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THE COMING DAYS

Psychological Crime Thriller

When there is only one thing more deadly than
a blood-letting serial killer...
The victim he is stalking.

A Short Story

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1. THE DAYS BEFORE

Joshua shuffled into the shared kitchen facility of a university residence on Silk Road in central London, England. He was disheveled and unshaven, as usual. Clothes clung to him in desperation; he did not wear them as such, they were loose and out of place, giving him the appearance of having just got out of bed, which is probably where he had just come from. With hair brown and confused, seeming not to know which way was up or down, it was too easy to suggest that Joshua didn't care, when in reality he did, just not about himself that much.

Neil, "The Alchemist", as he was known, worked busily at the stove in an open plan section of the room with cupboards and a linoleum floor. The rest of the once spacious room was carpeted, a dull teal which didn't match anything except possibly a Billie Eilish poster hanging beside the door. Mark and Sonya were sitting on benches either side of a small table against the wall, reading the papers with one eye and scanning their phones with the other. It was nine o'clock, November 6th, Saturday morning at Great Hall.

"Got any more of that home-brew stuff," Joshua inquired.

"Not beer.., no," Neil replied, without looking up. "But Mark quite likes my new wine."

Joshua turned towards the table, his eyes bypassing Mark, to fix on Sonya, their new undergraduate house mate. She was English, of East Indian descent. He had got on well with her the night before, tucked away in the corner of their common room in that huge, worn arm chair, the only light from a TV erupting with fireworks, though being ignored by most as booze took effect and a coziness, creeping. Their relationship, he felt, was on the verge of something, he wasn't quite sure what, as if suspended, and swinging, by a thread, from one unknown to another. She often confused him but was quick to apologise, stammering out one hasty explanation or another; then such honesty would emerge, an almost

childlike effervescence, overflowing with all her projects, hopes and dreams. And though they had not kissed he knew it was coming.

Straight, black hair plunged neatly by a shoulder and down towards Sonya's chest, like a velvet curtain, perfectly maintained. Her head drooped, she was peering at the pages before her, just a round, brown nose protruding. He liked that nose, as he did everything about her. She didn't have many friends, if any.., a burden they both had in common, and from that perhaps a gell had formed.

Sonya did not look up right away, not until he approached. As he reached the table and was about to speak, his toe struck a small object and toppled it to one side. He knew immediately what he had done, even before liquid began seeping into the carpet; he had visualised the whole disaster without even looking down.

“Shit!” Then looked down, “Was that yours, Mark?”

Peering lazily over the side of the table, Mark groaned, “Yeh, some of Neil's wine. Christ, Joshua, why can't you look where you're going.” He shrugged, got up and wandered out.

Having sucked up what he could from the carpet with a paper towel, Joshua took Mark's seat at the table. He placed a mug of coffee before him, looking out over the top of it at Sonya's big, dark eyes.

She felt his gaze and raised an eyebrow. In the weeks before she had grown fond of Joshua. He wasn't particularly handsome on the outside, but mysteriously attractive inside. Destiny played them, moved them about, yet they always seemed to end up together, as if that was the way it was supposed to be. Well, he was a pleasure to talk with. She could relax in his company; he offered stability, he listened, cared about what she was saying, hardly ever talking about himself. There in lay that darkness which intrigued her: the resentment of a world that could be so cruel. Yet the balance he had struck between misery and forgiveness was masterful, as if an uncompleted work of art, and it haunted her

emotionally. She enjoyed his struggle, it was oddly sexual. That said, she wasn't about to jump into bed with him, she was apprehensive, did not know how she would perform, or if she could, but she was still keen to see what might come of it.

“Your big day, huh?” Joshua finally spoke.

Sonya looked up and smiled. She knew what he was feeling, his pain was not easily hidden from her.

“Yes,” she replied, looking into his eyes. “You know I have to do it.”

Joshua nodded. “Sure. I was lucky to get a scholarship, not many do where I come from. But you are doing this all by yourself: A bank loan in arrears, a family at war – ”

“Hey,” she interrupted him, “It's just like a job. I go there, pick a guy, and make the audience happy. Then it's all over and I'm £20,000 richer.”

“Would you do it again?” he asked, looking into his coffee mug.

“Maybe,” she said, tucking a few loose strands of hair behind an ear. She doubted she would, but needed to convey the opposite, to keep Joshua from easy relief. Just in case. She really had no idea how things were going to unfold in the coming days, knew only that their relationship was beginning to take shape and that her acceptance on the show she had signed up for all those months ago, could not have come at a worse time for them.

Feeling that she had just lied she reached out a hand and gently touched his cheek. “Josh, It's not like I have to make out with the guy.”

The warmth of her fingers made his heart jump. It was the first time she had touched him in daylight. He was confused, she was going to and fro; one minute hinting there was *nothing* between them, the next that there was.

“That's cool,” he said, picking up his coffee mug.

She withdrew her hand and laughed, to disentangle herself from the foolish emotion that had made her act so out of character. “... The coffee?” she asked.

He shrugged.

* * *

They didn't meet up again that day. Sonya had purposely avoided him, sneaking out early in the afternoon. At seven o'clock that evening Neil, Mark, Joshua and a few others were sitting in front of a television in the bland and boring common room, watching the show, “Pick Your Mate”.

There she was, full screen: Sonya, seated on a throne, three guys on stools before her. The show's host and mediator was on the floor, conducting affairs, filtering questions and tossing out the odd, insinuating gag. He was a nuisance, thought Joshua, *this lecherous old man making circuits around the set, purposely touching Sonya on the shoulder or bending over to kiss her on the forehead.*

After half an hour of insane commentary and heckling from the audience, Sonya had to make up her mind: which one would she choose?

On her left was an impossibly arranged young man with beauty sculpted by gorgeous, Arab features. He was too perfect, his manner and his dress sense unnatural; an act, she felt, not a true reflection of his character.

On her right a man.., or perhaps still a boy. Charming, fair, cautious and very likable, but without spark. Boring! He would not cross swords with his counterparts which left Sonya with little compassion for him.

The guy in the middle was weird. His name was Lieutenant Bradley Cummings. The way he looked at her was alarming, gave her goose-bumps. There was allurement in his voice. He could casually open doors within her and she would let him walk right in. She had never met anyone quite so mesmerisingly astute. Not for a

moment had she considered what he looked like. It didn't matter.

The host began his cross-examination, prompting Sonya with lewd suggestions and down-grading each guy with every comment she made. Regardless, she had already decided. She was drawing out the ordeal for the benefit of the audience.

“Bradley,” she finally committed, to cheers and boos alike. She walked over to her prize still sitting on his stool, placed a hand on his knee, reached up on tip-toes and gave him a kiss on the cheek. And the audience exploded.

Then came the interview. Bradley was aloof, would not answer directly when asked whether he was happy because he had won, or happy because he liked Sonya. For her part, the question was but one, simple and crude: “What was it about him that turned her on?” Without hesitation she went for it, said, truthfully, she was excited by her fear of him, that he was a curiosity and that she wanted to find out more.

Cut for commercials, Neil and Mark nodding in satisfaction. Yup, he was the best choice.

Back to the show: Sonya and Bradley being hastily mounted into a helicopter, surrounded by flashing cameras, poking smart phones and extended mics. They were gone. Time to see what last weeks couple got up to in the Seychelles. Some out takes followed, of a girl falling off a horse, a capsized canoe and then the blank stares of a very uncomfortable couple sitting before the female interviewer. It had not gone well.

* * *

The following Wednesday afternoon, Joshua, looking oddly out of weekend character in a pressed white shirt and clean shaven, was sitting at the kitchen table trying to unravel a heap of scrawled notes taken during a previous lecture. He had grown up in the belly of Budapest, a scrounging orphan off the street who had fought his way out of deprivation, by education. For that, he had won a scholarship to City University London. He was scratching his nose

with a pencil when the door opened. He felt the cold draft on his sockless ankles long before the chill down his spine on seeing who it was: Sonya.

She came over, sat in front of him, purse on her lap. Smiling, she raised a piece of paper and laid it on the table. A cheque for £20,000.

“I did it,” she proclaimed proudly.

Joshua looked at her. “What did you do?”

“Josh, I can get my degree. I can eat and sleep. *I'm free.*” She reached out ecstatically for his hands, but he pulled back.

“I mean,” he said coldly, “What did you do with *him*?”

He was hurting, she could see that, and it was all her fault. She knew it had to come, but she was upset that it was the first thing out of his mouth. “Please, Josh, don't go there. It was just something I had to do.”

“Do they pay you a bonus if you lay the guy?”

“Hey, that's not fair,” She stood up. “I'll talk to you when you are in a better mood.”

Joshua shook his head as she departed. She had said it by absence of fact., right there. He knew it, there was no doubt in his mind, she had gone to bed with Bradley.

* * *

Sonya was sitting on her bed, head in hands, sobbing, tears soaking into her woolen skirt. Every now and then a gasp for air, then muffled whimpering renewed. She had been this way for most of Saturday afternoon, dreading her appearance on TV. Joshua had been withdrawn, didn't make eye contact anymore, barely a word had past between them since her return. She was trying to focus, but every time her mind wandered back to him the tears began to stream.

Then there was Bradley. Sex, wow! But going to bed with a stud was not the same as making love – she tried in vain to argue. Did she think she could love Bradley? Or was it just fascination..., infatuation? She'd had sex forced upon her many times before though she had never had an orgasm. He was different, he seemed to sense her loathing, encouraged it, made it work *for* her instead of against, developing it into passion. And so she came. After that, she couldn't remember a thing. She had never intend to make out with him or any she might have picked on the show, wanting to reserve herself for Josh... And with that came more tears.

Bradley, she fought for control, he hasn't called me, had said he would, that he had really enjoyed me. What is he playing at?

A cheer from the common room ripped her from her thoughts. She looked at her phone beside her, “Oh, God,” she murmured, “It's seven o'clock.”

A minute later she came in behind a muddle of sofas and chairs in front of the TV. She was thankful that the lights were not on, her eyes still swollen, she knew she must look like a mess. And there she was on screen, the opposite, looking radiant and sexy as flashbacks of her moment of glory flew about the room: She, stepping up to Bradley, hand to his knee, rising to give him a peck on the cheek, and an audience erupting.

Sonya took a step back and raised a hand to her mouth. *Oh, God, she cringed, here it comes.*

Abruptly, the screen went blue, to be replaced seconds later by a written message:

“We interrupted this program to advise our audience that following communication with the Metropolitan Police, the showing of the final interview with last week's couple has been suspended. We continue with this week's female contestants and a chance for one guy to, Pick His Mate.”

“News, news! Quick someone bring up the news channel,” Neil., arms flaying about, was hollering.

The remote was grabbed, numbers tossed about, mayhem

ensued... And then, there it was, all over the feeds: Lieutenant Bradley Cummings had been brought in for questioning by the police, as a suspect in the ongoing investigation of a serial killer the media had dubbed, “The Negligee Nailer”.

Joshua had not noticed Sonya enter the room. Then a cry from behind made him turn to see her vanishing form through the open door.

Neil glanced over at him. “Josh, you'd better go and see if she's alright,” he said.

“I can't, I'm too close to her. You go,” he replied.

“Fine,” Neil shrugged and got up.

The light was on when he entered, Sonya sitting on the foot of her bed. Neil could see she had been crying and yet, surrounding the blood shot, swollen eyes, was a frighteningly grim face, cold and utterly emotionless.

“Where's Josh?” she snapped, without looking up.

“Er, well... He said it would be better if I came to see if you needed any help.”

“No! I won't speak to anyone but Joshua,” she boomed in a deeply disturbing voice.

Neil returned to the common room.

“You'd better get in there, Josh,” Neil said, oddly. “I've never seen her like this, and it's not like she's going to get any sympathy from her family, you know.”

Reluctantly, Joshua got up. He walked down the corridor to Sonya's room, a fear in his mind of what he might say, how he might react, trying to pull himself together. *For her*, he kept reminding himself, *this is not about you*. He entered.

The door had barely closed behind him before Sonya sprang from the end of her bed and threw her arms around him, squeezing him fiercely, then tears and the release – not from him – from herself. She clung to him for a few minutes, while he struggled to

give her comfort. He raised a reluctant hand to her head and gently stroked her hair. She stirred, her face slowly lifting from a soaking shoulder, eyes focused on his mouth. He saw it coming. She was about to force her lips on his when he recoiled.

“Sonya, wait. Not now,” he said dropping her to the bed. “Just sit and talk. Tell me what happened.”

She fell back, lying prostrate and enticing. “I want you. I want to make love to you, here., now! Come on, Josh, you know you want me,” Sonya cried, desperate to strike Bradley from her mind.

Joshua shook his head. This was trauma at work, she was in shock. If she wouldn't talk sensibly then he would have to direct the conversation, himself.

“Sonya, listen. Don't go all crazy over this guy, you're acting as psychotic as him. You can't punish him by going to bed with me, if that is what you are thinking.”

“No... Yes... No. Damn it, I don't know.” She slapped the bed in anger.

He continued. “It must be awful, thinking you might have spent four days with a mad man. Did he do anything weird or horrible to you?” Joshua asked, sitting next to her.

She looked over. “No, but he did..,” she paused... shuddered, “He did ask me to wear a negligee he had bought especially for me.” Her reply, awkward. “And, you know,” she went on, “It never dawned on me... I never saw the connection.”

Joshua tried to find something else reassuring to give her besides his tightly pressed smile and raised eyebrows, but nothing would come out.

Sonya went on: “That's what he does, that monster. All the police ever find is a bloody negligee hanging from a nail on a tree branch, somewhere in a park.”

Joshua added: “Maybe it was just coincidence, or maybe – ”

“I feel like I've been raped,” Sonya blurted out angrily, taking Joshua by surprise. Though eyes watering again and anguish welling up, out came another side of her, firing up to quash the advancing tears. “Not just by him. By the audience, the producers, the whole damn show. I've lost my 20 grand, you know. I don't get to cash it until the return interview is aired, and now they've pulled it. That Bastard, I knew he was a freak, but that's why I chose him. I was drawn to his intellect, he had a power over me I can't explain. I was seduced even before we got to the hotel room.”

“Listen,” Joshua said, trying to steer the conversation away from Bradley, “If that guy is released and no longer a suspect then the show might air your return interview. This whole thing may end up okay.”

“Doubt it,” she replied, wiping her eyes and pulling herself upright, “He's the one, I know it, but he's way too clever for the cops. He'll be released, alright. You'll see. The negligee he gave me, that was his little trick, a subconscious attack on my senses, drawing me in with fear to leverage my lust. Very clever, you'll see.”

Joshua got up, looking for diversion. “Let's go out to dinner,” he said casually, “My treat, that Indian restaurant you always wanted to try.”

“No, Josh, I can't go out there, people will recognise me.” She was shaking her head, the anger within her seeming to have dissipated as swiftly as it had emerged. There was a hint of fear in her voice, a dread of confrontation, in shocking contrast to her earlier outbursts. Yet she was still Sonya, in *his* eyes, no matter what came out. There could only be one.

She patted the bed, urging him to sit back down beside her. “I'm sorry, Josh, I've acted stupidly and I – ”

“Hey, you're stressed,” he said quickly. “Things happen, but we shouldn't be jumping into bed at a time like this.”

“What do you mean?” she responded, bemused.

“What you said earlier. I'm just saying...”

“Are you suggesting I was the one wanting to get you in the sack? I was trying to thank you for supporting me. Then you took advantage of me, Josh. You threw me on the bed. That's disgusting.”

“No, the next bit.”

“What next bit?”

He sat back down. She was a mess.., or was *he*? It was difficult just concentrating on the present moment, let alone trying to remember exactly what had earlier transpired. Was he mistaken? Things were getting complicated. Another redirect was necessary. Said, “It's alright, I know why you did it, it took guts to go on that show. You can be proud of that. It was a great performance, you should take up acting instead of going into social sciences, I mean it.”

A weak, almost childlike voice responded. “Will you forgive me?”

“Of course, Sonya.”

“I need a real friend,” she sighed, “I don't want to be alone, I can't get through this on my own.”

Joshua nodded calmly, but his mind was anything but. He had taken everything in and was being thrown about by her ever changing mood, suffocated by her words like lust, power and seduction. Sonya was smart, was it all Bradley's making? Joshua felt impotent, his desire for Sonya waning rapidly. He could be her friend but that was going to be it, for a while. He had not been the one upon whom she had forced her sexuality; the little outburst when he had first entered, that was not the same thing, even if she was now denying it. Neither was it an act. Beneath the facade of that sensible young woman he had grown to fancy over the last term was a teaser and a flirt, like the one he had seen on TV. She had been deceitful and it angered him.

Two days later and Sonya was still in her room. She was afraid to go outside, had excused herself from appearing in class, studying instead on her own. A knock on the door and she looked

up. Saw a policewoman and a pleasant looking, older man in a brown coat, looking in. They introduced themselves, then asked if they could enter and talk. They needed some form of ID and her phone number. She nodded.

“You released him, right? That's why you're here,” Sonya said calmly.

“Yes,” the detective replied. “No real substantive evidence, mostly hunches due to locations. He's a bird watcher, but I guess you already know that.”

Another nod.

“How are you coping?” the policewoman asked.

“Oh, fine. Just having to be confined to my bedroom.., bit of a pain.”

“We are concerned for you,” the PC went on, “Although we are not sure about Lieutenant Cummings, we think it best to keep an eye on you, just in case. You could be a target. Even if Cummings is not the one, the real killer could come after you.”

“Well, thanks,” Sonya replied.

“We'll be posting a watch in the passageway down there,” the PC pointed with a gloved hand to the window, “And will be doubling our patrols around The Barbican.”

* * *

In the days that followed, Joshua would often bring food to Sonya, from takeaways mostly, as he was not a good cook. She was depressed, heavily so, often snapping out at him for the strangest of reasons, accusing him of failing to understand her, and even that he was lying. There she sat, upright on the bed, reams of paperwork before her; crying then laughing, focusing then screaming. She complained that sometimes the world around her would shimmer and fuzz, it annoyed her, she needed clarity at a time like this. He did not understand, he could only empathise, he had suffered from

depression, too. Which was why he still cared for her, knowing how awful a sense of losing control really could be.

Their conversations never wandered far from Bradley, Sonya consistently angry, adding new dimensions to her obsession.

“All his victims,” she would moan, “They don't even know how many young girls like me he has killed, just missing persons. One a month. And what does he do with their bodies?”

Joshua tried to console her. He had been watching the news. The consensus was that if the killings stopped then Bradley might be The Negligee Nailer. He was still under suspicion, on a tight leash, so she was safe. However, if another negligee was found then he was not the one, and she could then come out of hiding, perhaps even, get paid.

He was thinking differently about Sonya now, with the passing of days. He'd had time to absorb it all, and he was less upset with her, could forgive her outburst, knowing the pain that hung within the awful darkness she was inhabiting. It was his disdain for Bradley and his tricks that more frequently rose up – spurring him to jealousy – regardless of whether he was a killer or not. The thought had crossed Joshua's mind that he could do the same, but he didn't know any tricks, he was no womaniser, so resigned himself to the only thing he knew how to do: Be nice and maybe the day would come.

He decided to ask her something that had been bothering him. “Are you taking drugs?” he said, looking at her arm.

“Oh, those,” she laughed. “A sedative, yes. I was prescribed them some time ago. Never took them, until now. Seemed like a good idea.”

“Do they work?”

She shrugged, childishly, head down... “Dunno. Maybe. I've got a draw full. Want to try some?”

“You know, Sonya,” he said, “you've got to get out and about. You're going to get cabin fever in here. At night, why not? That

invitation to the Indian is still open.”

Her head rose up, the child was gone. She looked at him directly. “Didn't you hear me. *Not yet!* Why do you always force me to be negative? Can't you be nice, for a change?”

She loves me, she hates me, is there no in between? he wondered.

The following morning Joshua opened the kitchen door to a chatter of excitement. The Negligee Nailer had struck again. Joshua was relieved, in an odd kind of way. At least for Sonya. Now she could get on with her life, maybe cash that cheque. She had not been raped by a monster, after all. That would heal wounds.

He hurried to her bedroom. She was there, as always, but still asleep. He excused himself and was about to leave when she rolled over.

“That's alright, silly.” she laughed with an outstretched arm. “Come here, give me a kiss. I've waited a long time for this moment. Please.” She shook her bare arm impatiently.

Was it the right time? Joshua wondered, it all seemed too hurried. *Bradley off the hook, yes, but the very next thing that happens is me winding up in bed with Sonya.* Had she even heard the news? It took little time to decided, his relief and the urge to kiss her outweighed any suspicions, and he closed the door.

A few miles away to the south west, Victoria Embankment, and in a bland white, Regency building, Detective Ershaw was mulling over preliminary lab reports on the fourth floor. Was the killer becoming careless, or was this an amateur copycat? He needed the DNA results, a.s.a.p.. He decided to release photographs of the scene they had found that morning, to the media. He looked up at a clock on the wall, left his office and went downstairs to brief The Press.

“As you already know, we have a crime scene that appears to be the work of a serial killer you have named, The Negligee Nailer. Photographs of the scene on the screen behind me will be circulated

shortly. I will not be answering any questions, too early for that, however I will point out that evidence is suggesting this apparent murder is not in keeping with those that have come before.”

A shout from the front row: “Are you thinking this is a copycat?”

“I said, 'no questions'! That is all.”

2. THE DAY COMES

Tucked away in the corner of a dark Balti style, Indian restaurant, sat Joshua and Sonya, one evening. She had finally accepted his invitation. The endless twang of a sitar slithered over iconic, red wallpaper, trying to serenade the couple, but they were not listening, they were engrossed in each other. Although Sonya would frequently stare at a window by the door, Joshua imagined she was still concerned about her notoriety, being her first evening out since it all began. He was feeling particularly pleased with himself and his prowess: they had made out twice that day which must have meant she enjoyed their first experience. He was over Bradley, he was better than Bradley. He knew it.

On leaving, they zipped up their coats, it was a chilly, November night. Young boys, a few yards down the pavement, were dancing and swinging sparklers wildly all about. On the other side of the street stood a man behind an old, black Cortina. Sonya saw him at once. She excused herself and ran between passing cars to get to him. Joshua stood blankly, staring, had been wondering about those boys. Now he was looking directly at Bradley, he was sure. He waited..., afraid of what was to come.

“Hi, Brad. Thought I'd get your attention, and it worked,” Sonya said, mockingly.

“Very clever, Sonya. Did you do it for me, or for the money?”

“You, Brad. I want you. You said you would call, but you never did. So what was I going to do? Sit and wait?”

“You want to have me arrested, or you want to have me in bed?”

“I tried another man, the one over there. Are you jealous?”

“It takes practice to make a girl scream, Sonya.”

“I know, Brad,” she smiled and grabbed his coat lapels, trying to keep him tuned. It was her turn to take control and this time he would not get away so easily.

He asked, “So you think I’m The Nailer... Or are you just guessing?”

“Hoping, Brad. And I was right. Right?”

“What if I’m not?”

Sonya stared up at him. “Then I will be expecting an encounter with him any day soon. And he will get my full attention.”

“Well, Sonya, your negligee is going to implicate me, if my presence is collected by forensics.”

“Hardly a challenge for a psychopath of your expertise, Brad. Especially as I used my own blood. I’ve been siphoning out vials of the stuff for the last week,” she said, proudly displaying puncture marks on her left arm.

“I’m going to have to disappear for a while. Do you want to come?”

“Very much!” she crooned with a squirm and the curl of a lip.

“Then give me your phone. The police can track their pings. I like you, Sonya, but I don’t trust you, yet.”

Joshua was watching. He saw their heads disappear and then the Cortina speed off. He pulled his phone out and dialed the police. He had taken the Detective’s number off the card by the side of Sonya’s bed, as a precaution. Within minutes a police car was pulling up beside him. He got in and was soon rushing down Fleet Street to The Strand, sirens wailing.

“Why do you suppose she went with him, willingly?” asked Detective Ershaw.

“I don’t know,” Joshua replied.

“Footage from, 'Pick Your Mate', show them both acting very amorously throughout their holiday abroad.”

“She did it for the extra money.”

“You mean, they get paid more for sleeping together?” The Detective was shocked.

“Yes.” Joshua explained, “Sonya is in financial difficulties, trying to get through university. But she won't get paid if they don't show the final interview. Now he's off the hook, maybe she feels safe meeting up with him, so they can cut a deal with the producers..., or something.”

“First run DNA profiles of a saliva smear found on the negligee this morning match those of Lieutenant Cummings.”

Joshua was stunned. “What? Why would he have left evidence like that to incriminate himself, he's never done that before, has he?”

The Detective leaned over his desk. “No. Which is why we find it hard to believe this was the work of the true killer. The negligees all showed signs of small puncture wounds. He was blood letting his victims, so they would die slowly. No such signs were found on this one.”

“Oh, shit,” Joshua exclaimed, “Even so, Sonya may have gone off with The Negligee Nailer, after all?”

“Possibly.”

Joshua took a deep breath. He opened up, felt it was right even though he was treading on Sonya's privacy, and spoke: “She always believed it was him, she became obsessed.”

“Why,” the Detective asked.

“Well: for one thing, she told me how he played tricks on her, tried to subconsciously bring out fear in her to heighten her lust, gave her a negligee to wear, that sort of thing; and then that he had this way of almost hypnotising her with his stare.”

Detective Ershaw was still. A silence crept around the room.

Then abruptly he reacted. "Oh my God! A negligee..., he gave her a negligee?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever seen her wear one?"

"No."

"I think we have found our copycat." The Detective slid a photograph of her bloody negligee in front of him.

Joshua groaned on seeing it, "Oh, crap! What are you implying?"

"That Sonya used her negligee to pull Cummings out of the woodwork."

"Why?"

The Detective sat back, spoke slowly, thoughts banging into one another, queuing up to be heard. "He would have been the only one who knew what it looked like, though that would not implicate him as our serial killer. He had to get to her, perhaps with the idea of shutting her down, or at least finding out what she was up to. Meanwhile, he thinks she wants to incriminate him, but she probably realises that if he can prove he gave the negligee to her on holiday, then he'd be out, Scot free. And her DNA would back that up. No! She wanted to meet him. But for what purpose? She played him for a sucker. She is a very feisty girl, your Sonya."

"So, you don't think she did it for the money?" Joshua asked.

"No."

"Is he going to kill her?"

"No. There's something much more sinister going on. We need to speak with her family. Then we need to find them, and fast. Any ideas?"

* * *

A black Cortina turned off the main road by a 'For Sale' sign,

just north of Midhurst, Surrey. It roared up a long driveway through fields, headlights extinguished, and circled a courtyard before coming to a stop. Bradley pulled a set of keys from his pocket, selected a 'For Sale' label and tried a few on the front door. Finally it gave in. He walked through, Sonya behind him. He instructed her not to use any lights during the night, only a candle if necessary. He opened a cabinet in the living room and poured them both a whisky.

She sat down with her glass and spoke. "Brad, what do you do with all the bodies?"

"I keep them."

"Where? Can I see?" Sonya sat up.

"Well, there are some here, in the cellar. Let's finish our drink and we'll go downstairs."

"Do you have sex with them before you kill them?"

Bradley was standing by a window, admiring a gibbous moon. He didn't turn to face her. He said, "Kill them? They're still alive. I come here often., to give them food and satisfy my passion."

"Which is?"

"Watching them bleed. It's an ejaculation of the heart rather than sexual organs. A far more beautiful affair. You see it pumping out in little squirts, as the body gives in groans and cries of ecstasy."

"... Pain," she replied, blandly.

He chuckled. "Pain, pleasure. What's the difference?"

Sonya shifted in her seat. "Was I going to be next?"

"Probably. I have a list of suitable candidates. Your name is not on it, but you forced yourself upon me."

"You went into the show," Sonya argued. "What were you expecting?"

"To win. As I did. It's not hard to turn a girl on."

"So you did it for an ego boost?"

He faced her and smiled. “Yes. I don't want to lose my touch.”

“You haven't.”

As he was walking up to her, he said: “You don't seem in the least bit concerned. Do you like what I do?”

“I'm intrigued, yes. I want to see you do it.”

He stood before her. “I thought there was something different about you, how ferocious you eventually became in bed. So, I have met my match. You are as dark and wayward as I.”

“You like..?” she smiled coyly. Then changed tack. “If you can perform sexually, why do you need this other outlet?”

“Hmm, you are referring to the psychosis of failure and inadequacy, are you not? No, mine is simply an acute perversion. All must be young and beautiful, like you...” He paused. “And with that, it's time for a performance. I might even let you have a go. I'm sure in the front row you will experience the full force of their amazing outpourings, and climax, too. It'll bring out your lesbian leanings, I know you have them, Sonya.”

* * *

An hour earlier, Detective Ershaw, together with two PCs and Joshua, were rattling on a town house door in Peckham, south of The Thames: The Madangoshi's residence. It was 9.15 in the evening.

They pushed in, on the door opening, it was not a gracious entrance.

The Detective spoke first. “I have a warrant to search your property, but I don't need to, if you can answer a few simple questions.”

Mr. and Mrs. Madangoshi stood, huddled under the staircase. Both agreed.

“Your daughter, Sonya. Has she been in psychiatric care?”

They nodded.

“What was the diagnosis?”

“Dissociating..., or something like that.”

“Can you be more precise?”

The father responded, “She dishonoured our family by going to a counselor. There is no need to question our cultural heritage. Only crazy people go to psychiatrists. But she went anyway, against our will, and was told she had an illness,” he growled, “They made her sick. If she hadn't gone she would still be fine, today.”

“The diagnosis?”

“You know, being one person and then another.”

“Thank you. And the name of the hospital where she was eventually treated?”

“Shrewsbury.”

“Did she have any personal trauma when she was younger?”

The father emerged from his cell. “Don't you bring up that shit again, around here. We wiped that under the carpet years ago. It's on record, just leave us alone.”

The Detective nodded, he had read the father's gruesome file. Then a phone call. He excused himself, beckoned the others to follow him out. Information on Cummings had revealed that he was an estate agent in West Sussex, having been discharged from the army at age 30 for disrespectful conduct towards a female soldier. That much they had known, now they knew which houses he was entrusted to show. It was a long list they had finally received from the Agency. All had to be searched, tonight. Detective Ershaw had a hunch, personally took one of the properties nearest woods and secluded: Prefects Manor, near Midhurst. Phone tracking had indicated Sonya was north west of Sussex and still mobile.

On route to City Airport, the Detective received another message. He frowned, a nod of knowing almost imperceptible. He had decided to drop off Joshua on their way, but now, with this new found knowledge he was forced to review his earlier decision:

“Joshua, I'd like you to come with us. A friendly face could help us calm Sonya, if the need were to arise.” the Detective asked.

“Yes, I'm fine with that.”

“Right, then hear me out. This is her psychological profile: Sonya has Dissociative Identity Disorder. In other words, alter personalities which have lain practically dormant for years. They have now surfaced with a fury, due no doubt to the shocking trauma she has recently experienced. Some of them will be unimaginably smart and seriously dangerous. She has been subconsciously nurturing her abilities and her powers for years, it is how she defends herself from supposed adversities and how she relinquishes herself of responsibility. She has an IQ in the top Mensa range. What she is now, is not who she normally is, not who you know. She switches autonomously; one in particular is tuned to exact revenge.

He took a deep breath and continued. “She will almost certainly become 'The Protector', a warrior on automatic pilot, who will stop at nothing to finish Bradley, even though he may not actually *be* the serial killer. It doesn't matter to her, he is the demon to be vanquished. You see, her values are distorted. She will have played 'The Seductress', false adoration being her wriggling worm. Now, she may be even more deadly than he, and I suspect she is. He doesn't stand a chance. A psychopath is bent, she is broken. The reality we know, and his kind cleverly manipulate, does not apply to her – she makes up her own. So he is out of his depth. Don't trust Sonya. She may not recognise you, at first, if you get in her way... But we must respect her, nevertheless.”

* * *

Bradley flicked a light switch, descended a staircase to the

cellar below, ushered Sonya to a seat in front of a row of five dirty, young girls, all kneeling and shackled from the wrist to the floor by chains. They were whimpering and sobbing, they knew what was coming. He reached into a cabinet fastened to the wall by the side of a rack of wine, drew out a small plastic bottle and a six inch ice pick. Approaching the girl in front of Sonya, he lifted her head and kissed her brow, as if an act of apology. But it was not. It was an act of tyranny he was about to perform and was merely wishing her luck. If she survived she would eat.

Sonya knew she could handle anything: Blood, gore, shame and indignation, she had seen it all before, first hand. Her father had made sure of that. What she wanted to see was something altogether different. And she would do it herself, when the time came. Even if that meant, in the meantime, watching a poor girl suffer.

Bradley pulled the girl's negligee up over her head to expose a bare torso. She was puckered with tiny puncture wounds, some still oozing and septic. He wiped them with a solution that bubbled on contact. She winced, but knew it would be far less painful than what was to come. He wiped the pick, then pulled back, giving her one last look, before plunging the enormous, steel needle into her upper chest close to an armpit. She screamed. Though he did not force the pick more than an inch into her body, as that would probably have killed her, he made a deep enough hole in precisely the right place for the blood to flow freely upon extraction. His reward... a joy... spurting and seeping, to the rhythm of her heart. Then, he was stepping back, dropping to his knees before the distraught girl and unbuckling the belt of his trousers.

He turned to Sonya with a grotesque smile, an outstretched arm passing her the pick, as if to say, *'now it's your turn'*. She leaned forwards, rose expressionless, took the pick from him and approached the same, poor girl. He pointed to a mark just above her hip a few inches left from the top of her triangle. Sonya bent down in front of Bradley, kissed the girl on the lips, saw begging from her in a terrified expression. She secretly tried to console the distraught girl with a blink and a smile, as memories of her own

mutilation on the kitchen table as a child came into sharp focus.

Then she pulled back to make the strike. She had visualised Bradley's eye as if her father's, her uncles' and their abhorrent friends. It would be a sure kill, taking no effort to turn and plunge the pick through soft tissue and the hole behind into their brains.

At that moment a couple of beeps from Sonya's pocket startled her. "Battery Low". *Shit!* She rose up while Bradley was still caught uncompromisingly, trousers around his thighs. She threw the pick at him and took off like a rabbit, running for the stairs, knowing he would be but paces behind her. At the top, she swung the door closed in his face, then slammed a bolt in place. Running blindly through the living room in the dark, her eyes still having not adjusted, she stumbled over furniture with a screech of pain, falling, then up again, while thumping on the cellar door behind her boomed – then a crack of splintering wood. *He is out!* She reached the front door, but it was locked. *Damn.*

Now hurling a chair through the window, leaping head first after it, passing neatly through the frame without a scratch and rolling through a flower bed onto the courtyard cobbles. She stood, had just enough time to turn and see Bradley at the window, giving him a grin in triumph, before she was dashing off down the driveway.

Sonya, now in so much pain, was crying as she ran, dizzy and disoriented on finding herself running madly through the night. All she knew was that she had to keep running, no one to tell her what was going on. Why was she outside in the darkness? *So afraid.* A thunder then arose, the folding back of grass on the verge and a violent wind all around her. In a blinding spot of light she seemed suspended, gave up and slowed to a halt, raised hands to her face in wonder at the moon and watched incredulously the shuddering, improbable sight of it descending to one side.

Joshua jumped out before the chopper had landed. He ran towards Sonya, but did not reach her in time. Bradley had got to the startled rabbit first. A hand in the pocket before she had time to react and Bradley retrieved her other phone. He also had an arm

around her chest. She was his captive, now. But which one was she? It was to be his undoing; her eyes he could not see, glazing over momentarily as a rapid transformation took place.

Detective Ershaw reached the scene. He spoke calmly, "Lieutenant, you are not a suspect, you can release her and we can talk."

"Not likely. Let me and her go... A vehicle, NOW, and I won't kill her, yet."

As the last word left his mouth, a jabbing pain caught him between the legs. Sonya had raised her arms and unlocked her knees in textbook self-defense, weight dropping her nimbly through his grasp, before sending a fierce elbow to his groin in passing. She was falling in front of him to the gravel, screaming as she went: "Don't shoot the phone!"

A flash of gunfire from the helicopter and Bradley crumbled to her side. He looked at her as he tried to gasp a last breath. Nothing happened but a growing pool of black blood. He was gone, but her phone was beside her, a cracked screen in his hand. She grabbed it with a laugh and jumped to her feet.

* * *

"Sonya, I understand what you did, however reckless," Detective Ershaw exclaimed the following day in his office. "But you could have put us in the picture, before you went off on your rampage."

"Doubtful, Detective," she replied, her defensive personality still on high alert, "You would never have allowed me to do what needed to be done, and The Neglige Nailer would not have been caught, perhaps ever."

"Fine. We got your recording off the phone. Of twenty seven young girls found, six did not survive, but twenty one of them are now free, alive and well. You are to be congratulated.., quietly," he was making a point. "There will be no press, I can assure you of

that.”

“I didn't get there in time, did I? That evil bastard.”

“You did,” he nodded, “And you saved many lives, which I now believe was your true intention. The production company of that show you were in, ensures me that you will be paid in full for your contribution. They are proud, as we all are, of your incredible tenacity. Thank you. Perhaps we can ask you to work with us again, sometime.”

Sonya relaxed, began to feel fuzzy, put a hand out towards his desk to catch her balance. The Detective came into focus again. She said: “What..? Who? . . . Me?”

The END

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British born, Alan Graham has spent his whole life traveling, his father having been in the diplomatic service. He is a wildlife photographer/filmmaker and published author of novels in the genres of speculative fiction and thrillers. He has also written countless articles for international prints including BBC Wildlife Magazine, Travel Africa and International Living over a career spanning 30 years. His most successful TV documentary “The Affairs of Hares” was filmed entirely in the wilds of Devon, England, between 1996 and 2000.



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Title: The Coming Days.

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