

THE CRAVING

Jonathan Pidduck

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

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

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

#

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

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

He had had a few to drink, but not too many. She needed him sober enough to be able to walk back to her car without drawing attention to himself. She needed him to want her. She had tried in the past to choose men who hadn't been all wandering hands and clumsy chat-up lines, but she had to work a little harder to get them back to her place if they weren't desperate to get between her legs. Besides, it wasn't the same somehow. They tasted different if they

were nice. And she felt even guiltier afterwards. So now she was after bad boys every time, however much they might irritate her in the short-term.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Whilst he was attempting to remember how to undress, she slid open the drawer of the wooden cabinet by the double-bed, and produced a pair of dark

gun-metal hand-cuffs. “Play-time,” she announced, as he finally succeeded in pulling his jeans free.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

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

“There’s someone there. You told me you live alone.”

“I do. It’s no-one. The cat.”

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

“We can still play.”

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

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

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

Angie smirked.

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

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

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

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

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

Kate nodded in obedient agreement.

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

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

“Fuck off.”

“What a pretty little name.”

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

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

He rolled off the side of the bed to which he’d been handcuffed, determined to fight her off. Angie took a step backwards, to what she considered to be just out of arm’s reach. She got it wrong. He grabbed her free wrist, pulling her towards him. Kate seized her friend’s other arm – the one with the syringe – and frantically tried to pull her free.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“He can’t escape,” Angie said.

“He can. He’s out the door already.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kate nodded, and left the room.

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

#

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

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

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

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

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

And then there was the guilt. She felt no remorse at the time, of course. Just thirst. But once they were safely secured, and she had “fed”, the remorse came flooding in, almost overwhelming her. How could she do this to another human being? How could she be so vile, so depraved, as to turn her spare bedroom into an abattoir, killing an innocent stranger just to feed her habit? But Angie would always talk her round, pointing out that she could no more help herself than (cue any number of slightly clichéd analogies involving foxes and chickens, dogs and rabbits – and, rather inexplicably – a cartoon penguin and dancing, on one occasion).

She put on the light. Once she started dwelling on the guilt, there was no way she would be able to go back to sleep. She got out of bed, and slipped on her dressing-gown. There was actually no point in putting it on; she was only going to check on Clive, and as he should be very much unconscious then there was no real need to cover up her body first. But there was always that

slim chance that he might be awake, and for reasons she never really understood she was reluctant to risk them seeing her naked once she had started feeding on them. It didn't seem right, somehow. Indecent. Unclean. Another Rule to comply with.

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

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

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

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

#

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

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

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

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

There was nothing. Nothing she could use at all.

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

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

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

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

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

Maybe she'd pick up her mobile, if she'd left it on over-night. She rang the number. As she waited and prayed for Angie to answer, she went back to the

back window. The burglar was still there, standing just a few feet from her kitchen window. He had a balaclava on. Dark clothes. He was fumbling in his pocket. Got out his phone. Surely he wouldn't be taking calls at a time like this?

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

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

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

“Angie?”

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

“Is that you? Burgling me?”

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

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

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

#

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

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

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

“I know the feeling.”

“Trouble sleeping again?”

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

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

“So you smashed my windows?”

“So I smashed your windows.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m not a vampire either.”

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

“I had chicken-Kiev for my tea.”

“Which is relevant why|?”

“I’m not afraid of garlic.”

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

“Where were we?” Angie asked.

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

“Vampire.”

“Chicken-Kiev eating vampire.”

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

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

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

“I’m not insured.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And if it’s a police-woman?”

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

“You’re deranged.”

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

“How do you mean?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So I just use my home as a larder?”

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

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

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

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

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

Kate got up. She’d had enough. She wasn’t totally sure if her friend was just saying all this to wind her up. The broken glass on her carpet suggested

she was serious, but the plan was utterly suicidal! She'd be lucky to last a week before she was caught. She would just go to bed and pretend to sleep, until Angie had given up and gone back home. Hope that she'd forgotten the whole sorry idea by the time they next met up.

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

#

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

What was going on?

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

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

"Calm down, Angel," Angie cooed, as if speaking to a baby. "It's all right."

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

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

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