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Savage Moon

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Extract

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One

The house was pitch black as Jon Spicer shuffled, sleepy and naked, towards the mewling little cries. He stepped into the nursery where the soft glow of a nightlight barely revealed the tiny form in the cot.

She was on her back, head twitching from side to side, limbs jerking in mounting frustration. He stared down, mind slowly firing up as he assessed the situation, trying to work out what the problem was. Cold? Hot? Wet? Surely not hungry again, he thought, knowing that would involve a trip downstairs to warm a bottle of milk in the microwave.

He heard a faint plastic click as she flung a miniature fist out to the side. The dummy. Her dummy's fallen out. His movements were slow and clumsy as he patted the soft cotton sheet around her head and, at that moment, finding an object worth less than two pounds became the most important thing in the world.

A fingertip caught on the rubber teat. He picked the dummy up and held it to his daughter's lips. They immediately latched on to it and she began a greedy sucking.

He stood motionless with his eyes half shut, trying to maintain his semi-awake state, desperate to return to his own bed and fall back into the heavy folds of sleep. But the sucking noises continued with the same urgency and a tiny puff of exasperation escaped round the object in her mouth.

Shit, he thought. A dummy isn't going to be enough. She's hungry. Accepting that a feed was necessary, more parts of his brain started clicking into gear. He stepped back into the darkness and towards the stairs.

Movement from the main bedroom as his wife shifted in their bed. 'Jon?'

'It's all right,' he whispered, knowing that however tired he

felt his wife was a step closer to total exhaustion. 'Holly's hungry. I'll sort it.'

The bed creaked as she fell back against the mattress. He padded quickly down the stairs.

Punch stirred in his basket as he entered the kitchen. 'Hi there stupid,' he murmured, opening the fridge. A pool of feeble light spilled out across the floor, casting a ghostly glow across the room. He took a squat plastic bottle three quarters full of the formula they used when Alice was too tired to breast-feed. Leaving the fridge door open, he placed the bottle in the microwave. Holly's whimpers were increasing in strength upstairs. Looking out the window, all he could see was the faint reflection of his head and torso floating in the expanse of black glass before him. He felt a fleeting sense of vulnerability. Anything could be lurking beyond the thinness of the window, watching him from the darkness.

Uneasily, he glanced up at the clock on the wall. Four thirty-seven in the morning. The hours before dawn and the perfect time for raiding a suspect's house. The time when people were in their deepest sleep, disoriented and slow when wrenched from unconsciousness by their front door bursting off its hinges. Or a baby bursting into cries, he thought with a dry smile.

As the microwave whirred he heard Punch's claws ticking on the lino. He looked down and saw his boxer bathed in the glow from the fridge, the stump of his tail wagging uncertainly. 'Still getting used to these commotions, aren't you boy?' he said quietly, running a hand over the animal's head. 'Me too, me too.' The machine pinged and he took the bottle out, cupping the base of it in his hand to test the warmth of the liquid inside. 'See you in the morning.'

He pushed the fridge door shut and the darkness instantly surged back, jealously reclaiming the room.

Jon climbed the stairs two at a time, making it back into the nursery just as the dummy tumbled from his daughter's mouth. The whine of frustration was rapidly turning into a toy-like cry.

'Hey there,' he whispered, hooking his index fingers under her arms and lifting her clear of the cot, always amazed at how

light she was. He sat down on the padded chair and positioned her in the crook of his arm as her tiny legs kicked about.

'Here you go, greedy young madam.' He offered her the teat and she immediately took it. The squeaks were replaced by bubbling noises and she pressed her fists against the sides of the bottle.

Thank God, he thought, settling into the seat, feeling the cool material against his back. He stared down at the little thing in his arms, sifting through his feelings, searching as usual for the unbreakable bond of emotion that ought to be there.

But he couldn't find it. Of course he loved the baby and knew instinctively that he would lay down his life for her, but the tangible feeling of love that he felt every time he looked at Alice, or Punch for that matter, just wasn't there. Like an oak tree in the dark, he could sense its looming presence but, for now, he couldn't locate it.

Holly was born just over three months ago and he was only now beginning to comprehend how their lives had changed forever. At first, it had felt like she was a temporary break in their routine. The first night feeds were easy – after all, anyone can handle a few interruptions to their sleep. They'd even laughed, feeling relief at how it wasn't that hard having a baby after all.

But then the days stretched into weeks and the weeks into months and slowly it was starting to dawn on him that they were in this for the long run. Things weren't about to settle back to how they'd once been. Not ever.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back. Almost five o'clock. An hour and a half more sleep if he was lucky, then Monday morning and back to work. Bollocks, he thought, letting out a sigh. The case he was working on seemed to be a total dead-ender. A few elderly homosexuals had been assaulted at night in car parks dotted around Manchester. No one wanted to talk about it, especially not the victims once the ambulance drivers had patched up the minor cuts and bruises to their heads. Normally the Major Incident Team wouldn't be dragged into a case of this nature, but the latest attack had moved the case up several notches in the serious crime scorecard.

The recording of the emergency call was clear in his head. A man's voice, panic making it waver and dip.

'Police? That's the police? You need to get out here, someone's being killed!'

The operator's voice, calm and steady. 'Where are you, Sir?'

'What? It's the car park. The one by the recreation ground. Silburn Grove, Middleton.'

'The public car park on Silburn Grove. Thank you, Sir. Who is being attacked?'

'Listen, I don't know! This lad jumped out on us by the shed. He's got an iron bar. Oh Jesus, I can hear screaming.'

The recording had captured it too, muffled and faint in the background. Someone in terror for their life.

'Good God, hurry. He's killing him.'

'Please stay calm, Sir. Who is being attacked?'

'Oh! I can see him now, he's come back round. He's going towards his car.'

'Who, Sir? The attacker?'

'There's so much blood!'

'Can you see the make or registration?'

'MA03 H something. It's a big estate. Jesus, I don't know where the other guy is.' Movement against the earpiece as the man must have looked desperately around. Just before he rang off an engine surged as the accelerator was pressed down.

By the time the patrol car arrived the car park was deserted. As one of Manchester's more popular sites for gay rendezvous, that was very unusual – especially since it was late evening. The attending officers had swept the area around the shed with their torches and soon found blood spatters arcing in dotted lines up a side wall. Someone had taken a serious beating.

Clusters of drops had then led them across the asphalt towards an area of undergrowth that screened a shallow, dirty stream. The water was clogged with old tyres, bags of dumped rubbish and the odd shopping trolley. No corpse was in the vicinity.

The decision was made to refer the assault on to MIT and Jon arrived at the crime scene two hours later. The powers that be saw it as an escalation of violence that could – if it hadn't already – lead to murder.

The problem was the lack of witnesses. Jon was familiar with cases where victim and witnesses were unwilling to come forward. He was left trying to investigate a case that was doomed to failure. Only when an actual body showed up would the resources needed for a breakthrough be released. Still, at least he was getting home on time each night.

Gurgling noises returned him to the present. He looked down as Holly pushed the teat from her mouth. Her arms slowly lowered then fell slackly to her sides. He held the bottle to the nightlight and saw it was almost empty. Jesus, she could bolt milk like there was no tomorrow. His mum had seen this and, unable to resist in a bit of misty-eyed reminiscing, proudly told Alice that, as a baby, Jon could sink nine ounces in a few minutes. But, Jon thought, he'd weighed almost eleven pounds when he was born. The little thing in his lap had been almost half that. Obviously making up for it.

He lifted her to a sitting position, formed a V shape with the thumb and fingers of his spare hand and then gently wedged her chin into it. Her arms hung down and he began rubbing her back, feeling the minute bumps of her spine against the palm of his hand. So tiny. So fragile. Eventually a couple of surprisingly large burps escaped her. 'Good ones, my piglet,' he whispered, planting a kiss on her soft cheek. He lifted her up and gently placed her back in the cot. He was just straightening up when a noise outside caused him to freeze.

The sound, at first low and guttural, suddenly erupted into a hideous yowl. Something deep in Jon reacted to its animal ferocity and his heart started to beat more quickly. The noise came again, dying away into a fearsome hiss.

He stepped over to the window, lifted the blind and peered out into the blackness. A crack had opened in the unseen cloud layer above and moonlight shone down. Balanced on their rear wall was a large tabby cat, back arched upward, fur jutting out in a series of spikes. Its attention was riveted on something on the other side of the wall.

Jon felt like a wildlife photographer observing the secret interplays that take place between the creatures of the night. Sightings of foxes were becoming more and more common in

the neighbourhood and he felt a slight thrill that a wild animal could be just metres away, roaming the streets and alleys, using the darkness to claim an urban territory as its own.

Suddenly a tingle worked its way down his spine as he thought about what had taken place up on Saddleworth Moor not three weeks ago. A farmer's wife had been savaged to death by some creature and a frenzy of 'mystery beast' fever had gripped the nation ever since.

Jon knew from recent newspaper articles that the loss of sheep was a fairly commonplace occurrence for many farms in and around Britain's national parks. The problem had got so bad around Bodmin during the mid-nineties that the Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food had commissioned a scientific investigation to determine once and for all if a wild panther was stalking the bleak expanses of Dartmoor. The study was inconclusive and the issue had lapsed back to occasional sightings of large black cats. But ripped open and disembowelled carcasses of sheep continued to be found in the more remote parts of the countryside.

The Suttons' farm on Saddleworth was suffering particularly badly and the wife, a few years younger than her more elderly husband, had taken to going out at night and patrolling the perimeters of their land on a quad bike. On the fateful night, the husband had been away from home, staying overnight at a big sheep market in Keswick up in the Lake District. According to numerous witnesses, he'd got mightily drunk before staggering off to his hotel room at gone two in the morning. When he returned home the next day his wife was nowhere to be found. Eventually he'd gone out on to the moor, spotted the abandoned quad bike and then discovered her corpse alongside the remains of a partially eaten ewe in a nearby ravine. Both of their throats had been torn out and short strands of wiry black hair were found under the wife's nails. Laboratory analysis revealed that the hair belonged to a panther.

The cat on their yard wall was now backing away, a horrible low noise emerging from deep within its throat. Deciding there was enough distance between it and the unseen adversary below, it turned and leaped onto the adjoining wall before disappearing

up and over the neighbour's garage with a frantic scrabble of claws. The gap in the cloud closed up, the scene vanished and silence returned.

From beyond the curve of the earth came a faint glow, just strong enough to separate black horizon from dark sky. Night was coming to an end.

The creature remained motionless, body pressed into the tundra-like grass of the moor. Before it the ground dropped away, clumps of gorse quickly dissolving into the gloom. Further down the slope two sheep sheltered at the base of a particularly dense bush.

The wind shifted and the long hairs that emerged from the tips of the creature's ears bent ever so slightly. This new current of air carried up from the plains of Cheshire stretched out below. Contained in it were some interesting sounds and scents. The noise of engines, the sharpness of exhaust fumes, the presence of Man.

The creature's gaze moved across the uncultivated land, settling on the outermost edge of urban sprawl leading back into the city of Manchester itself. Its eyes narrowed slightly and it examined the lights that twinkled from street lamps and cars and people's homes.