

The background of the entire image is a photograph of a full moon, which is a bright, glowing circle in a dark, cloudy sky. In the foreground, there are dark, silhouetted branches of a tree, some of which have small, dark, spiky buds or flowers. The branches are intricate and crisscross the frame, creating a complex pattern against the moon and sky.

Mostly Dark

*A Collection of Small Pieces
by Miranda Kate*

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The stories in this book are works of fiction. All names, characters places and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental - and a little disturbing.

Cover image designed by Miranda Kate
Inside illustration by Miranda Kate

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to me - to prove to myself that I can do it.

And also to you, to prove that you can too.

Note from the Author

Mostly Dark, A Collection of Small Pieces, is a compilation of Flash Fiction tales I have written over the last five years. A few of them have been published in online ezines or journals, but the majority of them have been written for weekly online Flash Fiction contests I have taken part in.

The title reflects the genre of the tales herein: most of them are dark or disturbing in some way, but some are less so, and a handful are even heartwarming. Thus, I have categorised them like the phases of the moon: waxing and waning, with the darkness of the new moon at either end, and the brightness of the full moon in the middle.

Many people ask me why I write what I do, but all I can say is that I write what comes, whether inspired by a tune, an image or an idea. It rushes out of my head onto the page and dictates how it will be written. As most writers know, we don't get a lot of say in it; we can only tweak it once it has arrived.

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Full Dark



Matilda

I had been at it for ages and managed the difficult bits, but my back was aching. I needed to take a break. I put what I'd done into bags – careful to avoid any drips on the kitchen floor – and shoved them into the cold room. I made sure the door clicked shut afterwards. I wanted to keep them fresh.

I took my time washing my hands and getting all the blood off. I didn't want anyone seeing any bits of flesh under my nails – because they would notice. They were like that in the day room. I put on the kettle and waited for it to boil.

Looking at what was left on the kitchen counter it wouldn't take much longer, but I needed a proper sit down, so I decided to take my cuppa into the day room.

Taking hot liquid in there could be risky depending who was about, but it turned out there was only Samson staring out of the window, and Adele in her chair by the telly rocking back and forth. It was safe.

I took a seat in the front row and looked at the black and white movie they had on while I blew my hot tea.

As I took a tentative sip I heard a scream from the direction of the kitchen. I couldn't help smiling, I loved that sound. Then I heard footsteps running towards the day room. It was Nurse Clemens.

She came to a sharp halt at the door when she saw me. I smiled at her. She came in, taking calm, meaningful steps toward me until she stood in front of me. She barked "Hands!" as I knew she would when I'd cleaned up. I put my tea down to show them to her, but my smile was a dead giveaway.

Two orderlies arrived at the door, their shocked state indicating they'd come from the kitchen. Nurse Clemens gave them a brisk nod and they started towards me, grabbing me out of my chair and manhandling me out of the room.

Then she changed her mind and cried, "Wait!" but the sirens were blaring, and they couldn't hear her. She grabbed the shoulder of one of them to make them stop, and stood in front of me again to force eye contact.

"Tell me Matilda, who is it? Who is it you've just killed?"

There was another scream, this time from the corridor to the bedrooms. I giggled, I couldn't help myself. I didn't need to answer they'd know in a minute.

The orderlies resumed their wrangling as I tried to stifle more laughter.

Dousing the Fire

John was soaked to the skin and all he could hear in his head were the lyrics ‘make it rain’. It had rained heavily in his life; he’d been blessed with so much. But despite the present torrential downpour in the real world, the drought in his personal life had just begun and he was getting ready to enter the desert.

He could feel himself burning already with all the emotions. But there was one he could put a stop to; one he could clear up, and he looked forward to it.

Under the light of a passing car John’s grin lit up.

As he arrived at the apartment block, John checked his pocket again to make sure he still had it.

The night lights surrounding the building reflected the rain and gave it a sinister feel, one he hadn’t experienced on previous visits. But then he hadn’t had this plan in mind then. He smiled at the prospect.

He pressed all the security buzzers to the apartments, except the one he intended to call on. He knew someone would open the door without questioning it. Seconds later he was taking the stairs two at a time, the adrenaline giving his legs more strength than they usually had, and in moments he was at the front door.

John stood there breathing, letting his heart rate reduce as he thought about his next move. He brought the key out of his pocket, but knew the occupant better than that; he turned the handle and found the door unlocked.

It was dark inside and he stood in the lounge listening. It wasn’t long before their moans reached him. He knew they’d be busy; they’d been busy for years longer than their lies had declared.

He took the knife out of his pocket and enjoyed the weight of it in his gloved hand. It was one from her favourite set; a Christmas gift he’d spoiled her with years ago, a time when giving knives to your wife was a perfectly normal thing to do and no doubts would creep into your head that one day they would be used against you.

He rubbed at the freshly healed wound on his ribcage. He tried to stem the pain it sparked, but that was internal now, and twisted up inside wanting to scream its betrayal. He would quell it in a moment.

John stepped towards the bedroom door, the thick carpet soaking up the sound. Mark had always insisted on having the best of everything, never caring about the cost. Maybe that was why he’d been able to do this so easily to his friend, with no remorse – as the sounds coming through the door demonstrated.

He stopped to listen again, and like coals to the fire his rage swelled at the sound, enabling him to believe his plan was rational.

He turned the doorknob fraction by fraction, using their moans to cover each

movement. Then he opened the door a crack at a time, their writhing bodies coming into view, silhouetted by the light from the window. They hadn't even had the decency to close the curtains.

His movements became fluid as he rushed to the bedside and thrust the knife into the back of whoever was on top. It took a couple of seconds for the body underneath to register what was happening, long enough for John to pull the knife out and douse their screams in a flood of blood brought from a swift stroke to the neck.

As soon as he was done he dropped the knife, knowing the rest of the set was already here. She'd moved them in along with the rest of her things after their fight the week before.

He left as quietly as he had entered, shutting all the doors, leaving it as he found it – well, almost. Then using the stairs again before letting the rain wash him clean of any residue.

Only once he was on the plane the following day, did John allow himself a thought about it and acknowledge the tremble in his hands. But he would work that out in time, something he had plenty of now.

Stalker

Johnson shifted his position slightly and found the window he was looking for. He fiddled with the focus on the binoculars and someone came into view. It wasn't her. He sighed. Was she home? He thought she was; he'd seen the limo turn up and a group of glitter clad individuals rush into the house. He assumed she was among them. Maybe he was wrong.

He scanned the top floor windows. Lights were coming on and people were running about. Couples were pairing off and he wanted to know who she would be with.

Movement in another window caught his attention and there she was, head thrown back laughing at the guy in front of her. He looked like a typical New Romance geek; silver shoulder pads making him look like something out of a badly made sci-fi movie; hair lacquered into an elaborate quiff. The guy was lighting a cigarette, if he wasn't careful his hair would catch light. Johnson smiled. He'd like to see that.

They were drunk, swaying all over the place, and he was waiting to see if they were going to get undressed, but no such luck as they exited the room.

He pulled up, taking his weight off his elbows. Watching that guy light up had made him want a cigarette too. He pulled a packet out of his jeans and enjoyed a smoke here on top of the world.

Johnson surveyed the city below him as it glistened in the night light. He'd been scoping this location out the last couple of days making sure it overlooked the right house.

He'd wanted her ever since he'd first seen her in her debut music video. It wasn't as though he wasn't someone worthy of knowing: he owned a music production company. But it wasn't a big enough concern for her to notice. He'd found out all he could about her, and even though he could access the parties she attended, her group of sycophantic security guards wouldn't let him close.

He knew he'd tipped into the obsessive when he woke up every morning thinking about her and fell asleep every night with her image in his head. He'd started to resent it, started to resent her. And that's when he'd come up with this plan.

Johnson ground the butt into the dusty soil and flicked it away, spinning back round onto his belly. Looking through the binoculars again he found her downstairs in the lounge, moments before the French windows burst open and they all came flooding out. Even from this distance he could hear their screams of laughter and knew what they were planning.

He reached out and grabbed the hold-all he had with him and scrabbled about

inside with one hand. He didn't want to miss this opportunity.

He saw her come out, already stripping off her clothes, revealing a sexy string bikini beneath. It reflected gold in the light round the pool. He paused as his hand found what it was looking for and took in the view for a moment. He imagined his hands on that soft, supplicating flesh. It was such a waste.

He took away the binoculars and replaced them with the sight on the rifle. He found his target easily and flicked the safety off in one movement. He took a breath and waited a second as he saw her approach the diving board. She jumped once, then twice, and on the third he pulled the trigger. It hit home, making the dive less elegant, but the crowd round the pool loved it, cheering and thinking it was just the drink.

Johnson smiled as he beat his retreat, knowing that in a few seconds those cheers would turn to cries as the blood surfaced and she didn't.

He jogged down the top of the ridge, more sure-footed than he'd imagined and jumped into his jeep. Being half way up the hillside he was able to coast the car down to the tarmac, keeping his retreat silent.

If he couldn't have her, no one was going to.

Drunken Sailors

They were school buddies; she'd known them all for years, and they still went out together on a regular basis. The fact that she was the only girl made no difference; she could party hard just like the rest of them. She was one of the boys. Although that night it got missed.

Nancy tried hard not to think about that. She looked at their sorry faces and tried to believe their remorse, believe that it all just got out of hand. But Jimmy couldn't quite look her in the eye and that bothered her. It made her wonder and recall his eyes that night: the arrogance and the supremacy they'd shown. How drunk had he actually been? There was no telling with him. There were nights you thought he was completely leathered, but then he'd say something and you knew he wasn't.

But she had watched them all drink that night, watched them all put away the beers with the vodka chasers along with her.

It had been the usual fun in the local bar. Pool was their favourite, and they'd all wanted her on their team; she could pot anything no matter how drunk she was. Then as always they'd moved to the club. Nothing unusual there; two of their six had gone off to chase some skirt. And then afterwards they'd all piled round Johnny's – again nothing new.

Nancy looked down at her wrists and rubbed them. Maybe the courtroom thought it was a look of humility, but it was pain. The red embedded lines still hurt even though it'd been a week. The doctors said they would eventually disappear, but some days she could still feel the ties they'd used – those horrible plastic things you couldn't get out of. Something she knew all too well now.

She was asked how drunk she'd been and all she could think was, 'it's amazing how fast you sober up when you have to'. But it hadn't made any difference. She still couldn't work out how it had started, who had instigated it, and how it had ended up with them thinking it was a good idea. She swallowed, still feeling the gag reflex she'd had to the dirty sock they'd stuffed into her mouth. Another thing the doc said would pass.

Then she was asked to recount what had happened. She didn't think she could when she'd gone through it with her lawyer, but up here on the stand with them all there in the room watching, it poured out, every detail, totally clinical. As she named each of them, describing in detail what their turn had entailed, she found it cathartic, as though finally stating it out loud made it clear that it was a heinous unprovoked attack, and that the things they did were perverse and brutal. She shifted in her seat, still feeling the brutality.

When asked who had brought it to a stop, the true denigration of what they'd

put Nancy through was revealed. Johnny's mother was sitting in the courtroom. She'd already given her testimony through tears – tears that her own child was capable of such horror; that she had been the one to discover it after not liking the sounds she'd heard from his attic room. At no time was there a question that it had been a game, Jimmy's knife had put paid to that. Why would you need to hold a knife to a friend's throat if it was all in fun?

Nancy was relieved at the verdict, knowing she wasn't going to have to see them now for several years. It would give her time to recover, time to try and find a way through. She was still in shock she knew that, the doctor didn't need to tell her. She just wished the song in her head would stop; the one they'd put on repeat that night to remind them of the good old times. One line in particular kept getting stuck, along with the image of Jimmy's face as he'd mouthed it during his turn; 'Way hay and up she rises'. They'd been more than just drunken sailors that night.

Echo of a Whistle

Jonas had no idea how long he'd blacked out for this time. His heart raced as he spun round trying to see if the man was still there, but all he could see were empty train carriages sitting in the disused siding.

He shook his leg and pulled at his foot, but it was still wedged right under the track and he couldn't reach it.

It was really dark now, and the wind startled him as it hurtled round the corners of the derelict train sheds. Any second now the man would appear. He'd chased Jonas through the woods and out onto the embankment, he had to be here somewhere.

He fought back tears of fear and frustration. He knew that crying for his mummy wasn't going to help him – the man had been right about that – but the images of the underground room haunted him, with its dirt floor and rusty metal cot. He couldn't go back there; he couldn't go through that pain again. The very thought of the man touching him; putting those metal things near him. He yanked at his foot again to distract himself from the image.

His escape had been a stroke of luck rather than planned. Not only had it been one of the rare days that the man hadn't used the equipment on him, but the man had been complacent, allowing Jonas to go alone to clean up. Jonas had been halfway up the stairs by the time the man had shouted, already running for his life.

And he'd almost made it, but then he'd caught his foot running across the tracks.

He'd been too busy looking over his shoulder at the man, wondering why he'd stopped at the top of the embankment. And then the ground had come up to meet him: the air rushing in his ears creating a high pitch sound as he fell, and a blinding white flash as his head hit the track.

He attempted to reach his foot again, leaning on the track as he did so, and that's when he felt it – the vibration. He peered into the darkness and made out two pin pricks of light. They were moving towards him, increasing in size. In his gut he knew it was a train.

But instead of feeling panic, he felt calm. It was over; whether dead or rescued the man couldn't have him anymore.

Jonas looked up at the oncoming train, the lights clearly visible now, his eyes tracing their perfect roundness. He waved his arm and waited, listening for the whistle, the signal that they'd seen him. But it didn't come.

And as the train raced through him, he realised he'd heard the whistle earlier that day already, the blinding flash hadn't been his head hitting the track. His foot wasn't trapped anymore. The man was gone and so was he.

Being Prepared

Paul laid the lace wedding dress out on the bed. It still looked as fresh and white as it had done that day. He could still see her in it. She'd wrapped it up so carefully in tissue paper, making sure there wouldn't be a wrinkle in it. He unfolded the sleeves, smoothing them out gently, and ran his fingers along the edge of the shoulderless sleeves, and then along the sweetheart neckline of the bodice. He loved the sensation of it and remembered how it'd felt under him that night when they'd returned to their hotel room to consummate their vows.

She had talked about how she'd wanted her daughter to wear it on her wedding day, and how she wouldn't mind if had to be altered a little. But there had been no daughter, or son, so the dress had remained untouched.

Paul was secretly pleased; he wouldn't have wanted to see any other woman in it, it would've detracted from the sweet memories it held. And he needed those memories to hold on to now. He had to try and salvage something from the ensuing years of pain.

He turned the dress over, being careful not to crease it, and started to undo the tiny buttons that ran down the back. One by one it opened and he smiled as he remembered how it had exposed her back that night to his kisses.

Once he was done, he stepped back wondering how he was going to do this. He knew it wouldn't be easy, but it's what she would have wanted.

Paul lifted her up and if it wasn't for the dead weight of her, he imagined that this was pretty much what it was like to dress a mannequin. Her limbs were rigid and unyielding now that the rigor mortis had set in. He lay her face down on top of the dress, managing to slip her lower body into it without much trouble and buttoned up the lower half. The arms proved harder with the sleeves catching on the puffy skin, and trails of clotted blood ruining the purity of the white.

When he finished he was sweating and trying not to cry. He hadn't meant to hit her that hard; he had just wanted her to stop. He had tried several times over the years to get her to, but any attempts had only led to more beatings.

It had started after the honeymoon with the odd belittling comment that would get more hurtful. Then the verbal abuse had followed along with the odd thump. By the time they'd lost their third child she'd leave him black and blue, and once or twice unconscious.

It was the lack of remorse that had finally tipped the balance for him – that and finding a confidant, someone else who understood what it was like to be brow beaten, quite literally, by your own wife.

Paul never imagined it would be in the work place though. George struggled to

keep explaining away the bruises on his neck and face too, until the mumbled confession during their coffee break. It had been a relief to know he wasn't alone.

So when she'd started that morning raking up the same old stuff he just couldn't do it anymore. And when she'd lunged at him in the kitchen, his hands had reached out and grabbed whatever was nearby.

The first swing had knocked her sideways, but only caused her to falter. When she came at him again he'd swung it at her head. He'd never imagined that frying pans could do that much damage.

Paul turned her back over on the bed, and looked at her crooked face as he heard the approaching sirens. He wondered what they would make of all this. He knew he'd left it a little long before calling them, particularly when knowing it would take them a while to reach him out here in the sticks, but he wanted her to be ready, it's what she would have wanted. After all that's what she used to say the most, wasn't it? "You're useless Paul, never ready for anything, or anyone; you've never got your shit together."

He was happy to prove her wrong today.

Encased

Peter took out his penknife and scratched at the encrusted surface of one of the giant iron statues on the beach, trying to see what was underneath. Only pieces of dried seaweed and rust came away. He wondered if he would get a large chunk off lower down on the body.

He crouched down and spotted a cluster of barnacles nestled into the back of the left knee and got to work, pushing the blade up under it to create some leverage. But it wouldn't yield.

Rivulets of water started to pool round Roger's feet as he worked. He knew the tide was on the turn, but in the estuary it was slow; he still had time.

He wiggled the blade, trying to get in deeper, leaning against it. A satisfying crack sounded out. Peter grimaced, pushing harder; it wouldn't be long now.

He toppled over when it gave, the sharp movement sending him into the water, bum first. He jumped up to avoid saturation, and while wiping himself off looked down at the flap of crustaceans dangling from the calf, the red water flowing from behind it catching his eye.

Peter bent down a second time, expecting to find a corroded hole full of rust, but instead he discovered a white fleshy opening. Pushing back his qualms, he reached out a finger and brushed the tip against what felt like flesh.

The second he touched it a rendering boom sent him reeling into an oncoming wave. He flailed in the water until an iron fist saved him. It clamped down onto his head and lifted him up until he was level with the weather worn visage of the sculpture.

Bright glowing eyes shone into his, expressing a rage that made Peter's bladder loosen. And when the mouth broke open and tiny creatures ran out, Peter's mind spun, blacking out to avoid the view.

That night when Emily walked her dog along the edge of the high tide, doing her nightly count of the statue heads as they breached the water, she paused. Had she miscounted? There seemed to be one extra tonight.

Daffodils

He blinked his eyes open, the crack in the curtain confirming it was daylight even though the darkness in his soul hadn't lifted. Within seconds his mind was crowded with the memories of the night before, the dancing, the laughing, the snogging and later the daffodils.

He looked on the floor and saw the petals there, the yellow so vivid in the rays of sunlight pushing through. He followed the trail they made to the bathroom, her black and white checked shirt crumpled in the corner like a marker at the half open door, giving a clue to what lay beyond.

An image flashed in his mind and he flinched. He was sure he hadn't done it; it had to be his overwrought imagination. It might have been what he felt like doing when she had told him, but he hadn't put those thoughts into action ... had he?

His eyes traced the frame of the door as he recalled her pleading words.

"I didn't mean to, Jas, I really didn't. It was just the heat of the moment, just a kiss. Please forgive me Jas, you must!"

He'd watch the tears fall from her eyes as he stood there in the nuddy by the bed, about to jump in, about to fulfil all his desires and hers.

He'd thought he'd heard a whisper of it earlier at the bar, but he'd laughed it off. It couldn't have been his Linda, she wouldn't have done that.

But when they'd got home her sullen mood had kept killing the spark he was trying to kindle, until the crushing confession came.

He rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. But he hadn't done anything, had he? Other than show her forgiveness. He'd filled each thrust with his desire for revenge, driving it home. Her moans had been good moans ... hadn't they?

His eyes betrayed him again, returning to the bathroom door. There was only one way to find out.

His toes met the wooden floorboards with trepidation, and they creaked his way across the room, maybe trying to speak to him, to warn him it wasn't a good idea.

He hovered in the opening, his eyes adjusting to the bright sunlight reflecting off the stark white tiling. He pushed the door further, letting it swing open. Her kick-pleat black skirt lay strewn under the basin, and her under things were huddled in a pile next to the toilet. He peered over the edge of the bathtub and shuddered. The long-legged hairy spider might not be able to climb the enamel sides, but it could still give an unsuspecting person a fright.

She wasn't there.

He slumped, retreating out of the bathroom and falling back into bed, scuffing the daffodil petals as he went. He buried his head into a pillow, relieved but

annoyed at the same time.

She burst through the door, tray in hand.

“I thought I heard movement. I made us some tea.”

He peeked out from the edge of the pillow as she sat down on the bed, his black and white shirt billowing round her thighs, but not quite covering everything.

“You alright, Jas?”

He reached out an arm and put a hand on her thigh.

“Yeah Linda, I’m alright.”

“You’re not still angry about last night?”

“I thought I showed you I wasn’t?”

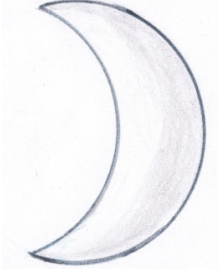
She grinned. “Yeah you did.”

His hand crept up her thigh. “Do you need me to show you again?”

She paused, her eyes sparkling. She put the tray on the floor. “Yeah, go on then.”

As she snuggled under him, his mind flashed images again and he wondered if he would have the nerve to make them memories rather than dreams this time.

Waxing



Feminine Power

She danced. Her hands slid down her long, luscious thighs as she wiggled her arse, which was tightly covered in a short black skirt. They were all looking at her - every single male in the place.

She could have any one of them at the snap of her fingers. Their feet tapped with the beat. Their bodies swayed as they watched her get into the groove. And their eyes followed her hand as she slid it up her body to her face, the tip of the middle finger dipping into the edge of her mouth for a second before she swept it up into her hair. Her eyes peeped out from under heavily laden lashes to look at them: all the animals in the house with their tongues hanging out.

She knew what she was doing. It was a fine balance between a tease and a genuine dance. No one could fault her; no one could say 'she was asking for it'; she was enjoying the music and they knew it. Just because she was female didn't mean she didn't have the right to do it. But it was a test too. It wasn't the first time things had gone awry here.

The bouncers watched too, but not her; they watched the dogs panting and getting ready to hump – whether her or any other girl in the house. She was setting them all off, even the girls, who started to join her.

They drifted in through the crowded men at the edges, feeling no shame as they started to move to the beat along with her, showing what they had to offer too. They looked at each other not the men. And with each beat they moved closer, but not touching.

They held eye contact, turning every now and then to face another girl, enjoying the freedom to show off their sexiness, their raw feminine energy, without fear of reprisal, without fear of having it misunderstood and taken from them by force. The throng kept increasing until all the women in the club were on the dance floor creating one writhing mass.

Then the spell was broken; their intensity, their feminine collective being too much for the raw animal lust. It stopped – some of the men even averted their eyes. Whether it was due to sensory overload or something unsettled them, no-one was sure. But the women had made it clear they didn't need them – or more than that they didn't want them. They were enough on their own.

And like an invisible string being cut, the tension was gone. A few men stepped away to find the bar. They had returned to a human state. Conversation resumed. The bouncers went back to enjoying the show.

Eastern Promises

Iona could feel the ropes on her wrists, the abrasive thick thread cutting in. She wriggled them, but knew she wouldn't get loose. The jeep jolted causing the hood on her head to move. A glimpse of light cut into the darkness, but it was too fleeting to show anything other than her own bare midriff. The man opposite her shouted at the driver.

She gathered they were taking her out into the desert. There wasn't anywhere else to go. She wondered who wanted her. It had to be somebody quite high up for them to have snatched her from under Saied's nose. Not many would risk it.

Iona knew she should be scared. She had heard tales of girls being used for all sorts of tortuous things to satisfy the blood lust of the elite, but she couldn't help feel a little excited.

After being sold into Saied's service at the age of twelve, she was tired of satisfying his fat sweaty needs. She'd been lucky that he had waited until she was fourteen before taking her, giving her a chance to get to know him and understand what was expected of her. But three years on she was struggling to keep up the pretence, especially since he seemed to have lost the desire to wash as often, instead spending more time gorging himself and increasing his already bulky frame.

Iona could feel the inside of the car warm up, and the blackness inside her hood fade a little. The sun was rising and she hoped that meant they would reach their destination soon. The man opposite had started talking to the driver again, but his dialect was unknown to her and she struggled to make sense of his words, only understanding that they weren't to waste time, and something about a ceremony.

She felt the jeep slow and swing round to a stop. She heard voices as they came round to the back and helped her out. But no one took off the hood.

She felt sand push between her toes as she walked; a hand on her arm to guide her. She could see the detail of the weave in the hood now she was out in sunlight. Then it went dark. She heard the movement of material as though in a breeze and felt thick carpet under foot, indicating they had entered a large tent.

There were noises and movement all around her, and voices all saying different things, many that didn't make sense to her. But then one stood out, the sound of it causing her stomach to lift in a rush of adrenaline; a voice she had only dreamt of hearing again. The hairs on her body prickled in response to the low, silken tone as it spoke three words, "She is here."

There was movement in front of her and her hood was removed revealing two bright blue eyes gazing into hers. They captivated her again, just as they had done the night he had come to the party.

“Tamir, you came for me.”

“I couldn’t leave you there under that fat pig!” Tamir spat the last word, his hand coming up to Iona’s face and cupping it.

“But he will come after you. I am not worth his wrath.”

“I am not scared of him. He can not touch me. He knows that.”

“But Tamir, he was to take me as his bride at the next full moon.”

“Then he will be too late, as I am going to take you as mine right now.”

Tamir clapped his hands and people rushed around them. Someone freed Iona’s hands while several women dressed her in the finest cloth, grooming and cleansing her as they went. Iona could only watch in amazement while Tamir was also dressed in fine white silk robes, highlighting his dark sleek features and striking eyes. Then he took her hand and stepped towards the Bedouin priest that had appeared at the far end of the tent. Never did she imagine feeling such joy on her wedding day.

Traceless

Lydia ran her hands through her hair and clenched the roots. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she looked out of the penthouse windows at the sleeping city.

She'd done it again and she had no way of getting out of it now. She mentally chided herself, feeling the frustration, knowing she had to bury it; it was too late now.

She looked over her shoulder at his sleeping body, his perfect skin, the line of his back, beautiful in the nightlight. His profile was perfect too: his lip line, his strong jaw. She wanted to savour this moment forever. Her stomach churned at the thought of what she had to do now.

She stood up and went to the bathroom, splashing water on her face and staring at her reflection in the mirror. She studied her eyes for an answer, some solution that would mean she could have both, but she knew there was none. The question was: how was she going to do this? She took a deep breath. The only way she knew how: without thinking.

Lydia returned to the bedroom and picked up her clothes, careful not to wake him. She went into the hallway to dress and took her keys out of her bag. She gently worked the key off the key-ring and laid it on the entrance hall table, while her mind ran through all the belongings she had here. There weren't many. None she couldn't live without.

She slipped her coat on, resisting the urge to take a peek at him one last time.

As soon as the door was shut behind her she ran down the corridor to the elevator. She considered the stairs, not really wanting the bellhop to see her, but when it arrived no one was in it. The universe was working with her tonight.

When she reached the foyer there was only the night porter and he was expecting her. She glanced at him as she walked past, and he gave her a meaningful look as he picked up the phone.

By the time she stepped out of the rotating doors she wanted to throw up. She covered her mouth to hide the retching sound.

A cab was waiting, but she didn't want to get in. She didn't want to sit. She couldn't. She needed to keep moving for as long as she could. She walked at high speed away from the building, not really thinking about a direction.

Going back to her apartment was out of the question. They'd find her and put her through it again. She couldn't keep doing this. She couldn't keep loving them, watch them love her back and then set them up. She didn't want to do it anymore. She wanted out of the loop, but no one got out – or so they told her.

A thought sparked in her mind and she ran with it. At the next ATM she took

out as much cash as it would let her, then she got on the subway – a taxi could be traced. Once at Grand Central station she scanned the destination boards and found what she was looking for. Even at this time of night she didn't have long to wait, and by the time the train crossed the border into Canada she was sound asleep.

Coming off the train she rummaged in the concealed pocket of her bag and pulled out her Canadian Citizenship card. She kept it on her at all times, the 'just in case' she knew would come one day. But they didn't – they couldn't; it was the one thing she had managed to keep from them.

From there she took a bus to the storage unit she'd set up years ago, when she had been someone else; when she had been free to make her own choices, before she had become indispensable to them. She changed her clothes and her hair, grabbing her real passport and some bundles of cash she'd stashed there. Then she headed for the airport.

Only once in the air did she breathe again and let her mind wander back to the life she'd been leading. It was no easy task being an assassins' mistress, but at least it had taught her one crucial thing: how to be traceless.

The Deal

Josie nodded, smiled and picked up another tray of champagne to offer the guests. She slid through the suits and gave them her glazed-eye smile, just repeating the same thing over and over in her head: 'Not much longer, you can do it.'

When she finished it was late. The client offered to call her a cab, but she politely declined. She told them it was just a short walk and she would be fine.

She loved the city at this time of night; it glistened in the darkness. The streetlights reflected the recent summer storm, the air moist and hugging her close. Many wouldn't feel safe, but she did. She'd found her place here, living among the millions of other anonymous people. It was only the work that sucked.

She hated having to do anything, but money was a necessity, and she was lucky to have found regular work. She reminded herself of that as she passed those huddled in doorways.

But she also thought about the looks on some of those suits faces as they had looked at her – or more correctly, at her body. She shuddered as she walked. It was all they really wanted: to touch her. And on occasion she let them.

Josie didn't like to think about it too much, but after a night like tonight she knew she would get a call. She could say no, but then she thought about the wad of cash that would be handed to her at the end. It was too tempting. It wouldn't be long now before she would have enough to retire.

Jack had got her into it, telling her she could do more than just play hostess at business functions. It was always him who called with a request, having vetted the clients first. And she would do it too – for him, and he knew why. The thought made her smile as she turned her face up to greet the light drizzle that had started.

She was right; the next day there was a message on her phone. Just a time and a place, she didn't need to know more. When she turned up there were three of them waiting.

The suite was luxurious, and they allowed her to experience it, saying they wanted to treat her just right. They were respectful and gentle, even bathing her too. She was able to try out all the rooms, looking at them from all angles. They'd also left out the money on the ornate coffee table, which gave her something to focus on when she needed to. When they were done she left feeling more liberated than normal and this time caught a cab home, thumbing the bundle of cash in her pocket as she went.

Now it was Jack's turn.

Josie found another message on her phone when she arrived home, telling her to block out the weekend, and she did so with a big smile.

He was waiting outside her apartment on Friday with the top down on his brand new red Mustang convertible – something he'd treated himself to as his business was doing well. She climbed in, looking forward to the weekend as he handed her the rings he kept in the safety deposit box.

It was just a couple of hours drive away, but it was like leaving one world and entering another. Whenever he took her home she was treated like one of the family, and for the weekend she was: the daughter-in-law, the sister-in-law, his wife. Having spent her childhood alone moving from one sleazy foster home to the next, never really belonging anywhere, this was the closest she'd ever been, and she lapped it up, embracing the fantasy.

And Jack played his part too as the dutiful husband – in every way. Sometimes she wondered how much longer she could do this, and sometimes she caught a glimpse in his eye on the way home that said the same. But for the time being it worked for them and they enjoyed it, their own personal deal.

High

She inhaled the smoke deeply and held it while he desperately tried to make her laugh, prancing about the room like a nude nymph. It didn't suit him, he didn't have the physique for it; he was too skinny. Her mind drifted into thoughts about the perfect figure and how it could be possible, how it was only a matter of refining certain things in your life. She looked down at herself and smiled. No matter how much 'munchie food' she ate she didn't seem to gain a thing. She watched her chest deflate as she exhaled and marvelled at how amazing the body was.

Then he touched her and she felt it shiver along her skin. Every hair felt the touch of his finger as it ran up her bare thigh. She watched as he reached the top, hovering as though debating direction, then travelling on up her rib cage, faltering at a couple of moles and circling them.

She inhaled air, watching her ribcage expand and his finger going up and down. She giggled and he giggled too, and then they couldn't stop.

The bed they lay on was messy, as though they had been there for days ... and it might have been, neither of them knew anymore.

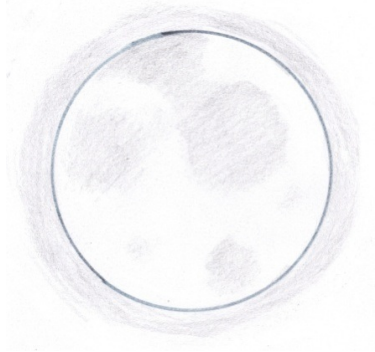
The doorbell rang and they froze looking at each other with dawning horror that there was a person out there, potentially a non-stoned person that they'd have to interact with. Paranoia crept at the edges of their thoughts. He rushed into some loose trousers, half falling in his attempt to look respectable, and running his fingers repeatedly through his hair as he left the room, shaking his head, trying to clear it and not look quite so out of it.

She heard laughter at the front door and then footsteps coming back. Two heads popped round the door and she grinned; it was play time. His two friends started stripping between drags of the joint they'd been working on and crawled onto the bed next to her.

Now she had three fingers to watch and they just made her giggle more and more. She slipped into the fuzzy delight of pure sensation and went with it.

The next morning she came to and found herself entangled in three other sleeping bodies. She tried to remember what had happened, but could only remember the smoking, giggling and lots of touching. She smiled to herself; they'd fallen asleep and nothing had happened. She knew it; this wasn't the first time. So she just lay there and waited. It wouldn't be long, and then the party would start again, but this time with some follow through.

Full Moon



Into The Light

Hidden Desire

Lily ignored his physical rejection of her attempt at a hug; at least he'd allowed the peck on the cheek. She watched him walk away hurriedly to the other side of the busy train station, a sudden heaviness on her chest and sickness in her stomach. By the time she'd reached the train there were tears in her eyes. She missed him already.

The day had been perfect, their nervousness diminishing after the first hour. He was friendly, attentive, and interested. It made her feel renewed. It made her feel there was a chance. But now he was gone again, with no idea of anything further.

She stared at her reflection in the train window. He had no idea how closely she'd been watching him, how much she knew about his movements: the places he'd been to, the parties he'd gone to, how many times she'd resisted a comment on social media that would give it all away. But she couldn't help herself, not where he was concerned. Not since they'd met at Joleen's party.

Lily stared at pictures of him on social media all the time. She imagined conversations with him, drinking with him ... sex with him. She bit her lower lip. What would that be like?

Her mobile phone beeped, and her heart leapt when she saw it was from him. "Good to see you," he said. "You free next week?" A rush of adrenaline ran through her, banishing all the sadness. She sent a text back with a simple "Yes". A few seconds later he responded with "I'll call you. We'll set something up."

She waited, but he clearly didn't mean now. She had no idea when it might be, but she was happy that it might be at all.

Lily tucked the phone back in her pocket.

Roger looked at his phone, his heart thumping. He'd done it. He'd asked for the second date. Had he been too casual? He didn't want to seem too keen. He still shook slightly after her attempt to hug him. He couldn't let her do that – that was too much – that would give it all away. He had to keep the cool exterior. He couldn't risk her seeing what she did to him. If they embraced he'd struggle to let her go, he knew he would.

After all this time they had finally met up. He'd scanned the social media timelines for months, for any mention of her going to any of the parties he was attending. He'd waited avidly for her to 'like' any of the events, but she'd always been absent. And then finally he'd managed to bring about a meeting – coincidentally been where she was. She always tagged the place where she went shopping, so it wasn't hard.

But he'd thought about it for weeks. Would she see through it? Would she know? Would he be able to do it? Could he approach her and pretend to be relaxed and surprised to see her? Would she respond? Be interested? He thought she might, but until that moment he hadn't known. It had taken a lot to get the nerve up.

And it had been perfect. She'd been in no hurry to leave. She'd been happy to join him for something to eat. And she'd lingered – or had it been his imagination? He didn't think so, not after she attempted to hug him.

He tried not to berate himself for his reaction, but he hadn't expected her to do that. Not yet. He wasn't ready for that yet – not in reality. He'd gone over it a hundred times in his mind. How he would hold on to her, embrace her, and then kiss her.

He stood up. He had to break that thought process, save it for later when he wasn't in public. He looked up at the board to see which platform his train was on, and started heading that way.

So when was he going to call her? How soon was too soon? And what would he say?

His mind buzzed as he boarded his train.

Kindred

Ruth pushed open the cabin door, inhaling the scent of the thick foliage and fresh wood that surrounded it. It had been too long. She walked in and found it untouched. Her heart sank.

She traced her finger along the rough wooden kitchen table and thought about the last time they had used it. She climbed the ladder up to the eaves where their bed lay. She looked at it, still pristine, not a crease in it. He hadn't been here.

She sighed and made her way back down the ladder. She brought in her bag and put it on the table. She unpacked its tiny contents into the single kitchen cupboard. It wouldn't be long before she would use them.

Ruth busied herself with preparing the hearth and a fire for the evening. Dusk wouldn't be long, and then she could get to work. There were a million reasons why he might not be back, and he could be on his way. She only allowed the questions to surface at the edge of her thoughts, not letting them in fully. She refused to acknowledge any of her nagging doubts. She would help him soon enough. She refused to chide herself for not having returned sooner. Things had to be arranged. She wanted this to go right; she wouldn't risk him being taken again.

Dusk fell and she took a stool outside so she could listen. It took a while, but soon she heard it. She smiled to herself. She went inside to fetch her tools.

As she brought out the array of objects she could feel it coming closer, the sound increasing. Her heart was light and totally open, as it should be.

Then more solid sounds were audible, in particular footfalls, or were they hoof falls? She wasn't quite sure, but it didn't matter.

The crashing and breaking of foliage moved closer until an outline appeared in the dark.

She was right, she had heard both. He stepped out into the clearing, leading his horse.

He stopped when he saw her, and swept the helmet off his head as though it blocked his view.

"My lady, you have returned!"

Ruth smiled, wanting to step forward, but knowing better. "I have."

"And you reached me."

"I did."

He bowed low. She curtsied in response.

"I will come."

When he stood there was a new light in his eyes.

"Please."

“Can you wait?”

“For eternity.”

He smiled. “It won’t be that long I promise.”

“Are you far?”

He looked back over his shoulder, seeing what she could not. “No, my lady, not in distance.”

“I will aid you.”

He remained silent, but his eyes told her all she needed to know. Again she resisted the urge to run to him, knowing he wasn’t really there.

He faltered as he spoke. “I must go.”

“I know.”

He started to turn, heading back into the woods. She watched him go. He glanced at her one last time, his eyes bright and smiling. It wouldn’t be long, they could both feel it.

Ruth remained outside picking up each object and delivering its incantation until the chill bit into her. Then she moved in by the fire and continued until the embers burned so low she could barely see. Eventually she climbed the steps up to the bed and fell into a dreamless sleep, exhausted by her efforts.

She didn’t hear the creak of the cabin door, or the soft footsteps on the ladder. But she knew the arm that fell across her and the body that shuffled up against her. The scent made her smile in her dream. They were well met at long last; there would be no more interference.

Soul Search

Lucille stopped in front of the subtly lit signage, knowing it was the place she had seen in her dream. The pull within her was strong; the excitement in her core peaking.

She entered the club and no one at the door batted an eyelid. When shown the card at the cloakrooms she knew she was in the right place; the image on the other side burned in her mind. Her response was met with a quick nod and smile.

When she walked inside, the music made her feel like she had walked into a time warp; its single note filling the room. The people stood around as though waiting for something and for a moment she wondered if it was her. Then the beat started and the dancing resumed.

When she approached the bar, she was handed a drink. She sipped it and delighted in its accuracy. Speech was rendered useless here, allowing the music to permeate.

Her mind was flooded with images and thoughts. The eye contact she made drew her in, engaging her in dialogue, tapping a previously untouched depth within her. She had finally arrived. She was among kindred souls.

Lucille looked round for him, he had to be here; he'd been the main player in the dream, going by the name of Rohan. And then, as if on cue, the people in front of her parted and there he was, on the other side of the dance-floor, standing with a group of people.

He looked round as though someone had called his name – and she realised she just had. The smile that spread across his face when he saw her, made her soul yearn. He wasted no time crossing the room to reach her and embraced her like a long lost lover.

When their lips touched her mind reeled in a white light that filled her entire being. When they broke apart she held his face, and looked deep into his eyes. Moments from their past lives flowed like an exchange of ideas as they caught up to the present. They had found each other again.

Zelus

Felicity sat bold upright, clutching her chest. Scott sat up with her.

“You all right, babe?”

“It was him again. He wants me to meet him.”

Scott rubbed her back. “Meet him? He doesn’t even exist!”

Felicity shot him an angry glance.

“Okay, he might exist in the ethereal sense, but he can’t manifest himself in the real world, can he?”

Felicity gave him a worried look. “I don’t know, but I have to go.”

“Go where?”

“The copse, midsummer’s eve, at midnight.”

“That’s tomorrow.”

“I know.” Felicity shuddered.

“What time is it?” Felicity whispered as they moved deeper into the woods.

Scott used the torch to look at his watch. “Two minutes to twelve. What’s that?”

They saw a strange light coming through the foliage and headed towards it.

When they arrived in the clearing the angel was there.

He was magnificent, just as Felicity had dreamed. His chest was bare, though the angelic wings wrapped round him made him appear draped in soft finery. He seemed tall, the light green glow surrounding him accentuating it. His bright eyes pierced hers.

“Hello Felicity.”

His voice rumbled deep within her, awakening feelings and desires she’d never experienced before. A longing to touch him overwhelmed her. She stepped closer.

“Hello Zelus.”

He eyed Scott.

“Who is your companion?”

“This is my husband, Scott.”

“Husband?” Zelus’ brow creased. “Are you tied to another?”

“Well I wouldn’t say tied ...”

“We’ve been married for several years,” Scott interjected. Zelus ignored him.

“Felicity, I asked you to meet me, to join me. We are soulmates. We have been for centuries – it has taken me two of them to find you. You can not stay with this mate.”

“Hold on a minute—” Scott began.

“Felicity please, you know it to be true.” Zelus’ right wing opened and he proffered a hand.

Felicity felt a pull in her gut. She knew he spoke the truth. “But Zelus, I can’t. I’m not like you, I’m mortal, human.”

Zelus smiled and gave a small laugh that sounded like distant thunder. “Felicity, you are spirit, we all are. You simply need to take my hand. Come.”

Felicity hovered, her hand coming up.

“Felicity!” Scott shouted.

She glanced back at Scott.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m sorry Scott, but I ...” When Felicity’s hand met Zelus’ there was only bright white light and his face. She was home.

Surrender

Matt saw it in her face their first night: a look in her eyes. He didn't let it distract him from what they were doing, and he still lost himself in the moment of sexual ecstasy – but he'd registered it.

After she left in the morning, showering his face in kisses and making him laugh, he sat and pondered what he'd seen. He didn't want to do it again – break someone's heart, it broke a part of him too. But this one? Could he love Jasmine?

He sighed. He wanted to; he wanted to give her all she deserved. But could he? Or would he let her down like he had all the others?

Later that day he had to smile at the text she sent. Jasmine wasn't going to wait for him, she was going to run the show and he liked that. And when she turned up at his door again the next day, throwing herself into his arms, he was overjoyed to embrace her, although he kept her in check with silence.

Days grew into weeks, which gathered into months. Matt took out the shoebox he kept under his bed and sifted through all the cards and scribbblings she'd given him. He'd tried to find the courage to return the emotion, but all he'd been able to give was his time; taking her out to dinner, shows, the cinema, pubs, bars, anywhere to keep her entertained and distracted, because he knew she wanted more. She would start to say something then stop, or tell him she wanted to know him better and then wait for him to speak. But he wasn't good at speaking; he was only good at showing, so that's what he did. He took her to bed and showed her time and again.

It didn't stop her pouring herself into him by including him in everything she did. And he was happy to join her and get to know her friends and their boyfriends. He enjoyed the elaborate dinner parties she arranged and lost himself in the drunken conversation. But every morning when they woke up together it was still there; that look in her eyes.

Then the first year was over and they celebrated, and the whole evening she was watching him with expectation. He did all he could, spun her the best night they had had, and in the morning he thought he had pulled it off. But there she was looking at him, only this time with a little box in her hand. He was terrified.

Jasmine had always been forward, moving it all along and he wondered how far she was taking it as he turned the box over in his hand. It was a perfect tiny square with a raised top. Matt's mind reeled at the idea that someone else might pop the question. He fiddled with it, delaying, but she pushed his fingers against it, showing him where he could start unwrapping.

He fumbled it open and tipped the lid a crack, trying to glimpse what was within,

before revealing it. And what he saw made him frown. He paused, opening the lid wider and picking up its contents.

“A key?”

“Yes, a key.”

“To your heart?”

She laughed. “No, to my apartment. It’s time, don’t you think?”

“What, for us to live together?”

She frowned at him and laughed again. “No silly, for you to be able to come round whenever you want. Why, do you want to live together?”

“Well ...” He flustered.

She laughed again. “That’s what I thought. One step at a time, eh?”

“But ...” he stammered.

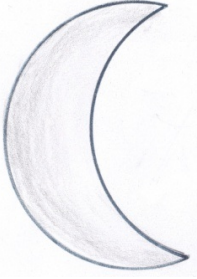
“What?”

“But, I thought, you know, that as we’re in love, you know, that was the next step? I mean, it’s been a year.”

Her jaw dropped as she looked at him, and he felt his cheeks flush. Then she threw herself on him, pushing her lips against his with such a fierceness he could only surrender – although surrender was all he wanted to do, so he returned the passion.

That night he packed a bag, and when they reached her apartment he picked her up and carried her over the threshold. There were no broken hearts here.

Waning



The Voices

Paul smashed his head against the wall and screamed as hard as he could. He felt a dribble of blood run to the tip of his nose and wiped at it absently. It hadn't helped.

He grabbed his jacket and rushed out of the apartment, shrugging it on as he fled down the steps to the street. He couldn't have given a toss that it was two in the morning and the city was flooded with drunks exiting nightclubs. He didn't see them.

He didn't want this, not tonight, not tomorrow, not any day, but he didn't have a choice; it was his birth right.

As the urge got larger he picked up the pace and started running. There was only one place for his kind to go and he needed to get there: a place of sanctuary, a place of understanding.

But even as the building came into sight he already knew it was too late. They were in the back of his mind already, pushing forward, consuming every thought, every impulse, every breath.

He stumbled, trying hard to focus on his intent, something they wanted to stop. He slowed, forcing each foot in front of the other, resisting what they wanted; he wasn't going to turn round; he wasn't going to the bridge; he WAS worth more than that.

The lights were on; the building was open twenty-four hours. There was a man on the door. Paul knew that – but that meant they did too. The whispering escalated to raised voices and he was reduced to his knees, crawling on all fours, each move a personal triumph over them.

A man bleeding from his head and crawling along a street in the early hours of the morning. Paul knew what the public saw, but it didn't mean he should do what the voices wanted. It didn't mean that he was worth nothing and he had no right to be here. It didn't mean he was scum or worthless and didn't deserve to live!

He shouted back, aware that it was out-loud rather than in his head, the humiliation bringing a wave of rage that pushed them out for a moment, allowing him to stand.

The white steps up to the facility were now in sight, as was the security guard's window. Relief flooded through Paul as he made eye contact with the man. But it dulled the rage, bringing them back full force and he was unable to climb the steps unaided.

He heard a bell ringing and several people in white coats came out to help the security guard bring him inside, their questions barely audible over the noise in his

head. Once in the entrance hall he could only drop to his knees and cover his ears.

Then a pair of warm hands rested on his, and a soft voice reached him as though across a great void.

“Paul? Paul? Can you hear me? It’s Audrey. Paul, look at me, lift your head.”

He brought his head up a fraction. A light flashed in his eyes. There was rustling around him and her voice came again.

“We’re just going to move you into the exam room, Paul. Relief is coming soon, I promise.”

He felt himself being lifted, and even though he thought it impossible, the noise inside reached a whole new level. He knew Audrey wasn’t going to torture him, or probe him, or experiment on him. He knew she wouldn’t harm him. He wasn’t going to try and hurt her and run from this place, this was where he needed to be and he repeated that over and over to try and placate them.

But they didn’t stop, not until the needle went into his arm and the drug flooded into his bloodstream, which fortunately only took a few seconds.

He slumped back, exhausted, knowing that he’d made it; the attack was over – he’d won.

But it was just a single battle in a war that was going to rage for the rest of his life, each one was a fight to the death, and maybe next time he wouldn’t make it.

No good for you

I saw it as he swung you back on the dance floor. Not many would have, but I was looking. It was just above your elbow, and it brought an image I didn't enjoy having in my head.

As he swung you again I took a closer look; it had scabbed over. So what was it? A couple of days old?

It wasn't there earlier in the week, I knew that. I'd kissed every inch of you – like I always did.

You smiled at the guy as he spun you round, and I saw it then: you, him, on his lounge carpet. You on your elbows straddling him. Maybe you bent to kiss him and slipped, or was it the movement? Rabbits came to mind.

You threw your head back and laughed when he dipped you, but when you saw me your smile faltered. I picked up my pint and took a sip, not taking my eyes off you.

The song finished and you came straight over to me. Leaning down to kiss me, I took the back of your head and made it a deep one, giving you a wink as we broke off. And you smiled that smile that was just for me.

I glanced over to see the guy looking. I looked back, murder in my eyes. He knew the score.

You went off again this time to chat up the girls and I relaxed, letting you have your time and enjoying a chat with the lads.

Time shifted.

I saw you dancing with him again. Okay, correction, he was dancing with you and the girls. Still, I didn't like it. He was too close.

He saw me looking and just looked back. I wasn't happy.

I glanced over at the lads and checked they'd seen it. They had. He had no idea what he was doing. But I wasn't worried about him, I was worried about you.

You glanced over too and I winked again. You smiled. I was okay with that. So I moved to the bar and got us some drinks. I took them to the dance floor and cut in, stepping right in front of him, giving you your drink and dancing with you for a couple of seconds. I whispered in your ear and you flicked your tongue across mine. I kissed your neck and left you to it.

When the slow songs started you were across the room with the girls. I saw you look round for me and I laughed beckoning you. But as you walked to me he was there again, pulling at you to go with him. You glanced at me and I waited. What were you going to do?

And I saw it then: that look, that indecision. And I knew then as I'd always

known that scab was no accident.

I moved quickly and reached you in a couple of strides, my hand wrapping round your arm, covering the scab.

“She’s coming home with me mate.”

He puffed his chest at me and glanced at you. You gave him a sympathetic smile and nodded. He didn’t argue, walking to the door with the rest of the departing club goers.

As the lads passed me they patted me on the shoulder reassuring me that the job would be done.

I led you out, my hands never leaving you. And in the back of the taxi I took your elbow, turned it over to kiss the scab. As my head came up, our eyes met. The sadness in mine palpable, letting you know I knew. Your eyes were wide but you turned them to gaze out the window as we pulled out of the parking lot.

I put my hand on your leg and you covered mine with yours as a tear rolled down your cheek. I pulled your hand over to my leg and put my arm round you, pulling you into me and kissing the top of your head.

Some would say you were no good for me, but it was me that was no good for you; I let you do whatever you want. But I love you, so what can I do?

Rehab

Annabelle giggled as she stood up and attempted to make her way through the crowd that seemed to have magically formed in the tiny club. How long had she been here? She didn't know anymore ... and didn't really care. She pushed through a group of guys and staggered as one pushed back. Her laugh was cut short by the pain of her bony hip hitting a pillar. She growled and shook a fist at the pillar, causing the guys to laugh. She laughed with them and continued to move towards the toilets.

She fixed her eyes on the door and made a beeline for it. She remembered being twirled around at one point and was sure someone put a hand up her skirt, but before she knew it she was staring into the dimly lit mirror in the toilets, trying to focus on her reflection.

She ignored the bags under her eyes, and how her cheeks had sunken into her jaw line. She attempted to tidy up the lipstick that had smeared during the last line of coke. She wasn't sure if she improved it, but it wasn't important; what was, was the rock she'd just scored. She pulled it out of the tiny pocket in her tiny skirt, and held it up between thumb and forefinger. She licked her lips. This could finally do it!

She reached into her other pocket for her little foldable pipe and lighter. Then, taking a surreptitious look round the toilets to make sure no one had seen her, she lurched into one of the cubicles and banged the door shut, fumbling with the lock to secure it.

She pushed the little rock into the pipe bowl, imagining the rush before she'd even brought the lighter up to it, and fell back onto the toilet seat once she did.

When she woke, Annabelle cracked open an eye, but shut it again to protect it from the harsh white light glaring down from the ceiling. She tried to move her hand up to shield her eyes, but found it tied down. Another peep revealed wrist straps tying them to the side of a metal bed.

"Morning Annabelle. How are you feeling?"

She didn't recognise the voice, and wasn't going to risk opening her eyes again – the pain of the light was too much. She tried to ask her own question, but gagged instead.

"Easy honey, don't try to speak, we need to take your intubation tube out first. Come, help me sit you up and breathe out hard as I pull, okay?"

An arm came round her back and Annabelle felt herself being lifted.

"One, two, three, and blow hard!"

Annabelle did, feeling something hard drag along her throat, reducing her to a coughing fit.

“It’s okay honey, drink this and it’ll feel better.”

This time Annabelle opened her eyes and squinted at a paper cup being handed to her. She took a sip and managed to croak, “Where am I?”

“You’re in the Mount View rehabilitation hospital.”

“How did I get here?”

“You were brought in by your family after you were resuscitated by paramedics two days ago.”

“Resuscitated?”

“Yep. You OD’ed I understand. You were found unconscious in a toilet in a club. For a while they weren’t sure you would make it. You’re lucky to be here.”

Annabelle groaned.

“You hurting, honey?”

Annabelle nodded, a tear running down her face.

“Where’s the pain?”

Annabelle tapped her chest on the left, and mumbled, “My heart.”

The nurse checked her pulse. “Is it a sharp pain?”

“It’s broken.”

“What?” The nurse was looking at her watch, counting.

“They knew I didn’t want to come here, but they brought me anyway.”

“They care about you, honey.”

“No, they don’t. They only care about their ‘good name’. Daddy’s little girl can’t be seen to be on drugs.”

More tears tumbled down Annabelle’s face. She looked down at herself, the bag of bones she had become and then at the wrist braces holding her. If only they had left her just a little bit longer it would be over. Now she had to start all over again.

House of Horror

Eloise didn't want to go there again, but they'd insisted. Her hands were shaking by the time they pulled up at the bottom of the embankment. When she looked up at the white weather-board house it seemed to plead its innocence, but she knew better.

Two cars pulled up behind and then someone opened her door. Eloise spun round, eyes wide with terror at the prospect of getting out and going in there again, but a hand took her arm and she knew she had to comply.

She climbed the embankment with them surrounding her. There was no escape, not even inside her head where the sounds she'd endured were replayed, even those made by her own body. She stumbled at the prospect of facing it again.

As they approached the front door Eloise pulled at the man leading her, until they were standing over the coal shoot she'd been shoved down a few terrifying days earlier. The men opened it, taking their time, ready to reveal its horrors.

The smell hit her, metallic and salty: the purist form of distilled fear. And then the sounds reached her and she pulled back, pushing against the men that held her. She clawed at their hands to release her and allow her to run free from the torture chamber below, where the few that were still alive wailed their agony.

And they did, they let her go as they braced themselves for what was ahead, letting her run back to the police van. She pushed through the underbrush oblivious to the damage it inflicted, knowing it could never cut as deep as the tools used in that cellar. Eloise flew into the arms of a waiting social worker, where she allowed herself to be held and comforted, and reminded that her ordeal was over.

Find the Girl

He could hear her, her breath panting, but it was distant. He followed where he thought it came from, but a crunch of twigs turned him in another direction. Damon pushed through the undergrowth, ignoring scratches and cuts to his arms and face, and the yanking at his long overcoat as it caught on branches. He had to find her, had to get hold of her, and soon.

He heard another crash and a squeal with it. It froze him in his tracks as he strained to hear more, but there was nothing. He slammed his shoulder against a tree trunk as he tripped over a root, pausing a second to catch his breath before going on. How much longer could he keep this up?

Then he heard a shot fired somewhere off to his left, but no scream followed it. He hoped it had missed. He hoped he still had time as adrenaline gave him another shove forward. He was determined. He had to be the first to reach her; he couldn't fail again.

A wall of thicket appeared in front of him. As he approached it he wondered how best to get inside, but found that throwing himself in was the only way. Was she in here? He didn't know, but he had to try.

As he pushed further in, Damon was momentarily blinded by dense leaves. He felt his foot snag on something as he slid face first into a carpet of leaves and mulch. But he barely felt it, his attention being caught by a sound next to him: a sharp intake of breath.

Damon turned his head to the side and there she was, cowering away from him, hugging her naked body tight in an attempt to cover herself. Her leg was bleeding where he'd caught it with his shoe.

He pushed back onto his knees and turned round, opening his long overcoat and sweeping it round her as best he could in the tight space. She pulled it round, and let him embrace her, resting her trembling body against his. Whether from fear or cold Damon couldn't tell, but at least he had her first before the monsters came.

Neither of them made a sound as they heard them crashing through the trees. Damon hoped the twigs and leaves of the thicket had bounced back behind him and they wouldn't spot where he'd dived in.

Footsteps crunched nearer, and two voices spoke in rough whispers.

"She came through here, I'm sure of it."

"We should have brought McKlennan, he could have tracked her better than you."

"She's here somewhere, I know it."

"You said that a mile back."

“We’re getting close. Shhh!”

The men went still and Damon held his breath, feeling the girl do the same. Everyone waited. Then something crashed off in the distance, an animal maybe, and they were moving again, excited by the sound.

“She’s over there!”

“I can’t wait to have her!”

Damon and the girl didn’t move or speak, though they relaxed as the sound of the men became distant.

Eventually the girl’s head came up from Damon’s chest, and she whispered, “Why?”

He looked into her pale frightened eyes, and said, “Because you’re a valuable human being, not a piece of meat to be hunted.”

Full Dark



Love Me

Jeffrey had seen his dad buy the fireworks and put them in the shed, but his dad wouldn't let him touch them. He said they weren't for children to play with, that they had to be handled with care. Jeffrey knew all about handle with care: it's what they'd been doing with him his whole life.

When he was little he wondered what it was they were afraid of; what it was he did that sparked so much fear in their eyes whenever he was around; why they barely touched him, or came near him. So he'd started experimenting and found that there were quite a few things.

The first time the police had shown up he'd acted as sweet as pie, but by the fourth he didn't care anymore. The empty threats were just that: empty. His parents never followed through on any of them, they were too afraid, afraid of what he might do next time. Ironical really.

And the older he got the more ways he discovered, no matter what they tried to hide from him, including the fireworks his dad had tried to sneak home. The fireworks meant for his baby brother Jeremy: the golden boy, the one who got all the love and affection. Did they really think Jeffrey would keep his hands off? He was fourteen now. His dad knew better.

Social services had been round that morning talking about taking him away. His mum had cried a lot. First time he'd ever seen her do that. He knew he was hurting them, and he tried to care, but he didn't know how. Plus he knew a way to make it all better.

He snuck out that night. Put the wheelbarrow ready in the middle of the garden. Then he found his dad's hiding place – it wasn't hard. He placed the fireworks round the inside of the wheelbarrow, in easy reach with him in the middle. He'd create one hell of a bonfire. He added paraffin, liking the smell of it on his clothing. Then he counted down ... three, two, one.

Maybe they'd love him now.

Doing What You Have To

Now she had the gun up against his head her hand was steady.

In every scenario she'd run in her head, Amanda had seen herself shaking, barely able to hold the gun. It was why she'd picked the little Taurus 405 model, easy to hold and easy to conceal. And when it had played out in her head she had seen him laughing at her. But he wasn't.

He stood stock-still, an edge of fear in his eyes. She liked that. For the first time ever he was taking her seriously. When she cocked the barrel he dropped the conch.

She paused, catching her breath, debating whether to go through with it or not – never imagining she'd get this far, and then he surprised her by starting to beg.

"Come on Mand, you don't want to be doing this. You don't want to go shooting me. You don't want that on your conscience. I'm not worth jail time. Come on, this isn't you. You're better than this. This isn't you at all."

"Maybe I'm not who you think I am, Brandon. I know I'm not who I thought I was. I didn't think I'd be somebody who'd let a man beat me daily. I mean look at me? Look at the blood trickling down the side of my head. That might be you; it might have been my mother, but it sure as shit isn't me. And I let you do that Brandon. Me, no one else. I let you worm your way in. I trusted you, I believed your sob stories, your excuses, your sorry speeches—"

"But I meant them Mand, I really meant them, it's just—"

She spat in his face, "You didn't mean a word of them! Not one ... single ... word! If I wasn't holding this gun to your head, you'd still be beating me with that!" Amanda kicked the conch across the kitchen floor. "But I was ready for you this time Brandon, because I realised that you were never gonna stop. And I need you to Brandon, because I need to live. I need to show those two little people upstairs, cowering at this very moment, that their mother is worth more than that, that she's stronger than that, that she's better than that."

"But I can change Mand. I can get help. I can turn this shit around, I promise."

"Promise?" Amanda scoffed a half laugh, the gun held firm. "You're promises aren't worth shit, Brandon, and you know it. You won't do any of that. Once this gun is removed you'll beat me to death, that's what you'll do. That's the only promise you'll keep."

She felt his body tense under the barrel of the gun. He knew she was right, and she knew she was right too. And in that moment she knew what she had to do. She pulled the trigger, feeling the warm spatter of blood on her face, and his body slump to the floor.

Prickly Fingers

The tips of Fraser's fingers tingled. He glanced over his shoulder, but couldn't see anyone else in the library. He looked back at his hands. They were never wrong.

He put his pen down, his chain of thought broken, and stretched, leaning back in his chair, listening. His ears strained for the minutest of sounds: a turn of a page, a breath, but there was nothing. His fingers hadn't given up though; it felt like hundreds of pins were attacking them.

He sat forward and gathered his books together, sliding them carefully into his backpack, making as little noise as possible. Then he heard it: a tiny scrape across a page.

Fraser had narrowed down his stalker to one of two girls on his course. He should be flattered but he was tired of their efforts to debunk him. They thought it was funny. They liked to tease him. They'd pretend they were interested in him, but they weren't, it was his fingers they were fascinated by.

He scanned the aisles as he left, catching a glimpse of something light in the second to last one. It was the blonde.

Once outside, Fraser dashed to the right, hiding behind a large potted plant at the entrance. He waited. When she appeared he watched her pause, looking round for him before heading across the lawns back to the resident halls.

He followed – stalker turned stalker.

He could see her head flitting from side to side. Did she sense someone watching her? Did her body give her signals about the presence of unseen people too? How did it make her feel? Uncomfortable? He moved closer.

She stepped into the shadow of a mature oak and he reached out, putting a hand on her shoulder. He felt her gasp as she stopped. He moved up against her, his hand sliding round to her throat, his mouth by her ear.

"Looking for me?"

"Yes," she breathed.

"Thought you could outsmart me, did you?"

A nervous titter escaped her lips as his prickling fingers massaged her throat. "Yes."

"Sorry to disappoint but my fingers tell me everything." His grip tightened on her throat. "Many ask what it feels like."

She started to gag, a hand coming up to pull his away, but he ignored it.

"And I tell them it's a bit like pins and needles."

Her hand batted at his.

"Which is caused by the circulation being cut off."

The batting slowed.

“And the limbs going numb.”

Her hand dropped.

“Some say dead even.”

Her body went limp. He lowered it to the ground, laying it in a foetal position so passersby would think she was sleeping. He stood, adjusting the backpack on his shoulder and looked at her lying there all serene. It was a shame they couldn't take his word for it. He glanced around, but no one had seen him. He'd know, his fingers would tell him.

Scissors vs. Knife

She told him to leave her alone when she was untangling the lights, but he wouldn't listen. She'd put them up on the tree enough times to know how it was done, but he liked to think he knew better. She bit her tongue and went with it, because she wanted to get the decorations up and relax, but all the way through he kept irritating her.

She watched him hang the paperchains up at the window. At least he was good at that; he had the height for it. But when he stood back to admire them, she could feel her rage building again.

Then at the dining table he started wrapping up the presents. He used a knife, claiming it was easier than scissors. But she knew he just liked being a smartass and wanted to look cool wrapping his presents all nice and tight, while hers were baggy and unprofessional.

Then he did it; he finally pushed that one last button, commenting how he could do it all himself, he didn't really need her. Well, those might not have been his exact words, but it was what he meant.

Sophie grabbed the scissors and stabbed them through his hand. She didn't give him long to recover from the shock before pulling them out and stabbing him again, this time in the chest. She was surprised how easily they went in, although they were harder to get out. When she yanked them, they flew out of her bloodied hands into the Christmas tree. She glanced over her shoulder to see where they'd gone, ignoring his gurgling sounds. She decided if they weren't clearly visible she'd leave them there – she didn't want to ruin the tree.

When she turned back to him, his tongue was protruding and his eyes were wide. He was gone. She sighed. Then she got up and went to the sideboard, pouring herself a large port. Now she could relax.

Last Supper

He'd called her earlier in the day to confirm the time he was coming home. She couldn't wait; the house was immaculate, and the dining room all laid out. She'd even polished the silver candelabra.

As dusk approached she prepared the food. He liked it meaty and lots of it, so she had gone beyond her usual expertise, and set it out in their best dishes.

Then she got herself ready, slipping into a comfortable sexy black dress. She knew he'd like it. She smiled. It was perfect; he wouldn't know what hit him. She giggled. No, he wouldn't, but that was how she wanted it.

She heard his car and glided down the ornate staircase, hovering on the bottom step as she heard his footsteps on the gravel drive. He opened the door and paused when he saw her. His greeting caught in his throat as his eyes swept over her.

"Avril, you look ... amazing."

"Thank you, Paul."

He shut the door behind him and put his briefcase down. She could see a question forming in his eyes.

"You want to ask me why, don't you?"

He stammered as he replied, "Well yes, I do. I ... Is there a reason?"

Avril smiled at him. "We'll get to that later, first I want you to enjoy it all."

She saw a crease flutter across his temple, but he remained silent while she led him to the dining room. When he saw the presentation of their meal, he stood in the doorway blinking, letting out a slight laugh.

"Come closer, take a look at what I've prepared."

"You've prepared? You mean this wasn't catered?" Paul stumbled forward, peeking under the lids of the huge tureens. It looked divine.

He sat down at the head of the table, and Avril sat at his side. She wanted to be close to him and share the intimacy of the moment.

He watched her serve him, laughing as she piled all the food onto his plate, relaxing a little as she piled it on her own too. He watched her tuck in first before starting in on his own, and they sat gorging themselves on all the meaty delights.

Then she brought over a bottle of red wine she'd opened earlier, and poured a healthy quantity into both of their wine glasses. He laughed as he raised his and took several swallows from it. Then his demure changed, the smile sliding from his lips.

"There's something in this, isn't there?"

She nodded while she sipped at hers.

"But you've got the same, haven't you?"

She nodded again and gave a small smile as she said, "I'm not about to let you go out alone. We started out together and we'll end together."

His eyes flashed with fear and rage as he regarded the glass and threw the contents across the room.

"I knew this was too good to be true! You haven't done anything like this for me in years."

"You haven't wanted me to; you've had 'her' to do it for you."

His rage dropped, but the fear remained. He swallowed. "You mean, Larissa?"

"Yes dear, Larissa. Did you think I wouldn't find out? Did you think I would be okay with it continuing under my nose?"

"What have you done?" he whispered.

Avril waved her arm across the table in front of them. "I decided to celebrate with a meal; a last supper if you will, while the poison does its work."

Paul could feel his legs tingling. "But I haven't drunk enough."

"It wasn't just in the wine, dear." Sweat beads were breaking out on Avril's forehead and she dabbed them with a napkin.

"The meat?" Paul's mouth felt strange, the edges had started twitching.

"Yes, I marinated her well."

Paul managed to whisper, "Her?" as he started to slide down the chair.

Avril was also struggling. Her glass dropped from her hand as her arm went limp, but she managed a giggle, and said, "Yes, Larissa. She had more meat on her than I thought. She tasted pretty good, don't you think?"

The frozen look of horror completed it for Avril as she grinned her way into death.

Limits

Cheryl could see the woman's mouth moving, jaw going up and down, but she couldn't make out all the words, not from across the aisle. The woman was going at him nineteen to the dozen, keeping her volume low, but the high pitch whine sounded upset to Cheryl. The woman seemed to be pleading with him, her eyes searching his face for some kind of attention or recognition. He just stared out the window, rocking gently with the motion of the train, oblivious to her.

For a moment Cheryl wondered if they were together; maybe the woman was talking into a hidden mobile phone mic – or even talking to herself. But then the woman sat forward and flicked her hand against his leg in annoyance, making him jump.

He drew back from her touch as though it was something vile and stared at her, his eyes hard and unforgiving. The woman sat back again, silenced by the look, her cheeks flushing. Cheryl could see she was trying to stay composed, but a stray tear betrayed her attempts. He resumed his overview of the passing countryside.

Cheryl was about to do the same when a quick movement caught her peripheral vision, followed by an ascending scream. He looked as shocked as Cheryl, the expression remaining on his face as the light faded from his eyes.

Everyone in the carriage stopped what they were doing and turned in the direction of the scream. Hands went to mouths, and the inhaling of breath was audible as they sat aghast at the spectacle, too horrified to move or speak.

With her scream spent the woman sat back down. This time it was her turn to stare out of the window, while his frozen gaze stared down at the umbrella handle sticking out of his chest.

In the Dark, They Sing

Crowley's heart lifted upon sight of the derelict building the sanctuary resided beneath. It stood black against the night sky. He felt the stress of a week away begin to loosen as he pulled the car under the side porch and covered it.

They heard him enter, their cries bringing a smile to his lips, washing away the remnants of his arduous week. He'd missed them – and them him. A week alone felt like an eternity, he knew that. He went about his ministrations, giving them much needed sustenance; their outstretched hands grabbing what they could, a few lucky ones grabbing more.

As they settled, he did too, taking his place in the worn armchair in the centre of the cavernous room facing the cell doors. Eyes peered between bars set into thick oak. The doors afforded him protection until he opened them. But it was early yet and he had to recover from a week out in the real world first.

He unscrewed the bourbon, enjoying its glint in the lantern light. He relished the first sip, the fire awakening his soul as it warmed his body. It wouldn't take many to bring him back to life tonight.

They watched him as he drank, waiting.

After just two he stood up, hearing their collective breaths as he walked to the back of the room to the CD player. He needed something dark and heavy tonight, something that would talk to his soul. He knew the one he needed, and they knew it too once he put it on.

He heard their murmurs when the first chords came through the tiny speakers, and he felt their eyes on him as he walked to the corner to fetch the keys, the rattle of which heightened their voices, bringing out their melodic high pitched tones. His mood lifted further; this was always his favourite part.

They shrank back as he turned the key in each lock, but he let them do the opening tonight; he was in no hurry. Instead he returned to his chair and the amber liquid that enhanced his enjoyment.

The door in the middle creaked open. Crowley knew she'd be first; she was bolder than the others, more daring. She slithered out, pressing herself against the wall and sliding down it, relieved to be out.

Her nakedness aroused him, but he remained seated, knowing she would come to him in her own time, but only once the others came out too. They were a collective – it was why he enjoyed them so much.

As they appeared they drew together like magnets, huddling close, their unique forms fitting like a writhing puzzle. He watched their constant motion as they stroked and caressed each other, comforting and titillating at the same time. Once

fully awake and excited they turned their gaze on him with a sparkle in their eyes. It was his turn to inhale.

Crowley set his drink down, and loosened his trousers, bracing himself for their onslaught. Capturing dark forest fairies was one thing, but satiating their lurid desires was another. He'd learnt to hold his own under their frenzied devouring of all he had to offer, and although he might be left raw, he was never left wanting. He didn't know if he could ever let them go, and in the peaks of their coupling, he hoped they didn't want him to.

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About the Author

Miranda Kate spent her early childhood in Surrey, in the south of England, and her teens moving round the UK, but currently resides in the Netherlands.

She writes under two pen names. Under Miranda Kate, she has been featured in several Flash Fiction anthologies, and has published two collections, one of dark flash-fiction tales called *Mostly Dark*, and another of science-fiction stories called *Slipping Through*. The latter containing a short novella, 'The Game', for which a full length sequel, *Pool of Players* was released on the 1st of June 2021.



Under her pen name M K Boers she has released a psychological thriller called *Sleep*.

You can find out more on her website: www.mirandakateboersauthor.com

Leaving a Review

If you enjoyed this book – which I sincerely hope you did – please leave a review on whatever platform you bought it on, or Goodreads if you have an account there. It makes a HUGE difference to the author, raising their visibility online, furthering their reach and making writing future books that little bit easier.