

THE WEDDING FEAST
Jonathan Pidduck

For Sue.

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She squatted in the corner, brooding and monstrous in her bloodied wedding dress, as she waited for him to awake.

The room was in darkness, but she had lived her whole life closeted behind shutters and black-out curtains, and her eyes made full and efficient use of the traces of street light that filtered through from Outside. She could watch over him, safe in the knowledge that she would remain shrouded in anonymous shadow if his sleep ever ended. Reassured by this, she felt herself gradually relax, until subconsciously her bloated chest rose and fell to the same rhythm as his.

They had left him there, bruised and naked, chained to the floor by wrist and ankle. Blood clotted his forehead. She knew about blood. She touched the dark stain on her dress, feeling it congealed and sticky on her fingers. Out of habit, she licked them clean. Waste not want not, Mummy always said, as had Nanny before her, and she was a good girl who did as she was told.

She willed him to live. They usually stayed alive for a few hours at least. She would hide in the shadows until then. And wait.

#

Philip was just having a nightmare. A particularly weird and unpleasant one, granted, but a nightmare all the same. He was almost sure of it.

He had been round Mandy's for 3 beers and the X-Factor finals, but she had kicked him out before bedtime. She had to catch a train to attend some weekend bonding session at work, where everyone had to "think outside the box" and hug the elderly middle-manager on their right. She needed her beauty sleep. So it was out the door by ten thirty, without so much as a goodnight "cuddle".

Halfway back to his Ford Focus, he heard a muted sound in the alleyway which flanked her house. Whispering, it sounded like. He wasn't the sort to go exploring passageways after dark (Mandy's excepted), so after a moment's reflection he put the key in the ignition, ready to drive off. But then the unfamiliar Snake of Conscience writhed deep within the furthestmost recesses of his mind. Mandy was alone in there. Maybe she had the window open in her bedroom. She was a good-looking girl. If someone was skulking around in the alleyway and he just drove away and left them to it, he would never forgive himself. More to the point, she would never forgive him either. Besides, if she got molested, she'd most probably go off sex for months, and he'd be packed off home every night for a lonely session with his trusty right hand and a few well-thumbed editions of his "Muff-Diving Dwarfs" magazines. (That wasn't his first choice of porn, by the way. It was just that the models were much smaller, so the magazines were more compact and easier to hide when Mandy was around).

He would need a torch. Maybe, just maybe, if he knocked on the door and asked for one, Mandy would freak out when he mentioned the prowlers and insist on him staying the night to protect her. She would be so grateful, she might even agree to do that thing he liked with the funnel, the lube and a dozen or so Maltesers.

He was back at the door within seconds, ringing the bell. An upstairs light came on, but the love of his life remained stubbornly indoors. He grew impatient. If there were perverts in the alleyway, he wanted her torch before they decided to venture out into her front garden and practise their moves on him. He knocked again, hoping the noise might scare them off.

Mandy appeared at her front bedroom window. She had her dressing gown on already. She did not look happy.

“What? I’ve gotta be in Bromley by eight thirty.”

“There’s someone in the alleyway.”

“You what?”

“In the alley. Round there. Perverts.”

He gestured round the side of the building, indicating helpfully precisely where the perverts were likely to be situated. She did not seem interested, though.

“There’s only one pervert round here, and I’m talking to him. Now fuck off home.”

She slammed the window shut, and the lights went back out. He felt aggrieved. There was he, trying to save her from being molested by total strangers, and she was telling him to fuck off! If she kept this up, they’d all be gone by the time he got the torch off her. Then she’d be sorry.

He knocked again, louder still. No reply. How rude!

“Mandy!” he called through the letter-box. “Throw me down a torch.”

Still no response.

“Fuck you, then,” he said, and made his way back to the car, slamming the door shut so she would know that he was cross. He jammed the key in the ignition, and was just about to twist it when he heard the whispering again. Whatever it was, it was still there.

He toyed with the idea of driving off regardless, but ruled this out, even before the Snake of Conscience started twitching again. He had made the mistake of telling her about the prowlers. “How could you leave me alone?” she would say if he drove away now. “You knew there was someone there! You just fucked off and left them to it, without so much as a backward fucking glance?” She would crucify him. Maybe he should have just driven away the first time, and denied all knowledge if anything happened. He would have been in the clear then.

He got back out the car, and looked up at the window, in the forlorn hope that Mandy might be up there, beckoning him in. No sign of life there at all. She was probably flossing her teeth by now. He dragged himself towards the passageway to investigate further.

“Hello?” he ventured. “Anyone there?”

No response. Not totally surprising, he told himself. They're bound to be too busy dropping their trousers, ready to roger me senseless the moment I go in after them. What was that film where they wanted to ride that fat bloke like a little piggy? Well no-one was going to be porking him tonight, that was for sure.

It was then that he realised that this must all be just a nightmare. The world swam around him like a flashback scene in a crap made-for-TV film, and all of a sudden he was somewhere else. It was hard to say where, as it was pitch black. He felt something tight around his wrists and ankles, and shivered in the cold. Damp stone numbed his side and his legs, and he knew that he was naked. He had that overwhelming sense of vulnerability you get in your dreams when you are wandering down the dairy aisle in Tesco's wearing nothing but a mortified smile, and praying that the CCTV footage doesn't end up on YouTube. Or Asda; sometimes it was the butchery aisle at Asda. Tesco's was worse though, as he had always forgotten his Clubcard.

He felt convinced that there was something watching him. He could sense it here with him, skulking in the darkness. He could hear it too. The sound of laboured breathing.

"Hello? Is there anyone there?"

He had just said that earlier, he realised, when he was back in the alleyway. It hadn't done him much good then, either. He had still ended up here, naked and alone, tethered to the stone floor like a goat at a Satanist's Christmas party.

He was overcome with nausea, and the world shifted, even though it was too black to actually see it move around him. Then he was back at Mandy's again, fully clothed and staring up at her window, howling for a torch as if his life depended on it.

He stopped for a few seconds, trying to make sense of what was happening here. Was he chained to a floor somewhere, being spied upon by God knows what, or was he at his girlfriend's house, checking for prowlers? Which was worse? The floor, definitely. At least he had his jeans on at Mandy's. It was harder to be brave without pants.

All of this was just a dream anyway. Neither "reality" could hurt him. Check the passageway, get back in the car, and wait for Radio One to wake him up tucked away safely in his own bed.

He went back into the alleyway. He could hear his own voice calling out to him, imploring him to stay on the street, but he paid no attention. His voice got louder, shriller, more hysterical, but still he stepped into the shadows and went in search of whatever was lurking there. He heard a sound behind him, and turned to find a man confronting him, blocking his path back to safety. Six foot plenty, with a face of pasty, badly-chiselled clay. Smiling, but not in a good way. Not in a good way at all.

Then there was something behind him, and the voice in his head cranked up to a slow-motion scream, disorientating him, leaving him in two minds as to whether to run or fight. Instead, he did neither. As the scream cranked up a notch or two at a time, he felt something slip over his head, and then a blow, and then nothing at all.

He woke up back on the stone floor in the black-hole of his nightmare.

#

Again, he sensed that there was someone out there. He couldn't see them. He couldn't even hear them now, above the sound of his own laboured breathing. But he knew they were there, lurking malevolently in the darkness like a spider watching the death-throes of a juicy fly pumped full of paralysing toxins.

"Who's there?" he asked, fighting the urge to soil himself with only partial success.

He paused, dreading a reply.

"I'm Matilda," came the unexpectedly informative response. "What's your name?"

A voice from the darkness. Harsh. Gruff. Halfway between male and female, like a drag-queen in need of Strepsils.

"What the fuck does it matter what my name is? What the fuck am I doing here?"

"You've got to whisper," she pleaded. "He'll come for us if he hears you."

"Who will?" he whispered as quietly as he could, looking about him instinctively even though it was too dark to see anything.

"Daddy," she said.

He didn't know whether to laugh or cry at this response. Daddy was supposed to be a good word. Daddies gave you pocket money, and took you out for pizza and took you to cricket matches at weekends (well, maybe not for ten years or so, but they used to do those things). But the way she said it was just too damn creepy. As if Daddy was the worst thing in the World.

"You've got to be fucking joking!"

"Don't swear. He doesn't like it when people swear."

Philip lost it. He had been abducted, stripped naked, and chained up in a cellar with a transsexual voyeur, and now she was trying to give him a lecture on good manners! He would swear if he wanted to. And right now, he really, really wanted to. As long and as loud as he could.

"Are you having a fucking laugh?" he enquired. "This has got to be a wind-up, right? You lock me up in what feels like a fucking freezer, stark bollock naked, and you have a go at me for using the fucking F-word!"

He paused between profanities to give her the chance to apologise before he moved on to the C-word. She was silent for a few seconds. Somehow, he could sense she was listening.

"He's coming," she said. "Daddy's coming!"

That didn't sound good.

He heard her scrabbling around in the darkness, searching frantically for a place to hide. Everything was silent for a few seconds, and then he made out the sound of footsteps outside, getting louder, getting nearer. He tried to flee, but the manacles cut into his wrists and ankles, pinning him to the spot, making escape impossible. The footsteps stopped, and his bowels noisily imploded in terrified anticipation of what was to come.

The door was thrown open with such force that it almost rebounded shut again. A large man stood in the doorway, candle in hand. The flame writhed, as if it too was trying to flee, in a futile struggle to free itself from its waxen prison. The flickering candle made the man's face distorted and troll-like. It was Clay-Man, from the alleyway. It was "Daddy".

Again, Philip tried to back away, but his bonds held him as tight as the tethered goat in his own Satanist metaphor. The troll strode over to him, kicking him hard to the face. He felt his teeth crack, and blood flow down his throat. Shock engulfed him.

"You don't talk," the man said. "You don't shit unless I tell you to. You don't do nothing, you got me?"

And then he was gone, the door slamming shut behind him.

"Double negative", Philip muttered, when he was sure he was out of earshot. "If I don't do nothing, I must do some-"

"Are you all right?" Matilda asked.

"Never fucking better," he replied, relishing the sound of the swear word on his tongue.

"I'm sorry. He's a pig. I'm bleeding too."

Philip started to cry. Not for her: he couldn't give a toss whether she was bleeding or not, and she probably deserved it anyway. He was crying for himself. Great big sobs of grief and fear and self-pity, stifled so as not to bring Clay-Man crashing back into the room.

He felt a weighty arm around his bare shoulder, but drew away in revulsion, as far as his bonds would permit. He didn't want her touching him.

"Don't cry" she implored, her voice heavy with empathy. "It's going to be all right, I just know it will."

He hesitated, searching for the right reply, determined that it should contain at least one swear-word to shock and offend her.

"Matilda, my Darling," he said. "You must be out of your tiny fucking mind."

#

Mandy was perplexed.

From her front bedroom window, she had seen Philip being bundled into a white transit van by two hulking shadow-men. They must have been fucking builders or something: who else would ride around in a crappy old “no tools are kept in this van overnight” shit-heap like that? But why were builders kidnapping her boyfriend on a weekday? And what could she do to stop them?

No way was she going out there. She was fucking gorgeous (everyone said so), and once they saw how pretty she was they were bound to chuck Philip out their van and bundle her in there instead. It was bad enough having to put up with them wolf-whistling at her when she wore her tartan mini-skirt past the building site (on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and sometimes on Fridays if she could make it), but she was bugged if she was going to let them gang-bang her as well. It was Philip they were after anyway. If he was stupid enough to get in the van with them, then he should take the consequences. Take one for the team, so to speak.

This was a nightmare. She had to be up early for Bromley tomorrow. She felt crap when she was tired. How could she think outside the box, if she was too tired to even find the box in the first fucking place? Why did these things always happen to her? She was a good person, she gave three pounds a month to Oxfam by direct debit to save all the little African children Madonna and her friends had not yet adopted.

The back doors of the van slammed shut, with one of the men in the driving seat and the other in the back with Philip. They would be driving off any minute. Philip needed her. But what could she do, especially in her Wallace and Grommet slippers?

The engine clanked reluctantly into life, and the van pulled uncertainly from the kerb, heading God knew where. Now! She had to act now, or it would be too late.

She threw open the window in one last desperate effort to save the life of the man she loved a bit.

“Oi, you fuckers!” she screamed after his kidnappers. “You bring that bastard back here now!”

#

Just when he thought things could get no worse, Matilda shared her escape plan with him. It had sounded quite plausible at first, but tailed off pretty rapidly after a sentence or two.

“I’ve stolen the key,” she told him. “To your manacles. I can get them off.”

Ordinarily, the thought of her getting anything off would have held no appeal for him at all. But in the particular circumstances, he was willing to make an exception.

“Oh God, please, yes. You’ve got to get me out of here.”

She shuffled around him, and dropped to her hands and knees in front of him, their faces just inches apart. He could feel her hot breath on his cheek, but it was not this that bothered him. It was more the fact that she looked like a troll.

Involuntarily, he pulled away. She repulsed him. Her nose was lumpy and bulbous, her lips like two fat slugs copulating at both ends. She had a wart on her chin, the size and shape of the kidneys they always insist on putting into steak pies to ruin them. It sprouted thick black hair which almost brushed against his face. And all this set in a large lardy face, resting atop multiple chins which spilled muffin-top-like over the fussy lace collar of her off-white dress.

Her hair appeared to have been cut using a badly chipped pudding basin; spirit-level straight around most of the circumference, but with a small V cut into the centre of the fringe for no apparent reason. It was not an attractive look.

But her eyes disturbed him most of all. They were beautiful! The purest blue, a swirling mass of destructive emotions trapped inside them, like a galaxy of pain. Philip was not known for his empathy – he had once cried during a Children in Need appeal, but Vodka always affected him that way – but even he could see the shyness, the fear, the need, the hurt locked within. One emotion dominated all the others, though. Self-loathing. It riddled her.

He shrank away from her, and her eyes died. All that turbulent emotion drained away, leaving behind a soul both desiccated and barren. And as he drew away from her, he realised something else for the first time, something which shocked him even more. She was wearing a blood-encrusted wedding dress. Unless she was marrying “Daddy”, he appeared to be the only remaining candidate for bride-groom. The fact that he was chained to the ground, butt-naked, with his arse raised provocatively in the air, did nothing to ease his sudden and overwhelming feeling of vulnerability.

Despite all of this, she was his only way out of this, the only person (in the loosest sense of the word) who could set him free. He had to be nice to her. Not *too* nice, of course.

“Matilda?”

“Yes?”

“You said you’d help me.”

She shuffled uncomfortably, refusing to make eye-contact like a child with a guilty secret.

“I thought- thought that we might- that you might agree to – ”

“What?”

“But we can’t, can we? You wouldn’t want to. Not with me. I disgust you.”

“Can’t what?”

She looked up at him, and the spark was back in her eyes. Longing. It was the look that Mandy had when she was in an expensive shoe shop.

Oh my God, he thought. She wants to shag me. He wasn’t even sure that she had the right biological equipment, yet alone precisely how she planned to use it on him. For the second time that evening, he thought back to “Deliverance”.

“I’m not a little piggy,” he told her, in a tiny little voice.

“I know,” she replied, mystified. “You’re an Outsider. Little Piggies are what Nanny used to eat in sandwiches before Daddy brought her here. They taste totally different.”

He relaxed, as far as is possible when you’re chained up with a troll-like creature in a bloodied wedding dress whose intentions remain uncertain. Fortunately, it didn’t occur to him to ask how she knew the difference in taste between ham sandwiches and grown men.

“You’re not going to ride me round the room like a little piggy, then?” he enquired, desperate for her solemn promise on this issue.

“No!” she recoiled, her shock at this suggestion catching him by surprise. “I would never do such a thing! What sort of animal do you think I am?”

He back-tracked, terrified that her raised voice might bring the wrath of Clay-Man crashing down upon him again.

“I’m sorry,” he grovelled in a whisper. “I’m really sorry. You just seemed to be the sort who – look, I’m sorry, okay?”

They lapsed into guarded silence. He could hear her breathing again, great noisy lungfuls like an asthmatic bulldog running a marathon. He had offended her. But she had still not told him what she wanted from him. What was the price of his freedom? He left the question unspoken, for fear of upsetting her again. Besides, he did not really think he could cope with the answer.

A noisy hack of a cough from an adjoining corridor reminded him of the urgency of the situation. He would have to press her, whatever the consequences.

“What is it?” he enquired with trepidation. “What do I have to do to get out of here?”

It was her turn to lapse into silence. Eventually, though, she seemed to come to a decision, and squatted back in front of him. Again, the hair from her kidney-shaped wart brushed his cheek, but he made a conscious effort not to recoil from her. Shivering and vulnerable, crouching on all fours, he looked back into the eyes of the creature who was lurking just a monstrous kiss away.

“I want you to love me.”

He scanned her face again. The puffiness, the multiple chins, the hair-cut; the Want, the Hurt, the Self-Loathing. And those eyes, flickering back into life again, pleading with him for some shred of acceptance as if her life depended upon it as much as did his.

“Love you?” he asked, taken aback. “Love *you*?”

She nodded miserably, the ember in her eye snuffed out again as hope died within her.

Philip closed his eyes, and counted silently to ten. He could do this. If he tried really hard to mask his abhorrence of her, he could convince her that what he really felt for her was Love rather than repugnance.

“Of course I love you. Who wouldn’t?”

Deep down inside, though, he would almost have preferred it if she had just wanted to ride him like a little piggy and get it over with.

#

It had taken nearly an hour and a half, but Mandy’s mobile was finally topped up and ready for action.

She hated those menus you get. Press one to use a voucher, press two for something fucking else. What a load of bollocks. She was in a hurry, but did that matter to O-fucking-2? Did it Fuck! And every time she tried to key in her number, her phone-lock went on, and she lost her place. Nightmare! Worse still, she’d lost out on the triple points she could have got if she’d topped up at Boots the following morning!

She dialled the number, and waited impatiently for the ring-tone. Four rings, five rings, six rings. Eventually, the answer-phone kicked in. Time for action.

“Hello?” said Mandy, in her best telephone voice. “It’s me, Amanda. Amanda Attwood, from Delta Insurance in Canterbury. I’m afraid I can’t make your course in Bromley tomorrow. My boyfriend is very poorly, and I need to stay at home to look after him. Thank you. ‘Bye.’”

She hung up, and snapped the phone shut. Time for bed. She needed her sleep. Tomorrow, she was off to find her Man.

#

Matilda opened the door, and sniffed the corridor outside. Philip peered around her, but the darkness was absolute. Clay-Man may have been standing right in front of them, for all he knew.

“Is it safe?” he whispered.

“No,” she replied. “It’s never safe when Daddy’s Home.”

She took his hand, and took a silent step forwards into the hall-way.

“They’re in that room there. On the left.”

Philip involuntarily shrank to the right.

“And that room there. To the right.”

He shrank back towards the middle again (or where he guessed the middle might be).

“Maybe we should stay here, Matilda. Until they’re asleep.”

“They won’t sleep until the other Families have arrived. You don’t want to be here for that.”

She took another step forwards, pulling him along behind her. Her hand clenched his, almost engulfing it in her great paw.

“What other families?”

She ignored him, taking another stride into the blackness, towing him along like a tug pulling a dinghy. One step at a time towards the relative safety of whatever it was that lay outside.

They were halfway along the passageway, when she froze. She clamped her free hand over his mouth, squeezing his hand with the other one in a futile attempt to reassure them both.

“Stop,” she commanded. “Say nothing.”

For a second, she sounded like her father. “You don’t talk,” he had said. “You don’t do nothing” (double negative). And now he was trying to sneak past Clay-Man’s living quarters in pitch blackness, with a crazed and bloodied bride as a guide.

They waited, and then they waited some more. He could hear nothing at all at first, but then a floor-board creaked close by. He fought back the urge to flee back to the room with the manacles in it. She would not even let him turn his head, though, yet alone turn and run, as she kept his face clenched between her fingers.

“Do-not-move!” she whispered, so quietly that he was not sure whether he had imagined it.

Eventually, she released his face. If he had finger-print-shaped bruises on his cheeks in the morning, she would have a lot of explaining to do! Mandy wouldn’t be too impressed either!

She took another step forwards into the darkness. It was then that a side-door opened, and a bulky shadow stepped out in front of them, blocking their path to freedom.

“Tilly!” whispered the shadow. “What are you doing?”

“The same as Nanny,” she replied, her voice scared but defiant. “I’m going to live on the Outside.”

“He’ll kill you!”

“I will not!” protested Philip.

Matilda’s hand clamped his mouth closed again. He strained to make out the features of this new monster. This one was even larger than his would-be rescuer. He thought he caught a glimpse of blue eyes, like hers but without the fear and self-loathing, but it was so dark that he could not have done. He stood stock still, frightened and helpless, as she tried to negotiate their escape.

“Please, Vincent. Let me go.”

“He’ll hurt you. He’ll kill you! Like he killed Nanny.”

“I’ve broken Philip’s chains. He’ll see that. He’ll *know* what I’ve done even if I stay here. There’s no going back. I run or I die.”

“We get more chains. And it’s not “Philip”; it’s the Wedding Feast.”

Something stirred in the room to their left. Philip felt his flesh creep. He could sense his two companions tense up, too. If they were scared of whatever was in that room, then it must be the man they were discussing. The man who would kill Matilda without a second thought.

“Vincent!” a voice bellowed. Philip recognised it immediately. Clay-Man.

“Run or die,” Matilda repeated urgently. “It’s up to you. Help me. Please.”

Vincent snorted, exasperated.

“Running won’t save you. Put him back. We’ll get more chains. Talk our way out of it. We’ve fooled him before.”

“I’m not leaving him here.”

“Vincent!” shouted Clay-Man again. “Get in here, now!”

Vincent visibly sagged. Philip was uncertain why. Maybe it was down to Clay-man’s ominous presence so close by, or maybe he had just resigned himself to losing his sister. Either way, he seemed somehow diminished. He stepped aside, allowing them to pass.

“Watch your back,” he told her. “And your front. Watch *everything*! He **will** come for you.”

Vincent’s shadow converged with Matilda’s for a second, and then he faded back into Clay-Man’s room again.

Again, Matilda and Vincent began to inch their way to safety. Eventually, they reached the front door, and Matilda eased it open. Light shone in from the street-lamp outside. Light! They stood on the door-step, exchanging glances. Now they had gained their freedom, both seemed too frightened to take it.

“I’ve never been out before,” Matilda said, regarding the street outside with a mixture of hope and terror. “Not even for a second. I’ve been here all my life. But Nanny’s told me so much about it.”

Philip had problems of his own. One, he could finally see her clearly, in all her glory, and if anything she was even uglier in the light than she had been when skulking around in the shadows. And two, he was stark-bollock naked. How was he going to make it home like this? It was like the Tesco’s dream all over again!

A door opened in the passageway behind them.

Fuck it, he thought. I'm off!

Without a word, he legged it down the street, his pale white bottom blazing the trail for the frightened troll in the blood-stained wedding dress who loped along behind him.

#

Nanny had been telling the truth, then. All the things she said they had on the Outside really existed. There were "cars", which Outsiders sat in and moved around without walking (some of which beeped their horns when they saw Philip running along the pavement). There were lights at the end of huge poles, which were bent over at the top, holding back the night. But above all, there was the Moon.

The Moon fascinated her. It hung bright and luminous in the sky, smiling down on her. It was round and white and suspended there as if by magic. There were no strings holding it up, no nails that she could see, no giant props even. It just floated above her, cool but friendly, as she trotted along behind her Beloved.

Vincent didn't remember all of Nanny's stories; he'd only been little when she died. But she remembered them, every one of them. Nanny would sit on the floor beside her and Vincent as they were nodding off in the morning, telling them stories of the Outside in a whisper so Daddy wouldn't hear. Fairy-tales, she thought at the time. But now she knew they were all true.

Daddy had caught Nanny telling these tales once. He hadn't been happy; Vincent wasn't supposed to know about the Outside until he was old enough to go there himself. And Matilda was never supposed to know. She was a girl. There was no need for her ever to leave the House, unless she was given to another Family for marriage and mating.

She hadn't liked it when Daddy hit Nanny. Matilda was used to violence; he beat her on an almost daily basis, and Vincent even more so. But Nanny was old. And she wasn't like the rest of them. Nanny used to be an Outsider before she married Grand-Daddy. She was delicate. Her legs snapped too easily.

Matilda stopped running, and looked up at the Moon. If she concentrated really hard, she could pretend it was Nanny's face looking down at her, smiling encouragement as she escaped from Daddy, leaving the Family behind her as she went in search of the life that Nanny had left behind her when they took her all those years ago.

She felt the tears welling up inside her. She missed Nanny, she missed her a lot. Nanny was nice, and Nanny was pretty, and Nanny told her stories which now turned out to be true. She felt guilty that she had not believed her at the time. She hoped Nanny would forgive her, wherever she had gone since she died.

She glanced around, and saw her Beloved disappearing round a corner some distance ahead of her. Poor Philip was so frightened of Daddy that he had forgotten to wait for her. She gave the Moon one last rueful smile and set off after him. They were going to have a beautiful future together. As long as he couldn't outrun her first.

#

Philip was finally home.

Having to jog through Ramsgate at 3 o'clock in the morning, freezing his bollocks off, and risking God knows what sort of attention on the way, would have made this comfortably the worst day of his life when taken in isolation. But bearing in mind that he had been kidnapped, kicked in the face, and chased home by something last seen lurking under a bridge in the "Three Billy Goats Gruff", then "worse day of my life" didn't even come close. It was a total fucking nightmare!

All the way back home, he'd been thinking of what to do when he got back here. The most appealing option was to slam the door in her face, hide under the bed, and hope everything would be okay when he woke up in the morning. But he had reluctantly dismissed the idea. She would either sit outside, pining for him like that ridiculous Greyfriars dog in Edinburgh or Glasgow (or wherever it was!); she would go home and tell "Daddy" where he lived; or worse still she would kick the door down there and then, and sort him out. The idea of being "sorted out" by Matilda held no appeal whatsoever, whatever it might involve. It was a bit worrying that she had spent the last quarter of an hour with a perfect view of his arse, too.

He found the spare key under the flower-pot, and opened the front door. He walked inside, resisting the urge to slam the door in her face. She followed him in, tensing as he flicked on the lights.

"Fire?" she asked, nervously.

"Light bulb," he replied. "Light-bulb is *good*," he added in a deliberately patronising way. "Light bulb gives us light, a little heat maybe, and a bill for a hundred bastard quid a month."

A light went on in the lounge.

"Fuck," wailed Philip. "They've found us already."

He took a step towards the door, but she gripped his arm, her meaty fingers encircling his bicep with room to spare.

"It's not Daddy."

"How do you know?"

"Daddy would have killed you in the dark."

He was not sure whether to be re-assured by this or not. He wailed again to cover his bets. He didn't want to die like this. He'd always pictured himself having a heart attack after a marathon sex session with six blondes when he was eighty three years old.

Just as he thought his life could get no worse, Mandy appeared from the lounge. By the look on her face, she was not at all happy.

"Mandy! Oh thank God it's you!"

He went to hug her, but she pushed him away icily. She was not a happy bunny at all. She turned her attention to Matilda, looking her up and down as if she was a flasher at a children's tea-party.

“What the fuck is this?”

“I was round yours, and there was someone in the alley, and I wasn't about to leave you alone so I confronted them for you, and they shoved a sack over my head and took me away in their van. And-”

Mandy's glare intensified, and she held up a hand to stop him in mid-sentence. It was always a bad sign when she did that. She usually tried to smack him in the face soon afterwards.

“I'll ask you again. What the fuck is *this*?”

She gestured aggressively at Matilda, who loomed uncomfortably above them both on the doormat behind him. Mandy was a petite size 10, and Matilda must have weighed twice as much as her, if not more. He would have still backed Mandy in a fight though, any day. She fought dirty (but then she did everything dirty, which is why he put up with it!)

“This is Matilda,” he replied weakly, not sure how else he could respond if she wouldn't let him tell her about Clay-Man, the van, the house-

“And who the fuck is Matilda?”

“Don't swear,” said Matilda. “Daddy doesn't like it.”

“Do I look like I give a flying fuck what your Daddy likes?” Mandy railed.

“You would if you met him,” Philip assured her.

She looked exasperated, which was never a good sign. She could get very aggressive indeed when she was cross. Philip was almost relieved that Matilda was standing behind him so that she could even the odds if it came to a fight. They could probably take Mandy between them.

“What is that *thing* doing in your house?”

“It's a long story.”

“Tell me you're not shagging her! God knows what diseases you've picked up! It could be anything from herpes, to foot and mouth!”

“No!” interjected Philip, genuinely shocked that she could think such a thing. If ever he strayed – sorry, if ever he strayed *again* – it would be with a glamour model, a hot lap-dancer, a sexy Britney Spears (pre-baby) if his prayers were answered. It would most definitely not be with Frankenstein's ugly sister. How could she say that? He had dumped girlfriends for less. Maybe he would dump her if she wasn't quite so damn scary when she was provoked!

“Look,” he said, “I would rather eat my own testicles than put them anywhere near her – her – well, you know what I’m saying. No offence, Matilda.”

“None taken.”

“You’re lying!” screamed Amanda, taking a threatening step towards the two of them. “You bastard!”

“Why would you possibly think that I’d want to shag *her*?” asked Philip incredulously.

“None taken,” repeated Matilda, even though he had not actually said “no offence” this time. She was sure he didn’t mean any. Outsiders had perfect manners, Nanny had assured her.

“Okay, one, you’re a cheating bastard. Two, you’ve brought her back to your house at three in the morning.”

“She had nowhere else to go.”

“Three, you’re all flushed and out of breath.”

“I’ve been running.”

“Most people wear track-suit bottoms, Philip, when they jog. Or at least a pair of pants! Which brings us on to four. Four is, you’re stark bollock naked!”

She waited for him to say something in defence of Count Four. He shifted around uncomfortably, Matilda mirroring his actions behind him.

“Okay,” he finally announced. “That one’s a bit harder to explain.”

#

Two hours later, Mandy had calmed down a little.

The three of them were sitting on the corner sofa, Mandy and Philip both as far away from Matilda as they could manage. Philip had served tea in china-cups, but Matilda had accidentally crushed two of them, so they had given her a saucepan of cold water instead.

Philip had cried when he told Mandy what he had been through. Matilda cried when she saw how upset she had made Philip. She tried to put a comforting arm around him, but he shrugged her off in revulsion, which made her weep even more. Mandy had come close to crying herself, but only when Matilda broke the bone china (which was an engagement present from Philip’s mother and would cost about two hundred quid to replace).

Matilda would have been much happier on the floor. She had never sat on a sofa before, and it felt strange, precarious and unnatural. She tried squatting on the floor, but climbed back on to the sofa when she saw the smirks that Philip and Mandy exchanged. And then, when she was on the sofa with them, Mandy accused her of getting blood on the cushions, so it didn’t seem that she could win either way! She expected one of them to give her a beating for

making the sofa dirty, but both seemed unwilling to get near enough to her to strike her (Philip sitting so far away from her that he nearly fell off the far side).

She tried to squat on the sofa, but it was too soft and spongy, and Mandy started trying to catch Philip's eye with that gloating look again, so she eventually gave up and sat there in the same straight-backed way as them. How people could feel comfortable without squatting was beyond her. And quite what was she supposed to do with the cushions? She wasn't sure whether to sit on them or eat them.

She wanted to take off her wedding dress, but they both looked panic-stricken and insisted that she keep it on. She cried again. All the while she was in this dress, Philip would remember that she was going to marry someone else, and how would he ever start loving her for real when he was constantly reminded of this rival Beloved?

They wanted her to explain what was going on. Part of her wanted to tell Philip everything; they were betrothed, and should have no secrets. Besides, once it sunk in what she had rescued him from, he might be a bit more grateful and a little less disgusted. On the other hand, what if it freaked him out completely? What if he looked even more appalled than he did now? How could she bear it, especially with Mandy in the room to rub her nose in it?

She took a deep breath, and started talking, avoiding all eye contact with everyone. The next few minutes would determine the course of her life. Either he would hug her and thank her and want to be with her always, or he would beat her and lock her in the cellar to starve.

"Where I live," she explained carefully, as if telling the facts of life to small children, "we have a custom. It's called the Wedding Feast. I was – I was getting married tonight. To Victor, one of my cousins from one of the other Families."

She risked a quick glance at Philip's face to gauge his reaction. Did he look hurt? Angry, maybe? Jealous, even, jealous would be good. She could not tell. He was avoiding eye contact, too. Mandy seemed only too happy to stare at her, but she looked so aggressive that Matilda looked away. She composed herself for a few seconds, and then pressed on, her voice small and hesitant.

"Philip was my Wedding Feast."

He shot her an incredulous look, but she could not bear to look back up again. If she stopped now, she would never find the strength to tell him what he needed to know. Her voice shook, but she carried on. She had no choice.

"It's traditional at weddings to give the guests something to eat before the ceremony. It keeps them happy, and stops them fighting the groom or making love to the bride."

She blushed. Mandy jumped in.

"Making love to the bride? You've got to be fucking kidding!"

"She wouldn't want them making love to her," Matilda replied, imploring them to understand. "That would be the last thing she'd want. But if you have 5 or 6 guests and only one husband to protect you, they can make you do things you're not comfortable with."

“That’s disgusting!”

Matilda shrugged miserably, but pressed on. She had suspected that Outsiders didn’t force the bride to make love to them at their weddings, but wasn’t quite prepared for the disgust which this revelation had provoked. She had a lot to learn about Outsiders, and she needed to learn fast.

“That’s why Philip was there. If they ate him, they would be happy, and leave me alone.”

“Your guests were going to *eat* me!” asked Philip in shock. Maybe it would have been better for her to focus on the love-making side of things, after all.

“Just until the wedding started.”

“How were they going to eat me?”

Mandy snorted with laughter, and Philip gave her such a poisonous look that Matilda felt a tiny sense of triumph. Maybe her family was going to eat him, but they would never ever laugh at their Beloveds and belittle them in such a cruel way. Surely Mandy had overstepped the mark, and he would beat her, even if just a little?

“My guess is that they were going to eat you raw,” Mandy told him, relishing his discomfort. He had turned up naked with this creature in the middle of the night, and never once apologised, even though he’d known she was due to be in Bromley tomorrow! He deserved all the discomfort she could heap upon him, and she could heap an awful lot of discomfort if she wanted to! And the more she embarrassed him, the more likely he would turn on the troll and send her back to Freakland where she belonged, to make love to whichever of her fucking family her husband failed to beat off (pun fully intended!)

“Yes,” Matilda nodded, close to tears yet again. “They like the arms and legs best. Easier to chew.”

“I bet they were going to slice chunks off you,” Mandy howled with laughter, “like a big pasty white kebab.” This was good. It was all she could do not to wet herself laughing. Maybe she should have wet herself on purpose, she thought. Mark her territory, so to speak. But this sofa costs a small fortune, and you could bet your life that Philip would never get round to scrubbing it clean.

“What’s a kebab?” Matilda asked.

“Never mind what a kebab is!” Philip shouted. “Are you saying that they were going to rip me to pieces while I was still alive?”

“You wouldn’t have been alive for long, my Darling,” Mandy assured him.

Matilda didn’t like that. Philip wasn’t Mandy’s darling, he was hers. They were going to get married, and if Mandy kept calling him her darling then she might just end up as the Feast at their wedding!

“That’s why I rescued you,” Matilda implored him to understand. “I couldn’t let them do that to you. I love you!”

Mandy roared with laughter all the more. It disturbed Matilda. She hadn’t heard laughter since Nanny had died, and this woman was nothing like Nanny at all! Nanny was sweet and safe and kind. This woman was horrid, and had her knees uncovered like a common harlot (she has never actually seen a harlot, but Nanny had explained that they were quite common on the Outside, especially in the land called “Margate”).

“Did your husband know that?” Mandy teased. “That you were going to ditch him at the altar and run off with the buffet?”

“He’s not my husband! I’ll never marry him. He’s a monster.”

“Look in the mirror, Love. You’re hardly Kelly Brook yourself.”

“Who’s Kelly -”

“Are you for real?” Mandy interrupted, suddenly losing her patience, “or is this some sick-fuck wind-up? People don’t usually get married in the middle of the night, even ugly fuckers like you! They don’t generally get gang-banged by their wedding guests to pass the time before the ceremony. And they certainly don’t lay on a spoilt little Mummy’s Boy as the fucking buffet to keep Uncle Alan and Auntie Maud from raping the bride before the vicar turns up!”

“How did you know that I’ve got an Uncle Alan?” asked a confused Matilda.

“Stop it!” Philip screamed. “Will you please BOTH stop it? Can’t you see what I’ve been through tonight? Have you got any idea what it’s like to hear that I was going to be torn limb from limb by a group of horny wedding guests?”

“I would never have let them do that to you!” protested Matilda, ignoring Mandy’s howls of laughter. “I’d have killed them all rather than let them –”

“Enough!” he wailed hysterically. “I’ve had enough. I’m going to bed. God knows how I’m going to sleep ever again after all this, but I’m gonna try my damndest! Now you two can either cuddle up on the sofa together, or piss off back to your respective homes, it’s entirely up to you.”

Without a backward glance, Philip marched out of the room and climbed the stairs to bed.

Matilda and Mandy exchanged uneasy glances. It was Amanda who broke the silence first:

“Typical man! It’s always got to be about them, hasn’t it?”

#

Matilda slept fitfully. Her “bed” was comfortable enough – she even had a carpet, when she was used to bare floor-boards – but she kept having nightmares.

She was back at the House: she had never been anywhere else, so what else could she dream about? Mummy was there. She was crying; Mummy cried a lot. Nanny said that when people cry, you should hug them to make them feel better, but not hard like Daddy does as that makes them feel a lot worse, and never to hug Nanny as her bones were brittle and would crumple under the strain. She gave Mummy a big hug, but all of a sudden she turned into Philip, and he was kicking and screaming and trying to batter her face, so she had to pin his arms to his sides and hug him all the more to cheer him up. The more he struggled, the tighter she hugged him, as she was afraid that he would beat her if she let go of him. And he struggled and he struggled, and she hugged harder and tighter, until he struggled no more. He was limp and lifeless. She had loved him too much. And there was Daddy in the shadows, looking proud of her for the first time ever, proud that she had squeezed her Beloved to death. But all she wanted to do was make Philip well again. How, though? The only way she knew was to hug him. So she squeezed him, and he was alive again, but he was struggling so she squeezed harder and the whole thing happened all over again.

Over and over she had this dream. Sometimes she thought she was really awake, and that Philip was there to comfort her, but as soon as she held out her arms to him she would crush him once more.

“I mustn’t hug you,” she said to herself, again and again, but she always did, and each time he died in her arms. And there was Daddy behind him, looking prouder and prouder, and she wanted to hug him too so that he would never smile at her again.

Once, when she thought she was awake, Mandy was there too. She was holding out a white fluffy thing, as if to put it over her face as she slept.

“What’s that?” asked Matilda, drowsily.

Amanda and Philip froze. They exchanged guilty glances.

“She’s awake!” said Philip, panic-stricken.

“It’s a pillow,” replied Amanda calmly. “We thought you might be more comfortable with a pillow.”

“No thank you,” smiled Matilda, thinking that maybe Mandy wasn’t so nasty after all. She drifted off to sleep again, back to her recurring hugging nightmare.

It was only the following morning that she remembered this “pillow” dream. Nanny had taught her to interpret her dreams, but she could make head nor tail of this one, no matter how hard she tried. Philip had been in it, though, looking very handsome, and she hadn’t been squeezing him to death. Maybe it was like one of those funny dreams Vincent used to get in his teens.

#

She awoke to find that Mandy had left Philip’s house already. It gave her confidence that her scary love-rival had gone, and she told Philip how she wanted to spend the day. It seemed to catch him off-guard, as he turned pale and sat down quickly on the sofa.

“You want to do what?”

“I’d like to meet your Mummy and Daddy.”

“Why?”

“We’re getting married. Nanny said Outsiders always meet each other’s parents before they get married. It’s a tradition. I want to do things properly.”

Philip went whiter still, and started blowing into a paper bag, which seemed to her to be a very curious thing to do. Another Outsider custom, perhaps? A thought struck her; a terrible, terrible thought. What if he was having second thoughts about their wedding?

“We are getting married, aren’t we, Philip? Please don’t send me back to Daddy!”

“No, no,” he broke off from the bag. “You’re definitely not going back to Daddy, whatever happens.”

Matilda gave him a huge girlish grin. She went to give him a huge girlish hug too, but much to his relief seemed to think better of it, patting his head instead, though even that hurt a bit.

“I mustn’t hug you,” she explained sadly. “I really mustn’t hug you.”

He shrugged. She was pleased to see that he seemed to have taken this news quite well. He was her brave little soldier.

“Can I call them Mummy and Daddy yet, or should I wait until after the wedding?”

The paper-bag came out again, and he spent a few minutes furiously inflating and deflating it before he was able to reply.

“Maybe not just yet, Matilda. Let’s take it one step at a time.”

Her face fell, but she nodded in understanding. She had hoped to call them Mummy and Daddy straightaway. But at least he had not ruled it out altogether, the wedding was obviously still on, and she could work on him. She assumed that Philip’s father would be scary and might beat her, but if his Mummy was nice then they could tell each other stories and drink from saucepans and do other things that Outsiders liked to do with their children’s wives. As long as she had Philip, what did it really matter anyway?

“Okay,” she beamed, having cheered herself up already. “I can wait until we’re married. What’s a week or two anyway? Now come on, Slow-Coach. Let’s go and see them now.”

She galloped round him in excited circles. Philip trudged unhappily to the front door. He slid on his coat. He looked so miserable. Matilda wanted him to be happy, but she couldn’t risk hugging him in case he suffocated again, like he had in her dream.

“Is you Daddy very scary?” she asked, sensing how reluctant he was to take him there. It was endearing in a way. Maybe he just wanted to protect her from harm. But she felt sure that his Daddy wouldn’t be as big as hers, so he needn’t worry quite so much.

“No,” Philip replied. “But “Mummy” sure as Hell is!”

“Don’t be silly,” she chided him. “Mummies aren’t scary!”

He shrugged, and walked out the house, leaving her to follow along behind him. She stepped out the front door, paused for a moment, and went back inside. She grabbed the paper-bag from the coffee-table where he had left it. Her intuition told that one of them might need it again before the day was out.

#

Philip took a deep breath, and knocked purposefully on the door.

He had positioned Matilda behind an immaculately trimmed privet hedge in his parent’s front garden. Best to give them a little notice before springing her on them. Two or three years notice might have been better, but it didn’t seem likely that she’d agree to wait that long.

The door opened. Fuck: it was Mother! Father would’ve been the easier option.

“Philip! It’s Tuesday! You know I’ve got Bridge Club at eleven, and Pamela does so hate tardiness. You’ve got 20 minutes. And take your shoes off before you come in, there’s a good boy.”

Without awaiting a reply, she disappeared back indoors.

He hesitated. He couldn’t just stroll in after her with a trolless in tow. Some sort of explanation would be required first. Quite a lot of explanation, in fact.

“Nineteen minutes!” he heard her call out from the living room. “And counting!”

He rang the doorbell again, even though the door was open. Father appeared this time. Short, placid, horn-rimmed glasses and a Marks & Spencers’ cardigan. Safe as houses.

“Hello, Philip. Nice to see you. Come in, why don’t you? Take your shoes off first, you know what she’ll say otherwise.”

“Father, wait.”

Father stopped, and waited as instructed. What could be so urgent as to keep Mother waiting?

“I’ve brought someone round with me.”

“Amanda? Oh good, Mother will be pleased. They’re like too peas in a pod, those two. Apart from the swearing. Amanda, I mean. Not your mother.”

“Eighteen minutes,” called Mother impatiently from inside.

“No, not Amanda. Someone else. She’s-”

“Gorgeous?” chuckled Father. “All your girlfriends are. Especially that Spanish girl a couple of years back. She had a lovely pair of - ”

“No, not gorgeous.”

“-Eyes. She’s what then? Funny?”

“Not in the conventional sense.”

“Good personality?” ventured Father, running out of ideas as to what particular qualities one of Philip’s girlfriends might have, which he would feel comfortable discussing with his son.

“No,” Philip shook his head emphatically. “Not in the least.”

“She’s what, then?”

“She’s behind that bush.”

“Hedge, Philip. It’s a hedge. Mother won’t let me have anything to do with bushes. What’s she doing over there? Is she shy, or does she just like gardening?”

Father toddled across the garden in his carpet slippers, determined to re-assure this shrinking violet that he did not bite (though Mother might if she forgot to take her stilettos off before she entered the house). Philip scurried anxiously behind him, wanting to prepare him for the worst, but completely at a loss as to where to start.

“Seventeen minutes,” bellowed Mother from inside. “And still counting!”

“Father, Father, there’s something I need to tell you first.”

“Yes?”

“You know you asked if she was gorgeous.”

“I thought that was a given, with you,” Father nodded.

They stopped on the lawn, a few yards away from the hedge. As Father turned towards him, Philip saw Matilda poke her head up above the hedge. Her big old face protruded periscope like above the top-most branches, turning from side to side as she looked back and forth between Father and the open front door. She wore a delighted smile, like a child surveying the presents Santa had left on Christmas morning. It was only a matter of time before she did something stupid and embarrassing. He had to act fast.

He pulled Father close, so they could speak in confidence.

“She’s pig-ugly,” he declared.

“Oh come now, Philip. That’s not a very charitable way to describe your new girlfriend.”

Philip looked back towards Matilda. She was still peering meerkat-like over the hedge. Her slightly crazed eyes were now focused firmly on the front door. For a second, he felt a flush of guilt, as if he had betrayed her by discussing her in such harsh terms. She had saved his life, after all. But then he tensed. All was not well. She was going to do something unpredictable. The fan was on, and the shit was ready for action.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” said Philip, keeping Father’s back to her. “She’s my fiancée.”

It was then that Matilda ploughed her way through the hedge, pushing her way through the tangled branches as if they were candy-floss strands, and made a break for the front door.

“Mummy!” she cried. “We’re going to be so happy together!”

Philip charged after her, determined to bring her down. She had too much of a head-start though. He made a despairing attempt at a rugby tackle, but all he got for his trouble was an accidental kick to the cheek-bone and a mouth full of immaculately-mown lawn.

She disappeared indoors, still calling out “Mummy!” as she went.

“She may be pig-ugly,” declared Father, “but the girl’s got guts.”

“Guts?” asked Philip, as he picked himself up and tried unsuccessfully to brush the grass-stains off his jeans. “How do you make that out?”

“She’s going to walk mud all over your mother’s new cream carpet.”

#

Philip followed her inside with a heavy heart, with Father chuckling along behind him.

As he was removing his shoes, he heard a Mother-sized scream from the living room, followed by the now familiar sound of breaking china.

“Get out!” screamed Mother. “I’ll have the Police on you!”

They entered the living room. Mother was standing precariously on the coffee-table, with an armful of cups and saucers. One by one, she sent them flying at Matilda, as hard and as fast as she could. Her aim was admirable; she had picked up a few useful tips from the fielders at the local cricket club after all those years of making cucumber sandwiches for their tea. They bounced off Matilda’s head, like machine-gun bullets off a brick-wall, fracturing as they struck her skull and shattering as they ricocheted into walls, ceilings and the 42 inch plasma TV that Curry’s had installed in October.

Matilda looked distraught.

“Help!” wailed Mother, as she saw her would-be rescuers enter the room. “Rape! Murder!”

“Rape seems unlikely,” mused Father. “Now why don’t you come down off the coffee-table, Alice, and stop throwing our best china at our guest? You’ll fracture your hip if you’re not careful.”

“That *thing*,” spat Mother, “that Bride of Frankenstein, is no guest of mine. I would never invite that monstrous creature into my lovely clean home.”

“That’s rather unfortunate. She’s going to be our daughter-in-law.”

Mother came down from the coffee-table. At speed. Fortunately for both her and her arthritic knees, she fainted straight on to the sofa. Matilda produced Philip’s paper bag from up the sleeve of her wedding dress and started waving it towards Mother like a white flag. Mother, being unconscious, ignored her.

“That went better than expected,” Father chuckled. “We’ve even got a few saucers left.”

Mother lay still. Matilda crumpled.

“Mummy!” she screamed. “I’ve killed your Mummy!”

“Oh, she’s not dead,” Father reassured her, as Philip hauled her back up into a sitting position. “She always does this when people forget to take their shoes off. She’s just – pining for the fields!”

“Sorry?” enquired a confused Matilda, who – having been brought up in a house with no electricity and a pathological hatred of all humankind - was not the World’s greatest expert on Monty Python sketches.

Mother groaned as she started to struggle unsteadily back towards consciousness. Father, always the man for a crisis, moved the few remaining saucers out of arms’ reach. He looked around the room. Philip had gone pale, and looked on the verge of fainting himself. Matilda was biting her lip, and trying not to cry. She kept looking at Philip for reassurance, but he was totally oblivious to her. Mother was starting to come to, and it was probably only a matter of time before she was back on the coffee table again. It was just the sort of situation he had been trained for in the Army in the Sixties.

“I’ll put the kettle on,” he announced. “Everything will seem much better after a nice cup of Earl Grey. Not sure what I’m going to serve it in though, we seem to have lost all our cups.”

“That’s okay,” Matilda smiled at him, responding to the warmth in his voice. “Philip only lets me drink from saucepans anyway.”

#

They left an hour later. Matilda had spent most of the time in the kitchen with Father, whispering like a Guy Fawkes’ conspirator, much to Mother’s annoyance and Philip’s incomprehension. It’s not like the two of them had anything in common. Philip had to marry an ogre, while Father was married to Mother.

Philip had stayed in the living room with Mother, alternating between reassuring her that he had not lost all his senses, and reviving her with smelling salts every time she heard Matilda’s voice in the kitchen. He also spent quite some time batting back texts to Mandy, explaining why he had not yet “manned up” and thrown that “big-ass moose” out the house. These texts

took a while to compose, as he wasn't entirely sure he knew the answer to these questions himself.

Eventually, he made their excuses and left. Father felt that there was only so much smelling salts that Mother could take before she risked becoming an addict, and it was clear that she was not going to stay conscious as long as Matilda was trampling around on her carpet.

As they walked back home, Philip was conscious of the attention he was getting. It was hardly surprising when he was being shadowed by a giant ogre in a wedding dress. There had been incidents on the way to Mother's too, but he had been so preoccupied with what to say to his parents that he had blocked the worst of it out. He was now in a very bad mood, and hypersensitive to every look and comment thrown their way. It was bad enough he had to marry her, without becoming a laughing-stock into the bargain.

He skirted the town centre to keep as low as profile as possible, but he still had to weather a number of unfortunate incidents. Several people called out "Freak!", two started barking, and a group of kids outside Aldi's started throwing Haribos at her. This was awful for him, truly awful. How could he ever show his face in public again?

It made things even worse when she started crying, as that just drew attention to them, and people would probably think it was his fault that she was upset. If there was one thing worse than having an ugly girlfriend, it was people thinking you had an ugly girlfriend whom you were beating up. To make his position more uncomfortable still, she kept holding her arms out to him for a hug, muttering "I mustn't squish you" and then putting them back down to her sides again. Seconds later (usually after a random bark from a member of the public) she would repeat the whole process, torn between seeking his comfort and reassurance, and seeking God-knows-what. It looked weird. Up with her arms, down with her arms, up with her arms, down with them again. It was like she was trying to do a Mexican Wave on her own.

"Stop that!" he ordered. "Can't you see you're embarrassing me?"

"Hold my hand," she pleaded, as shaven-headed men on the opposite pavement started howling at her. She was totally missing the point. If he was embarrassed now, how could she possibly not realise that holding her hand would make things infinitesimally worse for him?

"I'm going to walk ahead of you," he told her. "Just follow me, okay? Don't speak to me, don't keep signalling sixes, and under no circumstances whatsoever do you say or do anything which would give anyone the impression that we know each other."

Matilda nodded sadly, and shuffled a few steps backwards.

"Further," he commanded, and she took another five or six steps back. As she did so, the man opposite called his friends out the pub, and the whole pack of them started howling away at her like a pack of wolves on speed.

"Philip?" she called out to him, miserably. He tried to ignore her, but when he glanced over his shoulder she was going the Mexican Wave thing again, and the men opposite started mimicking her, calling out his name as they did so. He would have to move to Sussex now, there was no way he could risk seeing any of these people again.

He rounded on her, angry that she had shamed him in front of total strangers (and his Mum).

“What?” he shouted. “What the fuck do you want now?”

She resisted the urge to tell him that Daddy didn’t like swearing. It didn’t seem the time.

“Thank you for introducing me to your parents,” she said politely, as nanny had taught her. “I’ve had such a lovely day. Can we go and choose my wedding ring tomorrow?”

#

Back home, Philip insisted that she take a bath. She was overdue one. She had never had one before, and the stench was getting on his nerves. It also bothered him that she had shown no sign of using the toilet up until now – maybe human flesh made you constipated? – and he was convinced that if he left her alone for more than a few minutes he would return to find a giant dump on his carpet with human fingers sticking out of it (if not worse).

“I’ve heard of Bath,” she declared proudly. “Nanny went there on her holidays once.”

“Not that Bath,” he rolled his eyes. “You take your clothes off and sit in hot water until all the dirt comes off.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Does what hurt?”

“Hot water.”

“Depends how hot it is,” he replied. “Yours is going to be very hot indeed!”

Her face crumpled, but she resisted doing the raising and lowering of the arms thing this time (as he had told her that the next time she did this he would send her home, whatever the consequences). Big wet tears formed in her large blue eyes, and her chins quivered in unison.

“I’m scared,” she told him. “I don’t like it when things hurt me. Daddy beats me all the time, and sometimes it makes me cry.”

Philip felt guilty. What sort of life had she had in that house? Closeted away, never seeing the light of day, in permanent fear of violence from Clay-Man (of whom – having seen him in action himself – he knew she had every reason to be frightened). He couldn’t let her go back there, no matter how ugly she was. On the other hand, the prospect of actually marrying her made him heave. Maybe there was some sort of middle ground? He could keep her in the garden to deter burglars, perhaps? Or teach her to juggle severed limbs and put her on “Britain’s Got Talent.”

“Will you be in the bath with me?” she asked.

“God, no!” he protested. “Absolutely not! No room for two in there!”

Outrageously, she seemed to be more relieved at this than he did! There were plenty of girls out there who would *love* to see him naked. How dare she turn her nose up at him?

“That’s good,” she explained. “I wouldn’t want you to see me without my pants until after we’re married.”

“Maybe not even then.”

She nodded in agreement. Again, this irritated him. He really did not think he could face ever seeing her naked, but the implication that the feeling was mutual was almost too much to bear.

“Will you show me what to do when I get naked?” she asked.

“Huh?” he squealed.

She blushed. “What do I do after I’ve taken my pants off?”

“Didn’t Nanny tell you?” The birds-and-the-bees talk was awkward enough as it was, without him having to give it to an amorous troll. Perhaps it was better after all that she didn’t want to see him naked. He felt he might need his paper-bag again.

“Sort of,” she replied, “But I don’t know how to make the water hot.”

He exhaled a long drawn –out puff of relief. She was just talking about the bath!

He wondered whether after all this she would even fit in the tub anyway.

#

After running her bath (with very little water as she looked as if she would displace a lot) he left the house to buy her some clothes. No point in her washing if she was going to get back into that filthy wedding dress. He figured that a trip to Primark for some extra-large men’s clothes would cost him less than fifty quid if there was anything suitable in the sale section. Failing that, there were plenty of charity shops around with clothes being sold for next to nothing.

As he was closing his gate, a V-reg Renault Clio pulled up at the kerb. A man stepped out, looking like an extra from the Blues Brothers; dark suit, dark glasses, bit of a prat all in all. He locked the car, and tested both doors to make sure they were properly shut. He was about fifty, and five foot four at most.

“Government cutbacks,” the man explained sourly. “I used to have a 59-plate Astra with central locking, and now I’ve got this heap-of-junk.”

Philip shrugged in bemusement.

“You Philip?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“I like that. Nice concise answer. No waffle, no back-chat. You and me are going to get along just fine. Can we go inside?”

“Who are you?”

“Crow. Can’t tell you any more than that. Classified. Need to know basis. Come on. Just a few questions and I’ll leave you in peace.”

Crow strode purposefully down the path towards the front door. Philip followed reluctantly behind him.

“Have you got a warrant?”

“You’ve been watching too much television, Son. Why would I need a warrant to ask you a few questions? Now open the door, and let’s get on with it.”

“Proof of your identity, then? You could be anyone.”

“It’s the car, isn’t it?” Crow snapped. “You think that just because this guy drives up in a crappy car, that he’s a nobody? Is that it, tough guy? Well I’m not a nobody, you got that? I’m someone big. Someone very big!”

Philip smirked. “You don’t look that big to me!”

Crow grabbed him by both shoulders and slammed him into the front door. He was pretty strong for someone of his size. He brought his face so close to Philip’s that he could smell the Victory V’s on his breath. He felt intimidated by the agent, so much so that if he had been asked politely he might just have given Matilda up. But he had never responded well to threats, even when he was being roughed up by a midget under-cover officer in his own front garden.

“None of your Goddam lip, Sonny Boy. I used to have an Astra, remember that. Now I’m gonna ask you one more time, can we or can we not take this inside?”

Philip squirmed uncomfortably.

“No.”

“No?”

“My girlfriend’s in there. She’s – she’s – naked!”

“Why’s she naked? Is she some sort of pervert?”

“She’s having a bath.”

“I’m not planning on using your shower, Son. We can talk downstairs, leave the little lady to sponge herself down in peace.”

“She’s downstairs. She – she- likes to dry herself by the fire. You’d see her.”

“See her what?”

“See her everything.”

“Why would I want to see her everything? You know I said I liked you? I was wrong. I’m not often wrong, but I was about you. You were concise. I thought we were going to get along fine. But when I try to ask you a few questions, you start telling me about your girlfriend’s bath-time routine. What next? You gonna tell me what her favourite position is? She got a strap-on dildo, is that what you like, Soldier? Is that what you’re gonna tell me about next?”

“No. Sorry, Sir.”

“You gonna let me in now?”

“No.”

“Okay. That’s fine by me. It means I get to come back here with my buddy. See if the two of us can beat some sense into you.”

Philip panicked. He was not good with physical violence. He had been kidnapped, chained up, kicked in the face, pushed up against a wall, and was now being threatened by a short-arse psychopath with a like-minded “buddy”. And all because Mandy wouldn’t let him stay over the night before she was due to go to Bromley! He should have stayed in the car that night, and left her to it. He would have saved himself fifty quid on clothes, too!

“I’m not being awkward, Sir. It’s just that it’s inconvenient for you to come inside right now.”

“Because of your pervert girlfriend, so you said. Standing there all dripping and naked-”

He tailed off, as if deep in thought for a second, but then shook the image out of his head and carried on.

“Do you know why I didn’t bring my buddy along with me today?”

“He wouldn’t fit in the car?”

Crow took Philip by the throat.

“You cheeking me, Son?”

Philip tried to shake his head, but Crow’s fingers dug deeper, preventing him from doing so. “No,” he choked instead. The grip relaxed a little.

“I didn’t bring my buddy with me, cos he makes me look like a pussy-cat. He eats little shits like you for breakfast, and wipes his hard ass on the body parts he shits back out again. You get the picture?”

Philip nodded, though it was not a picture he was particularly comfortable with.

Crow released him, and gestured with a sweep of his arm for Philip to lead the way back to the front gate.

“After you, *Sir*.”

They made their way back to the road outside. Philip waited while Crow unlocked his car and climbed back into the driver’s seat. Despite feeling shaken, he had difficulty suppressing a smile as Crow searched in vain for the switch for the electric windows, only to find that there wasn’t one. He eventually had to settle for winding down the driver’s window by hand.

“I’ll be back,” Crow announced, switching effortlessly from bad-Blues Brothers to even poorer Terminator. “And next time, I’m bringing my buddy with me.”

He wound the window back up, and slid the key into the ignition.

Philip resisted the urge to flee back home. Crow might follow him, and slip inside when he opened the door. Or Matilda might come bounding out when she realised that he was back home again. Besides, it would look suspicious. Instead, he strolled off along the pavement as confidently as he could, whilst muttering “twat” under his breath as loudly as he dared.

He allowed himself the luxury of saying “twat” very loudly indeed when Crow took two or three attempts at getting his car to start.

#

That night, Matilda sat in the back garden, screened from the outside world by the row of hedges which skirted two sides the lawn and a large bushy area at the far end. Philip’s mother had insisted on him buying a property with hedges, as she was very proud of hers. She wouldn’t have given him the deposit if he had moved in to somewhere with just a back yard.

She was wearing her new clothes. They were too small, but Philip had given them to her as a present, so they were just fine. There was a shirt with palm trees and lots of yellows and oranges (she liked colour as she had only seen black all her life); trousers cut off at the knee which had dug into her waist until she had torn them a little at the side; and a hat with writing on it! Philip said that the word was “Relax” and that it had cost him a pound at a charity shop. It must have been quite an expensive hat as nanny had once told her that she had bought her first house for three thousand pounds and it was better to have a house than three thousand hats, even if they all had “Relax” on them.

He had told her she could keep her own pants on. The lady in the shop knew him, and he wasn’t keen on buying large lady-pants from her, even if they were fifty pence a pair.

She could see Philip inside, through the sliding glass doors which led back into the house. Mandy was there too. She didn’t like Mandy; she kept shouting at Philip and talking down to him all the time. And she kept swearing, too. It didn’t seem to worry her when Matilda told her that Daddy would be cross, but then again Mandy had never met Daddy!

She sniffed the air, and a smile engulfed her face.

“Vincent!”

Her brother stepped warily from the bushes at the far end of the garden, keeping away from the carpet of light which trailed back to the patio doors.

They hugged, Matilda clinging on to him desperately, like a child’s last hug with her mother before being taken into care. She loved Philip with all her heart, but his world was alien to her. To have Vincent here with her, familiar and reassuring, gave her a few moments of respite from the almost overwhelming sense of isolation she felt from the moment she had escaped to the Outside. If it hadn’t be for Philip, she would have fled home by now, back to what she knew, even though it meant Daddy breaking every bone in her body. She had come here in search of love and acceptance, but this world seemed even more cold and unforgiving than hers. But now her brother was here now, and everything was going to be okay.

She went to take Vincent’s hands but he drew them sharply away from her. She tried again with the same result.

“Don’t be cross with me, Vincent. I had to go. I love him.”

Vincent snorted.

“I’m not cross.”

“Then hold my hands.”

Vincent held his hands up for her to see. They were badly crushed, the knuckles having crumpled in on themselves. Instinctively, she went to take his hands in hers, but he pulled them away again.

“Don’t. It hurts.”

She had to wait awhile before speaking, trying to compose herself. She was tired of crying; she had seemed to do nothing but since she had run away. But this was too much. She had done this to him, as surely as if she had crushed her brother’s hands herself. Daddy had punished Vincent for letting her go. And now he was crippled, all because of her.

“Can you still forage?”

“I’m trying. If I can’t forage, I’m no use to anyone, and -”

“They’ll kill you.”

Vincent nodded. “They won’t want me eating their food if I’m not bringing any home myself.”

“Vincent, I am so sorry. It’s all my fault. I’ll forage for you.”

He snorted again.

“You’re a girl. Girls can’t forage.”

“I could. I’d-”

“You’ve never been out here before. You don’t know what it’s like, where to go, which of them it’s safe to take, how to take them without them calling for help. They’d catch you, and beat you, and you’d give us all up to them. Better I die than we lose the whole Family.”

“I would **never** tell them where **you** are!”

Vincent smiled. In spite of herself, she smiled back. They had always been able to cheer each other up, no matter how bad the beatings, how bad their life had been. But this! Crushed hands. Daddy knew what he was doing. By stopping Vincent foraging, he had as good as condemned Vincent to death. His revenge for losing a daughter was to sacrifice his son as well.

She took a deep breath.

“I’ll come home.”

“No. What would that achieve, anyway?”

“He’ll beat me, and leave you be.”

“You’re not coming home. If he did this to me, what do you think he’d –”

He stopped in mid-sentence and melted back into the bushes. She turned, and saw Mandy at the patio door, squinting out at her. Had she seen anything?

Matilda waved at her, in an innocent “I’m-not-up-to-anything-at-all-out-here” type way. Mandy held her gaze for a few moments, raised her eyes skywards, muttered something under her breath, and returned to her argument with Philip inside.

Vincent returned soon afterwards, when satisfied that the coast was clear.

“Will he find me?” she asked, knowing the answer already.

“Daddy? Of course he will.”

She seemed to shrink into herself. It was all she could do to stop herself collapsing altogether, finding shelter in the safe black nothingness that had since yesterday been creeping inch by insidious inch from the darkest recesses of her mind.

“I don’t know what to do.”

“You run.”

“With Philip?”

“No.”

“I can’t leave him behind. Daddy would kill him.”

“Philip’s dead already. He was dead from the moment you took his manacles off. He knows where we live. That makes him a danger to the whole Family. Daddy would have to kill him, even if you’d have stayed behind in the House.”

Her head whirled. There must be a way out of this, some way in which she could save Philip, save Vincent, and maybe even save herself. If Daddy would just leave them all alone, everything would be alright. She could get married, and Vincent could be at the wedding, and she would finally have some happiness in her life.

“We could fight him!”

“You don’t fight Daddy!” replied Vincent, genuinely shocked. “No-one fights Daddy. Besides, you’re a girl, I’m crippled, and your new boyfriend would hardly -”

And then Vincent was gone. There was Mandy, back at the door again, her hands cupped to the glass as she peered outside. Matilda could see the look of triumph on her face. There was no doubt about it; Mandy had seen Vincent!

Matilda ran inside, but Mandy was already on the couch next to Philip, whispering her poison to him. She looked up as Matilda entered the room, her face a kaleidoscope of smugness and fear, determined to finish telling Philip what she had witnessed, but wary of how Matilda might react to this.

Matilda’s thoughts pirouetted. She knew exactly what Mandy would be saying. “They’ve found you. I’ve just seen one of them outside. It’s only a matter of time before they take you back to that place again. She’s lead them here. She doesn’t love you; she’s betrayed you. Beat her, and lock her in the cellar, and come and live with me where it’s safe.

What to do? What could she say to stop Philip leaving her? She couldn’t lose him now, not after the price that she and Vincent had paid for him. She would do anything to keep him, anything at all.

“That was Vincent,” she told them, as casually as she could. “He’s talked Daddy round. Daddy’s happy for us to get married. In fact, he insists on you making an honest woman of me now we’re living together. Marry me, and you’re safe.”

She blushed at the word “woman” as if waiting to be contradicted.

Mandy and Philip stared at her. She wasn’t sure which of them was most shocked. She doubted either of them was as shocked as her, though. She had been brought up never to tell lies. If there was one thing Daddy hated more than swearing, it was lying. Beatings were socially acceptable, molesting brides on their wedding day was positively encouraged, but lying was wrong! But now she had started, it was hard to stop. Best to get it all out of her system now, and then she wouldn’t need to tell any more later on.

“Daddy wants us to get married straightaway. This week. He’ll be very cross if we don’t. And then he wants us to move somewhere far away, straight afterwards.”

Mandy frowned suspiciously.

“Why would he want you to move away?”

Matilda shrugged innocently. “I don’t know,” she replied sweetly. “I just asked Vincent the same thing, but he saw you peering out the window at us and you frightened him away before he could tell me.”

#

“Come in. Take your shoes off. You haven’t got that awful creature with you, have you?”

Philip took off his shoes, and followed Mother into the house. He took a seat on the sofa, and waited for Father to make the Earl Grey. Mother winced at the cheap Argos tea-cups Father had purchased as a temporary replacement for her lovely broken crockery. That was another thing she had to blame Matilda for.

“What is this all about, Philip? Amanda is such a lovely girl. You’re made for each other. Father likes her, don’t you, Dear?”

Father nodded obediently.

“There you go. But you leave her for that ogre you brought round here yesterday, without so much as a telephone call first! She’s not even *human* for Heaven’s sake!”

“And she didn’t even have the decency to take off her shoes before she accosted your mother,” father added mischievously.

Mother gave him a withering stare, before continuing her diatribe.

“Amanda is such a pretty girl. But that lumbering beast who broke my tea-set! How could I possibly explain that at the Bridge Club!”

She picked up her tea-cup, but her hand was shaking so much that she had to put it straight down again. She was tempted to drop it so Father would have to go out and buy more suitable replacement china, but it might have spilled on her lovely new carpet. She would have to drop it when Father was doing the washing-up instead. She had wipe-clean tiles in the kitchen.

“Why marry her when you could have Amanda? Think what my grand-children would be like!” she wailed. “We’d have to send them to the circus! It would be like Joseph Merrick all over again!”

Philip shifted around uncomfortably, deciding how much to tell his parents about his ordeal from the day before last. If Mother’s hands were shaking now, what would she be like if he told her the full horror of what those monsters had put him through? The alternative, though, was for his parents to think that he found Matilda sexually attractive, and anything was better than that. He knew where the smelling salts were if she fainted again, and his

hyperventilation bag was safely ensconced in his pocket in case he felt overcome as well. He took a deep breath, and told them the worst.

“I haven’t got much choice. I got kidnapped the night before last!”

Mother gripped Father’s arm for support, even though she was sitting down. She gasped. Kidnapped! Surely that only happened in Robert Louis Stevenson novels? But no, that troll had the look of a kidnapper about her, make no mistake. She was convinced that she had been right to accuse her of rape and murder, too. You can always tell these things (the deformed nose was a dead give-away).

“She kidnapped you! I knew it! It’s written all over her evil face. And to think that Father let that creature in my house!”

“No, she didn’t kidnap me. Her father did. They took me back to their house, chained me up, and – and -”

It all came flooding back to him. The ordeal. The things he had been through! He searched around the room for Mother’s box of Kleenex.

Mother was halfway through making another attempt at the tea-cup, but slammed it back down on to the coffee table at this latest outrage.

“She chained you up!”

“Her father did,” sobbed Philip.

“I’d quite like to be chained up,” quipped Father, in an ill-advised attempt at lightening the atmosphere and cheering his son up. Mother shot him a poisonous look, but was too busy berating Matilda to find the time to take him to task.

“What sort of sick family does she come from? I know Amanda’s parents are dead, but if they had been alive I’m sure they would never have done such a despicable thing to my precious son! Or to anyone else for that matter. They were respectable!”

A thought struck her.

“Do I know them?” she enquired. “This monstrous family of hers? Or are they from the Council Estate?”

“I doubt they move in the same Bridge circles as you,” Father remarked drily.

She rounded on him, furious at his misplaced levity.

“Do you even care that your son has been kidnapped and chained up and made to marry an ogre?”

“Of course I do!” huffed Father, uncertain whether a huff was a good idea when Mother was quite so angry, but feeling rebellious enough to chance one anyway. There was only so far she would go when Philip was here to referee.

“Well do something about it, then!” she screamed at him. “Go round there, have it out with them!”

“No!” Philip leapt out of his seat, narrowly avoiding a tea-spilling incident of his own. “You can’t go round there. They’d kill you!”

“I wasn’t planning to,” Father assured him. “I’ve met the daughter, remember. She’s twice the size of me. And I was only joking about being chained up. I’m quite happy in the safety of my own house, thank you very much.”

“The Police, then,” insisted Mother. “You’re the man of the house since Philip moved out. You’ve got to do something!”

“No Police,” Philip insisted. “There could be hundreds of them out there. Arrest one of them, and who’s to say the others won’t come and get me? Matilda says they’ll leave me alone if I marry her. I’ve got no choice.”

“I thought she seemed quite nice, even if her Father does sound like a bit of a character,” Father interjected, still hoping to diffuse the situation. Again, he had misjudged the depth of his wife’s feelings about the matter. She had made one final attempt at sipping the now-cold tea from her cheap china cup, but her hand froze inches from her lip. She stared at Father with such umbrage that Philip was concerned that she might actually throw her tea in his face. Father visibly wilted.

“A bit of a character?” she repeated icily.

“I just meant-”

She exploded.

“That troll family kidnap your son, chain him up, and plan to do God knows what with him, and you describe him as a bit of a character!”

She slammed the tea-cup back down again, shrieking in furious grief as the cup shattered and deposited its contents on to her lovely cream carpet.

“My carpet!” she wailed inconsolably. “Look what you’ve done to my carpet!”

Father shrugged apologetically, knowing from many bitter years of experience that it would only make things worse if he pointed out that he had not actually done anything to her carpet at all.

Philip twisted uncomfortably in his seat. Witnessing your parents in conflict was always excruciating, but when it involved the demise of treasured household furnishings the incident seemed so very much worse.

Mother shouted a “C” word at Father that Philip hadn’t even realised she knew, and stomped furiously out the room. He had not seen her this cross since she had become convinced that

an immigration detention centre was opening up at the bottom of her road. She slammed the front door behind her as she flounced furiously out of the house.

Father shrugged in resignation, and fetched paper towels from the kitchen. He dropped to his hands and knees, and started spreading the towels on the offending stain on the carpet.

“It’s a storm in a tea-cup,” remarked Father, but even he did not smile at the joke.

A car engine started outside, and they heard the Audi disappearing down the drive. Father’s face creased in concern.

“That’s not good,” he remarked. “She hasn’t driven since 1987, and last time out she mowed down three keep-left signs and a lollipop lady named Janet.”

#

Matilda froze.

There was a hammering at the front door. Philip had given her specific instructions not to open it to anyone, no matter what. Not to anyone. A-N-Y-O-N-E.

She hid behind the sofa for a while, but it didn’t seem to help. If anything, the hammering just got louder.

It wasn’t Daddy. He only went out at night, and he didn’t “do” knocking anyway. It wasn’t Philip either, as he had a key. Maybe it was Mandy? If anyone was a hammerer, it was her.

“Come out here now!” a voice shouted from outside. “Don’t you dare keep me waiting out here on the doorstep!”

The voice was angry. She recognised it. It reminded her of flying crockery. It was Philip’s mother. She wanted to come in, and she would get angrier and angrier the longer she was locked out.

“Philip told me not to let anyone in,” Matilda called apologetically through the letter-box. “I’m sorry Mummy, but I can’t open the door to anyone. A-N-Y-O-N-E.”

“Don’t you dare spell out “anyone” to me!” Mother screamed. “And if you call me Mummy one more time I will personally rip your face off.”

Matilda was stunned. This was all wrong. Daddies were scary and Mummies were gentle. What sort of crazy mixed up world was this? Were there no rules here at all?

Matilda opened the door before Mother got even angrier. She was resigned to a beating, and the longer she put it off, the worse it would be. She knew about these things.

Mother stood on the door-step, her face purple with rage. Yet she made no effort to come in, after all the fuss she had made about Matilda opening the door for her. Mother looked her up and down with an expression of such disgust that Matilda hung her head in shame.

“How dare you?” quivered Mother. “How *dare* you?”

Matilda shrugged, uncertain what it was she had dared to do that Mummy wasn't very keen on.

“You abduct my precious son, chain him to the floor like an animal, and then blackmail him into marrying you. What sort of a monster are you?”

“I love him,” Matilda replied, hoping that this might make a difference, but knowing deep down that it probably wouldn't.

It didn't. Mother stared at her in shock, as if she had slapped her round the face. She took a step forward and glared up at her, quivering with anger at this creature who was trying to steal her son away from the perfect daughter-in-law.

“Keep-away-from-my-son,” she warned, accompanying each word with a stiff-fingered jab to Matilda's breast-bone. “Call off the wedding, and call off your God-forsaken family, or you'll see just how far a mother is prepared to go to protect her child from harm.”

Mother held her gaze for a while long to bring her message home, and then jabbed her a few more times in the chest even though she had nothing more to say to her. It was strangely therapeutic. Then she turned on her heel and stalked back to her car. Reversing away from the road-sign she had rammed down when parking, she drove away at speed, anxious to check upon the state of her carpet.

#

As he returned home, Philip's heart sank when he saw the battered Renault Clio parked outside. Crow was back. And this time, he'd brought an older man who looked almost as battered as the car. The two of them stood on the pavement near his gate, smoking cigarettes; Crow short and skinny, the other larger with a lived-in face and a broken nose. Both had their “Blues Brothers” suits on.

As Philip approached, the older man dropped his cigarette on the pavement and ground it out with his shoe in what he clearly considered to be a “bad-cop-means-business” type way, but put Philip more in mind of Olivia Newton-John's last dance routine in *Grease*.

“You're back,” observed Philip without enthusiasm.

“This is my partner,” Crow replied, gesturing towards his crony. “Best you don't know his name. Makes it harder for you to complain about brutality if you don't know who he is.”

Philip vaulted over the garden wall and made a break for his front door. Crow tried to clamber over the wall after him, but his shorter legs were not up to the task and he struck his shin on the topmost layer of bricks, falling back down to the pavement. His partner had been around the block a few times, though, and knew the score. As Philip tried frantically to force his key into the lock, he strolled down the path and seized him by the neck. With surprising strength for someone who looked as if he was overdue for his pension, he forced Philip down into a kneeling position, holding him there until Crow joined them.

The diminutive agent had landed in dog-shit after falling to the ground. It was all over one leg of his smartly pressed trousers, and he had not taken this very philosophically.

“Look what you’ve done to me, Boy!” he barked. “I’ve got a shitty car; now I’ve got shitty trousers as well!”

Philip smirked. He knew it was a bad idea, but couldn’t help it. He stopped smirking when Crow kned him hard in the face.

Pain exploded in his head. He was shocked. It was bad enough being assaulted by a crazed in-bred, but these people were supposed to be government fucking officials! On Her Majesty’s Secret Service and all that shite. He was paying their fucking wages from his taxes (or at least would have been if he hadn’t been between jobs for the last few years). How dare they? How *fucking* dare they?

“You got a problem, Son?” Crow asked, as his partner hauled Philip back to his feet. “You’re not smirking now are you, you jumped up little runt?”

Crow punched him hard to the stomach, doubling Philip over, and followed it up with a right hook to his jaw. The man was a joke, but he knew how to punch. Philip dropped to his hands and knees, gasping in pain and fighting back the urge to vomit. The smell of dog-shit on the agent’s trousers tipped the balance, though, and he threw up on Crow’s shiny new brogues.

Crow went ballistic, kicking and punching him as his partner pinned him to the ground. He hadn’t the strength to fight back. All he could do was cover his head and fight to stay conscious.

The front door crashed open and Matilda flew out. She seized an agent in each paw, and lifted them off the ground. They kicked and thrashed about like convicted criminals on the scaffold, but her grip held firm.

“Leave my man alone!” she hissed, and brought their heads crashing together, face first, with such force as to knock the older agent unconscious and to fracture Crow’s nose. Both agents collapsed to the floor at Matilda’s feet, cowering as she trembled with rage above them.

“You broke my fucking nose!” Crow wailed astutely.

“Don’t swear,” she admonished him. “Or Daddy will come and find you, and he’s not as gentle as me.”

“You heard the lady,” said Philip, ecstatic now the tables had been turned. “Now get your shitty trousers off my land, and fuck off back to your crappy little car before we bury you both in the back garden.”

“How come he can swear and I can’t?” protested Crow, bristling at the injustice of it all. How had it come to this? He had been a damn fine agent for thirty years, and now he was lying on the floor with dog mess on his trousers, being threatened by the Daughter of Family #3, and bad mouthed by her sorry-assed excuse for a boyfriend. It might be his mission in life to exterminate the remaining Families, every last one of the vicious bastards, but he did have a grudging respect for them. They had a Code of Honour; whenever he captured one, they

never told him where the others were, no matter how badly he tortured them with his scalpel set. But this Philip character, standing there with vomit down his face, hiding behind his girlfriend like some damn Nancy-Boy pervert (not that Nancy-Boys had girlfriends, but you get the drift). He had no honour at all.

“Fuck off!” shouted Philip, and kicked him in the ribs for good measure. For a second, he thought that Crow would retaliate, but the agent backed away when Matilda took a threatening step towards him.

He started pulling his semi-conscious colleague back to the car.

“This isn’t over,” he told them.

Philip was reluctant to allow him the last word. He paused, carefully considering how best to respond.

“You smell of shit,” he announced. Hey, it didn’t rank alongside Oscar Wilde in the Top Ten Retorts of All Time, but it sure pissed off Crow, and that was the main thing.

#

Safely back inside the house, Philip retrieved his first-aid box and scouted around inside it for the correct-sized plasters for the cuts to his face. Matilda took them from him, and once he had explained how they worked she applied two or three to his face with surprising delicacy. He had bruises to his ribs and genitals too, but he assured her he could deal with those himself.

“Thank you,” he said. “They would’ve killed me.”

“It’s nothing,” she blushed. “Anyone else would’ve done the same.”

“Mandy wouldn’t, and she’s a better fighter than you!”

She shrugged, and stifled a little smile at being compared favourably to his ex-girlfriend. It was a small victory, but a sweet one.

“You shouldn’t have done it though. They know you’re here now. They’ll be back for you.”

“I know.”

“But you still rescued me anyway.”

“I love you,” she said.

For the first time, this didn’t make him feel physically sick. It was a start, if only a small one. If only he could swap Matilda’s mind with Mandy’s face and body, he would be a very happy man (especially if Mandy’s arse came too).

“Philip?”

“Yes?”

“Are we still getting married?”

He laughed. “Do I have a choice?”

“Not really. But I’d like you to do it because you want to, not because you have to.”

“Your daddy wants me to.”

She hung her head, and all of a sudden he realised that she’d been lying. Her father didn’t want them to marry at all. But did that really help him? If he called the wedding off, she would still go back home, and then they’d all know where he lived (if her brother hadn’t told them already).

Mother hated her. Father liked her though. Her heart was definitely in the right place. And she had now saved his life twice, once from the inbreds and once from Crow. Maybe, just maybe, it would work. She could protect him, and he could shelter her. As long as he never had to see her naked, he could live with it.

“And I want to marry you, too,” he told her, giving her a chaste peck on the cheek and an encouraging smile.

Her eyes lit up, those blue, blue eyes which deserved to be set in a much prettier face than hers. Happiness radiated from her, seeping into him as if by osmosis. He felt much more comfortable with his proposal than he had expected.

“You mean it?” she asked. “You’re not just saying that so Daddy won’t eat you?”

“I **want** to marry you,” he repeated. And just for a second, he really meant it.

#

Vincent came again that night. Mandy wasn’t home this time; she’d stropped off when she found out that the wedding was going ahead. Vincent must have known she was gone. Matilda doubted he’d have risked being spotted by her twice.

She fetched him food from the fridge. Raw chicken and the few remaining slices of wafer-thin ham. He looked weak already; someone his size needed a lot of calories to survive, and he’d clearly not been eating at all. How could he, without hands?

They sat on the lawn together, side by side, just a few feet from the bushes so he could make a quick getaway if necessary. It was the way he had been brought up; always in the shadows, always with an escape route planned. He had lost an uncle and a second cousin to the Outsiders (the latter to Crow, though he did not know this). If he was careless, he too would end up being dissected on an operating table, along with any other members of the Family his capture might compromise.

“Did she see me? Yesterday.”

“No,” Matilda lied. She was getting quite good at it by now. Why give him something else to worry about? She had done him enough harm already, without adding fear of capture to his list of woes.

She decided against mentioning Crow for the same reason. Everything was hopeless now. Today should have been the happiest day of her life. An Outsider had asked her to marry her of his own volition, not because she had threatened or blackmailed him. Not just any Outsider either; it was Philip, no less, the man of her dreams. But Crow knew where she was hiding now. It was only a matter of time before they came for her. She didn't care about herself; as long as she made it to the wedding they could do what they liked with her. It couldn't be any worse than what she could expect from Daddy anyway. But what would they do to Philip without her to protect him? And what would Vincent do when she was gone? Without her to feed him, he was as good as dead.

“Are you still going through with it?” he asked. “The wedding?”

“Yes,” she nodded unhappily. “We're getting married on Saturday.”

“Saturday!”

“I wanted it soon. Before they come for me.”

“They?”

“Daddy, I mean,” she lied. It was becoming a habit. “Before Daddy finds me.” But it wasn't Daddy she was most worried about now. It was Crow.

Vincent's reply, however, made her reassess her evaluation as to which of the two posed the most immediate threat to her wedding plans.

“It won't be long before they come after you. I've heard them whispering. They won't tell me when; they don't trust me anymore. But something's being planned, I know it. I don't think either you or Philip will make it to Saturday. There's no saving him, but there's a place I could hide you if we leave right now.”

Matilda didn't answer for awhile. She had taken the news surprisingly calmly (fatalistically might have been a better word). She stared up at the moon. Not for the first time, she thought she could see Nanny's face in it, gazing benevolently down at her. She had told Philip this after she'd put those plasters on his poor bruised face, but he claimed that Nanny Moon was not real, but just a character on Eastenders. Then he started giggling. She didn't know who the Eastenders were, but she knew shock when she saw it. She had seen countless Wedding Feasts go into it when the Family had started tucking into them at her cousins' weddings. They screamed at first as they were being eaten – terrified, pitiful howls that made her skin crawl but seemed to excite the rest of her relatives – but then their faces would go blank and glaze over. That's what Philip had looked like this afternoon. It had all been too much for him. And it was all her fault.

“Vincent?”

“Yes?”

“Maybe I should call the wedding off after all.”

“I wasn’t expecting you to agree with me. You’ll leave him then? Let me hide you?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m staying with him to the end. It’s just that I’m not sure I should marry him.”

He stared at her incredulously. This did not sound like her at all.

“Ever since you were a child, you’ve wanted to marry an Outsider. The number of times I tried to beat it out of you for your own good, before the Family found out and beat it out of you harder. The hours I spent worrying about you, and worrying that they’d blame Nanny for putting ideas in your head. It was even worse after Nanny died. It just showed what Daddy would do if he had to. And now you’ve finally got what you’ve always wanted, you change your mind? I know our family’s insane, but you’ve got to be the worst of the lot of us!”

“I’m not good enough for him.”

“Don’t you ever say that!” hissed Vincent, with such vehemence that she physically recoiled from him. “Do you hear me? You’re good, you’re kind, and you’d do anything for anyone who shows you the slightest kindness back. You’re the prettiest girl in the House. You’ve not got a bad bone in your body.”

“I tell lies,” she admitted, waiting for him to get angrier still about this.

“I don’t believe you,” he retorted, turning a blind eye to the paradox.

“But he’s so -”

“He’s just fresh meat on legs,” he interrupted. “If only you could see that, we wouldn’t be in this mess. But we are in it, and you say you love him, so that’s that. If you won’t leave him, you’re going to marry him, if I have to drag you to the altar myself.

She cried, and they hugged tightly, with Vincent holding his ruined hands in the air like a surgeon keeping his scrubbed arms clean before surgery. They clung to each other as if their very lives depended on it, as Nanny Moon looked on sadly from above.

#

Mandy sat on a plastic stacking chair in a badly lit room in the annex to Kent Police Headquarters in Maidstone. Crow sat opposite her, a plaster across his nose, his eyes blackened and panda-like. His “buddy” stood in the corner, slightly behind her, which made her feel uncomfortable as she could not see what he was doing. His buddy was wearing sunglasses indoors, which made him more creepy still. It was probably just so he could eye her up without her noticing. Maybe she should have worn a longer skirt, but she found that meetings usually went better if she had her legs out.

She had phoned the Police to tell them about Matilda and her freaky brother. Within twenty minutes, Crow had collected her in his crappy little car. She had wanted to speak to him at

home – she wasn't comfortable driving off into the night with weird little men like these – but he had insisted on driving her back here. She shuddered to think what the neighbours would say if they saw her getting into a Crap-Mobile with two men, especially when one of them had eyes like Kung-Fu-Fucking-Panda!

She still wasn't entirely sure who they even were. She'd asked for ID (as you do), but he had declined to show her any. "I don't need ID, Missy," he'd joked. "If you know who I am, I'd have to kill you!" What a cliché! What a wanker!

She was beginning to think that she'd been abducted – she was a bit nervous about these things since she'd seen Philip being bundled into a transit van – but surely no kidnapper would hide her in a police station? And he seemed to have his own room there. It said "Crow" on the nameplate on the door (no first name or anything). Someone had actually written "Wanker" underneath in black marker pen, which made her smile, but then the thought occurred to her that he must be a real bastard if he reduced even the Police to graffiti!

"I'm told you have some information for me, Missy?" he prompted.

She frowned.

"Don't call me Missy. It makes me sound like a fucking eight year old."

Crow rolled his eyes, which pissed her off even more.

"Would you prefer Ma'am?" he asked, as patronisingly as he could.

"I'd prefer a bit of fucking respect. You haul me halfway across Kent in the middle of the fucking night, sit me in a room with faulty fucking electrics – can you please stop that fluorescent light from flickering like that, it's driving me mental! – and now you're treating me like a fucking retard!"

"That's an awful lot of fucking," he teased.

She had never heard someone trying to flirt with her and provoke her at the same time. If he had been thirty years younger and hadn't looked like he should be chomping on bamboo shoots then she might have rather liked it. But she was fucked if she was going to take this shit from an ugly pensioner with eyes like a fucking raccoon, especially when he reminded her of this creepy caretaker at school who was always trying to convince her to accompany her to the school bike-sheds to "check her tyre pressures".

She got up, and walked to the door, trying to pull the hem of her skirt down a few inches to give the pervert in the corner less of an eyeful of what she had no doubt were the best legs in town. The pervert intercepted her, moving across the door to block her escape. She huffed, but he remained unmoved. She huffed louder, but this didn't work either.

"Did I mention that this room is sound-proofed?" Crow taunted. "You can scream too, if you like, no-one will come."

She returned to her chair, pouting furiously to make it clear that she was not a happy fucking bunny.

“I understand you have some information for me, Ma’am?” Crow prompted once again.

She nodded sulkily.

“Would you care to share it with us?”

No, she would not.

Crow decided that he had used enough stick for the time being, and to switch to the carrot. If that didn’t work, he could then spank her with the stick and poke her intimately with the carrot, which promised to be tremendous fun. In fact, he rather hoped she kept being uncooperative for a while longer.

“You know of the reward, of course.”

“Reward?” she asked, and then repeated it again, trying to sound less eager.

“Five thousand pounds for each of them. Twenty thousand bonus if we take out a whole family. A hundred thousand if we can take out the whole damn race.”

Suddenly, she was all smiles. She crossed her legs, allowing her skirt to ride several inches up her thighs as she did so, and leant provocatively towards him, turning a blind eye to his clumsy attempt at sneaking a quick peek down her cleavage as she did so.

“Well, Mr Crow,” she whispered to her new found friend (albeit an old pervy one). “Where would you like me to start?”

#

Matilda finally released Vincent from her hug. He had relaxed his some time ago, but she had been reluctant to let him go. He made her feel safe, if only just for a moment or two.

The game was almost up. Daddy was coming for her. Crow was coming for her too. It was just a matter of which of them got to her first. Either way, she was dead. It made no odds whether she was to be ripped to pieces by her own father, or quietly executed in a room full of hostile strangers. She had no preference either way. All she wanted was to get married first. To an Outsider. To Philip. After that, they could do what they liked with her, as long as they left Philip alone.

Vincent was right, she had always wanted to marry an Outsider, and at the time she had not cared much which of them it would be. Any of the Wedding Sacrifices would have done for her, but it had taken her an eternity to steal a key to the manacles, and chance after chance had gone begging in the meantime. But now she had seen what the Outside was like. Philip’s father seemed nice, but all the others were just as bad as her family, if not worse. Philip was different though. He had been nice to her when she put the plasters on him. It was no longer enough to be with just any old Outsider, no-one else but Philip would do. She loved him, and she was so very close to marrying him, and Vincent had given them his blessing. She had found happiness. Please Nanny, let them get married before anyone came for her and took it all away again.

Vincent froze. He sniffed the air, and then glanced from side to side like a startled deer. His senses were keener than hers, he had need of them more often. There was someone there. This confused her. She would have expected him to have vanished by now, so what was he still doing here?

He took her arm, wincing as he did so at the pain in his poor crushed hand. He started to back away from the bushes, guiding her back towards the house, which confused her even more. He should have been backing away from the house, not going towards it. She glanced over her shoulder, half expecting to see Mandy at the window again, but the house was in darkness.

“What is it?” she whispered.

Then she heard it. A slight rustling noise, coming from the bushes themselves. Almost inaudible.

“They’ve come for you,” he replied. She could hear the fear in his voice. It scared her. He had never been afraid of anything in his life.

“No,” she shook her head. “They can’t have. I’m getting married on Saturday.”

A shadow stepped out of the hedge. A very large, hard shadow, much bigger even than Vincent. Only one of the Family was that size.

It was Daddy. He had come to take her life.

#

Philip was worried. Mother had gone off in the car again. When she had returned earlier, the Audi had been badly dented – another disagreement with a signpost or a lollipop lady, no doubt – and Mother had been angrier than he had ever seen her before. She had not even thought to check whether the stain had come out of the carpet, so distracted was she. Father had urged her to lie low for a few days in case the “Traffic Police” were out looking for her, but she had stormed off again, God knew where! Hours had passed, but she had not returned.

He shifted uncomfortably on Mother’s fussy sofa, wondering why it was necessary for women to insist upon quite so many cushions (or indeed why it was necessary to have any at all). Father was more used to the clutter, but seemed equally ill at ease.

“Your mother,” he declared, “is a pain in the bottom. But I love her to bits. I’d never forgive myself if anything happened to her. I shouldn’t have teased her like that.”

They phoned the Police, who claimed that they couldn’t go looking for someone who had only been missing for six hours, even if she was a bad-driver and never went out on her own after dark. They had phoned the hospitals, which were equally unhelpful. They had even phoned Mrs Tomkinson from the Bridge Club, who seemed suspiciously chirpy at the news that Mother had gone AWOL. In fact, Father was convinced that she had had a chuckling fit, though she had insisted that she was just trying to suppress a rogue sneeze.

“Tea?” asked Father, out of habit.

“I’ll get it,” Philip replied, relieved to have something to do. Father followed him out to the kitchen, not wanting to be left alone.

“Do you think she’s alright, Philip? She was very stressed about your fiancée. I’m worried she might have-”

“She’s fine,” Philip insisted, with more confidence than he felt. It was true: Mother NEVER went out after dark without Father there with her. She was convinced that the town started crawling with drunks, thugs and prostitutes the moment the sun went down, whereas in truth he had never been able to find any prostitutes there at all (you had to drive to Margate clock-tower for that).

He took a deep breath. Now was not the perfect time to break the news of his wedding date, but at least it would pass the time while they were waiting to see whether Mother would make it safely back home.

“I’m getting married on Saturday.”

“To Matilda?”

“Who else?”

“Voluntarily?”

“Yes.”

Father grasped him by the hand, and shook it warmly.

“Congratulations. I’m really pleased for you.”

This reaction was not what Philip had expected.

“You are?”

“Of course. She’ll be a much better daughter-in-law than Amanda. I can’t stand that woman, if the truth be told.”

“But what about Mother? She hates her. She’s out in the car now, because of her. I thought you’d be furious, that you’d make me call the wedding off.”

“She makes you happy,” the old man replied, squeezing his arm. “If you thought I’d ask you to call off your wedding just to keep the peace with your mother, then maybe you don’t know me so well after all.”

#

Clay-Man lowered his head, and charged at Matilda. His bare feet made surprisingly little sound on the grass for a creature of his size. He ignored Vincent completely; the cripple

could do him no harm. He would deal with his daughter, and then punish his son's disloyalty afterwards. And this time, it would not just be his hands he crushed.

Matilda backed away in terror. She knew she was no match for him, and it did not even occur to her to try to protect herself. She had had beatings from Daddy before - many, many times over - which had left her bruised and emotionally broken, with the occasional fractured bone thrown in for good measure. This time it was different though. He did not mean to hurt her or chastise her. He wanted her dead.

Vincent intervened. As Daddy rushed past him, he barged into him with all his weight, sending him careering off course. Clay-Man fought to stay on his feet, but lost his balance and went crashing down on the neatly-mown lawn.

"Run, Tilly!" Vincent screamed at her.

Matilda backed away towards the house again, but stopped as Daddy climbed back to his feet and closed in on Vincent. She couldn't leave her brother alone. He was no match for Daddy at the best of times, but with two broken hands he would be slaughtered.

Daddy swung a heavy fist at Vincent's head. Vincent ducked too late. He was caught a blow to the temple which sent him staggering backwards. Daddy followed up with a punch to his son's stomach, leaving Vincent doubled over in agony.

Daddy raised his clenched fists high above his head, ready to finish off his son with his trademark "sledgehammer" blow. It was his favourite move, the killer blow that had finished off many opponents before, not all of them Outsiders. Nanny could have attested to its effectiveness had she survived it. Vincent floundered desperately before him, knowing full well what was coming after years of watching Clay-Man in action, but helpless to fend off his own execution.

Matilda struck, copying her father's move and dealing him a sledgehammer blow to the back of his head. It lacked the force of Clay-Man's blows - she had neither his strength nor his height advantage - but it was enough to send him pitching forwards on top of Vincent, as they both collapsed into a heap of thrashing limbs on the ground.

She needed a weapon. She hadn't a hope of seriously hurting him without one, and she needed to hurt him badly if Vincent was to survive. She looked desperately about her for something she could use to narrow the odds. A watering can lay discarded on the grass twenty yards away. Not much use in a fight. But then, a few yards behind that - yes, that would do it!

Matilda made a break for the rake, praying that Vincent could survive long enough for her to come to his rescue. She glanced over her shoulder, to see Vincent struggling to get back to his feet. He knew that to stay on the ground meant certain death. Daddy seized him by the throat and slammed him back down again.

She reached the rake. She turned. Daddy was standing over Vincent. Her brother was now in a kneeling position, his head bowed as if he was about to be knighted in one of Nanny's stories. Daddy raised his fists for the second and final time. The sledge-hammer was coming

again. She had just a second or two to intervene, but she was twenty yards away. It was too far. Too far!

She hurled the rake at Daddy with all her might in a desperate attempt to take him out. It wobbled in the air, and clattered useless and spent a good few yards from Daddy's feet. She had failed, and Vincent would die because of this.

Her brother looked up. Their eyes met. She knew what he was thinking, she always did. She had expected fear, but there was none. Just pleading. He wanted her to run. He was just about to die for her, and all he wanted was for her to be safe. It was almost too much for her to bear.

Clay-Man brought his fists down on Vincent's skull. She heard something splinter (even from this far away) and he crumpled to the ground, as if shot. He lay there on the grass, totally lifeless.

Daddy turned to face her. She was next.

For a second, they faced off, father and daughter measuring each other up across sixty feet of turf in a quiet leafy suburb of a sleepy seaside town in East Kent. But then he lowered his head, ready to charge. She had a five second head-start at best.

She fled.

#

Mother sat in the midnight blue Audi at the end of Philip's road.

Her life had fallen apart. Philip had been kidnapped, beaten, and betrothed to a Gorgon. Father had been worse than useless, failing to support her just when she had most needed him to show a little backbone. And that *animal* had locked her out of her own son's house (for which she was still helping out with the mortgage repayments!), leaving her howling on the doorstep for all the world to hear, while she sat inside gloating at how she had wrecked their lives for her own selfish ends.

She wasn't going to stand for it any longer. She had been through Hell and back for her son: the pain of child birth, paying every spare penny of Father's earnings to provide a privileged upbringing that other children would've killed for, sharing with him her closely guarded system for winning at bridge (even though her had neither the concentration nor the inclination to use it). Amanda was such a lovely girl, pretty and polite and excellent at any card game you cared to mention. If you gave this troll a pack of cards she'd be as likely to shove them up her bottom as shuffle the damn things. How could they possibly think that she would sit back and let her muscle in on their perfect tidy lives and ruin everything for everyone?

When she next saw Philip, she would have words with him, and they would not be nice ones either! She had been too soft with him in the past; it was time that she told him a few home-truths, and maybe got him to go out to work too. If she hadn't frozen to death in the car first, that is. Or if she hadn't been mugged or raped or whatever else people did with respectable middle-aged women whom they discovered sitting cold and alone in their Audis long after all honest people had gone to sleep.

It was then that she saw the two massive figures in the road ahead of her, running towards her as if to accost her, as if to do her harm. Matilda. And someone even larger than her, galloping furiously along behind her. One of her God-forsaken family, no doubt.

Well, she wasn't having it. Enough was enough.

She turned the key in the ignition, and floored the accelerator.

She knew what had to be done.

#

Matilda ran for her life.

Across the garden, round the side of her house, onto the road outside. Then where? Where could she go? Anywhere. Keep in the light, that was her only hope. Daddy hated the light; too much chance of someone seeing him. If she ran along the road beneath the street lights, then maybe she would live after all. And if she didn't, then at least she was putting some distance between him and Philip, who could arrive home at any time.

She ran along the white lines, keeping as far from the dark houses on either side of the road as she could. For a second, she thought the tactic had worked, but then Daddy appeared, loping along the pavement parallel to her, choosing his moment to strike. He had the rake in his hand, giving him added reach, turning her own weapon against her.

She looked ahead again, and ran for all she was worth.

Headlights flicked on ahead of her, full beam, nearly blinding her. She was used to a life of darkness. It had been hard enough getting used to daylight, and the light people stored inside houses, but this was like nothing she had ever imagined before. And then there was the noise too, a noise like Crow's car when he drove away, but louder, much more urgent than that.

She ran to the light, and the light sped towards her in turn. Daddy closed in behind her, throwing all caution to the wind, determined to finish her off while he had the chance, just as he had killed his son moments before. She had expected him to disappear back into the shadows, but now he was in the road behind her, chasing her down, wielding the rake like a club. The distance between them shrank quickly. He was almost within range.

The light was getting closer too. Five hundred yards away, four hundred, two hundred. And now she could hear Daddy, panting with exertion and anger as he prepared to take her down. Pain exploding in her head as the rake crashed into her right ear, sending her sprawling to the far kerb in a petrified heap of agony. She had lost. It was time for her to die.

Something flashed past her; large, fast, midnight blue. There was a crunch of metal on bone, then a thud, a noise of screaming metal, and silence. Then laughter, weird deranged laughter than made her shake with fear. It didn't sound human to her.

She struggled to her feet. It was hard to see anything, as dark sticky blood kept trickling into her eyes. But she could make out a car in the road, with the door open. And there was Daddy

in the road behind it, one leg bent at an impossible angle, his eyes wide and unblinking. Philips' mother knelt at his side, shrieking in unhinged delight as she battered his massive head with her tiny arthritic hands.

"Don't fuck with me," she kept repeating. "Don't fuck with me!"

"Daddy doesn't like swearing," Matilda wanted to tell her. But she couldn't. Besides, Daddy would never care about swearing again.

#

When Philip got home, he found his mother tucked up in bed in the spare room, and Matilda squatting morosely by the bushes at the far end of the garden. There was dried blood in her hair – lots of it – and a gaping wound just above her ear that he could have stuck his fingers in, had he been so minded.

His first thought was that Mother had attacked Matilda. God knows how, it would have hardly been an even contest! But no, Matilda told him, Mother had come to her rescue. Daddy had come for her, and chased her down the road, and Mother had run him down just in the nick of time. She had saved her life. Maybe Mother loved her after all.

She was sad, desperately sad. There were sitting there together in the garden for a full quarter of an hour before she'd told him that Vincent had been there too. She had witnessed him being "sledge-hammered" and thought him dead. But when she went to find him, he was gone. Maybe he was alive after all. Or maybe the Family had taken him. She had to find out which.

Philip took a few nervous steps away from the bushes, scouring the darkness around him for signs of any of his fiancée's family who might still be lurking in the undergrowth. Matilda gave him a sad, reassuring smile.

"They're not there now."

"How do you know?"

She shrugged.

"I just do."

He sat back beside her, and put a comforting hand on her back. It felt strange to touch her, even now. She was on the verge of tears again.

"I'm sure he'll be okay. He's pretty tough. It runs in the family."

A half-smile.

"Will they come back?"

She hesitated for a few seconds before replying. Maybe she was pondering his question. Or maybe she was deciding whether to tell him the truth rather than just what he wanted to hear.

“No,” she said. “Daddy’s gone. It’s all over now.”

“Where has Daddy gone, by the way? There’s no sign of him outside. Mother’s car’s not there either.”

“They came for him. Some men in a van. Wearing clothes like Crow. They took the car too.”

She seemed so flat and lifeless. She was worried about her brother. She had been through so much tonight. He wanted to cheer her up, help her see the bright side. It wasn’t all bad news. Clay-Man was no longer a threat, after all.

“At least your father’s dead,” he pointed out. “He was an animal.”

She gave him a hurt look. This puzzled him. What had he said now? He was used to being in the wrong with Mandy, but was struggling to see how he could have offended Matilda just by slagging off the man who had spent the week trying to kill them both.

“He was my Daddy,” she replied.

“He beat you,” Philip argued, partly to reassure her and partly to prove himself in the right. “He tried to batter your head in with my garden rake. He deserved everything he got.”

“He was just protecting the Family. There used to be hundreds of us. We’re down to just three Families now. He knew I could’ve led Crow to the House. He was doing what he felt was right to save their lives. How could I blame him for that?”

“And what about Vincent? What if he’s killed him? Was that right too?”

She cried, great gushing sobs that wracked her whole body. He tried to cradle her in his arms, though it felt awkward, guilty at upsetting her after all she had been through tonight. She snuggled into him like a sleeping child. They sat in the garden, holding one another, as she gave up her grief for a brother she believed to be dead.

#

Matilda had misjudged Mandy after all. All this time she had felt that Mandy had resented her and wanted her out of Philip’s life. Maybe even wanted her dead! But here she was, helping her look for wedding dresses in the little box she called “Online”.

Mandy sat on a computer chair, Matilda on a giant bean-bag beside her. There were hundreds and hundreds of wedding dresses in the “online” box, in every shape and size. Mandy said they were all new, too, so none of them would have blood or damp-stains on them like hers. They had even found a shop in the box called “Tranny Weddings” where there were dresses big enough for her to wear, with next day delivery. She had resigned herself to wearing her old dress, with the blood washed out, but Mandy wouldn’t hear of it. She wouldn’t let her friend get married in a second hand wedding dress. She had said they were friends! Matilda was so grateful she had invited her to the wedding.

They spent the afternoon doing friend-like things. Mandy showed her how to put on make-up, they ate some meat (“ladies-that lunch” Mandy called it) and talked about themselves to each other. Mandy told her that she should have been at work today, but after everything that happened last night she had phoned in sick so she could “be there” for her mate. Matilda was a bit worried by the reference to them being mates, until Mandy explained that it was just another way of saying “friend”, which is what they both were.

She encouraged Matilda to “open up” about what life had been like for her in the House. Matilda was hesitant at first, but grew in confidence as Mandy nodded approvingly and hugged her during the sad bits. The only thing she wouldn’t say was where she lived. That would seem disloyal to the Family somehow, and she had done them enough harm as it was, especially after what she had done to Daddy.

She told her about Nanny. Nanny was an Outsider too. Mandy would’ve liked her. She was funny, and she was sweet, and she was wise. She had been the Wedding Feast at Grand-Daddy’s Wedding, but Grand-Daddy was so taken by her that he married her and ate his fiancée instead. That had caused quite a stir, and it had been over a year before the two Families had spoken again.

Daddy had hated Nanny. He resented her for making him half-Outsider. Two of his brothers – her uncles – had looked like Outsiders, so they had been eaten at birth. There had been some discussion, apparently, about whether to eat Daddy too, but he was so big and lumpy that they decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. After that, he was determined to be the biggest of them all, the strongest of them, and the one who hated the Outside the most. To the others, Outsiders were just food, but for Daddy they were his chance to show loyalty to the Family. In his way, he was as needy as Matilda, but father and daughter just craved acceptance from different people, and went about getting it in different ways.

It was Daddy who had decreed that there should be no more female Wedding Feasts, in case history repeated itself. Only men from then on; the women in the Family knew their place and wouldn’t have been tempted by the spindly little people he brought them for dinner in any event.

It was why he had been so hard on her and Vincent. They were one quarter Outsider and he hated them for it as it reminded the Family of the shame Nanny had brought upon them all. Vincent had been able to win him round by being as strong and as ruthless as his peers, but what could she do to prove herself to him? And had she ever wanted to anyway? She looked like Family but felt like Nanny inside. It was like she had the worst of both worlds. Maybe Philip would have loved her more if it had been the other way round (though perhaps Nanny might have looked a bit too old for him).

The first thing Daddy did after Grand-Daddy died was to eat Nanny. Some of the Family had objected as they had all grown fond of her, and it somehow seemed disrespectful to Grand-Daddy’s memory to eat his widow. But Daddy had faced them all down, and they backed off. Even Vincent, who had loved her so much. She couldn’t blame him though. Daddy’s word was Law.

“So what are you going to do about Vincent?” Mandy enquired, resting a consoling hand on her knee. “You must be very worried.”

She nodded miserably.

“I want to go Home to see if he’s there. But I can’t. Someone would see me go, and tell them where I’ve been to, and they’d come for my Family. I’m no good at keeping to the shadows like Daddy and Vincent. No-one ever showed me how.”

“I could drive you there. No-one would see you if I hide you in the car. It would be our little secret.”

“You’d do that for me?”

“Of course I would. That’s what friends are for.”

“And you wouldn’t tell anyone where we’ve been. Not ever?”

Mandy smiled, and rubbed her leg affectionately. “What do you think, Mate?”

Matilda beamed. That “mate” word again. They were mates who chose wedding dresses together. And now she could go back Home and see if Vincent was alive or not. All thanks to Mandy. She had so much to thank her for.

“Best not tell Philip, though,” her mate cautioned. “He’ll only worry this close to the wedding. I’ll drive you there tonight, just the two of us.”

She nodded. She wanted to hug Mandy in gratitude, but was worried she might squeeze her too tightly. Tonight, she would find out whether or not her brother was dead.

#

Matilda asked Amanda to drop her off in the next street along. It was a risk covering the last few hundred yards on foot, but it was 3 o’clock in the morning and the odds were in her favour. She didn’t want Mandy to come too close to the House. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust her, not now they were mates. She just didn’t want to risk her new friend being eaten.

She stood at the door of the House. It was her first time back there since she had made her escape with Philip what seemed like months ago.

She fought back the urge to turn and run. She had spent her whole life trying to get away from this place. Why should she risk everything by returning there? Her freedom, her wedding, her life were all at stake. But she knew the answer. She had to go inside. For Vincent. If he was still alive, he would be here. There was nowhere else for him to go.

She pushed the door open (it was not the Family way to lock doors, as the only use they had for keys was for manacles). The stench hit her, the smell of eighty years of Family habitation with no running water. She had never noticed it when she had lived here. It was unpleasant, but comforting at the same time. It was the smell of Home.

She took a deep breath to steady her nerves, and stepped into the hallway, closing the door quietly behind her. The darkness was complete, but the silence was not. She could hear

laboured breathing from the far room. It sounded as if someone in there was scared, or injured. Quite probably both.

Hoping against hope that it was Vincent (if he was breathing, then at least he was still alive), she went to investigate.

#

Mandy's mobile rang. It was Philip. No "how-are-you-Darling?" He came straight to the point.

"Mandy? Have you seen Matilda? She's gone!"

He sounded panicky. You would have thought he'd have been glad to be shot of her!

"What am I?" she ranted, upset by the concern he was showing for her misshapen love rival. "Her fucking baby-sitter?"

"You two spent the whole day together yesterday, and now she's gone. I'm not stupid. What have you done with her? We're supposed to be getting married tomorrow!"

"I'm doing you a favour," she snapped, and hung up on him.

The phone rang again. She snapped it open. He launched straight into her.

"What's going on?"

She hung up again, and turned the mobile off. He was going to be seriously pissed off at her, she knew. Tough fucking titty. He deserved everything he got. He'd dumped her for the Elephant Man's ugly sister. It was he who should be apologising to her.

She had tried to follow Matilda down the street, but the troll had been better at keeping to the shadows than she had given herself credit for. It was probably inherited, passed down from one freaky generation to the next without them even knowing it. She had narrowed it down to one street, so she had parked the car halfway down it so she could keep an eye out for any signs of life. Matilda was in one of these houses, and she would be rich if she could work out which of them it was.

She had offered to sell Matilda to Crow, but he wasn't interested. "I know where she is already," he'd said. "I'm not paying you for information I already have, Missy!" That fucking "Missy" word again! "What I want is the whole family. Talk to her. Gain her trust. Find out where they're all holed up, and you'll have a small fortune. You could buy yourself something pretty."

Patronising bastard, she thought, her fingers digging into the steering wheel. "Buy yourself something pretty" in-fucking-deed! Okay, as it happened, she probably would – she'd dreamed of buying a walk-in wardrobe full of Christian Louboutins for as long as she could remember - but there was no need for him to talk fucking down to her!

She flicked the radio off to concentrate better. Where was that big fucking moose? Sooner or later, she would have to come out of one of the doors in the street, and when she did Mandy could buy all the shoes she wanted, with matching handbags too!

#

Matilda inched along the hallway whilst her eyes gradually became re-accustomed to the darkness. She could still hear the breathing – panting, she should say – from the room at the end of the passageway. She honed in on it. She prayed it was Vincent. She hated the thought that he might be in pain, but it was better that than if he was dead.

Something stirred in Daddy's room as she felt her way past it. Not Daddy; there was no doubt at all that he was dead. But one of the Family, no doubt. They would all be awake now, they did all of their sleeping during the day, when it was too light to go in search of meat. Her only hope was that they were out, or that they were busy, or both. If they found her here, she would be finished. Nowhere to hide, no hope of fighting them off, only Mandy for back-up (and she would never let her new friend risk her life in a futile attempt to save her). Discovery meant death.

She stopped outside Daddy's room, willing whatever was inside to settle back down. Again, she felt the urge to run, to get as far away from this place as she could. But she resisted. She had to know if Vincent was here. And she had to save him if he was.

Movement again, stopping and starting and finally stopping again. She waited for two or three minutes and then pushed ahead towards the end of the hallway, towards Vincent or oblivion.

It took her a full ten minutes to inch her way along the rest of the passageway. Eventually, she came to a halt outside the far door. This was the same room from which she and Philip had made their escape. How ironic if there were Family in here, ready to pull her to pieces the moment she stepped inside.

Another deep breath, and then she pushed the door open. If anything, it was even darker in here, and the stench of excrement was definitely worse.

“Vincent?” she whispered, praying to she knew not whom that it would be her brother who answered her. The panting seemed to get louder in response, as if coming from every corner of the room, disorientating her in the darkness. Her senses reeled as the panting, the smell, the all-consuming blackness overwhelmed her. She felt faint. It was all too much. She couldn't do this. She should go. This was not Vincent, she'd know if it was.

But despite everything, she had to be sure. Fighting back the panic which choked at her throat, she willed her heavy legs to take her over to the black-out curtains. She touched bare wall first. She had lived here forever, how could she not know where the curtains were? She fumbled in one direction, and then the other, and heaved an audible sigh of relief when her fingers closed round the thick and filthy material. What was the point in sighing quietly when someone was panting so loudly just a couple of yards away?

She pulled back the curtain a few inches. She could see Mandy's car right outside, but her friend had not seen her; she was holding something to her ear and talking into it. No help there. She had to deal with this alone.

She turned to see what was sharing the room with her.

She was right. It was not Vincent.

The creature was staring at her. A man. Naked and chained. Terrified. A Wedding Feast, just like Philip.

She took a step forward, wanting to free him. Just that, nothing more. She had her Outsider, she neither needed nor desired another one. But she couldn't just leave him there. She was as much a part of his world now as the one she had previously inhabited, (yet at the same time she knew she would never really be fully part of either). She would set him free, and find her brother.

It was then that her plans were shattered. As she took a step towards him, he screamed, rattling his chains in panic as he tried in vain to flee from her. Doors opened in the passageway outside. Hurried footsteps approached.

And then they all came in, cornering her, cutting off all hope of escape.

#

Mandy saw a front door open. Just by a foot or two, and then it was closed again. Something had just crept inside. She hadn't seen anything go in, but they were good at skulking around, these trolls. And if it was indeed one of them, she could go shoe-shopping on Monday. And on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday....

She got out the car and scuttled forwards, bending at the waist to keep low. She wasn't sure why, but they always did it on telly, so it must be the sensible thing to do.

She stood outside the house. What now? She wasn't going inside, that would be fucking suicidal! She would just peek through the curtains, checking that whatever was there looked like it should be chasing Billy Goats Gruff across bridges, and sod-off to collect her reward. If it meant that Matilda would end up captured and dissected while still alive, then so much the fucking better.

The house was in darkness. Try as she might, she could find no way to peer past the curtains. They were drawn tighter than a gnat's chuff. She could try the back garden (or the back yard, whatever these people had instead of gardens), but felt a lot happier doing this under the street lights, where she felt safe. She would have to try looking through the letter-box, and hope for the best.

She flipped the letter-box open, but her view was obscured by a row of brush-like bristles. Fuck knows what they were for! Insulation maybe, or perhaps to stop people like her spying on the people inside, the secretive bastards! She slid her fingers into the letter box to push the bristles aside. There was another row of the buggers further back! She had lovely slim hands though (if she said so herself), slim enough to slide right through the letter-box and

push the second set of bristles apart too. She had got quite a lot of practice at prising things apart since Philip had introduced her to his funnel-and-Maltesers game.

She peered in, using both hands to hold the letter box open and keep the bristles apart, giving her a fair view of the passageway inside. She thought she heard a noise on the other side of the door, a sound like slippers on carpet (not that trolls wear slippers). There was a light on upstairs, which cast just enough light into the hallway for her to have a good look around. A coat on the bannister, a dusty old –

That noise again, closer than before. If whatever it was would take just one more step forward, she could get a good look at it, and would be on her way to Crow before you could say Jack-fucking-Robinson.

She screamed. It had her fingers! It was tugging on them, trying to pull her hands into the letter-box. She couldn't break free. It was going to eat her hands, or hold her there until someone else came to bundle her inside! Why had she come here? Why had she risked her life for a few pairs of beautiful fucking shoes?

She tried to scream, but nothing came out. Her wrists raked painfully against the letter-box as the thing inside tugged her further and further towards it.

Mercifully, she blacked out.

#

The Wedding Feast gibbered in fright as the Family filed into the room.

Vincent came first, bruised and battered, but still very much alive. Behind him followed the women-folk – Mummy included – and a handful of children, blinking furiously in the weak street-light which filtered past the curtain which she had not fully closed. It was the first time they had encountered light in their short unhappy lives.

“Vincent!” she cried, hugging him. He hugged her back, ignoring the pain from hands which oozed infection.

The others crowded around her: mothers, aunts, nephews, nieces. She had expected them to rip her to pieces, but they were all over her like toddlers round a new puppy, Mummy in particular. It was only then that she realised how much she had missed them all. Maybe deep down she was still part Family after all.

“Tilly, you've got to go,” Vincent urged. “They'll be back any minute. ALL of them.”

“They're out foraging,” Mummy explained. “Angela's getting married tomorrow, to Victor (your old Beloved). We've all been so miserable this week, what with you gone and Daddy missing, that Uncle said we could have two Feasts this time to cheer us all up. They're out looking for the second one now.”

“Two Wedding Feasts!” beamed Angela smugly. “No-one's had two for years! You were only going to have the one, weren't you? Good job really, you would never have sneaked past

Uncle with two of them in tow! And all three Families are coming. This'll be the best wedding ever!"

"Tilly!" Vincent pleaded. "There's no time for this."

"I needed to make sure you were all right." She stroked his face. "I thought you were dead. When -"

She stopped in mid-sentence. It occurred to her that the others probably didn't know what had happened to Daddy, so it was best if she said no more. They thought that Daddy was just missing. Best leave it that way, in case she got her brother into even more trouble.

"I'm fine. Now go! Please!"

Matilda watched the Wedding Feast as he cowered miserably on the floor nearby. She still felt the urge to set him free, as she had his predecessor. But she thought better of it. She had her own man now. There was no point ruining Angela's wedding for nothing. Blood was thicker than water, and the room would be flooded with it by the time the night was spent.

Vincent wrapped an arm round her shoulder, his hand hanging loose on the other side, and guided her towards the front door.

"Okay, I'm going," she grinned. "Just promise me one thing."

"What?"

"That you'll bring Mummy to my wedding tomorrow."

"I can't. We'd be seen."

"I do love a good wedding," Mummy interjected.

"Just come into the back of the church for five minutes then, before the guests arrive. To wish me luck. The Family will all be asleep during the day, so they won't even notice you're gone."

"Okay," he said, without conviction.

"Promise?"

He didn't reply. She halted.

"Tilly, you've got to hurry. They'll be back any second. I'm serious."

She refused to budge. The others flocked around her, hugging her, saying their goodbyes, and she felt the urge to cry again. She knew that she would never see them again. If her Uncles did not kill her before or after the wedding, then Crow surely would. It was hard enough saying her farewells to everyone for the last time, but she couldn't bear the thought that this would be the last time she ever saw Vincent and Mummy as well. Especially not like this, rushing out the door, surrounded by fussing relatives, with no opportunity to tell them both

how much she loved them. They had to come to the wedding, so she could see them one last time. It would just be too sad otherwise.

“Okay, I’ll be there,” he huffed, giving in to her as he had done time and time again for as long as they could both remember. “Now go!”

The Family didn’t lie. If he said he’d be there, then he would keep his promise. And Mummy, too. Her wedding day would now be perfect and complete. Everyone she loved in this World would be there to see her get married.

She hugged her brother, and made her way to the front door, trying not to trip over the misshapen little children who frolicked at her feet.

#

Mandy very nearly had a heart-attack when Matilda leapt excitedly into the front passenger seat of her car.

“Vincent’s okay,” she beamed. “And he’s bringing Mummy to my wedding!”

“Where did you come from?”

“The House, of course.”

“Which house?” asked Mandy, clinging on to the steering wheel as if her life depended on it. Her hands looked bruised.

“What is it?” Matilda asked. “What’s happened?”

“Nothing,” snapped Mandy. “Now get back under that fucking blanket so we can go back home.”

“Daddy doesn’t like swearing,” Matilda told her, with a lot less conviction than normal. In fact, if she didn’t know better, Mandy would have sworn she was taking the piss.

“Daddy’s fucking dead,” Amanda replied, and pulled out into the street without waiting for Matilda to hide herself under the blanket. After what had just happened to her, she didn’t really give a toss any more.

#

Four bulky figures watched from the shadowy alleyway as Mandy drove away, melting into the darkness as she passed them by. One of them held a sack over his left shoulder, with feet protruding from the bottom. It had been a productive night. For some reason, there always seemed to be lone men roaming around in the park after dark every weekend, and it was an easy way to stock up for the Wedding Feast. He was the new Head of the Family unless his brother came home again. Giving Angela two men for her Wedding Feast was a good way to show the others that he was now the Alpha Male.

“That was Matilda,” he growled as the car went by. He had mixed emotions. He would know the car again; it wouldn’t take long to track her down now. On the other hand, he felt shame that a niece of his could share a car with an Outsider, making no attempt to hide herself, and no attempt to eat her companion. She had always been weak though. She was too much like her grandmother.

“We take her tomorrow night,” he declared. “We bring her Wedding Feast back here with her. And then we eat them both alive.”

The sack groaned. He was waking up in there. He slapped the sack against the wall to stun the Wedding Feast inside. It was time to go home, before the dawn-light brought the Outsiders scurrying out of their little houses. His daughter Angela would be so pleased when he showed her what he had brought her. With two sacrifices there to distract the guests, she had an excellent chance of making it through the ceremony virtually unmolested.

#

It was the morning of the wedding.

Philip was going to church from his parents’, and Tilly from his house. He was surprised that she knew of the tradition about the bride and groom staying apart the night before they married, but she insisted that it was a custom that Outsiders had borrowed from the Families (rather than the other way round). The Family would never let a groom spend the night with the bride before the wedding, because he was liable to get over-excited and eat her. Philip had assured her that there was no danger of him trying to snack on her in the early hours of the morning, but she had insisted they keep the tradition in any event, just to be on the safe side.

Father was supposed to be keeping an eye on her this morning, and driving her to the church in his now severely dented Audi. He had phoned his son during the night, though, to say that Matilda’s bedroom door was open, and there was no sign of her anywhere. Mandy had been his first port of call, but she had been extremely evasive when he had called, and had ended up hanging up on him and turning off her phone. She was up to something. Then again, she always was.

He was genuinely worried about Tilly. He had surprised himself at this. He should have been pleased if Mandy had somehow managed to dispose of her, as the wedding would then be called off. But for some inexplicable reason, he was desperate that she should be okay. And he knew how devastated Matilda would be if the wedding fell through. He was not used to feeling empathy. It felt rather strange.

Mandy came to see him at about nine that morning. Tilly was not with her.

“How’s your mother?” she asked as she brushed past him into the lounge. Mother sat in a corner, staring vacantly into space. Her left eye flickered from time to time, but other than that she was completely motionless. She had been like this ever since she had woken up that morning. If she hadn’t pulled herself together by Monday, he would have to take her to the doctor’s for some medication.

“Still in shock,” he sighed. “What have you done with Tilly?”

“It’s “Tilly” now is it?” she pouted.

“Matilda, then. Where is she?”

“Back at yours. Don’t worry. She’s perfectly safe. We just went out for her Hen Night.”

“Mandy, what’ve you done?”

“Nothing. She just wanted me to drop her round to see her family before your wedding.”

Philip froze. Why would she want to see her family, when they were all so desperate to kill her (and – more to the point – kill him as well!) And why would Mandy risk her life taking her there? He had a strong sense of foreboding. Their situation was desperate enough as it was, without Tilly throwing fat on the fire.

“You’re sure she’s okay?”

“I’m fine, by the way, thank you for fucking asking!”

She held up her hands for sympathy. They were covered in cuts, from the knuckles right the way up to the wrists, as if she had been in a bare-knuckle fight.

“They did that to you?” he asked, puzzled. Mandy was a hard little bitch, but she would have been no match for one of those things. There was no way she’d have escaped with just cuts and bruises if they had confronted her.

“Well, no, not exactly,” she squirmed. “But you didn’t know that. You could at least have fucking asked!”

“Do you have to keep swearing?”

“If you mention “Daddy” not liking it, I’m gonna gouge your fucking eyes out!”

“How did you do it, then?”

She squirmed again, and shrugged, avoiding all eye contact as she did so. He pressed her, but she was more evasive still. She eventually gave in when he threatened to cancel their last remaining joint credit card (funded by his mother) if she didn’t start talking straightaway.

“She went in alone. I waited in the car. Then I saw a door open and close, so I went to investigate, as you do. The curtains were closed, so I peered in through the letter-box to see to see if she was okay or if she needed any help. And then someone grabbed me by the hands and tried to pull me though the letter-box. Oh, Philip, I was so scared, I thought they were going to eat me there and then.

She threw herself into his arms, pressing her gorgeous body tight against his, knowing the effect it would have on him.

Philip shifted uncomfortably. He felt himself becoming aroused, as she wriggled around in his arms, grinding herself against him. Within seconds, there would be physical evidence of

this arousal, and then she would know he was at her mercy. He knew he should push her away. It was his wedding day, after all! But she was upset; she had been assaulted by monsters. How could he reject her after all she had been through?

Besides, he reasoned as she pressed her pelvis into his, what harm could a twenty second hug do? Or a fifty second hug, maybe, if she turned out to be really upset?

“Was it one of them?” he asked her. “One of the Family?”

“No,” she said carelessly, forgetting herself in her triumph as she felt something hard press against her left hip through his wedding trousers. “It was some old bloke letting his cat back in the house. He got really pissed off with me when he saw me waving my fingers through his fucking letter-box, and gave them a good tug to scare the shit out of me! Oh Philip, it was awful. I’ve been manhandled by a dirty old pensioner!”

He pushed her away. She had that look in her eyes, though, that knowing look of hers she usually reserved for him during the Maltesers game. I know your weaknesses, that look said. You’ll do anything for me when you’re horny, and right now you’re horny as Fuck. He shouldn’t have hugged her. And he certainly shouldn’t have prodded her in the stomach with his cock!

“You still want me,” she whispered, and she started to strip. She peeled off her top slowly, throwing it provocatively to the floor at his feet. She slipped her skirt down those long sexy legs of hers, and kicked that in his direction too. She was wearing stockings and suspenders. She only ever wore those when she wanted something from him. This was planned, she had come here to trap him, her very own Wedding Feast. He should protest, tell her to put her clothes back on and get out. But she was unhooking her bra, and it would’ve seemed rude to stop her now.

She paused, watching him ache for her. He cast his eyes hungrily over her body, tanned and toned, clad in nothing but a thong, fish-net stockings and a come-fuck-me smile. She had that look of triumph on her face, but that just made him want her even more.

She hooked her thumbs into the waist-band of her thong and slid it lapdancer-like down her legs, bending only at the waist, keeping eye contact with him throughout. That look was just so damn sexy. She was naked now, and ready for him. What chance did he have against tactics like this? He was a man for Goodness sake. Who could blame him?

He started to unbutton his wedding-shirt. He had never promised Matilda that he would be faithful. Their relationship was platonic. This was just his last fling, anyway. Besides, if the brides in her family usually got shagged by the wedding guests, then maybe she wouldn’t even mind about this anyway.

She handed him her knickers as a trophy.

“Come and get me,” she invited him.

“I can’t do this,” he muttered unconvincingly, hoping she would talk him into it.

“Would you like me to leave?” she teased. “Find someone else who’s man enough to fuck me instead?”

She stepped towards him, pressing her naked body against him, kissing his neck, his cheek, his lips. He slid his hands across her bare back, and then downwards over her hips, on to that beautiful firm bottom of hers. He squeezed it tightly, pulling her towards him, enjoying the sensation of his fingers digging deep into her cheeks.

She slipped away, and undid his belt.

“The only rule,” she teased, “is that you can’t leave your socks on.”

Something caught his eye. There was something going on behind her. She turned playfully to follow his gaze, and her face fell almost as far as his.

“Oh fuck,” said Philip.

Mother was staring at them encouragingly, smiling grotesquely on just the one side of her face. She was giving a “thumbs up” to Amanda with one hand, encouraging her to win him back from the troll who had ruined her life.

“Oh fuck,” Philip repeated. “I just nearly shagged you in front of my mother!”

“We could go upstairs,” Mandy suggested. “Finish what we’ve started.”

She tried to unzip his trousers, but he batted away her hand. The moment had gone. All passion had drained from him the moment he had laid eyes on his mother’s gloating face. He had just come so very close to making the biggest mistake of his life.

He gave Mandy back her knickers. Sulkingly, she snatched them back from him.

“Better put those on quick,” he advised. “It can get pretty drafty in church.”

#

Matilda was in her wedding dress already, the one from “Tranny Weddings” which Mandy had helped her pick. There were still a couple of hours to go before the wedding, but she couldn’t wait that long to put it on. The sooner she was married, the better!

Father told her she looked beautiful. He must have been lying, of course, but it was nice of him to say so anyway.

There was a regimental knock on the door and her heart sank. She knew who it was before Father had answered it. It was Crow. This time, he was on his own. She tried to hide under the bed upstairs, but there was no room, and she was a bit freaked out in any event by the magazines she found there. Why would so many little women want to do such uncomfortable looking things to each other, and what was that woman dressed as Snow-White doing with those cheeky little men with bushy beards? She didn’t remember the dwarfs all being naked in the stories Nanny used to tell, and they certainly weren’t trying to do *that* with the handles of their shovels!

Father coaxed her out, pointing out that she was making her wedding dress dirty. He didn't seem too keen on Philip's picture books either. He obviously preferred the traditional fairy tales, like she did.

Crow was polite this time. He just wanted to talk, he said. Ten minutes, and he would leave her alone to get married. Father said that sounded reasonable, so – against her better judgment – she gave in.

Father went off to the corner-shop to fetch custard creams for their guest, while Crow made himself comfortable in the living room. She had an overwhelming sense of dread. She was so close to the wedding, Father would be driving her there in just an hour or so. Crow surely couldn't spoil it all for her now.

“We know where they are,” came his opening gambit. “Your Family. We can pick them up whenever we like.”

She shook her head. She wasn't stupid. If he knew where they were, he would have taken them by now. They were fine last night. He was trying to trick her. He had to be. She said nothing.

“Amanda told me where you went,” he explained. “I don't know the house number yet, but I'm pretty sure I know which street they're in. Tell me the number, and I'll go easy on them.”

She shook her head again.

“No. They're my family.”

“They want you dead.”

“They're still my family.”

“They want Philip dead.”

“Vincent doesn't.”

“He's your brother, right? The one who was round here?”

How did he know that? Mandy, of course! She must have told him everything. They were supposed to be friends. She felt crushed, betrayed. But maybe Crow had beaten Mandy as he had beaten Philip. There wasn't much of her, of course she would have told him what he wanted to know in the end. Maybe it didn't count as a betrayal if it had been beaten out of her. Maybe they were still mates after all.

She longed for Philip to be here, to look after her. He would know what to say, he knew how this world worked. Father could've helped her, too. She needed someone to stick up for her, someone to stop Crow tricking her into saying things she didn't want to say.

“You're getting married today. I could take you in now, stop the wedding.”

She writhed miserably. She'd do anything for the wedding to go ahead. Well, almost anything. But losing her brother was too high a price to pay.

"Tell me the house number."

She shook her head.

"Look, I could call in the troops now, if I want. House to house search until I found the one we're looking for. There's what, sixty houses in that street, seventy at most. The only thing is that something like that gets on the news. I don't like publicity. But I'll do it if I have to, better that than they get away. So tell me the number."

She looked at her feet, like a naughty child caught raiding the fridge at night. He was right. He knew roughly where they were. He could find them if he wanted. She couldn't tell him the house number though. Vincent was there, and Mummy too. Her whole family. And those poor children. She couldn't have their blood on her hands, even if they were doomed already. She stayed silent.

"I'll make you a deal, Lady. Tell me the number, and you'll have your wedding. I'll pick you up straight afterwards of course, I can't let you go. But you get to be married first."

"I can't," she whispered. "Vincent's there."

"Same deal for your brother, then. Amanda tells me that you've invited him to the ceremony. Your Mum, too. So they wouldn't be there when we go in after the others. They'll be safe."

She shook her head yet again. Her head was starting to hurt. He was confusing her. She needed time to think, but he was talking so fast, not giving her any breathing space at all. She needed to hold out until Father got back. Everything would be okay with him there.

"Okay, you want my best deal? You and Vincent get immunity. Give us the rest of the family, and we put the two of you under house arrest somewhere. Somewhere in the country maybe, somewhere nice. Just the two of you."

"I don't believe you."

"Sure you do. You can save him, Tilly. It's all down to you."

"I can't tell you!" she screamed at him, her frustration boiling over. "You want to kill my whole family. How can I betray them just to save myself?"

She was crying again. She had lost count of the number of times she had been in tears since she'd left the House. She hardly ever cried at Home, no matter what Daddy did to her, but it all seemed so much worse out here when she didn't know the rules. All she wanted was to marry Philip. Why wouldn't they let her? They could do what they liked with her afterwards, but please, please, please could they just let her have her wedding first?

"I'm going to get them either way," he pointed out. "By the end of today, they're all going to be in my custody. It's down to me to decide what to do with them. You don't want me to be in a bad mood when I make that decision, do you?"

“I **know** what you’re going to do with them,” she hissed. “We **all** know.”

“You seem like a sensible girl,” he went on. “Let’s consider your options. Option One, you tell me the house number, and you get to have your wedding. Then I relocate you and Vincent to a nice little house in the country. Hell, I’ll even throw in a place for your Mum if you like, if it seals the deal.

Option Two, I arrest you now, send in the troops, and wipe out your whole family this afternoon. No wedding, no family, all dead, Vincent the first one to go, as painfully as possible. All that bloodshed on your conscience.

All I want is a number, Tilly, and you and your brother are safe. No-one’ll know you told me, it’ll be our little secret. Tell me the number and this will all be over.”

“Please leave me alone,” she begged. “I’m so confused. You make it sound like the right thing to do, but it can’t be. They’re my family!”

“I’m just telling it as it is. Trying to make you see sense. You’ve got to make up your mind now. I’m not going to offer you all of this again. The moment your father-in-law walks back through the front door with his custard creams, all offers are withdrawn, you understand me? I’ll take you in, and send in the Army to kill them all. You can’t want that to happen, surely? You’d never forgive yourself.”

As he spoke, the front gate opened. Father was back! He was trying to panic her. It was working. How could she decide what to do in just a few seconds? If he kept his promise, then everything he said made sense. Better to save Vincent if she could. But what if he was lying? And how could she sell out her own family anyway?

Father’s key was in the lock.

“And what about Philip?” Crow asked.

What little colour she had left drained from her face.

“What about him?”

“He’s an accomplice. He’s been sheltering you all this time. And he helped you assault me and my buddy. I could lock him up for a very long time.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Or he could disappear altogether. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve done that. Maybe lose his parents too, so there’s no-one left to ask any questions. It’s all down to you.”

“Forty seven.”

“What is?”

“The number. The number you want. They’re at forty seven. Promise me you won’t hurt Philip. Promise me you’ll let Vincent go. I couldn’t bear it if anything happened to either of them.”

Crow gave her a crocodile smile.

“Enjoy your wedding. I’ll let myself out.”

#

Philip stood outside the church, welcoming the guests to his wedding. Father was with him, and Mother was parked in a wheelchair nearby. She had glazed over again. Her thumb was still poking upwards in approval, making Philip shudder every time he looked at her. Try as he might, he had not been able to force it back down again after Mandy had left (her thumb, that is).

“Sit whichever side you like,” Father told the guests as he ushered them in. “There’s no-one here for the bride.”

Mandy approached, wearing a large hat and a very short dress. She had such great legs. That was probably the thing about her he’d miss most.

“Do you want to go round the back of the church to – talk?” she smiled at him. She gave him a wink. Whether it was the ridiculous hat, Father’s steadying presence or the aversion therapy with Mother earlier that day, he felt no desire to go round the back of anywhere with her. He shook his head, and gestured for her to move along.

“It’s not too late for us,” she said, stepping aside to allow a couple of his mates from university to pass her by. Father clucked crossly at his side, worried that she would talk him round. He would have been even more concerned if he had seen his son clutching on to her naked bottom earlier that day. But he needn’t have worried. Philip’s mind was set.

“Oh, I think it is,” Philip responded. “Now feel free to sit on either side of the church. There’s no-one here for Tilly.”

“Bollocks there isn’t. I saw her brother sneaking into the back of the church an hour ago. And before you ask me why I’ve been here for a fucking hour, it’s because I thought Crow might pick her up just before the wedding and I wanted to be here when he wiped that goofy smile off her big fucking face!”

“See you at the reception, then. Thanks for coming.”

He waved her on, and she stomped inside with her long legs and expensive high heels, like an angry giraffe at the Oscars. He caught Father furtively checking her out as she went.

“Horrible woman,” Father coughed in embarrassment, “but she does look good in a mini-skirt.”

“She’s got a great arse too,” Philip replied a touch wistfully.

Father cast a sideways glance at Mother before deciding how to reply. She was still staring into space, but who was to say what she could hear and what she would quote back at him later?

“I can’t say I noticed,” he lied, conscious of the fact that he had very much noticed this as she had been marching into the church just now. A girl like her really didn’t deserve a bottom like that!

“I think that’s the last of the guests. Let’s go in.”

They wheeled Mother into the church. Both were surprised at how many people had turned up at such short notice. Philip’s family all loved a good wedding, though, and his mates loved a good excuse for a piss-up.

“You’re sure about this?” Father asked him. But he already knew what his son’s response would be. Despite Mandy’s lovely bottom, Philip was definitely making the right choice.

#

Matilda and Vincent were indeed in a room at the back of the church, as Mandy had reported. Mummy was there too, bursting with pride. Her daughter was to marry an Outsider. Nanny would be so proud of her.

“Thank you for coming,” said Matilda, with feeling. “It means so much to me that you’re both here. I was so scared that you wouldn’t come.”

“It doesn’t matter if we’re here or not,” Vincent told her. “It’s your wedding day. Today’s about you and “Philip”, not us.”

“It **would** have mattered to me,” she insisted. “I need you here, today of all days. Both of you.”

They hugged for the last time. Despite the searing pain, he allowed his hands to rest against her back. He knew she needed a proper hug.

She was right to have saved him, she thought. Despite the terrible price she had paid for his life. She pushed the thought to the back of her mind. This was supposed to be a happy day. She could think about all the bad things later.

“My daughter’s marrying an Outsider,” Mummy grinned, much happier at the union than her husband would have been.

“He’s not an Outsider.” Matilda’s smile was wider still. “He’s my Beloved.”

She giggled girlishly, and blushed scarlet.

“And you’re sure about this?” Vincent enquired, echoing the question Father had asked Philip moments before. “It’s not too late. I still think you’re too good for him.”

“Because he’s-”

“Because he’s an Outsider, yes. You deserve better.”

Matilda frowned. She wanted today to be perfect, and this was the first cloud on her horizon since Crow had left, though unbeknownst to her it would certainly not be the last.

“You still don’t get it, do you? All my life, Daddy’s told us how evil Outsiders are. How they lie and they swear, and they never look after their elderly. Why they deserve to die. But Nanny was one of them. And I’ve always felt like one, too. I look like Family, but I feel like an Outsider inside.”

“You’re not-”

“I just want someone to love me, Vincent.” She implored him to understand. If he couldn’t, then no-one could. “Not to hit me or beat me, not to hurt me. Someone to look into my eyes and love me for who I am.”

“I love you, Tilly.”

“I know you do. But it’s not enough. However much I love you and you love me, it can never be enough. You’re my brother. I need someone to *choose* me.”

She smiled at him, and placed a hand on his arm.

“It’s all right, though. I’ve got Philip now. He’s all I ever wanted. He didn’t have to be here today; he could have run away or married Mandy or sold me out to Crow. But he loves me. Everything will be all right when we get married. I’ll be his wife, and we’ll all live happily ever after, all three of us.”

It was then that someone screamed outside. A man’s voice, shrieking in agony, coming from the front of the church. She looked round in panic.

“Where’s Mummy?”

Mummy was nowhere to be seen.

With a heavy heart, Matilda went to find out what was going on. She had started to be able to sense when Philip was nearby, just as she could often sense Vincent’s presence. But all of a sudden, she felt that he was gone from her.

#

The church was in chaos. Guests were milling around in the aisles in confusion. Some tried to flee, others tried to push their way to the front to investigate. A little girl in a pretty blue dress burst into tears as Matilda approached, so she covered her face with her veil and pressed on, gently pushing her guests aside as she made her way towards the altar. She had a sick feeling in her stomach. This was not how her wedding day was meant to be.

Mummy crouched on the floor by the front pew, gnawing on a dismembered arm. Her face was smeared in fresh blood. She tucked into the limb with gusto, stripping flesh and muscle from the bone in great chunks, slurping greedily at the marrow.

Wedding guests looked on in horror, keeping a respectful distance. Many had mobile phones pressed to their ears. One teenage boy was taking photos on his, and panned round to Matilda as she came to a horrified stop at his side.

A body twitched at Mummy's feet. It was wearing a suit and a red carnation, the shoes impossibly shiny. One arm was missing. She moved a step closer to get a better view of his face, but she knew who it was already. Philip. Poor dead Philip. Mummy was eating the bride-groom.

"Lovely Wedding Feast, Tilly" Mummy crooned happily. "Daddy will be so proud of you when he comes home."

Matilda's world imploded. Her whole life had built up to this. She was here to marry the man she loved, the man of her dreams, an Outsider who loved her back. And now Mummy had ripped his arm off and was munching away on it without a care in the world.

The body twitched. A spark of hope, but instantly gone. His eyes were glazed, staring flatly back at her. He was very dead indeed. She had brought him to this. She had no-one to blame but herself.

She gently took the arm from her mother. She couldn't bear to watch her chomping away on the bicep like an over-sized KFC. Mummy went to seize the limb back again, but caught the look on her daughter's face. Realisation struck home. She looked panic-stricken as it occurred to her whom she had been eating.

"He's not a Wedding Feast," Matilda intoned lifelessly. "He's my Philip."

She sensed Vincent behind her, and leaned against him, hoping to draw enough support from him to find a way through this. She felt her mind melting. She had to do something, find a way to make everything better again. Someone had to mend Philip so the wedding could go ahead. But he was lost to her, his arm had ragged Mummy-sized bite-marks all over it, and her reason dissolved still further.

Mandy fought her way to the front of the church, her expression half hatred and half triumph.

"I knew it!" she screamed at the bride. "I knew you'd kill him! You and your whole freaky fucking family! Murderers!"

Vincent seized her by the throat, and sent her cartwheeling through the air, bowling down three or four wedding guests in the process. Her head crashed into the corner of a pew as she came down. She lay still, blood trickling from her temple, her eyes more like Philip's than they ever had been in life. There was more screaming as everyone nearby fought to keep their distance from this new Vincent-shaped threat.

"Your hands," Matilda whispered. "Your poor hands."

Vincent shrugged. "It was worth it. Daddy always hated swearing."

He guided her out the church, giving Philips' father a grim smile as he frantically tried to thread his wife's wheelchair through the crowds towards the exit. Father shrank back from the two trolls as they passed him by, fear in his eyes, but Matilda neither noticed nor acknowledged him. Her face was as blank as her bridegroom's.

Mummy followed on behind them, casting one last frustrated look back at the Wedding Feast before she left. She did so hate to waste good food. Never mind. She could help herself to Angela's left-overs when she got home.

They exited the church, leaving behind them a traumatised congregation, and the still twitching corpse of a man who had tried to do the right thing but failed.

#

They arrived back at the House, Matilda still clutching Philip's well-chewed arm to her chest, a macabre souvenir of the man she had loved and lost.

The front door was open! Vincent went in first. He instructed the women to wait outside, but Mummy followed him in, anxious for her children, her sisters, her world.

Matilda waited on the doorstep, singing quietly to herself as Vincent and Mummy scoured the House. There was blood everywhere, staining the walls, the floor-boards, the ceilings even. It was the life-blood of the three Families, the last of her kind, who had gathered together for her cousin's wedding in the early hours of the morning. She seemed not to notice. She sang her slow mournful song, and clung on to the last part of Philip she possessed.

Vincent dragged her angrily inside, wincing yet again at the pain in his hands, but too furious to care about physical discomfort. He shook her, tears in his eyes.

"What've you done, Tilly? They're gone, all of them. There's blood all over the place. How could you do this to us?"

She gave him a gentle, deranged smile, and his rage evaporated. He started crying.

"Philip," she said. "They were going to take Philip away from me."

She held out the arm as if to introduce him to her dead lover, but after a moment she jerked it away again, fearful that he might try to take it for himself.

There was a noise from the back room. Vincent flew towards it, his screams for vengeance drowning out Mummy's pleas for him to keep away. He emerged from the room seconds later, an expression of disgust on his face. Mummy went to investigate, fearing that she might find what was left of one of her grand-children in there. Matilda followed, Ophelia-like, in Mummy's wake.

It was nearly as dark in there as always, but the curtain had been torn and there was just about sufficient light to make out two figures on the floor, both of them in chains. One was

sprawled on the floor, his neck at an unnatural angle, a casualty of the struggle which had taken place earlier that day. It was the Wedding Feast from the other night. The other was slumped over, badly injured but still alive. He groaned again.

The spark kindled briefly in Matilda's blue eyes.

"Philip?" she asked in desperation.

Vincent shook his head.

"Philip's dead," he said, a touch callously. He saw the spark in her eyes vanish again, and knew that it would never return. He wanted to hug her – as they had always hugged before – but he couldn't bring himself to do it, not after everything she'd done. She had destroyed his dreams in pursuit of her own. It was not an easy thing to forgive. Still, she was his sister. He had to do something to ease her pain, even if just a little.

"Have this one instead."

She stared at him for awhile, then at the surviving Wedding Feast, and then back at Vincent again. She clutched Philip's arm ever tighter to her chest, like a talisman against evil. She said nothing.

A car pulled up outside, followed by what sounded like a much bigger vehicle. There were urgent voices in the hallway outside. Crow appeared in the doorway, a handful of soldiers behind him.

Vincent lowered his head and charged, but the machine gun fire cut him to pieces before he had covered half the distance between them. Mother rushed wailing towards her mutilated son, but was felled by a single close-range shot to the head from Crow himself.

Matilda smiled, and pressed Philip's chewed and bloody limb to her face. She whispered to it, like a mother reassuring her baby, telling it that she would keep it safe.

Crow raised his pistol.

She smiled, and her eyes burnt more brightly than ever. It was time. Soon, she and Philip would be together again. And no-one would part them ever again.

A note from the author

Thank you for reading this book. If you've enjoyed it, any feedback/reviews you give would be greatly appreciated.

My first e-book was "Slave-Girls and Amazons", which is still available at all good e-book stores (and some rubbish ones)! Here are the first few chapters.

Jonathan

EXCERPT FROM SLAVE-GIRLS AND AMAZONS

The Hedral Watcher sat cross-legged on the floor of the underground cavern, staring sightlessly into the waters of the slow-flowing stream around him. The current circled his broad belly, searching in vain for a short cut around the island of flab in its path. He ignored the trickle of the stream against his skin, having grown accustomed to it over many thousands of years. He just waited silently in the darkness, naked and bloated, his unfocussed eyes constantly scanning the icy water about him for portents which only he could read.

It was then that Rod made his unexpected entrance. Seventeen stone of drunken biker appeared in mid-air, and catapulted across the cavern, his arms flailing wildly about him as he fought in vain to keep his balance. The profound silence of the chamber was shattered by the sound of violent curses, interspersed with unhealthy gurgling noises, as his face skimmed across the water like a bomb seeking a dam to bust. He came to a shuddering halt, his face wedged between the accommodatingly chubby thighs of the Watcher. After several panic stricken seconds of spluttering, thrashing around and prising apart, he finally managed to extricate himself. He stood up, peering about the cave in bewilderment.

"You smell of alcohol," complained the Watcher, who seemed otherwise unperturbed by the dramatic entrance.

"And you're a fat naked bloke sitting in a puddle," Rod retorted.

"You will find the wizard in the castle," the Watcher went on, ignoring his outburst. "Seventeen miles to the north-west. Hurry."

"What's going on? I was in the pub two minutes ago, having a quiet drink with my mates.

The next thing I know, some bald old pervert's got his legs wrapped round my ears. Call me old-fashioned, but that's not the way I like to pass my Saturday nights."

He waited for an explanation, but the "old pervert" was no longer paying attention. Instead, he was staring back into the water again, as if transfixed by some secret vision.

Rod laughed.

"Friday nights, maybe, but never on a Saturday. And you could at least have bought me a kebab first!"

Still no reply.

Sighing, he looked about him for a way out. Just for a second, he thought he saw the reflection of a forest in the stream, but as soon as he tried to focus upon it the image had vanished.

"Where's the nearest taxi rank, then?"

Without awaiting a reply, he waded to the nearest bank, and hoisted himself out the water on to the slippery rocks above. His wet denim jeans clung uncomfortably to his legs, and he reached for the wad of notes in his pocket to check they were still dry. They were. He envied them.

There were a dozen or so passages leading from the cavern, and he noticed for the first time that one was illuminated by a faint glimmer of light. As he watched it, the light became stronger, playing upon the ripples on the surface of the stream. As it grew brighter, the large naked bald bloke suddenly came into sharp focus. Rod took an involuntary step away from this disturbing vision, slipped, and ended up back in the stream. After a few failed attempts at gaining his footing on the slippery submerged rocks, and an impressively varied combination of F- and C-words, he eventually managed to struggle back on to the bank again. Upon checking his pockets, he discovered that his money had turned into a sodden pulp. It was not going to be his day.

After a few more close calls on the treacherous rocks, he finally made it to the mouth of the tunnel. There were two large slabs of stone on either side, reminding him of the sliding doors of a walk-in wardrobe. With one final look back, and a resigned shake of his head, he stepped between them, entering the passageway. The moment he did so, the stone slabs swung to noisily behind him, cutting off any possibility of retreat. At the same time, the light went out, leaving him in icy darkness.

For the first time since his explosive arrival in the cavern, he felt a surge of panic deep in the pit of his stomach. For some strange reason, he had the sensation that he had just been shut away in a fridge.

±

Yet again, Halfshaft had opened his mouth before his brain was in gear.

He was a failed wizard. In a recent survey commissioned by the Magician's Society (East Hedral branch), it had been ascertained that the average wizard had mastered over one thousand spells by the time he reached the age of fifty. Halfshaft had got the hang of two of them. He could create fire, and he could conjure up water from thin air to put it out again. These limited skills, he knew, made him a particularly bad advert for his profession, but he consoled himself with the thought that his was always the first name on the guest-list at barbecues.

In the past, his lack of ability had not really bothered him. Everyone suspected that he had about as much talent as a singles bar for elderly lepers, but his foul temper and ready sarcasm had allowed him to bluff his way through countless awkward predicaments without anyone being able to prove it. He had therefore been given the benefit of the doubt, and was treated with the respect due to one of the two most revered wizards at Spartan Castle. This was not much, because there were only two wizards there, and the other – the “ Grand Wizard “ – got more than enough respect for both of them.

It was Halfshaft's dislike of his colleague which had put him in this unfortunate position. The Grand Wizard was, he had to admit, a quite remarkable magician, with shape changing powers second to none. Six days a week, he would change himself into a dragon, and prow

around the perimeter of the Castle grounds, repelling marauders, devouring bandits, and giving passing tradesmen a nasty shock. On the seventh day, however, he stayed in his private chamber, sitting cross-legged on his bed with an eighteen-inch pipe clenched firmly between his teeth. Halfshaft, without a hint of professional jealousy, made no secret of the fact that he considered the pipe to be an extension of the Grand Wizard's masculinity. It was because he made no secret of it that he was now just minutes away from almost certain death.

The duel was to take place in a locked chamber. King Spartan himself was to supervise it. It was, to all intents and purposes, a fight to the death. Whereas the loser might not actually die – unconditional surrender and desperate grovelling was usually enough to avoid this ignominious fate – he would be expected to do the decent thing and go into voluntary exile. This, Halfshaft decided, was his only chance of salvation. Not going into voluntary exile, of course. That would be suicide. No, instead, while they were giving him the chance to do the decent thing, he could hide in the ladies lavatories, and cry like a girl when they tried to drag him out. It was a tactic that had got him out of numerous scrapes in the past.

There was no way that he would win the duel itself. He was hopelessly outgunned, and he knew it. Worse still, everyone else knew it, too. It was plastered all over the ugly gloating faces of all his "friends" and neighbours, who had crammed into the courtyard outside to witness his disgrace. He had tried to even the odds by attempting to learn new spells, but had discovered that the time-honoured adage about old dogs applied equally to wizards who were getting on a bit. He had even considered hypnotism in the hope that he could convince the Grand Wizard that martyrdom would be a good career move, but had given up on the idea when he found out that it involved swinging a timepiece in front of the eyes of the intended victim. He couldn't even lift a sundial, yet alone swing one.

Everybody who was anybody (and quite a few people who were not) had crowded into the courtyard outside the chamber, peering in at the two opponents on the off chance that they might have a quick warm-up before the doors were closed on them. The duel itself would take place in private, as was the custom ever since King Justice V had accidentally been turned into his own grandfather by a stray spell (to the horror of everyone, not least his proper granddad, who developed an identity crisis and died of confusion not long afterwards). There was nothing in the rules, though, to prevent the combatants from hurling the odd thunderbolt at each other before kick-off to keep the fans amused. But on this

occasion, neither did anything but sit in their respective corners, waiting for the signal to do battle.

All of the cynics who had denounced Halfshaft as a talentless fraud had been forced to wait a very long time for this moment. There in the crowd was William Taylor, the soldier who had paid him a small fortune for a “brutal strength” spell, only to be beaten up by his own wife for selling their prize pig to raise the funds for it. And Henry Morgan, the blacksmith who had wanted a potion to make him like an animal in bed, but had ended up confined to his chamber with legs as swollen as a hippopotamus at a weight-watchers’ class. He could see a dozen or two others, all of whom would be equally as keen to scrape his bloodied carcass off the floor at the end of the day, and divide it up between them as souvenirs. They were a sentimental lot, after all.

He looked over to the Grand Wizard to see if there was any sign of anxiety or doubt there. Nothing. Halfshaft noted resentfully that the magician had even brought his sodding pipe with him.

King Spartan raised his right hand regally into the air, signalling the crowd to silence. Although the courtyard was packed solid, none of the gathering ventured any closer than an arm’s length to their monarch. They valued their heads too highly for that.

“We all know why we are here. A very serious accusation has been made against the most revered and respected wizard who has ever served under Us. This accusation has been denied, and the Accuser has been challenged to a duel to test the truth of his ridiculous allegations. Let God be with the man who speaks truly.”

“God be with him,” approved the whole assembly, getting into the swing of things.

“And let the Devil take the man who is not.”

“The Devil take Halfshaft!” cried the crowd, in what the wizard concerned felt to be an outrageous and hurtful attempt to pre-judge the issue.

“Before the duel commences,” continued the King, “ it is my duty to introduce the two

opponents. On my right, we have Cyrellius, the Grand Wizard.”

Cyrellius, thought Halfshaft. No wonder he calls himself the Grand Wizard. I'd make up a name for myself too if I was called anything as ridiculous as that. Then he realised that he actually had a name about ten times as ridiculous as that, and made a mental note to change it if he ever lived long enough to get the chance.

Spartan spent the next seventeen minutes listing the various titles the Grand Wizard had earned. Guardian of the Gates; Liberator of the People; Holder of the Golden Shield of Zandor. You name it, he was it. Somehow, Halfshaft just knew that he must have been head prefect at school.

“And Protector of the Holy Shrine at Beacon Castle,” finished Spartan. “Oh yes, and he was also head prefect at school.”

This brought a polite round of applause from the crowd. It wasn't every day you got to see someone who had been to school, after all.

Halfshaft closed his eyes and prayed that Spartan would give him an equally impressive build-up.

“To my left,” announced the King, “we have – what's your name again, you?”

“Halfshaft, Sire,” mumbled the mortified wizard.

“To my left we have Halfshaft-Sire,” Spartan went on. “He's a bit of a conjuror, I'm told. Children's parties; that sort of thing.”

The assembly sniggered maliciously. Halfshaft vowed silently to get even with each and every one of them if ever he got the chance. But he was cut off in mid vow as the King clicked his fingers and the doors of the duelling chamber slammed shut, leaving the two old wizards alone together to fight to the death.

Rod had finally grasped the idea that he was no longer in Kent. He had been wandering around for hours since finding his way out of the underground caves, without seeing anything even faintly resembling home. No pubs, no kebab-houses, no signs of civilisation at all. And now it was starting to get dark, he noticed there were two moons. He had no idea where he was, or how he had come to be there, but felt that he had to make it to the castle which the fat naked bald bloke had mentioned, if he was to have any hope of getting to the Club that night. And he was determined to get there if he could. He was on a promise.

His hopes took a blow when he emerged from thick, shoulder-height grass to find his path blocked by a river. He wondered whether this was the same one he had seen in the cave. If it was, he had been wandering around in circles all this time. In any case, it now looked much rougher and deeper than before, and – swimming not being his strong point – he decided his best bet was to follow it along the bank until he found a shallow place to cross.

After just a few minutes, he noticed a black figure standing by a badly collapsed bridge ahead of him. He hurried onwards, and found an old hag on the riverbank, peering out across the water to the far side. She had a fat body, with thin straggly limbs protruding from it, like some grotesque parody of a spider. He was surprised he had not caught sight of her earlier, because the spot would have been within his view from the moment he had reached the river. She was dressed in dark rags, which fluttered pitifully in the breeze about her, as if trying to escape her wrinkled, unwashed body. If they were, then he could not say he blamed them.

“Young man,” she called to him. “Young man. I need to get to the other side of the river, but although this is the shallowest point, the current is still too strong for my old legs.”

“You want to get yourself a dinghy,” Rod quipped. “Row yourself across.

“But my arms are weak. And I would not know a “dinky” if I saw one. Will you carry me, across?”

“How deep is it?” Rod enquired, dubiously.

“Up to your waist,” the hag told him. “But don’t worry about me. I’ll stay dry if I cling to your back.”

Something stirred in the back of his brain. Some childhood story he had once heard. Man gives lost old biddy a piggy- back across a raging river; lost old biddy turns out to be more than meets the eye; lost old biddy later saves man out of gratitude. Besides, he could hardly leave her here.

“Do you know the way to the Castle?” he asked.

“Yes”, she replied. “If you help me over the river, I’ll take you there.”

“Okay, then” invited Rod, with a sigh. “Hop on board, Grandma.”

With a surprisingly energetic leap, she mounted his back, and clung on to him as he waded into the water. The shock of the icy waves battering his legs nearly drove him back out again, but she spurred him on, squeezing him with her spindly old legs as if he were a carthorse.

By the time he reached the middle of the stream, the water had reached his chest. Once or twice, he thought he had lost her as the current tried to rip her from his back, but each time she clung on ever tighter, cajoling him onwards. Slipping on the mud beneath his feet, he finally struggled out on to the far bank, cold and shivering, his clothes sticking wetly to him like a badly designed second skin.

The old woman dismounted, and squeezed his arm in gratitude.

“Thank you,” she said with feeling. “Thank you very much.”

“That’s okay,” he told her gallantly. “My pleasure. Now, where’s this castle, then?”

She pointed back to the other side of the river.

“Over there.”

Rod frowned, puzzled.

“So what are we doing over here, if you’re taking me over there?” he asked. “It was some sort of test, wasn’t it?”

“No,” she responded. “I’m afraid it wasn’t. It’s just the only way I get to straddle young men nowadays!”

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Halfshaft squinted in the darkness, trying desperately to see his opponent.

“Let’s discuss this sensibly,” he suggested.

“You mocked my pipe, came the reply. “I don’t see you laughing now.”

“You don’t see me doing anything now,” retorted Halfshaft unwisely. “Pitch blackness tends to have that effect.”

He heard the Grand Wizard stamp his feet, and the walls of the chamber started to glow a dull orange, illuminating the two wizards in an eerie, pulsating light.

It should be noted that every wizard has his own way of creating magic. The Grand Wizard had to stamp his feet for any but the simplest of spells, whereas Halfshaft clicked his fingers. Another wizard of his acquaintance had to scratch a part of his anatomy which shall here remain nameless. Suffice it to say that he got struck off after performing conjuring tricks at his nephew’s tenth birthday party.

The Grand Wizard was standing just a few feet away, a confident grin on his wizened face. He held his ridiculously long pipe in his left hand.

“Do you find my pipe amusing now?” he enquired, prodding Halfshaft in the chest with it.

“No,” he replied. “I stopped laughing at phallic symbols when I was about twelve.”

Idiot, he thought to himself. You’re digging your own grave. And you’ve even supplied the shovel!

“No more talk!” bellowed the Grand Wizard, stamping his foot furiously on the ground. Halfshaft was not sure whether he had done this in a fit of temper or as the cue for a spell, but had the feeling he was in for a rough ride either way.

“Look, it’s only a pipe,” he reasoned. “There’s no need for us to fall out over a pipe, is there?”

When he started speaking, he had been looking at the Grand Wizard. Before he had finished his sentence, he was looking at a huge, scaly, fire-breathing dragon, which virtually filled the room. The breath from its nostrils singed his beard, until the smell of burning hair made him feel nauseous. The expression of malice on the beast’s face left him with little doubt of its intentions. All in all, the transformation was not an encouraging one.

As Halfshaft tried to cover his face with his hands, the dragon knocked him off his feet with a powerful sweep of its tail, sending him sprawling to the stone floor. Resting one giant reptilian claw on his chest to pin him down, it brought its snout to within inches of his unguarded, vulnerable face. He closed his eyes, waiting for the inevitable stream of all-consuming flame to turn him to ash.

“Boo.”

The pressure on his chest had gone. He opened his eyes. The Grand Wizard was standing before him, smiling smugly down at him.

“I thought you were going to kill me,” gasped Halfshaft in relief.

“Oh, but I am. But not straightaway. It’s not every day I get to duel with a wizard, especially one of your abilities! Let’s see what you can do before I finish you off.”

Halfshaft climbed unsteadily to his feet, dusting himself down as he did so. He pointed a finger at his fellow wizard as he bent down to retrieve his pipe.

“Leave it there!” he ordered, in a tone which he considered to be authoritative and commanding.

“Sod off,” replied the Grand Wizard, who considered it to be neither.

Halfshaft finally lost his temper. All the fear and degradation of the days leading up to the duel now found an outlet. With a shriek of indignant rage, he clicked his fingers to unleash a stream of all-consuming fire at his opponent. Unfortunately, it did not quite turn out that way. The tiny flame which sprung from his finger was, he realised astutely, hardly what the occasion demanded. He never performed well under stress, as many of the less reputable women at Spartan Castle could testify. Insult was added to injury as the Grand Wizard approached him, guided his finger to the bowl of his pipe, and used it to ignite the tobacco inside.

“Thank you,” he smirked. “Very considerate of you. Now it’s my turn again.”

He stamped his foot, turning himself into an enormous crab. Its leathery shell and viciously snapping claws temporarily sent Halfshaft into bewildered paralysis. He had never seen a crab before, but some ancestral memory deep inside him stirred him to action. Somehow, he had a feeling that it could only move sideways. The room was fairly narrow, and if he could just keep in front of it, then maybe it would be boxed in. By keeping still, as far in front of those spiteful pincers as he could, he might just stay alive. And who was to say that the Grand Wizard might not be so impressed by his problem-solving abilities, that he would forgive and forget, call a halt to the proceedings, and invite him down the tavern for a tankard of ale and a nice game of dominoes?

All of these thoughts flew through his brain in an instant. Unfortunately, in the next instant he dismissed them all as total rubbish, and decided to rely upon another tactic entirely.

Gathering his robes up around his legs, he proceeded to run like buggery.

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