

# ***Dolly Mixtures***

***Not So Sweet***



***Alan Berkshire***

# DOLLY MIXTURES

(NOT SO SWEET)

An Anthology of Horror

By

**ALAN BERKSHIRE**

**\*Please note, all illustrations are AI generated based on actual illustrations painted by the author. The originals can be viewed on [alanberkshire.com](http://alanberkshire.com). (Artworks Tab)**

## **Dedication**

**Raven Fae, Destiny awaits**

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# CUTTER

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## PROLOGUE

Headline from the *Daily Sun*.

## CUTTER'S FIFTH VICTIM

### SLASHER CLAIMS ANOTHER VICTIM

MANCHESTER. SATURDAY, 19 OCTOBER 2019

*The identity of the serial killer dubbed "The Cutter," the word having been written in the victim's blood at every horrific crime scene, remains a mystery. The eighteen-month reign of terror across the United Kingdom continues unabated as several police forces across the entire country struggle to find any clue as to the killer's identity.*

*The latest attack in Manchester is thought to have occurred sometime between ten o'clock and midnight on Saturday the nineteenth of October bringing the victim total to five. The body of a young woman was discovered early Sunday morning by a local man out walking his dog. The victim has not yet been identified. A police spokesperson confirmed the young woman is the fifth victim of The Cutter, the third woman, and is a resident of Manchester.*

*The first victim, Clare Summers, was brutally murdered in Northampton on the eighteenth of March 2018. The other victims: Andrew Carstairs (second) was murdered in Great Yarmouth 10 July 2018. Maureen Willard (third) in Truro, Cornwall 18 December 2018. Owen Hopkins (fourth) was murdered in Cardiff, Wales 05 May 2019.*

*Except for the alternating genders and that all of them were teenagers no other connection has been made between any of the victims. The murders are widespread across the United Kingdom giving rise to speculation that The Cutter is a long-distance HGV driver, or possibly a sales rep...*

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## *CHAPTER ONE*

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Hands, wearing white linen gloves, lovingly closed the large scrapbook with careful deference, fingers caressing the colourful cover depicting lurid newspaper headlines from every part of the United Kingdom. Newspaper clippings filled the book, full of blood and death, covered with sticky-backed plastic to preserve them ... forever.

The sigh was deep, contented. Acknowledgement of a job well done, job satisfaction, only it wasn't a job, more a vocation, a passion play, acted out in blood, again and again. Each time a different location, a different story, different actors, though the ending was always the same. The ending must never change,

Laying the scrapbook carefully in the Samsonite suitcase, wrapped in a large blue and yellow beach towel depicting leaping dolphins for extra protection, the case was closed and locked. It was time to move onto pastures new, rewrite the script, audition the actors, and begin rehearsals in earnest...

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## *Chapter Two*

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Anita Baxter felt like a student going for her first job fresh from the summer break. Nervous, unsure of herself, hoping to make a good impression. Dressed in new jeans and a dark red jacket she looked presentable, the best Primark had to offer, the best she could afford. With a college scarf around her neck against the chill, she hoped she looked more mature than her nineteen years.

Packing shelves overnight at the local supermarket was hardly the dream job she had envisioned, but it was the sort of mindless job she desperately needed right now. She just wanted to cruise for a while, chill out. Besides, she needed the money, seriously needed it, London was so bloody expensive, even in the East End! A couple of months hard saving and then she would move on, staying too long in one place was not a good idea. She had no idea where she would go, but, as ever, she would work that out later, take one day at a time.

Turning off the High Street she headed down the wide access road toward the rear of the supermarket squatting in a huge ring of bright light cast by tall streetlamps surrounding the two-story building. The parking lot in front of the store was dark and empty, accentuating the feeling of desolation, it was like stepping into a different world.

Eleven 'til seven in the morning, an hour for lunch, and two fifteen-minute tea breaks. Lunch, at three in the morning! Sounded great! Yeah, right.

The interview had been during office hours, four days ago, the store had been open, a hive of activity: people, shopping carts, bright lights. The administration offices were easy to find, plenty of people to ask the way, totally unlike the dark forbidding edifice in front of her, as silent as a graveyard without a single soul to ask directions.

Heels clicking on the pavement, Anita kept close to the side wall of the red-bricked building which gave way to another car park at the rear, its edges lost in darkness as black as Satan's heart. The lighting was minimal, only the front rank of parking spaces was illuminated, a line of eight cars sparkling with the early onset of the night's dew, glittering liquid diamonds in the bright-white sodium glare squatted like colourful metallic beetles.

Keeping to the light, she was peeved that there still was no sign of a staff entrance. Glancing at her watch, she hurried on. The last thing she wanted was to make a bad impression on her first day, or should that be night? Wincing at her own bad joke, Anita turned the corner.

Her scream echoed across the car park as a dark shape lunged out of the darkness. She tumbled to the damp concrete with a startled cry, skinning the palm of her hand. She was on her feet in an instant, wanting to run, but her legs had turned to jelly, leaving her rooted to the spot.

"Oh my God! Are you alright?" The young man stepped into the light. A mixture of horror and concern creased his handsome face. "I didn't see you, you just popped out of nowhere," he stammered, stepping closer.

Instinctively, Anita stepped back, her heart pounding.

"I'm okay," she faltered. "You scared the hell out of me."

"I'm so sorry." The young man apologised again. "I've been wandering around this sodding building for over twenty minutes, trying to find a way in. It's like Fort Knox!"

"Me too, except I just got here," Anita brushed absently at the dirt on her new jacket.

"Only to have a prat like me knock you for a six. I really am sorry. I haven't messed up your jacket, have I? Put it into the cleaners. I'll pay. It's the least I can do."

"There's no need. Honestly, it's an old jacket anyway," she lied, looking ruefully at the small tear at the elbow.

"Do you work here?" he asked hopefully.

"First night."

She nearly laughed at his crestfallen face as he ran his fingers through dark tousled hair lying across a broad forehead, the bright grey eyes regarding her with frank, open concern, then looking along the rear wall as if a door might magically appear, he sighed heavily.

"I guess we're doomed to roam the dark wastelands of the car park," he said dourly, then brightened. "Danny, Danny Truman," he said, sticking out his hand.

This time, Anita did laugh.

"Anita Baxter," she said, taking his hand.

"New staff?" asked a voice.

They both looked around in surprise but saw no one.

"Up here," the voice said again.

A tall, thin man in a white coat stood above them on an iron gantry.

"Are you new staff?" he repeated, exasperation edging his reedy voice.

"Yes," they said together.

"Around the corner, up the iron stairs, through the door," the man said and disappeared into the building.

"This," said Danny, "is very surreal."

They found the iron stairs lost in a dark narrow alcove on the side of the building next to huge shutters marked "Goods Inward".

"You'd think they'd put up a sign," Danny said as they climbed. "Not a big sign, 'Employees Entrance,' or 'Staff Only,' just to give us a clue."

"Just be glad we're in, if only from help on high," said Anita.

"Very droll," Danny said as they reached the door.

"Come on, don't dawdle," the man in the white coat said irritably. "My name is Mr. Winterbourne, the night manager. Follow me. I'll show you to your stations."

Hurrying along the corridor, his heavy brogues thudding on the dark green vinyl and clutching his clipboard to his thin chest, the waspish man led them through a maze of corridors to a flight of stairs, clattering down to the ground floor. Without slowing, Mr. Winterbourne took them through a set of rubberised doors into a vast cavern of a warehouse. Wide avenues created by huge racking went off in all directions stacked with every conceivable foodstuff, cleaning product, and household commodity necessary for everyday living for the modern family. Two forklifts lumbered about the aisles loaded with pallets speared on twin tines like mechanical elephants.

"Make sure you keep within the yellow lines clearly marked on the floor whenever you enter the warehouse, which should be a rare occurrence. They're designated walkways. You'll be perfectly safe," explained Mr. Winterbourne, hurrying on.

The "designated walkways," exposed with no form of barrier, didn't look very safe to Anita.

After two more sets of double doors, they were finally led into a room full of wheeled wire mesh trolleys standing 2 metres tall and .25 metres square. In the room beyond, five teenagers, two boys and three girls, lounged at Formica-topped tables seated on bright yellow plastic moulded chairs, drinking coffee, tea, or soft drinks in cans. One was reading a newspaper.

The atmosphere distinctly changed as they entered. Anita saw one or two distasteful expressions directed at Mr. Winterbourne.

"Come on, come on. We should be on the floor by now. There's a lot to do," the manager said prissily, clapping his hands to emphasise the point, the clipboard clamped beneath his arm.

Sullenly, they got up and sauntered out of the room.

"Jennifer, would you remain behind?"

A thin-faced girl with dull blue eyes and scuffed back hair, tied in an untidy ponytail, stopped in the doorway wearing a bored expression.

"This is the staffroom," Mr. Winterbourne said needlessly. "You clock in and out over there. Jennifer will show you how to make out your cards. Be punctual, I will not tolerate tardiness.

"We are extremely understaffed at the moment, so we need to replenish the shelves as quickly as possible. Jennifer will show you to your lockers and supply you with overalls. Would you show...?" Mr. Winterbourne paused. "What were your names?" he asked perfunctorily.

They told him.

"Yes, yes, very good," he said, totally disinterested. "Jennifer will show you what's expected of you and take you to your sections. Don't forget to make out your cards. I'll be in my office."

Then he was gone, followed by a sour look from Jennifer.

Danny let out a long breath. "Wow! Is he always like that?"

"This is one of 'Prissy's' better nights. Wait 'til he's on a roll, he'll drive you bug-eyed." Jennifer's expression lightened considerably after Mr. Winterbourne's departure changing her whole demeanour.

"Prissy?" Anita said.

"Nickname," Jennifer said. "But don't let him hear you call him that. No one here really likes him, but hey, life is." Her smile brightened her face. "Come on, let's get you started."

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## Chapter Three

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"Hey! Wait up!"

Anita slowed as Danny ran breathlessly up to her.

"Is this weird, or what?" he said, grinning.

"Weird?" she said, bemused.

"Going home at seven fifteen in the morning. It's freaky."

"I wouldn't know. I've never worked night shifts before."

*It is strange though*, she thought. The day was a little chill with the sun shining brilliantly, one of those crisp pre-winter mornings where everything seemed bright and full of colour. People were hurrying off to work, queuing for buses, or making their way to the train station. Cars sped by; delivery trucks were starting their rounds. After an almost silent night, Anita realised just how noisy the world really was.

"God, I ache," said Danny, stretching his arms and arching his back. "Can you believe that place?"

"Pretty manic, huh?" she agreed. "Jens said they're well understaffed."

"Jens? The girl who showed us around?"

Anita nodded. "Yeah, that's what they call her."

"Did Jens happen to say why they're so understaffed?"

"Mr. Winterbourne, apparently. He really gets under people's skin. Employees don't last more than a couple of weeks. She also told me that the store is due to expand, become a 'hypermarket,' open twenty-four, seven."

"You've got to be kidding! Isn't the place big enough already? I got lost twice trying to find my way back to the staffroom. It's like Hampton Court maze."

"Filling the shelves will be fun with all the customers milling about. It'll be like a cattle market. Jens said they've been told that the store is supposed to be quiet between two and four in the morning. That's when we load the shelves," said Anita.

"What, just the seven of us? I don't think so." Danny snorted.

"I can only repeat what Jens tells me; the girl never stops talking! Anyway, she reckons we'll be fully staffed by then, and the day staff will be mucking in as well, filling shelves as and when needed."

"Jeez... Like you said, a cattle market," said Danny. "Though I get what Jens was saying about Mr. Winterbourne. He was watching me all night, peering round corners and doors when he thought I couldn't see him. The guy's a creep."

"Yeah, I saw him a couple of times watching me. No wonder they call him Prissy."

"So, what you doing with the rest of your day?" asked Danny.

"Home, hot bath, milky coffee, and bed," Anita said dreamily. "My arms feel like they're dropping off."

"Yeah, it was a bit much putting you on bottled stuff. You should have been on cereals or toilet rolls."

"I don't need favours," Anita said. "I can hold my end up."

"Never doubted it," Danny laughed. "I wouldn't want to take you on."

Anita looked at him wryly. "You remember that," she said.

"Absolutely." Danny held up his hands defensively.

"What about you? What are you up to today?" Anita said.

"Much the same as you. Might go to the gym later, work out some of the aches and pains."

"Are you crazy? Going to the gym after humping boxes around all night? Talk about a glutton for punishment."

"It sounds crazy," Danny said. "But working out helps me to relax."

"Relax? You're one of the least uptight guys I've ever met."

"Each to their own, my lovely." He grinned. "You should try it sometime."

"No thanks, I'll pass."

"Any plans later?"

"Not really, probably just laze about 'til it's time to go to work. I don't know East London very well, wouldn't know where to go anyway," said Anita.

"I didn't think you came from round here," Danny said.

Even as he said it, Danny could almost hear the stone wall drop between them.

"I'm not," Anita said guardedly.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry. My mouth starts working sometimes without me engaging my brain."

Anita smiled wanly. "I'm sorry. I'm just tired."

"Yeah, I get it," Danny said. "I've not been here long either. Never seem to settle in one place for very long."

"Not ever?" asked Anita.

"My mum's job took her all over the country, so we moved a lot. She used to always say I'd end up being like a gypsy."

"What do you mean 'used to say?'" Anita made a face. "Sorry. Now I'm prying."

"It's no big deal, Mum and Dad split two years ago, a doomed marriage from the start. I live with my dad. My mum kept her career, except now she's been promoted and spends most of her time behind a desk."

"Is that bitterness I hear?" Anita said.

"Nah," said Danny. "The breakup wasn't amicable. It hit Dad pretty hard. He tends to drink a tad too much, but other than that, we get on fine."

Something told Anita that wasn't strictly true, but she let it lie.

"Well, I go this way," Anita said as they reached the junction.

"Come on, I'll walk you home," offered Danny.

"No, no, you're as tired as me. I haven't far to go. I'll see you tonight, okay?"

Danny made a face. "How about meeting up before work? Go have something to eat?"

"I hardly think our overalls would go down well in a restaurant," said Anita, a little taken aback.

"Restaurant? Jesus, who can afford restaurants? I was thinking McDonalds or KFC."

"Well, you know how to treat a girl, don't you? Take her to all the best places."

Danny went scarlet. "It was just a thought," he said.

"It's a nice thought," said Anita. "But I don't think so. Everything would be such a rush."

Danny suddenly dropped to his knees; his hands clasped in front of him. "Oh please, please, say you will. I'll die if you refuse me. I swear I will!"

"Danny!" Anita was mortified. "Get up! People are looking!"

Danny calmly looked around, then grinned. "Then say 'yes,' or I'll go into my 'dying of a broken heart' routine. That one's a killer, lots of wailing and crying..."

"Alright, alright! I'll meet you. Just get up, you bloody fool!"

Brushing off the knees of his jeans, Danny got up.

"We'll say eight o'clock then, shall we?"

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## *Chapter Four*

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Danny Truman was walking on air, barely feeling the pavement beneath his trainers as he strolled down the sun-drenched street suppressing the urge to burst into song. He would've done if he had a half-decent singing voice. He contented himself with whistling. For the first time in a long time, things seemed to be going his way. It hadn't been easy since Mum left. He missed her. He missed her a lot, though he saw her more often than he told Dad. If he knew, his father would have flipped out for sure, seen it as a betrayal.

Watching the bitterness consuming his father was hard. Once a happy, gregarious man, a good father, a loving husband 'til the resentment set in. A slow-burning fuse, smouldering quietly through the years 'til finally igniting the inevitable explosion. Maybe it was pride, unable to accept his wife as the major breadwinner. Resentment led to anger, anger to arguments, arguments to divorce. His mother soared on the wings of her career success; his father dived headfirst into a whiskey bottle, leaving Danny somewhere in the middle.

Seventeen years old, two years ago, that's when he decided dad needed him more than mum. Moving in with his father was motivated by the hope he might be able to help him. Not a chance... If it came down to a choice between him and the bottle, he was under no illusion which his father would choose.

"Shit..." Danny said, realising he had just killed the high he was on...

\*

Quietly closing the front door, Danny padded out to the kitchen to avoid waking his father, who no doubt was still asleep. He stopped in the doorway, momentarily closing his despairing eyes. His chin dropped to his chest, swallowing hard, fighting the anger welling up inside. All the cupboards were open, food was scattered on the table, a loaf literally ripped apart amidst a

carnage of crumbs on the side next to the butter dish, the liquid contents running down the front of the cupboard onto the floor in yellow rivulets, melted by the heat of the gas stove, two jets still burning. Various cans stood open and discarded, a plate of baked beans congealed in the sink among the clutter of dirty saucepans and used cutlery.

Danny had left the place spotless before going to work, making sure everything was in its place, clean and tidy, trying to keep a modicum of order in a house plagued by chaos.

It was a continuous battle, forever picking up carelessly discarded clothes, empty whisky bottles, crumpled newspapers, dirty crockery. It was endless, perpetual. With a deep sigh, Danny recapped the milk and put it into the fridge, careful to avoid the spillage on the floor. A half-assed attempt at making tea puddled the worktop near the kettle which wasn't even plugged in...

"Oh, Dad..." Danny sighed again.

\*

He wasn't at all startled when his bedroom door crashed back against the wall as his father lurched into the room. Danny had been woken by his father's lumbered approach moments before.

"How long you been in?" his father asked, leaning heavily against the doorjamb.

"All day, Dad." Danny finished buttoning up his jeans. "I'm about to go out again."

"Out? Out where?"

"To work, Dad, remember. I work nights now, at the supermarket, loading shelves." He couldn't remember how many times he had told his father this.

"What sort of job is that, loading shelves?" His father hitched up the crumpled pair of grey trousers that hung from his thin hips, his belt hanging loose. Bare chested, unshaven, his hair swept back in unkempt, greasy strands, Danny wondered when his father had bathed last and was immediately sad to be thinking such a thing.

"We need the money, Dad," he said, sitting on the bed and lacing his trainers. "I've got a few minutes. Let me do you something to eat."

"No son, you're alright. I'll do something later. I've got a meet at the Black Horse, chance of some work, good money."

"That's good Dad. Tell me about it later, okay?" Danny said, playing along with the familiar charade, all the forgotten meals, the imaginary "man down at the pub." He knew he'd come home tomorrow morning to the same shambles as this morning, his dad out cold, blind drunk either on the sofa or in his room.

"I've got to go, Dad. Try and eat something. I'll see you later..."

\*

Sitting on a low wall watching the line of cars creeping through the drive-thru, Danny drummed his heels against the yellow bricks. Above him loomed the golden arches, bright in the uplighting as night descended.

Being a little early wasn't a problem, he just needed to get out of the house, he pushed the thought out of his mind as he raised his collar against the chill wind that had started to rise, hunkering down into his jacket for extra warmth. An empty drinking cup skittered across the asphalt, the top impaled by a red and white two-tone straw like a colourful spear. White napkins flapped against the kerb or flitted along the ground like wounded birds.

Despite the raised flowerbeds dotted about the area, all in all pathetic horticultural displays, the car park had a bleakness about it, a utilitarian sterility that was hardly conducive to happy eating. It didn't seem to deter the patrons in the crowded restaurant who obviously had no interest in flowers. Large, green bins placed at strategic points around the car park, all overflowing, squatted like weird Humpty-dumpties only adding to the squalor.

Customers, teenagers mostly, with the odd family group, came and went, the inevitable brown bag clutched in their hands, the grease already soaking through the bottom. The drive-thru line crept slowly on.

He had worked in a McDonald's once, up by the Old Street roundabout. Never again. They were insane asylums, slave labour for pittance wages. Constant verbal abuse from the customers, perpetual haranguing by the manager. *"Make sure you fold the top of the bag twice, logo facing the customer."* *"Politeness at all times."* *"Only three shakes of salt on the fries."* He was amazed he had lasted as long as he did, less than two weeks, it had felt like two years.

"Penny for them," said Anita.

Danny's head snapped round and there she was, wrapped up in her dark red jacket, jeans, and scarf, a woollen beanie on her head, smiling. Her elfin face, cheeks red from the chill wind surrounded by golden curls cascading to her shoulders from beneath the woollen hat, beamed at him, her pale blue eyes that always seemed to harbour a hidden sadness, and beneath, her dazzling smile. She took his breath away.

"What? Oh..." Danny said, hurriedly getting to his feet.

"Where were you? You looked kilometres away," she said, pulling her woolly hat down over her ears.

Danny blushed. "Just thinking," he said.

"Good or bad?" Anita said.

"Past," Danny said. "Come on. Let's go eat."

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## *Chapter Five*

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The next two hours were like a dream Danny would have no trouble remembering in the days to come. They got their food, sat at a table, and talked; it was good. No! It was great.

"No family at all?" asked Danny.

"None," Anita said. "Except for an aunt that lives in Wales somewhere. After I lost Mum and Dad, I was in foster care 'til I was sixteen, then I got a job and been on my own ever since. Growing up in Coventry wasn't exactly exciting."

"It must have been tough," said Danny, nibbling on some fries.

"Not really. I didn't know any different. It might sound grim, but it wasn't. My foster parents were good to me, and I was happy enough. What about you?"

"Nothing much to tell. Live with my dad, had a million shit jobs, just been taking things as they come."

Anita eyed him; she liked this crazy, dark-haired boy with bright grey eyes. He was easy to talk to, no swagger or bluster, and he listened. She liked that.

But she had to be careful. She couldn't get too involved. But wasn't she already? Even though it had only been a couple of days. She did like him, and that was bad. It always led to bad things happening.

\*

The huge supermarket, soon to be a hypermarket, loomed out of the darkness as they made their way down the access road through the car park. They had walked the last half kilometre in silence, comfortable in the quiet of each other's company. The throaty roar of a motorbike shattered that quiet with thunderous noise, the high-powered headlight scything across the road like a laser. Shadows leapt wildly against the backdrop of the supermarket's walls.

Whirling at the sound, Danny's heart leapt into his mouth as the machine blasted past in a rush of hot, oily wind, missing them by inches. Anita screamed as Danny pulled her against the wall out of harm's way, watching as the motorbike leaned into a tight right turn, the tyres shrieking as the black-clad rider hurtled out of sight.

"Dickhead!" Danny yelled helplessly.

Anita shook uncontrollably in his arms, her breath coming in short gasps.

"You okay?" Danny asked.

"He was so close, so sudden. I thought he was going to hit us." She shuddered, her eyes wide.

"If it's any consolation, it scared the bejeebers out of me, too," said Danny.

Anita snorted, a sort of cross between a laugh and a sob. "The bejeebers?" she said, her voice still held a quiver.

"Totally," Danny answered in mock seriousness. "Me 'jeebers' will never be the same again."

Despite the scare, Anita laughed, swiping away her tears with the back of her hand.

"Fool!" she said.

"Come on, we'd better go, we're gonna be late, we don't want to upset Prissy."

\*

Anita had calmed down considerably by the time they got to the staffroom. Danny went to get her some water.

"What happened to you? You look as if you've seen a ghost." Jens sat on the chair next to Anita.

"Nothing, just a bit of a scare in the car park." She managed a weak smile.

"Scare? You mean you were attacked?" Jens leaned closer, all ears.

"Nothing so dramatic," Anita said. "Just some idiot on a motorbike nearly ran us down."

Jen's face dropped. "A motorbike?" she said warily.

"Why'd you say it like that?" Danny said, handing Anita a paper cup of water. "Do you know who it was?"

"Well, well, if it isn't the 'newbies,'" came a mocking voice from the doorway. "Did you enjoy your evening stroll?"

Dressed in black leather, the thin-faced man leered at the group, small, dark eyes glittering maliciously, the leather jacket slung over his shoulder half concealing the crash helmet.

"It was you on the bike," Danny said.

"Excuse me?" The biker feigned ignorance.

"Just now, in the car park, you nearly hit us," Danny said.

"Really? I didn't see you."

"You..." Fists clenched, Danny stepped forward.

The crash helmet plunked onto the floor.

"Danny." Anita was suddenly in front of him, a restraining hand on his chest. "Let it go, it's nothing."

Danny blinked, momentarily dazed, his shoulders sagged as the rage drained out of him.

"Aw, let him go, babe. I won't hurt him ... much," leered the biker.

"Grow up, Kenny. D'you always have to be a dick? Try taking the night off for once."

Kenny dropped all pretence of humour. "Keep out of this, Jens. Wouldn't want you to lose your job."

"Go ahead, Kenny. You'd be doing me a favour." Jens threw back.

Glaring at her, Kenny snatched up the helmet. "Bunch of losers," he muttered, stomping off.

Danny made to go after him.

"Whoa, slow down Tiger," Jens said. "That's one a-hole you do not want to tangle with."

"Who was that dipstick? What did he mean about losing your job?" Anita asked.

"Kenny Phillips, part-time forklift driver, full-time moron." Jens looked at Danny and Anita meaningfully. "He also happens to be Prissy's nephew."

"Wonderful," Danny said.

"He's a carbon copy of Prissy, only worse," Jens said. "Not a good idea to get on his bad side..."

\*

"That's quite a temper he's got," Jens said, leaning against the pillar at the bottom of the drinks aisle. "Did you see his face? I thought he was going to kill Kenny."

"I saw," Anita said, hefting the six-pack of water onto the shelf.

"Good thing you stopped him," Jens said.

"I didn't want him fighting over me, over nothing."

"Yeah, well, Kenny has that effect on people. Just steer clear of him. Danny should too," Jens paused. "Danny was pretty scary. He seemed to be somewhere else, like all he wanted was to take Kenny's head off."

Anita said nothing, not wanting to admit she had been thinking the exact same thing.

\*

"Hey, you okay?" Joanne asked.

Danny savagely punched the bottom of the cardboard box, collapsing it and stowing it in the trolley with the others.

"Fine," he said tersely.

"You don't look it," Joanne said, splitting open a box of spaghetti hoops. "You haven't said a word for the last hour."

"I'm good. Just got nothing to say." Danny hauled another box onto the floor, dropping it with a thump, and began tearing the box open.

"If you damage those tins, Winterbourne will be pissed," Joanne warned.

Danny bit back the expletive dancing on the tip of his tongue and continued to load the shelf.

\*

Standing in the staffroom doorway, Danny slapped his hand against the jamb in frustration.

"Sue, have you seen Anita?"

Sue Cranston struggled into her coat. "Already gone. Seemed in a bit of a hurry."

*Avoiding me*, Danny thought. The knot in his stomach tightened, a hard, greasy ball of undefined emotion. He wasn't sure why it felt so bad. He hardly knew the girl! It was crazy letting it affect him this way. It didn't alter the fact it did.

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## Chapter Six

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Standing at the crossroads, he looked up and down the street. It was already ten-fifty, he knew she had already passed. Now there was nothing left to do but run.

"Bollocks!" Danny swore when he saw Mr. Winterbourne at the top of the iron staircase, standing there in his pristine white coat like some spectral Jack Skellington.

As he approached, Mr. Winterbourne made a big production at looking at his watch.

*"Alright, you creep. I know I'm late,"* Danny said under his breath as he mounted the last of the stairs.

"Mr. Truman," Mr. Winterbourne's voice was as brittle as ice. "I'm certain I informed you on your first night that I do not tolerate tardiness. You're nearly fifteen minutes late."

"Sorry, Mr. Winterbourne, I got held up. It won't happen again," Danny said, trying to keep a light tone in his voice.

"Well," he hurrumped. "Make sure it doesn't." Winterbourne turned on his heel and went inside.

The others were already on the shop floor. Grabbing a loaded cage, Danny hauled it to his section, looking down each aisle as he passed. There was no sign of Anita.

"Hey, Barry."

Barry Brett turned at the sound of his name, a box of cornflakes poised in his hand.

"Have you seen Anita?" Danny asked.

Barry blushed bright red, a nervous condition that made his pale skin glow, clashing badly with the permanent crop of pimples on his chin and forehead and his short, ginger hair.

"Um, some of her stock was damaged, Mr. Winterbourne sent her out to the warehouse to tell Kenny to check the rest of the delivery," Barry said, pushing the heavy-rimmed glasses back up his nose.

"Okay, thanks." Danny frowned and headed for the warehouse.

"You're not supposed to go out there..." Barry called after him.

"Yeah, sure." Danny dismissed the warning.

His footsteps fell flat in the vastness of the warehouse, the walls and ceiling too far to reflect any sound. Despite Barry's warning, Danny knew he shouldn't be here. Prissy was already on his case, but he couldn't ignore the bad feeling inside. Anita was nowhere to be seen. One of the forklifts trundled about; it wasn't Kenny. The minutes ticked by as Danny padded about the warehouse; still nothing. Biting his bottom lip, he stood scanning the interior, finally deciding she must have gone back to the shop floor.

The voices were faint, barely audible. There was no mistaking Anita's. They emanated from the loading bays at the front of the warehouse. He couldn't make out any words, but the tone was strained. Danny passed Kenny's forklift, parked in the shadow of one of the stacks, a pallet of shrink-wrapped boxes still on its tines.

"Kenny, let me pass..."

"Then say 'yes,' a quick drink before work..."

"Not going to happen." Anita made to pass Kenny, but he wouldn't give way, forcing her back into a corner.

Smirking, he raised a hand to stroke her face. Anita flinched...

"Maybe a kiss then, get to know each other..."

With a startled cry, Kenny flew backwards, wrenched back by the straps of his overalls, staggering as Danny hauled him away from the trapped girl.

"Danny!" Anita screamed, stepping between them.

Kenny lashed out as Danny closed in on him, more in panic than by design. The hasty blow caught Anita square in the jaw. Her head snapped back as she tumbled into Danny's arms, taking them both to the floor.

"Anita!" Scrambling up, Danny knelt beside her. Dazed, Anita shook her head. An ugly bruise was already forming on her face.

"Bastard!" Danny was on his feet in an instant, charging at Kenny.

Involuntarily stepping back, a tingle of fear sliding up his back, Kenny gawked at the sudden ferocious attack, appalled by the grey ice fire in Danny's blazing eyes.

"Danny..." Anita plucked feebly at his sleeve.

"Come on then, Lover Boy," Kenny grated with a confidence he didn't feel.

"Truman!"

The high-pitched voice resounded around the warehouse. Danny didn't stop. Through a red haze, all he could see was Kenny standing before him, fists hesitantly raised in defence.

"Truman! What are you doing here? What's going on here?" Prissy shrieked.

Danny hesitated, his temper unabated. All he wanted was Kenny, just one punch, that's all, just one. Anita's touch on his arm brought him out of the fugue that clouded his mind as she gently eased his arm back down. He blinked at her a little bewildered.

"It's okay," she whispered.

"You're supposed to be on the floor, not in here. I've already told you about your lateness. Have I got to add insubordination to the list?" Prissy continued storming up to the tiny group.

Kenny dropped his hands as his uncle glared at Danny Truman.

"We're sorry, Mr. Winterbourne. We're going back now," Anita said, stepping forward.

"Wait a minute," Prissy said. "What happened to your face?"

Anita touched her cheek, wincing. "Nothing," she said. "Just a minor accident. Caught my face on a pallet. That's why Danny's here. Kenny called him to come get me. Didn't you, Kenny?"

Looking from one to the other, Kenny licked his thin lips, looking confused.

"Yeah, yeah," he quickly agreed, seeing the chance offered and grabbed it.

Mr. Winterbourne frowned, not sure whether to believe the story or not, then decided he didn't care.

"Get back to work," he snapped. "And Miss Baxter, make sure you enter the incident into the accident book."

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## Chapter Seven

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"You shouldn't have stopped me," Danny said angrily.

"What's your problem? Why are you so angry?" Anita said.

"He hurt you," Danny answered.

"By accident. I was handling it."

"It looked like it," Danny said acidly.

"Danny, it was nothing."

"Not to me!" He turned away. "Not to me..." His voice dropped to a whisper. "You might think it's only a small thing, but I've had to deal with people like Kenny all my life. People who think they have the right to make fun of others, that they're entitled, bullies..."

"But ... why? Why does it get to you so much?"

They were the only ones in the staffroom. Danny leaned on one of the tables, frustration seething in his head, looking emptily into space, his mind awhirl.

"Talk to me, Danny," Anita said.

He wasn't talking. Losing patience, Anita headed for the door.

"Talipes," he said.

"What?" she said.

"Talipes, commonly called 'clubfoot.' A congenital deformity, present at birth. The afflicted foot appears rotated internally at the ankle, pointing down and inwards. It causes the victims to walk on their toes and the outer side of the sole..."

"I don't understand..."

"I was born with severe clubfoot, my left. Even after months of treatment, stretching, resetting, plaster casts, it wasn't getting any better."

"At four years old, I had to undergo major surgery. My Achilles tendon was lengthened, other tendons in the foot cut, altered, attempting to bring the foot into a more normal position. Up to a point it worked, but it left me with a severe limp, an awkward gait which worsened the more tired I became, which was frequently. My left leg was considerably thinner than the right from the knee down, which made wearing shorts an impossibility. It precluded swimming or any other sports.

"I was alright with this, I didn't know any better, then, at age seven, I went to school, a late starter..."

Danny paused, breathing heavily, his hands fiercely gripping the tabletop.

"You have no idea how cruel kids can be," he said. "Seven years old, being taken to school in a baby's stroller, not being able to run around with the other kids, being stuck on a chair in the corner of the playground, wondering why I was different..."

"The fighting started towards the end of Primary School. I was walking pretty well by then; no more pram." Smiling bitterly, Danny continued, "It got worse in Secondary school. Teased, taunted, continually picked on 'til finally my temper exploded. It became my only defence, usually ending up with me having a black eye or bloody nose. I never won a single fight, but I never gave up either.

"There was one particular boy, Kevin Crickley. He was relentless, day after day, at every opportunity. By then my temper was hair-trigger. At the end of my second year, just before the summer break, he and a few of his friends kept on at me, all through the morning, snide remarks, vile comments, name-calling... 'Cripple,' 'Iron lung,' worse.

"By lunchtime, I'd had enough. I thought the hell with this and decided to go home, without permission. Crickley and his cronies caught me in the playground as I headed for the main

gate. I can't remember who pushed me, I just remember going down hard. Everything's a blank after that... I remember seeing red, coming off the ground, and swinging at Crickley...

"I spent four days in hospital. Everyone was demanding to know what happened, teachers, headmaster, even the police at one point. I wouldn't even tell my parents..."

"Oh, Danny..."

"No, no pity. When I was sixteen, I had a final operation, my foot was put right, the limp is barely noticeable even though my foot looks like a roadmap." He frowned. "I thought I had my temper under control... Apparently not."

"You should have said something."

"Like what? It's not exactly everyday conversation, besides it's nobody's business but mine. I don't even know why I'm telling you now."

"Because we're friends," Anita said.

"Are we?" Danny said bitterly.

"We are," Anita said. "That's why you're coming out with us on Saturday night."

"Saturday?" Danny said warily, suspicious of the sudden change of direction.

"Yeah, me, Jens, Joanna, we're going bowling. I was going to drop out as they were bringing their boyfriends, didn't want to be a fifth wheel, now I don't have to."

"I don't know..." Danny hesitated.

"No arguments, you're going. Now we'd better get back. I think we've pushed Prissy enough for one night..."

She paused by the door.

"Danny, I'm alright, honestly." Anita kissed him lightly on the cheek. "My knight in shining armour..." Then she winked.

\*

"What the hell d'you think you were doing?" Mr. Winterbourne demanded. "We've got a good thing going here and jeopardise it over a slip of a girl?"

"It was a bit of fun, 'til Truman interfered," Kenny said sulkily.

"How did the girl get hurt?"

"It was an accident. Truman came at me, she stepped in the way... It just happened," Kenny said petulantly.

"Always excuses," Mr. Winterbourne said. "Have you spoken to your contacts?"

"Yeah, just waiting on Pete to confirm he's got his dad's van. It should be tonight."

"Okay. I'll make sure to keep everyone on the shop floor. Have the shutters down before you load the van. We don't need prying eyes. You've got the key to the utility shed?"

"It's the only one," Kenny said, patting the pocket of his jeans. "They think it's just my bike in there."

"Let's keep it that way," Mr. Winterbourne said. "Your buyers know you're coming?"

"Of course they do," irritation crept into Kenny's voice. "I've got all they wanted, baked beans, tinned tomatoes, eggs, bacon, sausages, the lot. It was a good idea to put the chest freezer in the shed, widens the possibilities," Kenny said. "We can start with the frozen stuff."

"As long as they pay," his uncle said. "On the barrel. I'm not taking risks for my health."

"They will," Kenny said smugly. "And as long as you keep faking the books, who's gonna know? There's plenty of cafes in the East End who'd love to get a chance at cut-price grub."

Mr. Winterbourne grunted, pulled on his overcoat, and headed for home with Kenny staring after him.

Kenny spat on the floor. "Arsehole," he muttered after making sure his uncle was out of earshot.

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## *Chapter Eight*

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Fridays. God! He hated them! Most people loved them, the run-up to the weekend after a long week at work. Looking forward to parties, weekend breaks away or just chilling at home or at the pub with a few mates. Maybe even going out to a nice restaurant for a meal.

Kenny had none of that.

To him, the weekend rush meant more stores were needed on the shop floor, which meant he would have to move a mountain of stock to accommodate so the plebs could load the shelves for the local populace to come and buy their groceries. All just a pain in the arse.

Impatiently throwing the oily rag onto the work bench, Kenny turned and looked at the Yamaha Ninja 1100 motorcycle gleaming in the middle of the large garage and his bad mood immediately lightened. The fluorescent lights reflected off the chrome, sparkled on the black and red paintwork. His pride and joy. The bike made everything worthwhile. Tomorrow was his day off. He intended to go to the coast, Brighton maybe, or Hastings. He didn't really care, as long as he was on his bike. He'd leave straight after work, eat when he got down there, stay until late.

They could keep their parties and fancy restaurants, their girlfriends and wives... He had something better in mind. He'd scored well this week, nearly four hundred quid. His share of the scam. Smirking, he thought how happy Uncle Bert was with his hundred and fifty. The old fart didn't need to know they'd got five hundred and fifty. Why should he? What did he actually do except turn a blind eye, keep the plebs out of the way, and cook the books? Who made all the contacts, had to deal with the café owners, keep 'em all sweet...? Kenny Phillips, that's who! He deserved the bigger share; he did all the donkey work, took all the risks...

The garage doors were open to the sky, grey in the dying rays of the sun, overcast with the promise of rain later. The forecast said brilliant sunshine for tomorrow. He didn't care what

the weather was going to be like, rain or shine, he was headed for the coast. Shrugging, he took one last look at his bike. He'd be leaving for work in another hour, but he was loathe to leave the bike uncovered for even that short space of time.

"You beauty," he said, affectionately running his fingers along the chrome handlebars.

The garage was big enough for two cars as well as the bike. His dad's silver Mazda occupied the right-hand side, work benches littered with tools lined the wall on the left. Dad had built the benches years ago, bought all the tools, and never set foot in the garage since.

"Lazy..." Kenny left the sentence unspoken as he picked up the dust sheet from the bench and shook it out, making it crack like a whip. He threw it over the bike, walked around the other side to straighten it... That's when the lights went out...

Plunged into darkness, Kenny stood still until his eyes adjusted to the gloom.

"Bloody fuse," he muttered.

He'd told Dad more than once the fuse wasn't big enough for the garage's needs. The automatic doors were too heavy, the lights too numerous.

With a whirr of the electric motor, the garage doors began to clatter down...

"What the hell?" Kenny gasped, startled. "How...?"

A second before the door thumped shut, Kenny turned to the door controls by the access door. There was no one there. The overcast day was shut out as the door closed. Darkness pooled within the garage, shadows flitted. The scraping of metal on stone was harsh in the silence. Turning again, he thought he saw a shadow move along the wall by the car.

"Who's there?" Kenny demanded, looking this way and that, seeing nothing. "Who's there?"

The crash made Kenny jump, barely managing to suppress the scream leaping into his throat.

"No..." The whisper was hoarse, his mouth dry. "My bike..."

Daring the darkness, hands outstretched, fumbling around like a blind man, he found his bike lying on its side like a wounded animal.

"Dammit!"

He desperately wanted to right the machine, but was afraid of doing more damage within the shadowy garage. He paused in the darkness, the thought leaping into his head. The bike had a double stand. How could it fall over by itself... Kenny realised he wasn't alone.

"Who's there?" he peered into the blackness. "Come on, show yourself."

"Time to pay the piper, Kenny..." The voice floated out of the dark.

Slowly Kenny rose to his feet. "Who are you? What d'you want?"

"You should have kept your hands to yourself," the voice hissed. It sounded muffled, sibilant...

"What the hell are you talking about? Who are you?" Kenny said, voice trembling. "Is this about the stolen food...?"

His eyes were adjusting, making it possible to discern shape from shadow in the gloom. Something rattled behind him. Kenny turned, realising too late that it had been a distraction.

A rush of movement checked his turn. A shadow flitted in front of him, silver flashed, and a sharp burning slashed across Kenny's stomach, making him gasp. Grunting, he staggered back, his black t-shirt gaped, wetness ran down his thighs, wet, sticky.

"Hurts, doesn't it?" mocked the voice.

Shock stole Kenny's voice as a shape rose up before him, bright lights bursting in his head as a boot connected solidly between his legs. Unable to breathe, Kenny sank to his knees, his hands grasping his genitals as scarlet pain blossomed in his groin.

The figure came on, the huge knife flicking out like a serpent's tongue, slashing across his left cheek and back across the right, the point was buried into his right shoulder, mercilessly ripped out, slicing across his chest, his neck.

Sobbing, Kenny fell back against the bench. "Stop! Please, stop... No..."

Clinging to the bench, Kenny forced his pain-wracked body to its feet, trying to get to the rear of the garage, back into the house. He screamed as the knife raked down his back, dropping him to his hands and knees. A hand grabbed his lank greasy hair, yanking his head backwards painfully. Rough cloth brushed his cheek, a mask...

"You shouldn't mess with strangers; you never know who you're dealing with..." the voice whispered into his ear.

Kenny caught a brief glimpse of pale, wild eyes as the knife punched into his lower back...

\*

"Have they turned up yet?" demanded Mr. Winterbourne.

"I haven't seen either of them," Jens said.

"This is not good enough," Mr. Winterbourne said. "This is the second time Truman has been late this week..."

"I'm sure he had a good reason," Jens began, but Mr. Winterbourne had stalked off.

"And thanks to you too..." Jens muttered.

In a rush of footsteps, Danny hurried into the staffroom, breathing heavily.

"You're pushing your luck; Prissy was just here asking after you. Where you been?"

"I overslept, missed the bus," Danny gasped.

"I'll clock you in. Just get on the floor," Jens said.

"Cheers Jens, you're a diamond."

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## *Chapter Nine*

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"Strike!" Anita leapt into the air, clapping her hands gleefully as Danny watched in amazement as his ball cleared the lane, all of the pins scattering as the paddle swept down.

"Again? I thought you said you'd never played before, Dan?" Darren, Joanna's boyfriend, said.

"I haven't. I'm as gobsmacked as you!" he said, turning his cheeks a vivid red.

"Three strikes in a row is more than being gobsmacked!" Joanna said. "You're a hustler!"

"There has to be money changing hands before it can be called hustling, Dumbo!" Jens quipped good-naturedly.

"Beginner's luck! Honest!" Danny said, putting his hands up, walking back to his seat.

"Yeah, right," Jens said, totally not believing him.

Tenpins crashed, excited cries of the winners, the groans of the losers, and the rumbling of bowling balls trundling down the highly polished alleys filled the twenty-four-lane auditorium. Huge screens above the alleys flashed the scores, music videos played on the unoccupied lanes, though it was impossible to hear the music over the din.

Danny sipped his coke as Jen's boyfriend, Colin, got up to bowl.

"They're just jealous," Anita said next to him. She leaned in a little closer and whispered, "You haven't played before, have you?"

Danny laughed. "No, never."

Anita was grinning at him.

"Very funny," he said.

"Well, I thought so," she said, relishing her teasing. "Wanna get a burger?"

They waited at the rear of the bowling alleys for their order, the ringing and dings of the video game section next to the burger bar mingling with the rest of the bowling alley cacophony.

"So, how are you doing?" Anita said.

"With this lot?" Danny said, indicating Jens and company.

"Among other things," said Anita.

"Not bad. How about you?"

"Same," she said. "It's hard joining long-term friends and trying to fit in."

"Tell me about it, but they're a good bunch, even if they do think I'm a hustler."

They laughed.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," said Danny. "Kenny's a low-life," he hesitated. "I've got to ask, why'd you cover for him?"

"Seemed the easiest way out of a bad situation." Anita shrugged. "If we'd told the truth, Kenny would only have denied it. Who d'you think Prissy would believe?"

"Guess you're right," agreed Danny. "Prissy doesn't like me, anyway."

"Prissy doesn't like anyone," Anita said. "At least we had a good night working without Kenny. He should take more time off."

"Absolutely, though his uncle wasn't too happy about it," Danny laughed with her. "But let's not talk shop, pardon the pun. Let's just enjoy the evening."

"Absolutely!" Anita paraphrased.

They got their hamburgers.

"We need a rematch," Darren said, putting on his coat.

"Anytime," said Danny. "But I'm really not that good..."

He turned scarlet when they all burst out laughing.

"So, what now?" Jens said, turning her collar up against the chill wind.

"Dunno about you lot, but I'm done. I need my bed," Joanne said.

"No, it's still early," Jens said. "Let's do something, go for a coffee..."

"Dan? Anita?" said Joanne.

They looked at each other.

"Yeah, why not?"

\*

They watched in total awe as Darren tucked into a large chicken supreme pizza.

"Where does he put it all?" said Colin.

"Hollow legs," said Jens.

"More like hollow body," Joanne added.

Darren stopped with a pizza slice halfway to his mouth, suddenly aware they were all watching him.

"What?" he said.

"You just ate a massive salad," said Jens, laughing. "Not to mention the hamburger and fries at the bowling alley."

"Snack," Darren said, chomping into the pizza slice. "This is dinner," he added, snatching up a napkin to catch the tomato sauce trickling down his chin.

"How you finding London?" Jens asked Anita.

"I haven't seen much," Anita said, surprised at the sudden question. "I haven't had the time yet."

"Where's home?"

"Northampton," Anita promptly replied.

Danny frowned, looking at Anita, his coffee halfway to his mouth. That didn't sound right ... Northampton? That night at McDonalds, they'd talked... He had asked the same question, and she said... His frown deepened as he tried to remember, but it wouldn't come.

"It must be great having your own place," said Joanna. "You get to have your own space, do what you want when you want, no nagging parents driving you mad."

"Definitely," said Anita. "Plenty of time to do your own laundry, ironing, cleaning... Not to mention cooking your own dinner after getting home from work," she laughed. "Trust me, you're better off at home."

"Massive downer!" said Joanna. "It's bad enough having to clean my own room!"

"Those were blessed days." Anita grinned.

"What about you, Dan?" Darren said. "What team do you support?"

"Ah," said Danny slowly. "Football."

"Yep, our national sport. West Ham, Arsenal?"

"Don't mean to disappoint, but I hate football," Danny said.

"What? How can you not like football?" said Darren.

"It's not natural," agreed Colin.

"Sorry mate. But I just can't get excited about twenty-two men running about a field chasing a ball. Bores me silly," Danny said.

"You can't say things like that. It's watched by millions."

"The sport of kings," chimed in Colin.

"I think you'll find that's horse racing," Danny said lamely.

"Not as far as we're concerned," said Colin, looking very aggrieved.

"Alright, that's enough, you football hooligans. Leave him alone," said Jens. "Besides, football *is* boring."

"You go wash your mouth out, Girlie!" said Darren covering his ears.

"Idiot," Jens said.

"Well, if it's not football, what do you like?" Colin said. "Needlework?"

"I moved around a lot, no real time for anything else," Danny said.

"Enough!" said Jens. "Don't spoil a magic day!"

"We're going to have to do this again," said Darren. "It's been a great evening."

"Maybe next time we can take in a movie," suggested Jens.

"Or maybe go for a meal," Joanna said, looking pointedly at Darren.

Darren looked at their collective grinning faces.

"What?" he said.

\*

"It was a good night," Danny said, breaking the silence between them.

"It was," Anita said absently.

"We could do it again or go out by ourselves if you want," Danny said.

"Maybe," Anita said.

They reached the junction, Anita slowed.

"Do you want me to see you home?" Danny asked.

"No, it's okay. I'll be alright from here."

"It's not a problem. Come on."

"I said I'm okay," Anita snapped.

Danny recoiled, surprised by her sudden change of mood. "Anita?"

"I'll see you tomorrow night," she said, walking off without another word and not looking back.

"What was that?" Danny muttered, struggling to understand what had just happened.

For a moment he thought Anita was angry, that he had done or said something to upset her, though God knows what. She had looked ... haunted, deep in her eyes. Her mouth, so quick to smile, had tightened into a thin, hard line. Then he realised it had not been anger he had seen in her expression, not even a glimmer... What he had seen was fear.

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## *Chapter Ten*

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Chief Inspector Ruperts stared at the word scrawled in blood on the garage wall.

"Why change your M.O.?" he wondered.

"Sir?" Paul Leeson, his sergeant, queried.

"All the other attacks were done in the open, with several escape routes. Why trap yourself in an enclosed space with no escape route? Why a home invasion? It doesn't make sense."

"Could it be a copycat?" Leeson said.

Ruperts studied the bloody words, the dark brown lines tracking down the rough wall like bitter tears.

"No, it's definitely The Cutter. Look at the 'Ts', see the curving crossbars? That was never made public, nor has any photograph been shown of the inscription. The same with the fatal wound on all the victims. Sometime during the attack, the victim is stabbed in the liver. The shock renders them incapable whilst keeping them alive. See the dark blood pooled by the motorbike... Hepatic blood, straight from the liver. It can take up to thirty minutes to bleed out.

"It's The Cutter alright..."

"Gives him time to play..." Leeson said, kneeling by the Yamaha still on its side. "Well, at least we know how Kenny spent his proceeds from the food scam," he said. "How can stealing groceries be so lucrative?"

"When you steal the basics like those found in the utility shed, it's easy to find people who want to buy in bulk, cheaply, mainly small restaurants and cafes," Ruperts said.

"That's a lot of baked beans," whistled Leeson.

The garage doors were raised allowing the early sun's rays in, giving natural light to the grisly crime scene. Two police cars had pulled up onto the drive, obscuring the interior from neighbour's prying eyes. Blue and white tape had been strung across the front of the house.

Kenny's dad, unable to sleep, had come downstairs to make some tea. Seeing Kenny's crash helmet still in the hall, he had checked to see if his bike was still in the garage, wondering why his son had not gone to work. He found Kenny. That was early Saturday morning. The next thirty-six hours had been hectic; forensics had gone over the garage, Kenny's body removed, everything else left as it was.

"All these tools..." Ruperts picked up a wrench from the workbench. "Phillips was a big lad, young, strong... Why didn't he grab one of these wrenches, or a hammer? Why didn't he fight back?"

"He must have been caught by surprise, taken from behind," Leeson said.

"Or he knew his attacker," Ruperts said, throwing the wrench down with a clatter.

"You think Phillips knew The Cutter?" Leeson said.

"I don't know. It doesn't seem likely. Phillips was a petty thief, his criminal record is as long as a toilet roll, but it's all small stuff, minor assaults, T.D.A., shoplifting, speeding tickets, dangerous driving... Even his driving license belongs to his brother, he's been banned three times over..."

"He lives in the East End, he's a home boy... Where's the connection between him and The Cutter?" Ruperts sighed heavily. "And then there's the circuit breaker... The lights in the garage were shut off... That indicates planning, premeditation... Daring. Mr. Phillips was still in the house... It looks to me as if Kenny was deliberately targeted."

Ruperts could feel the beginning of a headache lurking at the back of his head. None of this made sense.

"Let's go back to the store. His work colleagues should just be starting their shift," he said, glancing at his watch. "We'll talk to them, see what they've got to say."

\*

"Why did you lie?" Danny said as they sat in a quiet corner of the staffroom.

"I saw you were getting edgy; I didn't want you losing your temper. Besides, I know you were alone on Friday."

"I was at home, clearing up after my dad, not that he'd remember that," said Danny.

"Then it doesn't matter, does it?" Anita smiled.

"I'm not so sure that policeman's convinced," said Danny. "He knew so much."

"You can blame that on Jens," said Anita. "That girl could talk for England."

Almost as if saying her name conjured up, the devil Jens appeared in the seat next to Anita.

"What did they say?" Her face was alight with excitement.

"Just questions," Danny said sourly.

"I just heard two policemen talking in the corridor. They said it was definitely The Cutter, the name was written in blood and everything..."

Anita paled. "Oh my God..." she whispered.

"That's six..." Jens carried on, oblivious to the effect it was having on Anita. "Who would have thought Kenny..."

"Jens!" Danny snapped.

"I don't feel very well." Anita was ashen white. "I think I need to go home..."

"You'll have to ask Mr. Bridger. He's taken over from Prissy. Apparently, he's gone on leave..." Jens said.

Danny ignored her. "I'll go talk to the inspector..."

The policeman looked across the room at the girl huddled on the chair.

"Is she okay?" he asked Danny.

"I think it's just shock," Danny said.

"Okay, of course she can go. I'll have someone drive her." Ruperts motioned to one of his men.

"Come on, Anita. Let's get you out of here," Danny said, helping her to her feet.

Anita broke away from him, her hands raised. "No, no, I don't need your help."

"You're still a little shaky..."

"No! Stop fussing!"

People turned at her sudden outburst as Anita stumbled from the staffroom out into the corridor where the police driver awaited her. With a last glance, she left, leaving Danny confused once again. It was the same as yesterday. Danny knew she wasn't ill, nor was Anita in shock. It was the second time in two days he had seen that look.

Anita was scared.

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## *Chapter Eleven*

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Something changed, and it just wasn't because of Kenny's death. A pall descended over the store, a palpable gloom that was exacerbated by a not too discreet police presence by the utility shed which was taped off with bright blue and white tape. Even Jens's normally irrepressible exuberance was dampened. No one was really speaking. For a while, it looked as if Mr. Bridger was going to close the store but after consulting head office and the police, work, like the show, went on.

\*

Danny barely tasted the bacon sandwich as he stared at the glowing monitor. The coffee was good though, good enough for a second cup, and it helped with the fatigue weighing down his body as well as his spirit. His lower back cracked as he stretched, rubbing his tired eyes as he logged onto the internet.

It was at times like this that he wished he could afford a mobile phone, limitless calls, texts, and data downloads... On the downside, monthly bills, and expensive phones... Wi-Fi Bytes Internet Café would have to suffice. The night had been strained, except for the whispered closeted conversations floating around the shop floor as shelves were loaded, tending mostly to be instigated by Jens, other than that the work was done mostly in a strained silence.

Much like the café this morning, even though it was three-quarters full, the place was as quiet as a tomb, only the occasional click of a cup on a saucer or the absent stirring of coffee or herbal tea broke the silence as the patrons trolled through an endless stream of information on their monitor screens.

For nearly an hour, he searched through the brief history of The Cutter, victims, timelines, locations. The information didn't really tell him anything he didn't already know. There was some

stuff comparing The Cutter to various other serial killers, (inevitably the ever-popular Jack the Ripper got a mention) ending with the so-called expert predicting where The Cutter was most likely to strike next.

"London," Danny muttered drily.

The "expert" had suggested Edinburgh.

He didn't really know what he was looking for, though Danny was pretty certain he would know it when he saw it. Scrubbing at his face, he leaned back in his chair. He needed to sleep. The list of dates, times, victims' names mocked him as he looked down at the notebook beside the keyboard. With a grimace, he flipped it shut. Cramming it into his backpack, Danny finished his coffee in two short gulps, then headed home.

\*

Sleep eluded him, he knew it would. The previous night kept playing through his tired mind. Sitting in the staffroom, not wanting to eat, the cup of tea cold on the table.

*"Is Anita alright?" Joanne asked, slipping into the seat on the opposite side of the table.*

*"Yeah, I think so," he said. "Been a rough couple of days."*

*"What about you? Things haven't been plain sailing in your little pond either. You're looking a bit worn around the edges."*

*"Thanks," Danny scoffed. "I'm okay. I just wish none of this was happening. Kenny was a dipstick, but he didn't deserve that. How did things get so bad so fast?"*

*"I don't know," Joanne said. "You know they arrested Prissy?"*

*"No, why?"*

*"Rumour has it he and Kenny were working some sort of a scam together; a ton of stock was found in the utility shed where Kenny kept his bike."*

*"Shit," said Danny. "Just when you think there's nothing left to surprise you."*

*"Mum told me Kenny's murder is all over the news. So far, the store hasn't been named. This place is gonna be a madhouse when it gets out," said Joanne.*

*"And it will come out, sooner or later," said Danny. "It always does."*

*"Yeah, well, we can only hope for later," said Joanne. "And don't worry about Anita. When she comes back, I'll watch out for her."*

It all rolled around in his head as he tossed and turned. Something was niggling at him, maybe something important, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. He was getting a headache just thinking about it. Frustrated, he settled down and tried to sleep.

Like a switch clicking over, it came to him. The light in his head came on just as he was falling asleep. Sitting up, he picked up the notebook on his bedside cabinet and flicked through it. Dates, times, locations...

Danny stared at the page. It was a fantastic leap of logic, or maybe just coincidence, but the idea was in his head now and he couldn't shake it. He still didn't understand the significance of his discovery as he lay back down. In the end, tiredness won... His eyes began to drift shut and his last conscious thought was ... *Locations...*

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## *Chapter Twelve*

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"What do you mean, she's leaving?" Danny said.

"Just that," answered Jens. "She's with Mr. Bridger now giving in her notice. She looked really upset, close to tears."

"But why, because of Kenny?"

"I don't know," Jens said. "She came in all upset; I asked her what was wrong, and she said she was leaving."

Anita came into the staffroom, closely followed by Mr. Bridger. She was pale and drawn, dark rings circled her eyes, still red from crying. Danny stepped towards her, and she flinched and before he could speak, Mr. Bridger called him.

"Mr. Truman, a word."

Danny hesitated.

"Now, Mr. Truman," insisted Mr. Bridger.

Cursing under his breath, Danny followed the manager to his office.

"It says in your file you are 'aux fait' with forklifts, is that right?" asked Mr. Bridger without preamble.

"Yes," said Danny.

"Good. I want you to take over from Mr. Phillips. It's a sad business, and I know he was a colleague, but needs must."

"Not a problem, Mr. Bridger," Danny said. "Starting when?"

"Right away, we've fallen behind, deliveries have backed up, there's three trailers in the loading bay that need unloading ASAP."

Bridger hadn't exaggerated, the trailers were huge, and Danny realised any chance of speaking with Anita just went out the window. His anger subsided as the night wore on and the trailers took all his attention. At least driving a forklift got him out of the drudgery of loading shelves all night. Though the worry of missing Anita rose in his mind constantly. Bridger had requested he and the other forklift driver, Jim, work through their breaks. They'd agreed, drinking cokes and eating sandwiches, which tasted like cardboard as they worked.

It was just past six thirty when Danny stood by the open warehouse door. The other forklift had just finished unloading the last two pallets from the trailer.

"Jim, you okay with that?" Danny called as the last pallet came off the lorry.

"Yeah mate, no prob!" Jim waved back.

"Cheers!" Danny called.

Parking his forklift in the recharging bay, he hurried to the staffroom.

"Anita."

She looked up in surprise as Danny entered the deserted staffroom, then she turned her back.

"I don't want to talk, Danny. There's nothing left to say."

"You're not being fair," he said. "You haven't even told me why you're leaving."

"Because I can't stay here. I don't want to stay here..."

"You could at least look at me."

Anita turned. "Don't make this harder than it already is," she said wearily. "Please."

"What's going on? What are you so afraid of?"

Anita snatched up her bag and slung it over her shoulder, saying nothing.

"You lied to me," Danny said as she reached the door. "You told me you came from Coventry, but when Joanne asked, you said you came from Northampton."

"I'm sorry," Anita said quietly.

"Why lie in the first place? It bugged me for a while, then I realised, you left Northampton the same time as The Cutter first appeared. Was that a coincidence?"

Anita flinched at the name.

"Then as soon as you heard tThe Cutter was in London, you changed; you were suddenly afraid... And now you're leaving?"

"Danny, let it go. Trust me, you don't want to get involved," Anita began.

"No!" Danny suddenly snapped. "That's not good enough! Involved in what? What are you running away from? Talk to me. Why are you so scared?"

"Because he's after me!" Anita almost screamed at him. "He wants me, he's followed me all over the country..." Tears flowed down her drawn cheeks.

"I don't understand. Who's following you?"

"Oh, why won't you leave it alone?" Anita said quietly.

"For God's sake! Tell me!"

Anita plonked down in a chair. She looked exhausted, shoulders slumped, dark rings around her eyes set in a pale face. Sighing heavily, she closed her eyes. Wet diamonds sparkled on her long, blonde eyelashes as her chin sank down onto her chest.

"Okay."

He could barely hear her.

"But not here. The day shift will be here soon..."

\*

Neither of them wanted to eat as they sat in the corner of the McD's, nursing a coffee. Danny waited patiently as Anita gathered her thoughts, staring out the window, myriad expressions playing across her face, none of them good.

"You know I'm here for you," he said softly.

Her smile was bleak, lost, her eyes dull. "You don't know what you're talking about," she said distantly.

"Then tell me. Who's following you? What's so bad that you have to leave? You've only been here three weeks..."

"He found me quicker this time," she said. "I don't know how, but he did."

Danny waited.

"My name isn't Baxter. It's Summers, Andrea Summers, and you're right, I come from Northampton."

"Oh my God..." Danny said. He'd read that name dozens of times over the last twenty-four hours. "Clare Summers, The Cutter's first victim..."

Anita's face creased with pain.

"I didn't want to lie to you. Honestly, Dan, I didn't, but it was safer that way. Joanne caught me off guard. I answered without thinking." Taking a haltingly deep breath, she continued.

"Clare and I were orphans. Our parents had died three years before Clare was attacked. She was older than me by two years. She became my guardian 'til I could come of age. She was pretty, well-liked. No one had a bad word to say about her. That's what made it all the more terrible.

"Clare had been having a rough time. She broke up with her long-term boyfriend; six years they had been together, and then she caught him cheating on her. She was devastated. She practically became a hermit, never coming out of her bedroom except for work. It went on for weeks 'til I finally put my foot down and made her start going out.

"I went with her at first, only to the pub or the cinema 'til she slowly began to get her confidence back. She renewed old friendships and then things started to get better. We lived

together in the house our parents left us. We even got a couple of kittens... I say 'we,' they were hers really, Salt and Pepper. Clare doted on them, treated them like kids.

"We were alright for a while 'til some weird stuff began to happen..."

"Weird?" said Danny.

"Yeah. Clare thought someone was stalking her, the footsteps behind as she walked home from a night out, stopping when she stopped but never seeing anyone. It went on for quite a while. Then one day, Salt disappeared. We hunted high and low for him. Pepper even searched for him, continually prowling around the entire house, the garden. He was nowhere to be found. Two days later, Pepper started making a terrible racket by the front door, mewling and howling like a demented thing, wailing as only a cat can. The memory of that sound still sends shivers up my spine.

"It was late, after eleven. The cat flap was unlatched, but Pepper refused to go out, so Clare coaxed Pepper away from the front door.

"Getting a torch, Clare went into the front garden. Her screams brought me running. Someone had mutilated Salt and nailed him to the front gate. Clare was beside herself. It was horrible, sick. Why would someone do something so cruel?" With trembling hands, Anita sipped her coffee.

"Clare was inconsolable. Once again, she wouldn't go out, convinced it was the work of her mysterious stalker..."

Danny could see Anita reliving that night again through troubled eyes, wet and shining, but no tears fell. She continued in low tones, her voice flat and emotionless, as if thinking speaking too loud would make everything real again.

"A birthday party for one of her friends had been arranged weeks before. It took a lot of persuasion, but I finally got her to go."

Anita paused again, a hitch in her throat. She coughed; her mouth as dry as sandpaper, she took another sip of coffee.

"It was never explained why Clare refused the lift home, the police speculated that maybe she had found new confidence, or possibly she had, had one too many drinks... She was only a hundred and fifty metres from our front door when... when..."

Now the tears did flow down Anita's cheeks as she buried her face in her hands. Danny slipped around the table and put a comforting arm around her shoulders.

"It doesn't end there..." Anita said, biting her bottom lip as she dabbed her eyes with a napkin. "Clare must have screamed, or perhaps it was Pepper getting really restless, I don't know, but I went out into the front garden.

"There was a couple along the street. They looked as if they were arguing. I was standing in the full light of the open street door as the man turned to me. The coldness of that stare made me shudder. The hairs on my arms prickled even though he was one hundred and fifty metres away. It was like ice water flowing over my entire body. I couldn't see his face, just his eyes, as if they were somehow glowing in the dark. I quickly went inside.

"An hour later, Clare still had not come home. I was really worried; a terrible feeling knotted my stomach. I couldn't get the earlier incident out of my head; the feeling inside grew worse.

"I should have called the police, but half of me was hoping it was just an over-active imagination, just blowing a lover's tiff out of all proportion. Putting on a coat and taking the torch, I went to look for my sister."

Head down, shoulders heaving, the napkin in her fidgeting hands torn to shreds, Anita struggled on, trying hard to get through the narrative.

"I found her." Her voice was a hoarse whisper. "I saw what he did to her, saw that horrid name scrawled in her blood on the wall." She shuddered. "Several neighbours heard me screaming, one of them called the police. The next thing I remember was being in the hospital."

"What did the police say about the man?" Danny asked.

Anita looked tormented and desperate. "I didn't tell them."

"What? Why not? They might have been able to catch him..."

Her brief humourless laugh cut him short.

"And tell them what? What did I see? A shadow, a figure in the darkness a hundred and fifty metres away. He could have been anyone. I couldn't even tell how tall he was, if he was thin or fat... I saw nothing."

"But you said he stared at you..."

"Yes, but I didn't see his face. It was more like an... an emanation, a feeling, as he fixated on me, I just felt a bitter coldness..."

"So why run?"

"Don't you get it? I didn't see him, but The Cutter doesn't know that. I was standing in the full light of the open front door. He saw me as clear as day. He knows who I am..."

"Then let's go to the police now, tell them..."

"Why, what's the point?" Anita said. "What's changed? They know he's in London, they know he's responsible for Kenny... What more can I tell them?"

"They can keep you safe, protect you," Danny said.

Anita actually laughed, a brittle sound like ice cracking.

"For how long? A week, a month, a year? He would just go to ground, bide his time, wait it out until the police realise what I already know. I am no use to them."

"Protection will be lifted, and I'll be right where I started." Anita sighed heavily. "My only option is to run; hope I can lose him."

"That's not working anymore," Danny said.

"Don't you think I know that? I thought I'd lost him in Truro. But no, like a bloodhound from Hell, he tracked me down again.

"London is big, cosmopolitan, I thought I could lose myself here for sure... Some hope."

The silence lay heavily between them while all around people bustled and chatted, eating their Big Breakfasts, drinking their coffee or their cokes, ready to start their day.

"I need to go to the bathroom," Anita said, sliding out of the booth.

As she disappeared into the crowd Danny sat, pondering on what Anita had told him, staring out of the window, at the damp grey pavement, the iron sky full of clouds, their bellies heavy and dark with rain, the day reflecting the growing bleakness inside him. So many things were clear now, except where there should have been illumination, he had found darkness.

The minutes ticked by.

"Shit..."

Grabbing his backpack, Danny rushed outside, ignoring the blast of cold air chilling his face as he scoured the street. There was no sign of Anita. It was futile going after her. He had no idea where she lived. How could he have been so stupid? He should have known she would have done a runner.

Dejected, head down, he trudged his way home. The early morning commuters flowed by him like a river. He didn't even notice. A thousand thoughts ran through his troubled mind, uppermost was going to the police. He knew Anita would never forgive him if he did, and anyway, she was right. She had nothing new to tell them.

The newspaper placard outside of the newsagents caught his eye, the headline fairly screaming out its message:

**CUTTER'S SIXTH VICTIM**

**SCANDAL AT SUPERMART**

"Oh my god..." Danny said, crossing the road.

Standing outside the shop, Danny quickly scanned through the main headlines, the sick feeling inside growing with every word he read. It was all there in damning black and white, the name of the supermarket, its location, the stolen stock hidden in the utility shed. Everything.

The newspaper crumpled noisily as Danny crushed it angrily into a tight ball and threw it into a bin. If The Cutter didn't know where Anita was before, he sure as hell did now.

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## *Chapter Thirteen*

---

Euston Station was a heaving mass of humanity, like rats in a maze from every walk of life scurrying about their trivial lives. He watched from the newsstand, leaning back against the wall, the newspaper hanging limp from his fingers.

Luck. Pure luck. Another few minutes and he would have been on the train back to Northampton, the trail having gone cold in Truro. In all probability, he would have missed seeing the headlines altogether until he got to the other end. Thinking he would have to wait for her to surface and hope he could catch up to her before she moved on yet again, continuing their nationwide game of cat and mouse.

Dark eyes, full of malevolence, he read the headlines again for the umpteenth time, avidly absorbing every word, every detail. The smile was mirthless, cracking his thin face, showing discoloured teeth behind a lipless mouth.

Not for the first time he had trusted to luck, waited for a sign...

And here she was...

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## Chapter Fourteen

---

Jens, Joanne, and Barry occupied the staffroom, getting ready to start work on the floor. There was no sign of Anita. Mickey Tull was on his way out. Freezer duty, the one job everybody dreaded, and did their best to get out of. Tonight, Mickey had drawn the short straw, dressed as if he were going to accompany Shackleton. He nodded as he passed Danny and went dejectedly out of the door.

Danny felt the trepidation growing inside. *She's already gone*, he thought, *decided waiting was too dangerous. Get going while the going was good.* Then he heard hurried footsteps behind him. Anita breezed past him, her light perfume floating on the air, but her face was grim, as black as thunder, a newspaper clutched tightly in her hand.

"I've got to go," she said, throwing the newspaper onto the table. "I've got to go, now."

"Slow down," Danny said. "What's going on? We need to talk about this before you do anything rash. Think about it..."

"There's nothing to think about. It's all over papers, the T.V. There's no more time."

Jens sat up in her chair, her head turning from Anita to Danny as if they were playing tennis.

"What's going on?" Jens echoed the earlier question as she picked up the newspaper.

"Keep out of this, Jens," said Danny, reaching for Anita's arm. "Let's go outside and talk about this."

"No." Anita snatched her arm back. "I've just come in for my wages, then I'm gone."

She pushed past Danny and headed for the office.

"Danny? What's all this about?" Jens said, indicating the headlines.

"Nothing," Danny snapped and went after Anita.

By the time he got to the office, Anita was already inside. He could hear raised voices through the door, but the actual conversation was muffled. Abruptly the door opened, and Anita stormed out. Her face was livid. She stopped when she saw him.

"He won't pay me 'til tomorrow night," she said tightly.

"Anita..."

She tossed her head, pushing past him. He couldn't think of anything to say.

\*

Back in the staffroom, Jens and Joanne had the newspaper spread out on one of the tables, they stopped talking when Anita came back in, closely followed by Danny.

"Are you going to tell us what's going on?" Jens said. "And what it's got to do with the newspapers?"

Tight-lipped, Anita hung her coat up, refusing to look at anyone, leaving them staring after her as she went out onto the shop floor to start work. The girls looked expectantly at Danny.

"I can't tell you... It's nothing," he said.

"Well, it doesn't look like it's nothing," Joanne said.

"Maybe later," Danny said. "I've got to get out to the warehouse..."

He stopped in the corridor and looked at the payphone on the wall. All it would take is one phone call. Then this nightmare would end. Anita would be safe, despite what she thought. She'd probably never speak to him again, but she wouldn't have to run anymore either... He fished a handful of coins out of his pocket and looked at them, chewing his bottom lip, then he looked back at the phone...

\*

The night dragged interminably, it felt like days instead of hours, despite the heavy workload giving Danny no real time to think. Anita made a point of avoiding him as well as the

girls, refusing to have her breaks in the staffroom, preferring to continue working, while he, in turn, avoided Jens and Joanne, which wasn't too hard working in the warehouse all night. As much as he had wanted to, he had not called the police. Maybe he should have done, but he figured to talk to Anita one last time, convince her to call them herself. She had to. They both knew the situation was bad, and it was only going to get worse. Running wasn't the answer.

He should have known better. Looking at Anita's clocking-in card, he saw she had clocked out twenty minutes ago and the reason she worked through her breaks suddenly became clear.

\*

Danny glanced at his watch as he stood in the shadowy doorway on this side of the junction, making him practically invisible to the casual eye. Ten fifteen. He waited patiently.

The night was alive with sounds. In the distance, a dog was barking. Another dog, farther away, howled in return, a lonely, mournful sound. Cars still crisscrossed the busy junction, headlights splashing white light, splitting the darkness. A motorbike roared past; memories of Kenny. A radio or maybe a T.V. was playing somewhere, heavy rock, Sons of Merrick, a local band made good, one of Danny's favourites.

A car turned the corner. Danny stepped back into the shadows, keeping his anonymity. The car disappeared into the darkness, tail lights, like demons' eyes receding into pinpricks, and then they were gone. The night was chill as he pulled his jacket tighter about his body, sticking his hands deep into his pockets.

His watch declared ten forty.

She'd gone to work a different way; he was certain of it. She was playing it safe, that's why she left early yesterday, breaking her routine. He should have anticipated that. The truth was, it never even entered his mind.

"Damn," he muttered.

Eleven fifteen. At least there would be no Prissy waiting at the top of the iron stairs, tapping his watch. Danny headed straight for the shop floor in search of Anita. He found Jens instead.

"Have you seen Anita?"

"And 'Hello' to you too," Jens sniffled, wiping her nose with a Kleenex. She sneezed violently. "I hate colds," she grumbled.

"Have you seen her?" Danny said impatiently.

"Yeah, she's here somewhere. There's only four of us on shift: me, Barry, Mickey, and Anita. It's Joanne's night off and Lee is sick, gave me this bloody cold. Mickey's pretty pissed off. Bridger put him on freezer duty again. He is not a happy bunny...!"

Danny wasn't listening, already going to look for Anita.

"Thanks for the sympathy!" Jens called after him. Only it came out more like "Thags..."

\*

The door to the office closed silently, one glance back, a ray of light from the streetlamp falling across the large clock on the wall proclaiming the hour to be ten past eleven. The door clicked shut. Soundless footsteps moved along the corridor. The overhead neon lighting was harsh, glittering wickedly off the long razor-sharp edge of the eight-inch knife gripped tightly in the right hand. A single scarlet drop slipped from the needle point to splatter the scuffed green linoleum floor. Like a ghost, the shadow passed through the double doors at the end of the corridor, quietly going down the stairs to where the electric cupboard was located.

\*

"Anita..."

Her face creased as Danny hurried up to her.

"You've got to call the police. It's the only way," he said.

"How many times have I got to tell you? I'm not calling the police?" Anita said.

"Then I will!" Danny returned. "We've got to do something about this. You just can't keep running."

"Don't tell me what I can or can't do!" Anita threw the carton of soup onto the floor, the cans inside rattling dully. "I'm going to the office, gonna demand my wages, and then I'm out of here."

Danny grabbed her as she passed. "No, I can't let you do that..."

Jens and Barry appeared at the end of the aisle, attracted by all the shouting.

"Jeez! The whole bloody world can hear you two!" Jens said. "What's going on?"

They both looked at her, anger crackling between them like an electric current, glaring at each other like gladiators in the arena. Those about to die, salute you.

It was all too much for Barry, his pizza face already erupting into a stressed-out scarlet. Too much shouting, too much upset. Pushing his heavy glasses up his nose, he went in search of Mickey...

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## *Chapter Fifteen*

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Stamping his feet, Mickey Tull clapped his arms around himself trying to beat some warmth back into his body, his breath pluming almost as if he were vaping. (A nasty habit he thought was disgusting! How anyone could even think it looked attractive on any level was beyond him.) Dressed in overalls, heavy coat, woolly hat, and gloves, he really was more prepared for the Arctic than working in a crummy supermarket.

The third bloody night in this ice box. Where was the justice in that? Bridger should have designated one of the others for a change. But no... Mickey knew what went where. He had all the stock ordered. Well, of course he bloody did, he spent most of his time freezing his backside off in here... Thankfully these were the last of the boxes. They weren't heavy, just as slippery as hell, especially with gloves on. He could barely get a grip on them, no traction. It was more of a balancing act than a feat of strength, one arm under the other over, holding the frozen box of ready meals to his already chilled body.

It did no good bitching about it, just get it done and get out of here. Get back to the staffroom and a hot cup of sweet coffee...

Mickey gawked in surprise as an arm encircled his neck, someone standing close behind him, punching him in the side once, twice. The carton of frozen meals slipped out of his hands, splitting open and sending colourful boxes of microwave risotto sliding across the icy storeroom floor.

Pain bloomed in his back as his legs turned to rubber, all feeling flooded out of them, sagging in the powerful grip of his assailant, warm breath caressing his cheek like an obscene lover.

"You're lucky," said a soft voice. "I haven't got time to play..."

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## *Chapter Sixteen*

---

Barry Brett made his way to the freezer section, whistling some tuneless ditty that was somehow stuck in his mind. This part of the store was nice and quiet. No ruckus, no arguments. He hated all that stuff. Why did people have to argue all the time? Why couldn't they just be friends? He had enough of that at home, the bickering and the constant backbiting. Mum and Dad never went five minutes without some snide remark being passed between them, some nasty, petty criticism that soon boiled over into a full-blown slanging match. "You've always got your nose in that bloody mobile phone! You should be doing dinner." "Off to the pub again? You spend more time at The Oak than you do here. You might as well take your bed and sleep there." On and on, it was continual.

Working overnight at Supermart was good, not too many people about, and you could always lose yourself in the aisles, just load the shelves and let the rest of the world slip past, no fuss. The guys were easy. Once they realised you were "the quiet one," they just left you alone. Thought he was shy, which he supposed was true, but it suited him just fine. The only one he ever really talked to was Mickey, and that was only because they both had a love for PlayStation, C.O.D. in particular, or the Batman Arkham Series. They were his favourites.

"Hey, Mickey! Where are you?"

He paused at the intersection between the stores and the freezers. Barry could see there were no more cages in the stores, so Mickey had to be in the freezers.

"Mickey? Sing out, man!" Barry called.

Nothing.

Freezers, by virtue of their primary function, were basically soundproof, and with all the gear Mickey insisted on wearing, earmuffs, gloves, beanie, and hoodie, there could be a nuclear

strike on mainland Britain, and he wouldn't hear a thing. Plus, on top of that, he probably had his phones in with Nightwish blasting in his ears.

The freezer door was ajar, a cage with a couple of cartons stood just outside. Barry's foot clipped something, a packet of frozen food clattered across the concrete floor; others were strewn about in colourful profusion. Stooping, he picked one up, his bare fingers sticking to the surface of the icy package as he read the contents, Risotto Ready Meal, noting it was the store's own brand.

"Hey, Mickey, you seen the mess out here?"

Barry picked up a couple of the frozen meals, shifting them hand to hand, the icy packets painfully cold to the touch. Heaving open the freezer door, Barry stepped inside.

"There's ready meals all over..."

The words died in his mouth as Barry saw his friend sprawled out on the freezer floor, sightless eyes gazing at the fluorescent light above. Blood, already partially frozen, pooled about his body...

He didn't hear the surreptitious footstep behind him.

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## *Chapter Seventeen*

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"You two are beginning to scare me," Jens said, standing between Anita and Danny. "Why do you need the police?"

"Anita's in trouble," Danny began.

"Don't!" Anita said fiercely. "Don't say a word."

For a split-second, Anita's pretty face twisted into a mask of pure anger, her eyes blazing... Recovering her composure a little, her features softened, her eyes dulled.

Momentarily shaken by the sudden outburst, Danny almost stepped back, then his voice hardened. "The time for secrets is over, Anita! We should go to Mr. Bridger, call the police, make all this stop."

"It won't stop," Anita's voice was eerily calm, detached. "Not until they catch him."

"Catch who?" Jens was getting exasperated. "Will you tell me what the f—"

The high-pitched scream tore through the entire building, long, drawn out, fading with a stuttering gurgle.

"Jesus Christ! What was that?" Jens said, wide-eyed.

They all looked at each other, frozen for timeless seconds in the centre of the shop floor, fear and confusion etched into their faces.

"That sounded like Barry," Danny whispered.

"He's here," Anita said.

Then the lights went out.

For a few moments, they could see nothing until their eyes adjusted to the gloom. There was enough ambient light to make their way about. Shadows, a lot of shadows, pooled all through the shop floor, too many.

"We need to get out of here," Danny said.

"Which way?" Anita said.

"Wait, wait..." Jens said plaintively. "What's happening? Who's here and why do you need to call the police? What happened to Barry?"

"Staff entrance? Maybe get to Prissy's office, call the police," Danny said, ignoring Jens.

"What about the telephone by the staffroom?" Anita said.

"The scream came from that direction. We'd be heading towards him, not away."

"Danny...?" Jens face was a pale oval in the half-light.

Glancing at Anita, looking for confirmation, Danny took Jens by the shoulders. She was trembling.

"I can't explain," Danny said. "But Anita's in trouble. There's someone after her who's going to hurt her..."

"Who?" Jens stammered.

He bit his lip, hesitant to frighten Jens further. Despite the dim lighting, he could see the panic bubbling just below the surface of her fragile composure.

"The Cutter," Anita said, taking the decision out of Danny's hands.

Jens looked at them both wide-eyed, shaking her head slowly as she tried to assimilate the information. It was clear she was failing.

"The Cutter," she whispered. "You mean the lunatic going around stabbing people, who killed Kenny?"

"We've got no time for this," said Anita, almost brutally.

"Danny...?" Jens said plaintively.

"Just keep close, between me and Anita, you'll be fine," he said, glaring at Anita's callousness.

"What about Barry?" Jens said.

"We'll have to check on him later. We need to move," said Anita.

Swallowing his irritation at her uncharacteristic cruelty, Danny followed after Jens and Anita, his skin crawling every time they passed a deep shadow or crossed over an aisle. Anita led them towards the stairs, only the occasional squeak from her trainers on the rubberised flooring giving away their progress. She stopped at the end of canned goods, peering quickly around the corner. Danny saw her stiffen.

Touching Jens on the shoulder, he motioned her to wait, passing her and coming up beside Anita. She nodded around the corner. Danny looked.

"Oh shit," he muttered.

If there was any doubt they were not alone, it dissipated like smoke in a high wind as he saw Barry sitting propped up amongst a pile of neatly stacked cans, his head lolling forward on his chest, the ginger hair clashing with the crimson staining his light blue and white overalls and pooling on the floor in a thickening puddle, the gory scene lit up by a powerful torch propped up on a nearby shelf of canned goods, spotlighted like an actor in some Greek tragedy.

"The bastard's playing with us..." Danny said through gritted teeth.

"Not a game I want to play," Anita said darkly.

Jens's scream ripped through the store, suddenly appearing beside Danny, her legs and arms jerked as shock slammed into her, her howls descending into a terrified whimper. Danny grabbed her, turned her away from the gruesome sight of Barry as she clung to him for dear life.

"It's Barry, it's Barry..." Jens repeated.

"Easy, easy," Danny said.

"No... No..." Jen's voice began to rise as hysteria began to take hold.

Danny gripped her tighter. "Jens! JENS! Look at me! Look at me! You've got to calm down, we have to get out of here, now... Do you understand? We've got to go."

"It was Barry..." Jens burred. "Barry..."

"I know..." Danny said, enfolding the terrified girl into his arms and holding her close, her whole body trembling uncontrollably.

He guided her back down the aisle led by Anita, fighting his own fear roiling in his stomach.

"He's got around us," Anita said.

"Go through frozen foods, get to the stairs that way," Danny urged. "Jesus, where is everyone? Someone must have heard Jens screaming." He deliberately avoided mentioning Barry.

"God knows," Anita said tightly. "Come to that, where's Mr. Bridger?"

Reaching the end of the second aisle, they kept close to the wall; the stairs were just ahead. Ascending quickly, they paused at the top. The darkness was deeper up here, barely any light at all. Jens was walking like an automaton, her movements stiff, a low mewling issuing constantly from her trembling mouth. The darkness covered them like a suffocating velvet curtain dulling all their senses. Back down the stairs, all that was visible was a grey rectangle of dim light that was the doorway.

Disengaging from Jens's clinging arms, Danny took the lead, creeping along the gloomy corridor towards the office, the girls close behind. He couldn't see much, his hands fluttering like frightened butterflies in front of him, fearing at any second to encounter warm flesh or the wicked kiss of razor-sharp steel.

Thankfully, Jens had fallen quiet. Her constant low whining was beginning to grate on Danny's nerves. She was totally compliant, her face slack, her dull eyes vacant. Despite her normal ebullience, Danny couldn't help but think, perhaps cruelly, that she couldn't handle true-life

adventure. He regretted the thought almost immediately; it was mean and unwarranted. This wasn't an adventure; it was a nightmare made real.

Slowly their eyes became used to the dark. Ambient light leaked into the corridor from some unseen source, menacing shadows lurked everywhere.

"You okay?" Danny asked in a whispered tone.

"Apart from being terrified, you mean?" Anita answered, her voice equally low.

"The office is just here... We'll soon be safe."

Creeping on tip-toe, Danny's footsteps sounded thunderously loud. Each tiny squeak of his trainers on the worn, green linoleum was like a banshee's howl. The girls's flat shoes clumped like hob-nailed boots; every little sound amplified exponentially in the silence.

Reaching Prissy's office, Danny motioned the girls to wait as he reached for the handle, twisting it gently. The door was unlocked. For some reason, that scared him. Sweat popped onto his already slick forehead. Suddenly he didn't want to go into that room. Glancing at Anita, he was alarmed to see a reflection of his own expression on her face, as if confirming his innermost fear. Don't go in there!

Taking a deep breath to still his jangling nerves, Danny pushed the door open and peered cautiously inside. Light from a huge window washed the room, turning everything to monochrome. Automatically Danny reached for the light. The wall switch clicked uselessly.

The room was gloomy but there was enough light to see Mr. Bridger slumped back in his chair, pushed out from behind the desk almost to the window. He looked asleep, except for the large dark stain covering the front of his normally pristine white shirt. The carpet around the wheels of the office chair shone wetly.

Monstrous shadows danced about the room; deep pools of black lurked in the corners. The office had been ransacked, the filing cabinet drawers hung open, their contents strewn all

over the floor. The top of the desk had been swept half clear, the lamp lay shattered on the carpet next to the blotter, pens were littered about. The desk drawers had been tipped out and carelessly thrown aside, the stationary cupboard wrecked.

"Oh, shit..." Danny breathed.

His knees felt as if they would unhinge at any second as Danny stepped into the room. Other than Mr. Bridger, it was empty. Not understanding the vandalism, Danny searched for the telephone.

"Oh my God!" Jens turned from the doorway, sliding down the corridor wall to her haunches, burying her face in her hands with a sob. The mewling started again.

Anita touched her shoulder, kneeling down beside the mortified girl.

"It's okay, Jens, it's okay," she comforted, hoping to dispel the lie and failing miserably.

She looked back at Danny. "The phone," she urged.

"It's smashed. The wiring's been ripped out of the wall," Danny said, throwing the carcass of the ruined telephone onto the desk, wincing at the clattering noise. "Shit!" he said, cursing his own stupidity.

Anita's face fell. "What now?"

"I don't know," Danny said truthfully.

"We've got to get out of here," Anita hissed.

Careful to avoid the bloody carpet, Danny tried the computer keyboard on the desk, startled when the monitor glared into life. Tapping a few buttons, his frown deepened.

"How can the computer run when the power is out?" Anita asked, looking flustered.

"Probably on a different power source; security," Danny speculated, still pressing the keys.

"Maybe the screen saver had put it to sleep, I don't know... But this is weird."

"What?" Anita asked, glancing anxiously up and down the corridor.

"The main drive has been wiped. There's nothing on it," Danny said.

"So? Who cares?" Anita said. "Let's just go."

"It doesn't make sense. Why would he want to wipe a computer?"

"Danny, let the police figure it out. We have to move," insisted Anita.

Helping the unresisting Jens to her feet, Anita waited by the door. Danny came to help her.

"Staff entrance," he said, pointing down the corridor away from the stairs.

Anita nodded, following his lead.

"You've got to be kidding me..." Danny cursed, looking at the heavy padlock and chain wrapped around the door's push bars.

Anita shook her head in disbelief. "He's trying to force us back to the ground floor," she said. "Herding us like sheep."

Angrily Danny kicked the door with all his strength, once, twice. The racket filled the corridor, the heavy doors unfazed.

"We've no chance of getting through those," Danny said, defeatedly.

"All that noise will have given our position away," said Anita.

Taking Jens's other arm, Danny helped Anita practically drag the girl along the corridor.

"Where are we going?" Anita said breathlessly.

"The warehouse," Danny answered. "Maybe we can get out through the shutters."

He noted Anita's worried expression.

"We've no choice," he said.

"Won't they be locked?" Anita asked.

"Maybe, but we can open them manually, in case of power failure," he said pointedly. "We have to try."

The sense of increasing urgency crackled through Danny like electricity. The feeling of time running out was overwhelming.

They faced a ruthless enemy. It had been madness to think he could ever have faced down The Cutter. He was no fighter, despite his temper. Their priority was escape. Let the police deal with it as he should have done in the first place... He smiled grimly; hindsight was a wonderful thing.

Reaching the stairs, the deathly silence was shattered by a loud metallic boom echoing through the entire store, closely followed by a second thunderous crash. A low sound escaped Jens as they froze on the stairs.

"What the hell was that?" gasped Anita.

"I don't know," Danny said. "Something falling over?" he added lamely.

They stared at each other for a second, then, throwing caution to the wind, they rushed down the stairs, dragging the hapless Jens with them. Quickly traversing the rear of the store at a run, they slapped through the double rubberised doors into the warehouse. For a wild moment, the huge, cavernous space reminded Danny of the Mines of Moria, half expecting Frodo and the dwarves to come filing out between the mountainous stacks half hidden in the gloom being pursued by the balrog.

The reality was there weren't any friendly hobbits here, just a psycho with a very sharp knife.

"Keep close," Danny whispered. "Get close to the stacks and try not to make any noise."

"He could be in here, Danny, watching us," Anita said, peering into the all-pervading darkness.

"He could be anywhere," Danny said tightly.

Moving to the central aisle he led them past boxes of breakfast cereal and oatmeal, rice, and myriad other dry goods stacked neatly on the shelves on pallets, unconsciously holding his breath each time they passed a dark void, a shadowy harbour that could easily be concealing a hidden enemy. Fighting the fear, Danny hurried on.

He slowed at the end of the aisle, crouching in the lee of the racking. The shutters lay on the farther side of a wide-open area, two vague shadows, darker patches in a darker expanse of wall.

"Wait here. I'll get them open," Danny whispered.

"No way," Anita protested. "We stick together."

He looked at her, thin light from underneath the shutters catching the determined gleam in her eyes. Danny knew it made sense. "Okay, but keep close."

Staying low, eyes swivelling left and right as they stepped out from the shelter of the racks, Danny started across the open area. He suddenly felt very vulnerable, exposed, expecting at any second to see a dark shape rushing at them from the darkness.

The shutters appeared out of the shadows. Danny slowed, trying to make sense of what his eyes were telling him, confused by the dark shapes ahead of him, unable to make out the scene. He dropped to one knee, Anita and Jens almost colliding with him.

"Oh Christ," he moaned, his chin dropping to his chest.

Seeing past Danny, Anita's eyes widened in disbelief.

"This fucker is beating us at every turn..." Danny's voice was thick with frustration.

"Can't we move it?" Anita asked.

Danny had first thought the forklift was just parked in front of the shutters; closer inspection showed the tines had been driven right through the metal doors, making it impossible to raise. To the left, the other shutter had suffered the same fate.

"That's the noise we heard," said Anita.

Climbing onto the forklift, Danny examined the controls.

"The ignition's been ripped out, the hoist mechanism smashed, this thing's as dead as the dinosaurs."

He re-joined the girls. "We've got two choices," he said. "Find somewhere safe, barricade ourselves in 'til the morning shift comes on, or go through the shop floor to the front and smash our way out through the windows."

"It's nearly five hours before the day shift starts. We'll never last out 'til then, no matter where we hide.

"He's crazy, Danny. Trust me. If he can't find us, he will likely set fire to the whole store. We'd be trapped."

"Then we go out the front," Danny said emphatically.

Worry danced in Anita's eyes. "That's what he wants, isn't it?"

Danny saw no point in lying. Every avenue of escape had been blocked, only the shop floor remained. He regarded Anita frankly.

"Yes," he said.

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## *Chapter Eighteen*

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"I don't get it. Surely Dawkins must have heard the forklifts smashing through the shutters. Where the hell is he?" Danny cursed as they crouched outside the rubberised doors leading into the shop floor.

"We should expect the worst," Anita said. "Besides, what good would an old man be against The Cutter?"

Reluctantly Danny had to agree. Mr. Dawkins was an amiable old man. Danny liked him. They often passed the time of day, but he must have been in his late sixties if he was a day. Supermart only employed him to fill legal requirements. His job title was just window dressing. Store security, yeah ... right.

"This isn't good," Anita muttered.

"We run," Danny said. "Don't give him time to think..."

"Cutting people doesn't require a lot of thought," Anita said dryly.

Taking Jens's left hand, Danny looked encouragingly at Anita.

"We'll head straight for the front of the store. I'll grab something on the way to smash through the glass. Once outside, head for the High Street. Don't stop for anything."

"Good plan..." Sarcasm dripped from Anita's voice, her safety mechanism against the insanity surrounding her.

"Just run," Danny said.

Jens crooned her tuneless lullaby between them.

Putting a hand on each of the swing doors, they both took a deep breath and ran. The doors slapped back against the wall as they rushed through. Hearts racing, they pounded down

the nearest aisle, their progress hampered by Jens's stiff, awkward gait as they dragged her along, her feet slapping the floor loudly.

Throwing swift glances left and right as they passed each junction, Danny urged the girls on. It was impossible to see anything clearly, all grey shapes and dark moving shadows in the gloom. Veering around displays of canned goods and pyramids of boxed foodstuffs, they passed a half-empty cage of stock waiting to be loaded onto shelves. Without slowing, Danny turned a corner into the main aisle, running through the centre of the store and sprinting for the front.

The clattering of trolley wheels pulled them up short as an empty cage erupted out of the aisle on their right, spinning directly into their path. Jens broke free of their tenuous grip, blundering straight into the cage.

Instinctively she grabbed the wire mesh to prevent from falling. Her head snapped round as her fingers encountered cold flesh, looking straight into the lifeless eyes of Mr. Dawkins strung up inside the cage, suspended by white plastic ties. Jens's scream tore from her throat in a long tortuous howl, filling the vast shop floor with receding echoes. Violently pushing away from the cage, she staggered back, the cage spinning away with the bloodied corpse of the security guard hung like Christ crucified.

Crashing into the shelves behind her, Jens brought packets of dried cat food cascading down on her head and shoulders. Still screaming, her arms flailing in sheer panic, cat food flew everywhere. Off balance, she went down, frantically scrabbling on hands and knees into the next aisle where she scrambled to her feet, her trainers slipping on the polished floor. The terrified girl lurched upright, wild eyes glaring around like a trapped animal, wide with terror. With a cry, she whirled around and dashed off into the depths of the darkened store, screaming as if all the demons of hell were at her heels.

"JENS!" Danny shouted, snapping out of his horrified state.

On seeing Mr. Dawkins strung up like a side of beef, shock had slammed into Danny, transfixing him to the spot. He jerked in alarm when Anita staggered into him, her hands grasping.

"We have to go after her," she gasped.

Guided by her continued screams, they raced through the store, turning this way and that as Jens ran blindly, aimlessly.

"Dammit!" Danny gasped as they paused at a junction. "We've got to find her before she hurts herself."

He didn't voice the terrible alternative nagging at his brain. The thought had barely crossed his mind when Jens's screams abruptly stopped. Danny and Anita froze as the horrid silence enveloped them.

"Oh my God..." Anita's voice was a whisper.

"Where is she?" Danny said, his eyes were everywhere.

"That way, I think."

Taking Anita's hand, Danny felt it tremble in his grasp, the palm wet with sweat.

"Be ready," he said, moving stealthily forward on tiptoe.

"Do you think Jens...?" Anita couldn't voice the question. Danny's bleak expression was answer enough.

The Cutter had claimed another victim.

The air felt thick, the silence oppressive. Fear gripped both of their pounding hearts. How he hadn't followed Jens's panicked example and run screaming through the store was beyond Danny. If it hadn't been for Anita, he might have done just that. It was comforting to have her hand in his.

"This is pointless. We'll never find her," Danny said.

"We have to try," said Anita. "We can't just leave her."

"It's impossible, Anita. She could be anywhere, hiding in one of the shelves, or run back into the warehouse. She could have fainted for all we know."

Danny's expression was sympathetic, half-hidden in the shadows, but they both knew the truth.

"We haven't a choice," he said, touching her face gently. "Our own lives are at stake now; we have to get out..."

The sentence died in Danny's throat as a sudden rush of movement behind made him turn. Anita screamed as a dark figure lunged out of the darkness. There was a brief glimpse of a pale thin face, dark-ringed eyes glowing with an ethereal madness, a snarling, twisted lipless mouth, a flash of silver. Danny grunted, stumbling back, and white fire blossomed in his left side. Clutching his ribs, Danny dropped like a sack of potatoes as the knife man disappeared back into the darkness. Anita fell to her knees beside him.

"Get up, get up!" She tugged at his arm.

Grunting with pain, Danny got to his knees; dark blood seeped through his fingers.

"Fuck! That hurts," he groaned.

"Move..." Anita hauled him to his feet and guided him towards the front of the store.

The check-out stations appeared. Beyond them, just a few tantalizing metres away, were the store's plate-glass windows. Something clattered in the darkness, off to the right. They both looked. The knife plunged into Danny's shoulder from the left. He screamed as the blade was brutally ripped out in a gout of bright blood. He collapsed over the check-out desk as the knife struck his right side a glancing blow, slicing flesh, more blood flowed.

Anita's wordless scream rang in Danny's ears as she launched herself at the knife-wielding madman. Feebly he tried to yell, wanting to tell her to run, get away, but his strength flowed out

of him like water as he slowly sagged down the side of the cashier's desk, leaving a trail of blood on his descent.

Anita ploughed into The Cutter, taking them both to the floor. She rolled free, the scream still on her lips as she snatched jars of pickles from a nearby shelf and hurled them at their attacker as he dived for the darkness. Glass shattered, her efforts rewarded by a pained yell and the stringent smell of vinegar permeating the close confines of the store.

"Danny..." Anita moaned, kneeling beside him, the pooling blood staining the knees of her uniform trousers. "What do I do? What do I do?" she moaned, looking helplessly at his horrific wounds.

He felt as if his mouth was full of cotton wool, making speech impossible. He needed her to run, run! Thoughts swam like some ephemeral wraith through his clouded mind; wisps of smoke that were there and then gone on a stiff breeze, consciousness floated in and out in a wavering haze.

Only the sudden widening of Danny's eyes warned Anita. Without even thinking, she threw herself aside as the blade flashed by her face so close she felt the wind of its passing.

Lashing out with her foot, she struck the side of The Cutter's knee, more by luck than design, sweeping his legs out from under him. With a startled yelp, he crashed to the floor, the knife spinning from his hand. Anita rolled, ending up on all fours, gasping for breath, her sweat-soaked hair clinging uncomfortably to her face.

Scrabbling like some bizarre beetle, The Cutter lunged for the knife, shouting triumphantly as his fingers closed over the bloodied hilt. Chest heaving, he turned to his helpless victims. Light from outside the store glittered in his crazy eyes, reflected off the razor-sharp blade as he loomed over them...

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## *Chapter Nineteen*

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Danny watched helplessly through the greying mist hovering before his dimming eyes as The Cutter slowly advanced, the wicked-looking knife dancing from hand to hand, flickering brightly in the half-light. Crouching on the floor beside Danny, Anita made no attempt to run, her gaze never leaving the knife.

“Run...” The word was little more than a gasp issuing from his bloodied lips, pink froth gathered at the corners of his mouth, trickling down his chin.

The chest freezer was sited at the end of the aisle just to Anita’s left. Set deliberately to entice shoppers to make that last-minute impulse buy, like sweets and candy by the check-out to tempt the kids. Keeping her eyes fixed on The Cutter Anita eased sideways, slowly, keeping low.

“You want me...?” Anita teased. “You want to stick me...?”

Pausing, The Cutter glanced at Danny, lying semi-conscious in a widening pool of his own blood, shiny black in the dim light, the life force slowly seeping out of his mutilated body. The thin mouth twisted into a sneer as he looked back to Anita, his eyes feverish with unholy lust, greasy perspiration sheening his face.

“You should have listened.” His voice was sibilant, reptilian. “Now it’s too late...”

“You think?”

Exploding into sudden motion, Anita dashed for the freezer. The sliding lid crashed back as she thrust her hand inside. Her fingers closed over a hard, cold packet as with one smooth movement she turned and hurled the solid block of ice cream straight into The Cutter’s face. Screaming and clutching his face, he staggered back as another block of ice cream struck his chest, dead centre, frozen, and rock solid, swiftly followed by a third.

Screaming, Anita rushed the startled man, giving him no time to recover. Bowling into him, they both went sprawling. Still shrieking like a banshee, she grabbed two handfuls of his greasy hair and began pounding his head against the hard floor repeatedly.

Roaring, The Cutter twisted, and, with a surge of almost supernatural strength, hurled the raging girl off his chest. In an instant, both were on their feet warily circling one another. Feeling the back of his head, his fingers came away bloody.

“Bitch,” snarled The Cutter, stepping forward.

He froze in his tracks, eyes widening as he saw the knife in Anita’s hand, held low, blade stained black.

“You don’t know the half of it...” Anita grinned ferally.

The piercing scream startled Danny awake, his befuddled eyes snapping open. Anita and The Cutter were facing off against one another. His eyes dimming, Danny was vaguely aware that Anita held the knife, circling The Cutter, talking to him. Clutching his stomach, The Cutter was backing away; blood dripped from between his fingers, his thin face white with shock. With another scream, Anita slashed at him, once, twice, the vicious blade parting material and flesh like a hot knife through butter.

Whimpering, the man backed off, a vivid scarlet cross magically appearing across his narrow chest. Anita stalked after him...

Amidst the myriad pain already wracking his body, Danny’s neck hurt where he was lying awkwardly against the side of the checkout desk. He tried to shift position. Thunder crashed in his head, blood throbbed in his ears. Groaning, he slumped back against the counter, the floor slippery with his blood giving no traction to his trainers.

Still screaming, Anita pressed her attack against the retreating Cutter. She lunged at him, droplets of bright red flew from the knife blade as she slashed wildly at him. With a terrified whimper, The Cutter's nerve finally broke. He turned and ran into the aisle, Anita in close pursuit.

"Anita..." Danny moaned. "No..."

A startled cry came out of the darkness, the sound of tinkling glass, something falling heavily, then a few seconds of silence. The ear-splitting scream echoed around the entire shop floor, high-pitched, full of pain and terror, degenerating into a series of loud grunts in duet with meaty thumps.

"No... No..." gasped Danny weakly.

He tried to crawl towards the aisle, the world swimming before his eyes, fading. He was sliding helplessly down the side of the check-out counter, his blood leaving a scarlet trail. He couldn't even grunt as his cheekbone smacked the floor.

A shadow moved at the mouth of the aisle, cantered at a bizarre angle as he lay in his sticky, wet blood. Danny blinked, feeling the tension clench his stomach. Anita stepped out into the light, covered from head to foot in blood, her hair clung wetly to her skull, streaking her sweating face, her blue eyes vivid amongst all the red, not an inch of the blue and white of her uniform could be seen.

Shoulders slumped, she walked towards Danny carelessly throwing away the bloody knife clenched in her hand. It clattered into some unknown place in the dark.

Shockingly, she was smiling broadly...

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## *Chapter Twenty*

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"Well, that was a mission," Anita said lightly, kneeling down beside Danny, heedless of the gore staining her already bloody uniform trousers.

None too gently she turned him onto his back so she could look at his battered face.

"Look at you," she tutted, curiously examining the horrific wounds. "Well, that doesn't look good," she observed, prodding his shoulder.

Danny groaned, confusion clouding his already fogged brain, thinking his eyes and ears were playing tricks on him.

"Anita..?" he croaked feebly. He felt as if he were floating away.

"Here, let me make you more comfortable..."

Grabbing the front of his jacket, Anita hauled him up with surprising strength and thrust him back against the checkout counter. He screamed as his head smacked against the hard surface. His chest was on fire; fresh blood flowed.

"Oops! Sorry, did I hurt you?" Anita said sweetly.

Danny's head swam, his breathing jagged, shallow, and fast, panting like a dog.

Anita prodded his shoulder again, as if fascinated by the new flow. Danny grunted.

"I bet that hurts," she said, peering closer.

Holding his gaze, noting the bewilderment swimming in the depths of his cloudy grey eyes, Anita pouted. Danny's mouth worked, but no words came, just a small whimper.

"Well," she said, sitting back on her heels. "I guess I've got you to thank. It was a great idea, luring him into the store. I couldn't have done it without you..." Anita sighed.

"Of course, I'm sorry he got you... And all the others, but what can I say? Collateral damage."

Danny struggled to get up.

"No, no, take it easy," Anita soothed. "It won't be long now." She settled back on her haunches, the pink tip of her tongue flicked over her full lips, watching Danny intently.

"In a way, I'm glad he got you. I wasn't looking forward to doing it myself. You've been so sweet. The others didn't matter, but you..." Shrugging, she left the sentence unfinished.

"You're not understanding this at all, are you?" Anita sighed heavily. "I guess that's to be expected. It's a lot to take in. I wouldn't normally take time to explain, but like I said, you've been very sweet, good to me, and after all, this *was* your idea. Oh sure, I elaborated on it, but basically, it's all down to you."

Anita grabbed Danny's shoulder as he began to slide sideways, pulling him upright.

"All this blood, no wonder the floor's slippery," she mused, making sure he was going to remain vertical. "Now, where was I? Oh, yes..."

"What I told you about him seeing me on the night of Clare's murder was basically true. He did see me. Clare managed to scream, which was a pain. Only once, but it was enough. Someone in a nearby house switched on a light and lit me up like Blackpool Illuminations. It was my luck that he happened to turn the corner right at that second and saw me with Clare.

"I just finished writing on the wall when everything seemed to happen at once, otherwise I would have nailed the son of a bitch there and then.

"If I had, none of this would have happened. Anyway, he turned up. Someone started shouting from an upstairs window, demanding to know what was going on. I needed to get out of the light. He turned and ran; I headed back to the house.

"It could have all been so easy, but no, Clare, being the spoilt brat, she was, had to go and make a scene, screaming like a baby.

"She made the same sort of fuss when I 'played' with Salt. People telling you cats had nine lives and then causing a scene when you try and find out if it's true..." A look of disappointment crossed Anita's face. "It isn't. Stupid cat died on the first test. Cut its throat," she added dejectedly, looking genuinely aggrieved, then immediately brightened.

"Anyway, he saw me and all I saw was a shadow. Luckily the arsehole up at the window didn't get a good look at me, which was a bonus.

"Everything was ready at home, clothes and trainers in the washing machine, thorough shower, and then I waited a couple of hours before going out and looking for poor sweet Clare... The police bought the bereaved sister routine completely, I told them exactly what happened, with a few minor alterations. After a few months of them finding nothing and the bru-ha-ha dying down, it was safe to leave. Andrea Summers died that day, and June Farrelly was born." Anita paused, grinning at Danny.

"That was my first new identity," she said smugly, then shrugged. "I won't bore you with the others..."

Anita's dreamy expression was incongruous amidst her blood-spattered features as she looked off into the darkness, recalling pleasant memories. Her gaze dropped to Danny. Her eyes seemed to darken into a deeper shade of blue as they pierced into his, almost as if she were reading his mind, perceiving the unspoken question.

"Him?" She jabbed her thumb over her shoulder. "The Cutter? Give me a break!" She laughed. "He's just a pale imitation, a copycat. I mean, look at the bloody mess he's made here! Call that art? I don't think so. The man's got no finesse. He's a bloody butcher.

"After he saw me that night, he became a Cutter-wannabe. That's why the son of a bitch followed me all over the damned country. He wanted to team up with me! Can you believe that?"

"I thought about tricking him lots of times, getting him close, lure him into a trap, but he was too clever. Of course, not knowing what he looked like made it doubly dangerous, but you solved that little problem for me, didn't you, Sweet?"

Danny could only grunt in reply, refusing to believe the madness he was hearing, insanity dancing on the edge of the darkness, slowly closing in on him.

"Of course..." Anita continued, brushing at some imagined dirt on the sleeve of her blood-soaked uniform. "If Kenny hadn't hit me or said those dirty things to me, I might have been able to disappear before all this unpleasantness happened. No one would have been the wiser, especially that loser over there. I figured it would bring him running, but I wasn't going to let that prick Kenny get away with the nasty things he said to me... Or for hitting me..."

"I don't know. Maybe that's when a glimmer of an idea started to form, like a newly conceived baby, there but as yet unborn." She clucked her tongue thoughtfully. "But hey ho, it all worked out in the end, didn't it?"

Peering closer, Anita watched as Danny's eyes dulled, his skin, now the colour of cottage cheese, shone with oily perspiration trickling down his hollowed cheeks.

"Mmmmmm," she cooed. "I'm losing you, aren't I Danny Boy?" Lifting his chin up with her fingers, she watched as his eyes rolled back into his head.

"I think it's time The Cutter disappeared for good this time, don't you? Things are just getting too hot. That's why I went through Prissy's office, making sure all trace of my employment here was gone, even wiped the database clean.

"It was a pity it had to be Mr. Bridger and not Prissy, though. I wouldn't have felt so bad if I had cut Prissy. He was a rat of a man. But on the upside, I made it quick. Mr. Bridger was a little reluctant to give up the computer password, but he soon saw things my way.

"I have to say you damned near gave me a heart attack when you tried the keyboard and the monitor lit up. For a crazy second there, I thought I had messed up and hadn't cleared the data... The blank screen was sheer relief, I can tell you."

Pausing, Anita looked around the darkened surroundings, clucking her tongue again.

"What really had me worried was when that lunatic started to kill everybody. I mean no class or what?"

"Bridger was a clean kill." She smiled at him. "Mine always are ... at first.

"His were messy, far too much noise, poor Barry and Jens... All that screaming." She sighed.

"I was planning on cleaning up quickly and cleanly, quietly taking my leave, but that can't happen now thanks to him. They'll not stop 'til all this has been explained, which means forensics, DNA, and all that scientific stuff. They're bound to find some trace which will lead them to me. It's only a hop, skip, and a jump to connecting me with my sister, explaining that would have been difficult.

"But once again you came to my rescue, when you said about hiding..."

As if the cryptic statement explained everything, Anita got to her feet, looking down at her ruined uniform.

"Well," she said. "I won't be needing this anymore."

Within seconds, she had stripped down to her underclothes, which were relatively blood-free.

"Don't worry, Dan. I've got clean clothes in my locker. It wouldn't do to be seen wandering the East End in my bra and panties!" She giggled like a schoolgirl.

"Just have to clean myself up in the staff bathroom and I'll be presentable again." She tossed the bloodied garments aside.

"I have to admit that the last part of my plan was a bit hazy, sort of like a work in progress. I knew what I wanted to do; I just couldn't figure out how... It was talking about him setting fire to the place that did it. I remembered our Garden Centre, the barbeque section where all the lighter fluid is stored... Everything just fell into place." Anita laughed, a bubbly, happy sound.

"I can see the headlines now..."

**"SUPERMARKET BURNS DOWN"**

**"NO SURVIVORS"**

"I'm sure the newspapers will make the headlines somewhat more lurid than that, but you get the idea..."

Crouching down beside Danny, Anita gently brushed a wet strand of hair from his feverish forehead.

Danny's mind reeled. Coldness was creeping through his entire body. He couldn't feel his arms, his legs. His throat worked, tendons straining, but shock had stolen his voice as he looked desperately at Anita.

"It's alright, Dan," she said gently. "You will have slipped away long before the flames reach this part of the store. I'll make sure of that." She kissed the top of his head. "It's all good..."

Just beyond the check-out counters, there were two blank walls framing the main entrance to the store. Dipping her fingers in a pool of Danny's blood, softly whistling a pretty tune, Anita sauntered over to them.

"I don't know if it will survive the fire," she called cheerily back to Danny. "But old habits die hard..."

Danny watched as darkness closed about his peripheral vision, coldness enveloped his entire body as through closing eyes he watched Anita, her slim body, half naked and highlighted

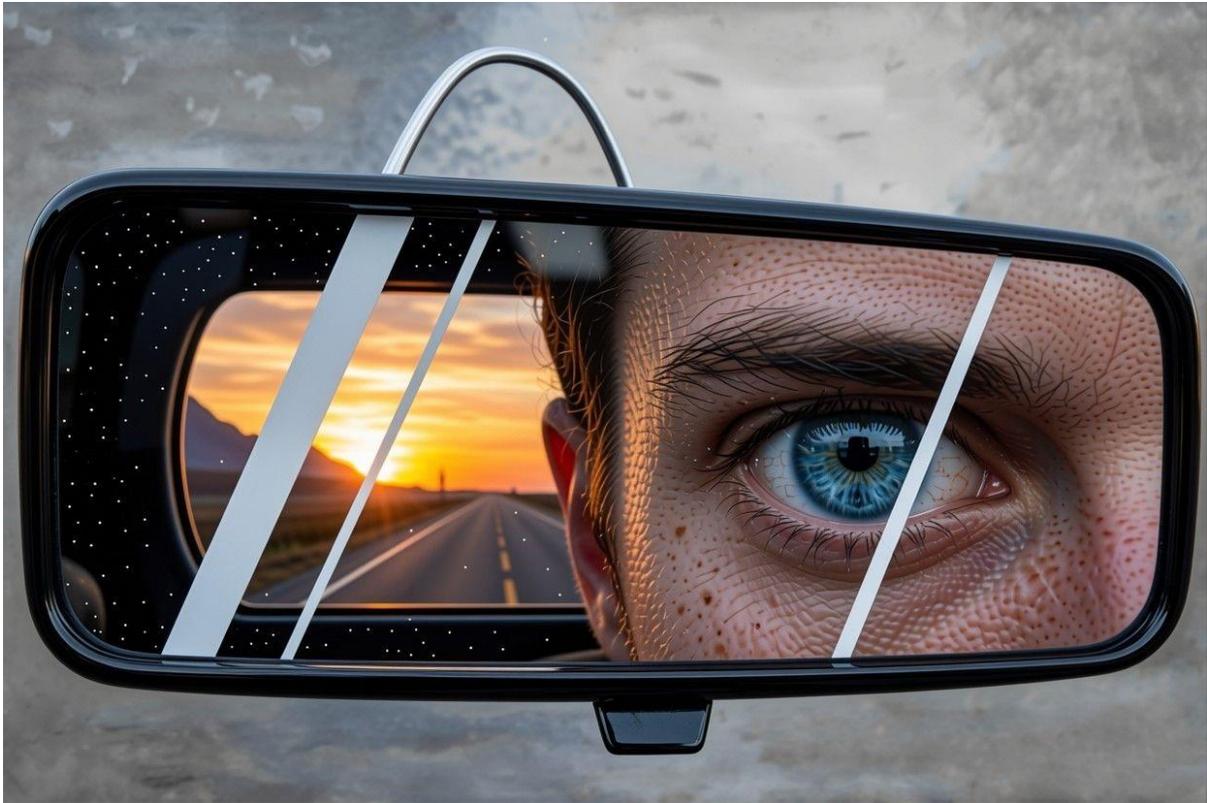
by the lights outside the store, reflecting off the curve of her back, her thighs, her hair thick with blood hanging about her bare shoulders a dark succubus of the night.

Smiling, Anita began to write.

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## *ROADKILL*

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It was all a matter of timing, precision. It couldn't be haphazard or rushed. Like vintage wine, it needed to be savoured, relished, for it to be the triumph he had dreamed about for so long. It simply had to be the right time.

The night was beautiful. A huge moon, almost full, peeked out from behind a scattering of broken clouds high in the sky. A fine drizzle smeared the windscreen until the wipers swiped it off with monotonous regularity.

*Chikka chak chikka chak chikka chak*

The day had been fine and sunny. Having slept, he missed most of it, not that he cared. He was eager for darkness to fall. Then he could drive. It was almost like hunting, only a lot more

exhilarating. Instead of the wild savannas of Africa, his hunting grounds were the motorways of the United Kingdom, and his game was very different from lions, or gazelle, or elephants, though no less dangerous. The motorway had been disappointingly empty. Two and a half hours and nothing to show for it, not even a motorbike. He smiled at that. Great beginnings. How it had all started, with motorbikes. Good days.

Pavarotti drifted out of the van's quad speakers as powerful dipped headlights carved a pathway through the darkness. The fine rain sparkled like diamonds in the bright twin beams. The blacktop shone wetly like molten silver, the dead tenor a perfect accompaniment to the monochrome night.

A huge blue sign appeared on his left. The reflective lettering picked out by his lights proclaiming he was approaching Junction 10. That way led to the A329 (M), Reading, Wokingham and Bracknell. He considered turning off. There were three towns to choose from, three opportunities. The problem was that there wasn't enough speed in the towns. People drove so slowly and that was no good. When times had been lean and pickings slim, way back when he was a road virgin, he had tried the towns. But his prey always pulled over or simply stopped... No good. His frustration only made things worse. The fire burning deep inside was never quenched.

He let the junction go by. If he couldn't find any sport on the eastbound M4, then what chance did he have on a shitty little "A" road?

The orchestra struck up the intro to "Nessun Dorma." He really liked this track. So had a million and one football fans. He hiked up the volume, his mind going into overdrive. What he needed was two coaches, full of kids or old age pensioners, going about eighty in the fast lane, nose to tail. Coaches did that sometimes, regardless of how many accidents there had been involving passenger vehicles. But they had been *real* accidents, genuine, cause unknown half the time.

He didn't want that. He wanted the cause to be known. *He* wanted to be the cause.

Glancing into the rear-view mirror, he caught a glimpse of a light grey eye looking back at him from a pale handsome face, a lock of jet-black hair falling across a wide forehead.

The road behind was clear, a black curtain, an ebony void chasing him like some voracious beast eager to swallow him whole. It was like driving on a ghost highway. He smiled at his dark humour as his gaze fell lovingly on the thing by the back doors of the van. Even white teeth gleamed as his smile broadened. It had taken nearly a week to weld the oil drum into the back of the van. He'd had to move the spare wheel from underneath so he could cut a hole in the van's metal floor. Welded in two supports to hold the drum steady, in place... Until he pulled the pin. A rope lay over the gear stick, looped loosely about the concertinaed boot at its base. The other end of the rope was fixed to a split pin that prevented the oil drum from revolving on its axis and dumping fifty gallons of used oil and scrap metal onto the road through the hole in the floor.

A sharp steel salad with rainbow oil dressing. Time for lunch kiddies!

He dreamed of the moment when he could pull that pin.

He'd pull in front of the speeding coaches, his fingers poised over the switch that would flash on his brake lights as if he had stamped on the pedal hard. The leading coach would automatically brake, the second coach braking with him.

That's when he would yank on the rope and the oil-drum would spin. It was designed to dump the oil and metal at a set rate, allowing maximum coverage of the roadway with the deadly spillage. He felt his crotch tightening with the anticipation of the coach driver's horror as the sharp metal shredded his tyres. The wheels of the coach would lose traction in the sea of oil going into a completely uncontrolled skid. A split second later, the other coach would suffer the same fate.

Maybe other vehicles would get involved. Lorries, cars. There would be rending metal, shrieking tyres. Glass would shatter, tearing flesh. And the screams! The motorway would ring

with the screams of the hurt and dying. Men, women, children. And flames. Huge bright orange fires that would reach up into the sky and be seen for kilometres. Fierce fiery tongues melting plastic, rubber, flesh, exploded petrol tanks! That would be the best sight. He sighed dreamily, envisioning the scene: clouds of oily black smoke hanging like a shroud, shot through with red and orange, staining the billowing sulphurous mass, Dante's Inferno... He sighed again happily.

*His inferno...*

Truth be known it hadn't always been like this. It started as a game. He'd come onto the motorway and drive as close as he dared behind motorbikes. Not to hurt them, but to scare. As the bikes changed lanes, so he would change lanes, keeping right on their back wheels. But the game became boring until one day he took it further. One day he touched the back wheel of a bike, just a gentle nudge. The effect was astounding! The bike wobbled terrifyingly as the rider fought to control it. Then he leaned too far over, and the bike went down in a shower of sparks, spinning down the road, followed closely by the rider.

As he drove past, he could see the leather and skin being stripped off the biker's tumbling body in red ruin by the hard, cruel concrete of the unforgiving road. He had never felt anything like that first excitement. It was like a drug filling his head; his entire body was electrified, euphoria drowning his senses, intoxicating.

Three days later, he did it again with the same spectacular results. Only this time, there had been two people on the bike. The pillion passenger had been a woman, slim, leather-clad, long, blonde hair streaming out beneath her matching blue helmet... The memory of her hair shining gold in the van's headlights as she flipped over the central reservation barrier lingered in his enraptured mind, tossed like a rag-doll, legs and arms akimbo, flailing helplessly, flying through the air as the darkness took her.

From bikes, he graduated to cars and vans. He'd harass them, driving too close with his headlights full on, horn blaring. He'd had a particularly loud horn fitted expressly for the job. He liked to catch drivers unawares. Come up behind them with the lights switched off. Then at the last possible minute, flick the HD lights on full and scare the living hell out of them, being very careful to stay out of the way of their startled swerving. Only once had he ever come close to cracking up himself and that was only because the car in front turned and braked in panic, the bloody driver totally over-reacting. He missed it by a hairsbreadth. The close call had been terrifying, but also exhilarating at the same time, he'd nearly crapped his pants!

But after a while that, too, became boring. He needed better things, greater things. An insatiable monster had him in its irrepressible grasp, whose appetite never seemed to wane, always hungry for more... More! Feed me! Feed me! He grinned. This monster was just like that plant in that movie starring Rick Moranis... Never satisfied.

Better and greater things incurred risk, became infinitely more dangerous. Cutting up and braking in front of speeding articulated lorries was definitely not for the faint-hearted. But the rewards were unimaginable. Once he had managed to force a refrigerated articulated truck to shed its load of frozen meat right on the Leatherhead turnoff on the M25, a notoriously bad black spot on that particular motorway. The eighteen-wheeler had jack-knifed, the trailer rocking crazily on its suspension, tyres screeching like a demented banshee. The rear doors couldn't stand the pressure and burst open. He could see it now, the sides of beef and frozen lamb carcasses skating all over the roadway, like bizarre figure skaters, twisting and turning uncontrollably along the tarmac. That had struck a funny chord. He laughed all the way home.

Then he had come up with the affair loaded in the back of the van. His motorway surprise. He had been carrying it for nearly a month now, but had not found what he was looking for.

It was a special idea that needed a special time, the right time. The ultimate roadkill.

All the other times scaring unsuspecting motorists, forcing bikes and cars off the road; they were nothing compared to this. This was his crowning glory. He had lain awake at night in masturbatory ecstasy, dreaming, creating in his fevered mind all the ways he could use his little surprise.

*What about dumping it in front of an oil tanker?*

There was a long underpass on the northern side of the M25 near Watford. What if he were to get in front of a tanker and in the darkness let the oil go? The tanker wouldn't stand a chance. And in the confines of the underpass, who knows? Maybe it would blow up! What a pyrotechnic display that would be! Or maybe he could catch a coach or two in the tunnel leading into Heathrow Airport. Maybe he could somehow cause a fire by dumping petrol as well as oil. The flames might even spread to the planes taxiing on the runway above, all that high-octane fuel... Now that would be something.

He had to slow down. The van was starting to drift across the motorway because of his lapse of concentration. It would be cruelly ironic to crack himself up without achieving his new ambition, and it was he who ended up bursting into flames.

He felt a niggling tiny fear, possibly his only fear. What if he did dump the oil and nothing happened? He couldn't bear the thought of that. That was the one thing he would not be able to stand, the bitter disappointment of nothing happening. Once, a long time ago, he had gone round to see a friend. The memory brought a nasty taste to his mouth. His friend was out, but his mother, who, he supposed, was fairly attractive, had asked him in so he could wait.

The seduction had been so quick, so brief that he had been left with a hollow ache deep inside his mind. He had dreamed about making love for years. Wondered what it was like. Wanting so desperately to find out. And when it happened? Nothing. His friend's mother had simply used him for her own gratification, not caring what he wanted or felt. Getting dressed afterwards,

ashamed, he remembered feeling disgusted with himself. With her. He could hear her urging him on, her wetness, and her smell. A smell, that he washed off the second he got home. He never wanted to have that smell on him again, ever. And he never had, so deep had his disappointment been of the whole affair.

He did not want to feel that disappointment again, either. That's why he had to make sure that the time was right before he gave the world his greatest gift. His brainchild.

He wanted *THE* feeling.

The thought just popped into his head totally unexpectedly. He wasn't even sure what it meant.

But he knew the only way to get to feel *THE* feeling was to fulfil his dream. The accident waiting to happen, a motorway firestorm that would burn and crunch cars, wreck coaches, buses, and lorries, rend and tear flesh and bone. *HE* had the time; he had the means. He just needed the venue.

Maybe he ought to get off at Junction 4B onto the northbound M25. Head up to Watford and pay that underpass a little visit. The drizzle had stopped, so he flicked off the windscreen wipers. The night had turned out fine, and he was feeling good. Maybe tonight was the night. It felt right.

As he approached the M25 turnoff, he noticed a single red light up ahead. As he drew closer, he saw that it was a motorbike. Its yellow left indicator began to flash, and the bike moved smoothly over onto the offramp heading for the London Orbital.

He grinned. Immediately the van began to pull left as well and he slowly began to gain on the unsuspecting bike.

*Just for old times' sake*, he thought to himself.

A few minutes later, they were moving along the M25. The motorway was busier than the M4, which pleased him. The motorbike was just ahead, cruising at about seventy kilometres an hour. Already his hand was hovering above the light switch.

Maybe tonight *was* the night...



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## *KEYHOLE*

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"Don't do this to me!" Kerry wailed, her voice as dry and dusty as the third-floor corridor in which she stood. "Tom!" The name echoed dully through the empty house.

She tried the door behind her; it was locked, and no amount of rattling the door handle would change that. All the other doors were locked too, but they hadn't been when Tom had tried them no more than an hour ago. They all opened up onto empty, dusty rooms with cobwebs filling the dark corners and old newspapers covering bare wooden floorboards, the filthy windows reluctantly allowing the bright moonlight to pass through the smeared glass.

"Tom, please! This isn't funny anymore!"

No answer. The narrow corridor, dancing with shadows and inky pools of darkness crowding into every nook and cranny, remained silent.

"All the doors were open..." Kerry mumbled to herself, eyeing the plain wooden door opposite. "All except that one..."

Stepping across the short space she tentatively tried the doorknob, a little gasp escaping her dry lips as the unnatural cold of the metal seared her hand. Resisting the urge to snatch her hand away, Kerry twisted the knob. The door refused to budge.

"Tom, Tom?" she queried, her ear pressed close to the door.

Her husband had gone into this room. She hadn't actually seen him enter, but in her heart, she just knew, against all logic, that's where he was. The room had been locked earlier. It was still locked now, but Tom was in there, as sure as eggs.

Below the worn gilt doorknob was a keyhole, the old-fashioned type, big gilt escutcheon large enough to accommodate a huge key. Slowly Kerry dropped to one knee until the keyhole

was level with her face. She didn't want to. Every ounce of common sense rebelled at the idea, but she had to look through that tiny aperture. She had to see what lay beyond. Her heart thudding fit to burst out of her ribcage, she placed her hands on the door and leaned forward, closing her right eye. It took a second or two to focus. She could see... something but couldn't make sense of it. Then it blinked.

The scream tore involuntarily from her throat as Kerry threw herself backwards, scrabbling on her hands and heels across the rough wooden boards until she collided with the wall opposite, hardly feeling the back of her head cracking sharply against the old plaster, small flakes drifting down onto her shoulders like petrified dandruff. Unblinking, she stared at the door, short sharp breaths creasing her chest painfully as she shook her head in horrified denial.

An eye! An eye had glared back at her through the keyhole. But not Tom's eye, no, not Tom's. Something inhuman, red, glaring, seething with malevolence.

"Omigod! Omigod! Omigod!" The words slipped from her lips like a mantra, a protective spell against the horror lurking on the other side of that door.

Kerry squeezed her eyes shut, just wanting this living nightmare to end. Why had they come here, her and Tom? It had been a mistake, a terrible mistake. It was her fault all because of her and her incessant, mindless need to "go one better," to be "one up" on her friends, her family...

\*

"Are you kidding me?" Tom said, looking at the laptop's glowing screen. "A haunted house, in Sidcup? Give me a break!"

"Look at the prize money, Tom. Five thousand pounds for just one night," Kerry said.

"It's some sort of scam, gotta be." Tom straightened, a bemused look on his handsome face.

"That's what I thought at first, then I read the rest... It says fifty per cent of the prize money will be deposited into any account designated, the remainder to be paid on the completion of the night's stay."

"That can't be right." Tom looked back at the screen.

"The conditions are minimal too..." Kerry said, absently pushing a stray lock of her blonde hair behind her ear. "No mobile phones, no electronics of any kind, including media players, no motor vehicles on the house grounds... Seems fair enough."

"Why no cars? That seems a bit odd," Tom wondered. "And this house is in Sidcup?"

"Grimhaven Street."

"Never heard of it," Tom said.

"It's just on the other side of Crown Woods," Kerry said.

"Near the crematorium?"

"Yes."

"Figures," Tom said sceptically.

"We could do with the money, Tom. Five thousand pounds would solve all our problems..."

"And whose fault is it we've got problems?" Tom said caustically. "You never stop to think about what you're doing, Kerry, about the consequences..."

"This is too good a chance to pass up," Kerry protested.

"How many times did we go over this?" Tom said. "We couldn't afford a house, you knew that. We agreed you could have the big wedding in Cancun, sunshine, white sandy beach, flash hotel, but if we did that, then the house would have to wait for at least a year or two before we could even begin to consider buying. It was one or the other..."

"But the house was a chance of a lifetime! The previous buyers pulled out, leaving the De Marios in a desperate position. They were leaving for Europe in four weeks. They were forced to drop the price by nearly twenty grand! It would have been crazy to let it go."

"But we haven't got the money! What part of that don't you understand?" Irritation edged Tom's voice. "Jesus Kerry, you're always doing this. You've got champagne tastes and lemonade money! Your ring, getting married in Mexico... Your dress cost a fortune, but you had to have it." Tom shook his head despairingly. "We even had to pay excess baggage at the airport!"

"Didn't you want me to have a nice wedding?" Kerry said, as tears leaked from her eyes.

"You know I did, and it was, you know that! But most of it was just for show for your friends and your family, showing off, always having to go one better. And now you've instructed a solicitor to go ahead with a house purchase and you didn't even consult me first!"

"I thought you would be pleased," Kerry said.

"We ... can't ... afford ... it..." Tom said, over-emphasising each word.

"The five thousand will help..."

Tom just looked at her, jaw dropped. It was like talking to a brick wall. Kerry would only hear what Kerry wanted to hear, ultimately to coincide with her own desires and wants. A spoiled child never taking "no" for an answer, just expecting everything to be handed to her on a plate. Friends had warned him that she would be "high maintenance." One look at her perfect, blonde hair, her china-blue eyes, a figure most women would die for, immaculate nails, and flawless make-up... He thought he would make a difference, keep her grounded... What a hope. She just couldn't bear the thought that people would think she was anything less than perfect, that her marriage wasn't perfect, her home, which they didn't even have yet, wasn't perfect. The thought they had to rent appalled her...

Silence hung between them for several seconds like a stone wall. The damage was already done. Even if they backed out of the house purchase, there would still be steep penalties to pay, more wasted money.

"When are we supposed to stay in this bloody house?" he asked testily.

"The thirty-first," Kerry said.

"Really? Halloween? It just keeps getting better."

"That's the whole point of the challenge," Kerry said. "The house has been empty for years, decades even. It's supposed to be haunted..."

"Of course it is..." Tom ran his fingers through his thick, dark hair in exasperation. "I can't believe I'm saying this... But okay, let's go for it..."

Kerry looked down at the floor.

"What?" Tom said.

"I already did. We've been accepted..."

"What?" Tom said, barely able to contain his temper. He turned away angrily. "I swear, one of these days your impulsiveness will be the death of you..."

\*

It turned out to be an old Victorian house standing on a half-acre of overgrown gardens and scrubland at the end of a cul-de-sac. (*What else?* Tom thought.) Three stories, apex roof, large chimney stacks stark against the darkening bleak October sky. The grounds were surrounded by dense privet hedges twelve-foot-high, shrouding the house from the road, the rear of the building was obscured.

A row of terraced houses flanked the entrance of Grimhaven Street. Beyond was just unused land, thick with undergrowth and dense bushes buttressing up against the privet hedges. Leaving the car on Crown Woods Way, Tom and Kerry walked to the house, passing through a

natural arch formed by the hedge. There was no gate, just a weed-infested gravel path, the loose stone crunching under their feet as they got their real first look at the house.

"I don't get it," Tom said as they made their way along the path. "What's the point of all this? Why pay to have people stay in a so-called haunted house but not publicise it, turn it into a reality show or something?"

"The blurb on the internet site said it was some sort of social experiment," said Kerry.

"For whom, the government, universities? Doesn't make any sense."

"Okay, but does it matter, as long as we get paid? The first half was deposited into our account as promised. We just have to spend one night, and our troubles will be over."

An odd stillness hung over the house. Even the slight breeze they had felt entering the cul-de-sac ceased as if the night was holding its breath.

"It's the hedges, natural windbreak," Tom said as they approached the brooding structure. "Look at that," he scoffed. "I'm amazed all the windows are still intact."

The gravel underfoot growled as they continued up the deceptively long path. The bordering leafless trees were preternaturally still; twisted, skeletal fingers scratching at the darkening sky. The trees were watching them, Kerry was sure, their sightless gaze pregnant with subtle menace.

"Well, at least there are no carved pumpkins or plastic skeletons," Tom said. "That would really be frightening." His laugh fell flat in the heavy air.

It was an old building of grey stone and dark timber, oddly out of place in rural Kent. The heavy oak front door set beneath a small featureless portico was unremarkable. Tom half expected to find a heavy cast iron knocker fashioned in the semblance of some grimacing demon, a hefty iron ring depending from gaping toothsome jaws... There was none.

Pushing the door, Tom found it unlocked. With a quick glance at Kerry, he entered. Kerry hesitated on the threshold, her gaze returning to the gravel path and the archway barely visible in the gathering gloom. It suddenly seemed so far away.

"Tom...?"

He looked back at her from the shadowy hallway, saw her hesitation.

"It's too late to back out now. You wanted it, you got it. So, get your arse in here." He looked around the ramshackle hallway. "This place is like a film set straight out of one of those old-time B movies. Who knows, maybe Dracula is home and waiting in the cellar..."

"Not funny," Kerry said.

Trying the light switch, Tom was surprised when dull light filled the immense hallway.

"Forty watts I would guess," he said. "Makes the place even more depressing."

Several doors led off the spacious hallway, all standing open. A wide staircase wound up into the darkness above. Beside it, a single passageway disappeared towards the back of the house, presumably to the kitchen.

"Early decrepit, don't you think?" Tom said, peering into some of the rooms. They were all empty. The third doorway gave way to a large sitting room. Tom clicked on the dim light.

"I guess this is our accommodation for the night. It seems to be the only room with furniture."

The air was stale, sticking to the back of the throat. Kerry coughed as she looked distastefully around the dismal room. The ceiling was high, the plaster cracked and flaking, the walls a drab brown, all colour long bleached out by time's relentless passing. Patches of damp lurked in the corners. A massive stone fireplace dominated the room, the mantelpiece a slab of polished granite, standing at shoulder height. The hearth was dark slate, grimed, and dusty, edged by a wrought iron rail, firedogs lay in the empty grate. An oversized leather couch was

situated in front of the fireplace, squatting in the middle of the room like a big brown beetle. To its left was a matching armchair, occasional tables stood at either end.

"God, it's cold in here," Kerry said, hugging herself.

"No worries, we got all the makings for a fire, soon have us warm and cosy," Tom said, throwing his backpack onto the sofa amidst a puff of fine grey dust.

Tom tended the fire as Kerry took in her surroundings. Despite the low lighting, or because of it, the room was filled with shadows dancing in the corners. The west wall was pierced by two tall windows, the glass so dirty it was impossible to see through them.

"Do you think we can close those drapes?"

Tom glanced up from the grate. "I guess so. If we're careful, they look pretty rotten. Hey! Let there be fire!" he exclaimed as the logs burst into flame.

The ruddy glow washed the room, reflecting off the drab furniture, but bringing little light to their surroundings, flames danced in the depths of a large mirror on the back wall. Instead of feeling cosy, the room took on a more sinister aspect. The chill in the air, reaching down to the bone, was not dispelled. Kerry thought it had nothing to do with the temperature as she moved closer to the fire.

"Okay," Tom said, opening the backpack. "Two lightweight sleeping bags, two torches, two extra sweatshirts..." He dumped the things onto the sofa. "And for supper, cheese, crackers, some fruit, grapes and strawberries, accompanied by a small, but enticing, chardonnay."

Kerry smiled.

"And the coup-de-gras!" Tom pulled a thermos from the bag with a flourish. "Hot coffee!"

"You really thought this through, didn't you?" Kerry said.

"I figured if we're spending the night, we'd pick a room, hunker down, and make ourselves comfortable and just stay put. What could go wrong?"

"Nothing, when you put it like that," Kerry agreed, relaxing a little.

"First, something I've got to do," Tom said, checking one of the torches.

"What?" Kerry asked.

"Check the rest of the house. Make sure there's no surprises."

"What's the point of that if we're going to stay in one room? Let's just wait it out."

"And we will, after I checked the place out."

"I'm not staying here on my own," Kerry said, abruptly standing up. "No way you're leaving me here by myself."

"Kerry, there's nothing to be..."

The sudden loud pounding on the front door startled them both.

"Jesus!" Tom gasped. "What the hell's that?" He went to the living room door as the thumping continued. "Someone's out there."

"Wait! Don't answer it! We don't know who it is."

"And we won't unless we open the door," Tom said reasonably.

"Tom, the house is abandoned. No one's lived here in years... Why would someone be knocking at an empty house just as night falls? No one knows we're here, no one..."

He got her point. Striding over to the fireplace, he picked up the long, formidable-looking poker.

"Come with me," he said. "Bring your torch."

Nervously, Kerry followed him.

"Okay," Tom whispered. "Train the torch on the door. I'll open it."

"Tom?"

"It'll be okay, just do it... Ready?"

Not too sure, Kerry aimed the beam of light at the front door. The hammering reverberated through the house. Raising the poker, Tom reached for the door handle. With a last look at Kerry, he abruptly threw the door open.

The hammering stopped immediately; the threshold was empty. Stepping through the door, Tom played his torch back and forth, the beam scythed into the night, revealing nothing.

"There's no one here," he said in surprise.

"That's not possible, the pounding..."

Both of their torches cut through the gloom. Except for the rattle of some dry leaves across the gravel path and the souging of the wind through the trees, they were alone. They looked at each other, their expressions mirroring their confusion.

"Come on, let's get back inside. You're shivering," Tom said.

Preceding her husband into the house, Kerry hurried into the living room and to the blazing fire. She wasn't totally convinced that her trembling was just a result of the cold.

"It must have been the wind," Tom said. "It's an old house. There must be a million creaks and groans."

"The thumping on the door was not a creak or a groan, someone was there," Kerry said, standing almost on top of the fire, but no matter how close she got, she couldn't get warm.

"Maybe it was something being blown by the wind then," Tom said. "It doesn't matter. It turned out to be nothing."

He headed for the hallway.

"Where are you going now?" Kerry said, suddenly alarmed.

"Hey, relax, I going to check the house, I told you."

"Not without me, you're not," she said.

Picking up one of the sweatshirts, Kerry slipped it over her head and followed Tom to the stairs.

Switching on the lights as he went, Tom went straight to the third floor. It was colder up there. Their breath steamed in the air. Wallpaper hung in tatters from the damp walls. The floorboards creaked under their weight as he checked the rooms one by one, leaving the doors open as he passed. Every room was bare of furniture, no drapes at the windows, dust and cobwebs the only decoration.

All but one of the eight rooms was open. Tom shouldered the door, but it refused to budge.

"Now that's odd," he said, bending over and peering through the keyhole. "Can't see a bloody thing."

He tried the door one more time, but it remained steadfast. "Come on, let's check the rest."

"I wonder who lived here," Kerry said as they went down to the second floor.

"Someone with money," Tom said, starting on the rooms. "This was probably quite a house in its time."

It was more of the same... Eight rooms, all empty, none of them were locked. At the last room, Tom paused in the corridor, shining his light back up the shadowy corridor. A frown creased his face.

"Do you feel that?" he asked.

"All I feel is bloody cold," Kerry said. "How can it be so cold?"

"Not that," Tom said. "It felt as if the floor shifted, tilted slightly. Like the house was settling."

The lights snapped off, the darkness lunging in like a predatory beast. Kerry screamed as Tom staggered. Both fell against the wall as the floor lurched.

"What the fuck!"

"Tom! Tom!"

The lights flickered wildly on and off before blazing bright, and then returning to their forty-watt dimness.

"What the hell was that?" Kerry gasped. "And don't tell me it was the wind!"

"I don't know," Tom admitted. "Maybe a power outage..."

Doors slamming on the ground floor cut him short. Like gunshots, one after the other, the sound ripped through the house, making the walls reverberate with the concussive impact.

"What's going on? What's happening?" Kerry said, clutching at Tom.

The silence was sudden. The house settled with a shudder.

"Come on," Tom said, leading the way downstairs.

All the previously open doors on the ground floor were shut. Tentatively Tom tried the nearest. It opened easily; they all opened. There was no clue why they slammed shut in the first place.

"It's got to be something to do with the draughts flowing through this place," Tom said.

"Six doors just don't slam shut by themselves."

Once again Kerry was practically standing in the fire, she was not getting any warmer despite having put on extra logs.

"Let's have something to eat," Tom suggested. "Maybe the coffee will warm you up."

Not sure if she could eat anything, Kerry sat on the sofa as Tom pulled around one of the occasional tables.

"Coffee sounds good," she said timorously.

"Coffee it is." Tom smiled, unscrewing the thermos and using the top as a cup. He handed it to Kerry.

"Oh my God!" Kerry grimaced, unable to prevent herself from spraying the coffee from her mouth all over the floor. "Tom, that's awful! What did you do to it? It's freezing cold and tastes like soap!"

"What?" Tom took a sip and unceremoniously spat the coffee into the fireplace.

"Jesus! I made it fresh this evening," he said, swiping at his mouth with his sleeve.

"Look at this," Kerry said, holding up the transparent sandwich bag.

Even without opening the baggie, Tom could see the prolific mould covering the sandwich. He checked the other food.

"It's rotten, all of it... The cheese, the fruit, all bad." He quickly unscrewed the bottle of chardonnay and took a swig.

"Vinegar!" The wine followed the coffee into the fireplace. "It was all fresh," Tom repeated.

"It's this house," Kerry said. "Everything about it is rotten, even the air."

"That's nonsense," Tom said. "It's just a house."

"It's freezing, despite the fire, its dark despite the light, the food, the slamming doors... This is not *just* a house."

"It was your idea," Tom said.

"I know..." It came out sharper than she had meant. "I know," Kerry said more softly.

Their eyes met.

"I don't want to be here anymore, Tom. I want to go home."

"What about the five thousand pounds?"

"Sod the money. I've had enough. I just want to be warm again."

They began to gather their things.

"I'm sorry, Tom, I should have listened," Kerry said. "I know I can be very demanding, but..."

"Forget it." He smiled, shouldering the backpack. "Let's just get out of here."

They left the rotten food and wine for the mice. With Kerry close on his heels, Tom tried the front door. It refused to open. He checked the locks. None of them were engaged.

"It opened up easily enough earlier," he said, shaking the door handle. "Damned thing's stuck fast now, though."

A low rumbling rippled through the house.

"What was that?" Kerry said nervously looking around.

"I don't know," Tom said. "Nothing."

With a last frustrated kick at the door, he returned to the living room, going straight to the windows. They wouldn't open. The frames were either painted shut or the locks were jammed tight.

"What are you doing?" Kerry asked.

"Getting out of here," Tom grunted as he tore the rotten drapes from the rail. Age-old dust billowed, making him cough. He threw the curtains aside and snatched up an occasional table. "Stand back."

He hurled the table full at the window, gawking in surprise as it merely bounced off the glass, a sonorous boom echoing through the room. The table shattered on the floor.

"Shit."

Undeterred, Tom snatched up the poker. Covering his face, he swung it in a vicious arc.

"Tom, be careful..." Kerry said.

Tom cried out in pain as the poker struck the window and span out of his hand, his wrist jarred by the unexpected resistance. Pain shot up his arm.

"Fuck!" he swore, grabbing his injured wrist. "That's not possible!"

Gritting his teeth, he snatched up the poker. Like a man possessed, he attacked the window, but the pane resisted all attempts to shatter it.

"How is that possible?" Tom repeated, gasping with the effort, echoes dying in the bowels of the house.

"Maybe we can force the front door with the poker," Kerry ventured, nervousness edging her voice.

The door, though plain, was solid oak, nothing short of a chainsaw was going to get through it, and Tom was dubious about that.

"What are we going to do?" Kerry said, sitting on the bottom step of the stairs, pulling her jacket tighter about her shivering body.

"Go through the rooms," Tom said. "See if any of the windows are open. Maybe even find something to help get us out of this place."

"I'm scared." Kerry's voice trembled.

"Don't be," Tom encouraged. "We'll be out of here before you know it... I promise."

Doors slammed at the top of the stairs. Kerry screamed, bolting up from where she was sitting straight into her husband's arms. More doors started slamming, a staccato of sound as if caught in a domino effect.

"There's someone else here," Tom said, looking up the stairs. "Hiding in that locked room. They made sure the front door was locked, fixed the windows, probably even swapped the food and coffee."

Disengaging from Kerry's arms, he started up the stairs, taking two at a time.

"Tom, wait! You don't know what's up there. Tom!"

Kerry rushed after him, missing her footing on the top step and barking her shin on the riser. With a cry, she tumbled onto the landing. Tom was already on the top floor. Grunting, Kerry lifted the leg of her Barbie-pink tracksuit, grimacing at the nasty gash across her shin leaking

blood. A single drop of blood fell to the dusty floor and was quickly absorbed into the dirty, ancient wood, leaving not a single trace. Kerry's eyes widened as the floorboard seemed to shudder.

"Tom!" she called; terror edged her voice.

There was no reply as she staggered to her feet, her eyes transfixed on the spot where her blood had fallen. With a mewling whimper, Kerry hobbled up the stairs.

"Tom! Tom, where are you?" calling, she continued to climb.

The terrible scream ripped through the house in duet with a rasping, throaty roar. Kerry's blood froze in her veins, her fluttering hand seeking support from the wall as the strength flowed from her shocked body. She snatched her chilled fingers back as the wall rippled beneath her touch, the plaster clinging like cold, dead flesh. Compulsively rubbing her hand on her tracksuit leggings, she howled into the darkness above her.

"TOM!"

Pain forgotten, fear clutching her throat, Kerry flew up the stairs...

\*

Even with her eyes tight shut, Kerry could feel the oppressive darkness pressing in around her like a palpable thing, sliding over her skin, slick, like dirty oil. Her back to the wall, shaking uncontrollably, the black visions of the evening flowing through her terrified mind. Tom was in that room, and he wasn't alone. The scream, that terrible eye... Kerry shuddered.

The wet slithering sound registered on her subconscious long before her ears picked up the noise. Slowly, reluctantly she opened her eyes, her scream catching in her throat, gagging her with liquid fear, filling her mouth, silencing her as her brain howled denial at the evidence in front of her.

The eye stared at her, scarlet, unblinking, suspended from the keyhole on a white and purple veined stem of pallid flesh, a translucent fluid dripping thickly onto the floor with audible

plops. The wet sucking noise continued as more flesh oozed out of the tiny aperture, sliding down the door like hot, red wax to pool in a glutinous mass at its base, writhing and congealing upon itself.

Aghast, Kerry watched as the drops of slime slithered across the floorboards, incredibly joining the gelatinous lump as a vague shape began to form, rising from the muck. Humanoid, but deformed, crouching in the shadow of the door, growing... Growing.

Kerry's voice hitched in a series of small moans, sheer terror paralysing her vocal chords, cleaving her tongue to the roof of her sandpaper mouth. Bizarrely a childhood verse ran through her terror-stricken mind. The verse, by Hugh Mears, had always faintly disturbed her...

*"As I was going up the stair,  
I met a man who wasn't there.  
He wasn't there again today!  
I wish, I wish he'd stay away."*

Kerry giggled. This wasn't a man... But it was definitely here.

The wide mouth filled with razor-sharp teeth grinned at her, the eyes glowing lambently like crimson stars, with no discernible nose, just two slits for nostrils oozing bilious green snot. The brown, grey body was squat, wrinkled like a giant prune. Tufts of coarse black hair sprouted indiscriminately over powerful shoulders, the long gangly arms, and bestial visage. Black talons beat an ominous tattoo on the wooden floor as the creature settled into a more comfortable position, crouching on short but heavily muscled haunches.

Something stringy hung in bloody tatters between the brute's teeth, something red and noisome.

"Tom," whimpered Kerry.

"Tom?" the voice in her head asked quizzically, incredibly sweet, melodious, caressing the inside of her skull. "Ah... Tom, very tasty. Better than my last meal, my keeper is getting more particular. I must remember to thank him..." The creature belched, its foul breath washing over Kerry, making her heave in revulsion. "I eat 'em raw, Ma'am... No gravy required... "

Kerry felt her bladder go, her Barbie-pinks stained a darker shade, spreading down over her thighs. Incredibly, the beast seemed to smile even wider, a toothsome grin as it cocked its bullet head to one side like an inquisitive puppy as Kerry cowered against the wall in a pool of her own urine. Crimson eyes watched the spreading pool of yellow liquid avidly.

"Well, okay," the voice cooed in her head. "I will have gravy..."

Its eyes glowed like hot coals on the floor of Hell, the mouth gaping wider as it emitted a low growl, the thin purple tongue flicking out over its teeth like some obscene snake, salivating, long strings of drool depending from its chin in hungry anticipation.

Pressed back against the wall, Kerry forced her quivering body to stand, her terrified mind bulging with insane babblings. "We just wanted a home," she mewled. "A house of our own where we could live for the rest of our lives... One we could share forever..."

The giggling in her brain made her cringe, realising the creature was actually laughing. In stark contrast to the sweet laughter, the growling continued, beginning low, softly filling the dark passageways, emanating from deep within the loathsome creature's body.

Its body tensed, gathering its legs beneath, preparing to leap.

"And so you shall..." the voice crooned.

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## *ALI B.*

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The scar was still vivid across the palm of my left hand fifty-three years on, wide, jagged, a constant reminder as if I would ever need reminding. Standing in the ruins of the newly demolished “old street,” brick dust dulling the shine on my shoes, the memories were still fresh in my mind like undying ghosts haunting me.

I was amazed it had taken the council so long to get around to demolishing Sedan Street; it had stood so long like a dirty brick contradiction amidst all the urban renewal that had risen over the last forty years all over the borough of Southwark. Some of that “urban renewal” wasn’t so great. The Aylesbury Estate being a painful case in point. A concrete jungle that rapidly deteriorated into a city slum, housing all the local miscreant families in one place, was never going to be a good idea.

The demolition of Sedan Street was long overdue. I guessed it was because the street was out of the way, tucked into a forgotten part of Southwark Borough. No major roads were nearby, no commerce or industry to encourage any redevelopment of the land, until now, apparently.

I hadn’t been back for years, almost forgotten the two rows of grimy, bricked, terraced houses where I had spent the first fourteen years of my life. Ironically, I still remembered all the names of the people who had lived here: neighbours, friends ... Ali B.

Alexander Brandon, Ali B for short. He was a peculiar kid, tousled hair hanging down over his shoulders, looking as if it always needed a comb run through it. Wearing it long in a time when long hair hadn’t yet become fashionable, frowned upon by the older generation. Like he cared. He never said much, always with a permanent gleam in his dark brown eyes. You know the look, like he knew a secret everyone wanted to know but wasn’t telling.

No one in the street had a bad word for him, though he didn't really mix with them. Ali B was always polite, respectful, often helping old Mrs. Dineway with her shopping or putting out Mr. Bailey's dustbins every Tuesday when the binmen came. He was a loner, friendly without being friends. I guess I was the closest he ever got to calling someone a friend.

There was one peculiarity he had which often caused raised eyebrows, as if his general appearance wasn't reason enough. Ali liked to go barefoot whenever he could, he could often be seen walking around with his trainers hanging by their laces around his neck. He hated shoes, kicked them off at every chance. The latest fads and trends didn't interest him, nor fashion or brand-name clothes. He was more than happy in his raggedy blue jeans and crumpled t-shirts that somehow always suited him.

It was a beautiful sunny day one August when I saw him outside of his house by the front gate. He was on his knees painting on the brick stanchion buttressed against the low brick wall that fronted the terraced house.

"Hey, Ali..."

He looked up at me, the brush, loaded with white paint hovering in front of the brickwork.

"Tony, my man," he said, putting the finishing touches to the number nine on the brick pillar. "What do you think?" he said, sitting back on his naked heels.

"It's a number nine," I said.

He laughed, a soft gentle sound with no hint of mockery in it at all. "Well, yeah," he said. "But is it a work of art?"

I pretended to assess the "work of art," my head cocked on one side.

"It's a number nine," I repeated, and he burst out laughing.

"Philistine."

The front window was open, and music drifted out on the warm air of the day. It wasn't anything I'd ever heard before, not the Beatles or the Stones, or any other current popular music, it wasn't heavy either.

"The Pink Fairies," he said when I asked.

"Never heard of them," I said. "But it's good."

"An acquired taste," Ali said, starting to clear up the paintbrush and tin. "You can borrow it if you like."

"I haven't got a record player," I said.

"Well, when you do let me know... I've got a load of stuff you might like, Velvet Underground, Strapps, Earth, The New Yardbirds... You can have a look through. Take what you like."

At fourteen, there was no way my dad was going to let me have a record player anytime soon. And as for playing the music I was hearing now... No chance. It wasn't raucous, but it wasn't your everyday pop music... It was almost esoteric. I didn't know that word back then, it just popped into my head later when I heard Lou Reed, the lead singer from The Velvet Underground who had begun a solo career and I realised that Ali had been way ahead of his time musically, and that the bands he was speaking of would go on to become rock icons.

There were those who blamed the music in part for what happened later, and Ali's non-conformist attitude... Absolute crap. Ali was his own man, always had been. He did what he wanted to do, what other people always dreamed of doing. It was his nature, as natural to him as breathing. Like going off at the weekends with nothing more than a couple of clean t-shirts, underpants, and jeans crammed into an old, battered, grey rucksack slung over one shoulder.

Where he went will always remain a mystery. Even his mum didn't know, and she was probably the only person in the world who understood him. She knew what was in his heart, if not

his mind. Bear in mind, Ali started his weekend jaunts at my age, which worried his mum to death, though he never knew it. I think finally she accepted his wayward travelling, though she never stopped worrying. His dad just got angry.

There was a gulf between Ali and his father, far more than the so-called generation gap. His father, a thin, puritanical man who had trouble expressing his feelings, never understood Ali's desire to travel, his music, or his mode of dress. Ali's hair was a complete anathema to him. There were a lot of arguments in which inevitably Ali's mum ended up being the mediator, the calming influence.

I often had brief conversations with Ali, normally throughout the week, when I was on my way home from school. I'd find him lounging on the wall outside of his house, always listening to his obscure music.

"So where do you go on the weekends you're away?" I asked one day.

"Anywhere and everywhere," was his short reply.

"Why do you go to these places?"

"To see what's there."

He could be so infuriating at times.

"Okay," I continued doggedly. "What do you eat? You're not going to tell me you live on roots and berries!"

He laughed, slowly shaking his head. "Trust me, Tony," he said with a knowing wink. "You can always find food in the country."

I guessed he wasn't talking about roots and berries.

It wasn't easy getting close to Ali, it just wasn't in his nature to have close friends, so I was really surprised when one Thursday evening he asked if I would like to go out with him on

Saturday. I asked where, but he just grinned and said it would be a surprise. I told him I would love to, but I didn't have any money.

"My treat," he said.

"I'll have to ask my mum," I said dubiously, thinking he might think I was a wus without a mind of my own.

"Absolutely," he promptly said. "I wouldn't take you otherwise."

I practically flew across the street to my house and in a breathless rush asked my mum if it was alright. I was startled when she agreed so readily, almost as if she had been expecting me to ask. Then I discovered that Ali had already spoken to her. He had told her where we were going, and what we would be doing, but neither of them would tell me. Suddenly, Saturday seemed so far away.

Mum gave me two pounds for lunch and a drink, telling me not to impose on Ali's good nature and to behave. I sometimes think she forgot I was nearly fifteen years old. Ali was waiting for me in the street, the inevitable grey rucksack slung over his shoulder.

"So, where are we going?" I asked eagerly.

He smiled. "You'll see."

We caught a bus to the Elephant and Castle, then a train which took us down into Eynsford, Kent. Ali paid for my ticket. I discovered later that he had insisted when my mum offered him money. Repeating it was his treat to me.

The weather was glorious as we ambled through the small Kentish town, across a bridge, past a pub, and onto a long, winding road. Just two kids out enjoying the countryside, the fresh air redolent with the smell of flowers, buzzing with insects. People nodded "hello" as we passed.

"That was the first time I've used public transport in a dog's age," Ali said as we wound our way up a road toward the top of a hill. "I normally use my thumb."

"Is this where you come at weekends?" I asked.

"One of the places," he said enigmatically.

Eagle Heights Bird Sanctuary was a magical place, sited on top of the hill overlooking a broad, green valley. Ali paid my entry fee, and we went inside. The aviary was in the open, large cages housing hawks, falcons, Ravens, even some lizards. There were owls of every shape and size, every species. I never dreamed such a place existed.

"This is amazing," I enthused as I looked at a huge Sparrowhawk sitting impassively on its perch.

"We'll have lunch," Ali said, remaining inscrutable. "Then you can have a real surprise."

Come one o'clock, we went outside to a large open area that was ringed with rough wooden benches. We took a seat on one of the benches, the other seats were already occupied by adults and children talking in low, excited voices.

I will never forget that flying exhibition for as long as I live. Three staff members flew hawks and falcons, sending them high into the clear blue sky, flying from high posts to wrist with the lure of meat. There was a show featuring Crook the Rook, a cheeky black bird trained to do various tricks. The backdrop was an endless view down a deeply green valley, topped by a clear blue sky. The sun flashed off something bright—water, maybe a small lake or a river. It took my breath away.

I caught Ali staring up into the sky, at a Lanner falcon hovering high on the thermals. He was up there with the magnificent bird, feeling the breeze on his face, the wind under his wings. The look on his face was euphoric, serene... In that moment, I got a brief glimpse of Ali B's true nature... I envied him.

Eighteen was a turning point in Ali's life. One of the long-running arguments he had had with his father was about getting a motorcycle. Ali's father flatly refused to stand as guarantor for

the finance required, and while he was underage, Ali was jammed. The age of majority wouldn't be lowered from twenty-one to eighteen for another two years, but it was legal to have your own credit at eighteen. Ali didn't hesitate.

His dad was furious and didn't talk to Ali for weeks, but Ali was oblivious, the bike had opened up a whole new side to his wanderings, presented a completely different world, suddenly time and distance didn't matter, the world was his oyster.

I saw quite a bit of Ali that year, as ever, only through the week when he was tinkering with his motorbike, or cleaning it, or just sitting by the front gate admiring it.

We never went out together again, and sometimes when he went off over the weekend, I would see his mum in the street, and we would talk. Sometimes she gave me a Coke, or a cup of tea and we would chat, inevitably the conversation would turn back to Ali.

"He worries me sometimes, Tony," she confided to me once. "I understand his need to get out and about, but it seems to consume him. It's all he lives for." She smiled bleakly. "He goes out of here every weekday morning to work, and you know what? I don't even know what he does."

"Haven't you asked him?" I said.

"Of course, but you know Ali. He just says, 'It is boring work, Mum,' and then he changes the subject. He pays me housekeeping every week without fail." Her voice trailed off. "One less thing for his father to criticise him for."

I didn't know what to say when I saw the tears standing in her soft, brown eyes, Ali's eyes.

"I shouldn't have said that," she suddenly said. "His father isn't a bad father; he just doesn't understand..."

"It's alright Mrs. Brandon. I know what you mean, a lot of people around here don't get Ali either."

"He goes off God alone knows where. He never says anything, just appears either late Sunday or early Monday. I say to him, 'Where you been, this time, Ali B?' And he just smiles, shrugs his shoulders, and never says a word. Just kisses me."

"I asked him too," I said. "But got much the same reaction, though without the kiss," I added hastily. "I guess that's just his way."

She rested her hand on mine gently over the kitchen table. "You're a good friend to him, Tony. He sometimes talks about you; he doesn't have many friends."

"I think that's through choice, Mrs. Brandon, but I'm glad we're friends..."

It came as no surprise that Ali B was a mystery to his mum. They were close, that much was obvious, but I think he never told her what he did on his weekends because he thought it might worry her. He didn't see that she was worried anyway, perhaps more so not knowing.

Whatever job Ali had, it must have paid well. He was very liberal with money, like every other materialistic thing in his life. It just seemed to serve a purpose. I saw him give a tramp five pounds once, outside the local grocery shop, Stamp's. That was when a fiver was a fiver. The tramp thought his birthdays had all come at once. He thanked Ali profusely; Ali just slapped him on the shoulder and left him staring after him in awe.

None of the families in Sedan Street were particularly well off. I know my family wasn't. Ali's parents were the same, living frugally, almost hand to mouth. So, when the first envelope turned up in the post containing fifty pounds in crumpled ten-pound notes, they were amazed. Nothing accompanied the money, no letter, no explanation. The envelope was postmarked Dulwich. They didn't know anyone in Dulwich.

This went on for several weeks. Every Thursday or Friday, an envelope would turn up containing fifty pounds. The postmark was always Dulwich, no return address. After six weeks both Mr. and Mrs. Brandon were becoming a little concerned, worrying who their mysterious

benefactor might be and why he, or she, had singled them out. Ali swore he knew nothing about it. How could he? He barely made enough to pay his mum housekeeping and pay for the bike.

I realise now, looking back, all the signs were there. I just didn't see them. The first inkling I should have had was on a day in June when I found Ali sitting on the garden wall listening to his radio. The motorbike was standing in the kerb, all gleaming chrome and black lacquer.

There was a news broadcast on the radio. Ali was listening to it with avid interest, a huge grin splattered all over his handsome face. Something about an incident in Norfolk. I didn't take any notice. I wish I had.

The next incident was really strange. Mr. Brandon wanted to go to the police about the envelopes. He was that straight. But was at a loss as to what to say. "Look, Officer, I have been receiving fifty pounds every week for the last six weeks from an unknown benefactor. What should I do?" It sounded crazy.

Then Mrs. Brandon's washing machine broke down. It was totally knackered and would need replacing. Up until now, the mysterious money they had been receiving was sitting in an old Peek Frean's biscuit tin at the bottom of the wardrobe. Mrs. Brandon confided in me some time later that they had a frightful row over the money. She saw no harm in using it to replace the washing machine. Mr. Brandon was adamant that the money wasn't theirs, that it had been sent to them by mistake and sooner or later the sender would realise his mistake and want his money back.

Then an envelope turned up with a hundred pounds in it and a newspaper cutting from the latest issue of the local rag, *The South London Press*, of an advertisement for washing machines. Mr. Brandon nearly freaked out.

It wasn't long after that incident that the proverbial hit the fan.

It was during the six-week break from school, from the end of July to the beginning of September. I was in my last year, when late one Tuesday afternoon in early August, there was a knock at the door. It was a very distraught and upset Mrs. Brandon.

"He hasn't come home," she said, her voice breaking. "He always comes home or calls to say he's going to be late. But I've heard nothing."

I brought her into the kitchen. Mum was looking concerned as I sat Mrs. Brandon down at the kitchen table.

"It's not like him," she continued softly. "He wouldn't let me worry like this."

"I'm sure there's nothing to worry about," I said. "Maybe the bike's broken down or something and he can't get to a phone."

As soon as I said it, I realised the other connotations behind such a thought.

"You think he's had an accident?" Her eyes went wide.

"No, of course not. There has to be a perfectly simple explanation. He's only a few hours late..." I said lamely.

"No, he isn't," said Mrs. Brandon. "He always comes home Monday morning at the latest because of work."

"Maybe he's gone straight to work," suggested Mum. "Have you called them?"

Mrs. Brandon looked even more distraught. "I don't know where Ali works. I haven't got a number. Anyway, he would have come home last night, wouldn't he?"

"Let's give it a little while longer, see if he turns up. I'm sure he's just forgotten the time..."

"What if he's lying in a ditch somewhere, or in hospital? I don't even know if he carries identification..." The tears started to flow.

Mum sat on a chair next to Mrs. Brandon and put a comforting arm around her shoulders.

"You can't allow yourself to get upset like this," she soothed. "Tony's right, you know what Ali's like, he's probably got involved with something and not realised the time. He'll be back, sooner or later. You know he can look after himself, like he's always done."

Mrs. Brandon was somewhat placated. She calmed down after a cup of tea and I walked her back home. But a dark fist closed about my heart. In my mind, I knew if Ali could have phoned, he would have.

The following morning, Wednesday, I was sitting in the kitchen with Mum. There was still no sign of Ali, and I was talking to Mum about going to the police with Mrs. Brandon to report him missing. The radio was on and there was a news broadcast running a story about a foiled post-office hold-up in Norfolk. The robber had made a daring escape on a motorbike. An astute witness had managed to get a partial on the motorbike's registration plate. AFB...

Mum and I looked at each other, a coldness gripped my heart.

"Surely not...?" Mum breathed.

At midday, there was a knock at the door. Mum came to my bedroom.

"Tony, it's the police," she said.

A motorbike had been wrecked in a high-speed chase, but the rider had escaped into some nearby woods. The bike was identified as Ali's. In my heart, I already knew that. During the robbery at the post office, the robber had been confronted by an off-duty policeman, despite the robber being armed with a sawn-off shotgun. During the struggle, the balaclava the robber was wearing was pulled off. From the description given by witnesses, and the subsequent discovery of the motorbike Alexander Brandon had been identified.

"That's not possible," I said. "He wouldn't do such a thing! And with a shotgun...!!"

"I'm sorry, son, there's no doubt," said DCI Hathaway.

Horrified, I looked at Mum. She just shook her head and touched my hand.

Hathaway fired several questions at me: Did I know about Ali's activities? Did I know where he might go? Has he been in contact?

I couldn't help them.

Later that afternoon, Mum and I went over to the Brandons'. Ali's mum was in pieces. His dad was just raving.

"I knew it would come to this! He's so bloody irresponsible! What does he think he was doing?"

"Fred!" exclaimed Mrs. Brandon. "He was helping us! Don't you see that?"

"What are you talking about?" Mr. Brandon said, a little taken aback by his wife's outburst.

"The money, don't you see? It was Ali. He was sending us the money. He saw we were struggling, knew we were having trouble with the rent, the bills..."

"Ali...?" Mr. Brandon said, his voice was but a whisper.

Then came the reporters, not like the paparazzi today, but enough for the street to know something was going on. It didn't take the neighbours long to figure it out. Mr. and Mrs. Brandon stayed indoors, the curtains drawn.

Ali was spotted just south of Chelmsford in Essex. The police closed in but once again he slipped the net. They couldn't catch him, they found evidence of his passing, but never Ali. The police brought a pair of sneakers to the Brandons for identification. They were Ali's. Now there was no doubt.

Stealing cars with impunity, dumping them, and disappearing, he was heading straight for London, home. For three days, he kept it up. He wouldn't have evaded the police for so long nowadays, but they didn't have our modern technology back then. Ali was like a wisp of smoke, slipping through their fingers as soon as the grip tightened.

The telephone rang. I was sitting right beside it in the living room. Dad was still at work; Mum was in the kitchen preparing dinner.

"Hello."

"Hey mate. How you doing?"

I could have died.

"Ali! What...? Where are you? "

"Just outside of London somewhere," he said. "Not sure exactly. How have you been?"

"How have I...? Ali, what the hell are you doing? You've got to give yourself up. They know who you are, what you've done."

"I figured that much," he laughed.

Despite his best efforts, I could hear the tension in his voice, the desperation.

"I need your help, Tony," he said. "I need some clothes, maybe some money," he huffed.

"My bloody feet are freezing. I lost my trainers; can you believe it? I was asleep in a barn when the farmer turned up. He nearly caught me. I legged it but forgot to grab 'em..."

"Ali, why?" It was a question I just had to ask. "Why?"

For a moment I thought he had gone, but then I heard him sigh heavily. "Mum and Dad were in trouble. They thought I didn't know. It was bad. I tried to sell my bike, give them the money, but the finance company wouldn't allow it. I started sending them money, but Dad wouldn't use it." He laughed quietly. "I should have known. I figured I had no other choice."

"Ali..." I said. "How am I going to get to you? I don't know where you are..." I paused, my mind racing, but at the same time, I couldn't think. "The police are watching me..."

"It's okay, mate. It was just a long shot. I'll manage."

"No Ali, you won't! You need to give yourself up. You can't win. They'll get you in the end."

"No, they won't," Ali said emphatically. "I won't let them put me in a cage, not ever." His voice took on a softer tone. "Don't worry about me Tony, you take care, okay?"

"Ali!"

The line was dead.

It was only then I felt the tears stinging my eyes, the trickling down my cheek. I have never felt so helpless, from then until now. I was fifteen, thought I had a handle on life. How stupid had I been? That brief conversation haunted me for a very long time. Could I have gotten to him? Helped him? I think I could. I should have at least tried. He was out there cold and alone, hungry, and probably scared to death despite his bravado. I had let him down, and it made me sick to the stomach.

It was inevitable that Ali would be cornered sooner or later. It had been too late to go over to the Brandons' after Ali's phone call, but I thought I ought to tell them about it. I was there early the following morning when the police turned up.

"He's taken refuge in a small cottage just outside of Morden in Essex. He's holding the occupants hostage," explained the policeman. "We have been trying unsuccessfully to talk him down for nearly three hours.

"We need you both on the scene to convince him to give himself up peacefully. He's still armed and being treated as dangerous; we have to think about the family he is holding hostage."

Though never said, the implication in the policeman's words was as clear as day. Ali's parents were escorted out to a waiting police car. I pleaded with Mrs. Brandon to allow me to go with them. The police were reluctant until Mrs. Brandon explained I was Ali's best friend. I should have told my parents what was happening, but I didn't. I was afraid Dad wouldn't let me get involved or the police would go without me. I told Hathaway that both my parents were out and

wouldn't return for hours. He thought about it. I don't know why he finally conceded and allowed me to go. I was just glad. All I was thinking of was Ali.

The drive into Essex was brief and very fast. The farm, a small holding with stone walls and a wide-open space in front of the small cottage was surrounded by uniformed police. Despite the remoteness of the cottage, (Morden, the nearest town, was three kilometres away) there was quite a crowd, held back by a police cordon.

There was a contingent of newspapermen by a large oak at the edge of the property, cameras in hand, scribbling in notebooks, like clamouring vultures picking over the carcass of some unfortunate beast. Naively I wondered; how do reporters get to know of these things so quickly?

I was sitting in the police car worried sick as I watched the police brief the Brandons on the situation. Then, using a bullhorn, Mrs. Brandon spoke to Ali, begging him to come out, to surrender peacefully. There was no response.

The police had tried telephoning the house. It was never answered. DCI Hathaway tried to talk Ali into giving up. Nothing. I was alarmed to see armed police marksmen moving into strategic points surrounding the house.

Then the front door of the cottage opened, and a man, a woman, and a small child hurried out, quickly scooped up by police and taken to safety. I slipped out of the car. The air crackled with tension. I knew something was about to happen, and staying in the car wasn't an option. I had to get closer.

I can see him now, sauntering out of the front door of the cottage, his arms outstretched, the sawed-off shotgun dangling from the fingers of his left hand. Barefoot, dirty, his normally immaculate hair stringy and lank, he looked a hundred years old. And still smiling that same old enigmatic smile.

"Put down the weapon," Hathaway's voice boomed through the bullhorn. "Get down onto your knees, put your hands on your head. Do it now."

Ali didn't move. Gazing about the farmyard serenely, seemingly looking at every face that looked tensely on, his smile never faltered as he looked up into the clear blue vault of the sky.

"Put down the weapon," Hathaway repeated. "Get down on your knees."

I saw Ali take a deep breath, slowly lowering his chin to his chest, his greasy hair falling over his face like a dirty curtain. Mrs. Brandon took the bullhorn from Hathaway.

"Alex, please. Do as he says, put down the gun. Give up, son, it's over. Please, Alex..."

The barbed wire topping the farmyard wall prevented me from getting any closer. I stood unnoticed about forty metres from where Ali stood in the centre of the yard, his shadow pooling on the hard-packed earth behind him. I can't explain the coldness that suddenly gripped me, the sure-fire certainty that washed over me in a dreadful wave. The last words he spoke to me on the phone filled my head, clamouring, insistent.

*"No, they won't. I won't let them put me in a cage, not ever..."*

"No..." I breathed.

Ali B looked around slowly, his gaze falling on his mother, watching anxiously, surrounded by police. His smile was mournful, full of pain. I saw him mouth the words, "I love you, Mum."

"NO!" I screamed, or at least I thought I did. I don't know if the words actually came out.

Ali lowered the shotgun to his hip and aimed it at the group of reporters. Three shots rang out. Ali staggered from the first, was spun around by the second, and was knocked sprawling in the dust by the third where he rolled in the dirt and lay still, the shotgun, unfired, spinning from his hands.

"No!" I lunged forward, the barbed wire on top of the wall slashing my left hand deeply.

It was a timeless moment. Though blood flowed, I felt no pain as I turned and saw Mrs. Brandon screaming, struggling in the arms of her husband, trying to get to her stricken boy. Mr. Brandon's shocked face drained of all colour as he held onto his sobbing, hysterical wife. Hathaway and two other uniformed officers rushed forward; it was like they were moving in slow motion as they raced across the open ground. One of the policemen kicked the shotgun clear as Hathaway bent down to Ali, lying ominously still on the ground. Two ambulance men ran over, dropping to their knees, turning Ali's body over.

I sprinted for the gate, wanting to get to Ali, but strong arms grabbed me. A policeman, holding me back. I struggled to break free. I think I was shouting, crying, kicking, punching at the arms that held me, but he held me fast. I remember seeing droplets of blood flying through the air as I beat down on the burly forearm encircling my chest. The policeman was talking to me, his mouth close to my ear, but I heard nothing, just a thundering in my head, and then the strength just drained out of me like water.

I don't remember much more of that terrible day, just that I had lost my friend, that the world was now a darker place without Ali B in it. The last thing burned into my numb brain was the vision of one of the policemen picking up the shotgun. The look of surprise on his face as he examined it. He called to Hathaway. The DCI looked at the weapon, broke it open and I watched the blood drain from his face as he looked down at Ali B, complete bewilderment on his pale features.

*"I will never let them put me in a cage, not ever..."*

I can still hear those words in my head, softly spoken, so emphatic, as if Ali B was standing at my shoulder. I knew he would never have hurt anybody. He couldn't, no matter what the provocation, he was too much of a free spirit. He had too much respect for life.

It came as no surprise when I discovered the truth. The shotgun wasn't loaded. It didn't even have a trigger...

I stood in the ruins of Sedan Street, surprised that I still had tears to cry fifty years on. Ali would have been proud of me. I had travelled the world, seen so many different places, met so many different people from different cultures. But I have never met anyone like him, and I doubted if I ever would...

"Goodbye, Ali..." I said quietly and turned away, leaving the dereliction of the past behind me.

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## *DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY*

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"Look at the mess!" Wendy said, looking in horror around the small kitchen. She flicked a long strand of brittle grey hair off her face with an irritated swipe of her bony fingers.

"Don't look at me, I didn't do it," Larry said, sitting in an overstuffed armchair, gnawing on a carrot, crunching noisily.

"There's blood everywhere," Wendy wailed. "Look at the state of the floor!"

She lifted the ragged hem of her long skirts to stop them trailing in the crimson flood under her feet.

"It was Vlad. He's drunk," Frank said from the doorway, his huge frame dwarfing the portal.

"Drunk? What do you mean, drunk?" Wendy demanded.

"He's drunk, an alcoholic," Larry said, flinching under Wendy's fiery wrath.

"An alcoholic? How can he be an alcoholic? He's a bloody vampire! Vampires can't get drunk on blood!"

"He does," put in Zom, his head jerking spasmodically.

Wendy shook her head in frustration, straggly hair brushing the wrinkled skin of her plump face. "He's undead, Nosferatu, a blood-drinker. How can he get drunk?"

"He gets his victims drunk before he feeds," said Larry, thinking it was the obvious answer.

Wendy's already wrinkled face wrinkled even more. "How? Does he carry a bottle of vodka with him or something?"

"In the tavern," said Zom, now his left arm was twitching. He tried to stop it with his right hand, but failed miserably.

"The village tavern? Here, in our village?" said Wendy incredulously. "Oh, this just keeps getting better."

"He goes down to the village, to The Red Dragon, and drinks with the locals," said Frank trying to fit his considerable bulk onto one of the kitchen chairs, but giving it up as a bad job, especially as the chair cracked ominously. "He gets one drunk, offers to take him home, and boom, Bob's your uncle!"

"He brings them home?" Wendy said.

"No," said Zom. "Normally he has them up against a tree in the woods."

"So where did all the blood come from? It's all over the kitchen?"

"He drank too much; the old fool could never hold his drink," said Larry, plucking another carrot from the bowl on the floor beside him. He looked at Wendy looking at him. "Y'know, the ol' technicolour yawn..." Larry put his fingers to his mouth, mimicking vomiting. "Only Vlad's tends to be mainly red..."

"Where's Vlad now?" asked Wendy, looking suitably disgusted.

"Sleeping it off," said Frank.

"Typical," Wendy said. "Well, he can just get his piss-arse out here and clear up his own bloody mess."

"You'll be lucky," Larry said doubtfully. "He barely knows how to put his cape on these days, let alone how a mop works."

"Well, I'm not doing it," said Wendy huffily. "I can't believe you let him go down to the village. We're supposed to be on the down-low here. You know what happens if anyone finds us."

"Vlad hasn't had a drink in over five hundred years, he deserves to let off steam once in a while," said Larry. "No one ever mentions you going out every full moon, stark bollock naked, flying off on your broomstick."

"It's a besom," snapped Wendy. "And my Sabbats are clandestine. No one ever sees me."

"I see you," said Frank. "Not a pretty sight."

Wendy glared at him. "You're one to talk!" she retorted before turning back to Larry. "And as for you... You used to go out every full moon if memory serves to chomp on some unfortunate human or other."

"I gave that up," Larry said sulkily, suddenly finding his carrot very interesting.

"Hah! The great Larry Talbot! What do you do now, go out every month and ravage the local vegetable gardens, savage the runner beans, rip up the defenceless carrots? Oooooooooo, nasty!"

"I've gone off meat, and blood makes me ill. Nothing wrong with that," Larry said, waving his half-eaten carrot at Wendy like an accusing finger.

"You're a werewolf, for Christ's sake!" Wendy said. "One of the most feared of all supernatural creatures, scourge of the night, bane of the full moon... They're going to be terrified

seeing you tearing an innocent iceberg lettuce to pieces with your bare teeth. What's the matter with you all?

"We're the last of our kind, we're all that's left of an ancient dynasty, living in a ramshackle house in the middle of a dying wood in the remoteness of Eastern Europe and you're all falling apart."

Zom sneezed, and something thumped to the floor.

"Damned allergies," he moaned nasally, bending down to the blood-covered floor. "That's the second finger I've lost this month," he said, shaking the blood off the digit with a grimace.

Wendy scowled at him. "I knew it was a mistake letting you take refuge here. It's too crowded. I'm getting claustrophobic."

"Wendy, it's been a hundred and fifty years," Frank said. "You should be used to us by now."

"A girl needs her privacy," Wendy pouted, oddly it made the wart on her nose glisten.

"Girl?" Frank said and clapped his hand over his mouth, the vagrant word out of his mouth before he could stop it.

"If you don't like it, you know where the door is..." Wendy said caustically.

"You don't mean that," Frank said. "You know I have nowhere to go. Besides, my plastic surgery fund is building. Soon I'll be able to start the treatments."

"Plastic surgery fund!" snorted Wendy unkindly. "Frank, you hire yourself out to children's themed parties! Even at Halloween, you barely make enough to cover your overhead."

"That's not my fault," whined Frank. "If Victor hadn't fallen into the Arctic Sea and got pneumonia, I wouldn't be in this situation."

"My plans for organ transplant are going very well," piped up Im.

"What plans?" asked Wendy.

"Financial plans, they're going splendidly," said Im, who had been sitting quietly in the corner up until now, plucking at a loose thread on his bandages.

Wendy looked at Frank, then Larry, and then back at Imhotep. "How can you have financial plans?" she asked. "You're stuck here with the rest of us."

"Internet," Im said.

"Internet?" repeated Wendy. "I don't get it."

"Simple," said Im. "I know things, valuable things. I sell the information on the internet for a percentage."

Wendy looked even more puzzled. "How the hell do you sell stuff on the internet? Any potential customer would take one look at those bandages and log off."

"I don't front it, Larry does, on his good days," said Im.

"When he's not savaging cucumbers, you mean?" sneered Wendy.

"You don't have to be so spiteful," said Im.

"She's a witch, of course she does," said Frank.

"Okay, so what commodity do you sell on the internet that is so lucrative?" asked Wendy sceptically.

"Treasure maps," Im said promptly. "Every second Thursday, Larry goes to the city to a place called an Internet Café; he does the business there."

Wendy burst laughing, actually more of a cackle. Tears leaked from her rheumy eyes, spilling down her wrinkled cheeks.

"And people fall for that scam?" she asked.

"It's not a scam," said Larry.

"I really do know where there is buried treasure," Im continued. "Lots of it. Me and Larry make maps. We offer them free to our subscribers."

"Larry worked out a contract. We give out all the relevant information one step at a time, then when the treasure hunters are sure it's all genuine, we negotiate a percentage, then we give them the final coordinates and they get the treasure."

The smirk dropped from Wendy's face. "That just might work," she said reluctantly.

"It does," said Larry. "We've got two hundred and fifty thousand pounds in a joint account already."

"That's not fair," said Zom. "There's no cure for allergies."

"You haven't got allergies," snapped Wendy. "It's all in your diseased mind."

"Of course I have allergies! Especially mould," protested Zom. "Why else would I keep sneezing and getting sore throats?"

"The fact that your body is decomposing might give you a clue," said Frank.

"What?" said Zom.

"You're rotting away," said Wendy brutally. "Falling apart, decaying, putrefying... You're fucking dead!"

"Oh," said Zom in a small voice. "I thought it was just allergies."

"Oh, good grief," said Wendy in an exasperated voice. "I can't believe I'm having this conversation!" She slumped into a lumpy chair. "It still doesn't solve the problem of what we're going to do about Vlad."

"What problem's that?" said a heavily accented, somewhat slurred, voice.

"Oh, his majesty has finally deigned to get up," said Wendy sarcastically, seeing the dishevelled figure shamble through the kitchen door.

Dressed as if he were going to some state function, his black dinner suit dusty and crumpled, the dirty white dress shirt spotted with what could have been either tomato ketchup or blood, the pale-faced man staggered into the room on unsteady legs.

"It's nightfall," he mumbled. "And I'm a count. Majesty doesn't apply. That's just for kings and queens. I swear, you lot make enough noise to wake the dead."

"Vlad, we need to talk," said Wendy.

"From what I've been hearing, you've done enough talking for all of us," said Vlad plonking down in a chair, groaning, and holding his head.

"Someone's got to lay down some rules," Wendy said petulantly. "You go down to the village, carouse with the locals and then victimise them... Are you crazy?"

"We're living on a knife edge here. If it wasn't for me keeping the mayor happy in his bed every other night, the villagers would have burned us out long ago. As it is, he barely keeps them under control."

"You keep him happy?" Larry said distastefully catching similar glances from the others. "Gross, the man's a pervert."

Wendy glared at him. "I send two succubi down to him every other night, not me personally," she said sourly.

"The mayor had a lucky escape I'd say," Frank said.

"You won't need to do that anymore then," said Vlad.

"What do you mean?" said Wendy.

"The mayor," Vlad belched. "Oh, excuse me, manners."

"What about the mayor?" Wendy asked, already fearing the worst.

"I had him last night," said Vlad, looking around the kitchen. "That's him all over the floor."

Wendy was aghast!

"You idiot!" She shrieked, leaping to her feet, her considerable bulk shaking fleshily beneath her loose dress. "Do you realise what you've done?"

"Had dinner?" Vlad said sarcastically.

"The mayor was our insurance policy! He had the villagers convinced, albeit tenuously, that we were just a reclusive family of ancient lineage wanting to preserve our privacy."

"And they bought that bullshit?" asked Frank, amazed.

"Barely, but it was enough to stop them looking too close," said Wendy.

"So they'll elect another mayor," said Vlad carelessly.

"Who might not be so easy to persuade," said Wendy. "Or might not see things from our perspective."

"It's taken me years to build up the trust and mutual understanding in my relationship with the mayor, and now you've ruined it! Who knows how the villagers will take it?"

"Errrrrr... Wendy..." said Zom, looking out of the window into the darkness, his entire body twitching.

"If the townspeople get even a little whiff of who we are," continued Wendy, well into her rant.

"Wendy," Zom persisted.

"We're going to have to relocate, all of us," continued Wendy, ignoring Zom's petulant whine. "And I swear, you lot are on your own. You can find somewhere else to live—"

"Wendy!" Zom insisted.

"What?" snapped Wendy, turning on the quaking Zom. "Can't you see we're having a serious conversation here?"

"Yeah..." said Zom, still looking through the dirty glass of the window. "But I can also see a whole bunch of torches coming through the woods... And I can see pitchforks, and very large scythes, and I think they're coming this way..."



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## *SANTA SLAY*

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### *(An Alternative Christmas Story)*

He was late... He was never late... But this morning he was. He'd overslept, well overslept, nearly two hours. The boss would be mad. The boss didn't normally get mad, but just lately, over the last few weeks, he did. It was like he had lost heart in the job, like it had become a burden, a wearisome chore, though he couldn't really see how that could be. The boss had loved the job, was renowned for being jolly, always laughing, blue eyes twinkling, always happy, especially at this time of year.

He pulled his bright green coat closer around his slim body, tugging the matching hat down over his chilled, pointed ears as he hurried on, his breath steaming in the cold air, his soft, red, leather boots crunching through the crisp, pristine snow. The animals would be waiting to be fed. He hoped they weren't making a racket and alerting the boss. That would put the cat amongst the chickens. He remembered the incident only yesterday when one of his co-workers, Rory, suffered the boss's sudden anger. It had only been a minor thing. A wheel on a toy train wasn't fully tightened, but the boss was furious! He could still see the little wooden train burst into a dozen pieces as it smashed against the workshop wall.

Everyone was shocked. You could have cut the sudden silence with a blunt butter knife. The boss *NEVER* shouted, and he absolutely *NEVER* threw toys against the wall in anger.

It was a bad moment, the latest of many...

And now he was late and considering the recent events with the boss ... not good.

Ahead, through the lightly falling snow, several low, wooden log buildings came into view. Warm, rosy red light shone invitingly through the windows of the largest of the buildings, the

workshop. He wished he could go in and get warm, have some breakfast before starting his chores. Everything looked calm and peaceful as he wistfully stood for a moment. But he was late. The animals could start making a ruckus at any minute. Best get on, get things done, and maybe his lateness would go unnoticed.

The stables, a long, low building, were to the right of the path adjacent to the tack room. The feed store was on the left. The warmth and the smell of the grain were welcome as he entered the store. Quickly he began to fill a large wooden bucket with the grain scoop. As he worked, he thought about the boss...

The workshop had always been a great place to work, a happy place. Everyone said so. Everyone who worked there loved it, especially the boss. So, what happened? Now everyone was walking around on eggshells, afraid to even talk, let alone laugh and be merry. The boss was no longer jovial or merry, stomping about the place with a face like thunder, no twinkle in his blue eyes, only a grey bleakness. He was often heard muttering to himself. Sometimes, the workers could hear what he was saying, things like, "It's not fair." Or "I deserve something, too." Or "No one cares." But most times, it was just incoherent grumbling.

He sighed. Maybe things would get better when the day arrived... He hoped so...

The air felt even colder after the warmth of the feed store as he heeled the door closed. Even swathed in his large coat with a woollen scarf wrapped around his lower face, he was still shivering. Picking up the bucket of feed he headed for the stable, his bright green pointed cap bobbing as he waded through the deep, pristine snow. The stable door creaked as he pushed it open, the warmer air inside redolent with the smell of the animals, making him sigh with relief as the ambient heat washed over him.

"Time for breakfast, lads!" he called cheerily. "As soon as I've fed you, I'll spend the day cleaning your tack and polishing your bells all ready for the great day..."

The words died in his throat as he saw the carnage in the stalls. He stared, horrified, unable to believe his shocked eyes. The bucket of feed dropped from his nerveless fingers and spilled on the red-splattered straw with the sibilant hiss of moving grain. Taking a faltering step backwards, he felt the bile rising in his throat as he clawed the scarf away from his mouth, his breath coming fast and heavy. Then the shock broke, and he turned on jelly legs hauling the stable door wide open, and half ran, half staggered toward the huge log cabin on the other side of the compound.

"They're dead! All dead!" he was screaming as he rushed across the snow-covered yard and clattered onto the front porch of the log cabin.

The front door crashed back against the wall as he blundered through into the workshop, panic now taking a firm grip on his thundering heart.

"The reindeer," he began as he crossed the threshold, but his words turned to a cry of alarm as his feet flew out from beneath him, the wooden floor slick under his boots.

He landed heavily on his back, the breath whooshing from his lungs. For long seconds he lay stunned, black spots dancing before his pain-filled eyes. He raised his gloved hand to rub the back of his head, a lump already forming where it had struck the floor. He froze, his hand still in mid-air as he looked with wide eyes at the red staining the palm and fingers of the light blue wool of his glove. A small mewling sound escaped his lips as he scrabbled the stained glove off his hand, wiping the hand convulsively on his coat front.

All pain forgotten, he slowly sat up, eyes bulging from their sockets as he realised he was sitting in a pool of congealing red fluid, blood! With another strangled cry, he scrambled to his feet, looking at the spreading pool of blood covering the wooden planks of the floor.

His mind was numb as he slowly raised his head and, for the first time, saw that the room was in shambles. Tables, chairs, toys, everything lay in shattered ruin, not a single piece of

furniture was left whole, cushions were slashed, their innards littering the room. And the blood! The walls dripped scarlet; great pools swamped the floor; there were huge sprays of red splashed across the ceiling.

Then he saw the bodies. At first, he had mistaken them for toys, dolls, and toy soldiers, smashed and ripped up like everything else. He recognised the twisted, pain-filled faces, mouths open in silent screams, the dead eyes staring at him as if dumbly imploring him to help, the illusion of broken toys dispelled. He wanted to scream, his knuckles jammed into his mouth, but his throat was dry, constricted and no sound would come. He was shaking almost uncontrollably as his eyes surveyed the charnel house that had been a place of laughter and good cheer just yesterday.

Shaking his head slowly in disbelief, unable to take in the horror before him, he wanted to run, get out, find help... But where? The workshops were kilometres from anywhere. There were no villages or towns nearby, they were totally isolated. Then he saw the bloody footprints. Not wanting to look but unable to resist the macabre impulse, he followed the footprints across the floor, heading for the stairs at the back of the room. He could see the scarlet prints on the first three steps going upwards.

Fear blossomed anew in his chest.

"Mrs. Santa." His breath was but a whisper.

His gaze followed the stairs upwards, the steps swallowed by the gathering darkness at the top. He stepped back towards the door, his hand resting on the jamb as he stared upward as if he could see straight through the ceiling. Looking briefly outside, he saw the brilliant snow was taking on a white, glowing shine as the morning sun rose into the clearing blue sky and then he fearfully looked back at the beckoning stairs.

Swallowing hard, he closed his eyes and cursed under his breath.

Looking fearfully at the stairs, knowing he had to go up them, he silently swore again and reluctantly crossed the floor, careful to avoid the pools of sticky blood which were darkening to a sickly dark brown colour. Constantly looking nervously behind, he reached the foot of the stairs and peered up into the gloom. Lengthening shadows pooled at the first bend, making it impossible to see beyond. It seemed preternaturally quiet up there, too quiet.

Pressing his back against the wall, he took his first tentative step, his boot resting on the bottom riser. His eyes darted like rats in a trap, knowing two more steps would put him in a very vulnerable position. Wiping his dry lips with a swipe of his hand, he carried on up, craning his neck, attempting to see around the bend in the stairs. It was no good; he couldn't see a thing.

Still throwing glances back down the stairs, he took another step, and another. The darkness above seemed to reach out to him. Stopping just short of the bend, he cocked his head, listening for any telltale sound. Everything was silent, nothing stirred.

"Not even a mouse," he muttered quietly to himself.

Steeling his jangling nerves, he suddenly lunged forward and looked around the bend, quickly pulling his head back after a quick glance. Someone was there! He took two quick steps back down the stairs, then realised the dark shadow had not moved and seemed to be sitting at the top of the stairs. There was no sound of movement. Momentarily closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, he ascended the few remaining stairs to the bend. Ready to run at the slightest sign of danger, he peered cautiously around the corner. The dark mass at the top of the stairs had not moved. He squinted into the gloom. Whoever it was, looked somehow crumpled, squeezed into the corner.

Something moving at his feet made him look down.

"Oh." His voice was a squeak as he saw the trickle of dark liquid, made black in the dim light, rolling lazily off the step. The blood trail went all the way to the crumpled figure and then everything was clear.

"Oh," he moaned again.

Beyond the dark figure, the stairs continued their ascent, shadows flickered ruddily, vague shapes indiscernible in the firelight's fading glow. Keeping his watering eyes rigidly locked on the top step, he fumbled past the broken body and fearfully ventured onto the first floor.

Three doors came off the landing, two were open, the third was closed. A brief glance showed the first open door led to an empty bathroom, the second was a large bedroom, also empty. He eyed the third door, terror clutching at his pounding heart. This was the source of the ruddy firelight glowing beneath the closed door, casting a shimmering fan-shaped radiance onto the landing floor. Taking a deep breath, he slowly, reluctantly approached the door, his shaking hand reaching for the handle. Bracing himself for instant flight, he turned the handle and pushed the door open. It swung inwards easily.

The room beyond was a sitting room, the soft lighting making it warm and welcoming accentuated by the large, log fire in the stone grate. The smell of lavender reached his nostrils oddly making him relax a little. He took a step into the room and looked around.

Mrs. Santa was sitting in a rocking chair on the far side of the hearth, her knitting in her lap. Relief flooded through him when he saw her sitting there. He took three more steps into the room and was about to speak when instinct warned him something was wrong.

He had thought she was taking a nap, but then he saw the blood dripping beneath the rocking chair onto the white, sheepskin rug under her feet. He peered closer and saw her single bright blue eye staring into nothingness. Two knitting needles protruded from the socket of her other eye, staining her white, embroidered smock a vivid crimson.

The gasp leapt to his lips as he almost gagged. At the same time he realised someone was standing directly behind him. He froze, his eyes wide with fear. In one quick movement, he whirled just as the wide-bladed axe chopped into his head, neatly splitting his skull, and his bright green cap in two. He never felt the axe being savagely ripped from his cloven head; he did not feel it when he crashed sickeningly onto his back to lie twitching like a manic marionette in a widening pool of his own blood.

Nor did he hear the axe head thud onto the floor as the bloodstained figure turned and, dragging the axe behind him, shambled out of the room. Black shiny boots, dripping with blood, tramped slowly down the stairs, the axe, thumping like a funeral drum, clumped on each wooden step loudly. Oblivious to the carnage, the axe man dragged his axe across the ground floor and out onto the porch.

Snowflakes began to drift down more heavily now from the morning sky as the man shambled across the virgin snow, blood staining the whiteness as he headed for a large wooden sign, which bore the legend, "NORTH POLE."

Only the man's sobs broke the silence as he approached the sign. Suddenly the axe thudded into the central post and stuck there. Still sobbing, the man dropped to his knees, his red trousers immediately turning the snow pink where he knelt, his huge arms opened wide as his tear-stained face turned skyward.

"What about me?" he moaned, a gentle breeze ruffled his long, blood-streaked, white hair and lifted an equally blood-soaked beard from his barrel chest.

"All year I work, making toys for all the boys and girls and then I'm expected to deliver them all in one night... I always get them what they want, what they ask for... But what about me? Who buys presents for me? Why am I always forgotten? Why doesn't anyone buy presents for me? It's not a lot to ask... Just one present..."

His bearded chin dropped onto his chest as his shoulders shook with emotion, and his heart-wrenching sobs filled the quiet clearing as the snow continued to fall.

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## *Mr. Bozman's Problem*

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(Or a Stitch in Time)

The surgery waiting room was small and dingy, a converted ground-floor flat, corner position, in a tenement building that was part of a housing estate built in the 1960s when housing estates were thought to be the way to go. The walls were a faded county cream colour and plastered with various posters, haphazardly stuck in prominent places with Scotch tape going brown with age, proclaiming the virtues of birth control and the dangers of testicular cancer.

The scuffed, grey, vinyl floor tiles never looked clean, even after they had just been scrubbed. The mismatched chairs, lining the shabby walls, barely uplifted the overall dowdy ambience of the waiting room.

Edith Parsons had been a doctor's receptionist for nearly twenty years, fifteen of those years were with Doctor Fox whom she had served faithfully, making sure that the appointments were in order, the patient's records were up to date, and that he got his tea and biscuits at 11:15, prompt.

Though the waiting room was shabby, Edith did her utmost to make sure it looked its pathetic best, even down to tidying the raggedy-edged magazines three or four times a day. She took pride in her work, even though she knew the patients didn't appreciate it. That didn't matter. This was her sole province, her kingdom, and here she was queen.

She returned the telephone receiver back to its cradle and entered Mrs. Burgess's appointment into the computer; one of the many innovations the Health Authority had imposed on all the local surgeries and the bane of Edith's life. She hated the new-fangled thing, always

updating, or downloading, or crashing. She hated it especially, as she couldn't see what was wrong with the old card system; it was just as efficient in her opinion.

It was still early, barely 9:40; the doctor's first appointment wasn't for another twenty minutes. Edith glanced idly through the small glass window into the waiting room to make sure it was still tidy.

"Oh!" The small noise leapt from her throat as the pale, oval face of a man peering through the polished glass hatchway suddenly confronted her. Momentarily flustered, Edith could do no more than return the man's stare.

"Can I help you?" she finally managed to stutter.

The man cocked an ear at her. "Pardon?" came the muffled reply.

Edith realised she hadn't opened the sliding glass hatch; she did so. "Can I help you?" she said with a little more composure.

She didn't recognise the small, balding man who hunched into the aperture, and Edith prided herself on knowing ALL her patients by name.

"I hope so," the man said; his voice had an irritating squeak to it. "I am a patient here, but I haven't got an appointment."

"In that case, the doctor can't see you today," Edith informed the man primly. "You'll have to make an appointment; Wednesday is the earliest I can fit you in."

"No, no, no, that's no good," said the man. "I have to see him today. It's very urgent."

"I'm afraid the doctor is fully booked; I just can't alter appointments around to suit latecomers, whatever next? That's what appointments are for!"

"Couldn't I just wait until the end of the surgery? Maybe someone will cancel?"

Edith looked suitably piqued at the suggestion. "Well, I suppose I could have a word with the doctor," she said begrudgingly. "But I can't make any promises. You'll just have to wait and see."

"That'll be fine, yes, very fine," said the man with a relieved smile. "I'll just take a seat, shall I?"

"You need to give me your name first so that I can retrieve your medical records from our files," Edith said.

"Oh, yes. Bozman, Arnold Bozman."

"Thank you, you may take a seat," Edith said and promptly slid the window shut with a loud thump.

The surgery turned out to be very busy. Edith went about her duties with her usual aplomb. Patiently, Mr. Bozman waited, not wanting to disturb the fierce-looking receptionist any further. He watched Edith as she worked, her hair, which was impossibly reddish brown, never lifted an inch from her head as she whirled about the reception. It had so much hair lacquer on it, he imagined it would serve quite admirably as a motorcyclist's crash helmet. Her eyes were flinty grey, and her mouth set harsh and thin. The downward lines at the corners denoted that it was a mouth that did not give in to smiling very much.

It was only when the waiting room was nearly empty that Edith noticed Mr. Bozman sitting unobtrusively in the corner. She blinked at him, as if seeing him for the first time.

He was dressed in a large, heavy overcoat that looked about two sizes too big, even though it was a warm spring day outside. Somehow, the coat made him look far bulkier than his sparse frame warranted. The light grey flannel trousers showed skinny calves as he sat cross-legged, making his lower body completely out of proportion with his upper body. Curiously, Mr. Bozman was perspiring profusely, but he made no attempt to remove his overcoat.

Tutting to herself, Edith turned to her files and rifled through the "A to C" section, quickly finding the file marked "Bozman. Arnold". She placed it with the two remaining files, ready to take into Doctor Fox. She'd inform him then that there was an extra patient on this morning's list. Finally, Mr. Bozman was called. Edith made a big show of how inconvenient it was for Doctor Fox to see Mr. Bozman, telling him he was lucky that Doctor Fox was so understanding. Mr. Bozman thanked her quietly as he entered the doctor's consulting room.

Doctor Fox was a small man, grey-haired and bespectacled. His grey suit was creased from sitting too long in the high-backed leather chair. His attention was focussed on the glowing VDU situated to the left of his huge desk. Mr. Bozman sat quietly in the chair next to the doctor's desk. Apparently satisfied with his efforts, Doctor Fox turned to Mr. Bozman and smiled expectantly.

"And what can I do for you ... Mr. Bozman?" beamed the doctor as he checked the file in front of him. "My receptionist said it was urgent."

Mr. Bozman smiled weakly as he fidgeted in his chair. "Yes, I think it is," he answered, perspiration flowing down his pale, round face.

"Well, would you like to tell me about it?" Doctor Fox urged gently.

Mr. Bozman looked at him bleakly, obviously very worried. "It's a little difficult to know where to begin," he replied. "I need some information, really."

"Information?" the doctor asked, puzzled. "What information?"

"Babies," answered Mr. Bozman.

"Ah, your wife is pregnant?" ventured the doctor.

Mr. Bozman looked surprised. "No, I'm not married," he said.

"Your girlfriend then?" Doctor Fox corrected.

"I haven't got a girlfriend either," Mr. Bozman said, a perplexed look creasing his sweating face. "I live alone."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand," the doctor said in exasperation. He was beginning to find this strange man a little tedious. "Just what do you want to know about babies for then?"

"Well, not babies exactly, more about what happens after they are born."

Now it was the doctor's turn to look perplexed. "I'm sorry, this isn't making much sense..."

"No, it should be me apologising. I'm not making this very clear, am I? I need to know what happens directly after a baby is born, you know, when they cut the... er... umbilical cord."

Doctor Fox sat back in his chair, frowning. He couldn't make out exactly what this strange man was after, and he said so.

Mr. Bozman's shoulders slumped, and then he tried to explain again. "When the umbilical cord is cut, what happens? What does the obstetrician do with it?"

"It's clipped to prevent bleeding," the doctor answered, completely baffled.

"Not tied in a knot?" Mr. Bozman continued.

"Well, yes, sometimes, but these days they prefer to clip it. Actually, tying the cord in a knot was phased out some years ago. Why on earth would you want to know such a thing?"

Mr. Bozman looked down at his restless hands, wriggling like white fleshy spiders in his lap. He sighed heavily.

"Years ago," he mumbled. "Oh dear, oh dear."

"Mr. Bozman, could you please explain to me what this is all about? Have you, or has someone in your family got a problem you wish to discuss with me?"

Doctor Fox was surprised, and somewhat alarmed, to see that Mr. Bozman looked really frightened. His baby blue eyes had a forlorn, haunted look.

"I think I have," he said with a moan.

"You have?" said the doctor, glad to be getting somewhere at last. "What sort of problem?"

"With my ... belly button," Mr. Bozman answered.

Taken aback, Doctor Fox looked at him in surprise. "With your..." he stammered, struggling to recover his composure. "Is it sore? Bleeding? Perhaps I should take a look."

"NO!" Mr. Bozman exclaimed, his face a mask of horror.

"But if it's bleeding, it could be something serious, an umbilical hernia or perhaps an infection. It would be better to treat it than ignore it, don't you think?"

"It is serious, very serious, and I'm so very afraid," Mr. Bozman wailed. Tears spurted from his eyes.

"Then let me look," Doctor Fox said, rising from his chair.

Mr. Bozman scabbled out of his chair, clutching his overcoat tightly, backing towards the door.

Doctor Fox halted by the side of the desk. "Mr. Bozman, I cannot give you any sort of diagnosis without first examining you, you must realise that?" he said patiently.

The odd little man looked like a trapped mouse, his eyes darting this way and that until finally, after a lot more persuasion, he allowed the doctor to remove the coat.

"Good grief!" Doctor Fox gaped in surprise when he saw the huge mass of bandages swathed around Arnold Bozman's body, going around his shoulders, crisscrossing over his chest, layer upon layer of them. "What on earth have you done to yourself?" he said, appalled.

"I have to wear them, for added protection, to keep me safe," explained Mr. Bozman in a tremulous voice, wiping the sweat from his forehead with a large handkerchief he had salvaged from his overcoat pocket.

"Protection? From what? Good God man, you must be roasting! Are you hurt?"

"Of course I'm not hurt," Mr. Bozman said. "I told you I wear them for safety. My life has been a nightmare ever since this started, two years ago." He slumped back in his chair.

Doctor Fox was speechless. Finally, he asked, "Why are you wearing all these bandages? What are you trying to protect yourself from?"

The haunted look crept back into Mr. Bozman's blue eyes.

"It's my belly button," he said, his voice quivering. "I think it's coming undone."

The doctor wasn't sure if he had heard right, but he knew he had.

"Is this some sort of joke?" Anger tinged his voice. "Because if it is, I find it in very poor taste."

"It's not a joke, it's true," Mr. Bozman said desperately. "I first noticed the knot was slipping nearly two years ago. At first, I thought I was imagining it, but I wasn't. I've been trying to stop it coming undone ever since. I just know if it does come undone, I'll turn inside out like a burst sausage, and I really don't want that to happen. I'm so afraid!"

The fear inside Mr. Bozman was very real; Doctor Fox was certain of that. The man was absolutely terrified. But it was such an unreasoning fear, the doctor wasn't sure how to deal with it.

"Mr. Bozman, this is absurd. I have been a medical man for over forty years and in all that time I have never, and I emphasize *never*, heard of anyone's belly button coming undone. It's just not possible, believe me. This is just an irrational fear that has somehow gotten out of all proportion."

Mr. Bozman didn't look convinced.

"Look, let me examine you. Then I will give you my honest opinion. How's that? I will show you; you have nothing to fear whatsoever."

"But the danger...?" Mr. Bozman began.

"There is no danger," Doctor Fox said patiently. "I promise you, nothing will happen. Please, trust me. Come on, let's get those bandages off."

Mr. Bozman stood up and very reluctantly allowed the doctor to start removing the wrappings about his body. Slowly but surely, they unravelled, metre upon metre of the gauzy material. As they dropped to the floor, Doctor Fox wrinkled his nose up at the sweet, sour smell of stale sweat and body odour that wafted from Mr. Bozman's mummified body. The stench got stronger as more bandages came off.

"How long have you been wearing these bandages? They are filthy," the doctor asked, letting another length flap to the floor, adding to the growing pile at his feet.

"I'm not sure," Mr. Bozman answered nervously; flinching as another wrapping came off. "About five and a half months, I think."

"And you never take them off?" Doctor Fox was astounded. "Not even at night?"

"Oh no!" Mr. Bozman answered, horrified. "That's the worst time to take them off, at night. Anything can happen in your sleep."

"Before I used bandages, I wrapped myself up in a plaster cast, but the cast was very hard and uncomfortable. After a few weeks, people began to tell me I smelled bad, so I took it off. Besides, I was getting sores under my arms and... well, between my legs. They bled sometimes. After I took it off, I added a little extra protection and then started wearing my bandages."

Before he could ask anything more, the last of the bandages came off and Doctor Fox discovered what Mr. Bozman meant by "extra protection." Strip after strip of silver duct tape was wound tightly around Mr. Bozman's greatly diminished girth.

"Mr. Bozman," Doctor Fox spoke in an awed whisper. "You can't do this to yourself. You are killing your skin; your body needs to breathe. This is very foolish."

"But it's necessary, don't you see? If I don't bind my stomach up, my belly button would just pop."

"No, Mr. Bozman, believe me, it wouldn't." The doctor sighed wearily. "This tape has to come off as well."

"Oh please, no," Mr. Bozman wailed piteously. "That will only leave..." His mouth snapped shut when Doctor Fox suddenly looked up at him.

"That will only leave what?" the doctor asked sternly. "What else have you done to yourself, Mr. Bozman?"

Mr. Bozman smiled meekly but said nothing.

"Mr. Bozman, please tell me what else you have done, or I will not be able to help you."

"I... I..." Mr. Bozman said hesitantly. "I stitched up my belly button with blue cotton," he said softly.

"Oh, good God!" Doctor Fox couldn't believe his ears.

"Then I super glued the stitches, so they wouldn't slip," Mr. Bozman added as a matter of course.

Doctor Fox got abruptly to his feet and crossed over to his desk.

"Mr. Bozman, I'm going to send you to the hospital," he said as he quickly scribbled a note on the headed pad in front of him.

"The hospital? But why?" Mr. Bozman asked, puzzled.

Doctor Fox looked up over the rim of his spectacles, which had slipped to the end of his nose.

"Mr. Bozman, I haven't the facilities to help you here. You need help, both physical and mental. The hospital can give you both. There are signs of necrosis around your..." Doctor Fox hesitated, was about to say bandages. "...the duct tape. I have no doubt the condition of your skin beneath is more serious. "

"Oh," Mr. Bozman said in a small voice. He bent down and began picking up his bandages.

"What are you doing?" Doctor Fox asked.

"I have to put them back on," Mr. Bozman explained. "The danger. I can't go to the hospital without them."

"I'm afraid you are going to have to," Doctor Fox said; his patience was beginning to run out. "Those rags are filthy and are of no use to you. I am arranging for an ambulance to take you to the hospital directly from here.

"You have done a very foolish thing and I dread to think what the doctors at the hospital will find when they get the insulating tape off your body and see what lies beneath.

"I do not think they will appreciate your explanation."

"But the danger," persisted Mr. Bozman, his lower lip trembling with fear. It was as if he hadn't heard a single word Doctor Fox had said. "What if my belly button starts to come undone? What will I do without my protection?"

"Mr. Bozman, for the last time, there is no danger; it's all in your mind. Now please, slip your coat back on and go to the waiting room. The ambulance will be here shortly."

Mr. Bozman nodded, obviously distressed at having to leave his precious bandages behind, continually glancing at the ragged pile on the floor as he shuffled into his over large coat. Doctor Fox felt a slight pang of pity as the pathetic little man as he, with head hung low, left the room.

Fifteen minutes later, the ambulance arrived and whisked Mr. Bozman off to the hospital. As soon as the ambulance had gone, a very relieved Doctor Fox settled down at his desk to finish off the morning's paperwork.

It was a busy evening surgery. All thoughts of the strange Mr. Bozman had left his mind until the strident ringing of the telephone startled him. He snatched the receiver from its cradle.

"Doctor Fox?" asked a voice.

"Yes, who is this?"

"Doctor Fox, this is Doctor Michaels at Guys Hospital. It's concerning a Mr. Arnold Bozman."

Frowning, Doctor Fox fought to place the familiar-sounding name. It wasn't until his eyes fell on the wastebasket full of dirty bandages that it clicked.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Bozman. Did you examine him? He was very distraught when he left my surgery this morning."

"Yes, I'm afraid we have. Mr. Bozman was a little hysterical when we removed the insulating tape from his body. His skin was in a terrible condition. A good deal of it had atrophied and was beginning to fester.

"He also had sewn several stitches into his naval and then super glued them. The result had become extremely infected. Mr. Bozman fought very hard to prevent our removing the glue and stitches. There was a lot of struggling and tears, but after a great deal of persuasion we finally managed it, though Mr. Bozman was absolutely terrified when we did."

"I guessed as much," Doctor Fox said. "I'm afraid Mr. Bozman had a terribly unreasoning fear of his belly button coming undone and would turn him inside out... A totally unreasoning phobia, but Mr. Bozman was absolutely convinced."

"Yes sir," cut in Doctor Michaels. "That's what I'm calling about. You see, there's been a terrible accident..."



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## *SOD'S LAW*

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**“Sod’s Law is the same as Murphy’s Law...**

**If anything can go wrong... It will!”**

The warm spring air was heavy with the scent of flowers as Crow walked leisurely along the quiet country road. A few cottages lined the narrow highway fronted by well-kept gardens and lawns, bursting with colour and the low buzz of insects. In the nearby beech trees, birds sang their joy of the glorious day. Adjusting the battered hold-all over his shoulder to a more comfortable position, he came to a wooden gate, the sign fixed to its front proclaimed he had arrived at his destination, “Norbreck. Bed and Breakfast. Vacancy.”

Passing through the gate and up the neat, gravel path, he surveyed the cottage with its thatched roof, small leaded windows, and whitewashed walls. The porch was covered in rose bushes that entwined the supporting pillars up to the roof; the flowers were a deep, wine red. Crow anticipated his stay here was going to be very pleasant, and much needed.

Before he had a chance to knock on the small oaken door, it swung open, startling him. A young woman stood smiling on the threshold. At a glance, he took in her slim figure, fair hair, and piercing green eyes.

“Hello, may I help you?” she asked.

Returning her smile, Crow suddenly found it hard to find the words. “The... er... guy at the station said this was the best bed-and-breakfast in Hampshire. Have you any rooms available?”

“You’re in luck,” she answered brightly. “I had a cancellation just this morning.”

“And it’s still free?” he said hopefully.

“It is.” The girl smiled that lovely smile.

"Great!" Crow said. "I'll take it."

"Without viewing?" she said.

"If the house and garden are anything to go by, I don't think I'll have a problem."

"Thank you. It's nice of you to say so," she said, stepping back. "If you'd like to follow me, we'll get you signed in..."

The room was just as Crow knew it would be. Floral print curtains and matching bedspread, soft brown carpet, and pine furniture, aired and scented with a small bowl of potpourri on the white, painted windowsill. Throwing his hold-all onto the wickerwork chair, he stretched out on the bed with a great sigh of relief. The trip down from London had been longer than he had expected. He had been tired before he left. The delay at the train station only exacerbated the condition. A quick nap would be most welcome.

A gentle knocking at the door immediately woke Crow from the light sleep; he got to his feet, momentarily disoriented by his surroundings. Brushing his fingers through his thick, black hair, he opened the door.

"I forgot to put these in your room earlier," the young woman explained, indicating the clean towels draped over her arm.

"Thanks." Crow pushed the door wider, allowing her access.

She breezed into the room quickly putting the towels over the rail by the small basin set in a discreet corner of the room. The soft scent of her perfume filled his nostrils, flowery, delicate.

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Mr. Crow?" she asked.

"Your name would be nice, seeing as you already know mine." Crow smiled.

"Sue," she said. "Sue Reynolds."

"Pleased to meet you." Crow gave a mock bow, his eyes twinkling. "Have you worked here long?" he said amiably.

"Nearly five years," she answered.

"So, you know the area well?"

"I do. It's quiet, with no hustle and bustle like the big city. It's very idyllic here. It's home."

"Absolutely," Crow agreed. "Maybe you'll show me about the village later, maybe go for a drink?"

"Maybe," Sue said. "But right now, I've got to get on."

As she left the room, Crow missed the pained look in her eyes.

Crow settled into the bed-and-breakfast over the next few days. There were around half a dozen other guests to whom Crow was cordial, but he preferred to keep himself to himself. The food was good, the countryside idyllic, as Sue had said. It made for a lot of solitary walks. Unfortunately, Sue hadn't taken him up on his offer of a drink, though he did make friends with her dog, Tod, a Welsh Border Collie. By the fourth day of his stay, with Sue's approval, Crow began to take Tod with him on his morning walks.

It seemed to break the ice with Sue, and she became a little more approachable, and that suited Crow just fine. She even agreed to go down to the local pub that evening, encouraged a little by Mrs. Beacon, Norbreck's resident housekeeper. Like a grey-haired, maiden aunt, she fussed over Sue, telling her a night out would do her good, peering at her through rimless spectacles.

"Just for a drink, you understand?" Sue said as she wiped the reception counter down with a waxed cloth. "Just to let you meet some of the locals."

"Absolutely." Crow grinned. "Let 'em know I'm not a stranger anymore..."

Sue laughed, a clear, crystal bright sound. "Michael, you could live here for twenty years and still be considered a Bacon Face..."

"Well, that's hardly complimentary." He joined her laughter. "Bacon Face?"

"You're lucky, the alternative is 'Hog'..." Sue grinned. "Hampshire is a pig-raising county or was... It's what they call outsiders here."

It was a good evening. Sue became very effusive, probably because of the wine. It really had been some time since she had indulged.

Crow listened attentively as she told him about her life, how she had moved from London and started the bed-and-breakfast with her brother as a silent partner. The business had proved very successful, hard work, but rewarding. She had been very happy living on the outskirts in Brocklehurst in the New Forest.

"And what about you?" she asked, sipping her wine. "What do you do to earn a crust?"

"Security," he said. "Mainly domestic, but some industrial. But what with the economy, and the business arena, things have been difficult. I needed to get away for a while, clear my head," he explained.

"My good fortune," Sue said cooly, taking another sip from her glass.

"Absolutely," Crow agreed, inwardly smiling.

Sleep didn't come easy that night for Crow. He lay in the darkness, his mind awl with the events of the evening. Getting up, he went to the bathroom, dousing his face with cold water, relishing the relief to his hot, flushed skin. With water dripping off his nose and chin, he gazed at his reflection in the mirror, his dark eyes grim, the corners of his mouth down-turned unhappily.

"What are you doing?" he muttered. "What the fuck are you doing?"

His mind wasn't any easier the following day out with Tod on their early morning stroll through the New Forest. The day was a little overcast, but still warm. Sporadic sunlight dappled through the trees, turning the forest floor into a patchwork quilt of shadows. Leaves crunched underfoot as he followed Tod's lead between the ancient trunks.

It gave him time for further reflection on the previous night with Sue. He felt good. Just thinking about Sue made him smile. It had only been a few days, but Sue had made a real impact on his life... And Crow was wondering, was it a good thing? He wasn't sure. his lifestyle and job didn't make for casual relationships; friends were a luxury he couldn't afford. Yet here he was ... smitten. Like a pubescent schoolboy. He knew he should put a stop to it, now, right now, but somehow... He wasn't sure he wanted to.

An hour later he and Tod were making their way back to the bed-and-breakfast, going around to the rear to deposit Tod in his kennel for a bowl of much-needed water. Mrs. Beacon was there, hanging out washing. She greeted Crow cheerily through a mouthful of clothes pegs.

"Sue's in the stable if you want her."

Looking puzzled, Crow stopped by the back gate. "Stable? What stable?" he queried.

"Just down the path, over there," Mrs. Beacon said, pointing. "You can't miss it."

Thanking the housekeeper, Crow headed down the path with Tod trotting at his heels. Minutes later, a small ramshackle building came into sight through the bushes. Pulling open the rickety door, Crow entered the gloomy stable, the smell of fresh hay and manure strong in the air. His eyes quickly adjusted to the dim light, and he saw Sue brushing down the rump of a chestnut mare standing passively in its stall.

"Well. You're full of surprises," he said.

Sue looked up, a little startled. "Michael..."

Before either of them could say anything more, a black and white streak pelted into the stable barking furiously. The horse whinnied, its eyes rolling in sudden fear as Tod began tearing back and forth in front of the stall, barking madly. The mare snorted, its rear hooves lashing out, kicking backwards at the door of the stall with great thumping thuds.

"Oh my God! Get him out! Get him out!" Sue screamed, trying to calm the rearing, stamping horse, and failing as she was hampered by the closeness of the stall. "Quickly! Get him out!"

Alarmed, Crow ran forward, trying to grab the still-yapping dog. Just managing to grab Tod by the scruff of the neck, he hauled the yelping, struggling dog toward the door. Grunting, he hurled Tod out and slammed the door shut. Running back to the stall, he discovered Sue had calmed the horse down, its eyes still rolling, its flanks quivering and twitching with fear.

"Are you alright? Are you hurt?" Worry edged Crow's voice. "Jesus, what the hell happened?"

Sue continued to soothe the horse, repeatedly stroking its neck and whispering. She looked at Crow.

"Tod and Melba have never liked one another," she explained, still petting the horse. "I've no idea why. It was like hate at first sight. That's why I keep Melba down here, out of the way. Tod's never allowed in here."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know," Crow apologised.

"How could you? Don't worry," Sue soothed. "I'm alright, and so is Melba, which is more than can be said for the stall door."

Crow looked at the shattered stall door, the wood splintered in several places, completely ruined.

"Oh shit!" he said.

"That's the third one in as many months," Sue lamented. "I'll have to call Harry Longdon again; he's a carpenter in Lyndhurst, he must be getting used to supplying new stall doors by now," she added wanly.

Crow's concern touched her. He was genuinely upset about the incident in the stable, blaming himself and apologising profusely, even though he couldn't possibly have known about Tod and Melba. Sue smiled, thinking about the tall, dark man. The attraction between them was obvious, right from that first moment on the doorstep. She had been attracted to his handsome looks and quiet manner. He didn't say much about his personal life, and she didn't press him. But she felt that maybe, just maybe, there might be something growing between them. Something good.

She found Crow in the television room that evening, watching the early evening news intently, completely absorbed. For long moments, she stood in the doorway as the reporter showed footage of the recent riots in Welling, Kent about the neo-Nazi faction, the BNP, the British National Party.

The Nazi party had illegally rented premises in the quiet London suburb and had managed to keep their activities from the locals. But now the secret was out, and the local populace was not happy. They wanted the BNP out of their town, and Sue was in full agreement.

How such a vile organization had ever been allowed to exist in the U.K. in this day and age was beyond her, even more so now in the light of recent events. Scenes of horrific violence flashed onto the screen, crowds of ordinary people fighting the fascists in the street outside of the BNP headquarters, a converted shop, the façade boarded up and painted a plain navy blue in an attempt to remain anonymous. The police, holding a line in front of the premises, were hopelessly outnumbered as stones and bricks were thrown, bottles, pieces of scaffolding, brutal fighting. Many people were hurt, bleeding, running.

*"...One mounted policeman was seriously injured when he was thrown from his horse and severely trampled after one of the rioters stabbed the horse in the chest with a sharpened metal bar. The policeman, who has not been named yet, is believed to be in critical condition.*

*"Reports that the riot was engineered by extremist members of an anarchist group are flooding into Scotland Yard who have requested that all newsreels, amateur videos, and photographs, especially on mobile devices, of the protest be made available to the Special Unit investigating the riots..."*

Sensing someone behind him, Crow got up and switched off the television. Turning, he saw Sue standing in the doorway. She looked pale, upset. Tears glistened on her eyelashes.

"Sue?"

Without a word, she turned and hurried away, leaving Crow puzzled and concerned.

\*

Using the pretext of overflowing paperwork, Sue spent the following morning in her office. She didn't want Crow to see her like this, upset, teary. It wasn't fair to him. She promised herself she would see him later, maybe give him an explanation, and hope it didn't scare him off. A distraught woman with baggage wasn't the ideal in a budding new relationship. Sue paused, the invoice in her hand forgotten. Was that what this was? A budding relationship? She'd only known Crow for... What? Five days? Yet somehow... It felt right.

Sue pushed the thought from her mind and tried to concentrate. Harry Longdon, as reliable as ever, had made repairs to the stall door earlier that morning, joking that he would soon be able to retire at this rate. Then one of her suppliers hadn't delivered half of her groceries and Sue needed to kick them up the arse and get them to deliver ASAP. Rechecking the invoice, she reached for the telephone.

Eavesdropping wasn't in her nature, but someone else was on the line as she picked up the telephone. Sue was about to hang up when she recognised the voice.

Crow was angry.

"... don't give me that!" His voice was a low growl. "You paid me for a riot, you got one."

"My sources tell me that policeman's not going to make it," returned a man's voice.

"Not my problem," Crow answered. "I just set it up. That's where my responsibility ends. The rest is down to you."

"You came with good recommendations," argued the man. "We were told you knew what you were doing, were experienced. This has turned into a real cluster fuck; it wasn't the result we expected."

"It was a bloody riot. What did you think was going to happen? I did what I was asked to do, what I got paid for. Controlling the situation was never an option once it got started, you knew that. All I want is the rest of my money, as agreed. I'm staying here for a while longer. Let things blow over..."

"And where is 'here' exactly?" asked the man.

"Really?" Crow said sardonically and was about to hang up when he heard another click on the line. For a moment, he hesitated, uncertain, then he hung up.

\*

Sue just stared at the telephone; her mind numb with shock. Without a thought in her head, her eyes drifted to the desk, to the crumpled letter and official brown envelope, lying there like a noxious stain she wished she could just wipe away, but couldn't. Tears threatened again just when she thought she was all cried out. She'd tried so hard not to think, to keep working over the last few days since she got the news. She couldn't sleep, couldn't eat. Mrs. Beacon had made her go to the doctors to get something to calm her down, make her sleep. The pills stood on her bedside table, unused.

And now ... this...

\*

Crow slipped on a clean white shirt. He had been a little surprised when he received the invitation to a quiet dinner with Sue that evening. He had known her barely a week, but he felt something growing between them, a bond. He hoped it was mutual. He had begun to doubt that as Sue had been acting somewhat distant with him over the last few days, barely talking, hardly a smile. When he asked Mrs. Beacon about it, the housekeeper simply said that Sue had received some bad news, family stuff and he was not to worry. She was a resilient young woman; she would bounce back soon enough. Crow wished he felt the same optimism.

Sitting on the bed, he let the thoughts run in his head. He wasn't quite sure where they were leading him, only that they were beginning to make sense. For months, Crow had been considering retirement, or at least getting out of the business he was in. Get out while the going was good. He had money. He could afford never to work again, but that wouldn't suit him. He needed something to get up for in the mornings.

He was entertaining the thought of investing. Maybe something like a bed-and-breakfast would be ideal, something like Norbreck. Then he and Sue could run it together, and who knows where that might lead? Perhaps he would get an opportunity to suggest it tonight, He figured it was worth a try.

\*

"You look stunning..." Crow breathed as Sue opened the door to her private apartment situated on the first floor.

And she did, a simple, soft, green dress that accentuated the piercing green of her eyes, her hair like shining gold, a simple silver chain at her pale throat.

"Why, thank you, kind sir!" Her smile was radiant. "Come in. Make yourself comfortable. Dinner won't be long."

Crow wouldn't have cared if it took all night. The table was simply but elegantly laid with a white tablecloth and napkins, plain white crockery, and undecorated flatware. A red candle burned in the centre, surrounded by a small bowl of white flowers.

"This looks lovely," he said, suddenly wishing he'd had time to buy her some chocolates or flowers instead of coming empty-handed. Stupidly he hadn't even thought to get some wine.

"Sit down, I'll get you a drink... Red or white?"

Crow looked at her. It was like she had read his mind.

"Wine," she said.

"Red," he answered and blushed at his uncharacteristic ineptness.

"Red, it is."

The evening was perfect, the meal, just steak and salad, was delicious, complimented by good wine and good company. Sue was a little distant, Crow surmised due to the family problems Mrs. Beacon had mentioned earlier. He was loathe to bring up the subject in case of dampening the ambience of the occasion. Likewise, he decided that it might be inappropriate to speak of business partnerships. That could wait. Right now, he was enjoying the intimacy of the moment.

"Let's get comfortable on the sofa," Sue suggested as they finished their meal. "I can clear up later."

As he sat down, Sue poured him a brandy. He smiled. He was feeling good, relaxed for the first time in a long time. Crow did not see the surreptitious movement as Sue took something from the drawer, nor did he notice the fine, white powder dissolving in the brandy. She swirled the amber liquid in the snifter and handed the glass to Crow. He didn't realise she had been lacing his drinks all night, a little at a time with the sleeping pills given to her by the doctor, ground up finely that afternoon. She watched with hooded eyes, like a predatory cat, as he drank.

She sat down beside him and rested her head on his shoulder. Crow sighed contentedly.

"Thank you for a lovely evening," he said dreamily.

"You're welcome," Sue said. "It's nice just to sit quietly and just enjoy each other's company, don't you think? Two people brought together by fate..."

Crow laid his head back and smiled.

"Drink your brandy," Sue said softly.

Still smiling, Crow sipped his drink. He felt a little tired. *Too much wine at dinner*, he thought. The room swam a little before his eyes, his limbs became heavy, his eyes felt like lead. He placed the brandy on the occasional table and gently rubbed his eyes. He tried to open them, but he was so tired, he could feel himself drifting, slipping into a deep, dark sleep...

He woke with a start, his head thundering, making him groan. The musty smell of the stables filled his nostrils, the heavy, pungent odour of the manure making him feel sick. At first, he thought he was imagining things, but then he felt the straw under his backside, the roughness of wood against his back. With another groan, he attempted to rise, but he couldn't move! With a tingling shock, he realised he was tied!

"What the fuck..." he said thickly.

His mouth was full of cotton wool. A bitter taste lay at the back of his throat. Crow was suddenly awake, struggling against the rope that was wound tightly around his chest pinning him to the inside of the stall door, craning his neck he tried to see more, but his vision was limited, he could barely see the partly open stable door, Melba, Sue's horse was standing sedately a few metres away.

He was helpless, unable to move, regardless he struggled against his bonds, then there was a slight movement behind him. Crow tried to swivel his head around to see who was there.

"Sue? Sue, is that you?"

There was no answer.

"Sue!" Crow suddenly shouted. "Sue! Help me! Sue, what's going on?"

Desperately Crow continued to wrestle against his bonds but there was no give, he threw his weight back against the stall door, but it was solid. Panic began to knot his stomach when he heard another noise behind him.

"Sue?" he queried.

"I'm here," she said softly.

Crow closed his eyes in momentary relief. "Sue, what's going on? Why am I tied up?"

"For a very good reason," Sue said ambiguously from the shadows.

Crow frowned. "What are you talking about?" he said darkly, his panic starting to be replaced by anger. "Untie me, let me loose."

Sue's soft laugh filled the stable. "Not a hope," she said evenly.

"I don't understand. Did I drink too much? What have I done?"

Stepping out of the shadows, Crow felt Sue behind him, could smell the perfume she always wore. A crumpled piece of paper was thrust in front of his face. He could barely read the short, type-written missive in the gloom.

It was addressed to Miss Susan Reynolds from the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, London, informing her of the regrettable death of Mark Reynolds, in the line of duty. Condolences were offered.

"I still don't understand. What's that got to do with me?"

Hidden in the shadows, out of sight, pain creased Sue's tear-stained face, her eyes dark-ringed from too much crying.

"Everything."

Crow sensed rather than saw Sue pacing in front of the stall.

"Mark was a mounted policeman, working in London," she suddenly said. Her voice was husky with emotion. "He was on duty during the BNP riots. He was thrown from his horse after it was speared in the chest by one of the rioters, the horse, in its frenzy, trampled Mark..."

Cold fear bathed Crow's body. "I still don't understand..."

"DON'T!" Sue suddenly screamed. "Don't you dare! I heard you, Michael, the other night. I heard you on the phone talking to your employer... I heard what you said... I know what you did..."

"Sue..."

"No! There's nothing you can say, no words." Her voice was but a whisper. "You may not have killed my brother personally, but you're responsible. You made the riot happen... You orchestrated all the violence..."

"It was a job, Sue, nothing more. It wasn't personal..."

"I don't want to hear it!" Sue yelled. "I don't want your excuses, or your reasons. Mark is dead, you killed him..."

"Then turn me over to the police..." Crow said. "Stop whatever ... this is."

"Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you? Suit you right down to the ground. I have no evidence, no proof, it would be so easy for you to slip justice... But I know. I know the truth... And I can't—won't—let you get away with it."

Footsteps clumped on the wooden floor of the stable as Sue went to the half-open stable door.

"Sue, wait! We can work this out. What do you want me to do? Tell me... Let me make this right."

"It's too late for that, and there lies the dilemma..." she said from the doorway. "I'm not like you. I'm not a cold-blooded murderer..."

"Then let me go..." Crow said. "I'll go far away from here, you'll never see me again..."

"I can't do that either," Sue answered.

"So, what are you going to do...?" Crow asked, beginning to think there might be a way out of this predicament after all.

A low growl froze Crow where he sat, all thoughts of escape flying from his mind like frightened birds as he forced his head around and saw Tod crouching in the doorway. Melba snorted, becoming restless, her hooves pawing at the stable floor.

"Sue...?" Crow said querulously. "SUE!"

Tod growled again, his hackles rising, Melba stamped, pulling on her tether. Barking wildly Tod charged into the stable...

Sue walked towards the house as Tod's frantic barking, mixed with Melba's terrified neighing, reached her ears. Solid thuds filled the air, meaty thumps, the sound of splintering wood, a few brief screams of pain. As she reached the back door, Sue paused, looking back in the direction of the stable, thinking she would have to call Harry Longdon again in the morning...



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## *ROOKIE*

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"You have got to be frigging kidding me!"

Bak "Flash" Gordon gaped out of the dusty transporter window as the lurid alien landscape whirled past.

"It's pink! The mountains, the rocks, even the dirt, it's all pink!"

Several of the other grunts craned from their seats to look out of the windows.

"Oh man, look at the colour of that sky!" John Corbin said, looking up. "Now that is weird! Green sky, pink landscape. How freaky is that?"

"No wonder it's so hot. There's two suns," pointed out Norbreck.

The transporter had just exited from the underground boarding point beneath the arrivals building; this was the first any of the thirty grunts on board had seen of their new assignment.

"Don't fret it, Gordon," growled Sergeant Drinkwater's gravel voice from the front of the transporter. Dinks to the new recruits when they thought he was out of earshot.

"Ya gotta remember, we're Rangers of the Eighty-Seventh, 'Seeing, not seen.' Once you get your new uniforms, you'll blend right in."

Flash looked aghast at the sergeant. "Don't tell me that, Sarge..."

Drinkwater grinned, his even, white teeth brilliant against black skin.

"Camouflage is everything, soldier."

Glances flew between several of the men.

"Y'mean..." Billings began. "Aw Jeez, how am I gonna send photos of me home to my girl wearing a pink uniform?"

"It'll be no problem for most of you," Drinkwater said. Then added maliciously, "'Course Gordon's gonna have a situation with that red hair of his. He'll look like a dick with the clap."

Flash scowled.

"Now, back in your seats. It's a two-hour trip to the base. Settle down and chill while you can. There'll be precious little time for it later." Drinkwater made himself comfortable, a small smile playing on his lips.

\*

Nick Dale also grinned quietly as he pulled his peaked cap down over his eyes and began to doze.

"Can you believe this place?"

Nick cracked an eye as Flash sat down beside him.

"Third trip, my man," Nick said, closing his eyes again.

"Third?" Flash said. "So you knew everything was pink, and you didn't let on?"

"Wouldn't wanna spoil the surprise," Nick said. "Besides, the other two trips were field explorations; this is my first tour as an enlisted man."

"Field exploration? Who for?" Flash asked.

"Holistic Minerals Corporation," Nick answered. "I worked for them as an astrogeologist. Didn't really get to see much. Figured if I signed up, I might get to see a lot more."

"What's to see?" Flash grumbled. "Pink, pink, and more pink. What I don't get is what we're doing on this dirt ball in the first place."

"Verdanium," Norbreck said from behind them. "The wonder metal of the Twenty-Fourth Century. That, and a shitload of other precious minerals and ores. This rock is full of the good stuff."

"And a lot of bad." Nick pushed his cap back and sat up. "Look around," he said. "What d'you see?"

Flash looked. "Grunts."

"Right," Nick agreed. "What d'you think is their average age?"

"Aw man, I dunno," Flash said. "Twenty, maybe twenty-two."

"You sure?" Nick quizzed. "What about Dinks? How old do you think he is?"

Flash frowned, guessing ages not being his forte.

"He's a sergeant," chimed in Norbreck. "That's gotta make him early thirties."

"This is his fourth tour," Nick told them.

"Jeez, he must love the place," Flash said in wonder.

"You not getting it," Nick said. "My first trip out here, I was twenty-two..."

"So?" Flash was totally mystified.

Nick laughed and pulled his cap back down over his eyes and started to doze again.

"Billings is worried about sending photos home to his girl. He hasn't realised yet, he's now seven years older, even though it seems as if we left Earth only yesterday. The flight out here takes seven years, with Cryogenic Suspension and Light Hyper Drive we don't age..."

"The sergeant looks thirty, maybe thirty-five. He's actually eighty years old. I look, what? Twenty-five? I'm biologically fifty-seven. Space travel's a bitch, isn't it?"

"Holy shit!" Realisation dawned on Flash. "You mean I've lost seven years?"

"Not exactly," grinned Nick, hearing the incredulity in Flash's voice. "Think of it as a sort of time travel, taken in seven-year leaps. By the time we get home, everyone we know will look seventeen years older once we've completed our three-year tour. Us? Won't have aged a day. One of the side effects of Cryogenic Suspension is exactly that, the aging process slows down for at least a year and a half after you wake up, sometimes longer. Keep travelling in space and you could live forever."

"Fuck a duck!" breathed Flash.

"Thought you'd like that," said Nick. "Dinks was right about one thing though Flash, with your ginger hair you're going to look really sweet in pink!"

"Fuck you!" Flash spat and got up.

Nick grinned as he heard Flash imparting the latest revelation to the rest of the grunts.

\*

The half-track transporter thundered on raising clouds of pink dust through the arid desert land. Behind, two other transporters rumbled, equally as hot and airless, a precursor to conditions at the approaching barracks.

"Okay, ladies," Dinks's voice bellowed above the throbbing engines as he stood at the front of the vehicle facing the main cabin. "Pull up your socks and grab your cocks. We arrive at base in about ten minutes. Keep your ears and eyes open and your mouths shut. Follow orders and we'll get you stowed away in double quick time."

The three half-tracks rumbled through the massive steel gates of Base Seven Two Four, New London, Nova Ventura, whirling to a halt in the middle of a hard-packed earth parade ground. Dust, thick and cloying, filled the air. The silence was blessed as the engines shut down. Seconds later, the rear ramps dropped and ninety new recruits and associated sergeants of the Eighty-Seventh Rangers, New Colonies Aggregate disembarked and got their first view of their new home for the next three years.

The compound was huge, lined on three sides by black-painted Nissan huts, set inside a heavy mesh electrified fence seated on a metre-high wall of solid reinforced concrete. In the middle of the compound rose a vast earthen mound, five metres high, surmounted by an ugly concrete building, heavily fortified. Gun towers squatted at intervals along the grey, concrete walls; laser cannon muzzles glinted in the shimmering light of Nova Ventura's twin suns. At the

base of the mound were more concrete buildings, also heavily armed, with smaller ordinance, proton machine guns and laser scythes.

"Holy crap!" Norbreck stared at the huge construction in the centre of the compound. "They expect an invasion, or what?"

"Careful what you wish for, soldier!" Drinkwater's voice snapped behind Norbreck, startling him. "Get your arse in line with the other recruits. I'm hot, dirty, and tired and you're keeping me from my shower time! Move!"

\*

The brief induction made out in the blistering twin suns of Nova Ventura was thankfully ... brief. Nick Dale found himself sharing a Nissan hut with nine other grunts, among them Flash, Norbreck, and Billings. Sergeant Drinkwater was assigned to the private room adjoining the hut.

"I gotta get out of this uniform and get into fatigues," complained Flash. "I feel like I'm melting."

"Better get used to it," Nick advised. "We're approaching July; it gets even more like a furnace."

"I still don't get it." Flash dumped his pack onto the narrow bunk and began pulling out clothes. "Why are we here? I haven't seen a single sign of any hostilities, yet all they went on about at Boot Camp back on Earth was how dangerous this assignment was going to be."

"That's because we're nowhere near the 'front,'" Billings said, shaking the creases out of his light blue fatigues. "Who knows what the hell's happening out there?"

"Out there? And where the fuck is 'out there?'" Flash asked.

"About twenty clicks north of here," Sergeant Drinkwater said from the doorway. "And as for fighting? You grunts are reserves, and you wanna be thankful it stays that way."

"Why's that, Sarge?" Nick asked.

Drinkwater regarded Nick with hard, dark eyes for a few brief seconds Nick felt as if his deepest thoughts were known to the taciturn sergeant.

"We got a front line," Drinkwater said in a low voice. "Trooper goes down; a reserve is racked up to fill the gap."

"So what happens when the trooper recovers?" asked Taggart, stationed in the bunk next to Nick's. "He goes back?"

"You're not listenin'." Drinkwater's voice was flat and empty. "A trooper goes down in this war, he don't get up. Now get your gear stowed, chow's up in thirty."

\*

"He was kidding, right?" Flash said as they made their way across the compound to the mess hall.

"Of course he was," Nick said. "Dink's a joker, likes to wind people up, especially those sucker enough to fall for it."

"He's got a fucked-up sense of humour if you ask me," Flash said. "An' he's wasting his time with me. I'm no sucker."

"Absolutely." Nick grinned.

The mess hall was a hubbub of noisy activity, mixed voices, the clatter of cutlery, clash of plates and cups on Formica tabletops, the scrape of chairs on the light grey linoleum. And then there was the thankful bliss of the air-conditioning.

"Man, that smells great!" Norbreck said as they made their way towards the food counter. He was glancing at plates as they passed occupied tables. "Looks good, too."

"So do they," Flash said. "Two o'clock guys."

All eyes turned to the right and rested on a group of uniformed women seated at a table near the far wall.

"They're all over," Billings said, nodding towards another table to their left.

Closer observation revealed that there were women at several of the tables, young, uniformed, and, for the most part, good-looking.

"Now I'd say the attraction of the base just went up about two hundred per cent." Flash grinned.

Picking up a stainless-steel tray each they walked slowly along the food counter eyeing up what was on offer. Norbreck's nose had been right. The food smelled delicious: steaks, chicken, cold meats, eggs, salads, and vegetables.

"Whoa! The rations weren't this good back home," said Billings, selecting steak, mashed potato, and gravy.

Nick had some chicken and salad. Picking up a carton of cold milk from the drinks station, he turned to follow the others to a table when suddenly there was someone in front of him. Unable to stop they collided, Nick's tray flew from his hands and clattered noisily to the floor amidst the mocking jeers of the assembled soldiers. Food was scattered everywhere.

"Oh my God! I'm so sorry!" The girl sounded mortified.

"No, my fault, I wasn't looking..."

The words died in Nick's throat as he looked into the startling violet eyes of the fair-haired girl in front of him. In that brief second, he took in her flawless, lightly tanned skin, the soft mouth with just a touch of pale pink lipstick, and the horrified eyes that softened into a warm, if hesitant smile.

"You okay?" she asked, her voice was like velvet.

"Oh, what? Yes, yes, sorry. I wasn't looking where I was going. Are you alright? I didn't hurt you?" stuttered Nick.

"I'm fine, though I'm not used to showering in cold milk." She grinned and stuck out her hand. "Penny Warden."

All Nick could do was stare at the darkening stain spreading over her pert breasts and down her flat stomach, turning her light blue fatigues dark.

"Hello?" She looked inquiringly at Nick.

"Sorry, Nick, Nick Dale." Feeling clumsy, Nick took her hand briefly.

"Nice to meet you Nick, Nick Dale, just got in?"

"Yeah, couple of hours ago. Look, I'm sorry, you're soaked..."

"No problem, no real damage done, though the same can't be said for your dinner."

"What? Oh shit!"

Nick dropped to one knee and began scooping up food onto the metal tray. The girl, Penny, knelt beside him, lending a helping hand.

"You don't need to do that..." protested Nick.

"It's okay," she said, dumping bits of chicken onto the tray.

Having cleaned up the mess as best they could, Nick dumped the ruined food into the garbage.

"I need to go change," Penny said. "You'd better get yourself some more dinner and join your friends; they seem a little concerned about your situation."

Nick glanced over to where Flash and the others were elbowing each other and pointing at him with big grins on their faces.

"It was nice meeting you Nick, Nick Dale. Maybe I'll see you around."

And just like that, she was gone.

\*

"They're blue," Flash said, holding up a pair of fatigue trousers.

Nick looked at him and shook his head despairingly. They had been ordered to the supply depot to take possession of their new uniforms and basic equipment.

"Flash, sometimes you make me want to cry," Nick said.

"What?"

"How long we been on base?" Nick asked.

"You know how long, four days," Flash answered.

"Exactly," agreed Nick. "And with all the personnel you've seen, have you seen a single pink uniform?"

The expression creeping over Flash's face was a picture, especially with Billings and Norbreck sniggering in the background.

"I knew that," he said lamely.

"Course you did," Nick said, grinning. He gathered his gear into his arms and headed back to the barracks. Flash and the others followed.

Nick would never get used to the sudden blast of heat every time he exited from the air-conditioned buildings. A couple of times, when he had not been quite prepared, the fierce temperature had momentarily taken his breath away. Immediately, a fine sheen of perspiration coated his bare arms, making the fine hairs itch, but at least his sunglasses saved his eyes from the glare.

"D'you think we'll ever get to see some action?" Norbreck asked, falling in step beside Nick.

"Dinks says it's a good thing we haven't been posted out yet," Nick answered.

"Then what's the point of us being here?" Flash asked.

"Orders," Nick said.

"I've been asking around. No one seems to have much of an idea what is happening at the front," continued Norbreck. "Either that or they're keeping pretty tight-lipped about it. I can't even find out who the hell the enemy is."

"I heard it was alien marauders," Flash offered.

"Alien marauders? Yeah, like that's gonna be right," laughed Norbreck.

"Why not?" Flash argued. "If we're here, why can't aliens be here, too? Everyone keeps telling me how important this verdanium stuff is. Who says we have the only dibs?"

"He's got a point there, man." Nick winked at Norbreck.

"Did they happen to mention what colour these aliens were, Flash? Pink, maybe?" Norbreck jibed.

"Har de fucking har!" Flash said sourly.

"Well, I for one am getting just a little bored sitting around sweating buckets," Nick said. "I'm gonna stow this gear and head for the gym. The way I'm eating, I'm gonna be as fat as a pig."

"It's the heat," Norbreck said. "Drains your energy. You need to eat just to walk across this goddamned compound. You want company?"

"You're welcome to tag along. Good to have a work-out partner."

\*

The base was lax within the confines of the secured perimeter. Time was their own, except for morning reveille and the odd kit inspection. (Two in six days as opposed to one a day, sometimes two a day, just to try to catch you napping.)

Nick Dale, Bak Gordon, John Norbreck, and Paul Billings spent a lot of time together. Nick enjoyed their company, showing Flash how to reduce the recoil on a proton rifle when they spent time on the firing range, or pushing Norbreck to greater effort pushing weights in the gym. They

helped each other, especially after a good night in the Final Shot Bar, the camp's only licensed "recreational" centre.

The four of them managed to find relief from the continual boredom, and the sweltering days slipped by, and though he kept looking, there was something Nick couldn't find and he figured he had missed his chance.

Most of the recreational facilities were inside in air-conditioned halls or large Nissan huts, out of the blistering heat of the daylight hours, except for one of the two swimming pools, but even that had the shady protection of a roof. The base boasted two games rooms, a small cinema, common areas, a fully equipped gym, a shooting range, an electronic library, and a twenty-four-hour mess hall.

The mound in the centre of the huge compound was a fortified storage area and last line of defence. It housed the communication centre, arsenal, and operations rooms. It also billeted all the officers. The communication shack was nestled in the shadow of the main mound, easily identified by its bright blue façade.

Lorries arrived at the base, coming from the north where the verdanium mines were located, though to call them specifically verdanium mines was incorrect. The lorries, loaded with precious minerals and ores, entered the mound on the east side through huge, steel doors that ran on well-greased rollers powered by large electric motors. No one ever saw the contents of the lorries; though it was common knowledge what they carried. On the west side of the compound was a row of three hangars in which various aeroplanes and helicopters were parked, alongside the motor pool and fuel dump.

It was oddly sedate, yet Nick felt there was always that hidden air of menace about the compound, as if it held a deep, dark secret and wasn't telling. Perhaps it was the Rec and

Surveillance Centre where camera drones were housed, used to patrol the camp's extensive perimeter. Strictly authorised personnel only.

To Nick, it smacked a little of *1984*. Surveillance was to be expected on a secured army base, but the cameras here seemed to be a tad overkill.

"May I...?"

Nick looked up from his drink and found Sergeant Drinkwater standing beside the table, indicating the empty chair opposite.

"Yeah, sure," Nick said.

"No *amigos* tonight?" Drinkwater observed.

"No, just needed a bit of down time," Nick explained.

Drinkwater hesitated. "Hey, I can leave you be, no problem," he said.

"No, sit. Can I get you a drink?"

The bar was dimly lit, not many patrons at the bar or in the booths, muzak played softly in the background, some inane tune Nick didn't recognise. He called for two more beers.

"So, you're the guy spreading rumours about me?" Drinkwater said once he'd settled on the moulded metal chair.

Nick blinked in surprise. "Excuse me?" He suddenly felt his stomach drop out.

"Don't try to squirm out of it, Trooper, but if you're gonna spread rumours at least get the facts right."

"Sarge, I don't know..." Nick stammered, beginning to blush.

"Eighty-five," Drinkwater said.

"What?" Then the penny dropped. "Oh... your age..."

Drinkwater smiled. "Causes a lot of confusion," he said, taking a sip of beer the barkeep had deposited on the table. "Plays hell with your private life."

"Sarge, I'm sorry. We were just talking..."

"Chill out, man. Not an issue, but you are. I been watching you."

Nick's eyes narrowed. "Me? Why?"

"Because you're a natural with a head that's screwed on right."

"You lost me."

"You're a natural leader, man. You got the touch. You learn fast and aren't slow in passing the knowledge on. Not many rookies pick up on the trick you showed Gordon with the proton rifle, using the thumb to reduce sideways recoil. I know vets that are still piss-poor shots because they don't handle the rifle right. Gordon, Norbreck, and Billings, they all look up to you."

"We're just friends," Nick said.

"Don't sell yourself short, Dale. It's a lot more than that. You got Gordon hanging on your every word," Drinkwater pointed out.

"Flash doesn't need me. He's a good recruit, knows his stuff," Nick protested.

"He's a damn fine soldier, and he'll go places... As long as he's got someone like you to follow."

"Why are you telling me this?" Nick asked. "I'm no different from any other enlisted man..."

"You're wrong there, but that's not my point," Drinkwater said, his expression softening. "Whether you admit it or not, those boys look to you for direction, and that's a good thing, and why I wanna make you into a squad leader, with those three as your squad."

"I don't think so," Nick said. "I just want to do my time and get off this rock in one piece."

"And out of all the recruits stationed here, my money's on you to do just that, but you haven't got a choice. Part of my job is to single out rookies like you, men with potential, and you got it."

Nick eyed the sergeant. "What you said about troopers at the front going down and not getting up again, you meant it, didn't you?"

"God's truth, man." Drinkwater played with the label on the beer bottle. "But it's not physical wounds that take them out..."

"What do you mean?" Nick asked.

Drinkwater brushed the question aside.

"And you know who 'the enemy' is, don't you, who we're fighting?"

The sergeant still said nothing.

"I guessed as much, should have known really, your fourth tour. That, and the fact that there's no MASH unit on this base, just a small infirmary, and I haven't seen one wounded soldier come from the front."

Drinkwater leaned over the table; Nick could smell his aftershave, faintly spicy.

"And you won't," the sergeant said quietly. "It's a dirty war and an even dirtier enemy, one that attacks you from within, without firing a shot. Once you get to the front, you'll understand, but you'll never be able to speak about it. What you do, what you see, you'll be bound by secrecy, signed, sealed, and delivered. What's more, you won't *want* to talk about it."

"But ... why? Doesn't it make sense that men would fight better if they knew who and what they were fighting?"

"Not this time," Drinkwater said. "We need men like you, Nick, quick, observant, willing to go that extra metre. Men like you give other men the chance to survive simply by being close to you."

"I'm just another ordinary guy," Nick said, sitting back in his seat.

"No, you're not. You're a squad leader now. Get used to the idea."

Being a squad leader carried no rank, just an insignia that Nick found lying on his bunk the following morning after he had returned from the showers. There were four sets, two for his uniforms and two for his fatigues; reluctantly, he shook his head as he looked at the badges, a triangle of blue cloth simply depicting the number one in red embroidery.

"Damn," he said quietly.

\*

Did Drinkwater know? Somehow Nick had a sneaking suspicion that the grizzled sergeant had foreknowledge, even as Nick stood before the posting board in the main hall staring at the four names from Hut 6. Dale, Gordon, Norbreck, and Billings, they were all listed, First Squad, due to be shipped out to the front in twenty-four hours. It looked like Flash was finally going to get his wish, action at last. Somehow, Nick didn't share his friend's enthusiasm.

\*

The hangar was fairly crowded.

The low drone of muted voices filled the building, amplified by the high metallic ceiling, the main subject of conversation being speculation about conditions at the front. There were quite a few rumours, Flash's alien marauders being the most prevalent. There were more rookies going to the front than Nick had anticipated. A cursory count made forty; he didn't care for the implications of that. Gordon, Norbreck, and Billings had taken his being squad leader in their stride. Just as Drinkwater had suggested, they already saw him in that role. Also, as predicted, Flash was eager to get going, looking around the hangar like a kid about to go on a school outing.

"Hey, Nick, Nick Dale."

Nick's heart leapt when he heard her voice behind him. He turned.

"Hey yourself Penny. How you doing?" He hoped he sounded casual enough.

"I'm good." She smiled, glancing at his shoulder flash. "I see you made squad leader."

"Not my idea," he said.

"Makes sense though," Penny said.

Nick looked at Norbreck, who had coughed. All three of his friends were looking expectantly at Nick and then at Penny.

"Oh right, Penny Warden, John Norbreck, Flash Gordon, and Paul Billings, First Squad."

"Hey Pen," Flash said. "You going to the front, too?"

"Absolutely," she returned.

"Who're you with?" Billings asked.

"Number Two, Third Squad."

"Who's your lead?"

"Lederer, you know him?"

Nick shook his head. "Seen him around..." There was a slight tone to his voice.

"Yeah, he's a bit of a dick, but knows his stuff," Pen confirmed the unspoken observation.

Penny looked good in the dark blue Ranger's uniform. Her hair was tied up out of the way and she had little make-up on, (regulations), but then Nick figured she would look good in sackcloth and ashes, *and no*, he thought to himself, *that's not because I'm biased...*

"Well, at least the scenery's looking better this time round," came a familiar voice.

Penny turned as Sergeant Drinkwater joined the small group.

"Dinks! You going on this trip too?" she enthused.

"Someone's gotta keep these rookies in order." He gave a grizzled smile as he half-hugged the girl.

"You know each other?" Nick asked, a little surprised.

"Dinks is an old friend of my father's. They served together during the Mars Conflicts," Penny explained.

"A picnic..." Drinkwater said.

"Yeah, so my dad says." Penny smiled. "He lies too."

Drinkwater laughed.

"So what are we in for, Sarge?" Flash asked. "Is it alien marauders?"

"Soldier, in this war, we're the alien marauders," Drinkwater replied.

Flash looked puzzled as Drinkwater indicated to Nick he wanted to talk. They moved away from the group.

"You okay?"

Nick nodded. "Apprehensive, none of this is what I expected, or that so many of us would be going to the front together."

"Shit happens, rotation means new troops so the vets can stand down and go on furlough," Drinkwater said. "I've had you assigned to my unit, along with the second and third squads. Let your boys know that when we get to the firebase, there'll be an induction briefing, most of it will be made clear then. You'll also be issued new uniforms and weapons, nothing fancy, but it will be new to you."

"Why the head's up?" Nick asked.

"Because..." Drinkwater answered.

Nick let it go at that as they returned to the group.

"Glad to see you're not the only girl going with us," Nick said, spying several other women standing about in the other groups.

"Don't get all sexist on me, Nick, Nick. Next thing, you'll be opening doors for me or offering to carry my pack," Penny laughed.

"Wouldn't dream of it," he answered. "I know when I'm outgunned."

"Ya think?"

Nick hesitantly touched her cheek and was glad when Penny didn't protest or pull away.

"You just be careful," he said quietly.

"Aim too," Penny replied. "Same goes for you."

"Warden! Get your gear!" yelled a voice.

A young, dark-haired trooper approximately the size of a Volvo truck glared at Nick and then at Penny. "Move it, soldier!"

"Gotta go." Penny raised her eyebrows. "See you on the other side."

"What's his problem?" Flash asked.

"Lederer," Nick answered.

"Doesn't seem to like you much," Norbreck observed. "Wonder why that might be?"

"I got a good idea," Drinkwater said. "And if any of you get any funny notions, and cause any unnecessary pain," he looked straight at Nick, "be sure I'll cut your dick off and make you eat it."

\*

Over a week of inactivity was suddenly replaced with frenetic action. Gear was loaded onto Chinook Jetcopters, orders were yelled, orderly groups were formed and double-timed out to the waiting aircraft, where they swiftly clambered on board and took their places.

Seconds later, the three Chinooks were in the air and the base dropped away and was quickly lost to sight.

The flight was noisy but brief. Thirty minutes later, Nick got his first look at the front. Only it wasn't a front, it was a wall. A huge, white shining wall closing off the wide mouth of a long valley, almost a kilometre across, filled with what looked like ruined buildings. On the plain outside the wall was a series of glittering pink dunes interspersed with clumps of shattered buildings, mere shells standing out starkly against the weird landscape.

As the Chinooks circled on their final approach, a heavy-duty mesh fence was visible running along the lip of the cliffs on either side of the valley, disappearing into the distance. At various points, a clump of machinery squatted on the inside of the fence with cables attached to massive copper terminals.

Swiftly the Jetcopters dropped out of the sky, landing at designated helipads, throwing up clouds of swirling pink dust. Shouted orders had the troops disembark and form ranks. Within the valley, there was little wind and the temperature soared.

"Shit! This place is a furnace," Flash muttered through clenched teeth; sweat poured down his face.

Nick craned his neck to see the top of the wall closing off the valley. He was too far away to make out details, but he could see what looked like brightly coloured figures lounging on top of the wall at close, regular intervals, blue and red and white. Above them was some sort of awning providing shade to the brightly uniformed soldiers who didn't seem to be doing anything in particular, not even standing to attention or on guard. From his low vantage point, Nick couldn't be sure, but there wasn't any obvious cover either, and as brightly uniformed as they were, the soldiers made perfect targets.

No sounds of weaponry filled the air, no crack of proton rifles, no scream of the laser scythes; it was all eerily quiet. Nor had there been any visible sign of the enemy as they had flown over the firebase. The land outside of the walls had been totally devoid of life. With a shock, Nick realised there hadn't been any sign of battle either.

*What the hell sort of war is this?* he thought grimly.

\*

The building was derelict, almost, but not from battle damage. There was no sign of proton blast scars, or laser scythe damage. It looked as if the building, which must have been

some sort of conference centre, was simply a victim of the planet's extreme weather conditions, and neglect. They were brought into the main hall situated at the centre of the building; built like an amphitheatre, it was shaped like a shallow bowl. Rough benches surrounded a stage at the centre, but only this portion of the hall was being used, the rest was cordoned off; crude rails created a wedge-shaped section in which they were seated.

"This is the weirdest briefing I've ever heard of," Billings whispered in Nick's ear as they gazed down at the stage.

"Dinks said there was to be an induction, but nothing like this," Nick whispered back.

The stage was bare, except for a single lectern set to one side. Hanging in the centre of the stage was an eight-foot square screen. A huge black felt curtain cut the stage in two, obscuring the rear of the platform.

Suddenly three uniformed men appeared from behind the curtain. As one, the assembly stood to attention with a low rumble of booted feet. As one of the uniformed men approached the lectern, with a motion of his hand, he bade them to sit. The other two uniformed men took up positions on either side of the blank white screen.

"Gentlemen," the uniformed man by the lectern began without preamble, his voice carried easily in the amphitheatre. "Strange days bring strange ways. You've had a long wait and have been given no apparent reason for it, so I'll not keep you long. My name is Telfast, Colonel Telfast, no pun intended..."

A ripple of laughter floated about the room.

"We are facing an enemy the like of which we have never faced before. The enemy is fearless, implacable, completely reckless of its own life, and has but one objective, our total obliteration from the face of this planet." Telfast nodded to one of his aides.

The lights slowly dimmed as an image was thrown onto the white screen by a rear projector. The whole room gasped in unison.

"This, gentlemen, is a 'hummer,' an appropriate appellation, as you will soon discover. This is your enemy..."

Nick Dale gaped in surprise at the screen, unable to believe his eyes. The large dark green carapace, the six multi-jointed spiked legs, the vicious-looking mandibles.

"It's a bug..." someone breathed.

\*

"Well, that was an eye-opener," Penny said as they trudged along the sun-baked street towards a building situated at the end.

"I guess," Nick answered pensively. "Though it posed more questions than it answered."

He looked around at the silent group of men and women making their way up the street with them, raising small clouds of pink dust beneath booted feet. Most had puzzled expressions on their sweating faces. They were being escorted to a special weapons store by a couple of sergeants. No one was talking, not even in whispers.

"The briefing even managed to shut Flash up for a while." Nick smiled grimly.

"It's a bit gutting to travel God alone knows how many millions of kilometres and lose seven years of your life just to find out we're nothing more than an interplanetary pest control unit," Penny said bitterly.

"No," disagreed Nick. "There has to be more to it than that, all this manpower, ordinance, investment? There's got to be a better reason than just pest control."

"Well Nick, Nick, we're Rangers. We're not meant to think, but when you find out what the reason is, you let me know." Penny smiled.

\*

Special weapons. The store was another refurbished, derelict single-storey building, strongly fortified and well-guarded. Windows and doors were heavily barred, armed guards were stationed on the roof, and remote motion-detecting cameras covered every angle and access to the building.

Inside, they were led into a large room: no furniture, no tables, nothing, just bare walls and floor, and a heavy black painted steel door set in the far wall.

"Listen up!" barked one of the sergeants. "You'll be called in groups of five. Go through and collect your equipment. You will leave the building as directed. You will be met in the courtyard outside and shown to your quarters."

"Have you noticed how well-tanned all the regular guys are here?" Penny said in Nick's ear teasingly.

He gave her a look.

"Just saying." She grinned.

\*

"What the fuck is this meant to be?" Flash said, holding up a white, shining breastplate that seemed to be made out of plastic. "I could punch my way through this."

He turned it over in his hands.

"It's a synthetic, polymer-based silicon plastic," Billings informed him.

"Plastic?" Flash said incredulously. "Do we get water pistols as well?"

"Close, but no cigar Gordon." Drinkwater's voice filled the room.

They all snapped to attention as the sergeant entered the new barracks.

The room was long, housing mixed male and female personnel, with partitioned sleeping quarters creating an open-ended cubicle with no doors, a single bunk, a stool, a small cabinet,

and a footlocker situated at the bottom of the bed. The walls were wooden, painted an off-white supporting a high curved roof. Strip lighting ran down the centre of the ceiling, end to end.

"At ease..." Drinkwater said, strolling down the middle of the room.

"Just what is this stuff, Sarge?" Flash asked, holding up other pieces of the plastic-like body armour designed and tailor-made to cover arms, legs, and torso.

"Well, I'll tell you, Trooper." The sergeant slung his pack into the last cubicle at the end of the room, where it bounced on the narrow bunk. "Despite appearances, it is body armour, light, bright, and all you'll need. The colour is blue, red, and white; the unit colours. The armour is close fitting, easy to wear, and is not designed to stop a proton round or even a knife blade."

The soldiers all looked at each other in confusion.

"What it is designed to do is repel hummers. I'm sure you noted the colour of the exterior wall protecting this firebase at the valley mouth. It's painted with the same material the body armour is made of, and the hummers don't like it. Silicon is not to the bugs' liking, nor are bright colours, something to do with the light wave frequency or some shit. Whatever, the little bastards do their best to avoid both the plastic and bright colours, so wear it with confidence, or get your arses chewed off."

"And what do we fight them with?" asked Billings. "Rocks?"

Drinkwater sort of laughed. "Nope, Gordon's water pistols... Kinda..."

"Come on, Sarge. At least give us some idea what we're doing," one of the other women recruits said plaintively.

"Relax Norrington. It'll all be made clear tomorrow in the a.m. Until then, you got free time. I suggest you make the most of it because, after tomorrow, your souls are mine."

\*

Everywhere they went, they were ignored. It was an odd feeling. There were no sounds or signs of war, yet the troopers relieved from their three-day stint on the wall looked ... haunted. Except for a thin layer of pink dusting their armour and streaking their faces, none of them were wounded or injured in any way.

"It's damn right eerie," Norrington said as a group of weary-looking soldiers trudged by them. "Look how sullen they look, almost embittered."

"How hard can it be killing a few bugs?" Flash added.

"It's gotta be like shooting fish in a barrel," Billings said. "An enemy that doesn't shoot back."

"So why are they looking so bad?" Penny said. "The heat you reckon?"

"If it was the heat, then everyone would be dropping in their tracks," Nick pointed out. "It's hot, but not enough to deplete you like it has those guys."

They looked at each other.

"Man, this place is weird..." muttered Flash.

\*

"A penny for them," said Penny.

Nick looked up, squinting in the sun. "Depends on what 'penny' you're offering." He smiled.

"Smartass," she said, sitting on the wall beside him.

They looked out over the strange pink terrain that ran into the wide valley. Several derelict buildings lay on the outskirts of what was once some sort of settlement. The nearer buildings had been commandeered and converted into barracks, recreational areas, and storage. The shadows were lengthening as the twin suns began their descent, throwing odd double shadows across the landscape.

"Is that west?" Penny queried.

"I'm not sure," admitted Nick. "I guess so."

"The sunset ought to be interesting... And those clouds, pale yellow... D'you think the rain looks like pee?"

Nick looked askance at her. "Eeeou!" he grimaced.

"Well, you have to wonder. The colour scheme on this ball of dust is totally screwed up."

Nick laughed. "Actually, only this region is comprised of desert," he said. "There's some pretty mean jungles beyond the pink stuff..."

"Pink stuff?"

"Well, I can't get used to thinking of it as sand; though I guess it is... technically."

"And what colour is the vegetation in this jungle?"

Nick shrugged. "No idea, blue?"

They laughed.

"I only know because I heard some of the guys talking, about the jungle. I mean, not that it's blue. I saw it marked out on some survey maps, years ago, cordoned off as non-development areas. Can't say I paid them much mind, figured it was just normal vegetation."

The silence between them was easy. Nick liked that. Never really a people person, he found he enjoyed Penny's company. He surreptitiously watched her as she looked out over the landscape. The sunlight highlighted her elfin nose, accentuated the strange violet colour of her eyes, glinted off the copper in her hair.

"Liking the view?" She grinned at him.

"What are you doing here, Penny Warden? All the heat, the dust, so far away from home... I don't get it. You could have a prime job back on Earth..."

"And that's exactly why I'm here," she answered. "I don't want a prime job, or any other job except being a Ranger. It runs in my family..."

"Your father," Nick said, remembering the anecdotes with Drinkwater.

"And two brothers," Penny said. "Besides, I heard rumours that the best-looking guys were out here." She winked.

"The girls ain't so bad either," Nick returned. "Come on, let's go get a drink. We can come back for the sunset later."

They clambered off the wall. Dusting themselves off, they headed for the mess hall.

"You never said why you volunteered," Penny said.

"Natural progression," Nick replied. "I'd been here twice before on mining expeditions, more information gathering, actually. And I wanted to see more. I wasn't allowed as a civilian, so I joined the Rangers and here I am."

Walking in the shadows of the buildings, they reached the mess hall. Nick opened the door for Penny, and they entered the cool, dark interior. Slipping off their sunglasses, they stood by the doorway until their eyes adjusted to the light. Nick caught the eye of Lederer as he and the rest of his squad exited the hall. Nick frowned as Lederer glared at him. He watched them leave.

"You got a 'thing' with Lederer?" he asked Penny.

She looked surprised. "He wishes."

"The guy's got issues. I don't think he likes me keeping you company."

"He's the leader of the Second Squad," Penny said.

"So, what's that got to do with it?" Nick asked.

"He wants to be the leader of the First Squad," she said dryly. "Let's get that drink."

\*

Nick Dale catapulted out of his bunk and landed on the floor, his hands cushioning the fall. The barracks were filled with bright flashes and loud bangs that split the darkness with sudden ferocity. Other bodies hit the floor; curses floated in the air; the smell of sulphur burned

the nostrils. The lights snapped on blindingly, making him screw his eyes up against the sudden glare. Fear clutched his throat, his heart pounded like a trip-hammer.

"Get out ya pits and into your kits, parade ground, five minutes!" bellowed a voice.

"Son of a bitch!" Nick clambered to his feet as the sergeant major stomped out of the room. "I've seen it in a dozen movies, got caught twice at boot camp, and still fell for the oldest reveille call in the book!"

"Be thankful them were firecrackers and not real proton blasts," Sergeant Drinkwater said, peering around the cubicle partition.

"A simple bugle call would have sufficed, even a taped bugle call," grumbled Nick.

\*

The pre-dawn heat was bad, nowhere near as bad as mid-day, but still bad.

Thankfully the new armour was light and comfortable, and the full-face helmet offered some relief from the heat, especially with the polarised visor pulled down. The uniform's close-fitting under-suit was a technical marvel boasting a water-cooling system for the torso, running like veins through the front and back of the suit and powered by a small but powerful solar battery on the belt webbing.

They stood in rank and file as the twin suns began to rise in the east. Forty troopers, resplendent in their white body armour, with red and blue trim. Nick had checked with the computer library and discovered that, whilst Nova Ventura had no magnetic north like Earth, the suns did rise in the east and set in the west. The brightness of the suns made the armour gleam brilliantly as they stood at ease listening to the parade sergeant's instructions.

"You'll form four groups of ten, led by a gunnery sergeant, and taken to the firing ranges. There you will be issued your primary weapon, the LL160. You have three days with which to

familiarise yourself with these weapons. Do not waste this time, learn your weapons well. Believe me, troopers, your life will depend upon it.”

\*

“So, what happened to breakfast?” Flash asked as they marched deeper into the valley, his voice oddly muted by the helmet’s localised communication system.

“You could always go ask the sergeant,” suggested Billings. “I’m sure they’ll delay the weapons’ training long enough for you to feed your face.”

Flash’s scowl was lost behind the helmet’s visor. “So they add starvation to the heat and dust, huh?”

“Maybe you should have asked for a packed lunch?” suggested Norbreck.

“You guys are a riot.” Flash fell quiet as they marched on.

The firing ranges were close to the east side of the valley wall: a wide-open space several hundred metres square that peculiarly had no visible targets. A long, low wall made of rectangular pink bricks cut across their path, no more than a metre high in places. At the base of the wall, stacked along its entire length were what looked like white plastic backpacks.

The column was brought to a halt and swiftly reduced to four groups. Nick and the First Squad had Penny and Jane Norrington join them, plus the Third Squad. They stood at ease, remaining helmeted as a gunnery sergeant, similarly uniformed, appeared before them. His name, stencilled in black on his left breast as they all were, identified him as Jurgens. Without preamble, Jurgens reached down and effortlessly picked up one of the strange, white backpacks leaning against the wall.

“Okay,” he raised the backpack. “This is the latest version of the LL160 battle pack. Its total weight is five kilos and is powered by this solar panel fitted to the top plate. It is not a precision

weapon, that is to say, it's not single shot nor automatic, nor can specific targets be attained. It's a maximum ratio kill weapon..."

Jurgens swung the pack behind his back, gripped it diagonally corner to corner, and snapped the pack downwards. Pulling his hands away, he turned and showed that the pack was fixed firmly on his back.

"You will learn to attach the pack as I have just shown you with a little practise. Until then, you may need help."

The gunnery sergeant flipped down a small lever on the right side of the pack and detached a lightweight rifle; a thin, concertinaed, green-coloured tube attached the rifle to the backpack.

"This is your weapon's means of delivery..." Jurgens stepped up on top of the low wall. "There is no recoil as there is no percussion. You simply point the barrel and pull the trigger."

Jurgens pointed the rifle out into the open ground. Keeping it at waist level, he pulled the trigger.

A sheet of blinding white light issued from the rifle's barrel and flowed out over the ground, rippling and wavering like water. One edge of the weird light struck some small rocks and the sheet literally splashed upwards and fell back again, just like water. The other three gunnery sergeants along the wall to their left had fired their weapons at exactly the same time as Jurgens, obviously a deliberate display of what the weapon could do. The entire group gasped in unison. Some even stepped back in surprise as the ground was lit up in the blinding glare. The blast was short, bright, and eerily silent. Spots danced before Nick's eyes when the weapons shut off and the brightness left false images bouncing on his retinas.

"The LL160, ladies and gentlemen. The designation 'LL' stands for 'Liquid Laser,' and that's exactly what it is. You will note that there is absolutely no damage to the terrain, not even a scorch

mark. But if the laser touches living tissue..." Jurgens fired at a nearby bush, no more than a comb of dry branches sticking up from the dusty ground. The laser sheared through the alien wood like a hot knife through butter.

"Sustained firing will destroy stone, wood, plastic, and even metal... Close range will cut through your battle armour in the twinkling of an eye, and anything underneath. The LL160 is specifically designed to kill hummers up to a range of a hundred metres; with its delivery system, it's almost impossible to miss the little bastards.

"Sustained firing also damages the LL160's delivery rod situated in the barrel. If the rod is damaged or compromised in any way, it will crack the casing and the liquid laser will not be contained.

"You do not want to see what effect that would have. So when you fire upon the enemy, you will do so in short, three-second bursts only. You will not exceed three seconds. If you do, you will probably only do it once."

Jurgens stepped down from the wall.

"At my command, you will take up a battle pack. You will attach it to your back, making sure it is locked firmly in place. You will then take up position along the wall at three-metre intervals. You will observe the terrain in front of you; you will mark out a thirty-degree corridor to your front. You will not allow your range of fire to exceed that thirty-degree corridor. You will also make yourself aware of the position of the man to your left and right. Is that clear?"

They answered, "Affirmative" as one.

"Squad, collect battle packs..."

\*

"Fuck, some water pistol," Flash said as they entered the mess hall.

"Damn thing's got no finesse," agreed Penny. "It's just a bug-killing machine. A kid could use it."

"Not sure if I like the idea of carrying this thing around on my back, either," Billings added distastefully.

"Gunny said as long as the rifle's stowed away the tank, it is completely harmless," Nick pointed out. "Besides, we'll only have to carry it while we're on duty."

"It's a glorified water pistol!" Flash exclaimed again. "Why the hell have we gotta have three days training on it? Hell, like Penny said, a kid could use it."

"It's more than just pulling the trigger, Flash," Norbreck put in. "There's a protocol that has to be followed when using it on the wall, various 'do's and don'ts.' Maximum safety, I guess."

"And for that, I gotta have a late breakfast?" Flash moaned. "Be lucky if there's any bacon left..."

\*

"Hey Nick, Nick, you're quiet tonight," Penny said.

Nick, almost hidden by shadows in a quiet corner booth of the bar, smiled wanly up at her. "It's been a long three days."

"The boys are having a party over there," she replied. "We're missing a body..."

Nick glanced across the room where Flash, Norbreck, and the others were grouped at the bar's counter amidst animated talking and a lot of drinking. They were all dressed in dark blue fatigues and were barely discernible in the soft lighting.

"Not tonight, Penny. Guess I'm just not in the mood."

She slipped into the booth, her violet eyes clouding with concern. "Wanna talk?"

Nick smiled. "No, I'm fine. Just got some things running around in my head I need to get sorted."

"I could help with that, if you'd let me." Penny moved a little closer.

Once again, Nick found himself drowning in her soft violet eyes, the gentle sound of her voice. Their hands touched, barely, across the table, and Penny smiled. Her whole face lit up, and Nick felt his mouth go dry.

"Hey, Warden! How about having a drink with some of your friends?"

Penny's eyes closed as a momentary flash of exasperation crossed her face. Nick pulled his hand away from the table.

"I already am with a friend, Lederer, maybe later," Penny said with faux sweetness.

"It'd be good if you were with your own," Lederer pressed.

Penny's expression hardened. "What? Jeeez Lederer, sometimes you can really be a prat! We're all in the same boat. We're Rangers. Maybe you ought to think about that."

Lederer's face reddened. One of the two friends behind him sniggered.

"You're Second Squad..." Lederer began. "Or maybe you'd like a transfer to the First Squad. You spend enough time around them."

"The lady said she was happy where she is, man. Why don't you just leave it at that?" Nick said softly.

"You keep out of this pretty boy. This has nothing to do with you," Lederer almost snarled.

In an instant Nick was on his feet, facing off to Lederer, who was forced to take a step back.

"Look, man. I'm tired. It's been a long week and all I want to do is chill with some peace and quiet. The lady has already told you she's not interested, so let's just leave it at that, okay?"

"You cock-sucking..."

Without warning, Lederer lashed out, his fist catching Nick square on the jaw. With a yell, Nick staggered back, nearly tripping over a chair. Shaking the sparks from his eyes, Nick lunged

forward, barging Lederer to the floor. They separated, rolled, and came to their feet simultaneously, preparing to charge one another. Then hands were holding them back, people were between them. Amidst angry shouts and calming voices, Sergeant Drinkwater's voice boomed.

"Can't a man have a drink in peace around here without you girlies causing a ruckus?"

Lederer went to speak.

"That was a rhetorical question, soldier," Drinkwater said, looking at one, then the other.

"If you ladies want to fight, then take it to the gym. That way, you can beat out what little brains you have at your leisure. Just don't let me get to hear of it, understand?"

Drinkwater walked off as Lederer pulled himself free from restraining hands.

"Let's do it." His jaw stuck out, anger seething in his narrowed eyes.

For a brief second, Nick was tempted to lash out at his arrogant face.

"You and me, in the gym, sunrise. If you're not too chicken-shit!" Lederer spat.

"Nick, it's not worth it. Let it go," Penny said, still holding onto his arm.

Nick returned Lederer's glare. "Sunrise..."

\*

"Are you crazy? What were you thinking? I thought you were above all this male testosterone bullshit!" Penny was angry. "You get caught fighting Lederer and you're done. The Corps will throw you out."

"What're they gonna do? Send me home?" Nick said petulantly.

"No... But you'll be on fatigues for the duration of your tour, cleaning bogs, scrubbing floors, hosing the showers down. Is that what you want? And for what? You knew Lederer was a prat. I told you as much. He's a plank, too busy with other's business to mind his own. You've got to call it off."

"I can't do that." Nick was adamant.

Penny slapped her hand against the side of the cubicle wall, a flat hollow sound.

"There's no way you're going to be able to keep this quiet; it's probably all over the camp already. The Redheads will just be waiting for you."

Nick sat up on his bunk, sighing heavily.

"It was going to happen sooner or later Pen. Lederer was going to ride us both until one of us cracked, you know that. The guy's got more than issues."

"And you think you're going to knock them out of him, huh?"

"I'm not going to just stand around while he gets his jollies off of me," Nick snapped.

"He's got the attention span of a fish. Once we go to the wall, he would have forgotten all about you and me. He'd be too busy trying to make a name for himself." Penny's voice softened as she sat beside Nick on the bunk. "Nick, just don't turn up. It'll all blow over by tomorrow."

"Yeah, like that'll work... We've got to live with these guys, Penny, with someone like Lederer that's going to be a like a life sentence."

"You can't fight all the guys like Lederer on this world or any other. They'll always be guys like him."

"I don't care about other guys; I'm only concerned with this one. If we don't do something now, it'll just get worse, and not only for you and me. A bully is a bully..."

The door to the barracks opened and several people walked in, Lederer amongst them. He headed straight for Penny and Nick, who got up from the bed.

"Drinkwater says we can't fight hand to hand. The MPs will arrest us both..."

"So it's off then?" Penny said, relief coursing through her.

"Like hell," Lederer spat. "We got to make it a 'competition so the Redheads will leave us alone. Long staffs..."

"No!" Penny exclaimed. "That's not fair!"

"You letting your 'girlfriend' talk for you now?" sneered Lederer.

"I don't care if you want to use toothpicks," Nick said. "I'll be there."

"Cool," Lederer said, and simply walked away, smiling broadly.

"Son of a bitch!" Penny punched the partition wall this time, her violet eyes blazing. "Just how dumb are you? You've just played straight into his hands!"

"Well, thanks for the vote of confidence." Through his bravado, Nick was hurt by Penny's stinging words.

"Confidence has nothing to do with it! Nick, Lederer has only been beaten once with the long staff. He nearly made Corp Champion."

"Then tomorrow morning ought to be interesting, shouldn't it?"

Penny fumed, her face contorting with rage. "Of all the stubborn, idiotic..."

Words failed her. She turned on her heels and stormed out of the barracks.

\*

If Nick Dale thought he was going to get through the following morning keeping a low profile, that thought was dashed before he even opened his eyes. Rough hands shook him from a deep sleep that had been a long time coming. He had lain awake for hours thinking about Penny, how angry she had been. And then, no sooner did it seem he had fallen asleep, then excited voices babbled in his ears.

"Come on, Nick, it's nearly dawn. Ya gotta get up!"

"Flash, for God's sake, leave me alone." Nick attempted to pull the covers up over his head, but they were pulled unceremoniously down.

"He's already waiting in the gym..." Flash insisted. "Bragging about how you've chickened out."

Nick huffed and rubbed his face. "Okay, okay..."

\*

The gym was packed though thankfully relatively quiet with just the minimal hubbub of noise, which rose as Nick, followed by the rest of the First Squad, entered. During the brief walk across the pre-dawn parade grounds, Nick was looking everywhere, hoping to see Penny. The area was deserted. The crowd parted as Nick strode through to find Lederer waiting at the centre of the floor, an arrogant smirk on his pale face.

"I didn't think you'd have the balls to show," Lederer said, exuding arrogance as he stood amongst his cronies.

"Look, man. We don't have to do this," Nick replied.

"Yeah, we do," Lederer replied. "Or have you lost your balls, after all?"

Nick bit his tongue, not wanting to inflame the situation. "It's over nothing Lederer, it was the drink talking, a little bit of temper maybe. It's not worth risking our careers in the Rangers. Why not just let it go and be done?"

Lederer grinned. "Okay, if that's what you want, but on one condition."

Nick's eyes narrowed, sensing something bad. "Which is?" he said warily.

"You go to Drinkwater, tell him you no longer want to be First Squad Leader. Then you recommend me for the job."

"What?" Nick was incredulous. "You are going through all this just to be First Squad Leader?"

"Better man," Lederer said. The grin was gone from his face.

"The hell..." Nick felt his temper rising.

Lederer threw one of the long staffs he was holding at Nick's feet.

"Then I guess we're back to plan A. Pick it up!"

Before Nick had a chance, Penny was suddenly in front of him. She scooped up the long staff and handed it to him. Lederer scowled.

"You're a bloody fool," Penny whispered. She glanced at Lederer, then back at Nick. "Try and keep to his left. He favours the right."

Then she stepped away, and the two men faced each other. The long staff felt unfamiliar in Nick's hands. He had had some training with it but had never rated it as a proper weapon, used mainly in training to develop coordination and spatial awareness.

Lederer, on the other hand, was perfectly at ease with the two-metre length of hardwood. He twirled it, seemingly carelessly, in his hands, but it was more than obvious he was extremely proficient with the staff, as the mocking smile on his lips attested.

Suddenly Lederer whirled, his staff becoming a blur. More by luck than judgement, Nick managed to block two blows before he felt a sharp blow on his left elbow, without thinking he reacted just as Lederer whipped to the right, his staff lashing out and Nick's legs flew out beneath him, he landed heavily on his back, winded.

Without hesitation, staff windmilling in his hands, Lederer loomed over Nick, who, seeing the danger, rolled swiftly away just as the staff thumped into the floor where his head had just been. Continuing to roll, Nick gained his feet and turned to face Lederer, who was simply standing with the staff across his shoulder regarding Nick disdainfully.

Nick circled, but Lederer didn't move. Keeping to the left, Nick lunged in. Lederer easily blocked the clumsy attack. The staves clacked loudly together as Nick desperately tried to fend off the blinding counterattack. There was another blow to his left side, and again as he reacted. Lederer whipped around and Nick ended up on his back again.

The long staff flew from Nick's hand out of reach. With a yell, Lederer rushed forward. Nick went to roll away but suddenly changed direction and went straight at the charging man, who

was too close to stop. Nick kicked at Lederer's knee, bringing him down. In an instant, Lederer was already rising. Nick lunged forward, his fist connecting with Lederer's jaw. He staggered back as Nick came on.

The gym was in an uproar, mixed voices calling for Nick and Lederer. Nick was quick, but not quick enough. Face contorted with rage, Lederer let loose a series of moves. Nick dodged, avoiding the first three, but then Lederer caught him off-balance, and the end of the staff slammed into Nick's mid-riff. With air exploding out of his lungs, Nick doubled over as Lederer whirled around, his staff coming in low.

Helplessly, through watering eyes, Nick watched the long staff sweep towards his legs, felt the sharp crack against the back of his knees, and the gym spun as he crashed onto his back for a third time. With an almost maniacal yell, Lederer brought the staff whistling down at Nick's unprotected head as he lay stunned.

Horrified, Nick raised his arm, trying to protect his face. Fear gripped his heart, and then Penny was there. The clack of long staffs meeting was loud in the gym; with a few deft moves, she knocked Lederer's staff aside and drove him back. She glared angrily at him as he hesitated, the long staff uncertain in his hands.

"What the bloody hell's the matter with you?" Penny shouted at him. "You could have killed him!"

Lederer's mouth worked, and his eyes blazed, but he said nothing. Before anything else could be said the loudspeakers mounted high on the gymnasium's walls blared. Outside, sirens began to wail.

"All squads, general quarters, general quarters! This is not a drill! Muster in five minutes, full battle dress! This is not a drill!"

For a few seconds, the gymnasium was a frozen scene. Penny and Lederer faced each other, long staffs poised, a look of hesitancy flickering in Lederer's eyes. Nick sprawled on the floor, his body aching in a half dozen places. The loudspeaker still bellowed out its verbal alarm. Lederer visibly tensed, his knuckles whitened on the long staff. Penny's lip curled slightly.

"Go for it," she dared.

"You heard the man!" bellowed Drinkwater's gravel voice. "Get your sorry arses out onto the parade ground, full combat gear! Move! MOVE!"

The gymnasium had already begun to empty to the tune of the blaring siren. Lederer and Penny locked eyes until one of Lederer's friends touched him lightly on the shoulder. He glanced around as his friend nodded, then with a grimace Lederer turned back to Penny, who was waiting expectantly. With an abrupt movement, Lederer threw the long staff at the girl. Penny caught it easily as Lederer and his squad headed for the exit.

Flash helped Nick to his feet and then looked back at Penny in undisguised admiration.

"Whoa..." he said softly.

"Come on! Out!" yelled Drinkwater.

The group headed for the exit with Penny making a slight detour to stack the long staffs.

"Dale!"

Nick stopped as the sergeant approached.

"Next time use stun knives..." Drinkwater said quietly.

Nick grinned ruefully, nodded briefly, and hurried after his squad.

\*

Penny was already out of sight by the time he exited the gym, lost in the melee of the parade ground. Bodies hustled here and there, each on their own personal mission, some already in full battle dress, others, like him, still heading for their barracks.

Dawn had still not fully broken but was lost in the glare of arc lamps snapping on all over the firebase, brighter than the sun, highlighting everything with a stark, white glare bleaching the pink from the land and buildings. Tramping feet raised the dust from the hard-packed earth, mildly choking; a confusion of voices filled the humid air, made electric by a subtle, growing tension. In the centre of the base, huge searchlights raking back and forth through the darkness lit up the buildings. Laser cannons mounted on strategic roofs cranked on well-greased runners coming to bear on the wall, itself alive with activity. It stood out like a brilliant white ribbon fading into the darkness, left and right. Eerily the summit of the wall seemed to float on a sea of night accentuated by row upon row of sodium lights running along its uppermost length as it disappeared into the distance.

"Holy shit!" breathed Flash as he watched the base burst with sudden life.

"We need to move!" Billings said, heading for the barracks.

Pushing through the press Nick and Flash followed.

\*

The hours of practise putting on the battle armour held them in good stead, as they were ready within minutes. Just as he clipped the liquid laser tank to his back Nick became aware of a low sort of throbbing in the air, the sound ululated through the barracks, vaguely sawing on the nerves like an itch you couldn't scratch.

"What the hell is that?" Flash said, looking around in puzzlement.

"I don't know," answered Billings. "But it's making me feel a little nauseous."

"Put your helmets on. It'll help block out the sound," said Drinkwater, appearing from his cubicle.

"What is it, Sarge?" asked Norbreck.

“The hummers. It’s how they got their name. Get your helmets on and fall in. We’re holding up the party.”

The entire base seemed to be filled with the weird humming as they exited the barracks and took their places on the parade ground.

“Christ on a crutch! Look at that!” Flash said, looking toward the wall.

The dark sky was seared with goutts of brilliant white light highlighting the wall in harsh silhouette like a miniature lightning storm playing on top of the wall. The colourful figures lined up against the farther edge of the wall were now black shadows backlit by the flare of their liquid lasers as they fired into the night beyond.

Orders came fast and furious via the integral radio-com in the suit’s helmet. The first ten squads moved towards the base of the wall in formation, forming rank and file, three rows of ten, and awaited further orders. Above them loomed the wall, its sheer size dwarfing the gathered troops, and beyond, the enemy, no more than a growing humming dulled by the helmet’s soundproofing.

At the base of the wall were four large lifts that rose and descended within the wall itself, huge cages capable of carrying at least fifty people at a time. Two of the cages waited for the waiting squads. The other two cages were above at the wall’s summit.

This close to the wall revealed that the inner side was rough stone, very pale pink with near-invisible mortar binding the whole together.

Glancing quickly left and right, Nick could see other lifts situated along the wall, massive steel cages, heavy mesh walls, encased in forbidding metal superstructures that rose to the giddy heights above, all waiting to take more troops to the top. As he listened to his own breathing filling his ears through the helmet’s respirators, Nick wondered how many troops actually descended.

The waiting was interminable. Searchlights began to dim as the twin suns rose, bringing light and heat felt even through the suit's cooling system. The humming rose in a sudden crescendo, light blazed at the top of the wall, bright flashes clearly seen even in the dawn's growing light. Tension became almost palpable as a strange certainty washed over Nick that something was about to happen, he could sense that others about him felt the same. Steadying orders spoke softly in his ears; he wished he could have a drink of something to take away the dryness in his mouth.

The humming stopped. Nick wasn't sure exactly when he realised it, only all of a sudden, he couldn't hear it anymore. He felt nerves grip his stomach as a low voice whispered in his ear.

"Thank fuck for that."

Nick looked about. The distortion of the radio and low timbre of the voice made it impossible to pinpoint who had spoken.

"First five squads, prepare to board the lift."

There was no mistaking who spoke then. Nick's heart leapt into his mouth as the order to advance was given. He marched forward toward the left-hand lift, his boots crunching on the rough sand, then the metallic ring as they mounted the lift. The remaining five squads took the right-hand car. The doors cranked shut and with a small jerk, the lift began to ascend.

Fear, apprehension, the need to urinate, all these feelings and more swept over Nick as the lift took him towards the wall's summit. Being in the first row, he could see the pink stone of the inner wall dropping past the rising platform. He thought his heart would burst out of his chest. It was thumping so hard behind his ribs and he wondered if any of the others were feeling the same overwhelming nervousness. He had to force himself to breathe as the lift slowed to a stop. There was a loud clank, and the upper doors began to open.

There was no way of knowing what to expect on reaching the summit of the wall. Several scenarios had gone through Nick's mind, but he had never expected this. The lift doors slid open and beyond was ... silence. A crowd of troopers waited, some with their helmets off, some down on one knee, their heads bowed to their armour-plated chests, all of them had the same haggard, haunted look on their sweat-soaked faces, their dulled eyes almost vacant of any expression. Others were slowly getting into the empty lift car waiting at the top of the wall, their shoulders slumped, their footsteps weary.

As the last of the relieved troops got into the lift, the order to exit was given. Trying to keep his eyes off the departing men, Nick marched forward fully aware that not a single one of them had so much as even glanced at their relief. The lift doors clanged shut, and the platform began to descend.

They were ordered to halt. Nick's eyes were everywhere. Stood beneath a vast canopy of white, opaque plastic; the arc lights still illuminating the thirty-foot wide, pink stone summit of the wall that stretched out left and right, Nick felt small, realising how vast the wall really was.

A row of uniformed Rangers, at order, stood at the farther edge of the wall facing out over the lurid, pink landscape of Nova Ventura, in front of them was a metre-high plastic barrier. From his limited vantage point, the area immediately before the wall seemed to be empty to Nick, totally devoid of life. Everything was eerily still.

Orders to form a single rank and order arms were issued. Like clockwork, the troops moved into position, joining up with the other squads to form a single line along the wall's summit, two hundred metres long. They were ordered forward to the wall's edge. The line moved between the Rangers already stationed there. At a command, these troops stepped back, turned, and marched away from the wall towards the waiting lifts.

It was all so surreal, like a changing of the guard but on a massive scale. Nick stared out over the empty landscape. It looked so peaceful and calm. There was not a single sign of any conflict ever being fought: no bodies, no ash, not even a single scorch mark. He felt the adrenaline flooding through his system drain away, leaving him feeling ... disappointed? Was that what he felt? All the anticipation, the excitement, and, yes, even the fear of facing this strange insectile enemy seemed to be for nothing. Yet the looks on the faces of the departing soldiers hung in his mind like a depressing portrait, and he wondered what had caused them to look and obviously feel so bad.

Below him the gleaming white wall dropped away, belling out at its base in order to make scaling it more difficult. The sunlight glancing off the brilliant surface made the wall look like sheer ice, smooth, shining, and, as he looked down at the pristine surface, another question rose in his mind. To his left, Nick could just make out the end of the wall where it terminated at the cliff face. The heavy mesh fencing surmounting the cliffs sparkled as it was lost in the distant haze. Nick frowned and looked back down at the silicon-coated wall and the more he looked, the more it didn't make sense.

Resting his head against the transparent guard fence situated at the top of the wall, Nick relished the cool plastic on the back of his sweating head. His helmet rested beside him on the ground. A small disposable plate of C-rations rested on his lap, untouched. For two hours he had stood watching the heat shimmering over the barren pink landscape sprawled outside the wall along with three hundred and ninety-nine troops. Except for the deceptive wavering heat haze, nothing moved. As they stood there, the minutes ticking past, there was some noise of activity behind them, the lifts rising and descending, what sounded like trolleys being wheeled along the walkway, the clatter of metal on metal. Nick was tempted to glance behind just to see what was

going on, but resisted, keeping his concentration to the front. Finally, the order was given for nine in ten men to step down. Nick turned and discovered breakfast was served.

Heated trolleys of C-rations had been brought to the top of the wall allowing the troops to eat whilst maintaining security. They got thirty minutes.

"This is just wild," Flash said as he shovelled some eggs down his throat, followed closely by black coffee. "Just wild."

"Ya think?" Billings said. "Seems a lot of 'hoo-hah' about nothing."

"That's because the bugs had already been sorted," Flash said. "We'll get our chance, you'll see."

"Be careful what you wish for, Flash," Nick said without opening his eyes.

"You okay?"

Nick opened one eye and saw Penny sitting beside him. He opened the other eye.

"Yeah," he said, sitting up, stifling a groan as his pained ribs made themselves known.

"How's the bruises?" she asked, putting her helmet beside Nick's.

"Ask me that later," he answered. "Guess I cocked that one up, didn't I?"

"No," Penny said. "Lederer knew he had the advantage."

Nick gave a little laugh. "Dinks reckons next time I ought to go for stun knives."

"Dinks is right. I told you, Lederer nearly made Corps' champion. He set you up right from the start; I knew that as soon as he dropped the long staff at your feet."

Nick frowned.

"If you had bent to pick up the staff, Lederer would have floored you, an old trick to feel out an opponent's expertise," Penny explained.

"Which is why you picked it up... And Lederer didn't seem too keen to face off with you either..."

Penny shrugged. "Even he wouldn't hit a lady."

"Yeah, right," Nick said. He cocked an eyebrow at her. "I don't suppose you know who the Corps Champion is?"

"You should eat something," Penny said. "We got another nine hours up here."

Smiling at Penny's diversion tactic, Nick looked out at the desolate terrain.

"That's something else I've been thinking about."

"What?" Penny asked.

"The Nova Ventura mines are all situated behind us, protected along a three hundred kilometre stretch of desert and cliffs. There are dozens of walls like this one thrown up at the mouth of valleys intersecting the cliffs. Thousands of troops, kilometres of fencing..."

"And?" Penny said.

"Well, look behind us. That's almost a city down there. This was once a thriving community, presumably with families, commerce, an established social structure."

"I don't see what you're driving at. What's an abandoned city got to do with anything?" Penny asked, mystified.

"Exactly that. It was abandoned," replied Nick. "The first settlers landed on Nova Ventura over eighty years ago, first settlements, then towns, and then some of those towns growing into fledgling cities. I was stationed at some mines about thirty kilometres north of here; the town there wasn't as big as this one, but it was just as deserted. The same at my second posting..."

Penny still looked puzzled. "It's hardly surprising. Would you stay in an unprotected settlement with hummers swarming all over you?"

"That's my point!" Nick said. "How long must it have taken to establish the towns and settlements, the commerce lines between those towns where I was first stationed? They were

even beginning construction on a monorail system..." Nick paused. "Fifty years almost... Fifty years."

"You've lost me," Penny said.

Nick looked at her, his blue eyes turning a darker shade as his brow knitted, striving to understand the puzzle running through his mind like an out-of-control merry-go-round.

"Fifty years, Penny... Where were the hummers" during that first fifty years? And there's something else..."

Nick never got the chance to finish as the warning siren began to blare. For a few seconds, there was confusion, then orders were bellowed.

"Resume battle positions. Incoming! Incoming!"

Leaping to his feet, Nick snatched up his helmet. Penny was right beside him, already securing her headgear into place.

"Oh shit! Oh shit! Oh shit!"

Nick turned and saw a bewildered-looking trooper fumble his helmet; it slipped from his fingers and clattered to the ground, rolling away from him. Nick snatched it up and shoved the helmet into the panicking trooper's hands. He stared at Nick with wild eyes.

"Take it easy! It's okay, just calm down and get your helmet on. Take your position, you'll be fine."

The man nodded but didn't move.

"Goddamn it! Pull yourself together, you're a Ranger, you're trained for this! Come on, follow me!"

Nick quickly got his helmet on and was relieved to see the trooper following suit.

"That's good; now get to your position... You'll be fine, don't think about it, let your training get you through..."

With a brief nod of thanks, the trooper turned and took his place. Nick did the same.

"What was that all about?" Billings asked.

Nick glanced at him. "Just nerves. Can't say I blame him."

"Amen to that," agreed Billings.

Sergeant Drinkwater took his place a short distance from where Nick Dale and Penny Warden were positioned. Behind his polarised visor, he regarded the two of them with interest. The intense expression he wore masked by the glass. He wondered if the two of them would become a problem, a problem that had nothing to do with the relationship obviously growing between the two of them. He knew that if anyone questioned the situation on Nova Ventura, it would be Nick Dale, and the overheard conversation had just proved he wasn't wrong in that assumption. The muscle jumped in Drinkwater's jaw as he considered the implications. He'd have to keep a closer watch.

They waited. Behind the line, the orderlies swiftly removed the remains of the impromptu breakfast, quickly descending to the safety of the barracks, leaving only the water coolers. The siren still sounded mixed with the continued babble of the radio announcer giving out his metallic verbal warnings. Nick was oblivious to the sounds as he scanned the terrain in front of the wall, doing his best to not grip the liquid laser rifle too tightly.

The humming was barely perceptible at first, just a sort of tickling on the surface of the brain, vibrating inside his skull, steadily growing stronger.

"Stand ready," barked a voice in his intercom. "Here they come!"

The ground shivered, or rather undulated, as if it had been magically transformed into molten wax, flowing toward the wall in a dark brown/black mass, swarming over rocks, over defiles, filling the mouth of the valley.

"Sweet mother..." someone said.

“Remember your thirty-five-degree corridors. Wait until they reach the wall before you open fire. Steady, steady...”

Nick grunted as the humming assailed his ears, penetrating the soundproofing of his helmet. Several troopers shook their heads in a vain effort to drive out the rising noise grating on their nerve endings. Looking at the roiling mass of insects was hard on the eyes as much as the sound was on the ears. It was like the sea crashing against the shore as they clambered over one another too fast for the eye to follow. Travelling at least twenty kilometres an hour, the hummers rushed toward the wall, unheeding the certain death awaiting them.

“Steady... Steady... Let them reach the wall...”

They hit, there was no jolt of impact, just a rising susurration of sound like gravel rattling in the bucket, flowing back on themselves, millions of tiny claws scrabbling for purchase on the slick silicon-coated wall in a frenzied effort to reach their prey at the summit.

“Fire!”

The command was short, sharp, and the insect-infested plain in front of the wall lit up as sheet after sheet of white lightning tore into the ranks of swarming hummers and instantly reduced them to ash. There were a few whoops of joy from the troopers as they lashed the reckless insects with wave after wave of liquid death, but the hummers kept coming, their weirdling hum filling the air, throbbing in the ear, the brain, until it was all that could be heard during the mindless slaughter. There was no time to think, no time to do anything except continue to pour down sheet after sheet, squinting against the brightness, trying to ignore the sweat stinging their eyes, the ache pounding their muscles, the tension coursing through their entire bodies.

Time seemed to stand still, legs ached from standing, backs hurt, fingers were sore from constantly pulling triggers and the hummers kept coming, and coming, and coming...

The hummers' initial assault was over as quickly as it started. One second the wall was under full attack, the air throbbing with the incessant hum, bright light flashing in the clear air, and then they were gone, melted back into the landscape like insectile ghosts. For a few seconds, the troops gazed out over the empty landscape in dead silence, almost as if they were in shock at the sudden cessation. The order to stand down was given, and then the vomiting began.

Weapons were dropped or clumsily holstered, helmets were frantically torn from heads as several soldiers, Flash included, leaned over the wall's parapet, and splashed their morning meal on the pristine white wall below.

"The hummers have that effect," Drinkwater said, appearing beside Nick Dale. "Gets about six in ten people."

Nick turned away. "I just feel a bit dizzy, and my head hurts a little," he said.

"You're one of the lucky ones," Drinkwater said dryly. "It wears off soon enough, and the vomiting stops, but prolonged exposure sure makes you feel like shit."

Nick went over to one of the coolers and drew a cup of water; he tipped it over his head, moaning appreciatively at the cool relief to the low throb in his skull. As he drew another cup, Flash came over and slumped down against the guard fence, his head down between his knees.

"Fuck," he groaned.

"Here," Nick offered the cup of water. "Drink something, you'll feel better."

Looking pale and haggard, Flash accepted the cup and took a sip. All along the fence, other troopers sat looking the worse for wear. Eyes looked haunted, expressions drawn, and then Nick realised he had seen these expressions before.

"Shit, we've got three days of this," he muttered.

"Or ten consecutive attacks," Drinkwater said. "Our relief depends on whatever comes first."

It turned out to be three days, during which time the hummers came at the wall seven times. By the third attack, no one was whooping with glee as they lasered death into the churning masses.

\*

"Hey, the warrior awakes!"

Nick stopped as Penny approached. The parade ground was alive with bodies going about their daily business, a sea of dark blue fatigues, tanned faces, and the ever-present sunglasses.

"How you doing?"

"Good," she said. "You?"

"Famished. I was just on my way to the mess hall."

"I'm not surprised. You've been asleep for nearly fourteen hours. I thought you'd gone into permanent hibernation." Penny fell in beside him.

"It was pretty heavy up there," Nick said. "My head still feels as if it's full of cotton wool. Have you seen Flash?"

"Yeah, he's fine. Appetite's a bit dulled."

"That's not surprising. Makes things a whole lot clearer."

"Things?" Penny queried.

"Why nobody talks about the wall, or the hummers. If it wasn't for the fact that sixty per cent of our troops all suffered throwing up, it could be pretty humiliating."

"It wasn't pretty..." Penny agreed. "But on a brighter note, I've got something to tell you. I spoke to Dinks—"

"Hold on a minute, Pen, give me a sec," Nick interrupted as a soldier passed them. "Hey, man, you okay?"

The soldier turned and regarded Nick; there was no sign of recognition in the pale haunted eyes set in a sweat-sheened face, his complexion painfully white and sickly.

"Huh?"

Nick glanced down at the name tag on the man's fatigues, Simmerson.

"We spoke on the wall. You dropped your helmet, remember?"

"Oh yeah, right! We sure gave it to the little bastards, didn't we? Blew 'em all to hell..." Simmerson's voice was pitched slightly high; his eyes became hot, fevered, spittle gathered at the corners of his working mouth. "Sure did..."

"Yeah, we did," Nick agreed hesitantly. "You okay, man? You look a little wiped out."

"Headache," Simmerson said looking around, he reminded Nick of a trapped animal. "Gonna go lay down for a while... Be ready for the next attack." Simmerson patted his uniform pockets, looking for something. "Gotta find my sunglasses too..." he mumbled distractedly. "Fucking sun's frying my eyeballs..."

Simmerson nodded absently at Nick, his hand fluttering in the air in a feeble "I gotta go" gesture, and hurried off.

"He looks a little freaked," Penny said, watching Simmerson hurry into the barracks.

"Yeah," Nick said. "Probably just nerves." He suddenly smiled at Penny. "You hungry?"

"I could stand some fried chicken," she said.

"Yeah, me too." Nick glanced back at the barracks at Simmerson's departing back, a worried look passing quickly over him, and then, taking Penny's arm, headed for the mess hall.

They ate in silence for most of the meal though Penny soon became aware that Nick kept throwing frequent glances at her, which she pretended not to notice.

"You're going to go straight through the bottom of the cup you keep stirring," she warned with a smile as Nick fidgeted with his coffee.

"What? Oh, yeah..." Nick hastily put the spoon down on the tabletop with a clink. "You doing anything tomorrow? Y'know, early? I thought we could do something if you're not busy. Of course, I'd understand if you were..."

"I'm not," Penny answered.

"You're not? Good... Well, would you like to do something? Spend some time together, relax a bit?" Nick was having trouble sitting still.

"What did you have in mind?" Penny hid the smile behind her hand.

"I thought we could requisition a couple of quadbikes, maybe go into the valley and explore a little, maybe even take some lunch?"

"I'd love to," she said.

Nick finally managed to look her in the face. "You would?"

"Yep Nick, Nick Dale. I think that's a great idea. What time shall we say? About six thirty?"

"Cool, that's great..." Nick's smile threatened to crack his face, making Penny laugh. "Hey, wait a minute; earlier you said you had news, spoken to Dinks? Shit, I cut you off because of Simmerson..."

Penny laughed again. "You're going to have a nervous breakdown if you don't take it easy, Tiger! It's okay, nothing really important, just that Dinks reckons because of our 'differences' with Lederer, it would be prudent if I transferred out of the Second Unit to the First, effective immediately."

Nick's jaw dropped open, then quickly shut as he gazed at Penny in surprise.

"Really? Hey, that's great, but Lederer's gonna be really pissed at that."

"I think you're mistaking me for someone who gives a shit!" Penny laughed. "And I also think you ought to take a girl for a celebratory drink, don't you?"

"Absolutely! Let's go."

\*

It was still early evening, but the bar was pretty full as they entered. The babble of voices was low, almost subdued. Nick noticed most of the patrons were soldiers who had just completed their first three-day duty on the wall; almost all of them had the now familiar drained look.

"Hey Big Man! Over here!"

Nick guided Penny towards the rear of the bar where Billings was waving at them from a booth. Norbreck and Flash were with him. After getting a round of drinks, Nick slipped into the seat beside Penny. No one was talking.

"Rough duty, huh?" he said, trying to break the ice.

"I'll never take the piss out of bugs again. I know that for sure," Flash said, fingering his bottle of beer, tracing the droplets of condensation at the neck of the glass.

"I thought it was going to be easy," Billings said.

"I think all of us did," Penny put in. "Guess we know better now."

"Did you see 'em? The way they just kept coming, wave after wave... I don't get it. Why would they do that?" Flash said.

"You're assuming they have some rudimentary intelligence, they don't," Norbreck said. "They're just mindless bugs with only one thing driving them. They want to get to us, to them nothing else matters."

"And that fucking humming, I thought I was going to go crazy." Flash bit his lip. "I know it's warped, but I was glad when I found out it got everyone else the same. I almost convinced myself it was just me."

"No, we all got the same treatment at one level or another," Nick assured him. "Dinks says we'll get used to it, eventually."

"No way," Flash said. "No fucking way!"

Nick glanced at Penny, an unspoken question in his eyes. Penny nodded briefly.

"Well, let's talk about something else, something we can celebrate," Nick said.

They all looked at him as he raised his beer.

"A toast: I want you to welcome a new recruit to the First Squad, Miss Penny Warden!"

Faces brightened immediately, bottles clinked together, welcomes offered, and for a brief time, the wall was forgotten.

\*

"I didn't realise how beautiful it is out here," Penny said.

"It is something," agreed Nick.

Sitting in the shadow of a large rock perched on a high crag above the valley, the pair took in the breathtaking scenery laid out before them. Far from being just empty sand, the landscape rose and fell in a series of jagged ridges, like miniature mountain ranges walking off into the hazy distance, the pink hues deepening into a soft red.

Shadows created strange shapes, giving the rolling land a mysterious depth, deep pools of darkness hiding unknown secrets from prying eyes waiting for some intrepid explorer to discover their wonders. In contrast, the clear green sky somehow complimented the land, it should have looked odd, jarred the senses, but it didn't. It was beautiful.

"What's that on the horizon?" Penny asked, using her hand to shade her eyes as she gazed at the thin purple line, a mere brushstroke on the edge of her vision.

"Jungle," Nick said.

"Really?" she asked in amazement.

"It is," laughed Nick. "Dinks told me..."

Penny looked at him askance. "Something tells me you already knew."

"I've studied what maps there are, mostly created from photographs taken by the first astronauts from space when Nova Ventura was initially discovered. The planet is basically divided into three equal parts: water, jungle, and desert. Of course, on my first two trips here, all I got to see was the inside of a mine or the labs, the lot of an astrogeologist I guess."

Penny chuckled.

"What?" Nick said. "You think geologists are tall, skinny geeks wearing tweed and glasses?"

"Something like that." She laughed. "I would never have you tabbed as a rock expert, a lifeguard maybe, or a fireman."

"I'm not sure if that's a compliment or not," Nick said.

"Are there any indigenous animals here, or birds?" Penny asked.

"There's bugs." Nick grinned. "No, not funny, is it? I guess there must be some sort of life other than the hummers on this rock. Though I've never seen any, mind you. I wouldn't whilst being in a hole in the ground. Maybe we should take a furlough and go look in the jungle."

"You Tarzan, me Jane, huh?" quipped Penny. "Might be worth a look."

Nick looked back into the valley, past where they had parked the quadbikes below, and into the derelict city.

"I'd like to have a look around there before we go back," he said.

"Can't be much there after all this time," Penny said, following his gaze.

"Still like to see," Nick said.

"Maybe we could stop on the way back?" Penny suggested. "But let's not wish the day away just yet."

"Absolutely," Nick said. "What's for lunch?"

\*

"So come on, Nick, Nick Dale. Tell me about yourself," Penny said, nibbling on a piece of cheese.

Nick wiped the chicken grease from his mouth with a paper napkin as he put the chicken bone back on his paper plate.

"Nothing to tell, really," he said between licking chicken juice from his fingers. "Born in South London, only child, partial to travelling."

"What about friends?" Penny asked.

"No one in particular, especially coming out here, had a few at college, and then Uni. Our paths went in different directions. What about you? I would have thought a girl with your talents would have it made back home."

"I told you that's why I joined the Rangers and came out here. I don't want it 'easy.' I want to see things, experience them, not be stuck behind some desk or traipse around after someone as their P.A."

"Somehow I don't see you behind a desk or anyone's personal assistant; I think you made the right choice."

"You can take that inane grin off your face as well," Penny teased.

Nick pulled her close, Penny resisted, sort of.

"I hope chicken isn't the only thing on the menu..."

They lay in each other's arms. Nick could feel the *frisson* between them, saw it in Penny's eyes as the moment seemed to freeze frame.

"I'm not sure the Rangers would approve of this..." Penny murmured, her arm encircling the back of his neck.

"I won't tell if you don't," Nick replied.

Penny smiled. "Deal..."

\*

The roar of the quadbike engines ripped through the still air as they barrelled along the rough road, leaving clouds of billowing pink dust in their wake, Penny in the lead.

"Come on, slowpoke! You got no stamina!" Penny's laughter reverberated through the crash-helmets speakers.

"I'll give you stamina!" Nick gunned the bike and tore after her.

"Not like that, Nick, Nick!" Penny began to draw away.

Nick slewed the quadbike to the left, shot over a low mound, flew through the air, and cutting across rough ground, closed the distance between them.

"Hey, no fair!" complained Penny in mock indignation. "No off-road!"

"All's fair in love and war, my lovely!" Nick returned, coming up beside the speeding girl.

"In that case!"

Penny cut across Nick's path, forcing him to swerve, his off-side tyres churned in the loose pink soil at the edge of the track, his bike almost stalled, nearly unseating him as he lurched to a stop.

"Playing rough, huh?" he said, heaving the bike around and gunning the engine again.

Penny stopped a hundred metres farther on, laughing happily. "If you can't stand the heat... Whoops!"

She revved her own bike frantically as, engine screaming, Nick broke out of the soft earth and tore up the road towards her. They raced to the outskirts of the deserted city.

The streets were of dressed stone and, apart from the dust piled everywhere, they were in good condition, no cracks or weeds visible anywhere. The buildings were plain and functional, with lots of windows, now like empty television screens peering out blindly into a barren world.

The majority of doors were open, allowing access to rooms still full of dust-laden furniture made out of moulded plastic or lightweight metal similar to aluminium. Though Nick couldn't be sure.

"It's like they just up and left," Penny said, peering about what appeared to be a living room.

There was a low sofa, a coffee table, and sideboards, all with the inevitable layer of thick pink dust. There wasn't any sign of electrical goods of any kind. Nick surmised these items had been salvaged, maybe by the military personnel who took over the area.

"It looks like a good home, a family home," Nick said, peering out the back. "There's signs of irrigation in the garden area, water pumped from some natural source. Probably from wells or maybe springs back in the mountains."

"But who would have lived here, other than military personnel?" wondered Penny.

"Except for a token force, there was no military personnel here when the first settlers came. They were from the scientific community: engineers, builders, terra-formers. They came to colonise, to build a new life. It was the discovery of minerals and precious metals that brought the businessmen and miners and with them came the demand for security. The discovery of verdanium brought the army, the new plutonium..."

"But I thought verdanium proved to be scarce and hard to mine?" Penny said.

"It was and is. The extraction process from the ore is both delicate and difficult. That's why only a relatively small amount has been sent back to Earth for further analysis. It has potential, that much is obvious. But exactly how it can be used beneficially is still to be decided. Meanwhile, everything else this planet has to offer is worth the mining costs."

"Til the hummers turned up," Penny said.

"Til the hummers..." agreed Nick. "That's the part I'm having trouble with. Why the hummers waited so long to put in an appearance. Why they reduced the cities and settlements to

ghost towns. And why they keep on coming. I can't see any motivation for it and I just don't believe it's because they see us as a food source. My gut tells me there's more to it than that. I just don't know what..."

"Hey, Nick, Nick. That's pretty intense," Penny said, putting her arms around his shoulders. "They're bugs. Just one-track mindless bugs."

Nick slipped his hands around her waist, smiling at his own seriousness. He shrugged, looking about the sad-looking room.

"Are they?" he said.

The twin suns were setting, casting their odd double shadows as Nick and Penny cruised into the firebase. Everything was quiet, no flashes from the wall, no eerie humming filling the air, just business as usual as the day concluded. Side by side, they headed for the hangar, where they parked the bikes, leaving the crash helmets on the seats and the keys in the ignition. Mechanics would come and garage the machines after a routine mechanical check and a clean, to rid them of the cloying pink dust.

In the west, the suns gilded the yellow clouds streaking the sky with golden ribbons. As twilight encroached from the east, the sky turned into varying shades of darker green. The couple stopped momentarily and gazed at the strange spectacle; both loathe to break the pleasant silence between them.

"It's beautiful..." Penny finally said. "I never stop being surprised just how beautiful it is."

"I know what you mean," agreed Nick. "The mornings are just as spectacular sometimes. The clouds are so pale, the sun's so bright, it's amazing."

"It's been a lovely day." Penny smiled.

"You'll get no argument from me, girly!" Nick winked at her. "We could always do it again tomorrow."

"Go out, you mean?" Penny said innocently.

They laughed.

"Dale!"

There was no mistaking Drinkwater's gravel voice. Automatically, Penny and Nick snapped to attention as the burly sergeant loomed out of the dusk.

"At ease, soldiers," Drinkwater said casually. "Dale, I need a word."

Nick flashed him a look and then looked back at Penny. She smiled and took the picnic basket from him.

"I need to shower, get this dust off. Meet me in the bar in about an hour?"

"Yeah." Nick smiled briefly, turning back to Drinkwater.

"Walk with me." Drinkwater strolled off leisurely. Nick fell in beside him.

"You and Warden are seeing a lot of each other," Drinkwater said without looking at Nick.

"Yes, Sir," Nick answered. "It's not a problem."

"I didn't say it was, as long as you're discreet."

"Yes, Sir."

"And you don't mess her about."

"I'm not, Sir," Nick said. He could feel himself blushing.

"Good," Drinkwater said, and they walked in silence for a few minutes.

"I'm going to the Vesper Mines day after tomorrow," the sergeant suddenly said. "I want you to go with me."

"Me, Sir?" Nick was a little surprised. "May I ask why?"

"Because of your specialist knowledge on geology, and because you worked there for a while," answered the sergeant.

"Yes, Sir," Nick confirmed. "Can I ask why we're going, Sir?"

"Just for a look-see, soldier, just for a look-see. Report to the heli-pad, 0600 hours, day after tomorrow. Wear civilian clothes."

Drinkwater stopped and, for the first time, looked directly at Nick.

"And keep it to yourself. Tell Private Warden if you must, but remind her to keep it to herself as well, understood?"

"Yes, Sir. She will, Sir."

"I'm sure she will," Drinkwater said, looking about the darkening firebase. "Think I'll walk a bit longer. Don't let me keep you, soldier. Sorry to break into your personal time."

"No problem, Sir. Thank you, Sir."

Drinkwater was already walking away at a sedate stroll, leaving Nick looking after him, feeling somewhat puzzled. Shrugging, Nick headed for the barracks, intending to get a shower in before going to the bar.

\*

"That's all he said?" Penny asked, sipping a beer straight from the bottle.

"That's all he said," Nick answered.

"He didn't say how long you'd be gone?"

"Nope, just 0600 at the heli-pad in civvies. Though it explains why he transferred you to the squad. Stops 'em from being short-handed while I'm away."

"It's very odd," mused Penny.

"Yeah, well, I'll find out what it's all about soon enough." He sidled over closer to Penny and kissed her quickly. "Let's not waste what time we have."

"And this is being discreet?" She grinned.

"Who's to know?" He grinned.

"Know what?" said a voice.

Flash appeared at the booth, a young brunette in tow. They seemed pretty close. Nick and Penny looked at each other, smiling.

"Nothing," said Nick, suppressing the urge to laugh. "Want to join us?"

"Great," said Flash, slipping into the seat opposite. The girl slid in beside him. "This is Tamsin, Tam. Nick and Penny..."

Tam nodded a greeting at them both.

"What you drinking?" Nick asked, catching the eye of an orderly as he spoke.

"Beers will be fine," said Flash. "How was your day?"

"Good, good," Penny said while Nick ordered. "Yours?"

"Spent most of it in and out of the pool. Gets pretty hot round here." Flash flicked a look at Tam.

"I'm sure," Penny said. Nick nudged her.

"No attacks?" Nick asked.

"Nah," answered Flash. "Been quiet. Though there was some grief in the mess hall at lunch."

"Grief?" queried Nick.

"Yeah. Some guy freaked out, started shouting, and threw a tray of food at the garbage bins. He was yelling about the hummers watching him or something. It was pretty intense."

"Who was he? A newbie?" asked Penny.

"Chris Simmerson. Came on the last ship," Tam interjected.

"Simmerson? He's the guy that freaked on the wall," said Nick. "Was he alright?"

"Yeah. Calmed down pretty quick when the Redheads turned up. Though most of the ruckus was caused by the rest of the hall jeering him on," said Flash. "He got out of there damned quick."

The conversation turned to the other events of the day. Billings turned up and joined them, a young-looking blonde on his arm, Sally.

"So, what are you doing tomorrow?" Billings asked. "I thought we could do something together."

"Well..." Nick stuttered, looking at Penny for help.

She shrugged, unable to come up with an excuse. Flash laughed.

"It's obvious our company is not required." He winked at Billings.

"Well, that's just great," Billings picked up. "Probably not good enough."

"No longer needed to prop up his failing ego," Flash bantered.

"Got someone else to hold it..." Billings returned.

"Hey, enough!" Nick said. "And you hit the nail right on the head! Why would I spend time with you uglies when I've got an angel on my arm?" He looked at the other two girls. "Female company excepted, girls."

They all laughed.

"Then you'd better get another round in to soothe bruised egos and hurt feelings!" Billings said.

\*

Even at 0600 hours, the firebase was active. There hadn't been any overnight attacks from the hummers. Normal routine commenced. The wall, as ever, was manned. Squads One to Ten were about to relieve them. Though, from his position at the heli-pad, Nick couldn't actually see them. But he knew they were already waiting, rank and file at the lifts. Elsewhere, uniformed soldiers went about their duties; others were going off duty. Nick envied the ones still in their bunks, wrapped up in blankets, with nothing to do all day. He could have done with a few more hours of sleep.

He smiled broadly. Of course, the reason for being awake last night was more than worth it, and perhaps Penny got the thin of the wedge. After all, she was about to spend the next twelve hours on top of the wall. Nick felt a slight pang of guilt, almost wishing she didn't have to face that particular duty, but he also knew if he ever voiced such a thought, Penny would most likely bite his head off.

Nick allowed himself another small smile. He wasn't sure how he actually managed to find himself in this position, how he managed to land a stunner like Penny, but he wasn't about to argue about it either. They had both signed up for a three-year tour with the Rangers, and the posting to Nova Ventura. It suddenly seemed an awful long time, and, as Penny had said, he wasn't sure how the Rangers would take to their relationship.

"Good to see you're bright an' early," said a voice.

Nick turned. "Sarge."

"Yeah, well, now that's something we gotta change," Drinkwater said, dropping his rucksack beside Nick's. "Where we're going, rank don't matter much."

"So, what do I call you?" Nick asked.

"What you normally call me when you think I'm out of earshot," the sergeant replied. He looked around, breathing deeply of the morning air. "This is a good time of the day," he mused.

Nick wasn't sure how to answer. Drinkwater grinned at him.

"Take that stick out of your arse, Nick, and relax. I told you, we're just going to go have a look-see. Nothing to worry about. I'd just as well not let 'em know who we are, is all."

Nick regarded the sergeant who, despite wearing civilian clothes, still had an air of authority about him, a quiet confidence that was disguised as gruff. Nick suddenly realised that the mystery that was Sergeant Drinkwater went deeper than that and that set him wondering again about exactly what they were doing here.

"That's what I don't get," Nick said, voicing his thoughts. "What is it we're doing exactly? Whose orders are we following?"

Drinkwater faced him, dark face inscrutable.

"You are following my orders," he said. "You're here to watch my six, and me. I'm here to check on security at the Vesper Mine."

"Why us?"

"Me, because it's part of my brief. You, because I asked for you," Drinkwater answered.

"Which is why you transferred Pen... Ranger Warden to the First Squad," Nick said.

"Something like that," Drinkwater said. "This is no big deal, Nick. Just a routine security check, and the best way to get honest results is by taking 'em by surprise. It's the Rangers' job to protect the mines. Manning the wall is only one aspect of that job; there's also internal security to be maintained. Ah, our bird I presume..."

A Chinook jet-copter was being wheeled out of one of the hangars, towed by a low, electric cart onto the heli-pad. Drinkwater snatched up his rucksack and headed for it.

"All aboard that's getting aboard," he said.

Nick picked up his bag and followed.

\*

Forty minutes later, they were descending over a large community of Nissan huts. Towers and smokestacks spread out over a square kilometre of terrain. To the north was a complex of glass-fronted buildings, the brilliant sunlight bouncing off the polarised facade. Next to this was a large heli-pad.

"Holy shit," Nick said, looking through the cabin window. "This place has expanded since I was last here."

"When was that?" asked Drinkwater.

"Last trip," Nick informed him.

"A lot can happen in sixteen years," Drinkwater said.

The helicopter settled down with a gentle bump and they disembarked, heading for one of the hangar offices. After a few brief words with the office personnel and signing a couple of forms, Drinkwater commandeered a land rover vehicle, which looked like an oversized quadbike with huge balloon-type tyres and an uncomfortable cabin.

"Where do we stay?" Nick asked as they drove out of the aerodrome, shifting in the hard seat trying to find a comfortable position.

"Hotel," Drinkwater answered, catching Nick's surprised look. "Don't worry. It's nothing fancy."

Nick just smiled and looked out as they sped toward the mining complex.

"I'm amazed they've got roads now," he commented as Drinkwater tore along the pavement.

"Progress, huh?" Drinkwater answered.

The journey was short as Drinkwater guided the rover through the wide streets of the Vesper mining community. Nick looked around at the prefabricated buildings, glass and wood fronted, aluminium sidings, covered sidewalks, solar-powered street lighting, shops, cafés, even a bank, and a barber's shop and the inevitable bars, gaudily adorned with bright lights and vivid colours and very lurid names.

"Definitely changed." Nick whistled as they pulled up outside a four-storey building with a pink brick façade. The sign above the double glass doors read: Excelsior Hotel.

Drinkwater switched off the engine, grabbed his rucksack, and got out of the vehicle. Nick followed suit and joined him on the bustling sidewalk.

Most of the people, even the women, were wearing blue jeans or dungarees with loose cotton shirts of varying colours, white being predominant. There were a few dresses, some skirts, and shorts, but the dry dust made jeans more practical.

Inside the hotel, Drinkwater booked them in, overseen by a slim, black-suited man with what seemed a perpetual smile on his thin face as he stood attentively behind the dark, wood reception desk. It was a relief to feel air-conditioning again accentuated by the Spartan white of the foyer and reception area. Blue uniformed busboys offered to take their rucksacks but were politely refused. There was a bar through some white-painted bat-wing doors to the left of the reception desk. Even though it was only early morning, it seemed some patrons already frequented it. To the right of the reception desk, there was a small area with four sofas around a low, heavy, glass coffee table. Various magazines were laid out neatly at one end of the table. Several matching armchairs were set back against the walls. In which, a few people sat and talked quietly, some read newspapers and drank coffee.

Beyond the lounge area was a bank of three lifts flanked on either side by a flight of grey-carpeted stairs. As they walked toward the lifts, Nick smiled inwardly. Almost a lift for each floor, perhaps a little ostentatious? Their rooms were side by side of the first-floor rear. After a cursory look at his accommodation, Nick joined Drinkwater in his room.

"So, what now?" he asked.

Drinkwater offered him a cold bottle of water from the small refrigerator.

"Now we look around," Drinkwater said and took several gulps from his bottle.

"It might be nice to know what exactly I'm looking for," Nick said, pulling a chair away from the wall and sitting. "Maybe just a hint?"

Drinkwater stretched out on the bed, the plastic bottle balanced on his stomach. He stared at the ceiling for a few moments.

"See that file sticking out of my bag? Take it, don't bother looking at it now. You can read it later." Drinkwater waited until Nick took possession of the buff-coloured folder and was seated again.

"Does the name Sandor Milieus mean anything to you?"

"Yeah. The C.E.O. of the Holistic Minerals Corporation back on Earth," Nick answered.

"Used to be your boss," Drinkwater said.

"Well, yeah, technically. But I never met the man,"

"That's part of the problem," Drinkwater said. "For the last fifteen years, nor has anyone else. At least, there's no record of any public appearances."

"So the man's a recluse. Been known to happen with most multi-billionaires."

"Agreed. But there have been a lot of major changes within the H.M.C. hierarchy. Changes that, according to most other multi-national and inter-planetary business practises, should and would need the approval and signature of their respective C.E.O.s. Sandor Milieus's name does not appear on any of the company records for the last fifteen years. Which, as you know, are a matter of public record."

"What's that got to do with us, or the Vesper Mines?" Nick asked, puzzled.

"Nine years ago, a year before we left for Nova Ventura, three consignments of verdanium arrived on Earth. The verdanium originated from this mine. The three consignments were placed in three different science facilities for examination. The three facilities were top secret, known only to a few very highly placed government officials. Totally protected with state-of-the-art security and a small army of well-trained specialist troops.

"One month after the arrival of the verdanium, all three facilities were totally destroyed by massive explosions. Each explosion occurred within minutes of the other.

"Three months of intensive investigation turned up precisely nothing. No sign of infiltration, no sign of security leaks, no sign..." Drinkwater paused, as if reflecting.

"In total four thousand, three hundred and seventy-three technical and army personnel were vaporised without trace. Each facility was reduced to a pile of ash. There's absolutely no indication what caused the explosions or what type of explosive was used."

"Did no one claim credit for the explosions?" Nick asked, stunned.

"That's another part of the problem; no one has claimed responsibility. Which really isn't surprising because no one could have known about the verdanium being on Earth. At first, it was thought there might be some sort of dissidence about the money being spent on what, after all, is nothing more than a massive mining expedition. Albeit that a lot of the finance comes from private corporations.

"It was also considered that the verdanium itself might have been the cause of the explosions. Maybe one of the tests touched on some unknown property which caused the verdanium to become some sort of super explosive. Except for the fact each of the facilities was working independently. The odds of the same test being performed at exactly the same time are astronomical, making it virtually impossible for all three facilities to be destroyed simultaneously."

"I still don't see what all this has to do with us," Nick said.

Drinkwater sat up. "There are no leads as to the cause or reason behind these explosions on Earth, other than they must have been deliberate by virtue of the close timing. The only connection we do have, though somewhat tenuous, is the H.M.C. and the mystery surrounding Millieus, but that could be no connection. So, if there are no leads on Earth, then the answers must be here on Nova Ventura and it's up to us to find them."

Nick digested this information as they headed for the hotel's small but adequate restaurant.

\*

"So, who am I?" he asked, wiping the hamburger grease from his chin with a paper napkin.

"Who you've always been," replied Drinkwater. "Nicholas C. Dale, astrogeologist. Late in the employ of the Holistic Mineral Corporation and now seeking your own fortune."

"Which accounts for why I'm out here at the arse-end of nowhere." It was more of a statement.

"Exactly," Drinkwater said, forking a piece of steak into his mouth. "It pays to stick close to the truth."

"Okay," agreed Nick. "So... Who are you? I mean, really?"

Drinkwater momentarily stopped chewing as he regarded Nick, then he glanced around the café. It was still a little early for the lunch crowds, the room was barely half full and there was no one close.

"I guess that's a fair question," he began in a low voice. "I am Sergeant McKenzie Drinkwater, and this is my fourth tour to Nova Ventura. That much is true. I am also qualified as a training instructor, though this last tour is the first time I've taken on a bunch of rookies for a long time, probably longer than I want to consider.

"Like I told you back in my room, my actual brief is to make discreet inquiries concerning the incidents back on Earth and see what, if any, connections there might be to H.M.C."

"And your boss is?"

Drinkwater genuinely laughed; a rare thing. His dark eyes twinkled.

"I should have known you wouldn't stop with the questions," he said. "I work for the InterWorld Government. More than that, I can't tell you. If I did, I'd have to kill you... Seriously." Drinkwater raised his eyebrows. "I work in a specialist department, designed for just this sort of mission, no names, no titles."

"And no official standing."

Another statement.

"And no official standing," Drinkwater agreed.

"So, we're on our own. Where do we go from here?"

"The investigation into H.M.C. management turned up nothing. Even with the Milieus mystery, nothing untoward was found in their files. So now, we go to the mines, see what we can dig up."

"Humour." Nick grinned, taking another bite of his hamburger.

"Been known to tap dance as well..." Drinkwater said.

\*

Things had changed at the Vesper Mines. The Nova Ventura firebase had been modernised and the derelict building refurbished to army standards, comfortable enough for active troops. The Vesper Mines were leagues in front where comfort and modernisation were concerned. The streets were all paved. The walkways were covered and well-lit with sodium lighting every thirty metres or so. There was ample parking for the compact electric vehicles favoured by the inhabitants. Shops were glass-fronted and well-lit, well-stocked with goods from cans of beans to portable mining drills, socks to three-piece suits.

Nick was impressed as they walked about the settlement. The people were polite, many nodding a silent greeting or briefly smiling if he caught their eye. Drinkwater barely showed any acknowledgment whatsoever. It was as if the threat of the hummers did not exist here. The settlement seemed free of any worry or fear even though a few kilometres away a strange war was being fought for their benefit and protection.

"Do they know about the danger?" Nick asked, matching the sergeant's measured stride.

"Of course they do," Drinkwater said. "They just pretend not to believe it."

"Out of sight, out of mind," Nick muttered.

The mine workings were just beyond the settlement, behind titanium steel wire mesh fencing. Drinkwater produced identification identifying him as an inspector from I.W.G. As bogus as the fictional department they supposedly served, and they were allowed through. An electric cart appeared driven by one of the mine's personnel, dressed in a dark blue, one-piece suit, a black beret with the H.M.C. logo emblazoned on it, and a pair of sunglasses obscuring his deeply tanned face.

"Sir," he said stepping out of the tiny vehicle. "Transport to the mine head, Sir."

Drinkwater nodded for Nick to get into the vehicle while he took the front passenger seat. They drove in silence through the mine workings. It was much as Nick remembered from his two previous visits to New Ventura, except for the obvious modernisation of the facilities and a lot of new machinery, at least, new to him. Gone were the high-pressure water cannons, fracking machines, replaced by hard lasers, cleaner, faster, easier to maintain.

The office blocks were steel containers stacked on one another, three high and up to four containers in length, allowing mobility and swift relocation of the administration facility in the shortest possible time. Time, the most valuable commodity besides the verdanium itself. Piles of pink slag lined the improvised roadway system, blocking the view to the surrounding area. A thin, light dust floated in the air, giving it a weird, flesh-like hue. The closer to the mine head they got, the thicker the dust became.

Stopping at a cluster of buildings, the driver got out and retrieved a couple of face masks from the rear of the vehicle.

"You'll need them in the mine, Sir," he said, giving them to Nick and Drinkwater.

The mine was a hive of activity. As they walked towards the main offices, a low vibration could be felt underfoot. Nick had forgotten about that constant reminder that work was twenty-four-seven here in the mine. It never stopped.

"Mr. Drinkwater, hello."

Drinkwater shook the hand of the man who stepped out of the office as they approached, his deep voice muffled by his mask. He took Nick's hand and shook that, too.

"Adrian Postleman, general manager. Welcome."

Drinkwater introduced himself and Nick and followed the black-suited manager back into the office.

"I hate these bloody masks," Postleman said, pulling his off and throwing it onto a filing cabinet by the door. "But they're necessary."

Indicating two chairs, Postleman waited until they were seated before sitting himself behind the paper-cluttered desk.

"Now gentlemen," he said, smiling disarmingly. "What can I do for you?"

\*

Drinkwater's normally grim expression was even harder as they drove back to the hotel three hours later.

"Nothing," he snarled. "Not a damned thing."

Nick said nothing as they sped along the road somewhat faster than the posted speed limit.

"If it wasn't the Earth facilities, and not the administration, I figured it had to be the mines themselves," Drinkwater continued. "Yet nothing seemed out of place. Did anything seem out of place to you?"

"Nothing," Nick agreed. "Every safety protocol, failsafe, and safety rule was strictly enforced. And their security is airtight. If those three consignments of verdanium were sabotaged here, then I don't see how it was done."

"All the crew and personnel on the consignment tankers have been checked and rechecked. Every one of them is cleaner than a nun's wimple..." Drinkwater shook his head in frustration. "It can't just be coincidence, it's not possible. Somehow, somewhere, I'm missing something."

\*

"Maybe we should start at the beginning again," said Nick once they were back at the hotel. "See if there is something that's been missed."

"This is the third time round for this investigation, Nick, and it's gone nowhere. We're no closer to finding out how those facilities were destroyed back on Earth now than we were nine years ago. There's nowhere else to look unless some new evidence has turned up back home. And if there has, it's going to take six months to reach us via microbeam communication..."

It was the first time since they had met that Nick saw the stalwart sergeant's confidence shaken. Drinkwater threw the pen onto the desktop and slumped dejectedly into a chair, gazing moodily out of the window.

"What's worse, I'm stuck on this goddamned planet for another year before I can return to Earth," Drinkwater said sourly.

"A year?" Nick echoed.

"My fourth time," Drinkwater explained. "I can't go back into stasis for at least a year. It might kill me, my body might not be able to take the strain."

"Yeah, I was told about that when I signed up for my third trip. The risk is very low. About one in five thousand."

"Be my luck right now if I was five thousand and one," Drinkwater said.

The rest of the day was spent going through computer files, witness reports—painfully scarce—forensic test results that showed nothing. As Drinkwater had said, there was nowhere else to go.

"I'm done," Drinkwater said, throwing the last file onto the coffee table. "I'm going bug-eyed reading the same crap over and over again. There is no obvious answer."

Nick sat back in the armchair, rubbing his eyes.

"Maybe it was just some sort of freaky coincidence. I can't see how it can be anything else. They've been using verdanium on Nova Ventura for years, redesigning engine parts, machinery. Its heat resilience is extraordinary. It's extremely light, yet durable.

"It's undergone extreme temperature changes from freezing cold to super-furnace heat used in the smelting process. If it was at all volatile, it would have been discovered in the manufacturing stage."

"I don't believe it," Drinkwater said, getting up. "But I've no evidence to refute it. It's going to have to be written up as one of life's big mysteries."

He looked bleakly at Nick.

"A shipment of verdanium is being sent to Earth in three weeks' time. A big shipment. I've got to sign off on this investigation before it can leave."

"Are you going to sign off?" Nick asked.

"Got no reason not to," Drinkwater said. "It's too valuable a commodity to hold back any longer. The moneymen are getting more than a little twitchy, as are the powers that be. The verdanium, along with all the other precious metals and stones, is going to revolutionise life as we know it.

"They knew it was going to be a long-term investment, just not this long."

"Understandable I guess," remarked Nick.

"But I still got a bad feeling about it, Nick. Something's not right. I feel it in my water."

"You've already said, there's nothing else to be done. "

"You're right," sighed the sergeant. "We'll stay here tonight, go out, have a drink, dinner. We'll head back to base tomorrow."

\*

The barracks were empty when Nick and Drinkwater got back to base late the following day, tired, dusty, and sweaty. Nick showered and changed into clean fatigues. He was thinking about the guys up on the wall, feeling a little guilty for sloping off with the sarge, finding little comfort that he'd had no choice.

The squad had become close. Probably for the first time in his life, he felt he belonged to something, something good, especially Penny. Nick had read somewhere that strong bonds were often forged between army buddies. Now he understood what that meant. It was more than just a good squad. They were brothers. Norbreck's sarcasm, Billings's seriousness, Flash's boyish naiveté, it all went to make up a whole. Flash made him think of a missed opportunity... If only they had had the foresight to have some pink fatigues made. Flash would have been mortified, totally freaked...

Still smiling, Nick slipped on the dark blue t-shirt, chuckling quietly to himself... It would have been hilarious.

He was hungry, but he wanted to wait for Penny to come back. A quick look at the rota pinned to the hut's notice board confirmed she and the rest of the squad were still on the wall. He closed his eyes, relaxing on his bunk...

What felt like a second later, raucous voices filled the room, and the bed was shaken violently. Nick snapped immediately awake to find grinning faces all around him.

"What the hell..."

Laughter echoed around the room as the bed was dumped unceremoniously back onto its legs, nearly pitching Nick to the floor.

"Hey, Bugman. Welcome home!" exhorted Flash.

They crowded around him, pulling him from the bed, slapping him on the back, and hugging.

"Jeez, Flash! You stink! You need a shower man, double time!" Nick said, wrinkling his nose.

"Does that go for all of us, Bugman?" said a voice.

Nick looked over Flash's shoulder and saw Penny standing by the door, her helmet slung carelessly over her shoulder, and a sardonic smile playing on her full lips. The squad parted as Nick went over to her and hugged her.

"Only if I can wash your back..." he whispered in her ear, "...or something."

\*

"So, what's with this 'Bugman' thing?" Nick asked in the mess hall. "What did I miss?"

"We decided we all needed nicknames, like Flash," said Norbreck. "I'm 'Hotdog'..."

"Because he's always eating the damned things," interrupted Flash.

"Billings is 'Swing,' because of the way he walks. You're 'Bugman' because it seemed to fit and Penny is 'Legs.'"

Nick raised his eyebrows. "Legs? A little chauvinistic, don't you think?"

"You should have heard the other suggestions!" Penny laughed. "No, Legs is fine."

\*

Two days on the wall brought Nick Dale back to reality. The heat, the infernal low decibel sound of the hummers, the continual grating on his nerves as he sprayed wave after wave of

liquid laser into the swarming ranks of the chittering masses. And still, they came on, an endless suicidal torrent, clashing unceasingly against the high curved wall of the defences.

"Jesus." The cool water was delicious on the back of his sweating neck.

The rest of First Squad sat along the wall, helmets off, heads down. The attack had momentarily ceased. The hummers disappeared, leaving no one in any doubt they would be back soon enough. He wasn't sure if he had imagined it or not, but Nick felt the bugs' attack had been more frenzied this time, more ... desperate. It was an odd feeling.

"At least we'll have a break from this tomorrow," Penny said, gulping down water and passing the bottle to Nick.

"I'm not sure taking a patrol out there could be called a break," he said, putting his empty bottle down and gratefully accepting Penny's. "But it's got to be better than this damned wall."

A siren began to wail from atop the central spotter's turret.

"Don't these things ever stop?" growled Flash, slapping his helmet back onto his head.

Doing the same, Nick helped Penny to her feet, the low hum already filling the air.

Like horrors from Hell, the valley floor became a hazy blur of motion as hummers spilled out of the ground, rushing towards the wall, tumbling over themselves in their haste to meet certain, unheeding death. *Almost eager...* thought Nick.

"Come on, you sons-of-bitches! Come and get it! Come and die, you fuckers!"

The stretched, strained voice was loud in their earphones.

"What the hell?" Billings cursed, snatching off his helmet.

"Keep it down, trooper!" the order barked from everyone's helmet.

Billings slipped his helmet back on and got back in line.

They waited for the order to fire, unconsciously gripping their lasers tightly in sweating hands as they watched the implacable insects surge below.

"Fire."

The command was short, curt, decisive. A sea of liquid lasers spilled down the gleaming white wall, engulfing the roiling mass below, instantly reducing them to ash.

"Come on! Come and get it!" shrieked the voice again.

"Trooper, hold it down! Concentrate on your fire!"

Nick briefly looked down the line, squinting his eyes against the glare of the lasers, trying to locate the yelling trooper. He saw a figure dangerously close to the wall's low barrier, his laser sending sheet after sheet of death-dealing light into the hummers below.

"Simmerson! Short bursts! Release the trigger!" Nick spoke into the helmet's mic.

Simmerson ignored the order, sweeping his laser back and forth along the wall.

"Simmerson, three-second bursts!"

Nick ceased firing, slotted his laser into its holder, and stepped back out of line, heading for Simmerson.

"Die you bastards! Die!"

Simmerson was leaning over the wall, shucking his helmet to shut out the interfering voices in his ears. The tip of his laser rifle glowed as he fired continuously downwards. Nick hurried up behind him. Just as he reached for the screaming man, he heard a sharp crack.

Nick had never heard or seen that sharp sound before, but he knew what it meant.

"Down! Down! Everybody down!"

Simmerson howled as he continued his one-man barrage. To left and right troopers stopped firing, throwing themselves flat on the ground as the crazed man hurled abuse and liquid death at the hummers. There was another crack, Simmerson's laser spluttered, then scythed away, the beam out of control. It lanced back, the fierce light slicing cleanly through the trooper's left leg. Shock registered on Simmerson's pale, sweating features. His eyes, hot with madness,

gawked as he fell back against the Perspex barrier, gasping, reaching for a leg that was no longer there.

Simmerson's laser pack began to whine, rising to a crescendo. Roaring, Nick surged up from the ground, grabbed the stricken trooper around the waist, and hurled him over the wall. Three seconds later, the pack exploded in a blinding flash of light. Simmerson's flailing body winked out of existence and a fifty-metre gap appearing momentarily in the mass of hummers below before the insects swept in and commenced their frenzied attack.

\*

"Dale!"

He was tired, sweaty, dirty, and irritable. All he wanted to do was shower and wash this shit day down the drain. With a heavy sigh, Nick paused by the door to the squad hut.

"Sarge?" he said, turning to face Drinkwater.

"You look like shit, soldier."

"I feel it, Sarge," Nick confessed.

"Well, don't. You did good today. You saved the lives of your squad and a lot of others."

"I threw a guy off the parapet, Sarge. I killed a fellow Ranger."

"He was already dead, soldier. He just didn't know it yet. You gotta get past it." Drinkwater's voice softened slightly. "Let it go, Nick. Simmerson had lost it; I should have drummed him out a week ago. I let other shit get in the way. You did right by your squad."

"Doesn't feel like it, Sarge."

"I guess," agreed Drinkwater. "But you did a solid. You have to report to Admin Block 0700 tomorrow morning, make a statement. Nothing to worry about, just routine paperwork."

"But the squad's up for a patrol at 0600 tomorrow," protested Nick.

"They are, you ain't. 0700," Drinkwater said and marched away.

"This just gets better..." Nick groaned, entering the squad hut.

\*

Nick adjusted Penny's shoulder strap. She shrugged, testing the comfort.

"It doesn't feel right," Nick complained. "I should be with you."

"It's not a problem, routine. We'll be back before you know it," Penny said. "Then we can have a beer and celebrate our three-day furlough."

"I bloody need it," said Nick, stepping back and checking Penny's gear for the fifth time.

"Jeeez, man! You're worse than my mother," Penny said, punching him in the shoulder playfully.

"Better safe than sorry."

"You never check my harness..." jibed Flash.

"You are more than capable, big, tall, and ugly," Nick threw back.

"Charming," Flash huffed.

"Okay, listen up. I don't need to tell you, but I'm gonna anyway," said Nick. "Watch yourselves out there and watch out for each other. No fancy stuff, keep it tight. Any sign of trouble high tail back here double time."

First squad filed out of the room. Nick caught Penny's hand and quickly pulled her back.

"That goes double for you," he said and quickly kissed her. "See you later."

She winked at him and stepped out into the bright alien sun.

\*

It felt like a long morning. The report was perfunctory. The commander, a bluff, grey-haired, grizzle-featured veteran, commended Nick on his swift action, assuring him there would be no follow-up, and no case to answer.

It did little to lift the heaviness in his gut. He sat in the mess hall drinking coffee he didn't want and continually looking at his watch. First squad should be back any time now. Leaving the coffee, Nick made his way back to the barracks, the brief walk from the mess to the hut immediately soaking him in sweat. He found Drinkwater lounging on his bunk, hands behind his head.

"Hey Sarge," Nick greeted. "No duties this morning?"

"I had to see Telfast just after you," Drinkwater said, without opening his eyes.

"Did the commander have a problem?" Nick asked.

"None that concerned you," Drinkwater said, unmoving. "I gave him the verdanium release, the shipment leaves in three weeks."

"You're still not happy about it," Nick ventured.

"No longer my concern," Drinkwater said simply.

The sergeant cocked an eye at Nick. "You keep looking at that watch, your ugly mug is likely to make it stop."

Nick self-consciously put his arm down. "I thought the patrol would be back by now," he said.

"Timing's never exact," Drinkwater said carelessly. "No telling what they might see out there."

"Mmmmmmm," Nick muttered absently and laid out on his bunk.

"What will you do when you eventually get back to Earth?" he asked.

"Retire," Drinkwater said promptly, lost behind the screens of his bed space. "This old warhorse is done."

"Retire?" Nick said. "And do what? The Rangers have been your life."

"True enough," Drinkwater agreed. "But I got me a sweet parcel of land in Colorado. One of the few wild places left on Earth, literally. Gonna build me a cabin, do a lot of fishing, and drift around in a boat on the lake."

"No chance of settling down on New Ventura, then?" Nick grinned.

Drinkwater hurrumphed. "I'll leave this shit rock to the Newbies if you don't mind," he said.

Nick laughed just as the door to the hut burst open. A private stood in the doorway, breathing heavily.

"Sarge, you're wanted at the C.P. ASAP! Distress call from First Squad patrol."

Nick was off his bunk in a flash. "Where are they?"

The soldier looked startled. "I don't know. Just ordered to get Sergeant Drinkwater..."

The grizzled sergeant stepped out of his cubicle, slapping a cap on his head and adjusting his sunglasses.

"Sarge?" queried Nick.

Drinkwater looked at him, his face giving nothing away. "Okay, but keep your mouth shut and keep out of the way."

Nick grabbed his cap and sunglasses and hurried after his NCO.

The command post was bustling, a big room, full of desks and non-coms sitting attending radios and surveillance screens glowing white and blue, highlighting tense concentrating faces. A large table dominated the centre of the floor with several uniformed men standing around it quietly talking amongst themselves. Nick recognised Commander Telfast.

"Sir?" Drinkwater came to attention.

Nick, just behind him, followed suit.

Telfast turned.

"Sergeant, it seems we have a problem," the commander's voice was deep, soft, but exuding authority. "Seems one of your squads has gotten into a little difficulty."

"Sir, yes, Sir," Drinkwater said. "May I ask for a sit-rep, Sir?"

"At ease, Sergeant," Telfast said. "We have their location, three clicks north, in an abandoned village. They're trapped on a roof, cut off from their vehicle, surrounded by hummers.

"There's no way to bring them out by land. You will have to take a heli-jet and airlift them."

"Yes, Sir," Drinkwater said, looking at the holo-map spread out on the table, a 3D representation of the area surrounding the base. A red light blinked to the north.

"Take a team. Bring your people home, Sergeant."

\*

Minutes later, they were both geared up and heading for the heli-pad. Nick fought hard to quell the growing worry tearing at his thoughts. First Squad was well armed, but their ammunition was finite. The hummers were implacable, relentless... It was going to be a race against time. He tried not to let the pictures of Penny playing on the screen of his worried mind distract him.

Clambering aboard the heli-jet, they strapped themselves in. There was a pilot and a co-pilot, a third crew member manned the LL120 mounted laser at the heli-jet's open hatchway. On the opposite side of the craft, fixed into the hatchway, was a winch and a metal link ladder rolled up in the centre of the hatch. Nick and Drinkwater looked at each other. Their only means to get the squad out.

"We got a strong crosswind," the pilot informed them. "Blowing just over twenty-eight knots, gonna make this a tough exercise."

"It's not a damned exercise. They're my friends on that fucking roof," Nick said, suddenly angry at the pilot's flippancy.

"Hey, just giving you the heads up, Ranger," the pilot said. "Meant no offence."

"Calm down," Drinkwater said. "I know what you're thinking, but they're well trained. They'll be fine. They're Rangers."

Nick looked at him. Behind the dark glasses, his sergeant was harder to read than ever.

With a rush of wind and thunder of engines, the heli-jet took off, swinging round to the north. Its nose dipped slightly as the craft accelerated. Within minutes, the abandoned village swept into view.

"Oh shit!" Nick breathed as he saw the sea of roiling, scrambling bodies like a rippling black sheet across the lurid pink landscape.

"Use the 120, let 'em know we're here," the pilot instructed.

The gunner unclipped the laser and swung it easily into position. The cabin lit up as the bright sheet of liquid light splashed down, carving a rent in the living mass below. A gust of wind made the heli-jet dip erratically. The pilot, fighting the controls, struggled to keep the craft level.

"Stand down the 120!" ordered Drinkwater as the laser's beam panned indiscriminately across the landscape below.

The gunner was thrown off balance, unable to release the weapon's trigger as he fought the bucking heli-jet.

"Goddamn it!"

Drinkwater hauled the gunner away from the gun, pinning the man to the floor. The craft dipped as the pilot brought it around in a wide circle, trying to ride out the buffeting wind.

Down below, Nick saw four figures bunched on a rooftop. Three of them were firing in controlled bursts into the swirling mass milling about the base of the derelict building. The fourth man was kneeling behind them, Billings, his laser depleted.

"They're running out of ammunition!" Nick yelled at Drinkwater.

"Get over them. We need to get the ladder down to them fast," the sergeant ordered the pilot.

The wind momentarily abated as the heli-jet got into position over the roof. Nick kicked out the metal-linked ladder, rattling against the metal floor as it deployed below them. Billings was the first to climb, then Norbreck. Flash and Penny increased the radius of their laser beams to their widest setting, standing back-to-back, flooding the rooftop and streets below with deadly white light.

Anxiously, Nick watched as Flash yelled at Penny to climb. Swiftly holstering the laser, Penny grabbed the ladder just as a gust of wind caught the hovering heli-jet. The craft lurched, swinging Penny out over the mass of hummers, clinging precariously to the rungs of the ladder.

Drinkwater rose from the floor where he was still holding the gunner just as the heli-jet dipped to the side. Caught off-balance, the sergeant was thrown forward, straight out of the heli-jet's open hatch. More by luck than design, Drinkwater snagged the heli-jet's landing strut, barely managing to hold on as his legs swung wildly underneath him, threatening to tear him loose.

"Sarge!"

Nick dropped onto his belly, Norbreck and Billings grabbing his legs as he strained to reach Drinkwater dangling precariously over a thirty-foot drop. The sergeant's shades flashed in the sunlight as they flew off his face. For a brief moment, their eyes met. Nick saw the fear in the sergeant's eyes as he managed to grab one of his hands. Grunting, Nick hauled back, bringing Drinkwater back into the cabin, Norbreck grabbing his belt and bracing his foot on the heli-jets bulwark. With a gasp, Drinkwater slumped against the wall of the heli-jet, relief etched on his sweat-soaked face as he nodded thanks at Nick.

Below, Penny was struggling to climb the swaying ladder.

"For fuck's sake! Hold this bloody thing steady!" yelled Nick at the pilot.

"We're overloaded!" the pilot shouted back. "The wind's making it impossible to keep level."

"Just fucking do it!" Nicked screamed and turned his attention back to Penny.

Long, agonising minutes later, he hauled the exhausted girl into the cabin, hugging her close.

"Thank God," he whispered into her ear as the shaken girl clung to him.

Only Flash remained trapped on the rooftop, sweeping his laser back and forth in wide arcs, slowly being driven back to the corner of the building. Nick realised the heli-jet wouldn't be able to get into position soon enough.

"Flash!" he yelled. "Flash! Jump for the ladder! Jump!"

Flash glanced up, then at the ladder swinging in the air fifteen metres beyond the edge of the rooftop behind him. Standing in the hatchway, Nick watched as his friend unclipped his laser pack, threw it at the advancing hummers, turned, and dived for the ladder. For a heart-stopping moment, Flash seemed to hang in mid-leap as the ladder swung away from him. Nick gasped, his heart in his mouth as he leaned precariously out of the hatch. Then Flash's hand closed about the rung of the ladder just as a vagrant gust of wind hit the heli-jet. The craft dropped, almost on its side.

"We're too heavy!" yelled the pilot, desperately fighting for control.

Caught unawares, Nick lost his grip and pitched out of the hatchway. He screamed as his arms flailed, plummeting down toward another rooftop below. He had a brief, wild glimpse of Flash trying to catch him as he flew past. Penny's scream was loud in his ears as he crashed through the flimsy material of the roof and was lost amidst clouds of billowing pink dust.

"Turn back! Get down there!" yelled Drinkwater aghast, looking as the hummers swirled towards the clouds of pink.

"There's no way we can go down there!" the co-pilot shouted. "We've lost him!"

"No!" Penny said, whirling on him. "We've got to get him out!"

Drinkwater took the distraught girl in his arms, holding her tight, knowing there was nothing they could do. Norbreck and Billings hauled Flash into the cabin.

"We gotta help him!" Flash said, looking back down. "We can't just leave him! We got to go back!"

"Stand down, Ranger!" Drinkwater said tersely. "There's nothing we can do." Drinkwater held onto Penny, maybe as much for himself as for her comfort. "God help us. There's nothing..."

\*

"We've got to at least make sure," Drinkwater said.

"You know as well as I do, Sergeant, what you'll find... Nothing," said Telfast evenly.

"Sir, with respect, he was my squad leader, a good Ranger, one of the best. I owe it to him to make sure... Sir," Drinkwater said stiffly.

Telfast looked at the sergeant standing at attention in front of his desk.

"It could be considered an opportunity for further recon, Sir," added Drinkwater.

"Okay, Sergeant. If this is what it takes to get you out of my face. Go look for your Ranger," Telfast relented.

"Sir, thank you, Sir!" Drinkwater saluted and hurried back to the barracks.

\*

An hour later, they were hovering over the same spot where Nick had fallen. There was no sign of the hummers, or Nick.

"I'm going down," Drinkwater said. "Hold your position here," he said to the heli-jet pilot, the same one as before.

"I'm coming with you," said Penny, picking up a rescue harness.

Drinkwater was about to deny Penny's request. The look on her face made him mentally shrug and let it go. After a quick descent, covered by the rest of the squad and the 120 Laser cannon, Penny and Drinkwater made a quick circuit of the area. There was no wind. Everything was eerily quiet. There was no sign there had even been any hummer activity in the area.

"Nothing," said Penny, exiting the derelict building Nick had fallen into.

Except for the obvious roof collapse, there was no sign of the Ranger.

"Not even a button."

"We knew that this was the probability," Drinkwater said heavily. "I just needed to be absolutely certain..."

Penny looked at him, her eyes shining with tears.

"We've lost him." Her voice was low and as bleak as a Siberian landscape.

\*

"I can't believe he's gone," said Flash, absently sipping his beer straight from the bottle.

"Me either," said Norbreck. "But he died as he lived, helping people. That's gotta say something."

"He's always helped, right from the start," put in Billings.

"Yeah, he sorted me out on the weapons range. Never forget that," said Flash.

"And me with the damned laser pack. Could never get it on my back without a struggle. Then Nick showed me a simple trick to line it up and bang... No more probs."

"What about that guy that lost it... Fuck, what was his name? On top of the wall when his laser blew...?" Flash's face creased as he dug for the name.

"Simmerson," said Norbreck.

"Yeah, Simmerson... That's it," agreed Flash. "Nick didn't even hesitate, just tossed the guy off the wall. The whole lot of us could have been vaporised if not for Nick."

"He wasn't happy about that," said Norbreck. "Killing a brother didn't sit well with Nick. He was broody about it for days after."

"That's how he was," said Billings.

The crowded bar bustled around them as they sat in the booth in the corner, a small island of remembrance for their fallen leader. They had held a small requiem that afternoon. The whole company had turned out. Sergeant Drinkwater had led the soliloquies. Even Commander Telfast made a brief respectful appearance.

They knew tomorrow their lives would go on, duties would be carried out, the wall awaited them. But for now, they told stories, remembered small anecdotes, mourned for their friend and brother. Penny sat in the corner of the booth, just listening, her beer untouched, her heart breaking and filled with loss. Tears unshed stung the backs of her eyes. The tears would come later, when she was alone in her bed and no one could see.

They fell quiet, each lost in their own thoughts, each trying to make sense of it all and failing.

"The best of us," murmured Billings.

"Shit..." said Flash, swiping at the pretend speck of dust in his eye.

\*

"Come on, move! Move!" yelled Sergeant Drinkwater. "You're not on bloody vacation. Get into formation!"

First Squad waited for the lifts to take them to the top of the wall. It was their second day. The twin suns were merciless, the temperature just over a hundred degrees. Today was going to be a bitch.

If anyone noticed the renewed vehemence First Squad unleashed on the relentless hummers, no one mentioned it. Wave after wave of liquid death poured down on the persistent

creatures swarming at the base of the wall. In the great scheme of things, it seemed futile, hardly making any difference at all. The hummers just kept coming... And then, they didn't.

They retreated mid-afternoon, giving the troops a brief respite to rest, drink, and for those who could, eat. Night was falling, with no sign of the hummers returning to renew their mindless attack. First Squad was relieved.

The next day, they waited in the blistering heat on top of the wall, but the landscape remained eerily quiet, devoid of any sign of life. Even the wind seemed listless. The day dragged by interminably with still no show. The first time it had ever happened, a day without the nerve-shredding noise eating into the brains of the troops. The eye-searing glare of the lasers sweeping the wall and terrain below.

"What the fuck's going on?" Flash asked no one in particular. "Where are the little bastards?"

"I don't like it," said Norbreck. "Do you think they're planning something?"

"They're bugs," sneered Billings. "Mindless, acting on instinctive reflex. They can't think."

"Do we know that for sure?" queried Norbreck.

The long day finally ended without anything happening. The conversation in the bar that night was muted, the absentee bugs being the main topic of discussion. Some crazy rumours were bandied about, anything from subterranean tunnels to mutating into winged insects. Penny listened for a while, but she wasn't really there. Her mind was... God knew where. Nick wasn't mentioned at all, almost as if they had forgotten him already, though she knew that wasn't true. It was the way of the soldier. Speak only of the victories; let the dead sleep in your hearts. She slipped quietly away.

The following day was another day without action. The hummers did not make an appearance. After a couple of hours, Commander Telfast came on top of the wall, accompanied

by his staff. For long minutes, they surveyed the terrain through powerful binoculars, making quiet comments, then looking some more.

The third day was the same, an empty landscape. Ironically the troops were becoming uneasy. Months of slaughtering billions of insects, suffering the interminable invasion of their minds and ears of the awful noise razoring across their nerve endings to this insufferable silence. It was a war of reverse attrition.

"What is this?" complained Flash as First Squad sat in the shade of the wall. "What are they waiting for?"

"The sixty-four-thousand-dollar question..." said Norbreck.

"Do you think they have finally given up?" ventured Billings.

The exchanged glances between them proved none of them believed it.

"This bloody silence is worse than the hummers' susurrations..." said Norbreck. "Like the calm before the storm."

"Oh, that's right, make us all feel better," said Flash.

"Just stating facts, man," returned Norbreck.

"Maybe you should just keep 'em to yourself," Flash said sourly.

Before Norbreck could answer, the siren began to sound. With a clatter of weapons and equipment, the troopers scrambled to their feet, helmets were shoved on heads, laser rifles primed as they came to order.

The tension was palpable. Hundreds of eyes scoured the empty wasteland fronting the wall... It was empty. Unease rippled through the ranks.

"Easy, easy. Maintain the line," soothed a voice in their helmet speakers. "Keep alert, be ready for anything..."

The troops were ready, but nothing was happening.

"There," barked a voice, one of the troopers. "Down by the rocks, two o'clock."

All eyes swivelled in the same direction; murmurs floated along the entire line of soldiers as a figure staggered out from behind a large pile of pink rocks about five hundred metres from the base of the wall. Dressed in dark blue, the clothes dirty and ragged, the face covered with pink dust, streaked through with lines of sweat, making it difficult to make out the features, hair plastered to the skull.

"That's a Ranger." The words fluttered up and down the line.

Penny's heart leapt in her chest. She turned as two small medi-craft flew overhead, heading straight for the staggering figure. He was indistinguishable, unrecognisable, but she dared hope. She glanced at Flash, who was looking at her.

"Oh my god..." Penny said in a small voice.

"Keep alert, watch the perimeter," a voice barked in her headphones.

The man in the wasteland dropped to the ground and lay still just as the medi-craft began to descend. The other remained aloft, keeping watch. Penny fought the urge to rush from the wall, knowing in her heart what her eyes were telling her was right.

"You can't," said Flash, divining Penny's hesitancy. "Keep in rank. You'll be deserting your post."

"But..."

"Rest easy, Ranger," came a steadying voice behind her. "If it's Ranger Dale, we'll know soon enough. You suck it up and maintain your position."

"Dinks..."

"Sergeant Drinkwater, or Sarge..." corrected the gruff soldier.

"Sarge," Penny said, coming to attention.

Drinkwater carried on walking down the line as Penny watched the heli-craft medics disembark, quickly check over the fallen Ranger, and put him onto a stretcher which was then loaded onto the medi-craft. Seconds later, it was winging its way back to base.

\*

"It's Nick," Drinkwater said three hours later outside the small infirmary. "He's in good shape, no obvious injuries, but he's unconscious."

Penny's face twisted with worry as she stood with the rest of First Squad listening to their sergeant, desperately fighting the tears that threatened.

"Can we see him?" asked Flash.

"No, they're still working on him," said Drinkwater. "Maybe a little later. Right now, I suggest you get out of that combat gear and shower. You're offending my olfactory senses something bad."

Reluctantly, First Squad turned to walk away.

"Ranger Warden, a word," Drinkwater said.

Penny stopped as the sergeant waited for the others to leave.

"He's fine," the sergeant said when they were on their own. "A few bruises, some contusions, nothing major, and dehydrated... How the hell he survived I have no idea..."

"The hummers didn't touch him?" Penny asked incredulously.

"Not a single bite," Drinkwater said. "It sounds impossible. They were all over him..." he said, thinking about that day.

"How did he get away? How is it even possible?" Penny said. "I'm glad, of course... But where has he been these last three days? The hummers..."

"We won't have the answers 'til he wakes up," Drinkwater said. "I didn't want to tell you this in front of the others because I don't want any misconceptions being construed. I owe your dad, but I don't want that to be common knowledge.

"You can tell the others, but keep it within First Squad, and I'd appreciate you being discreet about our connection."

"I will, Dinks..." Penny turned to go. "You'll let me know if there's any change?"

"Affirmative," Drinkwater said.

\*

Two weeks. Penny sat at his bedside at every opportunity when off-duty, the other members of First Squad paying frequent visits, especially Flash. Drinkwater looked in at regular intervals but there was no change. Nick remained unconscious, unmoving.

The doctors could find no reason for the coma-like state. Nick was in perfect health. Except for minor injuries, there wasn't a mark on him. Extensive tests showed no organ or brain damage. Every test came back negative. His vitals were good and strong. He just wouldn't wake up.

"You need to get some sleep, Soldier," Drinkwater said.

Penny looked at him from the bedside. "I'm fine, Dinks," she said, despite her pale complexion and dark-ringed eyes.

"Yeah, you look it," Drinkwater said. "You're pulling long tours on the wall and spending every given minute here with him. It's not good. You need to rest."

"The wall has been quiet for almost two weeks without a single hummer attack. I manage to doze a little during my shift... Our secret, right?" She smiled.

"Some secret," Drinkwater replied. "What do you think all the other grunts are doing up there?"

Penny laughed. There was no humour in the sound.

"What do you think happened out there, Dinks? How did he survive?"

Standing at the foot of the bed, looking down at the pale, still figure with crisp white sheets up to his chin and various tubes needled into his body, the sergeant frowned.

"I don't know, Penny," he said. "By rights, he should be dead. If not from the fall, then what happened after. I always figured there was something special about him, saw it from the off... But this, this is off the scale."

"He has to wake up," Penny said.

"He's young. he's fit. There's no discernible injury..." Drinkwater said. "It's just a matter of time. But I'm more concerned about you right now. When was the last time you ate?"

"Breakfast," Penny said.

"No, you didn't," Drinkwater said. "I was looking for you. You need to go eat now. You've less than eight hours before you go back up on the wall and I need you fit and alert.

"He's in good hands. I'll let you know the moment there's any change."

"But..." Penny began to protest.

"That's an order, Ranger," Drinkwater said sternly.

Defeated by orders, Penny got up from her chair.

"The minute there's any change...?" she said.

"Go," said Drinkwater.

\*

Sleep came easy, despite her worry. She grabbed a sandwich from the canteen and returned to the barracks. Penny knew nothing until she was roughly awakened by someone shaking her by the shoulder.

"Sergeant Drinkwater wants you to report to the infirmary, ASAP," said the orderly Penny vaguely recognised from the hospital. She sat up on her bunk, rubbing her eyes. Still in uniform, her sandwich half eaten on the bedside cabinet.

"ASAP," repeated the orderly.

Then the message penetrated her fogged brain, and she was moving like a whippet off the bed and out the door.

The rest of First Squad were already at the hospital, crowding around Drinkwater.

"Sarge?" Penny said breathlessly.

"Okay. You're all here because I don't wanna have to keep repeating myself." Drinkwater glanced at Penny. "Nick's awake. He's weak, disorientated, as you would expect. He hasn't said anything, but he's taking on fluids. He's sleeping normally right now, no more tubes, just a monitor keeping a check on his vitals."

"He hasn't said anything, about what happened?" asked Flash.

"No. I told you, he hasn't said anything. But the doctors tell me he is fit and there are no signs of trauma of any kind. He just needs to rest and regain his strength. That's it, carry on."

A slight nod directed at Penny indicated she should hang back.

"Walk with me," Drinkwater said as Penny fell in beside him. "I told the doctors about your connection to Ranger Dale. They feel you might be able to help him in his recovery."

"How?" Penny said, puzzled.

"Nick is displaying signs of confusion, withdrawal. To put it plainly, he doesn't know where and possibly who, he is. "

"He's got amnesia?" Penny said, appalled.

"The doctors aren't sure. They're concerned about his lack of response. They told me a whole bunch of medical gobbledegook, the why and wherefore, but that's the crux of it all.

"They think a familiar face, especially someone special to him, might jolt him back to reality."

"I can see him?" Penny said.

"Sergeant...?"

The orderly was standing in the doorway of Nick's room.

"Thank you," Drinkwater said, turning back to Penny.

"He's awake. Go see him, but no stress. Just see how he reacts."

Penny's heart was thundering in her chest as she entered the sterile white room. Everything was white, the walls, the ceiling, only the floor, a pale green offered any colour. Nick lay back on a pile of pillows, sitting up but with his eyes closed. He looked serene, at peace. His handsome face in repose, as if he didn't have a care in the world, let alone surviving what should have been a little more than a near-death experience. His hands were folded over his stomach, his deep tan accentuated by the snow-white blankets. A picture of health.

"Nick?" Penny said softly, approaching the bed.

His eyes opened immediately, regarding her calmly. Penny was suddenly afraid, as she saw no recognition in their blue depths.

"It's Penny," she said, now beside the bed. "How are you?"

His smile lit up his face. "I'm good, thanks."

"You had us all worried," Penny said, her hand resting on his. "I was worried. I thought I had lost you."

He looked curiously at her hand resting on his and then looked at her concerned expression.

"You don't have to worry about me ... Penny. I'm going to be fine," he said.

"You could have died..." Penny couldn't help the tears. "What happened out there, Nick? What happened to you?"

His face creased, looking past Penny, trying to recollect.

"I don't know..." Nick said slowly. "I can't remember anything... The last thing I do remember is being in the barracks with the sergeant." He shrugged. "Everything is blank after that."

"Nothing?" Penny said.

Nick shook his head. "It's like my head is shrouded in fog and I can't see through it."

"Do... Do you remember me?" Penny asked tentatively, afraid of the answer.

"Of course, and Flash, Norbreck, Billings... First Squad."

Penny could feel her heart breaking.

\*

"He doesn't remember..." Penny said, twisting the tissue in her hands. "He doesn't remember what we had... Have."

"He will," Drinkwater said. "Just give him time."

"He wasn't even sure what my name was, Dinks... He hesitated before saying it. He was smiling, but it never reached his eyes, and his voice, his tone... It was like he was reading from a script."

Drinkwater pulled up a stool and sat in front of Penny, who was slouched on her bunk, her head down, her face wet with tears.

"What the hell happened to him out there?" she moaned.

"Whatever it was, it was traumatic enough to cause his temporary amnesia. The doctors tell me that's not unusual. Happens a lot, especially on the battlefield. It's a defence mechanism

to allow the mind to come to terms with the experience. It takes time, but Nick will come back to us, I promise."

"What if he doesn't?" Penny whispered in a low, tear-filled voice.

\*

There was no reason for Nick to remain in bed any longer. He was pronounced fit and well physically. He was beginning to interact with his peers, like the old Nick, but as Penny watched him fooling around with Flash and the others in the barracks three days later, she detected a certain ... falseness. He reminded her of an actor in one of those old holograph movies she had seen back on Earth. A bad actor...

"It's good to have him back, isn't it?" Flash said beside Penny.

"It is," Penny agreed without conviction.

"Lucky bastard has been given special dispensation on the wall... He won't have to go up there for another few weeks," continued Flash.

"Hardly lucky," Penny said. "He paid a hell of a price."

"Hey, come on, it's all good. Bugman is back, safe and sound. There's been no sign of the hummers for nearly three weeks, and we've got a four-day furlough coming up. Can't get any better than that!" Flashed enthused, taking a swig of his beer.

"Don't call him that!" Penny snapped.

"What?" said Flash in surprise.

"Bugman... I hate it," Penny snapped.

"It's a nickname, that's all," Flash said.

"A stupid nickname..." Penny said and walked off.

\*

"He's not right," Penny said to Drinkwater as they walked across the compound towards the swimming pool. "He looks okay. He laughs when he's supposed to, listens. He's not eating, never going to the mess, always makes excuses which I know are not true. Something is missing, and it's more than just his memory."

"I don't know what you want me to say, Penny," said Drinkwater. "I've been keeping an eye on his welfare. The doctors say he is progressing well, improving every day."

"That's physical," argued Penny. "He's... He's like a robot. He smiles and laughs, even jokes, but there's no feeling there..." She hesitated. "I got him alone last night, tried to get ... close... Do you know what he said? He said it was 'inappropriate' for the two of us to have a physical relationship. We were Rangers, we should respect the uniform..."

"Penny..." Drinkwater began.

"Dinks, he couldn't keep his hands off me before... We were close, so close. On every level. We never stopped thinking about each other. We were already making plans about what we were going to do when this tour was over." She laughed, a brittle, tenuous sound. "When I reminded him about our plans last night, he joked we were going to go to Colorado and start a farm... But it was like he went through a series of possible answers on some list in his head and selected the most suitable."

Drinkwater frowned. "That's what I told him I was going to do when I retired," he said.

Penny looked at him. "Did you invite him to join you?"

"No, we were just chewing the fat..."

"Why would he say that, then?"

"Maybe his memories are confused, mixed up," Drinkwater ventured.

"No, it's more than that..." Penny said. "It's like he's trying hard to fit in... I just don't get it."

"I'll keep an eye on him... Make sure he's okay. Meanwhile, you have to quit worrying and start concentrating on your duties."

"Yes, Sir..." Penny smiled wanly.

\*

Drinkwater stood in the deep shadow of the heli-jet hangar. With his black skin and dark blue uniform, he was almost invisible as he watched Nick Dale walking casually toward the storage hangar next door. The rest of First Squad was on the wall, their last day before their four-day furlough.

The sergeant watched as Nick glanced left and right before slipping into the storage hangar. Breaking cover, Drinkwater moved to the hangar door and peered inside. Nick was moving along the line of storage containers, opening hatches and peering in, then moving on to the next one.

"They're all empty," Drinkwater said, stepping into the warehouse. "The verdanium shipment is already on its way to Earth."

"When?" Nick asked, unfazed by Drinkwater's sudden appearance.

"A week ago," Drinkwater said, approaching him. "Why would you concern yourself with that?"

Nick's face creased. "There's still time," he said, almost to himself.

"Time? Time for what?" Drinkwater asked. "What's going on Nick?"

"You need to recall the shipment. Bring it back," Nick said. "Now."

"I don't think I can do that," Drinkwater said. "Not without a damn good reason. Have you got a reason?"

"How much verdanium is in the shipment?" Nick asked.

“Okay. Enough of this bullshit,” Drinkwater said. “Tell me what’s going on, Soldier. Why are you suddenly so interested in the verdanium?”

“You are not listening,” Nick said, moving past Drinkwater. “You need to get to the communications shack and recall the shipment before they get out of range.”

Drinkwater grabbed Nick’s arm and pulled him around to face him, the sudden movement knocking the sunglasses from Nick’s face. The old soldier involuntarily recoiled as the arm felt strange under his restraining hand, waxy, malleable, like silly putty.

“What the hell...?”

“Sergeant, take me to the communications shack... Recall the shipment immediately.” Nick’s voice was flat, a drone.

Something black flowed across Nick’s pupils, like ink, there, and then gone. Drinkwater thought he had imagined it—a trick of the poor lighting in the hangar. Then it happened again.

“Fuck.” He went for his gun.

The pistol had barely cleared the holster when it was snatched from his hand. Before he could react, Drinkwater found himself staring down the barrel of his own gun.

“The communications shack,” Nick Dale said coldly, the gun pointed at Drinkwater’s head.

Drinkwater stepped back at the vehemence of the sudden outburst. The young soldier’s facial skin rippled and despite the obvious anger, his eyes were totally blank, expressionless, deep wells of inky nothingness.

“I will not hesitate to shoot you, or anyone else that tries to hinder me.” Nick’s voice dropped to a flat monotone as they exited the warehouse.

“Are you going to tell me what this is all about?” Drinkwater tried again.

“After the mining transport has been recalled,” Nick said in his awful voice.

Surreptitious glances showed the young soldier was savvy enough to keep his distance as they made their way across the parade ground. The gun was jammed into the side pocket of the light jacket he wore, and Drinkwater had no doubt he would use it if provoked.

The day was a typically hot, bright day. The twin suns beat down on the enclosure mercilessly. Despite the glare, Drinkwater noted that Nick wasn't wearing sunglasses, nor was there a single drop of sweat on his face or bare arms...

No one took any notice of the two soldiers casually walking across the enclosure. One or two privates saluted Drinkwater as they passed. The sergeant thought of chancing disarming Nick, but years of experience told him to wait. The young soldier was alert, ready, and he would use the gun.

The communications shack was on the right, a Nissan hut with a bright blue façade.

"What do you hope to achieve by this?" Drinkwater asked.

"Saving lives," Nick said flatly. "Thousands, maybe millions of lives."

"How does that work?" Drinkwater said, opening the door of the shack.

"By recalling the verdanium," Nick said. "Now go inside."

The interior of the shack was a cool relief from the blistering heat outside, though it didn't seem to make any difference to Nick. Three radio technicians sat at a long table loaded with radio equipment, their backs to the room, lightweight wireless headphones wrapped around their heads, as they monitored various frequencies. A fourth man, a lieutenant, was sat at a desk at the far end of the shack perusing papers.

Nick pushed Drinkwater to the left as he stepped right, taking command of the room.

"You!" he shouted at the soldier sitting at the desk. "Up, now! You three, in the corner!"

All four men just looked at him in surprise, not moving.

"Now!" Nick barked, brandishing the gun.

"Who the hell..?" began the soldier at the desk, rising to his feet.

"Do as he says," Drinkwater intervened.

"You too, get over with them," Nick ordered the sergeant.

Drinkwater complied.

Once they were all herded into the corner, Nick stepped out into the middle of the room.

"Jesus! Look at his eyes," gasped one of the soldiers.

"Who's the senior operator?" Nick demanded.

The lieutenant stepped forward; his name tag identified him as Gregg.

"What the hell is going on here? Sergeant?"

"It's his show." Drinkwater nodded towards Nick.

"You're the senior radio operator," insisted Nick. "You need to contact the Earthbound mining freighter..."

"The Mona Luna?" queried the lieutenant. "Why?"

"Just do it, now!" ordered Nick. "Tell her it's imperative she return to Nova Ventura immediately..."

"I can't do that, not without written orders." He glanced at Drinkwater. "You know that."

"This is your written order." Nick waggled the gun at the lieutenant. "Call them! Now!"

"Lieutenant Gregg?" One of the soldiers in the corner spoke tentatively. "The Mona Luna, she's out of radio range, Sir, as of 0300 hours yesterday."

"You heard?" Gregg said, addressing Nick.

He remained expressionless; the gun levelled at the five men.

"What's this all about, Nick?" Drinkwater said. "Why is the freighter so all-fired important? Why does it have to return to Nova Ventura?"

Nick said nothing. He hardly seemed to be paying attention, as if assessing what his next move might be.

"I can try and contact them," suggested one of the operators. "Maybe boost the signal a little..."

"Do it," Nick ordered.

Sitting at his station the operator flipped various switches, tuned in a dial, he flicked a switch on the adjacent comms board, glancing at the lieutenant as he altered his head microphone.

"Alpha One Base, Nova Ventura calling Mona Luna, do you copy?"

The pause seemed endless. Nothing. He tried again.

"They're definitely out of range, probably kicked into HyperDrive. We won't be able to contact them 'til they reach Earth."

"Okay, enough of this bullshit, Soldier. You need to tell us what's going on," Drinkwater said, stepping forward. "There's no need for all this."

The movement by the door of the shack had not gone unnoticed.

"There's no need for guns or coercion. Just tell us what you need."

"How far out is the freighter?" Nick asked.

"I don't know without checking," said Gregg. "It left over a week ago..."

"Could a subspace cruiser catch up to it?" Nick cut in.

The door inched open behind him.

"Maybe," said Gregg. "But it would be a suicide mission if the cruiser didn't catch up to the freighter within the next forty-eight hours. It would run out of fuel and it would be a one-way trip. You'd be crazy to try it."

"There is no choice," said Nick.

"Put the gun down, Ranger!" The voice was terse, commanding. "Do it now!"

The security guard was crouching just inside the doorway, his automatic rifle trained on Nick. A second guard, equally armed, stood in the doorway.

The atmosphere within the shack became electric. Tension froze the scene as Drinkwater watched Nick scrutinising the two security personnel, weighing up the odds.

"Don't do it, Nick," Drinkwater said tightly. "Just put the gun down. Let's talk this through."

"That ship must be stopped," persisted Nick.

In that instant, Drinkwater knew...

"Down!" he yelled, throwing himself flat.

Nick whirled on the security detail as the others dropped to the floor. There were two sharp cracks and Nick spun away, the gun flying from his fist. Striking the wooden boards, he rolled and laid still as the security team rushed forward.

"Wait! Wait!" Drinkwater said, scabbling across the floor to where Nick lay ominously still.

He shuddered as his fingers closed over Nick's shoulder, turning him over. The flesh seemed to writhe beneath his touch, his head lolled into his arms, his weird black eyes still open and staring at the ceiling. Two holes, closely placed, had torn his chest open, leaving two gaping holes. Amazingly, there was no blood, not a single drop.

"What the fuck..." Drinkwater gasped disbelievingly.

He started violently as Nick's hand lurched up and gripped the front of his tunic in a vice-like grip.

"Stop them," Nick said, his voice still flat, emotionless. "Stop the freighter. Don't let them reach your world."

"Nick, I don't get it. What the fuck is it? What are you trying to say?"

"Nick Dale is dead," said the voice. "He died the day he fell from your flying machine. We took his body, at last, after so long... So long. We finally found one of your kind we could meld with without extinguishing its life completely..."

The dark, oil-slick eyes bored into Drinkwater's uncomprehending face.

"We couldn't communicate with you; we had no voice," the toneless voice continued. "At first there was no danger, as long as the metal you call verdanium remained on our home world it was safe. But you sent it off-world... And there lay your mistake. We tried to stop you, but were powerless to do so. Ultimately all we could do was distract you, delay you, prevent you from exporting more of the verdanium off world... We failed.

"Then, finally, one came to us... Literally fell from the sky. One we could use to end the slaughter of our kind, and perhaps save yours."

Drinkwater looked at the shocked faces of the men who surrounded him, hoping to God they were hearing what he was hearing, that he wasn't on the brink of madness...

The hand tightened on his tunic.

"You must stop the freighter... You cannot let it reach your world, enter your atmosphere... The verdanium. It will degrade, become unstable. It will destroy your world... Many will die. You have no idea of the power it will unleash... Nothing will survive."

The hand dropped away from Drinkwater's tunic to slap limply onto the floor with a loud smack. The whole body rippled violently, the skin undulating, stretching. Rents and tears appeared in the roiling flesh and dozens of hummers scurried out of the long dead flesh.

With a horrified cry, Drinkwater scooted back away from the grisly remains as the shiny, black creatures scuttled across the floor, lightning fast, bony legs clicking on the hard floor as they disappeared into the dark nooks and crannies and were gone.

"What the fuck was that?" Gregg exclaimed, his face the colour of curds.

His mind struggling with the dry, monotone voice still rolling around in his head, the grizzled sergeant watched as Nick Dale's body flattened, deflating like a punctured balloon until only skin and bone remained... A puppet.

"Sergeant...?" demanded Gregg.

Drinkwater looked at him, his mind continuing to process. His mouth worked, but nothing came out. All these years, the hummers, the wall, the terrible slaughter of the bugs... Billions, incinerated. And the explosions on Earth, the destruction of the three labs, it all made sense now, a terrible, horrifying sense.

"They're not our enemies." Drinkwater's voice was a whisper. "They never were."

Snapping out of his stupor, knowing what had to be done, he turned to Lieutenant Gregg, his dark face alive with growing dread.

"Contact Departures, tell them to fuel and stock a subspace cruiser for immediate departure... Do it now!" he yelled rushing for the door.

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## *LUNCH IS SERVED*

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White light, blinding, it lit up everything, the room, outside my window... A sudden glaring flash seen even through my sleep mask. A lurid radiance that had no heat. Sheer brilliance. It was there for a brief second and then gone—Wasn't it? I pulled the sleep mask off my face, sat up, the bedclothes pooling about my waist. Everything was eerily quiet, muffled. Then I remembered the earplugs. I screwed them out of my ears and screamed...

The high-pitched shriek cut into my brain like a chainsaw, splitting my head, almost bursting my eardrums. Frantically, I stuffed the wax earplugs back, breathing heavily as the banshee howling receded. The world felt unnatural, muffled. I felt cut off, alone, deprived of my hearing, silence. An odd feeling in the middle of a bustling cosmopolitan city and the familiarity of my bedroom. I did not like being unable to hear. It was—unnerving.

Throwing back the bedclothes, I got up, the lino cold on my bare feet. There was something else. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I looked down at the floor, wondering at the throbbing I could feel coming up through the soles of my feet, rhythmic, pounding. I frowned. Road works? Pneumatic drills? It didn't make sense. It was Sunday.

Pulling back the curtains, I peered out of the window onto a bright spring morning. The sky was blue, the sun was shining, and there was no sign of any road works out in the street. There were people, though, several people, wandering about, hands fluttering before them like errant butterflies, stumbling, with no apparent direction, blundering into obstacles, lampposts, parked cars, and walls. It took a few seconds until I realised—they were all blind!

"What the hell is going on here?" I muttered hurriedly throwing on a t-shirt, jeans, and struggling into my trainers.

Opening the front door, I reeled back, gagging. The smell that assaulted my olfactory senses was horrendous, putrid. My hand covered my nose and mouth, but the stench was unstoppable. I staggered into the street, bending over at the kerb, and vomited, a vile, watery mess that splashed into the gutter. Last night's curry. Through watering eyes, I gasped for breath, my hands on my knees. The smell wasn't going away.

Fighting back my gorge, I managed to gain a modicum of control over my heaving stomach, breathing deeply through my mouth, spitting out the last vestiges of vomit. Maybe a half-dozen people were in the street. I could see their mouths working, but heard nothing. My earplugs were doing their work. Several people had stains down their fronts, sickly browns and greens, evidence that the stink had gotten them too. A woman wandered close to me. I gasped at the milky whiteness of her eyes. Her light blue dress was filthy, torn at the shoulder, her knees were grazed, and her hands cut from obvious falls. Her skin was pallid, the colour of cream cheese. Tiny sores were erupting over her flesh, and she looked somehow—bloated. At first, I thought she was just plump, but seeing some of the other people revealed they all had the same puffy, bloated look.

The High Street was carnage. I stood on the corner, observing the death and destruction surrounding me. A double-decker bus had ploughed into a bus stop, killing the queue of waiting, expectant people. Bodies lay crushed and broken under the vehicle's wheels. *They didn't expect that*, I thought darkly.

Two were pinned between the bus and the bus stop shelter, which leaned drunkenly from the impact. The bus driver was slumped over the wheel, his face oddly flattened against the windscreen, his head at an impossible angle, his eyes blank white.

Nearby, an old man was sitting on the kerb, crying, raising his hands to the heavens. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but his expression was pitiful as tears gushed down his cheeks from white, milky eyes.

Cars had collided, steam rising from ruptured radiators, the stench of petrol overlaid the smell of decay, and the road was wet with a mixture of the flammable liquid and dark oil with rainbows dancing on its glistening, spreading surface. One car was buried deep into a storefront, Boots the Chemist. Glass lay shattered like glittering ice all over the pavement.

A child, a little girl, no more than five or six years old was standing sightless in the road screaming holding onto the lifeless hand of her mother sprawled by a crashed motorcycle, the rider was nearby, a crumpled pile of leather wrapped around a concrete lamp post.

Everywhere was death and blood and torn bodies. People were wailing, vehicles stayed where they had stopped, some with engines still idling. A few people were blundering around, others just sat on kerbs, in shop fronts, in the middle of the road, by walls and lampposts. They all looked the same, white-eyed, bloated, and covered in sores.

There was nothing I could do for them. I felt sick to my stomach as I made my way through the high street, heading towards the police station on Jordan Road. If I was to find any information about what was going on, I hoped it would be there.

Weaving in and out of the helpless throng, I passed by the library, the front steps crowded with people, clinging together, seeking some sort of comfort in the close proximity of others, quiet, vulnerable, lost. I noted some of them had blood trickling from their ears, blind and deaf. They must be terrified.

Turning the corner onto Seymour Street, I abruptly stopped, my jaw dropping open in complete surprise at the bizarre spectacle before me. There was a crowd of people, all blind. Some were still in their nightclothes, pyjamas, dressing gowns, others were only half-dressed, walking

in three lines, heading down the road. As they shuffled along, I saw they were all holding onto a length of brightly coloured green rope and being herded by a woman dressed in a bright red corset that barely contained her ample breasts, cinched tight around her slim waist and barely covered her shapely rump. Fishnet stockings covered her legs, kept up by a black garter belt. Black patent high heels adorned her feet.

With a shock, I realised the woman could see!

"Hey! Hey!" I yelled, my voice sounding muffled in my own ears.

The woman stopped, turning to look at me as I ran towards her. Bright blue eyes flashed from an oval face surrounded by a profusion of black foaming hair floating about her narrow shoulders. She shouted at me, brandishing a length of wood. I stopped. She continued to shout at me, but I couldn't hear.

Another woman came out from behind the lines of people dressed equally as strangely as the first.

A shiny black patent leather costume hugged her voluptuous body. Thigh-high leather boots. She was blonde, very pretty, with bright red lips. She carried a length of metal piping as she stood beside her friend.

I motioned my ears, shrugging my shoulders. Impatiently the dark-haired woman indicated I should remove the earplugs. I was a little reluctant and apprehensive as I slowly reached up and plucked the little wax balls tentatively from my ears, ready to stuff them back in at the slightest indication the squealing sound was still present.

It wasn't.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" demanded the woman.

"I'm nobody," I returned. "Just trying to find out what the hell is going on."

"Where have you been?" said the woman. "Didn't you see the light? Hear the noise?"

"I think so, I'm not sure. Something woke me up. I sleep badly, I take pills," I explained.

The dark-haired woman looked at the blonde. "I guess that would do it," she said enigmatically.

I sensed someone behind me. I whirled and gaped at the redhead who stood a few metres away, brandishing a hammer which she slapped into her hand as she smiled coyly at me, her dark brown eyes mocking. She was wearing a white version of the black patent leather outfit of the blonde, only her boots were knee high and white.

"What's happening?" I asked dumbly.

"Tammy, look!" said the redhead, looking towards the horizon.

"Damn!" Tammy, the dark-haired woman, cursed. "We need to get to the park, and quick."

The sky on the western horizon was turning a putrid green, swirling and roiling like spilt ink in water spreading out and staining the entire sky, moving rapidly towards us.

"The park?" I said.

"We've been taking people to the park. It's safer there, less chance of them having accidents," explained Tammy.

"But..." I looked her up and down.

"Oh, I get it. Why are we dressed like this?" she said.

I shrugged.

"We work at the Ebony Rooms, the nightclub down on Neston Street? We were closing for the night, punters all gone. We were having a nightcap before locking up. Luckily, we were in the dressing room when the god-awful wailing started. We stuffed our ears with cotton wool balls. We felt the thumping and trembling through the walls and decided to stay where we were until it all subsided.

"We came out at two o'clock this morning and found all this..."

"Where are the authorities? The police?" I asked.

"Probably as blind and deaf as these poor buggers," said Tammy. "We have some people at the park who can still see and hear, but not many. You'll be welcome."

I nodded, and the girls got the lines of people moving again. Over the roofs of the city, I could see brilliant flashes in the distance, bright green, bilious.

"We've no idea," said Tammy when I asked about the flashes of light. "It's been going on all morning."

As I walked beside her, I caught wind of her and wrinkled my nose. She smelled awful! Yet she seemed blissfully unaware of the terrible stench emanating from her body. I surreptitiously stepped away a few metres trying to get upwind, coming close to Suzie, the blonde, only to discover she smelled just as bad.

Bobbi, the redhead, passed me, going to the front of the line of people. She startled me by farting very loudly. I gasped at the rank odour flapping my hand in front of my face. None of the girls seemed to be bothered by their overt flatulence and pungent body odour.

The people shuffled along, guided by the life-saving rope. Ahead lay Winston Park, a large area laid to grassland. I could see columns of smoke rising above the parklands. Bright flames glowed against the backdrop of trees and bushes.

"We discovered that fire holds back the stench that seems to be everywhere," explained Tammy. "Besides, it gives the people some comfort feeling the heat against their bodies, helps them cope with their other afflictions."

"What's wrong with them, other than the obvious?" I asked. "They all look ill, the sores and the bloating."

"We think it was the gas," said Tammy.

"Gas?" I queried.

"Something else you must have missed," said Tammy, almost reproachfully. "A green gas covered the entire area like an old London fog, just before the bright flash and shrieking noise."

"But where's it all coming from? Is it a government project gone wrong? Some sort of eco-disaster?"

"No idea," said Tammy. "We'll have to wait on the authorities to tell us. Here we are. Let's get them into the park."

As Tammy walked away, she too farted, loud, raucous, and the stink was more horrendous than Bobbi's. I dropped back, gasping for air as the girls led the people through the park gates to the grasslands beyond.

The atmosphere took on a strange shade as the sky turned a lurid green. The air became thick, hard to breathe. In the park, were several bonfires. I could feel their heat even at this distance. Silhouetted shapes moved about the fires, whether it was a trick of the flames, or my eyes were simply playing games, I wasn't sure, but the figures looked bulky, out of shape.

The girls led the front of the line off to the right. I was a little concerned when I saw the people being led into pens, herded like cattle.

"It helps keep them safe," said Tammy. "We can't have them all blundering around loose, the fires... This way we can keep control while we prepare food and water."

It seemed reasonable enough.

The ground underneath my trainers was muddy, wet, and stank. Everything stank. It was worse than a pigsty. The mud had an odd, rusty-coloured hue to it, clinging, as thick as treacle. I didn't think it had rained, but my sleeping pills were pretty strong. I could probably sleep through a thunderstorm and not ever stir.

Then I could smell roasting meat. It was strong, battling for supremacy with the putrid stench that permeated everything. The result was not at all appetising. I moved towards the fires.

As I drew closer, I saw that there were several smaller fires crowded about with the bulky figures I had seen on entering the park. They were wearing some sort of hazmat suit, bright yellow. Puzzled, I went closer.

Clothes littered the muddy ground, lots of clothes, jackets, trousers, torn shirts, even underclothes, all in rags. I paused, puzzled. Crouching down, I picked up a woman's blouse. It was in tatters, from the frayed edges it was obvious it had been ripped forcibly apart and, through the mud soiling most of the blouse, I could clearly see blood stains.

"What the...?" I let the ruined garment plop back into the noisome mud, wiping my dirty fingers against the legs of my jeans in disgust.

From my new perspective, crouching on the ground, I could finally see beyond the figures crowding around the cooking fires. I saw two of the figures holding the naked body of a young woman, lolling limply in their grasp as a third figure took a long, chrome bar, pointed at one end, a crooked handle making up the other end of the bar. The figure held the woman's head as he inserted the pointed end of the chrome bar into her mouth and shoved hard. The bar slid down her throat, through her torso, and exited between her legs. Transfixed, I watched as her hands were bound above her head and her feet were tied to the bar like a suckling pig.

My legs turned to jelly, plopping me into the rank mud, horrified, as the skewered body was lifted and the bar was laid across the fire and settled on two metal uprights. One of the suited figures began to rotate the handle slowly.

Oblivious to the stinking, clinging mud, I rose shakily to my feet. Eyes wide, I observed a man being stripped of his clothes, ripped off him bodily until he was naked. Firelight glowed on the pale, bloated flesh as the man stood helpless. Hands held him, lifted him. The chrome rod glittered, reflecting the dancing flames.

One of the figures turned toward me. Through the clear Perspex visor covering the porcine visage he—it—regarded me with pig-like eyes, black, hard. Drool dribbled from the bristling snout; snot glistened at the wide, round nostrils. I staggered back, tripped, fell in the mud, horror flooding my bewildered senses. Laughter floated on the air behind me, sweet, bubbly, quickly turning into a grunting, gurgling guffaw. Tammy stood a few metres away, her hands on her shapely hips, her legs braced wide regarding me with a mocking, sardonic grin.

“I did tell you we were preparing food—” she said.

Her outline rippled, her flesh trembled, flowed, grew... The red corset split at the seams, fell away, pendulous breasts flopped onto her bloated belly, her head grew, the hair dropped away to flutter about her stumpy legs, cloven hoofs bursting out of the high-heeled shoes. Her ears grew long and floppy, bristling with coarse hair, as was her fleshy, wrinkled snout.

“Ah...” It was more of a grunt than a sigh. “Finally rid of that ugly human form.” She shook her whole bloated, fat body, and farted. She regarded me with black eyes. “Face it, if you had seen us like this, you wouldn’t have been so compliant... Always eager to help a damsel in distress, mmmmm?”

I scrambled hastily backwards through the mud and muck, the stink and stench. Words stuck in my throat, my eyes wide with horror, shaking my head in utter disbelief.

“The girls are here somewhere,” Tammy continued in her grunting, coarse voice. “They turned out to be a convenient disguise. Of course, we didn’t realise their mode of dress wasn’t the norm.” She waved a pudgy hand dismissively. “It all turned out well in the end. This world is a lot better than most we’ve dined at, very well stocked. We’ll be able to stay for quite a while...”

Another monster came and stood beside Tammy. The ruined, black, patent leather and black panties, stretched to their material limit barely able to contain her vast behind, identified her as Susie. She was picking her teeth with a piece of bone.

"So he finally got it?" Susie grunted.

"Yep," agreed Tammy. They both smiled at me... Sort of.

I broke and ran. Their gurgling, braying laughter floated after me as I ran pell-mell for the park gates.

"Don't stray too far," squealed Tammy. "This is only lunch; dinner is still to come...!"

"And you're invited..." Susie added, her grunting, wet laughter following me as I ran.

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## *PARTING WISH*

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Parkes and Son had been trading for over one hundred and eleven years, passed down from father to son over four generations. They were well known and respected to all the locals, always dependable to give the deceased a good send-off. Like this afternoon's service. Mr. Blenkensop, seventy-eight years old, good life, big attendance. Everyone praised Parkes and Son for their respectful and sincere handling of the whole service, the go-to funeral home.

Jeff Newberg, though, wasn't happy.

"I know it's a funeral, Jeff, and we have to keep a sombre and appropriate demeanour, but your face is like thunder... What's wrong?" asked Ashley Lombard.

Jeff pulled off the dark grey cravat and undid the top button of his pristine, white shirt, sighing heavily.

"I don't know Ash," he said, slumping down into the staffroom chair looking down at the floor.

"Well, it must be something," Ashley said, sitting opposite him. "Come on, spill it."

Jeff looked up at her, gazing into her light grey eyes. She was a pretty girl, two years his junior, twenty-three years old, light brown hair, soft brown eyes. "Haven't you noticed anything odd over the last couple of months?"

Ashley's brow furrowed. "Like what?"

Jeff shook his head. "Things haven't been right, nothing major, just little things."

"You're going to have to give me more than that," she encouraged.

Sitting back in the chair, Jeff briefly closed his eyes. He had seen things, odd things, out of kilter. But now that he was giving voice to his concerns, he started to have doubts.

"Several times over the last few months, I've found Reggie in the preparation room. He said he was just checking to make sure everything was in order."

"He's the boss's son. It's part of his job, especially now that he's taken over from his father," pointed out Ashley.

"But that's just it. Mitch complained to me that he's found the latch pins unfastened on the coffins several times. On checking inside, the pillow fold was disturbed, or the lid fastenings were loose. A couple of weeks ago, I went into the prep room and I'm sure Reggie was just closing the lid on a coffin."

"What are you saying?" asked Ashley.

"I don't know," Jeff said, shaking his head dejectedly. "I didn't give it much thought 'til today."

"What happened today?" said Ashley.

"Mr. Blenkinsop's funeral," said Jeff.

Ashley huffed. "Well, I know that."

"What you don't know is that I'm sure the coffin was the same one we used for Mrs. Peabody's funeral two weeks ago."

Ashley gasped. "That's impossible."

"Ash, I was front, left pallbearer at Mrs. Peabody's funeral, just like I was today at Mr. Blenkinsop's. I noticed a small 'v' shaped scratch just below the handle on Mrs. Peabody's casket, nothing big or really noticeable, but it was there. Today I saw the same scratch on Mr. Blenkinsop's casket."

"You must be mistaken. Mrs. Peabody was cremated."

"I know," agreed Jeff. "But the handle was three inches from my face, Ash. I know what I saw. It was the same casket."

"But how?"

"That's the question," Jeff said darkly. "How?"

He got up and paced the room.

"I mean, look at Reggie, he's what, one hundred and twenty pounds soaking wet? Mrs. Peabody was at least one hundred and eighty. I know. I helped carry her."

"Are you saying Reggie somehow switched coffins? That's crazy," blurted Ashley.

"Is it?" said Jeff. "That coffin was top of the range. It cost £4956.00, I checked. That's a lot of money just to burn."

"I can't see how it's possible, especially for a little weed like Reggie," said Ashley.

"That's what I can't work out," said Jeff. "He obviously has help, but who? Once the inspector checks the coffin nameplate against the cremation order, there's very little time to make a switch. It has to be someone inside the crematorium."

"I don't know Jeff. I think you're treading on very thin ice. Even if you're right, how are you going to prove it? Old Man Parkes will have you out the door before you can say 'grave robber.'"

"I know," sighed Jeff. "And you can bet your bottom dollar Reggie has his tracks well covered."

Jeff stopped pacing. "Come on, let's change out of these clothes and go to The Green Man. I think we need a drink."

\*

Reginald Ian Parkes sat back in the armchair and gloated over the large box placed on the coffee table in front of him. The Amazon Prime logo on the side grinned back at him. The overhead light reflected off the many jewels crammed into the box, highlighting the gold and the silver, like

a pirate's treasure chest, which in effect it was. Rings, brooches, bracelets, necklaces, pearls, there were even a few World War One medals in there somewhere, one or two of them very rare.

A small fortune, gathered over the last three years since his father handed the reins of Parkes and Son to him whilst he went into semi-retirement. The best thing the old fool ever did. He was always too prissy, too "hands-on" to allow Reggie any opportunity to relieve their deceased clients of their valuables.

"Well," reasoned Reggie. "What's the point in cremating it all when I will be able to put it to far better use? Seemed such a waste." And when Seth Burroughs, assistant chief administrator at the crematorium, came up with the idea of recycling caskets, it gave him something else to think about... How could he refuse?

They had met in the pub one evening, sheer chance. Seth had been drinking, got a little bit loose-tongued. The suggestion was tentative. The discussion following the lines of what a waste it all was, expensive caskets, reduced to worthless ash. What was the point? Sentiments after his own heart, thought Reggie. The "discussion" took on a serious note, then they started to make their plans. It took a bit of working out and it wasn't something they could do on a regular basis, just play it by ear as the occasion arose. It was lucrative, though. Very lucrative.

\*

"If I could just get a photograph, catch him at it," said Jeff. "Concrete proof."

"It would cost you your job," said Ashley.

"I don't think I want to work for a funeral director that robs its clients," said Jeff. "Do you?"

Ashley sipped her Bacardi and Coke. "I guess you're right."

"Of course I'm right," Jeff said hotly. "It's wrong, Ash, on every level. Totally bloody wrong. I thought of confronting Reggie, one on one, when no one was around. Let the little shit know I was on to him. Threaten him with the police. But it's pointless, there's no evidence. It would only

be my word against his, and he's the son of a respectable funeral director. All he would have to do is say I was just a disgruntled employee."

"You should just let it go, Jeff. There's nothing you can do, really. Sooner or later Reggie will get his 'comeuppance.'"

Jeff looked moodily at the pint of Guinness sitting on the table in front of him. "I can't, Ash. It goes against everything I stand for. The public trusts us to do right by their loved ones, to treat them with respect. Not rob them blind.

"No, I'll just bide my time, keep an eye on Reggie. Sooner or later, he'll make a mistake, and when he does, I'll be right there, waiting—"

\*

Flora Merryweather stood in the reception of Parkes and Son, quietly waiting to be noticed. The room was tastefully decorated: plain, light green walls with dark, oak wainscoting and matching table and chairs. Dark green carpet covered the floors and soft ambient music played in the background. In the middle of the table sat a shallow copper urn filled with dried leaves and flowers, all in shades of autumn.

"May I help you?" asked Ashley Lombard.

"I hope so dear," Mrs. Merryweather answered. "I'm here about my friend, Phoenix Sunflower."

"Would you like to sit down, and I'll take some details?" offered Ashley.

Ashley respectfully waited until Mrs. Merryweather was seated before sitting opposite this extraordinary-looking woman dressed in a sleeveless, flowing dress of purple silk, throat to ankles, a beautifully made shawl of fine, black cotton draped over her right shoulder. Mrs. Merryweather was slim, tall, with dark, flowing hair, raven black, cascading down over her straight shoulders and narrow back. Ashley noted her hair wasn't dyed; it was her natural colour without

a single strand of grey showing. Her eyes were a lively green, twinkling with a friendly light. She had a full mouth with a touch of discreet pale pink lipstick. Several jewels adorned her fine, long fingers and wrists, jade, amethyst, intricate silver bracelets, and rings. A dark green emerald set in a lovely silver mount surmounted by a small crescent moon hung around her long neck by a fine, silver chain.

“Okay,” said Ashley, producing a leather-bound clipboard. She was finding it hard to take her eyes away from the amazing tattoos covering Mrs. Merryweather’s left arm: an intricate design of vines and ivy leaves interspersed with cryptic sigils and runes, light grey and black, delicately trailing the full length of her arm.

“What can Parkes and Son do for you, Mrs. Merryweather?” Ashley asked with difficulty. The tattoos seemed to captivate her.

“My best friend, Phoenix Sunflower, passed recently. It was her wish to be cremated,” she said in a soft voice.

“My condolences,” Ashley said sincerely. “I’m sorry for your loss. We at Parkes and Son offer several options, services to suit every taste...”

“A service will not be necessary. The appropriate service and rituals have already been observed. All Phoenix requires is the cremation,” said Mrs. Merryweather.

“Oh, I see,” Ashley said, somewhat surprised. “You wish to choose a casket, then?”

“No,” said Mrs. Merryweather. “Phoenix and I have that in hand. We made our own.

“All we require is a vehicle to pick up Phoenix from our home and transport her to the crematorium. Can you accommodate that?”

“Yes, we can,” said Ashley. “It will be our privilege.” Ashley hesitated. “May I just say that Ms. Sunflower’s name is very unusual...”

Mrs. Merryweather smiled. "Yes, it has often been commented on. Ever since we were at school together. We have been friends almost all our lives, sixty-eight years. Her name always suited her." Surprisingly, Mrs. Merryweather chuckled. "She always said she would rise from the ashes."

Ashley was amazed. She had placed the beautiful woman sitting opposite her in her mid-fifties, perhaps younger. Yet if she had met her friend in school sixty-eight years ago, that must put her in her early seventies at the very least.

"Well, you look amazing," Ashley said. "You must tell me your secret."

Mrs. Merryweather laughed again. The soft, rich sound was somehow comforting.

"I don't think you would believe me if I told you," she said.

\*

"It's beautiful," said Ashley in awe.

"They made this by hand?" Christopher "Mitch" Mitchell asked.

"That's what Mrs. Merryweather said," replied Ashley.

"It even smells good," remarked Jeff.

"Chrysanthemum," advised Ashley. "And tobacco."

The two men looked at her.

"Mrs. Merryweather told me. She gave me a whole list of things she required us to do before the cremation tomorrow. The candles surrounding the casket, the hydrangeas to ward off negativity and cleanse the air, the white linen shroud, and the white flowers.

"She asked if the clock could be stopped, and all mirrors covered as well as a window left open in here. Seeing as the only mirror is in the reception, I told her it wouldn't be a problem."

"Odd requests," commented Jeff.

"It's part of their belief system. They're Wiccan," Ashley informed him.

"Wiccan? You mean witches?" asked Mitch.

"Yes," answered Ashley with a quiet smile. "Though not the Disney type witch, all warts and wrinkles."

"I can see that," said Mitch, looking down at the cadaver in the intricately decorated willow-work casket on the plinth. "She was beautiful, especially her hair. What a lovely shade of auburn."

"I don't know how they even managed to weave those flowers into the wickerwork. The horse is amazing."

"So are the stars and the crescent moon. It's a bloody work of art," admired Mitch.

Phoenix Sunflower lay in quiet repose, dressed in a simple white shroud that covered her from head to toe. Her slim hands were folded over her breast, adorned with several rings, jade, amethyst, opals all set in silver. *Just like Ms. Merryweather's*, thought Ashley. An identical amulet hung about her neck, a dark green emerald, twinkling in the discreet overhead lighting, surmounted by the same silver crescent moon.

"What's that?" Jeff said, indicating a golden statue nestled in Ms. Sunflower's hands. About six inches tall, it depicted a young woman carrying a bow with a hunting dog stood beside her.

"That's Diana, the Huntress, one of their deities. It's to be cremated with her," said Ashley.

Jeff frowned but said nothing.

"Look at this," Ashley said, moving around the casket. She picked up a large wicker-work lid. "Look at the work on the tree."

"Oh, wow!" said Mitch.

The lid showed a tree, every branch, every twig, and every leaf, set in the middle of the lid just below a copper nameplate. The whole thing worked in wicker, reeds twisted and woven, without any other fixings except the wicker itself.

"That must have taken weeks," said Jeff.

"And it fits perfectly, snug and tight. The whole thing is a complete work of art, right down to the black and white ribbons," said Ashley. "Ms. Merryweather told me the tree is a symbol, the connection between life and afterlife. It's very sacred.

"Every part of the funeral furniture means something, the designs, the sigils, the colours, even the smells. She is relying on us to make sure everything is just right, and I promised her we would."

"Absolutely," said Mitch.

"There are still one or two things that need to be attended to. The final one being the car. Ms. Merryweather requests that the car circles the crematorium three times, sunwise before entering and then the cremation can begin."

"Sunwise?" queried Mitch.

"Clockwise," said Jeff.

\*

"I saw your expression," said Ashley. "Are you not comfortable having a service for a witch?"

Jeff looked at her in surprise. "Hell yes!" he said. "I think it's great. That's not my concern."

"Then what is?" said Ashley.

"Did you see the jewellery?" he said. "That gold statue? It's got to be worth five, maybe six hundred pounds alone. Add the rings and bracelets, and that necklace... There's a small fortune sitting there."

"You're worried about Reggie," said Ashley.

"Absolutely. He's not going to be able to resist," said Jeff.

"What are you going to do?" asked Ashley.

"I'm going to stay overnight, keep watch. I'm not going to let that little bastard rob this client, no way. I'll get some sandwiches, and there's tea and coffee in the staff room. I'll settle down in the armchair in reception. Reggie will have to pass me to get into the viewing room."

"Isn't that a little drastic?" said Ashley.

"Prevention is better than cure," said Jeff. "And I haven't got a cure, so..."

"Do you want me to sit with you?" she asked.

"No, I'll be fine. I'll have Stephen King's latest to keep me company."

\*

Avarice glowed in Reggie Parke's eyes as he slowly walked around the wicker-work casket in the viewing room. He regarded the jewels, the rings, the necklace, but especially the gold statue of the woman and dog. He knew quality when he saw it.

He had read the instructions left by the client, a Mrs. Flora Merryweather. His employees had seen to most of the requirements. The only immediate item left was the closing of the casket at dusk, and Jeff Newberg and Ashley Lombard already had that in hand. Reggie smiled to himself. There were no fastenings on the wicker-work casket, no locks or screws. The ornate lid just fitted over the top like the lid of a shoebox. It would make his task all the easier.

He would wait until late tonight when he was sure everyone had gone home, then he would pay a little visit to the shop, and no one would be the wiser.

Easy, risk-free money.

\*

## **23.45 hours**

Jeff put down the paperback and rubbed his eyes. Everything was quiet. He figured if Reggie was going to come, he would have been here by now. The man was intrinsically lazy,

always looking for the easy way out, leaving all the work to Jeff and his colleagues. Jeff had been thinking of moving on from Parkes and Son for a few weeks now, regardless of the situation with Reggie. He had thought it was a good career move when he came here four years ago, but over the ensuing years, he realised he had made a mistake. To quote a little grave humour, it was a dead-end job as far as his future prospects were concerned. Reggie was just the final straw. He was a nasty piece of work, sly, underhand—charging for services never performed was just the tip of the iceberg. The recent events just compounded the situation. Jeff thought about the letter of resignation sitting in his desk drawer. It was time.

He yawned, stretched. Drowsiness suddenly stole over him. His eyelids felt like lead weights, the reception area felt warm, stuffy.

“Maybe just for a minute or two...” Jeff muttered, lying his head back against the armchair.

\*

The key rattled in the lock, the door swung open on well-oiled hinges and Reggie Parkes stepped into the reception area.

“Shit!” he gasped as he saw Jeff Newberg sitting in the reception armchair highlighted by the small lamp on the occasional table beside him.

Words choked in Reggie’s throat. No excuse why he was at the funeral home this late came to his guilty mind. Then he realised Newberg was asleep. He looked closer. No, not just asleep, he was fast asleep. Reggie clapped his hands—a sharp, loud crack. Newberg didn’t stir. A golden opportunity.

Quickly, quietly, Reggie closed the front door. On silent feet he moved across the reception, his gaze never leaving the sleeping man. He swiftly opened the door to the viewing room passed through and closed it behind him.

The candles surrounding the casket threw a flickering light around the room, a soft, calming ambiance accompanied by the sweet smell of hydrangeas. The casket rested on its plinth, the lid in place. Reggie's eyes gleamed.

An owl hooted, momentarily startling Reggie. It sounded as if the bird was actually in the room! Reggie peered into the dark corners, chiding himself for being an idiot. Passing through the circle of candles, he stood before the casket. Despite his cynicism, Reggie had to admit it was a beautiful thing. Tentatively he stroked along the lid, snatching his hand back when it felt unnaturally warm. He realised the wickerwork wasn't wood. It was tactile, absorbed heat, not like the cedar and oak of ordinary coffins, but still, it seemed to be generating a lot of heat.

"Ah!" Reggie jumped back.

Something had brushed against his legs. He scanned the floor, shadows moved. He thought he saw a shape moving along the wall at the base of the wainscoting. Something feline— Then it was gone. Had Ashley allowed cats into the viewing room without asking permission? Another one of the damned woman's "requirements?" If she had, there would be words tomorrow!

The window was open. Impatiently Reggie strode across the room. He grunted as he pulled on the lower casement. It refused to move. Taking a firmer grip, he pulled harder. The window stubbornly remained open. Stepping back, he frowned at the window, a gentle breeze wafting through the open portal. They were brand new, well, almost. His father had all the windows in the funeral home replaced just over a year ago. Top of the range, they had never stuck before.

Reggie turned back to the casket. Time was passing. He had no idea how long Newberg would sleep for, and he had no idea what he was even doing here. It didn't matter. Reggie would take what he came for and be out of there before anyone noticed. Perfect. He hesitated before

touching the lid again. The warm sensation he had felt before had been unpleasant. He hadn't expected it. Now he did. With a grimace, he took hold and eased the lid up and off the casket.

The fluttering of wings made Reggie jerk, almost made him drop the lid as he whirled around. Someone—something—whispered in his ear, so close he could feel the sweet, scented breath against the sensitive skin of his neck.

"Thief... Desecrator..."

Reggie whirled again, facing the open casket. Ms. "Whatever her name was" lay in calm repose, the thin, white, silk shroud covering her face unmoving. Candlelight glinted on the gold statue clasped in her white hands, the emerald resting on her breast shone a verdant green.

Something tugged at Reggie's mind, he was drawn to her face, made filmy by the white silk. She looked so calm, so serene. Then her eyes opened and looked at him, a vivid violet gaze that held just a hint of reproach.

Reggie screamed, dropped the casket lid, and bolted for the door. He twisted the handle. The door remained firmly shut. Using both hands, he pulled frantically. Using a fist, he pounded on the door, throwing fearful glances over his shoulder.

"Newberg, Newburg help me. The doors stuck, Newberg!"

There was no response.

"Newberg! For God's sake! Open the fucking door! Newberg!"

Reggie turned his back to the door, his thin chest heaving, eyes fixed on the casket. He was expecting to see the woman rising from her resting place, the violet eyes glaring at him, fingers beckoning—But there was nothing. From where he stood, he could clearly see the body still lying in the casket, looking as if it had never moved. *"Her eyes had opened, looked at me, they had!"*

Trying to still his jangling nerves, Reggie hesitantly approached the casket. His mouth was dry, his heart beating hard against his ribs. He could see her face. Through the veil, he saw her eyes were definitely closed.

"Idiot!" he cursed.

How many times had a corpse "moved," flexed its fingers, looked as if it were breathing and, yes, opened its eyes whilst being prepared for viewing? That's why the eyelids were glued shut to prevent such a thing happening whilst being viewed by loved ones. Before the implication of that thought could take root, laughter filled the room, mocking, soft and gentle, but mocking.

"Who's there?" Reggie peered about. Shadows danced. "Newberg, is that you? Stop playing games or you can collect your cards at the end of the month. See how funny you think it is, then."

The laughter continued.

The slim arm floated out of the air behind him, encircling his throat, the soft hand clamping over his mouth. Wide-eyed, Reggie gasped, fixating on the delicate tattoos swirling up the forearm to the shoulder, vines and small ivy leaves interspersed with sigils and runes, grey and black. Rings glittered on the long fingers closing over his mouth, pulling him gently but inexorably back against the side of the casket.

With a fluttering of gossamer wings, two tiny figures hovered above the coffin, their eyes twinkling, their laughter soft, melodic, like miniature angels, or maybe cherubs, hovering in the semi-darkness, their outlines glowing with a silvery radiance. One dipped down and though he could feel nothing, Reggie's legs were raised as the cherub effortlessly hoisted him up and settled the terrified man into the coffin next to Phoenix Sunflower.

"Familiars..." whispered the soft voice in his ear.

The cat landed on his chest, purring, its green eyes boring into Reggie's, as black as ebony, its outline depicted in an ethereal radiance. It cocked its head on one side, like an inquisitive puppy, its tail curling sinuously in the air.

It was there, Reggie could see it, but there was no weight on his chest. He couldn't feel its paws even as it disdainfully turned and slipped over the side of the casket, out of sight.

"Please, please, let me go—I'll never steal again, I promise to God! Please, let me go."

The words were muffled, unintelligible through the hand over his mouth, he tried to struggle, to break free, but his limbs wouldn't respond, he just lay there, beside her, together like star-crossed lovers, the soft smell of lavender enveloping them. The fluttering of wings drew his attention and Reggie screamed. The two cherubs, the familiars, hovered above the casket suspended between them was the beautifully woven lid. Tears streamed down the helpless man's face as the lid began to descend, Reggie kept on screaming—

"Hush... Hush..." crooned the soft, gentle voice.

\*

"He's late," said Ashley, looking at her watch.

"It can't be helped," said Jeff. "We'll have to proceed without him."

They looked at each other as they stood in the reception of Parkes and Son.

"This is my last funeral with this firm," said Jeff. "I think enough is enough."

"He didn't turn up last night, did he? Everything was alright," said Ashley.

"That's not the point, Ash. Having to stand guard over our clients? It's the last straw. I can't be here anymore."

"Jeff..." Ashley nodded towards the door.

Ms. Flora Merryweather stood quietly, dressed as elegantly as before. A dark veil covered her face.

"Good morning," Jeff said.

"Good morning," she answered mildly. "It's a beautiful day."

"Just a sad occasion," Jeff said.

"Oh no," smiled Ms. Merryweather, "you mustn't think that! It's not sad at all. Just another milestone on our path."

"That's a lovely way to look at it," said Ashley.

"Our lives don't end just because we pass from this world," Ms. Merryweather said.

"Everything's ready," Jeff said. "We've placed Ms. Sunflower in the car, and she awaits your pleasure."

Ms. Merryweather smiled. "Oh, and I would like to thank you, young man, for sitting with Phoenix last night. She really appreciated the company."

Jeff looked surprised. "How...?"

"We have our ways," Ms. Merryweather said with a knowing smile. "You fulfilled her parting wish."

"I did?" asked Jeff.

"Yes. It was always her wish to have someone with her when she began her long journey to Summerland." She touched Jeff's hand, feather-light, and smiled. "You made that possible."

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## *BONUS STORY*

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## *STILL LIFE*

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"Goddamn!"

Herbert Talbot scrutinized the tiny screen on his video recorder, then looked at the exhibition before him.

"Everything's been moved around," he said exasperatedly. "Hours of work, wasted."

With a frustrated sigh Herbert looked at 'The Weird and Wonderful' exhibition. An apt title. The creatures were an exemplary example of taxidermy, though obviously fake. Winged cats with exceptionally long tails, a two-headed Raven, a dog-headed monkey and many more, large and small, fantastic, sinister, incredibly real, displayed in a huge mausoleum, dimly lit, casting macabre shadows everywhere, a perfect setting.

Herbert shuddered as a draught blew across him, making him turn.

"Oh!" he gasped as a strange figure appeared beside him, as silent as a wraith.

"Mr. Orloff, you startled me," Herbert cleared his throat nervously.

Orloff smiled his disconcerting smile, which seemed extra wide, almost splitting his round face in half, his small, pointed teeth making him look like a shark, accentuated by his black, beady eyes totally devoid of any emotion.

"Apologies," the voice was paper thin.

The man unnerved Herbert, he was unable to look directly at his pale face, the unsettling eyes.

"All the exhibits have been moved," Herbert said. "I spent hours yesterday setting up specific shots for your promotion which won't work if the subjects don't match the videography."

"I did not move them," Orloff said, his hands behind his back.

"One of your staff then?" Herbert suggested.

"I work alone," Orloff said, moving with a weird floating grace, his bony hand caressing the glistening beak of a griffin, the size of a small pony. Herbert blinked, had the griffin closed its golden eyes, enjoying Orloff's affectionate touch?

"Then how...?" The question died as Orloff turned to him, an eerie glow in his dark eyes.

"You keep calling them 'exhibits'," Orloff said, his hand brushing against the griffin's sleek torso. A low purring floated about the cathedral hall. "They are far more, they're my... children."

"What... What do you mean?" Herbert asked, his mouth suddenly dry.

"You believe them to be fake, creations," Orloff's chuckle dripped evil. "You're wrong."

The room was filled with sibilant rustlings, furtive movement, the air grew colder, chilling the sweat popping out on Herbert's shocked face, he was suddenly aware dozens of eyes were regarding him lasciviously.

"They live," continued Orloff. "And to live, they need to feed... They are very partial to human blood..."