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Normal

Written by Graeme Cameron

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GRAEME CAMERON

NORMAL

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CHAPTER ONE

I'd learned some interesting things about Sarah. She was eighteen years old and had finished school back in July with grade-A passes in biology, chemistry, physics and English. Her certificate stood in a plain silver frame on a corner table in the living room, alongside her acceptance letter from Oxford University. She was expected to attend St John's College in the coming September to commence her degree in experimental psychology. She was currently taking a year out, doing voluntary work for the Dogs Trust.

In her spare time, Sarah enjoyed drawing celebrity caricatures, playing with the Wensum netball team and collecting teddy bears. She was also an avid reader of fantasy novels and was currently bookmarking chapter 2, part 8 of Clive Barker's *Weaveworld*. She'd been seeing a boy named Paul, though she considered him a giant wanker. He refused to separate from 'almighty slut'

Hannah, who was evidently endowed with a well-developed bosom and a high gag threshold. This caused Sarah considerable consternation, but she could not confide in her mother because she wouldn't understand and would just freak out again like last time. She instead turned to her friend Erica, who was a year or two older and thus possessed of worldliness and abundant wisdom. Erica's advice, apparently in line with her general problem-solving ethos, was to 'cut off his dick and feed it to him'. Sarah didn't talk to her mother about Erica, either.

All four walls of Sarah's bedroom were painted a delicate shade of lilac, through which traces of old, patterned wallpaper were still visible. She had a single bed with a plain, white, buttoned cotton cover. She also had a habit of leaving clothes and wet towels on the floor. Her soft toys commanded every available inch of shelf and dresser space. The collection consisted of plush bears manufactured in the traditional method, and all had tags intact. It was too vast to waste time counting. But there were sixty-seven.

That morning, Sarah had spent just under half an hour in the bath and just over five minutes cleaning her teeth. She had no fillings or cavities, but the enamel on her upper front teeth was wearing thin from over-brushing. She also applied toothpaste to the index and middle finger of her left hand in a vain attempt at stain removal. There were no ashtrays in the house, and her cigarettes and lighter were hidden inside a balled-up pair of tights in the middle drawer of her dresser.

The following day was Sarah's birthday. Many cards

had already arrived and stood in a uniform row on the living room mantelpiece. Someone had tidied in there early in the morning, but there was already an empty mug and a *heat* magazine on the coffee table. Sarah had a habit of leaving the TV on, whether she was watching it or not.

I'd discovered, too, that she plucked her bikini line. Most of her clothes were green. She dreamed of visiting Australia. She had a licence but no car. The last DVD she watched was *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*—the feature film, not the more popular television series—and coincidentally, or rather perhaps not, Buffy was also the name of her cat.

Oh, and I knew three more things. I knew that her last hot meal was lasagne, her cause of death was a ruptured aorta, and her tongue tasted of sugar and spice.

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Fortunately, the kitchen floor was laid with terracotta tiles, and I easily located the cleaning cupboard, which held a mop and bucket, bleach, cloths, a roll of black bin liners and numerous antibacterial sprays. I hadn't planned on doing this here, since I had a thousand and one other things to do and not enough time to do them, so my accidental severing of the artery was inconvenient, to say the least. Happily, I'd reacted quickly to deflect most of the blood and keep it off the walls.

I'd used a fourteen-inch hacksaw to remove the limbs, halving each one for portability. The arms and lower legs fitted easily inside a bin bag with the head and the hair

lost in the struggle to escape. Using a separate bag for the buttocks and thighs, I'd placed these parts by the back door, away from the puddle of blood. The torso was unusually heavy despite Sarah's small frame, and required a heavy-duty rubble sack to prevent tearing and seepage. Thoughtfully, I'd brought one with me.

The cleaning operation was relatively easy. My clothes went into a carrier bag, and I washed my face over the sink. Warm water followed by Dettol spray was adequate for removing the spatter from the cupboard doors and for disinfecting the worktops and the dining table once I'd swiped most of the blood onto the floor. Mopping the floor took three buckets of diluted bleach, which went down the drain in the backyard. The waste disposal in the sink dealt with stray slivers of flesh; the basin was stainless steel and simply needed a cursory wipe afterwards.

The only concern was a couple of small nicks in the breakfast table, courtesy of my clumsiness with the carving knife. One or two spots of blood had worked their way into the wood, but these were barely visible and since the table was far from new, it was unlikely they'd be noticed by chance. Altogether, you'd never have known I was there.

In fact, the only thing out of place, once I'd moved the bin bags to the yard and returned each of Mum's implements to its rightful home, was me. Fortunately, Sarah's father was about my size, and I'd already dug out a pair of fawn slacks and an old olive fleece from the back of his wardrobe. The fleece was frayed at the elbows and

smelled a little musty, but more importantly it was dry and unstained.

Satisfied, I slipped into my jacket and shoes, stepped outside and closed the door gently behind me.

In keeping with modern town-planning philosophy, the Abbotts' house was separated from those to either side by the width of the garden path. In a token effort at providing some privacy from the neighbours, each garden had been bordered on both sides with high, oppressive panel fencing, secured at the bottom of the plot to a common brick wall. This wall was a good six inches taller than I was and, mindful of the difficulty in bundling Sarah over unseen, I elected to fetch the van and come back for her.

I took a lengthy run-up and hauled myself over, dropping down onto a carpet of twigs and soft brown leaves. The treeline was a matter of feet from the edge of the plot, at the foot of a steep incline. It was from here that I'd seen the upstairs window mist over and heard the bath running, watched Sarah in silhouette pulling off her clothes, waited until she closed the door and her ears were full of the roar of running water before I let myself in.

It was an altogether different scene now, as I picked my way back between the rows of pines toward the road. All that had made the dawn so perfect was gone—the dusting of snow on the rooftops, the faint crackling of twigs under muntjac hooves, the rustling of leaves disturbed by inquisitive foxes. In their place, the clatter of diesel

engines and the grating thrum of cement mixers, the white noise of breakfast radio and the tap-tap-tap of trowel on brick. It had started soon after my arrival and, whilst the development would be blissfully quiet once complete, for now the inescapable din of suburban sprawl rendered it a living hell. Although, on the other hand, it had at least allowed me the luxury of not having to tiptoe.

Thinking about it, there was something else missing, too—something I couldn't quite put my finger on. Some weighty comfort I was accustomed to feeling against my leg as I walked, and which just wasn't there anymore.

It wasn't until I reached the van that I realised I'd locked the bastard keys in it.

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I was loath to break a window, but the Transit was fitted with reinforced double deadlocks, and I specified the optional full-perimeter alarm system when ordering. Consequently, just as anyone else would have trouble breaking in, so did I. Having weighed up this option, considering my various time constraints against that of taking a cab home for the spare key, it didn't take me long to find a brick. I was back in business, albeit at the mercy of the heater.

I'd left Sarah just behind the side gate, and I backed right up onto the two-car driveway to minimise my exposure. I took a moment to double-check the small toilet window at the back of the house; I'd chipped some of the paint away, and there were obvious indentations in the wood, but it was shut, and the glass was

intact. Judging by the number of boxes and blankets piled up inside, and the concentration of long-abandoned cobwebs, the damage wouldn't be discovered this side of summer. Good.

I was happy to find that Sarah hadn't leaked out of any of the bags, and it took seconds to load the lighter ones into the van. But as I turned to collect the rubble sack, I happened to glance towards the doorstep, and my heart dropped. The face staring inquisitively back at me was a familiar one; I'd studied it briefly, in a tiny photograph from one of those instant booths you find on station platforms, fallen from Sarah's diary as I lay on her bed. But it was unmistakable.

Erica's hesitation was such that I could almost hear the whirring of her brain as she stood there, finger poised over the doorbell, eyebrows cocked, mouth agape. I knew all too well where her train of thought was carrying her, and so diverted it with a smile and a friendly wave.

'Hello, there,' I called. 'Don't panic, I'm not a burglar.'

Her expression turned instantly to one of apology. 'Oh, no, no, I wasn't thinking that,' she laughed, letting a few ringlets fall down to hide her eyes.

'Age Concern,' I explained. 'Just collecting some old bags.' Ha ha. 'I mean bags of old clothes. Are you looking for the young lady?'

She was walking towards me now. Dark curls bouncing, woollen scarf swaying to the rhythm of her hips. Breasts struggling to work the top button of her jacket loose with each confident stride. The blood began to race through my veins, the noise of the mechanical

diggers and pneumatic drills fading to a low hum. 'Yeah, do you know where she is? She's not answering the door.' Close enough now that I could hear the rub of the denim between her thighs. I could take this one of two ways, probably avoid a scene by way of swift, decisive action, but as so often happens in the face of outstanding natural beauty, my honesty beat me to the punch.

'Yes,' I said. 'She's in the garden.'