



‘It’s not my fault,’ I said, slinging back the drink and wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. ‘I’ve got a lot of stress.’

‘Cassidy, what the hell are you talking about?’ Mince was standing across from the coffee table like a mountain of muscle, clad in tight blue sweats. ‘You work at a DVD store. You just got *given* thirty grand.’ He peered at me. ‘Is that *vodka*? It’s ten o’clo—’

‘I got the bottles mixed up. I thought it was spring water.’ I drained the glass and pushed the bottle towards him.

As security guard for my friend, Mike, aka the Beast, Mince was trying to teach me self-defence. While he had a lot of patience with my substandard fitness level and addiction to chocolate, it didn’t look like it ran to morning shots of 80 proof.

I could feel the heat rise in my cheeks as he stared at me. ‘And anyway,’ I said, fighting the urge to throw a pillow at him, ‘the DVD store is just weekends and the money wasn’t

exactly a twenty-first birthday present. I was hit with a tranquilizer by a psycho. I earned it and believe you me, it was no picnic.'

Oh God! Did I just say, *believe you me?* I'd been drinking, alone, in my apartment, at ten o'clock in the morning. This was pathetic. But my parrot and I had just had an ugly altercation, which explained the feathers everywhere, but not the drinking. Not really. Normal girls didn't have laybacks for breakfast. Even I knew that.

But then I guess I wasn't really a normal girl. I worked, pretty illegally actually, for various people, mainly doing crappy, dirty, dangerous things they couldn't—or wouldn't—do themselves. Mostly I did it for the money. Certainly it wasn't for the perks. Essentially it all boiled down to trying to get other people out of trouble. Unfortunately it almost always ended up with me getting *into* trouble. Occasionally I also got beaten up and, less occasionally, I got paid for it.

I also seemed to make people mad.

The angry people were often bigger than me, or at least better armed, so I could no longer rely on harsh words and a well-executed Chinese burn to get rid of them.

Recently I'd been working with an ex-cop called Ned Maxwell, which seemed like a good idea. It meant I had a lot more work and I wasn't entirely in charge of my own doom. I was also sort of hoping the whole violence thing would be reduced by my new self-defence skills.

Sure, I thought Ned was cute, but I hadn't admitted that to my boyfriend, Sam, who hated his guts—not just because he used to work with Ned. I think he'd picked up on the whole vibe between us. Or maybe it was because Ned had

once shot a guy in the back of the head and wasn't exactly on the right side of the law all the time.

Sam, despite his sex appeal, was always on the right side of the law. He'd been a nerd for most of his life and even now the essence of it was still there, festering away. I was embarrassed to admit that at times Sam could still be a goody-two-shoes. It kind of gave me the shits. I'd always had a hankering for the cop who made his own rules, who went his own way. Unfortunately, Sam always played it straight.

I'd recently saved Ned from the same deranged psycho killer who'd shot me, so I figured the guy owed me one. Maybe Ned would give me a raise. Or one of those polite goodbye kisses that actually landed on my lips. They were excellent.

For the past few weeks I'd had a normal life, a boyfriend I adored, money in the bank, good friends and even better lingerie. This morning's WWF incident (the wildlife one, not the wrestling thing, although I guess both kind of played a hand in the violence) had really put a spanner in my smugness. My parrot Jock had been an excellent personal bodyguard until he turned his skills on me. Mince hadn't explained how to defend myself against an angry little flying machine and now I was pretty much tarred and feathered.

Mince put his fingers to his mouth, rapping slightly on his lips. I frowned, peering closer. Was he smiling? That wasn't good. He never smiled. Unless, of course, he had some plan to increase my heart rate to hyperventilation levels, like making me do push-ups. That had been crappy. I still had the carpet burns on my knees.

I'd become used to Mince turning up every three days

and usually I was at least awake for our self-defence lessons, if not exactly wearing fitness gear and bouncing cheerfully on the spot. Jock usually watched us from the sidelines, squawking whenever I fell over or fluffed a punch.

He squawked a lot.

Mince's training was pretty good and it wasn't all physical. I'd also learned to count to ten when I was mad. Mince said I should try to be the bigger person and not reduce everything to violence. I agreed. Unfortunately other people couldn't count so well.

Just yesterday a teenage boy had seen my skinned knees and made a lewd remark. Other people had turned to look. It was lucky about the whole counting thing, otherwise I would have hit him. Instead I just walked away, trying to be the bigger person. Unfortunately, in this case, I really was. He must have been all of thirteen years old. I should have squashed him like a bug.

Being the bigger person really wasn't all that much fun.

I checked the tape on my neck. 'Is it still bleeding?'

Mince shook his head.

'What if Jock severed a vein? I might need a shot. He's never bitten me before. Not even when I clocked myself on the top cupboard, fell off the chair and nearly crushed him to death. He's not that kind of bird. Mostly he nuzzles me. He makes little sad chattering noises when I go out.' I shook my head. 'It's all gone horribly wrong.'

Mince watched me, unmoved. That morning we'd planned a session of meditation and inner peace. He'd turned up carrying a box of tea-light candles to find me in my T-shirt and

undies and evidence of a pizza breakfast. He didn't look all that happy about it.

I brushed down my shirt and stood up. 'Okay, let's get started.'

'Cass, sit down. Relax.'

'I'm *fucking* relaxed!'

'You're drunk. It's different.' His smile seemed to morph into a frown, only I couldn't be sure because my eyes weren't working so well. Probably it was just the early start. When a guy like Mince looked at me like that, I usually pissed my pants. Today, I shrugged.

'You think *this* is drunk?'

God, it was suicide by talking...

'No, I think this is weird.'

His voice had an odd lilt to it and he glanced at my bruises. 'You know, you look twelve. I can't believe you got all this from a fight with your bird. Have I taught you nothing?'

'Jock's a mean-spirited bird,' I said, then hastily sat down as my stomach shifted. A sour taste filled my mouth and I held in a groan. Urgh. Vodka breakfasts sucked.

Mince silently grabbed the bottle, kicked the pizza box under the coffee table and looked around my sparsely furnished apartment. I wasn't being groovy; I'd just been poor a long time.

'Stop sulking just because you lost.'

I picked a feather off my shoulder. 'I didn't lose, you butthead.'

I sucked in a breath and squinted up at him, but he was still looking around the room, ignoring me. 'I brought Jock sweet corn,' he said. 'Where is he?'

I cocked my head towards the bathroom. ‘I kind of threw him in the tub.’

He put the vodka bottle on my kitchen island with a thud, and crossed the floor.

‘What’s with the long pink thing?’ he called over his shoulder, indicating my new pink-tinted chrome lamp lying sideways on the floor.

‘I had some money so I bought it.’

‘But it’s pink.’

‘I know.’

‘You have red crockery. It’ll clash.’

I threw a pillow at him. ‘So I won’t eat while I’m sitting near the lamp!’

He stood the lamp back up, ignored the pillow that had skimmed lazily past him and, before I could say anything, turned the bathroom door handle.

‘Jock?’ he called, peering around the door, his body filling the frame. ‘You know, Cass, there’s a hell of a lot of bir—’ He jumped back and slammed the door. Something thudded against it from the other side and then squawked in a high, wailing pitch.

Mince looked over at me, his shaved hair somehow askew. ‘What the hell?’ He stared at the door as the wailing continued. ‘He sounds like the creature in *Alien*.’

‘You mean *the* alien?’ I rubbed my forehead with the tips of my fingers until the sudden pain behind my eyes eased. I heard Mince open the fridge and then the couch cushions bounced as he sat down, handing me a Pepsi Light. ‘Drink that and then tell me how Jock just turned into a minion from hell.’

I drank until the lump in my throat eased, like a hefty vitamin pill dislodging itself. Then I slumped sideways, resting my head on the back of the couch and hugging a pillow to my chest. ‘You know the reward money?’

He nodded. I’d recently foiled a kidnapping and the victim’s father had unexpectedly paid me for it. It wasn’t the most fun I’d had, but the payment would probably beat almost any other job.

After nearly dying, the cash had been a happy surprise for someone in my crappy financial position. I’d had a ten grand Visa debt, was behind on the rent, and my car was a recently vandalised, shitty old Laser that hadn’t been doing anything for my image or ability to get laid.

‘Well, you know I’ve got to get a new car. I can’t borrow Mike’s forever.’ Mike was Mince’s boss, and an unexpected friend of mine. Our lives didn’t exactly connect in any meaningful way except we seemed to enjoy each other’s company. I was at a loss to explain it so I never did. Mike was nicknamed the Beast, mainly because of his genitals, which I’d seen, in a non-sexual way of course.

I was referring to the Alfa Mike’d recently offered as a gift. I’d refused, of course. I knew car gifts were for wives or mistresses and I was neither.

I also knew I was still driving it.

I figured my prolonged possession of the luxury vehicle might be some immature tongue poking at everyone who had teased me about my shitty old Laser. I’d get sick of the excellent stereo and leather seats soon enough. It was like therapy.

Free, cooler, nought-to-a-hundred-and-ten-kilometres-an-hour-in-seven-seconds therapy.

Loads of people did it.

‘And Jock?’ Mince reminded me. ‘Your bird?’

I waved him aside. ‘I’m getting to it.’ I finished the Pepsi, discreetly burped and hugged the pillow closer. ‘I’ve been broke for ages, Mince. I had to buy home brand tampons. The string kept falling off. It was embarrassing. Now I’ve paid off half my debts, but the car...’ I wiggled the little tin handle on the cola can back and forth until it broke off. ‘It’s a fucking big step...’

I fell silent.

Suddenly Mince snorted. I turned to him with a hurt look, but his expression didn’t change into an apology. In fact, he seemed to be smiling. Or maybe he had intestinal trouble.

Sometimes when I burp in public I let it out slowly through my teeth. Probably that was it.

He sure had a lot of gas, though.

I was so unused to having money, and growing so used to the luxury of Mike’s car, that the idea of laying down my own cash on a car that didn’t have electric windows just gave me the willies. Secretly I wanted Mince’s approval on this. He knew stuff. ‘It’s just a really big step,’ I repeated slowly.

Mince cocked his thumb towards the window. ‘And you’ve got totally the wrong, albeit brand new, shoes for such a step.’ I followed his gaze to a pair of pale pink, three-inch heel sandals under the buffet. The man had eyes like an eagle.

‘They were on sale,’ I said.

‘And the lamp?’

‘On sale too. I thought it would jazz the place up a bit. Only when I got it home, Jock got a little...well, excited...’

Mince started to say something and I jumped in. ‘When I first adopted him, he wasn’t fully grown. He looked miserable in the pet store and it was sort of an impulse purchase. Like the shoes. It’s a sickness.’

The early morning drinking hadn’t been to numb the pain from the fight; it was because I felt terrible. What if Jock hated me now? He was my best friend. Ever since he’d tucked his head under his wing and slept on my shoulder, I’d loved him. I swallowed the lump in my throat and faced Mince with a blank expression. No way was I going to get soppy in front of this guy.

‘When I got Jock, I didn’t know anything much about parrots except they ate seeds, were easily bored and shouldn’t be exposed to mirrors or they’d get self-obsessed.’

Mince looked around. ‘Ahh, so that’s why you live like a vampire.’

I rolled my eyes. ‘You see a fucking crypt anywhere?’ I bit my lip. ‘Anyway,’ I said, in a more controlled voice. I so didn’t want to get sat on by a 200 kilo guy. ‘There’s a mirror in the loo, he’s just never been that interested. He doesn’t even sit on the chaos table.’ I pointed to a slab of mirror I used as key, mail and handbag dump. ‘But—’

‘But?’

My phone rang and I ignored it as it flipped to machine.

‘Well,’ I said, feeling stupid but not knowing what else to say. ‘I think it’s the pink tinting.’ Mince raised an eyebrow and I ploughed on. ‘When I got up this morning, Jock wasn’t on his stand or the wardrobe. He usually sleeps on the wardrobe.’ I could hear a distinctive whine settle into my voice and I cleared my throat.

‘He was hopping about and sort of nudging the lamp like he does my cheek when he wants to be petted.’ I shook my head. ‘It was bizarre. The pink made his reflection look like a cute little Penelope Pitstop bird.’ I stopped. Even I felt stupid saying that and I said stupid things all the time.

‘*You know,*’ I said, as confusion played across Mince’s face. ‘The tall, pink chick from Wacky Races. She got stuck with these total losers in the race that never ended.’ The blank look remained and I could feel my temper climb. What did boys do with their time? No wonder I had problems dating. ‘You remember! Saturday morning cartoons, late ’70s, *Frosty Flakes.*’

‘Saturday mornings in the ’70s I was either hauling bricks for my dad or drunk in a ditch somewhere.’

I stared at him. Mince never said anything like that. I opened my mouth but nothing came out.

He stood. ‘You want another Pepsi?’

I nodded.

He fetched us both another drink while I tried to calm myself. Mince was a dark horse, a mystery man, like Steve Trevor. I mean, he married Wonder Woman, for God’s sake. Who the hell *was* that guy? Mince was Steve Trevor for me.

He was also getting to be a good friend and it made me nervous. I never called people on the phone to chat, or even did much socialising unless I got the urge for a beer (which was increasingly more often). I hated the obligations involved with juggling people in my life.

Luckily not too many of them seemed all that interested in the game, so the small bunch of friends I had tended to find their own way of settling in there somehow. I wasn’t

sure how Mince fitted in. I just couldn't imagine him hanging out with us at Easy, my best friend's bar. He'd crush Josie's leather cubes like a matchbox.

'Anyway,' I said, trying to get my mind back to the present disaster. There was also the increasing drama in my pants to deal with, and it wasn't one of those good, sexy ones either. I knew Mince wasn't going to let me go until I'd explained what had happened. I sighed and thought back.

'Jock's pink reflection must have looked—' I wiped the sweat from my forehead, 'nice. Honestly, Mince, I mean, he's my *bird*. It was kinda weird. So I had some breakfast and tried to lure him away from the lamp but he wouldn't move. Normally he loves—' I paused, flicking a guilty look under the coffee table, '*muesli*.'

Mince kicked the pizza box meaningfully.

'And then he wouldn't come over when I turned on the telly. He knows I don't watch telly before 11 o'clock at night. And I got nothing. So I tried to pick him up. I thought we could have a little moment, you know, and,' I paused, swallowing, 'that's when we sort of *tussled*.'

'You have blood all over your ear.'

I put my finger to the spot, pulling back at the warm wetness. 'Is it bad?'

'I gotta say I'm impressed. He really got—'

I held up my hand. 'Shut *up*!'

'But he really—'

'Shhht!'

Mince grabbed the hand I held up, crushing it in his huge man hands. I felt the blood drain from my face.

'You said you threw him in the bath tub.' He said it easily,

as though we weren't now breathing each other's air and he wasn't reducing my impatience to feeble-minded fear.

I cleared my throat. The man smelt like Rexona deodorant. I knew that smell because it was what my dad had used. It smelt a lot different on Mince. He loosened his grip just as the blood shot back and flooded my cheeks. I paused, trying to collect myself.

'Okay.' I stared at the shoes under the buffet to cheer myself up and distract me from the sudden arrival of Mince's masculinity wrapping itself around me like cigar smoke.

'It was only because he had his claws dug into my shoulder and he'd already done this,' I said, pointing to the scratch on my cheek. 'It hurts like hell. He's a fucking fair-weather friend.' Mince let go and I heaved out a sigh without thinking. The flush intensified and I was grateful for the skimpy outfit. Sweat was beading on me like dew.

Mince said nothing.

'He really did attack me first,' I said, pointing to my neck again. 'It's pretty sore. Maybe I should go to the doct—'

'You're fine. And by the look of him, he came out okay too. A little bent out of shape perhaps. There's a certain *baldness*.'

'Uh, that would be this.' I pulled four green feathers from the side of the couch.

Mince raised both his eyebrows.

'It was an accident.'

He rolled his eyes.

'He had me by the throat!'

Mince wiped his hands on the front of his trackpants. 'Okay. We need a *Beverly Hills 90210*-style intervention.'

I stared at him again. 'You stopped laying brick to watch a Darren Starr series?'

He shrugged. 'I'm mysterious.'

'I have to have a shower. I smell bad, I have morning breath and my hair looks like shit.' I leaned over and picked up the phone. 'I'll see if I can use Neil's shower.'

Neil, my ex-housemate and ex-boyfriend and Sam's older brother, had just moved into an apartment two floors up. I missed him and had to consider the possibility that his absence may have contributed to Jock's bad mood. I dialled. Just as Neil picked up, Mince took the phone from my hand.

'Hey!' I tried to grab it back, but he turned his back on me.

'Neil, it's me. Yeah, look we've got a bit of a problem. Have you got a minute?' He frowned. 'Sure, I'll give you a hand with it. Yeah, I know, but it's Jock.' He nodded and flicked the phone off. 'He'll be here in a sec.'

'You didn't ask him about his bathroom.'

'I know. You're going to make up with Jock and help him through the lamp confusion and then use your own.'

'I really do have to go out.'

'Where?'

I racked my brain. 'I'm going over to Easy to see Josie. I have presents.'

Sam and I had just spent a week in Melbourne. It had been wildly romantic right up to when he had dropped me off three days ago and said he was going to help Neil move in. I'd played cool even when I could hear them on the steps outside my door, carrying furniture, but aside from an excel-

lent kiss in the hallway while carrying a room divider, we'd been incommunicado.

Sam and I had a habit of missing emotional cues, launching into heated conversations and having loads of sex, not always in that order. In my books that was a fireball just waiting to destroy us all. I had no time for more confusion.

In all honesty, I found life itself hugely and unamusingly tricky. There were many times when I realised being twenty-nine was no different to being fourteen, only you got to stay up later and wear lipstick. Love and shopping were still just as hard—in between the pain-free naked wrestling, of course.

I hated wondering whether my impulse purchase baby-blue corset in a Melbourne fetish store had freaked him out, or whether it was just my new haircut that meant he preferred unpacking boxes of discount crockery to kissing me. All I knew was that I was happy when I was with him and distracted and slightly lonely when I wasn't. Sam was being a kind brother, but I missed him all the same. I felt myself settle into irritation at the thought that Sam could be just two flights up and he hadn't bothered to visit.

'I want to go out!'

'You're not going anywhere,' said Mince. 'Neil will be here in a sec.' And with that, the door opened.

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Neil was tall and good-looking in a rangy, guitarist kind of way. He bore few signs that he'd struggled with a drug dependency for much of the past ten or so years. From dope to speed and then a year or so of increasingly less casual heroin

use, he'd moved from dropping out of school to dropping out of life.

Some six months ago I'd sought him out to help me with a job. His skills in B&E and cunning were still as high as his skills in driving me crazy when we'd dated for a short time at school. And in the course of the bungled activities that ensued, Neil had somehow come clear of the demons that had plagued him and, after being placed under house arrest in my apartment, had cleaned up his act along with my flat.

I had to admit I missed his company terribly. We got along a lot better now than we ever had when we were dating. I sometimes secretly wondered if I was trying to replay events, only somewhat more successfully, with Sam. It was an unpleasant thought, but I had plenty of those so it didn't bother me. I had a bad tendency to replay my life over and over, mostly at night, staring at the ceiling, listening to the trucks pass outside.

My street was within the mile radius city centre of Adelaide and I found comfort in the industry and purpose clanking around me at all hours. The occasional bird in a tree outside didn't hurt either. It was a good place to live and one of the high spots of my life was the fact that I had enough money to make rent for some time. Unless I bought a decent car, of course. Damn it.

'I still have a key,' Neil said, holding it up.

'Keep it, honey. Just in case I lose mine.'

He dropped it back into his pocket and came over to kiss me lightly on the top of my head. I noticed he made no comment on the flat, or my outfit. Clearly he thought this was just another morning for me.

‘I won’t abuse the key privilege,’ he said, turning to shake Mince’s hand. ‘I can’t exactly picture myself racing over here hoping to catch my brother and my ex-girlfriend in spacesuits again, going at it on the couch I used to sleep on.’

Mince turned to me. ‘Spacesuits?’

‘That was just the one time.’ I shot Neil a look.

‘Sam’s idea?’

‘Look,’ I said. ‘We’ve got bigger problems here—’

‘Cass got her hair caught in the plastic straps,’ said Neil, as though I’d never spoken. ‘Sam had to call me over to help. She tried to bite anyone who touched it.’

‘It was a reflex action. It fucking hurt. I would have figured a way out on my own.’ I sat down with a grunt. ‘We also thought you’d be a decent guy and keep a secret.’ I added, ‘I was kind of freaking out.’

‘Really?’ said Mince, tapping his fingers to his lips again.

‘Sam begged me to bring something to calm her down. She was going mental. Threatening to drop him and/or smash the helmet,’ Neil laughed. ‘Which to my brother would probably have been one and the same thing. He loves this girl, but those helmets were original set pieces. He paid a fortune for them when he was eighteen.’

I rolled my eyes. ‘The stupid thing was really well made.’

‘It was one of the *Battlestar Galactica* helmets.’

Mince nodded and I looked at him curiously.

‘But it all ended well,’ Neil said. ‘She eventually fell asleep after all the yelling and kicking and biting and we cut out all the hair.’

‘I’m right here, you know. And the best bit was, Sam paid for this *great new haircut* when we were in Melbourne. I

think the hair stylist was on drugs.’ I tugged at a bit which refused to curl around my ear. God, I used to have hair that tickled my bottom. I’d been known to use it during the sex. Now I’d be lucky if I *had* any sex.

At first, the hair had made me feel sort of cool, but none of my clothes were all that cool so the feeling had faded pretty quickly. I was a soft fabrics, silky lingerie and skirt kind of girl. I was never cool, no matter how I tried.

My new hair needed jeans, some kind of deconstruction top, flat shoes and a backpack. All my shoes had heels and I preferred bags with handles. Preferably with Louis Vuitton stamped somewhere. Even if it was on real imitation vinyl.

‘Well, don’t worry, hon,’ said Mince. ‘My dad used to say the only difference between a good haircut and a bad one is two weeks.’

‘It’s been three already.’

‘Oh.’ He glanced at Neil for support. ‘Well, I mean, it looks good.’

I threw him a look.

Neil stepped forward and picked up the pizza box. As he tucked it behind the chrome bin in the kitchen, he flicked a glance at my floor. Okay, so he liked to clean. I was tempted to tell him to get over it, but it was so nice seeing him I felt a goofy smile settle on my face instead.

Of course, I could still be drunk.

I frowned.

‘If that expression means you’re still thinking about your hair, forget it. At the moment you’ve got feather and poo stuck to it and it looks like someone’s given you a couple of dozen paper cuts.’

I huffed and sat down.

‘What’s with all the dishes, Cass?’

I shrugged. ‘I’ve been a bit slack.’

‘I mean, why are they all just bowls and spoons?’

‘What are you, my nutritionist?’

‘No, but he is,’ said Neil, pointing to Mince. He opened the cupboard doors one by one. ‘Judging from the lack of soup ingredients or cans, or fresh salad in the fridge, I’m figuring you’ve been eating cereal dinners again?’

I pulled myself off the couch. ‘Look, cereal has wheat and oats and stuff, which is good for fibre, and the milk has calcium, and all the sultanas and stuff are fruit. It’s the perfect five food groups meal. I’ve taken control of my nutritional destiny.’

‘Does your destiny tell you that if you buy five more packs you might win a “cool” pair of hot pink glitter shades?’ Neil said, turning the box over and reading from the side. ‘Or that there’s more sugar and sneaky names for sugar and sugar-coated choc drops in this honey-smearred heart attack in a box than a chocolate bar?’

He came over and handed the box to Mince. I reached to grab it, but Neil held me back. He really had grown some muscles since Mince had been giving him fitness and health tips. Damn it. All I’d grown was a big blind zit behind my ear.

‘Cassidy,’ said Neil quietly, a little frown creasing his handsome features. Oddly, he’d grown into his looks—a thin, scraggly rebel turns into a hot and annoyingly intelligent man who is living far too close to me to let anything escape him.

He held up another box and read from the label. “Soccer ball-shaped choc-coated malt balls to wake you up and keep

you playing hard?” He looked at me. ‘Well, sure. I guess you play hard, but I don’t think that’s quite what they meant. You eat these every day?’

I fixed my gaze on the doorframe. ‘Sometimes.’

‘And Cassidy,’ he said, as though I hadn’t spoken. ‘Does Jock still sit on the edge of the bowl and pinch some?’

I nodded and then noticed his expression and tried to turn it into a shake. ‘N-oo...’ I could feel the flush creep back up again. It was like menopause only without the maturity. ‘I keep his seed bowl topped up and his water’s always clean and, and, I give him those millet seed branches every day. He loves those.’

‘But Jock is still a bird and doesn’t know right from wrong.’ Neil paused. ‘Sometimes I think he learned that from you, but anyway—’ I flicked a melting ice cube his way, but he dodged it. ‘If you let him snatch your sugar nasties, he’s going to get undernourished and overexcited. Sugar probably caused the Jerry Springer episode. And you’re not doing a great job with yourself, either.’ I opened my mouth to protest, but he waved me away. ‘I think the sugar overdose and vitamin deficiency is having an effect on both of you. Your mood has been decidedly substandard.’

I looked at Mince, the alcohol making me almost teary. ‘Gee, Mince,’ I said, concentrating on not making more of a fool of myself than I had already, ‘who’s your nice friend?’

‘Sorry, Cass,’ Neil said. ‘I can see the irony here better than anyone. I haven’t exactly set high standards in terms of self-care, but I didn’t lure any innocent pets into my depraved world.’

‘I think there might be a chance I’m addicted to those choc

balls,' I said, concentrating on the wall behind his head. 'But I'm not exactly letting myself go. I've *lost* weight. I look good.'

'Cass, that is screwed,' said Mince. 'You're grey. You've lost more than some weight, babe. You've lost your mind.'

'Hey—!'

He held up his huge hand. Any undernourished girl would be a fool to challenge that hand. I'd seen it crush more than Pepsi cans. 'Cassidy, you're high on sugar and chemicals, you drink too much and you're too grumpy to be responsible for what's happened here. Let's just try to coax Jock out and make sure neither of you eat this shit more than once a week.' He paused when he saw my face.

'Okay, except maybe when you're hungover or something lady-related.' He turned to Neil. 'She's like Godzilla.' He looked back to the kitchen. 'And then we can all have a drink because it's nearly lunch time and I fucking need one.'

He sat down with a sigh.

'Quit talking like I'm not here,' I said. 'When we get Jock, you have my permission to smother and accidentally kill him.'

'Cassidy!' Neil took a step towards me, taking my hand slowly and making the hairs stand up on the back of my neck.

'What are you—?'

'Now I want you to shut your eyes, just breathe slowly. I—now don't yell at me.'

His voice was slow and calming. Like the dentist just before he sticks me with a big needle right in the jaw line. It was freaking me out. Sweat broke out again. This wasn't normal. I was a cool PI. I stopped the bad guys. Sometimes.

'Cass,' said Neil in the same spooky hypnotist voice. 'I'm going to make you some *herbal tea*.'

My eyes flew open. 'No way!'

'Do you want Mince and I to leave you and Jock to your own mass slaughter?'

I took a deep breath and an image of Jock appeared before me. Sitting on my shoulder, all fluffed up and feeling safe enough to sleep while I read my book and ate two-minute noodles. He was my little pal. Before Neil had turned up, I'd talked to him all the time. Suddenly I had a horrible thought. Maybe Jock had seen the pretty pink lady bird in the lamp because he was lonely.

'Okay, I'll calm down, have some herbal tea and then we'll have an intervention. Only I'm dying for a wee and a shower.'

Neil threw me his keys. 'Go up to my place. Complete your ablutions then come back here. If you're not back in half an hour I'm going to call Zara and Josie.'

He knew how easily persuaded I could be by my two sensible friends, especially when it came to guilt and bad behaviour, so I caught the keys, grabbed some fresh clothes from my rack, shoved my feet into shoes, shrugged on a coat and shut the door behind me.

I could almost picture the boys going about their individual habits. Mince, stretching, sitting at the table, reading my latest tabloid magazine. Neil would undoubtedly be fighting his urge to clean my place. I was hoping he lost.

As I climbed the stairs to Neil's floor I realised I'd forgotten to snag a towel, razor or toothbrush.

But I was getting a rush of blood about seeing Neil's new place and I was the fastest shower girl alive. Scrub, shampoo, wash down, then I could snoop at my leisure.

This morning was turning out all right after all.



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