

08.00

The soil was encrusted with ice, each of her boot laden prints crunched through the once soggy soil with a satisfying crunch. Maxwell trotted happily beside her, his paws skipping lightly over the mud like a skittish butterfly. Maggie felt satisfied, a bowl of hot porridge and lots of warm layers and she couldn't be happier. Outside on the moors she felt so content, she glanced down to find an empty space by her right leg. She stopped and her feet slipped on the now icy patch.

"Woow," she turned and smiled at Maxwell. He was a cross breed combining a terrier and god knows what, he was a delightful chap and she was also sad when her time with him was over. Maxwell turned his head and despite staring longingly at the bush he ran to catch up. Maggie ruffled his fur and strode forward; she had to pick up The Tank now.

Maggie loved her job it was perfect, freedom, fresh air, sometimes too fresh and physical exercise, just perfect. It was just the pay, she had thirteen dogs on her books but even that barely paid all her bills. She topped up that meagre wage with two night shifts stacking shelves and that reminded her just how lucky she was to have such a perfect job during the day. Maggie stomped down the path and tapped lightly on the elegant door knocker. Cathy had told her that it had cost over £70 for that dragon shaped door knocker. She smirked at the word 'knocker' and waited her breath now visible as she exhaled. It seemed to be getting colder. She could hear the Tank snuffling behind the door, he gave a short sharp bark and then scurried off.

Matthew counted out £370 pounds and then placed it in an envelope. He placed his hand on the envelope and pressed in down. He felt sick. His brain felt swollen and he felt feverish. He stared at the back of the envelope. Cathy entered the kitchen; she poured out a coffee from the filter jug and stared at him.

"Is that the money?"

He nodded gently.

"Make sure it gets paid in today or we'll be back in court and this time it'll be harder to convince them that we can afford to pay."

"We can't."

Matthew said hoarsely. Cathy felt her scalp shrink, how many times had they been through the same old conversation.

"We've checked out the price of rented and it's more expensive. Anyway we should be able to afford it, you work full time and you get commission and I have a good job."

"But you're not going back for a couple more months."

"Christ, Jesus Christ again, when will you give that up. I want to spend time with her, she's a baby Mat, so tiny, I won't go back yet."

Cathy slammed her cup on the granite work surface and turned away to stare out through the window.

"This was my last chance Mat, I'd be too old soon to have another and she's so beautiful."

Matthew stared at her back, her voice had become quiet.

"I know, it's not that, it's just this mess."

He swallowed and stood up as he heard the knock at the door.

"That's Maggie for Tank."

"Its things like that Cathy, we can't afford her, not now."

His voice was quiet and sad. Cathy turned to face him. She moved forward and stroked his hair.

"I know but if we get rid of her we have to give a months' notice or pay her off, and by then I'll be a month away from working and we'll need someone to do it and she may have filled the

space and then what do we do? Tank goes crazy without his long walks; you know what happened before Mags he wrecked the place. Then we'd have to find someone else and she's reasonably cheap and she's reliable, and we trust her."

Matthew raised his head and nodded at her, it made sense but, he nodded and picked up the envelope, he tried to force it into his jacket pocket. He headed for the door and realised he had to empty his pocket first. He placed it on the table as he opened the front door to let Maggie in.

Maggie smiled back at him; he wished he liked his job as much as she did. He stepped back to let her in, she took two cautious steps and she remained close to the door keeping her muddy boots and Maxwell's dirty paws as far away from the rest of the house as she could.

"Hey Mags, oh its Maxwell today. Tank loves him. I'll just get his lead."

Matthew headed for the kitchen where Tank was bouncing mindlessly around the cooking island that was the focus of the room. Cathy stepped into the hall and smiled at Maggie.

"How are you doing today Cathy? Is she sleeping through yet?"

Maggie sniggered jokingly. Cathy rolled her eyes knowingly.

"She's ready to move out already, I've fixed her up a baby down the street and she'll be married soon."

Maggie laughed.

"Still knackered then?"

Cathy nodded laughing.

"Yeh, thought I might have a bath whilst you entertained Tank."

"A bath? Does that involve a quilt and a pillow?"

Cathy laughed shaking her head.

"No cheeky a real bath, its weigh in at the clinic."

"Oh I'll take them for a long one then, bring him back after lunch."

"No really."

Cathy felt guilty at the thought of the extra money.

"It's no problem I have Maxwell until then and they entertain themselves.

Cathy relaxed and nodded.

"Thanks Mags, that'll be thirty we owe you?"

"Just the twenty thanks but I could do with the cash today."

"No worries I'll get you some before you leave."

Cathy moved to the lounge where Mathew was trying to hook his dog's collar. He stared at her, the veins at his temple raised in anger.

"More money!" he whispered between closed teeth.

"No, just the same she's keeping him extra time for no extra money."

She replied through her equally closed teeth, they stared at each other both indignant and angry refusing to back down from this confrontation. Maggie stared at the wallpaper, it was so delicate, it really must have cost a small fortune, she recognised expensive stuff when she saw it. The envelope containing the money had been discarded hastily on the table, the wad of twenty pound notes were obvious to the casual observer.

Matthew stormed into the hall and tried to smile whilst handing over the lead. Maxwell and Tank bounced up at each other and a muddy paw glanced his trouser leg. He swore angrily and moved into the kitchen.

"Sorry Mat, do you need help."

"No, sorry Mags it was my fault."

Maggie watched Cathy storm tearfully upstairs. She glanced down at the bouncing dogs, and felt embarrassed. She had no cash and needed to pay the milk and the window cleaner. Cathy had said she would get the money but the dogs were beginning to get excited and starting to bark. Maggie picked up the post it pad and wrote a note, she stuck it to the envelope and took out a £20 note, then she opened the door and let the dogs lunge outside.

“Mat, I took one of your twenty’s, Cathy said she would pay today and.”

The dogs were beginning to yap excitedly.

“Bye Mags.”

He yelled from the kitchen.

Maggie smiled and closed the door. The breeze gushed through and the post it lifted high in the air and floated back and forth across the hall landing gently on the floor. Matthew had finished cleaning his trouser leg, he took a swig of Cathy’s tepid coffee and tapped his pocket, he scanned the kitchen what had he done with the envelope. He sighed as he remembered the table and he picked up the money. His shoe had wafted the post it high into the air, it settled gently on his shoe. Matthew counted out the money again. He stared at the pile puzzled, then he counted it out again, turning his head around the room, he was totally confused, no one had been near the door, how could he have lost the money.

Matt heard the door upstairs bang and anger bubbled in his stomach. He ran to the stairs and climbed them two at a time, by the time he had reached the top he felt slightly light headed, he strode forward, he could hear the sound of the taps running into the bath. His face was becoming pink, why couldn’t she have a shower? No, she had to have a bath. It used so much more water, so much more heated water. He pushed the door and stared wildly at her daughter.

Millie was the typical teenage Goth, her dyed black hair and over emphasised eyes turned his stomach. Didn’t she have any imagination? He didn’t remember being a teenager; he had forgotten what it was like to be at that vulnerable fragile age of ego and hormones.

Millie glared at him. “Good Morning Mat, why not come into my room, your teenager step daughter’s room unannounced, I mean why would that be an invasion of privacy?”

She sneered back at him. She knew he was angry, he was always angry these days, she could deduce from the expression on his face that she would be the person to suffer, and rather than try to discuss it logically she felt the need to provoke him. He curled his lip.

“Where’s the money?”

“What money?” She hadn’t bothered to rise from her bed, she was sat fully dressed on the edge, her legs encased in the teenage uniform of black tights and short black skirt.

“The money you borrowed from the hall table?”

He sneered at her and loomed large over her bed. Suddenly Mille felt vulnerable, she was fourteen and despite being younger than her mother he was still twenty years older than her. He used to be so handsome and carefree, there had been occasions when people had thought they were a couple, but he was her step father, and he seemed so annoyed, maybe she should try to talk calmly.

“I haven’t taken any money from the hall table?”

She replied calmly. As the realisation of his words sunk in she became agitated. Why was he automatically blaming her?

“Well where is it then? You always seem to have money for clothes and that shit you put on your face.”

Millie suddenly felt her face begin to burn, her heart rate was increasing, she could barely speak with her anger.

"I have my Saturday job and my dad pays for all that, he can afford to look after me properly."

"Properly?" Matthew screamed.

"He buys you a few bits of crap and he's looking after you. He barely pays anything for your upkeep, who pays for the house, food, the heating, I do. I pay and you give me teenage angst crap all the time and you wander around looking like a tart. You're an embarrassment."

Mille felt her eyes fill with tears she knew her father used the money he gave her to score points, she knew Matthew was a good man, but all she could hear were the words 'tart' and 'embarrassment.' She turned and lifted her baby sister who had been sleeping quietly throughout the argument lying helpless on her bed. Millie gathered Ava to her shoulder, she held the soft head in her hand and rested it on her chest, then she stood up.

"How dare you use that word to me? How dare you?"

She forced the words through her clenched teeth.

"Why don't you borrow the money from your girlfriend, she must be loaded, I mean it was a Mercedes you climbed into wasn't it?"

Matthew felt his eyes dilate in shock.

"Surely she could help with a loan? Or maybe that's why we can't afford to pay the mortgage? Maybe it's because of her expensive tastes, wining and dining an upper class whore must be expensive."

Mille gently rocked her heels swaying slowly from side to side encouraging her sister to continue sleeping. Matthew swallowed and licked his dry lips.

"I."

This was beyond anything he had expected, he couldn't think what to say. Millie felt remarkably satisfied; she could feel a smug smile creep across her face. The crackle of static that burst into the room was incongruous. Both Matthew and Millie turned instantly towards the monitor Millie had brought into her room. Matthew watched the colour drain from Millie's face, he felt nauseous. They knew Cathy was standing at the door, as he turned he heard the receiver slip from her grasp. Cathy slowly raised her hand and handed Matthew a £20 note.

"I went to get Maggie's money, she needs it for today, she shouted out to you to explain, I heard her."

She turned towards the bath and turned off the taps.

Matthew pushed the money in his pocket and left the room and the house immediately. He climbed into the car and released his breath; he had begun to hate returning home. He remembered the early years bouncing through the door, excited to be home with his family, but now, all they ever did was argue and poke at the bruises that life gave. He pushed his phone in the docking station and Anya's smiling face appeared she had left him a message; he smiled in response and reversed off the drive.

Millie couldn't move, her legs were too tense to bend. She felt her sister nuzzle her hair and that broke the spell, she strode into the bathroom where her mother sat on the stool staring at the pink bubbles. The smell was amazing.

"Mum?"

"It's my fault, that bubble bath cost £25, we don't have the money, but I work so hard so I thought why not I deserve it, but the truth is we can't afford it, it's that or the television licence, we have to start making choices, shit I've been so stupid."

"Mum listen."

"I don't blame him, I quite fancied being away from the stress of it all too. But don't let him tell you it's because I was on maternity leave, we had debts before that, he uses me being with Ava as an excuse. I'm sorry Millie, really sorry. We'll probably lose the house, and maybe now I'll lose him too."

Millie lowered herself to her knees.

"Listen mum, it was probably nothing, I just saw him get in a car that's all. I was angry and I made it seem bad, he'll explain when he gets back from work."

Cathy nodded and lowered her hand into the bath; she turned her hand making more bubbles. She stood and removed her dressing gown; she climbed in and relaxed into the water.

"Just pop her in her cot and get off to school ok?"

"Should I stay off today?"

Cathy stared straight ahead and shook her head as she disappeared under the bubbles.

"No need, I speak to him when he's back from work and we'll sort it out. Don't look so worried Millie it'll be fine really."

Millie touched up her mascara and collected her bag, she was already late but it was only religious studies. She kissed Ava and her mum and bounced out of the house smiling, she felt quite impressed by the way she 'stood up to Mat'. She cringed at using his name, it was so clichéd. She smiled contentedly as she rode the bus to school.

Cathy wept silent tears into the expensive bubbles and tried to focus on what to cook for dinner.