“You just said you can’t go out. Make your mind up; you can’t have it both ways.”

“I’ll call him. Put him off to another day.”

“You won’t last until another day. Look at yourself. I hate to say this, Kate, but you’re dying. You need this. You need this to save yourself. Isn’t it about time you thought of yourself for a change? Is your life worth any less than his?”

They heard a car (van?) pull up outside. They exchanged looks. Kate shook her head. “I’d do it if I was well. But I can’t. Not like this.”

“Good job you’re Auntie Angie’s here to look after you, then.”

Angie had brought a handbag with her, which she’d hooked over the end of the bannister by its strap. She rummaged inside it and produced a silver flask. “Take a sip of that.”

“Alcohol’s not going to help.”

“Drink it.”

Someone knocked on the door, making Kate jump. Mike. Mike was here. She wasn’t ready for this. Nowhere near ready.

Angie thrust the flask into her face. How annoying was she being? Kate snatched it from her, and took a swig from it to keep her happy. The expression on her face changed. Blood! It was blood! She drank the rest of it down in one glorious go.

Mike knocked on the door again. She ignored him until the flask was empty. She felt the liquid trickling down her throat, deep inside her, warming her up. She was feeling a little better already. It was starting to work its magic.

“Where did you get this? It’s not yours is it?”

“Fuck off. As if I’d waste my blood on a slut like you,” Angie grinned back at her.

“It’s human though? You haven’t given me cat or dog or something?”

“Because that would be disgusting, right?”

“Angie!”

“It’s human okay? Now should we be having this conversation here? Your little boyfriend’s about two or three yards away, on the other side of that door. Maybe he can hear everything we’re saying.”

Mike rang the bell.

“Well, if he can, it’s not put him off.”

Kate answered the door. Mike gave her a huge smile, and a kiss on the cheek. He offered her a large bunch of flowers. He caught sight of Angie standing in the hallway behind her. His

smile faded.

“Hello,” he said, without enthusiasm.

“Hello, lover-boy,” she replied. “I think you’re going to be in for one hell of a night, tonight, you lucky, lucky man. She’s always been turned on by men with rough hands.”

He shifted uncomfortably, not knowing how to reply. He forced a smile. He glanced at his watch. “Well. We’d better be going, Kate.”

Angie moved to Kate’s side and whispered in her ear. “You may want to clean your teeth before you go out. They look a bit red.”

Kate put her hand in front of her mouth. “Just got to pop upstairs for a second, Mike.” She started to walk towards the foot of the stairs.

“We can’t have you standing out there, making the place look untidy,” Angie told Mike. “Come in. Make yourself at home. I’ll keep you entertained while she’s tarting herself up.”

“No!” Kate said, louder than she intended. “I’ll only be a minute. No need to come in. I’ll be right out.”

“She doesn’t want you to see how untidy her house is,” Angie explained. “It’s a complete pigsty in there. You won’t believe what I scraped off the armchair the other day!”

“Stay there,” Kate ordered Mike. “And pay no attention to her. She’s twisted.”

“That’s rich coming from you!” Angie chuckled. “Well, unless you want a threesome, I’m going home.” She saw Mike shudder at her reference to a threesome, but chose to ignore him. She would have the last laugh soon enough.

Kate watched with relief as Angie tucked her bag under her arm and left the two of them alone. Mike gave her a relieved smile. She resisted the urge to return it, not knowing whether Angie had just been teasing her about the blood in her mouth. It would be his blood by the end of the night, she thought. He’ll be handcuffed to the bed, while I drain him. And despite the revulsion she felt at this, something deep inside her made her smile after all.

#

They went to a pub in Ramsgate, one of those pubs with a dance-floor so it could pretend after dark to be a nightclub. It was still early, and the place was only half full. Their date was not going well.

This was a mistake, thought Kate. He’s going to be dead soon. What’s the point of getting to know him better? It’s just going to make it harder for me later on. Angie was right, as always. She should have just invited him in, and had done with it.

It was like going out on a date with a man she’d already decided to dump, someone who still believed they had a future together. Only she wasn’t just going to dump him. She was going to pump him full of poison, and drain him dead.

Mike had been understanding at first, putting her bad behaviour down to her illness. But he had started getting a little agitated by her behaviour. It was almost a relief. She wasn’t sure

how much “nice” she could cope with.

He went to the toilet. By the time he came back, she had enticed the bald bloke from the next table over. Alan. She laughed at the man’s poor jokes. She was tactile. She had him eating out of her hand in just a minute or two. If Mike hadn’t been around, she could have taken him home to Angie without any trouble at all.

Mike glowered when he found a stranger in his seat. She ignored his bad humour, and introduced the two of them. “Mike, this is Alan. Alan, Mike. Alan was just telling me he liked my dress.”

“More the woman inside it. You’re a lucky man.”

“Oh, he’s not my boyfriend. We’re just friends.”

“I bet you are,” Alan grinned knowingly.

“Mate, could you just fuck off back to where you came from, and leave us alone?” Mike asked.

Alan shrugged, and retired to his own table as requested. “I was just paying the lady a compliment, that’s all.”

Mike sat back down. He was fuming. She had never seen him cross before. “What was that about?” he asked.

“We were just talking. I am allowed to talk to other people, aren’t I?”

“Just friends? You told him we’re just friends.”

“Friends that fuck.” If she was going to piss him off, there was no point doing it by halves. She would go for it, get him really upset, make him shout or swear at her, and then everything which followed would be his fault as well as hers. His death was too much responsibility for her to bear it alone.

“Really? I thought we were a bit more than that.”

“Then you thought wrong. This is only our second date.”

“Third.”

“Second. Accompanying me to hospital doesn’t count.”

He lapsed into silence for a while. A couple of times, he opened his mouth to say something, but thought better of it. He took a swig from his beer glass. She sat in silence, waiting for him to make the first move. This was getting painful.

Eventually, he decided upon the words to say to her.

“You’re different when you’re on your own. The other night. I thought – I thought we had something. I know it was just the one night, but it was intense, you know what I mean? It’s Angie, isn’t it? She’s said something, something to put you off? Took the piss, or something. You’re totally different when she’s around. Harder.”

“She’s not around now, is she?”

“What has she said, Kate? Why are you acting like this? What have I done to deserve this?”

“I don’t know what you’re going on about. Deserve what? You’re the one who’s acting weird. We go on one date, and all of a sudden I can’t even talk to the bloke at the next table without you sulking. I never had you down as the possessive type.”

He sighed. He was clearly trying to control his temper, but seemed to be fighting a losing battle. A few more well-chosen remarks, and he would explode. And then it would be game over for the two of them. The thought made her want to cry, but she had to see this through, however hard it might be. Her survival depended on his demise.

“You’re doing my head in, Kate. Maybe we should just finish our drinks and I’ll take you home.”

“That’s it. Run away. Run away like they all do.”

“I’ve got no idea what that even means! Run away like who does? I’m not running away. I just don’t like who you are tonight.”

“I’m me tonight. Who did you think I’d be?”

“You’re not you. You’re different. You’re acting like your bitchy mate.”

“Me? Acting like Angie? You’ve got to be winding me up? I’m nothing like her.”

“No. That’s my point. You’re not normally like her at all. You’re sweet and you’re funny. And you’re kind of vulnerable. Bossy as Hell, but vulnerable all the same.”

“That’s what does it for you, is it? Vulnerable? You want to chain me to the bed, and use me when the mood takes you?”

“Chain you to the bed? Where the fuck did that come from? That’s not what I meant at all. You’re fragile. Broken almost. I guess I just want to fix you, that’s all.”

“Well thanks very much.”

He stared at her. “What? What’s wrong with that?”

“You make me sound pathetic, that’s what’s wrong with that. Have you any idea how patronising you’re being. Poor little broken Kate. I’ll come along and sort her out. A few days with me and she’ll be right as rain. As long as I make sure she doesn’t talk to any other men while we’re together. And under no circumstances whatsoever should she have anything to do with that woman who lives next-door to her; the woman who helped her when she was ill, who does practically everything for her.”

“You don’t need anyone to do things for you.”

“Then how come I need fixing, then, Smart-arse? You can’t have it both ways. Either I’m broken or I’m not. You make your mind up, and we’ll work it out from there.”

“That’s Angie talking again.”

“Oh, just fuck off, will you?”

“Okay. I will.”

He took the coat from the back of his chair, and started marching towards the exit. Kate panicked. She had played her “stand-offish” card a little too well. She had meant to fall out with him, so that it wouldn’t be quite so hard to do what had to be done at the end of the evening. But he wasn’t supposed to walk off and leave her. Angie would kill her if she returned empty-handed.

“Mike! You’re over-reacting. Come back.”

He reached the door.

“I’m sorry,” she ventured. And all of a sudden, she really was. What was she doing to the poor guy? He was nice. Much too nice for her. She had to let him go, whatever the consequences. Save him from Angie. Save him from her, too.

He started to walk back to the table. “Go away,” she said, when he was just a few feet away. “Before I change my mind.”

He looked at her in exasperation. “You just called me back. And now you’re telling me to go away again. What is it with you? Is it some weird power thing?”

“Mike, please. It’s for the best, believe me.”

“Come out with me tomorrow. We’ll go to the park or something. Talk. I don’t understand what’s going on here. If you want to dump me, then that’s fine, but I don’t want it to end like this.”

“I can’t. Not during the day.”

“Why not? It’s not like you’re busy or anything!”

“I don’t go out during the day. It makes me ill. And people would see me.”

“See you?”

“See how hideous I am.”

She started to cry. She had never told anyone that before. It was her secret. She’d told him, shared it with him, but now she would never see him again.

He tried to pull her to her feet to hug her. She shrugged him off.

“You’re not hideous,” he said. “You’re beautiful.”

“You don’t know what I am,” she sobbed. She was conscious that she was making a fool of herself in public. That was bad. She didn’t want people remembering her. She couldn’t afford to have a scene like this; she needed to stay in the shadows, where she belonged.

“Mike, please go. I’ll call you tomorrow. I’ll feel better tomorrow.”

“Feel better? Oh, I get it. You’re -”

“I’m what?”

“On the blob,” he blushed.

“On the what?”

“It’s your – you know, what you get every month.”

“My period?”

“Yes.” He avoided eye contact. All men are children, she thought.

“Okay, if you like, that’s exactly what it is”. It made her behaviour easier to explain. But it wasn’t her blood that was making her act like this. It was his.

“Tomorrow?” he asked. “You’ll phone tomorrow? Promise? We can have a proper talk?”

She nodded. She felt exhausted. The man at the next table –Alan, was it? – was looking over at her. He seemed a bit creepy. Not that she was in any position to judge anyone. Time to get rid of Mike, and work out how she was going to explain things to Angie when she returned home empty-handed.

“I’ll take you back.”

She shook her head. “It’s best you don’t. I’ll call a taxi. Really. I’ll be fine. I just need a minute or two on my own. To get my head together.”

He left reluctantly. He shot a wary glance at Alan on his way out. He looked like a child who had been substituted in a football match, and was desperate to stay on the pitch. He disappeared through the door. She couldn’t see him again, ever. Sooner or later, they’d end up back at hers, but she couldn’t take him home to Angie; she just couldn’t. But if she didn’t, she’d die. The Craving would kill her, she was certain of it.

How was she going to tell Angie about this? Maybe she should phone her first. The coward’s way out. She’d still have to face her when she got home, but Angie might have calmed down a little by then. Then again, she might not.

She put her hand over her face. She noticed it was trembling. The Craving was kicking in again already. It was almost as if it knew she’d just lost her supper. It was like feeling hungry when you smell someone else’s barbecue. An automatic reflex, like Pavlov’s dogs only rather more sinister.

“Hello again.”

She looked up. Alan.

Her first impulse was to tell him to fuck off. She wasn’t in the mood to be chatted up by a seedy little bald bloke like him. But then she had second thoughts. Angie wanted blood. Okay, she’d asked for Mike’s, but surely this would be the next best thing? It wasn’t her fault that Mike had stormed off (well, maybe it was, but Angie didn’t need to know that). If she brought her home a peace-offering, a blood sacrifice, then maybe she’d forgive her for screwing everything up?

She crossed her legs, the short skirt of her dress riding up her thighs so high that she was almost exposing her thong to him. She smiled, a confident, “I’m-in-control” smile. Men loved that.

“Looks like I’m single, after all,” she flirted.

“Lucky me,” he grinned back.

She leant forward, giving him the opportunity to look down her top. She touched his arm, and whispered in his ear, trying to ignore the nicotine smell from his shirt-collar.

“This is going to be a night to remember.”

He nodded, enthusiastically. “Shall we stay for another drink, or -”

She got up and took her coat from the back of her chair. “Back to mine,” she said, in full seduction mode. “There’s a little game I’d like you to play. You do like games, don’t you?”

“Oh yes,” he said, nodding like the dog in the insurance adverts. “I love them.”

The Craving subsided. It was willing to be patient; it knew that she would be feeding before the night was over.

#

They took a taxi back to hers. She’d left the porch light on. He tried to grope her as she was opening the door. Why did men always do that (Mike excepted)? Well, let him. It was a small price to pay for what he would be giving her in return.

As the door opened, a rectangle of light appeared on the lawn next-door. Angie was up and about. One of these days, she’d nod off, and then she’d really be in trouble. Trouble like that first night, with Danny. She wasn’t sure how many of the men she brought home would be happy hearing that she’d changed her mind at the very last minute.

She unbuttoned Alan’s shirt in the downstairs hallway. He tried to pull her dress over her head, but made a hash of it, and she had to help him with it. No time to hang around; she needed him upstairs and handcuffed to the bed, before Angie came in. She went up the first few stairs, and then turned to beckon him to follow. He stood watching her for a few seconds, drinking in her body, now clad in just a blue bra and matching thong. She still had her high heels on.

“I think I’ve died and gone to Heaven,” he said.

One out of two ain’t bad, she thought.

This was taking too long; Angie would be here any second. Maybe some more encouragement to hurry him up. She took off her bra. “Are you ready for me?” she asked.

He charged up the stairs after her, snorting like a cartoon bull. She kept ahead of him, crying out in mock terror. She ran into the spare bedroom, and turned on him. He tried to push her back on to the bed, but she was having none of it. A change of tactic was in order to hurry him along. She pointed at the mattress.

“Down,” she instructed.

He beamed. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

He lay on the bed, wriggling out of his pants as he did so. He had a chubby little penis. It wasn’t an attractive look.

“What now, Mistress?” he enquired subserviently.

“I’m gonna handcuff you, and do whatever I like with you. Understood?”

He nodded eagerly. He was going to be the easiest victim ever.

She removed two sets of handcuffs from the drawer of the bedside cabinet, and chained his wrists up, left before right (that was the order it had to be). He looked as if he was going to explode with pleasure.

“Have I been a bad boy?” he asked.

“Not really,” she told him. Her voice had lost all seduction. She sounded bored. Now he was secure, she couldn’t be bothered to keep up the act. Just wait for Angie to put him out of his ecstasy, and then she could drink fresh blood for the first time since Clive had left her. Right on cue, she heard the door open and close downstairs. She looked at Alan, waiting for him to panic. He seemed perfectly calm.

“Have we got company?” he asked.

“Oh yes. Angie. You’ll like Angie if you’re into S & M. If you’re the “M”, then she’s very much the “S”, you just see.”

He was virtually quivering with anticipation. What was wrong with this bloke?

Angie came in, syringe already in hand. She stopped when she saw Alan.

“Where is he?”

“What do you mean? He’s right there.”

“Mike? Where’s Mike?”

“We had an argument. He said he didn’t like you. Thought you were corrupting me. I told him where to stick it. He stropped off. So I’ve brought you Alan instead.”

“It’s true,” Alan chimed in from the bed. “I saw everything.”

“Shut up,” Kate told him. He was starting to annoy her.

“Sorry, Mistress.”

“This isn’t what we agreed. I told you to bring Mike back. Who is this, anyway?”

“Some bloke I found in the pub.”

“Alan,” the man introduced himself. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Pleasure to meet me!” Angie waved the syringe under his nose. “Are you blind or something? Can’t you see this?”

“Yes, Mistress,” Alan nodded eagerly. “Are you going to stick it in me? Stick me like a pig?”

“I was going to,” Angie replied. “But I’m not sure I want to, if you’re asking for it.”

“Angie, please!” Kate interjected. “Just finish him off. I’m starving.”

“Don’t tell me what to do. If you’re so keen, you do it.” Angie handed her the syringe, and stood back, crossing her arms. Kate took the needle reluctantly. She had never done this part before. She approached the bed. She expected Alan to start screaming, but he just nodded his head enthusiastically, urging her on.

“Yes, Mistress. Go on. It’s okay, really it is.”

“I can’t do it,” she told Angie. She didn’t want any part in this. She took no pleasure in sedating them. She just wanted the end product, safely drugged to the eyeballs and secured to the bed. Otherwise, it would be like going into McDonalds and having to slaughter your own cow.

“Please,” Alan wailed. “Just stick me. You’ll feel better for it.”

“Shut the fuck up, will you?”

Kate handed the syringe back to Angie. “You do it.”

“I’d rather the pretty one do it, given the choice,” Alan complained mildly. “But you’re the boss. It’s your call.”

“You do realise what we’re planning to do to you, don’t you?” Angie asked him in exasperation. “This isn’t just some kinky role-play game. This is real. We’re going to sedate you, drain you of all your blood, and bury you in a shallow grave in the woods in the back of beyond. Well, Ashford actually. You can start screaming now, if you like.”

“Oh, please! Please do it. It’s okay, I don’t mind. I want it. I’ve seen her in a pub before, chatting up someone I used to go to school with. He went missing. I thought it was down to her at the time. I didn’t say anything, honest I didn’t. The bloke was a prat. But I thought to myself, what a way to go. Hacked to pieces during sex (I didn’t know about the needle thing, but it’s fine if that’s the way you want to do it). And she’s gorgeous; just look at her, standing there pouting in just her pants. What a way to go. Naked and powerless, like a little baby.”

“A dirty little baby,” Angie scolded, but he just nodded all the more. “Okay, I’ve had enough of this.” She marched out the room.

“Angie!” Kate screamed after her. “You can’t leave me with him. What am I supposed to do with him?”

“Stick me like a pig,” Alan suggested helpfully. “Anywhere you like. I’ll close my eyes if it makes it easier.”

“I thought I told you to fuck off!”

“It’s kind of hard to fuck off when you’ve chained me to the bed,” he chortled. “I don’t suppose you could give me a quick hand-job while you’re waiting for your mate to come back. Only if you want to. You’re the boss, like I said. But it seems only fair, after what I’m signing up for here. Quid pro quo, so to speak.”

Angie re-entered the room. She held a hammer.

Kate held out her hands in a placatory gesture. “Angie, no! Not again. I can’t go through that again!”

“Have you got any better ideas?”

“We let him go.”

“We can’t. He knows everything. Besides, you need blood.”

“Well, we’ll syringe him then. I’ll do it. I’m fine to do it now. I was just a bit nervous before. Hand it over.”

“We’re not doing it if he wants us to. I’m the one who’s supposed to be in control here, not him. If he wants it, it would be his decision. I’d just be doing what he tells me. I’m not having that. He’s my bitch, not the other way round. I’m gonna smash his head in with a hammer instead. See how he likes that.”

“I’d rather be injected,” Alan remarked mildly. “But it’s your call. You can bash my head in if you like. Would you mind both stripping naked first, though? And maybe sit on me for a while before you finish me off. Wriggle around a bit, you know the thing. It’s how I’d like to go. That’s all I ask, really it is.”

Angie smashed him hard to the head with the hammer. No warning; she just did it. Twice, three times, four times. Kate screamed. Alan said nothing. He just lay on the bed, his brains protruding from his battered skull, his erection slowly deflating as the blood drained from it like a little balloon with the air expelled a puff at a time.

Angie threw the hammer on to the bed. She glared at Kate, daring her to say something. “Your mess, Kate,” she told her. “You clean it up.”

And then she was gone.

#

This wasn’t the first time she’d had to scrub blood and brains off the carpets, the walls, the ceiling. Last time, though, she hadn’t had to worry about the bed linen. She would just burn it, she decided. It had been hard enough cleaning Clive’s body matter off them; Alan’s would be too much of a chore entirely.

She thought back to the first time, when Angie had battered Danny, the bastard who’d tried to rape her in her own front garden. That was the start of it all. They had both cleared up that time, Angie taking the garden by torchlight while Kate desperately tried to expunge all bodily fluid from her hallway.

She still remembered staring at the blood on the carpet. It was all over the place, a thick sticky substance which matted the carpet pile. There was one particularly large pool of it, which she was unsuccessfully trying to soak up with wet kitchen towel before she doused it with detergent. She’d stuck her finger in it, tasted it, felt it on her tongue. She had no idea why; she’d just had a sudden overwhelming urge to see what it was like. It didn’t taste of anything much, but it comforted her somehow; calmed her down. She did it again. Angie walked in, catching her as she was licking the blood from her fingers for a third time. Kate had leapt up, and ran upstairs, feeling as if she had been caught doing something perverse, something awful. Angie had followed her up.

“It’s okay. You wanted to taste it. So what?”

“I wasn’t tasting it. I was just getting it off my fingers.”

“With your tongue.”

“So what?”

“So nothing. I said it was okay, didn’t I? I’m not judging you. I’ve just battered a total stranger over the head with a claw-hammer. I’m in no position to judge anyone!”

So they had finished scouring the blood from the walls, the carpet, the lawn, and nothing more had been said about it. But while Angie had been out looking for somewhere to dispose of the body, Kate had tasted him again and again. She had this overwhelming urge, a compulsion, even though she loathed herself for doing it. It was one step away from cannibalism. What sort of monster had she become?

But then she had noticed that she had felt so much better for it. The cramps had gone. No nausea, no migraines, no meltdowns. It was the blood. It just had to be. Her body had told her what she needed to be well again, and it had worked. Her medicine was unimaginably gross, but 100% effective.

Eventually, she had confessed all to Angie. She had to tell someone; it wasn’t the sort of thing she could work through on her own. She had expected her to be repulsed, to tell her to pull herself together and get over it. But she had been supportive. Even with something like this, she had been supportive. Which was probably why she had become so dependent upon her. No matter what she did or said, however irritating and overbearing she was at times, Angie would always be there for her. She had to give her that.

Angie had confessed to her in return that she had got a kick out of what she had done. All of her pent-up frustrations, her rage, had evaporated one hammer-blow at a time. Was that sick? Yes, Kate thought, but she wasn’t in a position to judge her either. So they’d exchanged detailed descriptions of their depravities, again and again, until they seemed normal, until they seemed acceptable. And seven murders later, she was on her hands and knees, frantically trying to scrub the blood which had splattered on to the carpet, wondering how much more of this she could take before her cowed and battered little conscience decided that enough was enough.

#

Mike called her on her mobile the following day, but she didn’t take the call. What was she supposed to say to him? She couldn’t even arrange to see him. Meeting up during the day wouldn’t be safe for her, and meeting up during the night most definitely wouldn’t be safe for him. She didn’t trust herself with him anymore. Best to just steer clear.

Besides, it was Angie she needed to see. She tried calling her, but she wasn’t picking up her calls on her mobile. She called her landline, with the same result. That was strange. Even if Angie was ignoring her, she would have thought that Trevor would speak to her. Maybe he had been ordered to stay in bed.

She could go round to see Angie at nightfall, but wasn’t sure she was ready for a face to face confrontation yet. She preferred to weather the storm on the phone first. But that wasn’t going to happen as long as Angie was ducking her calls.

Time was in short supply. She needed to patch things up with Angie so she could go and find herself another victim. Angie had taken Alan away, without letting her drink a drop from him. She'd said it was because he was dirty; unclean. The way he'd behaved, it would demean Kate to drink his blood. She shouldn't give him the satisfaction. But she wasn't so sure that this was Angie's real motive. She knew exactly what she was doing. It was like taking the heroine away from a drug addict. Angie was well aware that she would do just about anything to have her addiction fuelled again if she forced her to go "cold turkey".

She considered going out on her own, relying on Angie coming to her assistance when she brought a man back home, but it was too much of a risk. If Angie didn't appear at the relevant time, she'd be stranded here, on her own with a hyped-up man who might not be prepared to take no for an answer. Another day or two, though, and she wouldn't have a choice. She needed to find her next meal before she was too weak to go and look for it, whatever the risks might be.

It was about nine o'clock when she noticed that Angie's car was missing. She must be burying bodies in the woods again; it was the only place she visited after dark on her own. She hoped she was making a better job of it than last time. And then the thought struck her. Why not talk to Trevor? Trevor could tell her whether Angie was anywhere close to forgiving her. And, if she wasn't, could maybe help her patch things up. It would be difficult, of course. She couldn't tell him anything about what was going on, for obvious reasons. But as she didn't have a Plan B, then Plan A would have to do, however desperate it might seem.

It would take her friend quite some time to drive all the way to Ashford, and longer still to dig the graves far enough down to keep the men safe from foxes. That had to leave her at least a couple more hours to talk to Trevor, even if Angie had been gone for a while. She'd have to tell him that he mustn't say anything to his wife about their conversation, though. She'd go mental if she thought that Kate was trying to manipulate her. Angie was the only one allowed to manipulate anyone.

She slipped on a coat and shoes, and went next-door. She knocked. No reply. She knocked again. Still nothing. She started to get worried. Where was Trevor? It was once in a blue moon he left home. His wife didn't like him going out, except for medical appointments. It was too late for him to go to hospital. Unless it was some sort of emergency. He wasn't in the best of health. Had something happened to him? Maybe Angie was taking him to hospital, rather than burying men in the woods. If he'd been really ill, that would explain why he hadn't been picking up her phone calls.

Angie had given her a spare key years ago, at the same time she had given her hers. She'd taken it to be more of a gesture than anything. She knew how much her friend would hate it if she let herself in without asking, especially after she had started getting funny about Kate's friendship with Trevor. So she had stuffed it in a drawer somewhere, and forgotten all about it. She'd get it now, find out what was going on. Reassure herself that everything was alright.

She went back home. It took her forty minutes and several drawers searched twice before she found it, languishing behind her beside cabinet. It must have fallen off at some stage in the last couple of years. She really should clean up more.

She rushed back to Angie's. She was starting to get a bad feeling about this, made worse by the frustration of hunting for the key. Trevor never left home at night. There must have been

some emergency. He was in hospital, intensive care, surgery. Please God, not the morgue. And Angie hadn't told her, just because they'd fallen out over Mike. How could she keep something like this to herself?

She let herself in. "Angie!" she called out. "Trevor!" No reply. She hadn't really expected one.

She checked the living room, the kitchen, everywhere. The house was the same lay-out as hers. She'd forgotten how old-fashioned it was. Nineteen seventies wall-paper, twee ornaments from Sunday supplements on the mantelpiece, paintings of sweet little girls and cute little puppies on the walls. Angie had inherited the house from her parents, and hadn't changed a thing since they'd died. They'd been murdered at home when Angie was in her teens.

"Trevor! Are you okay?"

She took the stairs two at a time, skirting round the stair-lift as she did so. Running made her joints protest, but it was amazing how potent an anaesthetic fear can be. No-one in Angie's bedroom. No-one in Trevor's either. Worse than no-one. She gasped, and hung on to the door-frame for support. Trevor's wheel-chair sat by the single bed, empty and abandoned. He was never out of his wheelchair, unless he was in bed. Never.

Had Angie carried him down the stairs and into the car? She would have taken the wheelchair with her, surely she would? Maybe he'd been carted off in an ambulance, and she hadn't had time to take the wheelchair with her. But no, she would have heard the sirens, seen the flashing lights, when it came to pick him up. It didn't make sense. This wasn't right. This wasn't right at all.

She descended the stairs, wondering what to do next. She wanted to phone Angie, but knew there'd be no point. If she'd been ducking her calls all day, there was no reason to assume that she would pick up now. Besides, Angie had her number. If she had wanted to talk to her, she would have called her up when this first happened.

She came to a halt in the hallway. What to do? Go home and wait? The suspense would kill her. She had to do something. She felt the urge to call Mike. There was nothing he could do, but she really needed to speak to someone. Someone to tell her she was being silly, that she should go home and everything would be fine in the morning.

She noticed the door to the cellar. That was the only difference between their houses; she had no cellar in hers. What had Trevor said? That Angie was spending hours in the cellar, banging away, confining him to his room.

He can't be in there, she thought. He'd never get down the stairs on his own. But maybe he'd tried. Maybe he'd waited until Angie had gone out, and then curiosity had got the better of him. She pictured him, trying to make it down the steps on his own to see what his wife was up to down there, his legs giving out beneath him, falling down the steps. He could be down there now, unconscious, bleeding to death.

"He wouldn't," she said out loud. "He can only walk a few steps".

But where else could he be? She'd searched the rest of the house, and he couldn't have gone out without his wheelchair.

She opened the door. It was dark down there. It made her uneasy. She groped around on the wall inside the door, searching for the light switch. She found it. It was a very low wattage bulb down there, like a night-light for children. She didn't think they even sold those anymore. Maybe another relic of Angie's past.

"Trevor?" she called down the steps. Please answer, she thought. I don't want to go down there. It's freaking me out. But there was no reply.

She descended the stairs one nervous step at a time, ready to go flying back up to the light if there was anything down there she didn't like. This must be where Angie had been keeping the bodies she'd exhumed. Hopefully, they were being repatriated to their shallow-graves right now. If Trevor had seen them, the game was up. He'd never forgive them for this.

She came to the bottom of the stairs. She had to turn the corner to gain a view of the cellar. At least there was no sign of Trevor at the bottom of the steps. Surely he hadn't come down here? Not when his wheelchair was still in his bedroom. It would be suicidal. But she had to make sure. Just in case.

She took a deep breath to steady herself. It didn't work. She tried again.

"Bloke up," she told herself.

She stepped round the corner, and looked around the room. There were two or three corpses heaped up in the corner. Angie could only get one body in the car at a time. She'd have to make a number of journeys. It was her own fault. It was her choice to bring those men back here to put in Kate's armchair to frighten her. She should have left them in the woods, where they belonged.

But there was something else down here. Three sets of metal chains of varying lengths, set into the cellar wall, like some medieval dungeon. Angie had turned her cellar into a torture chamber.

She felt nauseous. This wasn't what she wanted. She brought men back because she needed them, she had to have their blood to stay alive. Yes, they suffered, but that wasn't why she did it. The handcuffs, the syringe, they were just a means to an end. But Angie loved it, she got a real kick out of it. And now this? Torturing men in her cellar, with her husband upstairs? It was sick, even by her own exceptionally low standards.

"Her husband". She felt like her spine had frozen over, becoming cold and inflexible. Trevor was still missing. And his wife had turned out to be a complete psychopath. Where was he?

She looked over at the heap of bodies. Three men, limbs entwined. It was difficult to see in this light, but one of them looked as if he was missing a forearm. One of the corpses from the woods, she supposed. Another was bald, with a partially caved-in head; Alan, no doubt, though she couldn't see his face from here.

The third. Oh my God, the third.

She rushed over to the corpses. She screamed. She felt the vomit rise in her throat. She fought to keep it down, but it was no use. She was sick on the floor, just a few feet from where Trevor lay. His brown eyes stared back at her, blank and uncomprehending, as if puzzled as to how he had come to be here. His hair was smeared sticky red with his own blood.

Angie had given her blood when she had gone out with Mike. Fresh blood. In a flask. Where had she got it? It couldn't have been. She wouldn't. Not Trevor. She couldn't have killed Trevor. They had been married since the nineties! She bullied him something chronic, but she loved him. She wouldn't have done this to him; murdered him, dumped his body in a pile of decaying cadavers. And fed his blood to her best friend in a flask.

She retched again. She had drunk his blood. She was sure of it.

It was then that she heard the front-door slam upstairs. Unconvincing giggling from the hallway.

Angie was home.

#

She crept up the cellar stairs. She didn't want to go up there. She couldn't bear the thought of seeing Angie. And if her so-called friend was capable of doing this to her own husband, what might she do to her when she found that she had been snooping round the cellar while she was out? But she would be cornered down here if she stayed put. She needed to get back out into the hallway. At least she would have a chance of fighting her way to freedom if Angie attacked her. An outside chance, granted, as Angie was so much stronger than her. But even that had to be better than being murdered down here, and thrown onto the pile of bodies in the corner, with no-one but Trevor for company.

She reached the top of the steps. The door was open by ten inches or so. Had Angie noticed? She could hear her on the stairs leading up to the bedroom.

"I know what you want," she heard her say.

Kate held her breath. Angie knew she was here. What to do. Run for the front-door. Or maybe head for the kitchen, grab a knife, defend herself. Would that make things worse though? If she had a knife, then Angie might go for her hammer. Would she be better off acting like she was cool with the idea of Trevor lying dead in the basement, and try and talk her way back to the relative safety of her own home?

She was just about to make a break for the kitchen, when Angie spoke again.

"You're such a naughty boy. I'm gonna have to teach you a lesson."

Her voice was supposed to be teasing, provocative, but it was coming out all wrong. It just sounded creepy.

She relaxed a little. Angie had someone else in the house - someone who didn't seem particularly keen on talking - and it was him she was talking to. Whatever Kate might be, she most certainly wasn't a "naughty boy". All she had to do was wait for them to disappear into the bedroom, and then she could slip out quietly. Have someone come and change her locks as soon as possible. Avoid Angie at all costs, however strong the Craving became.

She heard the bedroom door open upstairs. Trevor's room (Angie's was the next floor up, at the top of the house, like hers). She felt a flush of indignation. She was going to have sex with someone in her husband's bedroom! Just after she'd murdered him. Wouldn't the guy wonder about the wheelchair by the bed! It would hardly be much of a turn-on for him.

And then her mobile rang. She swore to herself. She answered it as quickly as she could; just the two rings, but surely that was two rings too many? She should have turned it off the moment she'd heard Angie upstairs. Stupid, stupid girl!

"Kate?" It was Mike. He sounded subdued, upset. Something was wrong. Something bad must have happened. Had Angie been to see him too? She had a sudden panic-attack; maybe it was him upstairs with Angie! But then it occurred to her how ridiculous that would be. There was no way in a million years he'd allow Angie to entice him into her bedroom, and, even if he did, he certainly wouldn't be phoning her to tell her all about it. No, it was something else.

"What is it? What's wrong?" she whispered as quietly as she could, torn between her need to check that he was alright, and her urge to hang up on him and run for her life.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what I'm supposed to have done, but I'm sorry, whatever it is. You were trying to dump me in the pub, weren't you? It must be something I've done, something I've said. Tell me. It won't happen again."

"This is really bad timing," she hissed.

His tone changed from sad to suspicious. "Why are you whispering? Are you with someone?"

"Not now. I can't have this conversation now."

"I'm coming to see you."

"No! You stay where you are. I'll call you tomorrow. Have a proper talk. I promise."

There were footsteps on the stairs above. Angie was coming down. She must know she was down here; she'd heard her mobile ring. There was no time to escape. She rang off, and pulled the cellar-door closed. She waited, and hoped for a miracle.

Footsteps in the hallway. Past the cellar door. Into the kitchen. Please don't let her be fetching a hammer. She would apologise, apologise for all she was worth, and beg her friend to spare her.

More footsteps, heading back towards the stair-case, coming to a halt outside the cellar door.

"That's weird," Angie called up the stairs to the man she'd brought home. "I could've sworn I heard my phone."

No reply. What was wrong with the guy?

"I'm coming up! Ready or not!"

She heard Angie go back into the kitchen. A drawer opened. Realisation suddenly dawned. The man upstairs wasn't Angie's new boyfriend. He was her next victim. She had cut Kate out of the equation, and was fetching men home herself. She felt a twinge of jealousy. This was something they did together. Why was Angie going freelance?

But she knew the answer to that. She'd refused to give her Mike. This was her way of punishing her. From now on, she wasn't even going to be allowed to choose her own victims.

What was Angie thinking? Was she planning to kill men because she enjoyed it, or was she going to bribe Kate with their blood? It was hard to say. Maybe a little of both.

That explained Trevor. She could hardly chain men to the bed while her husband was at home. Any sane woman would have just thrown him out or divorced him, though. Not caved his skull in and thrown him in the cellar. Angie had lost it. She was well and truly mental.

She heard the drawer closing. Angie had got the syringe. She was back in the hallway. Please don't call back, Mike. Not now. Just hold off for another minute or two, and I'll be back home.

There was a sharp knock on the cellar door. Kate started, holding a hand over her own mouth to stifle a scream. The door opened. Angie looked in, an amused smile on her face.

Kate stared back at her like a frightened animal. She could hear her own breathing. She said nothing. She waited for Angie to make the first move. Her friend just looked at her. Kate shrank back on the cellar stairs, trying not to hyper-ventilate. The seconds ticked by.

"You look really funny when you're scared," Angie whispered. "Give me two minutes to get him chained to the bed, and then follow me up. Don't be late; you'll miss all the fun."

She left.

What now? She didn't want to go upstairs. She didn't want to see Angie, yet alone help her sedate whoever she had up there. But she was even less keen on making her cross. She'd do as she was told, get it over with as quickly as possible, pretend she was fine with everything, and then go back to her own house and work out how she was going to get herself out of this terrible situation.

She'd been waiting less than a minute, when she heard Angie shout out in rage. A string of obscenities followed, accompanied by the sound of struggle. She took the stairs two at a time. "Hang on! I'm coming!" she called out. Her mobile rang again on her way up, but she hung up without answering it. Mike could wait. She had more important things to worry about right now.

She burst into Trevor's bedroom. She stopped, confused. There was a naked man – dark hair, well-trimmed beard – chained to the pipes of the radiator. Angie was standing there in her bra and panties, rolls of flab hanging over the waistband, the syringe in her right hand.

"Fucking cheek!" she shouted at Kate, as she entered the room. "Did you see what he just did? Fucking cheek!"

"What? What's going on?"

"He was naked when I got up here. So I thought I'd take my kit off, like you do, just to rev him up a bit, and he tries to put his pants back on! What is it, Mate? Is my body not good enough for you?"

The man rattled away at the radiator, trying to pull the pipes from the wall. He was in his forties, much older than the men Kate brought back. Angie would have wanted a younger man, she felt sure of it. Still, beggars couldn't be choosers.

"I look good for someone my age, don't I?" Angie struck what she considered to be a seductive pose, one hand tucked into her knickers, the other hand raised to her lips as if she was going to suck the syringe. She looked ridiculous, and the proximity of the needle to her mouth made Kate really uneasy. Perhaps that was why she was doing it.

“Maybe it was the syringe that frightened him?” Kate suggested. “I’d put my clothes back on pretty quickly if I saw that being waved around.”

Angie chuckled. “Good point. I hadn’t thought of that.” She touched the needle to her lips. “What do you reckon? Sexy, eh? Shall I deep-throat it?”

“Could you put it down? You’re freaking me out.”

“It’s okay. It’s empty. I was so busy planning how I was going to get him back here, that I forgot to fill it up before I went out! I’ll be better prepared next time.”

Their captive changed tactic. He pulled back the curtains, and started to bang loudly on the window with his free fist.

“I’ll go and fill the syringe. You try and keep him away from the window as much as you can. We can’t have a naked man frightening the neighbours like that.”

“Why isn’t he saying anything?” Kate asked, as she approached him with trepidation.

“He’s mute. Can’t speak at all. Kind of made chatting him up a bit difficult, but he couldn’t resist these babies.” She shook her flabby bosoms in Kate’s direction. “I don’t even know his name. He tried to sign it, but I’m fucked if I understood what he was doing. Go on then, jump him. I’ll only be a minute or two.”

Angie left the room. Kate skirted the wheel chair, and grabbed the man by one wrist, attempting ineffectually to pull him away from the window. She didn’t have Angie’s strength. He lashed out at her, sending her sprawling back on to the bed.

“Angie, quick!” she shouted. “I can’t do this on my own.”

She got back to her feet. She shuffled round on top of the bed, skirting round to the side upon which he was handcuffed, waiting for a chance to seize his arm without him hitting her again. Her mobile rang again. She ignored it. Mike could wait.

The man caught sight of someone outside. He redoubled his efforts, pounding on the window-pane, and pointing down to his handcuffed wrist which was just below the level of the window-sill.

Kate glanced out the window to see what he had seen. Two things, both equally frightening. For there on the pavement, directly outside Angie’s house, stood two police-officers looking up at the window. And on the far side of the road, standing by his van, mobile phone held to his ear, was Mike.

#

PC Parker (“Nosey” to his highly unoriginal colleagues) would probably have driven by on a busier night, but the worst he had had to contend with so far this shift was a “drunk and disorderly” in Harbour Street (couldn’t have been much of a drinker to be in that state this early on!) and a couple having a shag in the alleyway that led up towards the synagogue. Another ten yards further up, they would have got away with it (as there were no lights up there and no-one would have seen what they were up to, yet alone complained about it). He’d even mentioned this to them in jest. But the girl had told him that she was afraid of the dark, and had insisted upon doing it with her boyfriend within sight of the street-light, or not at all. By the

look of him, he wouldn't have complained if she'd have wanted to shag him in the middle of the road.

He liked to think of himself as a man of the world, but if everyone went around shagging in public, then it wouldn't be safe to take the kids outdoors after dark. You had to draw the line somewhere. Still, she was a nice-looking girl. A shame to nick her, really. So he'd given her boyfriend a really strong bollocking, and given her a friendly wink as he walked back towards the police-car. Job done. Community policing, you could say.

But then, just a few minutes later, he had seen this man hanging around by the side of the road round the corner, looking up at the house opposite, as if "casing the joint" (as they say in films). He was talking to someone on his mobile. He looked upset. On a hunch, Parker pulled over.

"What's up?" asked his colleague, WPC Dyson ("Hoover" to her colleagues, who didn't seem to know or didn't care that Dyson and Hoover were two totally different brand names). She would have kept driving if she was behind the wheel. She was all for getting through each shift with as little paperwork as possible. Good job, really, otherwise he would have had to nick the couple in the alleyway, no question about it. He got on well with her, though. A bit too well, a couple of years ago, but all that nonsense was well behind them now. Especially since she got engaged to that scruffy git in CID.

"I just want to check this bloke out. He's looking a bit shifty."

She sighed. "I'll stay in the car."

He parked up and approached the man on the pavement. The man spotted him, and thrust his mobile into his trouser pockets, as if hiding evidence. He wiped his hand against the side of his face. Had he been crying? That was usually a sign that something was going on. A domestic, as often as not. They could get quite nasty, sometimes.

"Good evening, Sir," Parker said.

"Good evening, Officer."

"Is there anything I can help you with?"

"No. No. Everything's fine."

"Would you care to tell me why you're standing outside that house over there? In some distress, if I might say. Is everything okay?"

"She's left me."

"Sorry?"

"My girlfriend. Kate. She's left me. We were in the pub, and she started chatting up some bald bloke. And now she won't answer the door. I've tried phoning her, but -"

"Women, eh?" nodded Parker knowledgeably. "You can't live with them, you can't bury them under the patio. It sounds to me as if now might not be the best time for you to talk to this lady friend of yours. You're in a bit of a state. You might say things you don't really mean. Best if you go home, and talk to her in the morning."

“I need to talk to her now,” Mike insisted. “Tell her what she means to me.”

“Have you known her long?”

“We’ve only been out a couple of times.”

“Maybe you’re better off without her, Son. Two dates, and she’s picking up other men already. That’s not really the ideal start to a relationship, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“No. I like her. I really like her. She needs looking after, that’s all.”

“Not tonight, though, Sir. Talk to her tomorrow. She’ll still be there, no doubt. Plenty of time. Things will look different after a good night’s sleep.”

“What if she’s got that bloke in there? What if that’s why she doesn’t want to talk to me?”

WPC Dyson joined him. “Problem, Dave?”

“This young gentleman has had an argument with his lady-friend. He’s a little upset. May have had a drink or two, I think. I was just telling him to go home, and sort it out in the morning.”

“You’re not stalking her, are you?” asked WPC Dyson. “You do know that’s a criminal offence?”

“No. I wouldn’t do that. I just want to talk to her. I love her.”

“Well you’d better get back in your van, and go home. You can tell her all about it tomorrow.”

Mike got his mobile out, and dialled a number. Parker and Dyson exchanged looks. “He’s not listening, is he?” Dyson said.

Mike swore, and put his phone away. “She hung up on me!”

Parker was starting to lose patience. The bloke was obviously upset, but he’d just told him to leave, and he was being ignored. You can’t have that. People had no respect for the police nowadays.

“Okay, we’ve asked you nicely. I want you to get back in your van, and go home. Now. Or I’m going to have to nick you. What’s it to be?”

He gave the man his sternest stare, and waited for him to wilt. WPC Dyson nudged him. He looked at her, slightly irritated that his stern stare had been interrupted. She pointed up at the window of the house next-door to the one the man had been watching. The bedroom curtains had been opened. There was a man standing at the window, banging on the glass, naked from the hips up (and presumably from the hips down as well, though fortunately only the top half of his body was visible).

“There’s a naked man up there,” Dyson advised him, a little unnecessarily.

Parker nodded. Was that an offence? Probably not. As long as he kept his tackle out of sight, he could do what he liked in his own bedroom.

A woman appeared at the window, trying to pull him away. Quite right, too. The exhibitionist pushed her away. He heard WPC Dyson sigh again. She hated having to deal with “domestics”. They took ages, and nine times out of ten the women didn’t want to prosecute afterwards.

“Kate!” the-man-on-the-pavement shouted. “That’s Kate!”

“Your girlfriend?”

“Yes!”

“And that’s the man in the pub you were talking about?”

“No. That’s a different one. He’s got hair.”

“She gets around a bit, your girlfriend.”

Kate appeared behind the man, higher up than him, presumably standing on the bed. She started circling round him, like a wrestler waiting for a chance to pounce on a disorientated opponent. All the while, the man kept banging on the window as if his life depended upon it.

“Kate!” shouted the-man-on-the-pavement to his errant beloved.

The man in the window started pointing downwards at something just below the window-sill. He wore an imploring expression (but nothing else). He said nothing.

“What’s he doing now?” Parker pondered aloud.

“I think he’s pointing at his knob,” Dyson replied with a weary shake of the head.

The woman in the bedroom suddenly spotted them. She froze on the bed (or whatever it was she was standing upon). She gave them (or the love-lorn man on the pavement?) a guilty-looking wave. The guy in front of her pointed furiously down at his knob again.

“Kate!” shouted Pavement Man.

“Okay,” Dyson sighed so loudly it sounded as if she might expire. “Let’s get this over with.”

Together, they approached the house.

It was going to be an eventful night after all.

#

Everything was happening too quickly. Kate had barely had a chance to come to terms with the bodies in the woods, the bodies in her armchair, the acrimonious break-up with Mike. But tonight was something else. Trevor, lying dead in the cellar. Angie bringing her own victim back home, without even telling her what she was doing. And now, a fully conscious man banging on the bedroom window with the Police outside. And Mike, too.

She needed time, time to think of something plausible to tell the police officers heading for the front door. She wracked her brains, trying to ignore the hammering on the window. Nothing. What could she possibly say or do to get her out of a situation like this? They would arrest her, and put her on trial, and the whole world would know what she was. She would be the most hated woman in the country after what she’d done.

If only she could get out of this. She’d reform. No matter how bad the Craving, she would ignore it. She raised her eyes to Heaven. Give me one more chance, she thought. I won’t do it again if you save me. Just this once.

There was a knock on the door downstairs. They'd come for her. Maybe she should let herself out the back. Run away, hide somewhere. But it was useless. She had no money. She had nowhere to go. And when the sun came up, she'd be toast.

"Angie! She screamed in desperation. "It's the Police!"

No reply. Angie was still busy filling her syringe downstairs.

The man at the window turned round. She saw relief in his eyes. Wariness, but relief. He knew he'd been saved. He was saved, and she was damned. Mind you, she'd been damned for a very long time.

Another knock at the door. They were waiting for her.

"Let's get this over with," she whispered. She went to the bedroom door. She looked back at Angie's mute victim (Angie's victim, not hers; this would never have happened if he had been hers). "I'm sorry," she told him. "I really am. It's not my fault."

He stared back at her, but said nothing. Not really surprising in the circumstances.

She descended the stairs to the front-door, one fatalistic step at a time. Still no sign of Angie. If she had done a runner, leaving her to face the music, then she would give her up. There was no way she was taking all the responsibility for this on her own. Besides, the man up there would tell them what had happened. Or write it down, at least.

She opened the door to the Police. As she did so, Angie emerged from the kitchen. She turned to look at her. She was still in her Primark bra and pants. She was holding something behind her back. Surely not the syringe, not with the police officers here to arrest them? What was she thinking? It was too late to inject anyone now. It would just make things worse.

"Angie, no," she cautioned. "We have guests."

Angie ignored her, heading up the stairs, moving the syringe as she did so, so it remained shielded by her body. Kate felt the urge to squeeze past the two police officers and dash off into the night, but it was no use. They'd catch her before she made it to the far side of the road. Besides, Mike was standing behind them. She didn't want him to see her being manhandled to the ground.

"Good evening, Madam," said the male officer, far more politely than she had anticipated. "Were you aware that there is a naked man exposing himself from your bedroom window?"

"It's not my bedroom. It's Angie's. My friend. I'm just visiting."

"Kate, how could you?" asked Mike. He was subdued, as if all the fight had been knocked out of him.

"I'm sorry, Mike. I'm so sorry." She was tired of apologising to everyone. But if anyone deserved an apology, it was him. She hoped he wouldn't hate her too much when he found out what she was.

"I'm not really worried whose bedroom it is," the officer persisted. "I'm more worried by the fact that the gentleman appears to be pointing out his penis to passers-by."

“Bit of a tongue-twister, Dave,” said the WPC, but he ignored her. He was clearly expecting some sort of explanation. But Kate just shrugged, not knowing what else to do.

There was a crash upstairs, accompanied by a string of violent curses. “Come back, you little bastard,” Angie was shouting. “We’re not done yet.”

The naked man appeared at the top of the stairs, one wrist still in handcuffs. The police officers watched in astonishment as he rushed down the stairs towards them. He launched himself at the male officer, hugging him. He had found sanctuary, and he was not going to let him go until the two women were safely locked away inside a police van.

“Kate, how could you?” Mike asked. He was getting annoying. Couldn’t he just get back in his van, and leave them to it?

The police officer prised the naked man off him, just as Angie pounded down the stairs in pursuit. For some inexplicable reason, she had removed her bra. Her heavy breasts slapped up and down each step she took. The only consolation, Kate thought, was that she had had the sense to ditch the syringe before putting in an appearance.

“Get off me,” the male officer warned their mute victim, as he tried to hug him again. “Do you mind putting your pants on, and telling me what’s going on here?”

The man started signing at speed. The two officers exchanged looks. The police-woman shrugged. “Buggered if I know.”

Angie intervened. “I’m sorry about this, officers. It’s rather embarrassing. We were having an orgy.” She jiggled her bosoms to illustrate the point. The police-man didn’t look impressed by this. Indeed, he seemed to shudder a little.

“He doesn’t look as if he was enjoying it very much, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“Oh, he enjoyed it alright. He’s just pretending to be upset. That’s the thing about S & M role-play; you have to grimace a lot. If he was beaming, it would look all wrong. Look, see how he’s cuddling you. He wants you to join in. He gets lonely when he’s the only gonzo.”

“Me? Join in! I don’t think so!”

“He’s always like this. The moment Kate’s ready to get naked, he gets all excited and he runs off to find someone else to join us. That’s why he was waving at you from the window. Dirty little bugger loves a bit of male company. He swings both ways, you see.”

Kate watched as Mike’s face hardened. “Now it all makes sense. No wonder you didn’t want to handcuff me to the bed the other night. You couldn’t trust yourself.”

“That’s exactly what it would have been,” Angie confirmed. “She’s a dominatrix. She’d whip you soon as look at you. You’ve had a lucky escape there.”

The naked man made a break for it. He’d given up on the police officers coming to his rescue. They seemed to be falling for all this bollocks the chubby woman was coming up with. For a second, he thought he was free. He caught the police-men by surprise, and the depressed-looking bloke behind them leapt out of his way as if he was a leper. But the fat woman had stuck a needle in him upstairs, just before he’d wrenched the radiator-pipe off the wall. As he started running, the world skidded across his field of vision, and he had to cling on to the gate-

post to keep himself upright. The police-officers caught up with him, and started to pull him back towards the house.

He opened his mouth to scream, but nothing but air came out. He struggled frantically, but inch by inch, they were dragging him back towards his death. The world swam some more. He couldn't stay awake much longer. But he had to. He had to. He couldn't go back in there. They were going to hurt him, mutilate him, kill him. And the police were helping them.

Kate watched as the two police-officers wrestled the poor man back inside. She almost wished he had escaped. The game was up. Why have another victim on her conscience now?

She glanced at Mike. He was looking so cold, so contemptuous. Why wouldn't he? She deserved every bit of it, and more. She was a monster. What would he think when he found that she was so much worse even than the dominatrix he supposed her to be?

The naked man made one last desperate bid for freedom. He lashed out at the police-man, and staggered a few steps back along the path to the front-gate. And then his legs buckled out from under him, and he was face-down on the concrete, his eyes glazed over. The police-officers grabbed an ankle each, and hauled him indoors, all patience with him lost. She winced. Being dragged along a rough concrete pathway, and over the lip of the doorway, testicles-down, would have been agonising if he'd been conscious. Worryingly, she felt just a little bit aroused by this at the same time.

"Okay, I'm nicking the lot of you," said the male officer.

Salvation came from an unexpected quarter.

"Do you think that's wise, Dave?" his colleague asked.

"Yes, *WPC Dyson*, I do!"

"We've just knocked him unconscious, and hauled him down the pathway on his bollocks. I think that might look pretty bad if we take him in."

"He was resisting arrest."

"All the same. Look at his bollocks. See if they're okay."

"You look at his bollocks!" the male officer exploded. "I'm not going anywhere near them. It's bad enough him pressing them against my uniform, but I'm bugged if I'm going to examine them afterwards!"

She turned him over, and gave his testicles careful scrutiny. "Look. They're badly scuffed. What's the police surgeon going to make of that? There's going to be a complaint. We could get suspended for this. And think what the others would say, down at the station. We'd be a laughing stock. There could be new nicknames in this for us both. "Hoover" is bad enough, but I'm not going to spend the rest of my career as "Bollock-Scuffer" for anyone."

The two officers stepped outside, and started arguing in whispers. There was the sound of a van starting up. Mike was going. It was for the best, Kate thought. One less thing to worry about.

“Don’t worry about his damaged testicles,” Angie called out to the police constables. “He would probably have quite enjoyed it, if he’d been awake. And he never wanted children anyway”

Kate nudged her hard in the ribs. “You’re not helping. And would you please put your bra on? You’re making me feel ill.”

Angie’s face clouded over. She didn’t like it when Kate spoke up for herself. “Your chest is better than mine, is that it?”

“Hell, yes!” So what if she was antagonising Angie. She no longer had anything to lose.

The officers stopped talking. The WPC approached them, while her colleague stalked sullenly back to the police-car.

“We’ve decided not to arrest you on this occasion. It’s all been on private property, no-one else around, no-one likely to be caused alarm or distress. But if we ever see so much as a nipple sticking out of that bedroom window again, we’re going to nick the lot of you, no questions asked, however scuffed your bollocks might be. Understood?”

They both nodded.

“And put your bra back on, Ma’am,” she ordered Angie. “Now. Or I’m nicking you for possession of offensive tits.”

#

Kate left at the same time as the WPC. She didn’t want to speak with Angie, not after what she’d done to Trevor, yet alone be left in the house with her. The mute guy was Angie’s problem, not hers. She didn’t want his blood. She didn’t want anything to do with him.

For half an hour or so, she thought she was safe. But when she thought it through, she realised that it was only a matter of time before the police would be back for her. The mute guy would be reported missing. The officers would put two and two together. They had got a good look at him while he was trying to make his escape (in more ways than one!) Isn’t that the bloke trying to make a run for it from those two strange women, they’d say. And they even knew where Angie lived. Angie would blame everything on her, they’d find the bodies in the woods, do forensic tests etc. and that would be it. Her life would be over.

She had nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. But she couldn’t face prison for the rest of her life. Especially not with everyone in there knowing what she’d done. The other people in the prison would pick on her, cut her, do things to her; horrible, horrible things. She’d seen it on the telly. Worse still, what if she ended up sharing a cell with Angie for the next forty years? Five minutes with her would be too much.

There was only one way out. That scared her. But not as much as prison did.

She wanted Mike to know before she did it. She couldn’t phone him. She doubted he’d take the call, even if she had the courage to make it. She’d write to him instead.

She found pen and paper, and took a seat at the kitchen table. She couldn’t think what to say. How do you tell someone you have feelings for, that you’re a serial killer, that you drink the blood of strangers? And that you’re going to end it all because you can’t take any more of it.

She went upstairs, put the plug in the bath and turned on the taps. She'd slit her wrists. After all she'd done, it seemed appropriate that she should die from blood-loss. Should she take tablets as well? Or was it one or the other (slit-wrists or overdose, but not both?) She didn't know the etiquette. Then again, she didn't suppose there were any strict rules about these things. And maybe there would be less pain from her wrists if she dosed up first. She didn't want too much pain if she could help it.

She cursed when she found that she had nothing but paracetamol in the house. She always had stronger medication than that, for when the Craving kicked in. But all she could find were empty packets of Tramadol. Paracetamol would have to do. She swallowed two packets, one tablet at a time, to be on the safe side, and then went back to her letter.

She wrote. It was stream of consciousness stuff, whatever came into her head. She told him she murdered men. She told him that she couldn't help it, that the pain was unendurable if he didn't have their blood. She didn't want to do it. She got no pleasure out of it, as Angie did. But she had no choice if she wanted to stay alive.

She told him she had feelings for him. Strong feelings. She wouldn't say love, as they hadn't known each other long enough for that. But strong feelings all the same. She didn't want him to hate her. He would, of course, and she didn't blame him for that, but one of her reasons for doing this to herself was that she didn't want to put him in danger. In a way, she was doing this for him.

Angie might say things about her, before the police came for her. He should ignore her. Angie was jealous that they'd found each other, She wanted her all to herself. She didn't like men. That was why she got such a kick out of what she did. But she wasn't like Angie. She hated what she did, what she was, what she had become. And it was time to end it all, before she did it again.

She was starting to feel drowsy. It was time. She added a few kisses to the end of the letter, but then crossed them out again. They looked stupid. Dear Mike, I murder men for their blood. Kiss, kiss, kiss! She thought of rewriting the letter without them, but it was too long. She wanted to get this over with. Besides, she might fall asleep when she was re-writing it, and then she'd have to go out and buy some more drugs before she could try it again.

She went back to the bathroom. The water was spilling over the top of the bath. She must have been writing longer than she thought. So what? She wouldn't have to clean it up. Someone else's problem, for a change.

She stripped off her clothes, and sat on the edge of the bath. She trailed her hand through the water, watching as more of it spilled over the edge on to the carpet. Could she do this? It would hurt. She was scared. She was very scared indeed. Maybe this was a mistake. But what choice was there. Being bullied in a high-security prison? What sort of choice was that?

There was a banging on the door downstairs. "Kate!" It was Angie, shouting through the letter-box. "You come out right now." She was glad she'd put the latch up to stop her using her key. The woman wouldn't even let her die in peace.

She took up the razor blade, holding it flat between her index finger and thumb, careful not to cut herself. Oh, the irony. She didn't want this to be any more painful than it had to be. A quick slash across each wrist, and then she would lie back and let the world slip away.

She drew the blade across her wrist. "Fuck!" It really hurt, like a bad paper-cut. A tiny trickle of blood. She'd have to do it again, deeper this time. All the while, Angie was banging at the front-door downstairs. This is my moment, she thought. How could you spoil even this?

She was crying by the time she'd opened her wrists. The blade was blunt, and she had to saw it back and forth to open a wound which she judged to be large enough to do the trick. It hurt, more even than the Craving hurt. She wanted to cry, but fought back the tears. She was going to die. She didn't want this. It was too frightening. But she had no other option. She had to go. It was too late to change her mind in any case. She was bleeding to death already.

She laid back and closed her eyes, trying to ignore the pain in her wrists. It took longer than anticipated; she had been under the impression from the TV that it would all be over straightaway, but she was clinging stubbornly to life as if it was something she should value. After a while, though, she noticed that the pain was becoming more manageable. The banging downstairs started to fade into the distance. She was zoning out. Soon, all of the horror, all of the misery, would finally be behind her.

And all that would be left of her would be her lacerated shell and a suicide note with kisses on the bottom.

#

She opened her eyes with some trepidation. She wasn't sure if she was dead or not. She'd had recurring visions of Hell, and she was trying to work out if she was just dreaming of being there or if it was the real thing.

No. She was in bed. Her wrists hurt. Her stomach, too. And the Craving had kicked in big time.

Mike was by her bedside. This wasn't her bed, though. Where was she?

"Where am I?"

"QEQM hospital. I managed to get you a private room."

"Hospital?"

He nodded. "Kate, I'm sorry. About the way I acted. We've only just met. You're entitled to do what you like with other men. It was just a bit of a shock, that's all. Forgive me."

She closed her eyes, and tried to work out what was going on. It came back to her, a little at a time. Trevor. The police. Mike. Open wrists in the bath-tub.

"Do you want to rest?" he asked. "I could go away for a while. Have lunch or something. I just wanted to be here when you woke up."

She opened her eyes. She looked at him. She gave him a half-smile. "How did you know? Know I was here?"

"Angie told me. She rescued you. Found you in the bath. Brought you here. She's been talking to the nurses. They reckon you've more of a chance of coming home if you have someone there to look after you." He leant forward and whispered, "so I'm your fiancé as far as they're concerned. Okay?"

“My fiancé?” She was having trouble following the conversation. She felt tired. More tired than she’d ever felt before.

“Just so they let you out. You have to be assessed. To check that you’re okay. They need to make sure you won’t try it again. I told them we had a row, but everything’s okay now. Tell them that, and you’ll be out of here tomorrow at the latest. I expect they need the bed.”

“We’re not engaged, though, are we?”

He blushed a little, and avoided eye contact. “No. Angie said to say that. She thinks it’s the only way they’ll let you out. She’s worried you might be sectioned.”

“Angie wants me out?”

“Of course she does. We both do.”

She wasn’t sure she wanted to come out, though. Not if Angie was out there waiting for her. What if she wanted to harm her? She wouldn’t put it past her, not after what she’d done to Trevor. Surely even Angie wouldn’t do that, though? Save her from a suicide attempt, just so she could kill her herself. That would be twisted, even by her standards. Angie was pretty good at “twisted”, though.

She could just turn herself into the police, of course. She really didn’t want to do that; it frightened the life out of her. But it was only a matter of time before they came for her, and she didn’t have the strength to try to kill herself again. She was trapped in this life, whether she liked it or not.

She needed to sleep. When she awoke, she’d be able to think clearly. If she still felt the same way when she woke up, she’d confess everything to the doctor. He’d call the police, and it would all be out of her hands. She could just go with the flow, do as she was told, and she wouldn’t have to worry about any of this anymore. Who knows, if they thought she was mad, they might even give her further treatment. They might even cure her. It would be worth a life in prison if they could do that for her.

She persuaded Mike to leave. It wasn’t hard. He was contrite; ready to do whatever she asked. He was being so nice. She didn’t deserve “nice”. Maybe he was just feeling guilty. But the way he was looking at her, it was as if they were back together again, despite everything she had put him through. All this talk of them being engaged had gone to his head.

She was tired. She drifted back off to sleep. She awoke when someone put a hand on her forehead, as if checking for fever. She opened her eyes, expecting to see a nurse. It was Angie. The shock nearly killed her.

“Everything’s all right,” Angie cooed, as if talking to a frightened kitten. “It’s all sorted. And you don’t need to worry about the police coming back. Our chatty little friend won’t be missed, believe me.”

“Why? How do you know?”

“Do you want the long answer or the short one?”

A doctor came into the room.

“Tell me,” Kate persisted. “How do you know he won’t be missed?”

Angie shifted awkwardly. “I think maybe we should have this conversation later? The doctor’s not going to want to hear about all our troubles, is he?”

“He might.”

“He doesn’t,” Angie said firmly. “Do you understand that?”

The doctor looked on, slightly troubled by the conversation. “Could I ask you to leave? I need to have a few words with Miss Pearce in private.”

“She’d like me to stay,” Angie told him. “We’re best friends. I’m like a mother-figure to her. Isn’t that right, Kate?”

“I’m sorry. I need you to go. I’ll only be a few minutes. You’re welcome to come back and see her afterwards.”

Angie huffed out of the room. The doctor sat wearily in the chair by her bed. He looked as if he had had a long shift. “Was she bothering you? I can have her removed.”

It was tempting to say yes. Oh, so tempting. But she would just be making matters worse for herself later on. She had still not decided for sure whether she was going to tell this doctor everything; it was such a huge step. There was no going back once she’d confessed to him all she had done. And if she chickened out, kept her mouth shut, she would have to go back home, back home to Angie. Best to keep her options open, at least for now.

She shook her head. “It’s okay. She’s just worried about me.”

“How are you feeling? Don’t worry, I’m not a psychiatrist, I won’t be taking notes. Someone else will be along to see you tomorrow morning about that, see if you’re fit to go home. I’m just asking.”

“I’m fine. Everything hurts like Hell, but I’m fine.”

“That’s good. Not the hurting bit, of course. We can have a chat about painkillers in a minute.” He paused. There was something he wanted to tell her, but wasn’t quite sure if he should. She could see him running through the pros and cons in his mind.

“What is it? What’s the matter?”

Was she ill? Had she done more harm to herself than she thought? Maybe she was dying after all, and he was deciding whether the news would be better off coming from the psychiatrist or psychiatric nurse who would be seeing her later?

“You can tell me,” she encouraged him. “I’m fine, really I am. Is everything okay?”

He came to a decision. He smiled at her. She smiled back, but wished he’d get on with it. The suspense was awful. Was she dying or not? She wasn’t sure if she still wanted to go or not.

“More than okay, actually,” he told her. “You’re pregnant. You’re going to have a baby.”

It was actually two more days before they released her back home. They spoke to her, they spoke to Mike, they even spoke to Angie (which was a bit of a worry!). She managed to convince them that she would never harm herself again. She was pregnant now, after all. She had the baby to think of. The baby had changed everything, she said. And she had meant it.

She was supposed to be discharged at midday, but it was three o'clock before she was finally signed out. Once she was finally discharged, she went and sat in the waiting room until it was dark outside. She wanted to get home, but was trapped there until after sunset. She kept getting funny looks from the woman on the desk, but fortunately no-one tried to turf her out into the daylight.

She chose to phone Mike for her lift home. She had no money on her for a taxi, and she couldn't face calling Angie. She would have to speak to her sooner or later, of course. There was only so long she could hide from her next-door neighbour. But not this evening. She needed tonight to herself. Mike was all she had left.

He wanted to come indoors with her, but she sent him home. He looked worried. He still thought that she was a suicide risk. But she wasn't. She wouldn't do that again, not with the baby inside her. He would have been more worried still, though, if he'd known she was pregnant. He didn't know he was going to be a father. At least the baby would have someone to look after him or her when she was arrested and gave birth in prison.

She couldn't invite him in anyway, even though she could have done with spending an hour or two with him before he left her to her own devices. Not with Angie next-door. Especially not after dark. She couldn't face her neighbour coming round with a syringe. If there had been a bond with Mike before, it had just got a lot closer. She was having his baby. She wasn't going to let her neighbour inject him and bleed him dry. Not when he was the father of her child.

He kissed her just before she got out of the car. She kissed him back. Then she kissed him harder. And then she was clinging to him, as if a really tight hug could chase all her demons away. The demons remained stubbornly put, no amount of embracing being enough to persuade them to leave home. She broke off. This wasn't helping; now she had an emotional attachment to him, her life was going to get more complicated still.

Her front window was boarded up. That must have been how Angie had got in. How did she know that Kate was in danger? More to the point, did she break in to rescue her, or was she planning on hurting her? Just as she had hurt Trevor a few days before. The more she thought about it, the harder it was to reach any conclusions.

She let herself in. She went in search of her suicide note. It was gone. Did the authorities have it? She hoped not, bearing in mind what she had written. No, they couldn't have taken it. She'd never have made it home if they had seen her confession. Angie. Angie had disposed of it for her. To keep her safe. To keep them both safe, more like. She supposed she had a lot to be grateful for, but really didn't feel like thanking her.

She went straight to bed. It was still early, and she hadn't had dinner yet, but she couldn't face eating. She just felt so tired, and she needed to be alert enough to think things through. She was in a mess, and she knew it. She couldn't go out looking for more men, not now she was known to the police (even if Angie was right that they wouldn't be searching for her mute friend for some reason). And she didn't want any more victims anyway. She couldn't stand the idea

of drinking blood with that little baby inside her, absorbing it all through her placenta. What sort of way would that be to start life? The baby had to stay pure, untainted. As different from her mother as possible.

But then again, the Craving didn't care if she was pregnant or not. It would still demand blood. And without it, she would get more and more ill. So she'd harm her baby either way.

She felt like crying. She wanted to do what was right for her child. After all the damage she had done to herself in her teens, she'd been convinced that she would never have children. They had told her so, in no uncertain terms. And now she had been given this blessing, right at the time she had been trying to end her own life, she had to do what was best for the tiny little life growing inside her. But how? What was she supposed to do? Starve them both, or pump it full of drugged-up blood to keep them both alive?

She climbed into bed. She felt so sleepy, she was expecting to drop off instantly, but she couldn't stop thinking about everything that had happened in the last few days, how she had come so close to death, how Angie – of all people – had saved her. She would make a list in the morning, a list of the things she wanted to achieve: like giving up blood, and being with Mike without him being in danger, and reducing her dependence on Angie (a little at a time, so as not to cause offence). And then she would wrack her brains to work out how on earth she could ever hope to achieve any of these things, yet alone all of them.

As she was drifting off, she remembered that she hadn't put the catch on the door, to stop Angie letting herself in. Too tired to do that now, she thought. She won't be round tonight anyway. She thinks I'm still in hospital, or she'd have phoned already.

With this thought to comfort her, she finally morphed into sleep. Although she didn't know it, it would be the very last night she spent in her own bed.

#

She was cold. She must have shrugged the duvet off herself in the night. Still wrapped in sleep, she tried to pull it back, but her arm didn't respond. She opened her eyes to try to work out what was going on.

It was dark; still night-time, then. It took a few seconds to adjust to the darkness. She could feel the duvet was pulled right back, exposing her, right down to the thighs. She tried to move her arm again, but it wouldn't budge. She was paralysed.

And then she saw her. Angie, leaning over her bed, looking her all over, as if choosing a cut of meat at the butchers.

"Angie!" Even talking was an effort. Her mouth didn't want to move. What had she done to her?

"Hello, Kate."

She put out a hand. Kate could feel it on her breast.

"What are you doing?"

"Stupid question. I'm touching you."

“Why?”

“Because I deserve it. I saved your life. Things are going to be different from now on. Instead of me running round after you all day, I’m going to have what I want, what I need, from time to time. It’s only fair, don’t you think?”

Her hand travelled down over Kate’s body, her fingers skimming her skin, stroking her ribs, her stomach. Kate tried to pull away, but her body ignored her.

“I can’t move.”

Angie’s fingers came to rest on her groin. She touched the neatly trimmed hair. She smiled. “Do you know how long I’ve wanted to do this?”

“I can’t move!”

“That would be the syringe I stuck in you a couple of minutes ago.”

She had started to feel drowsy again, but the sudden rush of petrified adrenalin shook her awake. “No! You wouldn’t have. Not to me.”

“I’m sorry, Kate. There’s something we have to do tonight, something you may not have wanted to do without a little encouragement.”

She patted her between the legs. “Anyway. Enough talk. We’ve got work to do. There’s plenty of time for this later.”

“Please don’t do this. Don’t drug me. You can’t. It’s not just me. It’s -. I’m -”

She stopped. She couldn’t have this. The baby; all that poison inside her might harm her tiny little baby. She wouldn’t let Angie do that; she’d kill her first. But she was in no position to fight. She didn’t know whether to tell her she was pregnant. Would Angie leave her alone if she told her? Or would it make things worse? Surely she’d stop when she found out. She was a woman. She’d understand. She wouldn’t want to hurt her when she was in this condition.

“Pregnant?” Angie asked. “Oh, I know all about that. I had a chat with the doctor. He was a crap liar. I could read him like a book.”

“You’ll stop, then?”

“Oh no. I can’t do that. The wheels have been set in motion, so to speak.”

She removed her hand from Kate’s groin, and stroked her cheek with her fingers. She was feeling sleepy again, really sleepy. The drug was taking effect, however much she tried to fight against it.

“Besides,” Angie added. “Our little baby is kind of the reason why I’m doing all this. You’ll thank me later. Auntie Angie to the rescue yet again.”

#

My life used to be straightforward, Mike thought. Okay, maybe I was a little lonely on my own. Too old to chat up girls at nightclubs, too young for online dating agencies. But I knew where I stood. I went to work, ate, drunk, slept. Everything was pretty simple.

And now this. He'd met Kate. Had gone out on a couple of dates, ended up in bed together, had developed real feelings for her, even in such a short space of time. She was funny, she was sweet, she was vulnerable. She needed looking after. And her bitchy mate sure as Hell wasn't going to do that for her.

But then, all of a sudden, with no warning at all, she'd changed. She'd provoked him in the pub, started chatting up other blokes, acting more like Angie than the Kate he'd started to get to know. Then he'd found out she was some sort of perverted dominatrix, chaining up blokes in her bedroom for their sexual pleasure, letting Angie join in (though how anyone would get any pleasure from seeing that flabby old cow in her Primark underwear was totally beyond him). Maybe that was all part of the masochism thing.

And after all that, when he'd made up his mind never to see her again, his very own version of the Craving had kicked in. He couldn't stop thinking about her. He sat at home all evening, on his own, seeing things on TV he wanted to share with her, dwelling on the few moments they had had together. Yeah, sure, he thought of what she was like in bed quite a lot. Her lovely body, him inside it, (inside her, he should say). But it was more than just sexual attraction; much more. He just wanted to pick up the phone and forgive her, tell her he had to be with her, no matter what.

And then Angie had phoned him through work, had told him that Kate was in hospital. She'd taken an overdose, right after he'd left. He shouldn't feel guilty, she'd said. Kate had been on the verge of doing something like this for a very long time. She had never been particularly stable. It wasn't his fault if he'd turned up on the doorstep unannounced, and having a go at her over the heads of the police officers, had pushed her over the edge.

She'd asked him to go to the hospital, pretend to be Kate's fiancé. She was under the impression that they might not let her out unless she had a stable family to come home to. It made him feel funny, thinking of him and Kate being family. He agreed straight away.

When he'd seen her in the hospital bed, he remembered just how gorgeous she was. She looked vulnerable again, childlike almost. He would swallow his pride. Forgive her. Stand by her. Do whatever it took to make her well again. And if he could prise her away from Angie in the process, he thought that she might just heal, given time. That woman was cancerous. The less of her Kate saw, the sooner she'd be back to her old beautiful self. And they could spend the rest of their lives in peace, without Cruella breathing down their necks.

As he lay in bed in the dark, working his way through everything that had happened to him since he'd met her, he thought again that his life had been oh so simple before she'd come bounding into it. But would he go back to that? No. Even with her being some sort of kinky prostitute, she was still worth fighting for.

His mobile rang beside his bed. He answered it.

"Mike? It's Angie."

"What's the matter? Is she okay?"

"She's fine. She's a bit tied up right now, but she needs to speak to you. Tonight. Can you come over?"

“Tonight? Why? What’s going on?”

“She’ll tell you when you get here. It’s important. She’s here at mine.”

“Can you put her on? I’d like to speak to her.”

“When you get here. She can’t talk right now.”

This was weird. Suspicious. He didn’t trust Angie. He didn’t trust her at all. Why would Kate ask her friend to call him? She knew how he felt about her. Angie would be the last person she’d ask. Something was going on, and if Angie had anything to do with it, it was bound to be bad for everyone concerned.

“Tomorrow. Tell her I’ll come tomorrow. If you’re sure she’s all right.”

There was an impatient sigh from the other end of the phone. “Okay, I didn’t want to have to tell you this. She wanted to tell you herself. She’s just done a pregnancy test. You’re gonna be a Daddy.”

He nearly dropped the phone. If he was ever thinking of bailing out on their relationship, this changed everything. He was going to be a father. Have a child. With Kate. She’d have to stop the sex games now, surely she would.

A thought occurred. “She told me she couldn’t have children.”

“The pregnancy test would seem to suggest she was wrong about that. Now, are you coming over or what? I can tell her you’re not too bothered, if you like. That you’d rather stay at yours and watch porn, or whatever you single men get up to when you’re home alone.”

“No, no, I’m coming.”

“Not for the first time, it would appear from Kate’s pregnancy test.”

He hung up, not bothering to reply. He wasn’t going to let her bait him, not after what he had just found out. It had always frightened the life out of him when he was younger, that one of his conquests would get pregnant, trap him into a life of misery with someone he didn’t even like that much. But Kate was different. She was made for him. What did she want to speak to him about? Marriage hopefully. He’d been fine with that; over the moon. Please, please, please, don’t let it be to dump him, to tell him that he would have no part in the child’s life.

The thought made him feel a little nauseous. It was almost as if his Craving was starting to develop the same symptoms as hers.

#

Kate awoke in a darkened room. For a second, she struggled to work out where she was, why she was here. But it wasn’t hard to piece the clues together. For one, the dimmest of lights hung from the ceiling above her. Secondly, Trevor’s corpse was propped up on a chair opposite her, with the dumb guy’s body not far away from his feet. She was in Angie’s cellar, sitting on a chair of her own. And she was chained to the wall by the manacles Angie had spent so long installing while her husband was still alive.

She was naked. She felt cold and vulnerable. What was this all about? Was Angie going to abuse her? Kill her, even? She could have done so already, while she was unconscious, but maybe she wanted to have some fun first, while she was awake. The thought of Angie's hand on her body made her shudder. She wanted to scream, but thought better of it. She might panic her friend into using the hammer to shut her up. Her only chance of getting out of this alive was to keep calm, pretend that everything was okay between the two of them. Agree to whatever she wants, she told herself. And walk out of here in one piece when it's all over (physically, if not mentally).

She stood up, and inspected the wall. The manacles were fixed to it about six feet off the ground. Fortunately, Angie had provided her with a chain about three feet long, so she could sit on the chair with her wrists only slightly raised. Only Angie would chain someone to a wall, and then think to give them a chair to sit on so they didn't get uncomfortable.

She heard footsteps on the stairs. Angie came into view. Her heart sank still further; she was in her bra and pants again. Kate sat back down, and drew back into her chair. She pulled her legs up, covering her body as best she could. Angie laughed. "Little Miss Modest. Don't worry, I'm not planning on touching you up again. You're only naked 'cos I couldn't be bothered to get you dressed. I'm not planning on hurting you either, if that's what you're worrying about. We'll just get this over with, and then you can go home and get some rest."

"You drugged me! I'm pregnant. You knew that. How could you do that to me?"

She waited for an answer. She shouldn't be acting like this, she knew that. She had meant to be friendly, subservient, whatever it took to help her survive. But she felt so angry. They had been best friends for so long. Who in their right mind would do something like this to their pregnant best friend?

"Half dosage. You'll be fine. You both will. I know about these things. I used to work in a hospital, remember? Until I got sacked for stealing drugs for you."

"For groping sleeping patients, more like."

"No." Angie laughed. "I was always very careful when I did that. It was definitely just for the drugs, as far as they were concerned."

Kate looked at her sullenly. She had to try to be nice. But she couldn't, not after everything Angie had done to her. She just couldn't.

"Why's Trevor in a chair?" It wasn't nice, but at least it was civil. Civil was the best she could manage in the circumstances.

"I've buried all the others. I don't need them anymore. I took him out there, too. But I couldn't do it. He'd be lonely out there in the woods, all by himself. He didn't know them, you see. He'd have no-one to keep him company, and he was always telling me how lonely he gets when he's alone. He was a bit needy, like that. So I brought him home. We'll bury him in the back garden when all this is over. You and me. When things return to normal. It's what he would have wanted."

Things were never normal, Kate thought. Not between you and me. And I am never, never going back to what we used to do together, no matter what. I have a child now. I don't need

you anymore.

But she said nothing.

“Aren’t you going to ask me what we’re here for?” Angie enquired. “I thought that would be the first thing you’d want to know.”

Kate shook her head. “Sometimes it’s better not knowing.”

“I’ve phoned your boyfriend. Window-Boy. He’s on his way over. I hope you don’t mind. I told him about our baby.”

“No.” Kate was panicking now. As if her situation wasn’t bad enough, she didn’t want Mike here. She wanted him safe. “Please. Leave him alone. This is about you and me. There’s no need to hurt him.”

“Oh, but there is. We were fine, just the two of us. The best of friends. And then he came along, and spoilt it all. I know he’s been trying to turn you against me, it’s obvious from the way you’ve been acting since you met him. All that swearing and answering me back; you’ve not been yourself at all. He wants to split us up. He wants you all to himself, to cut me out. And that’s only going to get worse now you’re pregnant. You have something together, something for you to share, something he can use to exclude me all the more. I’m not having that.”

“He wouldn’t do that,” Kate lied.

“All men are like that. Except maybe Trevor, but he was different from the others. I wouldn’t have put up with him for so long otherwise. I loved Trevor. That’s why I’ve given him a chair to sit on until we can bury him in the garden. Keep him comfortable.”

“Please don’t do this. He’s a nice guy. He doesn’t deserve this.”

“You’ll be fine after it’s over. Trust me, I know you will. Once he’s gone, we can go back to where we used to be, just you and me, raising the baby between us. Only more than we used to be. Now Trevor’s left us, we can be a proper family. Maybe even get married. We could do that now. I was reading all about it the other day. I’ll show you the magazine, if you like. It’s upstairs in my bedroom.”

“I’m not letting you anywhere near my baby.”

“Our baby.”

“My baby.”

“Our baby!” Angie shouted at her. “See. See what he’s done to you. Done to us. We never had a cross word between us before he came along. Never. You’ll thank me for this, one day. I can look after you, keep you supplied with what you need. And maybe even have a little fun myself in the process, if you stop being so frigid. This is what you want, Kate, even if you don’t know it yet. I’m what you want. Just you, me and our little baby, happy together forever.”

“Hello?” A voice from upstairs. A man’s voice. Mike was here.

Angie smiled. “Play-time.”

“Please don’t,” whispered Kate. “Please don’t do this to him.”

“I’m afraid it’s too late for a change of plan. I’ve left him a little present upstairs, you see. I want him to know what you are before he dies. What you do. I want you to see the loathing in his face when he looks at you. So you know. So you know that no-one else would accept you for who you are; no-one but me.”

Kate closed her eyes. She took a moment to pull herself together. This was all too much. Everything was spinning out of control, and she didn’t know how to stop it. Mike and the baby were all she had left to cling on to, and Angie was hurting them both.

“What is it?” she asked, her eyes still closed. “What have you given him?”

She felt Angie patting her shoulder, as if in sympathy.

“Nothing much,” she reassured her. “Just your suicide note.”

#

The key had been left in the door. How dangerous is that, thought Mike, as he pushed it open. Anyone could have walked in.

He stood in the hallway. The lights were on, but there was no sign of life. A bit like Angie, really.

He put his head round the door to the living room. No-one there.

“Hello?” he called out. No reply.

He walked along the passageway towards the kitchen. It was the only place left to go. He wasn’t about to start wandering round upstairs, outside Angie’s bedroom, not for all the money in the world.

A thought occurred. Maybe she was up there, lounging on the mattress in those horrible knickers of hers, planning to seduce him so that Kate would dump him. She’d have her work cut out. No way was he going up those stairs, no matter what. If she wasn’t in the kitchen, he’d try phoning Kate again, and then he’d go home and wait.

He passed the door to the cellar. It was open a foot or two. There was a light on down there. A very dim light, but a light all the same.

He looked in the kitchen. It was empty. He returned to the cellar-door. “Hello?” he called down the steps. No response. Surely they wouldn’t be down there? It looked old and disused, like cellars always are. It made him feel uneasy for some reason. He wished he could see the whole room, rather than just to the wall at the foot of the stairs.

He would leave. He could see Kate tomorrow. Everything would seem better during the day.

It was then that he noticed the letter blue-tacked to the door. Four or five pages of hurried handwriting. Addressed to him.

He pulled it away from the painted wood, taking care not to tear it. He read through it. He died a little. A suicide note. Kate’s suicide note. Saying horrible, horrible things. That she kidnapped men. Murdered them. Drank their blood. Kisses at the end, as if that would make everything okay. This had to be a fake; something Angie had dreamt up to split them up. Kate would

never have written this, would never have been the person this sick letter described. She was scared, beautiful, vulnerable. The author of the letter, on the other hand, was a psychotic bitch. It had to be Angie. Not his Kate.

But then again, it would explain why she'd want to kill herself. Why she had men in her bedroom. Why they had handcuffs on.

There was a scream from downstairs, down in the cellar. A woman's scream. He hesitated only for a second, before descending the stairs. He took them slowly, partly through fear and partly because he wasn't sure he wanted to find out who was crying out down there. Was it Kate? Or was it someone Kate was making scream?

Three steps down, the light went out. He returned to the top of the stairs and turned it back on again. He heard a huff – Angie, that had to be Angie – and the light went off again. He flicked the switch back down. No way was he going down there in the dark, not with Angie lurking round the corner at the bottom.

And then Angie was halfway up the stairs, charging towards him, syringe in hand. She looked wild, deranged. He turned to flee, but she grabbed hold of his ankle with her free hand. He tried to shake her off, but she was strong. She brought the syringe up into the air, ready to stab it down into his calf. He kicked out at her with all his strength, catching her in the throat and the top of her chest. She grunted, and dropped the needle. He heard it clatter a few steps down.

He heard someone scream his name from the cellar. Kate; he was sure it was Kate. He tried to ignore her. He had to focus on her psycho friend if he was to have any hope of getting out of this alive.

Angie was looking over her shoulder, trying to see where the syringe had gone, still holding on to his ankle all the while. He kicked out at her again, aiming at her face this time round. She ducked away from him, the sole of his boot just catching her left ear. She shouted in rage, and pulled on his ankle sharply. He lost his balance, landing heavily on his bottom a few steps down, a few stairs closer to Angie. He could see the syringe on the stairs behind her, just a step or two down. She was reaching for it.

“Get off me!” he shouted. He tried kicking out at her with his free leg one last time, from a sitting position, but as he drew his leg back she took hold of his other ankle. She pulled both his legs hard. He dropped down two more steps, so he was practically astride her, one leg on either side of her shoulders. She bit his groin through his jeans, sinking her teeth into him, growling all the while. He howled in pain, and struggled to free himself, but she had him round the waist now, and she wasn't about to let him go. The noise she was making was frightening the life out of him.

She shuffled backwards, pulling him with her, one step at a time, down into her lair in the cellar like some monstrous predator with her prey. Kate was howling his name as Angie dragged him down the stairs towards her. He thrashed around, no plan now, just frenzied movement to try to free himself from her grasp. He couldn't get over how strong she was.

Angie cursed. She'd found the syringe. He hoped she'd stabbed herself when she sat on it, but no such luck. As she turned to pick it up, he made a desperate bid for freedom, pulling away her remaining hand and springing to his feet. He'd made it almost to the top of the stairs

when she swiped his left ankle out from beneath him, a tap tackle, sending him sprawling back down the stairs towards her. She seized him by his collar and hauled him down the steps after her into the depths of the cellar, using his own momentum against him. He fought to stay on his feet, sensing that if he went down it would all be over for him.

They rounded the corner at the foot of the stairs. Angie shoved him into the middle of the room. He could see Kate in the dim overhead light, standing by a chair, manacled to the wall with long chains. For some reason he shuddered to think about, Angie had removed all her clothes before chaining her up. It looked like she had had plenty to scream about.

Angie stood across the bottom of the stairs, syringe held out like a dagger, blocking his escape route.

"I expect you two would like a bit of a cuddle, wouldn't you? Being so close, and all?"

He looked at Kate. His heart flipped. He still had feelings for her. Even after the letter, he still had feelings for her. That was so screwed up. How can you love a self-confessed serial killer?

"Run, Mike!" she screamed at him.

"He may find that a bit tricky," Angie replied on his behalf. "Due to the fact that I'm waving a big-fuck-off-syringe in his face."

"Kate," he said. "How could you? How could you do all those things?" He was desperate for her to justify herself, so that they could go back to how they were, or as near how they were as would be possible after something like this. "Was it Angie? Did she make you? Tell me she made you do it."

Angie laughed, loud and harsh. "Yeah, like she'd be an absolute angel without me. She's the one who drinks blood, Window-boy. She's the blood-junkie. I just help her score it, that's all."

"I'm sorry," Kate said, her voice barely a whisper. "I'm so sorry." She trailed off, not knowing what else to say. He needed more from her. She had to convince him to forgive her.

"Go and stand by her," Angie instructed him.

He shook his head. "No."

"But you love her, don't you? Surely you'd want to be with the mother of your child at a time like this?"

"You were making that up. To get me here." He looked over at Kate. "She was making that up. Wasn't she?"

Kate shook her head. "It's true. I'm pregnant."

Mike turned on Angie. "Get her down from that fucking wall! Now! She's having a baby, for fuck's sake! You're even more fucking mental that I thought you were!"

"You get her down. Go and stand by her, and I'll give you the key. You choose whether she walks free or not. I can't say fairer than that, can I?"

"Don't trust her," pleaded Kate. "Get out of here!"

“She keeps forgetting about the syringe,” Angie chuckled. “She may be pretty, but she’s not particularly bright. Okay, I’m giving you five seconds. Stand by her, and I’ll give you the key, to use as you please. Stay there, and you’re getting a syringe, right in the bollocks for maximum effect.”

He was tempted to rush her. Sure, she had a syringe. She was much stronger than any woman had a right to be. But he was a bloke. He was fourteen stone. If he could just fend off the needle, he could be out of here in no time. But he’d have to leave Kate behind. He’d never get the key off Angie before she injected him. Kate was having his baby. He loved her. How could he leave her behind with that thing by the stairs? Even though she was a monster, too.

“Time’s up,” Angie whispered. She took a step forward towards him. He scuttled away from her, coming to a halt at Kate’s side.

“I’m sorry,” Kate told him again. He ignored her.

“That’s better,” Angie said. “That wasn’t so hard, was it? Keep doing as I tell you, and you two might just make it out of here alive.”

She approached them. Mike backed off a few more steps, coming to a halt two or three feet to Kate’s left. He was conscious of the fact that he was cornered. For the first time, he noticed the two corpses on the other side of the cellar; an old bloke and the naked man he had seen round here on his last visit. He was clearly meant to be Victim Number Three. This was do or do, no doubt about it. He’d have to force his way past Angie to make his escape. He looked on with trepidation as Angie faced Kate. She placed the syringe in Kate’s hand, and closed her fingers over it.

“You know what you have to do,” Angie told her. “To earn my trust back. We can be happy once he’s gone. You and me, just like we used to be. You, me and our baby. But I need to know that you’re over him. You have to do this, Kate. For me. For us.”

Mike made a run for it. Now Kate had the syringe, there were two of them. Two against one. He thought he could trust Kate, but what if he was wrong? What if she turned on him, did what Angie told her to do, just as she always had. Panic set in. He barged past Angie, made it one step, two steps, before she grabbed his shoulders and almost yanked him off his feet. He lashed out at her, as he fought to keep his balance. Another pace towards the stairs. She was frantically tugging at him, punching the side of his head, screaming abuse in his ear, calling him a faggot, a bastard, a home-wrecker, anything that came into her crazy mixed-up head.

He stumbled. She swung him round, using his own momentum against him again, and he was staggering back towards the wall, back towards Kate and the syringe. He bumped into her, elbowed her in the stomach, turned to fend off Angie as she closed on him again. Angie grabbed him in a bear-hug, forcing him backwards, hard against Kate’s frail naked body. He stamped down on her bare foot, trying to take her out of the fight, keep her syringe at bay, while he tried to free himself of Angie’s grip.

“Stick him!” Angie shouted in his face, her spittle warm on his cheek. “Stick him like a pig!”

And then she screamed, a scream of rage and frustration and pain. She glared over his shoulder, looking at the woman she had chained to the wall as if she had just done the worst thing in the world.

“Bite me, bitch!” said Kate. Her voice was cold, hard, almost expressionless.

Angie released her grip on Mike. She took a few steps back. She stared at Kate in incomprehension.

“You injected me,” she said. “Why would you do that? You need me. You can’t survive without me.”

“You call this surviving? Chained to a wall with my tits hanging out, while you try and make me stick a needle into the father of my baby?”

Angie held out her hands in supplication. “I’m doing this for you, Kate, can’t you see that?”

“None of this is for me. It never has been. It’s always been about what you want. I just wish I’d realised that from the start. Sure I’d be ill. But anything’s got to be better than this.”

“It’s always someone else’s fault with you, isn’t it? Poor little Kate. Angie made me do this, Angie made me do that. But you’re the one sucking at some stranger’s arteries until you’ve bled them dry.”

Angie closed her eyes. She looked drowsy. The drugs were working their magic.

“I’m not having this,” she said. “I’m not having it.”

She shoved Mike to one side, and prised the syringe from Kate’s grasp. She jabbed it hard into Kate’s bare thigh. Kate screamed out, tried to take the syringe back, but she was no match for Angie even now.

Angie turned on Mike. “You ready for your medicine, Window-Boy?” she sneered.

“Mike, run!” Kate screeched at him.

He took a step towards the stairs.

“Ah, it must be true love,” Angie bitched. “Saving his own skin while you’re chained to a wall pumped full of drugs. And you wonder why I hate them?”

Mike stopped.

Angie took a step forwards towards him. She raised the syringe above her head. “I’m so going to enjoy this,” she told him. And then she was down, collapsed on the floor at his feet. And Kate, too, slumping down in her chains almost at the same second as Angie, as if someone had flicked a switch and turned them both off simultaneously.

Mike looked at the women, and then at the door. He had a decision to make. A really big one. And three lives depended on the outcome; four if you included the baby.

But it all boiled down to one question. Should he rescue Kate, or leave her here to rot?

#

Kate woke up first. She was still chained to the wall. Angie was now chained up in the manacles next to hers. There was no sign of Mike.

“Angie!” she called. “Angie!”

Angie opened her eyes, and looked round, disorientated.

“Is my baby okay?” Kate asked. “The drugs.”

“Oh, you’re priceless. You shove a syringe in me, and then ask me for pharmaceutical advice before I’ve even woken up.”

“Please.”

“I think so. I’m not a gynaecologist. I don’t expect it matters much now anyway. We’re both well and truly fucked, whichever way you look at it.”

“How long have we been here?”

She looked at her watch. “It’s morning. Seven or eight hours, I guess.”

“Seven or eight hours! Where’s Mike?”

“Would you stop asking stupid questions?”

“I’m cold.”

Angie shook her head in disbelief. “Poor little Princess.”

“Fuck off.”

“That’s more like it.”

“Something must have happened to him. He wouldn’t just leave me here.”

Angie smiled. “Because he loves you. Right?”

Kate nodded her head. But she wasn’t so sure any more.

#

Mike stood on the far side of the road, staring at the house in much the same way as he had that night he had been spoken to by the two police officers.

He had spent hours driving round, trying to make sense of what had happened to him that night, trying to decide what to do about the two women in the cellar of Angie’s house. On the one hand, he loved Kate. He was sure of that, if nothing else. And she was having his child. How could he leave her there, chained to a wall? He couldn’t. He’d either have to turn her over to the police, or let her go.

He’d like to release her. Try to make things work. But there was a problem with this, though. If he set Kate free, he’d have to release Angie, too. The two women were inseparable, and there was no way would Kate let him leave her best friend chained up in her cellar. But if they were both free, the killing would go on, he was sure of that. Kate just wasn’t strong enough to stand up to her so-called friend, however much she might want to. He couldn’t have that on his conscious. Besides, he was pretty sure he would be the first victim. Angie would see to that.

But what if he turned Angie over to the police? At best, she would take Kate with her, just to spite them both. At worst, she would try and implicate him. He had walked free from the cellar, leaving two women chained to the wall, heavily drugged. The drugs would still be in their

systems, no doubt. One of them was naked, and pregnant with his child. It was usually the partner who murdered people, he had heard that before. And his finger-prints would be all over the place. If Angie wanted to, she could have him in prison for the rest of his life, for something he hadn't even done. And he had no doubt at all that she would do that to him. She would have her revenge upon him, one way or another, just because she could.

What would Kate say if Angie accused him of drugging the two of them and chaining them up? He wasn't sure. Would it help him to point out that Angie was the one with a torture chamber in her cellar? Not if the two police officers from the other night testified that he was outraged when he found out his girlfriend was a dominatrix, but that he had still come back for more.

It would be best for everyone if he left them in the cellar. No police, no accusations, and no more murders. But he loved Kate. And then there was the baby.

He had come full circle. What to do? What the fuck to do?

He came to a decision. He was far from sure that it was the right one, but it was all he had.

He crossed the road, and entered the house. Along the hallway, through the cellar-door, down the stairs into the dimly-lit room. They were still there. Where else would they be? Both of them conscious now.

Kate gave him a smile, a cautious, shy smile which almost broke his heart.

Angie, on the other hand, told him he was a callous twat.

"I've been thinking what to do with you both," he told them, choosing to ignore her. He had all the power now. Her life was in his hands. Both of theirs. And the baby's, too.

"Not very quickly, though," Angie sniped. "We've been here for hours."

"Kate, I love you," he said.

She looked back at him, a mixture of shame and longing in her eyes. "I love you, too," she said. She seemed on the verge of crying. His stomach somersaulted. She had that effect on him.

Angie just laughed. Hateful and vindictive as always.

He approached Kate, hugged her to him, pressed his face into her bare neck. She hugged him back, as best as her chains would allow. They stayed that way for the best part of a minute, with only the sound of Kate's breathing and Angie's tutting to distract them from their embrace.

He took a step backwards again, gave her an unsteady smile, ignoring the torrent of abuse which Angie had opted to unleash upon him.

For better or worse, he told them the decision he had made, trying to hold it together as Kate disintegrated before him.

And then, brushing tortured, trembling fingers along Kate's tear-flecked cheek, he said his goodbyes.

Other horror books by Jonathan Pidduck:

1) The Wedding Feast:

Philip awakes, naked and chained to the floor by wrist and ankle, in the ramshackle dwelling of a family of murderous in-breeds. His only hope of rescue lies with Matilda, their hideously deformed and needy daughter, who lurks in the shadows in her bloodied wedding dress. But what will she require of him in return?

Matilda has lived in the darkness all her life. Finally, an Outsider has appeared, a man who - with a little good-natured prodding - can save her from her brutal father and show her what life is like outside the House. Unless, of course, her family snack upon him first.

This dark romance is about unrequited love, uncontrollable yearning and the terrible consequences of accepting a marriage proposal from a creature whose family have chained you to the ground in a dark cellar.

2) Tethered: Book 2 of the "Wedding Feast" humorous horror series.

Abigail awakes, naked and vulnerable, in pitch darkness. Her wrists and ankles have been manacled to the floor. One by one, her brutal, troll-like captors come to visit her. Time is short; she is to be the feast at their wedding that night.

And just when she thinks things can get no worse, her husband turns up.

Elsewhere, three friends spring a young woman from her cage at an animal experimentation centre. To survive, they must stay one step ahead of the government agent who is determined to recapture her. But was it wise for them to leave her alone in an old caravan in the woods whilst they go off for with two frisky old-aged pensioners for tea and custard-creams?

3) The Last of the Neanderthals: The third and final book in "The Wedding Feast" humorous horror series.

Matilda has spent the last ten years in the woods, foraging for anyone foolish enough to venture into the brooding trees. But her Family has finally summoned her home. Tired of hiding from the Outsiders in the darkness, they are fighting back, and have chosen as their battleground the pubs and sex-shops of the sea-side town of Margate.

With Georgia in pursuit, and frisky pensioners Maurice and Elsie following along behind as fast as their artificial hips will allow, Matilda takes to the battle-scarred streets of Thanet in a desperate attempt to save her people from extermination.

But, as usual, nothing goes quite according to plan....

4) Defunct: George is a bewildered zombie.

He "wakes" to find himself in a battened-down coffin. He isn't sure he likes it very much.

These are the unintentionally humorous memoirs of a befuddled old man, who returns to this world as a zombie after his soul dithered too long over his body in the operating theatre in which he died. Incarcerated in a Dover detention centre for the recently resurrected, he strikes up unlikely friendships with two twenty-somethings and an elderly woman whom he knows only as "The Queen". Together, they set off on a journey across Kent in a bid to rediscover their humanity.