

“TETHERED”

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Abigail could not have been more frightened. There were two very good reasons for this.

Firstly, she was kneeling on a stranger's stone floor, with her bare chest pressed into her thighs, her wrists manacled to the ground on either side of her, a trembling zed on stabilisers.

Secondly, someone had stripped her naked before chaining her up like this. And she had no idea who he was, or why he had done this to her of all people.

It was pitch black. She waited for her eyes to become accustomed to the dark, but it made no difference; she could see nothing at all. She could smell, though. The odour spoke of damp, dirt and urine. Smell was the one sense she could really have done without right now.

She could shuffle her knees around on the stone (though it scuffed them badly), but her ankles stayed firmly pinned in place. They must be manacled, too. The sense of vulnerability, of being powerless, was almost overwhelming.

She shivered violently, partly through cold, but mostly in shock. This couldn't be happening to her. She was a nice girl, from a good middle-class family, with a safe and caring husband. Women like her weren't kidnapped and chained up in cellars. And certainly not in Ramsgate! This sort of thing happened to drug-riddled prostitutes in London or the other big cities, not friendly shop-assistants from sleepy sea-side towns in Kent.

She had been to the cinema that evening (or possibly yesterday; God only knew how long she had been here before regaining consciousness a few moments before).

Mike had dropped her off. They normally went to see films together, but he hated musicals, so she had been going with a friend instead. She'd waited for Mary outside the "Classic" for twenty minutes, but she hadn't shown up. It hadn't been the first time she had let Abigail down like this. Mary had a tendency of accusing her husband of sleeping with some woman at work, and storming off to her mother's in protest. This always seemed to happen on nights she was supposed to be going out with Abigail. Last time it happened, she had been left sitting in a pub for half an hour, getting chatted up by seedy men, whilst waiting in vain for her unreliable friend to turn up. That was before she'd married Mike, of course, though they were engaged at the time and he had come to collect her from the pub when she had phoned him. He wasn't a fan of Mary at all. But his antipathy towards her friend was outweighed by his intense dislike of musicals so he'd agreed to the two ladies going out together, just this once.

Mary's non-appearance had left her in an awkward situation. If she phoned Mike to ask for a lift home, he would not be impressed that she had let Abigail down again. He hated rudeness with a vengeance, and he would do everything possible to stop the two of them going out ever again. She wasn't very happy with Mary herself, but she wasn't ready to burn her bridges just yet. After all, they had a lot of fun on the occasions she actually showed up. She wasn't keen on going to the cinema alone – it looked too sad – but she could walk to her Mum's instead, and then come back to the cinema just before the film was due to finish, ready for Mike to come and collect her. He need never know that she had been stood up, that way.

Something brushed against her bare leg, something small and furry. It had to be a rat. She tried to slow her breathing down so she could listen for the scrabbling of sharp claws on stone, but the more she tried to control her breathing, the harsher it became. The only thing which stopped her screaming was the thought that her captor might come to her “rescue”, and she felt safer with the rats right now.

She flapped her elbows up and down as if they were wings, and slid her knees apart twelve inches or so, before clenching them shut again. She wanted to try to convince the rat (or rats?) that she was not helpless, that she was still mobile and able to defend herself, but these were about the only movements she could manage with the manacles on. She tried this two or three times before giving up. If there was one thing worse than being bitten by a rat, it was looking like a chicken on a bicycle while she tried to scare it off.

She shouldn't have used the alleyway, she could see that now. But it was the quickest way to her mother's house, and she needed to be there and back before Mike came to pick her up. She'd heard a deep chuckle behind her, and had turned round, convinced there was someone there. But the alleyway had been empty. She turned back to the front again, ready to run to the far end, even if it made her look like a scared child. She remembered taking one step, two steps, maybe a third. And then nothing, nothing at all. The whole world had just vanished. And then this.

She tried not to succumb to the swell of panic which threatened to sweep her away and drown her. Someone had kidnapped her, brought her back here, removed all her clothes, and chained her up in his cellar (she had no doubt it was a “him”, as women

didn't do that sort of thing; they had better things to do with their time). She was alone and totally defenceless. But for the manacles, she could have punched him, gouged his eyes, done whatever it took to drive him off. But as long as she was pinned wrist and ankle to the floor, as if collapsed in mid-prayer, she –

A door opened. She screamed herself hoarse, wrenching in huge lungfuls of air between each shrill shriek. Eventually, emotionally spent, she lapsed into silence.

There was that chuckle again, like the one in the alleyway.

“She’s a screamer,” said a gruff male voice.

“The females always are,” a woman replied. “I keep telling you to get males. More meat, and they go into shock quicker.”

She felt rough hands exploring her body, running over her shoulders, her stomach, her bottom. She tried to wriggle away, but there was nowhere to go. The manacles held her firmly in place.

Another chuckle.

“Too much muscle and sinew on the males,” argued the man. “I prefer my food to be a bit more – fleshy.”

She screamed again, only to be clubbed hard around the head with a heavy paw.

“Enough,” said the woman. “It’s getting on my nerves now.”

“Couldn’t we have a nibble now?” asked the man. “Just to keep us going until the others arrive? The shock might shut her up if we took an arm off.”

It was all too much. Abigail started crying. She knew she had to stay strong if she had any chance at all of surviving this, but how could she after everything she had

been through? It was bad enough being snatched off the street and bound hand and foot like an animal, but now they were talking of eating her! These creatures weren't human, not in the accepted sense of the word. How could you reason with animals like this?

The paw made vicious contact with her head again, the exact same spot as the previous blow. They could obviously see her, even if she could not see them.

“I told you to shut up! Another sound and you lose a leg.”

Abigail whimpered, but said nothing. She heard them leaving.

“I'm having a leg,” declared the woman. “I'm fed up of being given the ribs every time, just because I don't forage.”

“You can have the shin. I'm saving the thigh for myself. Plenty of meat, and none of those fiddly little bones you get elsewhere. I haven't got the patience for them.”

And with that, they were gone.

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The cages were lined up against the far white-washed wall, spaced well apart from each another (to avoid any physical contact between the creatures inside). Their hose-clean metal bases measured about five foot by five foot, and they stood just four feet tall to discourage unscheduled activity or exercise. The bars were a good inch in diameter, more than enough to contain the rage of even the most frenzied of the chimpanzees the medical research centre had housed.

There were seven cages in all, but all save one stood empty. Photo-copies were tacked to the wall between some of them. Three of the chimps had been taught to sign, and the photo-copies contained diagrams of the signs the chimps used most, to assist those lab technicians who were authorised to communicate with them.

Gradually, the sheets of paper had been removed as their sign-language fell into disuse. The chimps no longer had any use for the words “happy”, “play” or “friend”. The remaining signs were “hurts”, “want go home”, and two different gestures for “frightened”.

A hospital trolley was parked near the occupied cage at the far end of the row. A mutilated female corpse lay upon it, half-dissected, the body left spent and broken to taunt and intimidate the occupant of Cell 7.

Like the previous inmates of the research facility, the creature in Cell 7 was large, intelligent, and very, very powerful. She squatted in the cage (there was insufficient head-room to stand), rocking back and forth, and making pitiful mewing sounds in a futile attempt to articulate the depth of her grief. Every so often she would try to jam her meaty arms between the bars in an attempt to stroke her mother’s carcass, but they were too narrowly spaced, and the trolley had been deliberately positioned a fraction too far away. Frustrated, she returned to her rocking, and mewed all the more.

But despite her size, her strength, the hair on her face, this was no ape. She was human, barely into her twenties. She had betrayed her family to save the man she had worshipped, and now she was paying the price.

#

Two young men entered the room, both wearing lab coats. One was tall, dark and arrogant; the other was short, fat and exceedingly anxious. This second man held the gun.

“Shoot her,” the first man commanded, beckoning at Cell 7.

“Look at her,” Dexter replied. “How can they leave her mother there, all torn open like that? Think what that must be like!”

“Shame it’s not your Dad! Now shoot her, quick.”

Dexter lowered the gun, and approached the cage. The woman inside sat whimpering on the floor, hugging her knees to her chest, rocking back and forth as if to comfort herself. He tapped on the bars, hoping for eye contact. It would be good to make some sort of connection with her, show her that he understood her pain. Maybe she’d be happier if he gave her a friendly smile, a little sign of kindness in a harsh and unforgiving world. But she was oblivious to him.

“Look!” he exclaimed, pointing furiously to the empty water-bottle which was clamped to the bars to his right. “They’ve not even given her anything to drink!”

“Would you please just shoot her?”

“Do you think I should sign first? Let her know what we’re doing?”

“Yeah, why not? Earn her trust, and then stick a gun down her throat. Shoot her, you twat!”

Dexter raised the gun, pointing it reluctantly at her heaving chest. He knew that it was the right thing to do, but somehow it just didn't feel that way. How was she to know that it was all for the best? He didn't want her to think that he was as bad as all the others. And to make matters worse, now was the time she chose to look at him. Not with fear or loathing, as he had anticipated. All he could see in those blue, blue eyes was overwhelming relief.

“Look in her eyes, Keith,” he prompted. “I swear she wants us to –”

“Oh, for fuck's sake!”

Keith snatched the gun from him, squeezing the trigger in virtually the same motion. His aim was poor, and for a second it appeared that he had missed her altogether. But then she shuddered in shock, and tried to climb to her feet. Her head struck the ceiling of her cage, her eyes rolled, and she staggered forwards towards them, bent at the knees to give herself more room, a grotesque and unintentional parody of the chimpanzees the cells had previously contained. One step, two steps, three steps, and she was down, crashing face-first into the bars just a few feet away from them.

“That's gotta hurt!” Keith winced.

He turned, and rolled the corpse of the mother off the trolley. It landed on the floor with a wet squelch that left Dexter on the verge of gagging.

“Okay, Dex. You've got two minutes to get Miss World out of there, and on to the trolley. And no touching her up while you're at it.”

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Matilda was very confused.

She was pretty sure she was dead – she had after all been shot twice at close range in the last twenty four hours – but the Afterlife was not at all what she had expected. She had always envisaged romping around a big sunny meadow, with maybe a little stream for drinking, and a plentiful supply of docile rabbits (who would give themselves up to her with a friendly nod of their ears whenever she got hungry). Nanny would be there, of course, to tell her the rules (if there were any), and Mummy and Vincent, too. But best of all, she would have Philip back again. And he would hold her, and tell her not to worry about being dead, because they would be together forever now.

Instead, she had woken up in a cage the size of Philip's toilet-under-the-stairs, with her poor dead Mummy lying silent and desecrated on a trolley just out of arm's reach. She had been shot (for the second time) by two nervous men, who had spent an eternity of grunting and swearing in an effort to haul her up onto a trolley (Daddy didn't like swearing, but she didn't have to worry about that any more). If they hadn't shot her, she would have got on it herself, and saved them all the trouble!

She wondered why they had shot her, when she was already dead. Maybe when Crow had killed her, back at the House, he hadn't done it properly, and their job was to do it again just to make sure someone who wasn't really dead didn't sneak into the Afterlife and then go back home to tell everyone else about it. And maybe the cage

was some sort of waiting room, somewhere for her to sit quietly while they were getting her meadow ready. She felt guilty that she had made all that fuss, what with the crying and the rocking and suchlike. But then joy swamped her as she realised that they were probably taking her to the meadow now, on the trolley. Before long, she and Philip would be together again!

She tried to raise her arms to throw off the sheet they had placed over her face (it was probably naughty, and they would beat her for it, but she was too excited to just lie here and do nothing!). For some reason, her arms stayed put. It was the same with her legs. Even her toes refused to wriggle when she told them to. Only her brain was still working. She prayed to Nanny that her body would start to function again soon. It would spoil all the fun being in a meadow with Philip if all she could do was think! Okay, maybe he could roll her around a bit, but she got dizzy easily and she wouldn't be able to tell him when to stop. Besides, it wouldn't be the same somehow.

The sheet was covering her from head to toe. The cotton tickled her nose. She wanted to sneeze, but didn't. She wasn't sure if it was allowed, now she was dead.

She puzzled over why they had covered her up. Maybe because it was more tidy, or because they didn't want to have to see her face. Or maybe it was to stop her finding out the way to the Afterlife, just in case she didn't like it and tried to find her way back home again. They were silly if they thought she would ever return here, though. Everyone she loved was dead. Besides, she would end up back in that cage, with Mummy just out of arm's reach. No, she would stay in the Afterlife, thank you very much, where it was safe, and people didn't keep shooting her every five minutes.

It would be safe, she hoped. As long as Daddy wasn't there, it would be. Daddy was dead – run over by a car whilst trying to smash open her skull with a garden rake – but if he was in the Afterlife he would probably have a meadow of his own, with black-charred grass and a stream half-dammed with broken bones and chewed muscle, a meadow that was forever dark and lonely. She didn't want them to put her in a meadow like that. It was too much like Home had been.

She frowned, and felt her forehead wrinkle. Progress! She tried her toes again, and she was sure they moved, if only just a little. Death was wearing off. It was only a matter of time before she would be able to move her arms again. And then she would throw off her cotton shroud and gallop off into the lush green grass of her Meadow Heaven.

She felt the trolley stop moving. Was she here already, ready to be reunited with Philip? The thought was almost too much for her to bear. It had been so sad in that cage, what with the bars and dead gaping Mummy, it just hurt so very much. But the nightmare had ended. All she needed to do now was to find the strength to pull back the sheet, and they would be together again.

A voice; familiar, harsh, elderly.

“Stop,” it said, and all her dreams crumbled to ash and bone.

Oh no, please no, not him, not him. This could not be her Heaven, not with him here.

It was Crow, the agent who had shot her dead, after first slaughtering her entire family (except for Daddy, whom she had sort of been responsible for killing herself,

albeit accidentally).

She had led a bad life. She had eaten human flesh, got Daddy run over (when he was the only one who could have protected the Family from Crow) and had once rubbed herself against a door handle as it made her feel nice (until Uncle caught her and fractured her cheek-bone, without even telling her what she had done that was so wrong). He had told her at the time she was damned for it (whatever “it” was), and he had been right. Now she was here with all of the others who had led bad lives. And if Crow was here, then Daddy would be, too.

#

Abigail fought against it, but she had to wake up sooner or later. She had been dreaming of her wedding day: friends and family, seating plans and speeches, lace wedding dress and three-tiered wedding cake. Now she was back to being tethered to the stone floor; cold, hopeless and very much alone.

Or was she? Was that breathing she could hear? Irregular, frightened breathing, just like her own?

“Hello? Is there anyone there?”

“Don’t hurt me!” it shrieked. “Please God, just let me go!”

If it wasn’t for the manacles, she would have leapt three feet into the air in shock. There was someone else here! Someone to talk to, plan with, *escape* with. A man. All of a sudden, she became acutely aware that she was naked. There was a man

here, just a few feet away by the sound of it, and they had no doubt undressed him too. She instinctively tried to cover her chest with her arms, but the manacles held her wrists firmly in place. She clenched her knees firmly together, hoping that if the lights went on then he would at best get a side view of her, and would not see *too* much. It was bad enough that those monsters were going to eat her, without her having to flash her “bits” at a total stranger in the process.

She took a deep breath to calm herself down. She knew she was being irrational. It was pitch black in here; if she couldn't see him, then he couldn't see her. And what if he did? It was the least of her problems. Besides, if they were going to escape, then she'd have to bang on the neighbours' doors, stark naked, until help came. He wasn't the only one who was going to see parts of her which were normally reserved for her husband alone. As long as she hadn't been chained up with her bottom poking in his face, she could live with it.

“It's okay, it's okay. They've got me chained up, too,” she reassured him. There's no-one else in here.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she replied, with more conviction than she felt.

“It was awful,” he wailed. “I was walking across the park, when they came for me. A sack over my head, knocked unconscious, woke up here.”

“That's how they got me, too, I guess. I don't remember much about it”

“They've taken my clothes!”

“Mine, too”. She blushed, despite her earlier resolution to put it out of her mind.

Nudity wasn't a topic she had been brought up to discuss with strange men, and this one did sound slightly odd. She supposed that hysteria did that to you.

“What are they going to do to us?”

She couldn't tell him they were on the menu. She felt sure that he would snap. It was better to calm him down as far as possible, and then work out how they could both get out of this mess. They needed a plan of action, but it was beginning to look like she was the one who was going to have to come up with it.

“They dropped the key,” he announced. “When they were locking me up.”

“Don't even joke about that!”

“No, really. It's on the floor.”

“Can you reach it?”

“Sort of. But the manacles dig into my wrists when I try. And I don't want them to get angry if I try to escape. They might do something awful. Maybe we should just stay here, and ask them to let us go.”

Abigail wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry, and had to stifle the impulse to do both at once. He had a key! They could escape! But he hadn't used it because he didn't want to make his brutal kidnappers a bit cross! She was locked up with the village idiot!

“Okay, I didn't want to have to tell you this, but they told me that they were going to eat me!”

He screamed. Okay, maybe honesty wasn't the best policy here after all. She shushed him to silence.

“Look, there’s nothing they can do to you for trying to escape that they’re not planning on doing anyway. Our only hope of staying alive is for you to pick up that key – ”

“It hurts my wrist, though.”

“-Is to pick up that key, unlock your manacles, and go for help.”

“Will you come, too?”

“If the key fits my manacles, yes, I’ll be only too pleased to keep you company. And if it doesn’t, you can go for help. Now please get going. They could come back any time.”

There was silence for a few seconds, followed by the sound of fingers brushing stone. A clinking noise.

“Got it!” he shouted in triumph.

“Will you be quiet!” she bellowed, and then repeated the instruction rather more quietly. “It’s probably for the best if they don’t know we’re escaping!”

“Sorry.”

Five more minutes of fumbling and cursing, and he was there. He was free. She heard him get to his feet, and come over to her. She felt a rough hand run over her back, sliding over her spine towards her –

“Steady!” she squeaked. “My wrists are the other end.”

And then the key was in the manacles and her arms were free. He passed her the key, and she unlocked her ankles. It seemed safer for her to do it herself. It took her two or three attempts to stand up – pins and needles now of all times! – but she made

it. Resisting the urge to cover herself up – she really had to get over this – she walked forwards until she felt brick beneath her fingers. Sliding her hands around the wall, she eventually found a door. So close now. If there was no-one the other side, they would both be free within seconds.

“Over here,” she whispered. “I’ve found the way out.”

She sensed him moving towards her. She pulled the door open, hoping that there would be a little light on the other side so they could get their bearings. It was a hallway. A candle burnt on a small wooden table at the far end. Just enough light to see by. No-one around outside. It was going to be alright. They were going to escape.

She looked around, to see her companion, reassure him that all was well. Her heart froze. This was no man. It was a creature, the head hideously misshapen, part human, most not. Its grotesque face leered down at her, checking out every inch of her body, revelling in how much this was distressing her. She flushed red with shame, and frustration that her escape plan had come to nothing. Temper exploded inside her, and she lashed out at his face, determined to get in at least one shot at him before he dragged her back to her chains. He waved her arm away, as if deflecting an angry blue-bottle.

He chuckled. That same sickening laugh as before, when she had first woken up in this Hell-hole.

“That was fun,” he chortled. “We should do it again sometime. Nice tits, by the way.”

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