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Savage Night

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Extract

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SAVAGE NIGHT
10.30 P.M.
FRASER'S

WHEN HE OPENED his sitting room door, the last thing Fraser Savage expected to see was a corpse. Stuffed inside a stainless steel bathtub on a plastic sheet in the middle of the floor, the body was naked and clearly male, even though it was face down.

'Who the fuck is that?' Effie said.

Fraser shook his head slowly. The corpse had pale skin. Hairy buttocks. It was plump round the middle.

Holy fucking Christ, it couldn't be . . .

Fraser's toes and fingers started to prickle and his stomach cramped. The two pints he'd had earlier in the evening suddenly seemed like a lot more. And those three – or was it four? – lines of coke hadn't helped. Sweat rolled down his back. His nose was running too. He dabbed at his nostrils with the back of his hand.

'I think it might be Uncle Phil,' he said.

'Does he have any identifying features?' Effie asked. 'Tattoos? Scars?'

'I don't think so.'

He shivered. Not that he was cold. Felt like he'd puked his guts out and there was nothing left. Another shiver rippled through him.

Was it his uncle? Same waxy pale skin that ginger people have, same overall body shape.

But he'd never seen Uncle Phil naked. He might have identified him by his hair, that permanent ginger bed-head, but that wasn't an option. Maybe the corpse had ginger pubes. Although even that didn't mean it was Uncle Phil. There were plenty of other poor bastards with ginger pubes. Maybe the skin was excessively pale because of the blood loss and he wasn't ginger at all.

Fraser could turn him over, find out.

Yeah, right. He wasn't wrestling with that.

There was a good reason for the tub. There was a good reason Fraser felt sick. There was a good reason Fraser didn't want to turn him over.

Somebody had cut the poor bastard's head off.

And it was nowhere to be seen.

'DRINK THIS.'

He took the glass of vodka from Effie, the liquid sloshing around as his hand shook. Steadied it with his other hand and knocked it back. It burned his throat nicely. He gave her back the glass and she poured him another. He took it, drank it. Felt warmer now, less shivery, hands not so shaky.

Effie didn't appear fazed by the situation at all. Almost as if she was used to stumbling over corpses in her boyfriends' homes.

Not that he was her boyfriend, exactly. But they'd been getting along well and maybe something would have happened tonight. It certainly wouldn't now. A headless corpse was a major turn-off.

Jesus, he had to grow up.

Maturity, that's what it was. Fraser was twenty-five. Effie'd have to be around the thirty mark. He hadn't asked her, didn't want to risk screwing things up. Anyway, she'd had more experience than him, which is why she was so much more composed.

Although it was unlikely, however old she was, that she'd seen a naked, headless corpse before.

And yet, Fraser couldn't help but think of the way Effie had introduced herself when they first met. Wearing a two-tone

orange blouse, open at the back, checked headscarf, sandals, almost a hippy thing going on. Said the cold didn't bother her, although her nipples suggested otherwise.

That was less than a week ago.

'Effie,' Fraser had said, shaking her hand, feeling her cool palm in his. 'Nice name. And what do you do?'

Her grin brought out tiny wrinkles round her eyes. 'I kill people,' she'd said.

Fraser grabbed her hand tighter, laughing. Played along with her. 'Like a mercenary or something?'

Effie squeezed his fingers hard, then slid hers out of his grip.

You just had to take one look at her to know she didn't have what it took to be a paid killer. She was no more than an inch over five foot.

But, Fraser wondered now, staring at the tub in his sitting room, what if it *was* true?

Shock. Had to be. Starting to suspect Effie was plain fucking crazy. She'd been at the pub with Fraser, so she couldn't have done it. Even if she was some kind of psychokiller. What the hell was he thinking? He should concentrate on more important questions.

Like, where the fuck was the head? And why would anybody want to run away with it? Jesus, maybe it was lying around somewhere. Under one of the chairs, or beneath a cushion or behind the curtain. Christ's sake.

Fraser didn't feel too good.

He was glad Simone wasn't here. She'd probably order him to get down on his hands and knees and start hunting for it.

'Want to take a closer look?' Effie said.

She was as bad as Simone.

Fraser found himself stepping towards the tub. Swaying as he walked, as if he was drunk. Hadn't had much, though. Just those pints and the neat vodkas Effie'd given him.

The plastic sheet scraped underfoot. He bent over the body, peered down at the neck. Ragged skin and gristle. He looked away. Straight at the inch or so of dark liquid clotting in the bottom of the tub. A bloodbath – yep, that's exactly what it was.

And the smell: sharp and raw. His stomach muscles tightened, cheeks puffed, but somehow he held his dinner down. Amazing he could smell anything, the way his nose was streaming. He wiped it with the back of his hand, beyond caring what Effie would think.

He stepped back from the tub shaky, a bit fuzzy headed, but okay. Shit, yeah.

The corpse's legs were bent at the knee, flopped sideways. Fraser couldn't remember seeing the soles of Uncle Phil's feet before. They were white and tender looking. It felt wrong that they were exposed like this. He shouldn't be staring at them.

Effie said, 'Recognise that?'

Fraser followed her gaze towards the corpse's hand, twisted behind his back. He wasn't sure what she meant.

'The ring,' she said.

Of course. If Fraser got a close-up of that ugly monstrosity, he could be sure, right enough. But he couldn't tell with the hand lying palm-up like that.

'Go on,' Effie said. 'Take a good look.'

Fraser didn't move.

Effie strode over to the tub, grabbed the hand, turned it over, held it out. She bent the ring finger towards Fraser.

No doubt about it. Uncle Phil's silver Viking longboat ring.

Effie raised her eyebrows.

Fraser tried to speak. Nodded instead.

Effie dropped Uncle Phil's hand and said, 'I'll call the police.'

FRASER WATCHED HER step over to the table, pick up the phone, dial. Calm in a crisis. Every bit as capable as Simone.

Fraser didn't feel calm or capable.

If he'd been alone, he'd be shouting fit to rip the lining from his throat by now. If he could summon up the energy. That's what he wanted to do. Open his mouth and yell and yell and yell. And throw up and throw up and throw up. Then probably yell some more, throw up some more. Or just fall asleep.

Anything, as long as this would all go away.

Another line of coke might do the trick.

He stuck his hand in his pocket, but took it out again when Effie said, 'Police.'

He thought she was warning him, but she was speaking into the phone. Made him think, though. Probably not the best time for him to indulge in any dodgy habits. He listened as she explained what had happened. Gave the cops the address.

Impressive. Memory like a bank vault.

She'd only been here once before. All over him when they'd arrived – clinging to him as he punched in the alarm code – but she'd grown more distant as the night went on. Not that it went on that long. Called herself a taxi after a couple of drinks. Fraser was probably coming on too strong.

But she wouldn't be here now if there wasn't some hope. Thing was, he fancied the pants off her, but he liked her a lot, too. Anyway, he suspected he was creating a bad impression right now, one that wasn't hugely attractive, forgetting Uncle Phil for a minute. Right now, he'd settle for not throwing up or pissing himself.

He wiped his nose again, breathed deeply through his mouth, and immediately wished he hadn't. He wasn't ready

for the taste that clung to his tongue, his lips, his teeth. Like he'd just sucked a penny. He glanced over at Effie, who shrugged, spoke into the phone again.

Fraser felt like crying. Not that he felt sad, exactly. Come to think of it, he could just as easily break into a fit of giggles. Really fucking odd. Like he'd taken a fistful of pills and was buzzing and sloppy drunk at the same time. Could be the coke, but it was a feeling he didn't recognise.

He was glowing under his skin.

What he really wanted was for Effie to hold him, stroke his hair while he fell asleep. That'd be nice.

THE NIGHT HE met Effie, Fraser had been doped to the eyeballs – so much so that all the beer he'd drunk wasn't having any effect – but even straight, Effie would have made him laugh his balls off. She had something about her. An air, a friendly face, a charm, a genuine smile. And that dark humour you either loved or hated.

Fraser loved it.

At first he decided to use Effie to make Simone jealous. Simone was Fraser's on/off girlfriend. She was also Worm's wife. Fraser had never slept with a married woman before, and it was fun, and a little dangerous. Anyway, his plan wasn't working. Simone didn't pay them any attention and before long Fraser was having a good time chatting to Effie and didn't care if Simone noticed.

'Come with me,' Fraser had said an hour or so later, grabbing Effie's arm. 'I want to show you something.'

He steered her towards the back door of the house, weaving through the throng along the way, careful not to spill his beer. Through the lobby. Into the kitchen.

'How do you know Worm and Simone?' he asked Effie.

'I don't,' she said. 'I gate-crashed. How about you?'

'Friends of my Uncle Phil. I'd introduce you but he'd embarrass me.'

'He's here?'

'The fat, ginger guy sinking beers like there's no tomorrow.'

'Maybe there isn't,' she said, shrugging. 'I can see the family resemblance.'

'Thanks.' He grinned.

'My pleasure.'

'What *do* you do?' Fraser asked as they jostled past a stoned couple all tangled up in each other in the doorway. 'You never told me.'

'I did.'

'That's right.' She killed people. Fraser laughed. Laughed till his eyelids were heavy with tears. It wasn't that funny, but he'd started and couldn't stop.

Effie moved off.

He followed, wiping his eyes. 'Oops,' he said as he tripped.

She caught him. Lightning reflexes. A killer's reflexes.

He laughed again but managed to control himself before it turned into another fit of giggles. Didn't want to get hysterical. Anyway, if it came to a square go, he could take her easy.

'What's so funny?' she asked.

'I love your . . . style.' He smiled. Her eyes widened and she smiled too. He chinked his beer bottle against hers. 'I like you, Effie,' he said.

'I like you too,' she said. 'What did you want to show me?'

He wrapped his arm round her waist and dragged her to the end of the garden. There was a shed at the back. An ordinary shed. A common shed. A common or garden shed. Ha! 'Whoo.' His legs nearly gave out there. Stumble bumble. Maybe the drink was having an effect after all. About bloody time.

'Here.' He stopped. The shed was padlocked. He rattled the lock.

He handed his beer to her, raised a forefinger. Then dipped his hand into his pocket and rummaged around. Found his keys. Ran his fingers through them, found the little brass fucker.

Effie said, 'I won't ask why you have a key for Worm's shed.'

Fraser nodded, put his fingers to his lips, licked them. They tasted of beer. Put the key in the slot. Or tried to. Wasn't as easy as it looked. It was dark and the slot was tiny and he was pissed as a fart.

Effie placed the beer on the ground, took the key from him. Opened the padlock. And then pressed her palm against the door.

'After you,' Fraser said.

'After you,' Effie said.

And she wouldn't budge. So he didn't budge either.

'You're a bumshite, Fraser,' she said. 'What do you want me to see?'

'Just step inside.'

'I don't think so.'

'Okay,' he said. 'If you're scared of the dark, I'll go first.' He stepped inside the shed, switched on the light. Nice touch, the outside electricity. He'd been impressed when Simone had shown him. 'That better?'

Effie moved into the doorway, keeping the door open.

Fraser said, 'Well?' cause her face was a blank.

'What am I looking at?'

These hippy-killer-types, you had to spell everything out. 'These,' he said, pointing at the rows of swords hanging on the walls. All sorts. He was no expert, and neither was Simone, but there were a couple of dozen types on display, from the medieval to the modern. Some decorative, some kept razor-

sharp by Worm. Simone said it gave him something to do when he couldn't sleep at night.

Fraser reached up, took one off the wall. 'This,' he said, unsheathing it, 'is Japanese.' He held it, two-handed, between himself and Effie. Nice weight. Beautiful curved blade. 'Run your finger over that, you'll cut it off.' Made his stomach flutter just thinking of the damage this baby could do.

Effie looked but didn't react.

'Well?'

'Looks very nice,' she said. 'Does Worm fence or something?'

'Nope. He just collects them. A real fucking waste.'

What he didn't tell her was that he'd mentioned to Uncle Phil that he was thinking of stealing them, selling them on eBay, imagining that Phil would be up for making a quick buck, but Phil had clipped him round the ear and told him not to be a cunt.

'We better go, then,' Fraser said, slotting the sword back in its sheath, carefully hanging it on the wall. He noticed a gap a couple of rows along. Either Worm had a sword in the house, or Uncle Phil had pulled a fast one without telling Fraser. He'd keep an eye on the new eBay listings. 'Sure you don't want one?' he asked Effie. 'We could smuggle one out. Killer like you is always going to need another weapon, right?'

'A killer like me,' Effie said, 'likes to use something that can't be traced. You want to steal me something, a length of clothesline would be just fine.'

FRASER STARED AT the headless body in the tub. Hard as he tried, he couldn't drag his eyes away from it.

A human without a head. Triggered some kind of primeval fear of your brain being separated from the rest of your body.

Or was it that having no head made you appear to be more dead than you would otherwise?

He was having a hard time seeing that thing as Uncle Phil. Come to think of it, he was having a hard time seeing. His eyelids didn't want to stay open.

'Why do you –?' Fraser said, before the rest of his sentence was choked off.

Felt at first like his collar was buttoned too tight. But he was wearing a t-shirt, so it couldn't be that. Then a sudden jerk and a shout from Effie and something crushing his windpipe. It was like the time when he was a kid, messing around with his pal, Ian. Playing at strangling each other. Seeing how far they could go.

His hands flew to his neck, feeling for the thing that was digging into his throat.

Effie said, 'Relax,' and grunted in a very unlady-like manner.

What the fuck was she doing? Trying to get this thing off him?

Oh, he knew.

He had always known.

Oh, fuck, no he hadn't. He just wanted to be right, even now. It was fine to be right after the event, but he hadn't fucking known, otherwise he wouldn't have let the bitch within spitting distance.

She was strangling him. And it wasn't going to be like Ian. No chance she'd let go, finally, say, 'Nearly killed you. Na na na-na na.'

Still, she was only a woman. A small one, at that.

Fraser swiped behind his back with his hand. Smacked something. But there was no power in it. Like he was moving underwater. Resulted only in the cord – or whatever it was – tightening round his neck.

A fucking clothesline. She'd told him that's what she'd use.

His head felt like somebody'd blocked up his nose and mouth and was pumping air through a hole in the top of his skull.

He wheezed.

Eyes back to the tub. To the body. Fraser didn't want to admit it to himself, but there was every chance he'd be joining Uncle Phil soon.

Fraser's cheeks puffed out. Behind his eyes, blood pounded and surged and bubbled against the inside of his skin. He tried again to dig his fingers into the clothesline, but it had sunk in too deep. And he was too weak to prise Effie's fingers off the cord.

Why the fuck was she doing this?

Fraser's remaining strength drained out of him. He wasn't going to hold out. She had been playing him all along.

He made a last attempt to breathe. Sucked in nothing. Couldn't even make a noise.

A figure appeared in the kitchen doorway, wearing only a pair of disposable yellow gloves, clutching a carrier bag in one hand, a lit cigarette and a hacksaw in the other. Smudges of red tangled the hairs on his bare thighs, spattered his clear plastic booties.

The stranger's eyes widened as if he hadn't expected to see Fraser staring at him. His head tilted to the side. Hands covered his crotch.

Careful with the hacksaw, pal.

Fuck that. This was the fucker who'd killed Uncle Phil. Not that Fraser could do anything about it now.

Fraser's eyes closed. He struggled to open them, finally raising his lids enough to see that the naked murderer had gone.

Tears burned tracks down Fraser's cheeks. He wasn't going to see Dad again. Off on some trip, hadn't seen him in ages. Never see his arsehole little brother again either. Never see his granny again.

Ringing in his ears. Metallic taste in his mouth. He licked his lip, spat. His nose was bleeding. Fucking brilliant.

Had to be Worm who was behind this. The bastard must have found out that Fraser had been sleeping with Simone. She was a great fuck but she wasn't worth dying for. Still, Fraser hoped she was okay, that Worm wasn't planning some kind of fucked-up revenge for her too. Was somebody strangling her this very minute? Was Worm doing it himself? Would he cut her head off too?

But why would Worm want Uncle Phil dead?

Fraser's vision blackened at the edges. In the middle, spots and bars of colours hovered and drifted: livid purple and burnt orange and tangerine and scorched brown and lime green.

His eyes closed once more and this time he knew they'd never open again.