THE MOTHERCAGE

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BY

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FORWARD

As someone who prefers to do rather than read, The Mothercage is the first book I have read from cover to cover in over 10 years. But I'm very pleased I did so.

ALF activists are almost always portrayed as either terrorists or super-heros, depending on the point of view of the portrayer, but neither comes close to the truth.

Those who carry out direct action in the cause of animal liberation are, indeed, doing something extraordinary, but they are not super-beings, just ordinary people who care sufficiently to risk their own liberty in bringing freedom to other creatures. But ordinary people have their differences, their frailties, their loves and hates and their fears - and the strength of The Mothercage lies in the way in which Maire Ni Bhradaig reveals these qualities in her characters, so that they come to live as real people rather than merely existing as balaclaved automatons.

No good book comes without a good ending, and the same can be said of this one. I'm not ashamed to say I was in tears.

Ronnie Lee

Author's note

I would like to thank all the people (necessarily anonymous) who have shared their experiences with me in the writing of this book. Although this is fiction, and not a depiction of any actual raid or liberation, everything that occurs in this story has been described anecdotally as having happened on an action at some time or another. Likewise the characters are not based on real people. I can honestly say that, although some of the characters share characteristics with people I know, not one character in the book is a straight portrait. It is also worth pointing out that if you think you recognise someone in this book this should not be taken as an indication that the person you are thinking of has ever engaged in this kind of activity.

A few of the terms in this book, while familiar to an Animal Rights activist, may be strange to some of the readers, so I shall provide a short glossary.

Sab: (as in "hunt sab", "sab van," etc). An activist who goes out, usually with a group of other activists, and acts in a co-ordinated manner to sabotage a hunt, and prevent it from killing animals.

Gizmo: A piece of equipment designed to help hunt sabs disrupt the hunt. A walkman is rigged up with a booster to a loud speaker, which a sab will carry in a rucksack. When switched on it will play out a repeating signal of "hounds in cry" – i.e. the distinctive noise of a pack of excited dogs yammering after their quarry. When a pack of hounds hear the noise they believe that another group of dogs has found a fox (or hare, or whatever else the quarry is) and run to the sabs. This obviously means that the pack is no longer chasing foxes, or hares, or

whatever.

Producer: A legal document that the police serve on the driver of a vehicle, requiring the driver to produce legal documents to their local police station within a set period of time – usually days. The police are entitled to serve such a document on any driver of whom they are suspicious who does not have their driving licence or another form of ID to hand when they are stopped.

Finally, think of this: in the time it will take you to read this book hundreds of millions of animals will be eaten, tested on, hunted, beaten to death, trapped in zoos, paraded in circuses, turned into clothes, raced to exhaustion and beyond, starved to death, degraded, mocked and destroyed. Their habitats will be ruined, their health shattered, their friendships and families torn apart.

So please, as you read this book, and after you put it down, remember all the nameless victims, whose only "crime" was to be born other than human. They remain our fellow travellers in the world we all inhabit, and deserve more than just our pity – they demand our respect.

THE MOTHERCAGE

Afternoon

Frank

It shouldn't have been cold, but it was. The sun was out, shining through the autumn leaves, and everything looked warm – russet and amber and gold. Still, there was a bite in the air, not quite frost. Summer lingered, but winter couldn't be far behind.

Frank sat on a park bench, and watched Mrs Chips go. She was an old dog now, but still danced around with glee when she was let off the lead. Head down, tail high, she rummaged through the leaves. Frank smiled, and gulped. He had a pain in his throat, the start of a headache bulging behind his temples. Maybe he should have stood up for himself, shouted back, he thought. Maybe he shouldn't always swallow his words when she abused him. One day he would just stand up and tell her to...

He laughed. He was kidding himself. There was no way he could ever stand up to her. He wasn't a grown man. He was Norman Bates. A freak. *All I wanted was a dog sitter. Just for one night, someone to keep an eye on Mrs Chips for me, so she wouldn't be lonely.* He shook his head. And Mother had even agreed. *"Oh yes, I'd love to have Chips."* She had smiled, teased, wished him happy. Then she had come out with the killer question: *"Do I know the girl?"*

He looked around the park. No-one there. He stared at his boots, ashamed. *You don't have to do this,* he thought, imagining Tim's disappointment if he realised. Tonight of all nights. No, he had to keep himself alert. *Yes, but alert hurts too much. Wouldn't numb be better?* No-one was looking. No-one cared. He closed his eyes. *I can cope better numb.*

He twirled the lid off his hip flask, and took a nip. Then another. Better. Worse. As the heat spread through him he felt like garbage. Defeated. He put the lid back on the flask, turned it over and over in his hands. The monogram, 'FW', caught and glinted in the sun. For some reason his twined initials irritated him. *Everything she touches has to be labelled somehow. She'd put a monogram on me if she could get away with it. 'Queer.'*

"Oh shut up," he said, aloud, and put the flask back in his coat pocket. His voice sounded sharp in his ears. *All this brooding, what good is it doing? Snap out of it.* He closed his eyes. Maybe he shouldn't go tonight. Could he do it? He didn't know. But then, how could he not? He shook his head against his internal dialogue, as

though he could rattle it out of his skull. He couldn't not go. It was the most important thing he had ever been asked to do.

When he was a kid he had daydreamed about a night like this. Lying awake in the dormitory, listening to the other boys breathe. He remembered the day the head of his house took him on a shoot. He had been a good shot in the rifle range, had really enjoyed it, since it got him out of rugby. He was rewarded with a trip to a grouse moor.

The poor bewildered birds blundered about, and the older boys just blasted away. Feathers and bodies everywhere. He hadn't been able to stand up then. He had thrown down his rifle and cried, been beaten for it, mocked for years afterwards, but he hadn't stopped the shoot. He hadn't stepped in front of the guns. He hadn't hit the master.

How could he do that again? How could he not stand up now, not be there, not help? How could he turn his back now?

Mrs Chips ran to him, tail wagging, and placed her paws on his knees, gazing up at him, adoringly, expectantly. Her tongue lolled out over the nubs of her ruined teeth, and he found himself smiling at her. She had survived. Worse than anything he had to complain about. He stroked her head, and ran her tattooed ear through his fingers. *Pull yourself together man,* he told himself again. *This is real. Lives are at stake here.* Mrs Chips had once been seen as nothing more than a breeding machine, destined for a laboratory, a piece of meat. Then, against all odds, the place was closed down, and she got to live. She got to survive, surmounting her fear – not of all men, but at least of one.

"Alright darling, I'm coming." He stood up, ball in hand to throw for her. *I'll be alright,* he told himself as his body relaxed with the alcohol and he let the ball fly. *I'll be fine. I can do this, I really can.*

Ann

"Mum, I don't need a baby sitter." Katriona was pouting, with her hands bunched in fists. Ann laughed. Since becoming a teenager her daughter's behaviour had reverted in many ways to that of her toddler years. It didn't do much to support her contention that she was really grown up, and didn't need her Gran to come around and keep an eye on her.

"Don't laugh at me."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to."

"Just, I'm fourteen. I can look after myself."

"Why don't you look after Gran then?"

"Oh, I'm not going to fall for that one. You really do think I am a kid, don't you?"

"Look, until you are sixteen you put up with the occasional babysitter, that's all."

"I'm old enough to *be* a babysitter." Katriona threw her arms out in a histrionic gesture, and flung herself down on a dining room chair, scraping it backwards over the tiles with a noise that set Ann's teeth on edge.

"You honestly think I would let you baby-sit?"

"Don't you trust me?"

"I don't trust Ted, that's all."

"Oh, so that's what this is about..."

"Yup."

Katriona leaned forward over the dining room table and wagged her finger at her mother in a schoolmarm fashion. "You get to go out with some bloke I have never met, probably stay out all night and have a good shag into the bargain, and I'm not allowed to spend the night *innocently* with my boyfriend, that I've been going out with for years..."

"Look, this isn't about me..."

"Yes it is." Katriona was looking pleased with herself. She felt she was on to something. "Why can't I see this fellah?"

"I don't think it's good to introduce you to people I'm not sure of myself, that's all. Let's face it, any bloke you see me with, you'll be asking yourself 'is he the one?' I don't want you to get attached to someone who might disappear, okay?"

Katriona looked away from her mother for a moment, with her jaw sticking out. Then she shrugged. "I suppose it makes sense."

"Course it does. That's why I'm the mum."

"Just one thing."

"What?"

"Be careful."

Ann smiled again. Katriona had no idea how careful she planned to be tonight.

"Yeah. Course I will."

"I mean, if you have to, use a condom."

Ann choked. "Jesus, where did that come from?"

"It's just good advice."

"I'm not planning on needing one."

"Good." Katriona stood up on tiptoes and kissed her mum. "I don't mind Gran babysitting then. So long as Ted can come for tea."

"Well, you know Gran will like him."

"She'll probably try and run away with him you know."

Ann laughed aloud now, and her daughter joined in, both of them relieved that the ritual battle had ended without bitterness ensuing. Ann knew how pointless the whole argument had been, since her absence tonight was prompted by a completely different kind of date than the one Katriona had in mind. Still, she had needed to tell her daughter something, and she supposed she could understand Katriona's feelings. How would she have felt at that age if her mother, up and out of the blue, had said she was going on a date with a mystery man? She wondered how Katriona would react if she ever realised what her Mum had really been up to – whether she would be proud of her, or disappointed that she hadn't been entrusted with the secret.

Never mind. Hopefully the matter would never arise. Katriona was never to know the significance of tonight's events. The only way that Ann could imagine the girl ever finding out would be if everything went wrong and they were caught in the act.

And that's not going to happen, she thought, her fingers brushing the wooden table automatically.

"Do you want a cup of tea love?" She lightly switched tack, and Katriona graciously accepted the change of subject.

"Yeah, I'll stick the kettle on."

Katriona smiled and kissed her Mum on the forehead as she went into the kitchen. Ann took a deep breath, and closed her eyes. That was the easy bit over. Now she had the rest of the night to worry about.

Manjit

Dapinder was annoyed. He could tell from the set of her shoulders as she chopped up onions and diced carrots and potatoes. He wished he could tell her, but he didn't really know how she would react. He thought she would be okay, but how could he tell? He had only known her a year.

He sidled up behind her and put his arms around her waist. She didn't respond. He nuzzled his face into the nape of her neck, and breathed in. She smelt good... he wished he didn't have to go

out quite so soon. As he started to snuggle into her warmth she flicked her hair impatiently and turned away from him, moving out of range of his kiss. His heart sank.

"Look," he wheedled, "I'm only going overnight."

"But why do you have to go?"

"It's just with the lads..."

"But it is not even something special, like somebody's birthday. "

"Course it's special. It's the quarter final."

"Quarter final," she snorted. "Why does that mean you have to stay out all of the night?"

"They want to make a big party of it, that's all."

"You know what that kind of party is going to be like." She spoke precisely, carefully finding her words in a foreign language. "Firstly, they will all be drinking. And I know that you are going with vegetarian friends, but second, people are going to arrive at this party eating burgers. So you will be spending all of the night watching television in a pub with meat-eating drunk football fans."

Manjit shrugged helplessly. Dapinder was astute. She had barely been in this country a year, and already she had people sussed. If he had actually been going to watch the football that would have been a fair description of what he could expect.

"Anyway," she continued. "I just don't understand why you want to watch football at all."

"That's because you grew up with cricket," he pointed out. "It doesn't mean I can't like football."

"I like cricket," she said, pausing and raising her finger, "because the men look elegant – not like a lout."

"Do I look like a lout when I play football?" he asked, huffily.

She rolled the vegetables in the gram flour batter, then dropped them in dollops into the vegetable oil. As the sizzle started up she turned around and smiled up at him.

"You always look elegant to me," she conceded, standing on tiptoe to put her arms around him. "Even in your muddy shorts." She kissed him on the chin, then withdrew. "I don't want to get batter in your hair," she said, and turned away again. "You will want to look smart for your 'boys'."

She sighed, sounding more saddened now than angry, and started plucking bhajis out of the fat.

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Tim

Frank hadn't answered his phone. Not his mobile, not his landline. *Maybe he is still out walking Mrs Chips.* Tim sighed. The way that things had been going lately he worried more and more about trivia. *Just because Frank isn't answering his mobile doesn't mean he's gone on a bender. It's not like we're Siamese twins after all.* Just that, in Tim's opinion, since his mother had moved back into his life three months ago Frank was coping less and less.

He remembered the day he first met Mrs Whitely. He and Frank were watching 'Arsenic and Old Lace,' with Frank speaking along with the actors. He didn't know what was funnier – the television, or Frank's alarmingly accurate rendition of the actors' lines. He was laughing, and had his head buried on Frank's shoulder when Mrs Whitely let herself in.

The first he knew of her presence was a scream. He and Frank jumped to their feet, and Mrs Chips ran out of the room. Frank was stammering, and backing away. A hard faced middle-aged woman with steel hair and a powder blue suit was screaming at them. He remembered her face, inches from his own. "Pervert," she had screamed, over and over again, jabbing her finger in his chest.

"Who the hell are you?" he shouted back, though he had an idea. This had to be her, the mother from hell.

After the first explosion of hostilities things settled into a frosty peace. Frank insisted that she was coming round to the situation, that it had just been the shock talking. Tim knew better, but also knew how hard it was to turn your back on family. Frank didn't seem able to do that. Since his father died when he was a little boy he had felt like it was his responsibility to look after his mother, no matter what she put him through. For just over a year relatives in Switzerland had been taking care of her, and Frank had seemed to blossom. That was when they got together. At the time he seemed the perfect man. Then, all of a sudden, the mother was back, with all her problems, all her neediness, and everything changed. Whether Mrs Whitely's sister had finally tired of her, or she had decided herself to be more of a mother was unclear. The result was the same. She moved back in to the family abode. Within a matter of days Frank had moved out to a flat of his own, in what appeared to be a doomed bid for independence, and slowly crumpled like wet paper.

Perhaps, Tim reflected, it was unfair to expect Frank to just be able to cut his mother lose. He had never had to make that choice himself. His own Mum was the polar opposite of Mrs Whitely. Tim's father forced an ultimatum when his son came out of the closet, and was shocked when his wife chose divorce. "I don't know what he's so ashamed of," she said at the time. "It's not like you've done anything wrong." So maybe, Tim reasoned, he shouldn't be so harsh in his judgement. At least he still had family who loved him. Frank's family was worse than none at all.

Better off without them, Tim thought to himself, *especially her.* Frank was sinking into a dark place that he couldn't, that he wouldn't follow him into. *If he loved me he would leave her,* he thought, then smiled. *If I loved him, I would make him.* Things weren't working anymore. He had to admit that to himself. They were breaking up without admitting it to each other. Well, not breaking up so much as breaking down. Frank had started drinking. Not everyday, but often enough that Tim was scared for him. *If I hold on, if I give him time, maybe he'll come back to himself, back to me.* Even as he thought it he didn't believe it. The comforting words felt like a lie.

So when Frank didn't answer the phone Tim worried. And he had enough to worry about tonight as it was.

Bagpuss came up and curled around his feet, begging for his dinner. Tim dipped at the knees, then rose again, lifting him up to his shoulder. As Bagpuss rode high against his chin, nudging his head and purring persistently, Tim prepared dinner for the cats, and watched the clock, and thought about Frank, and worried.

Sam

Bugger, he thought, as he hung up the phone. Tonight was the most awkward time of all for Fiona to pop round for a chat. He looked across at the opposite wall, and sighed. Just what he didn't need in fact. Although he knew she could be trusted, it was anything but ideal for his daughter to turn up now. He had deliberately kept her out of this kind of thing all throughout her childhood. He had just let her grow up, as best she could, and never let on that he was involved in anything illegal at all. He owed her some kind of normality after the way her mother died.

For a couple of years after his wife's death he had steered clear of this sort of action, thinking that if anything happened to him

then it wouldn't be fair on the children. But as time passed and the kids grew older he found himself mulling over the nagging sense that he owed the animals something too. By choosing not to fight for them he was turning his back on them, and who was he to do that? Everyone had some reason why they wouldn't want to go to prison after all. Yet what was prison, in the greater scheme of things?

Every time he took the kids shopping for clothes in the town centre they would pass rows and rows of corpses in the butchers' windows, and he would wonder whether someone could have saved them. Wondered if that someone could have been him. As he held his daughter's hand or watched his son run on ahead and check out the CD's and video games, he would turn over in his mind the extent of his betrayal. He had been a warrior for the animals. Now he was just a has-been, someone who had fallen along the way. He would shake his head, and hold in his anxiety, but still he felt that he should do more. He owed the animals for all the awful things that humans did to them in his name, in his children's name. What made his physical comfort more important than an animal's life?

So two years after Tracey's death he had returned to the battlefield, and done what needed to be done. It had been good to be back, to know that there were still people out there who cared, and good to know that because of his actions some animals' lives could be lived out in peace and dignity. And he realised that, even though it would have been hard on the kids if he had been captured, still, it wouldn't have been the end of the world. The worst for him would be the loss of his freedom – and that only for a few years. Teenagers could deal with that, couldn't they? They could deal with their father being locked up for a few years. It wasn't like the animals' fate at all. The animals died when no-one stepped in. Teenagers, at least in this country, could stay with relatives and grow up, even if their father did go to prison. They would live. The animals wouldn't. Sam shook his head. The animals died in their billions. His problems meant nothing at all.

That was why he still did this kind of thing, why he would always do it – for as long as he was physically capable of it. Tonight a woman was coming out who was sixty-eight for god's sake. If she could do it he had no excuse to stop. Just because Fiona was coming...

Worst time though. Definitely the worst time. She won't be prepared at all. He sat and scratched his chin, pondering whether he

should just go round and tell her why she couldn't come. It wasn't the kind of thing he could go into over the phone after all. He could trust her not to tattle if he told her about it, but could he trust her to hold it together under stress if she ended up coming out, unrehearsed? She wouldn't know what to expect, what to do. She might flunk it. Might fall to pieces.

"Bollocks," he said it aloud this time, and shook his head. He didn't have time to explain things to her. Not at this short notice. The thing had been in the planning stages for half a year now, but they had only decided on the date when the fixtures for the semi-final had been announced. The two teams playing were famously antagonistic, and there was bound to be a heavy police presence in the town centre when the match finished – whatever the score was. If the police were busy with the football crowd it gave them more security doing what they had to do.

Okay, so they had known the date from four weeks ago, but they had only started pulling people together as a team a few days ago. Reduce the chance of somebody bragging. And now there was no more time to worry – not even about Fiona's unexpected visit. His little girl was coming around later, thinking no doubt that his "very busy night" was just more of his usual routine – expecting to be in for a night of trapping feral cats no doubt. Well, she would just have to think on her feet. Sink or swim. She wasn't stupid. He had taught her how to think on her feet, hadn't he?

"She'll be fine," he muttered to himself, and crouched down over the toolbox, checking his supplies for the last time before going.

Everything has to be right, he reiterated, chewing his inner lip. *We can't afford to make any mistakes.* So he checked, and rechecked, before getting to his feet and going downstairs. *Load the van, and hope nobody stops us,* he thought, and rolled his head on his shoulders in an effort to relieve tension from his neck. There was nothing to worry about after all.

For the last six months they had been watching and evidence gathering. By now they knew Mr Fitzwilliam's routine better than the farmer did himself. The bed and breakfast side of his business had provided the perfect cover for a succession of guests to get close to him, to watch his every move. At this very moment farmer Fitzwilliam nestled a viper in his bosom, a respectable couple, unknown to the authorities, who, two nights ago, had taken the opportunity to implant a virus into his computer system. Tonight, while the group

moved in on its target, farmer Fitzwilliam would be distracted by the conversation of a friendly Scottish school teacher and his charming wife. A terrible job for a couple of vegans, to get close to somebody they so despised, but they had done it, with aplomb. Sam grinned. Come morning, Fitzwilliam wouldn't know what had hit him. The McClorey's were clever. They wouldn't leave a clue. No-one would be able to pin anything on them, because the disk with the virus on it was long gone.

As for the rest of the night, everything was planned, and although things would hiccup – there were always little cock ups – at least they knew what they were doing. They had been doing it long enough after all. He had never been caught, in nearly twenty years.

We will be fine, he reassured himself. *We always are.*

Fiona

She hung up the phone, puzzled. Dad seemed to be in a really weird mood. Like he didn't want to talk to her or something. He didn't out and out say that he didn't want to see her tonight, but he hadn't come far short of it. *'I'm really busy'* he had said. That wasn't like him at all. Normally if he was working nights he was glad of the company. Lonely business sometimes, watching badgers, or catching feral cats. Specially when some of the cats he had caught and taken to be neutered seemed to have developed a personal vendetta against him.

There was a big ginger Tom who stalked the car park at Tesco's who had been mightily offended when he woke up unmanned. Fiona smiled. She remembered the day they released him. That cat knew who was responsible. He stood at the door of the cage, bushed his fur out until he looked like a porcupine, then turned, rattling like a snake and swiped out at Dad before striding off to reclaim his territory and dignity as best he could. No doubt about it, Dad had been glad to have Fiona there that night. The wound would have gone nasty if it hadn't been seen to immediately.

Maybe Dad had guessed what it was she wanted to tell him, and that was why he was putting her off. If he knew, or thought he knew what her news might then perhaps he was trying to get his head around it. After all, it wasn't like he was a stupid man, even though he insisted he was thick as two short planks. Could be that he wanted to sort out what he thought about this whole thing before

he talked to her about it.

Still, he hadn't out and out forbidden her to come over. And she could think of two benefits to her going around now. One, they always did enjoy rambling and companionable chats on these long nights, and two, if the news came as a shock, he couldn't yell his head off at her. She grinned. Sooner she told him, the sooner the shouting would be over, and the sooner everything would settle back down. Not to normal – never back to what normal had been. But at least to a new normal.

Although she knew all the reasons against taking the path she was now committed to, she was glad that it had happened. Lucky to have been unlucky really. Secretly she had always yearned for this. And she was confident that, once past his shock Dad would come around. It wasn't like it was the end of the world after all.

Rose

She stretched, easing her painful back from the chore of digging. A beautiful day, she thought, should be spent in the garden. She looked at the spillage of blossoms, and grasses, and fragile yellowing leaves, and smiled. She loved this garden, and all the work that had gone into it. Of course, Harold had designed the garden around the orchard, built the rockery and arranged the water that trickled down to the pool. But she liked to think that her digging, raking and weeding, all the minute little jobs no-one ever noticed, had also done their bit.

The geese were striding away to their favourite haunt, by the trees on the other side of the pool. She wondered again if the new Gander (Alfred might be a good name) needed to see a vet with that limp, or if he was just getting on a bit. She sighed, and shook the earth off her hands. She would think about that in the morning, if she wasn't sitting in a police cell. In the meantime, she had to go inside. Had some preparations to make.

Harold was sitting up in a straight-backed chair. Her heart went out to him, as she watched him carefully combing Shaz, the oldest cat. Shaz wouldn't allow anyone else to comb her, so Harold still performed this duty for her. Although everyday she got her fur tangled up again attempting to climb trees, or rolling in long grass, Harold ensured that she ended each day as smooth and shiny as a nursing queen's favourite kitten. His hands were all knuckle these days, and Rose knew that they ached. Still, carefully he loosened

the knots out of Shaz's long and matted fur, and gently he talked to her while she purred her appreciation.

He is a good man, thought Rose, and tutted herself impatiently as her eyes grew damp. After all these years she still loved him. How lucky she was to be able to say that, of someone she had met when she was seventeen. *An old soldier,* she thought, smiling. How many of the young folk in Animal Rights would disapprove of that? Funny to think they would have agreed with her father on that, and yet disagreed on anything else. A young one said to her a wheen of years ago, *'You can never trust a soldier. I don't know how you live with him.'* She had smiled, and said nothing. No point telling the girl that she sounded just like a long dead Irish pig farmer. The arrogance of young folk. *'You can never...' 'I don't know how...'* Everyone is black and white, good and bad to the young. To old folks too, she supposed. Maybe just people in general, draw up their ranks, line up their soldiers. So intolerant. So unforgiving.

Her old soldier was a pacifist these days, had been since he helped to evacuate a bombed out hospital. After that he refused to bear arms, and the army got rid of him. Thought he was broken. He wasn't broken. Never had been. Every morning he made his way down the drive early to put food out for the birds, and every night he put down food for the vixen that visited the garden.

As he finished 'the combing of the cat' (this ritual was becoming so significant it had it's own title) she walked up to him, and kissed him on the forehead.

"How are you, my love?"

He smiled up at her. "Fine. Our Shazz cat takes all my aches away." Shazz sprang from his lap, and trotted along to hide in the laundry basket. Rose stroked Harold's forehead. "Will you need anything before I go?"

"You know me. I'm fine. There's food in the fridge I can heat up, and all the animals are fed. And besides," he looked at her archly. "I am not so very decrepit as all that you know."

She twitched a smile. "Of course you aren't."

Harold patted her on the bottom, and laughed as she feigned surprise. Then he grunted, and pulled himself up to his feet, steadying himself on the side of the chair. After a moment he got his walking stick, and started to move to the kitchen. Rose followed, not offering her arm, since she knew it would upset him. She was there

if he needed her, but she knew he needed space too. In the kitchen he leaned on the counter, and put the kettle on, before sitting down in the wheelchair, breathing slightly faster. He smiled. "The doctor will be pleased. I am walking a lot more these days."

"You are that my love. But promise me not to go walking all over the house when I am gone."

"Oh no. Long day – I think I deserve my rest." The kettle boiled, and he rolled the chair over and made a pot of tea. "Do me a favour love," he said, as he gathered the tea-things onto the tray.

"What is that?"

There was silence for a moment as he put the tray on the table, and sat with his face turned away. He put out biscuits, and poured tea into her favourite cup. Added one sugar and a dash of soya milk. Fiddled with the biscuits, arranging and rearranging them on the plate.

She waited for him to speak. She knew how hard it was for him sometimes, even after all this time, to tell her what he was feeling. So she didn't push. He put his hand up over his face, then gasped out,

"Come back home safe to me."

She got to her feet and walked around the table, knelt in front of him, and put her arms around him.

"Don't you worry about me, darling. You know nothing ever happens to me. I'm only the lookout. No-one would hurt me."

"Just – I know that. I know that you know what you are doing, that they know what they are doing – But I just feel so – " he thumped his leg, and winced. "I wish I wasn't in this. I wish I could still go with you."

"You know you're my strength, don't you?

"Oh, woman, you're daft." he laughed, and knuckled the tears out of his eyes. "Drink your tea now. You'll have us all crying in a minute."

THE MOTHERCAGE

7.50 pm

Simon

Simon's hands were sweating. It was the only thing that betrayed his nerves, even to himself. The rapid heart beat, the dry mouth, these he could put down to adrenaline rather than fear. He knew what he was going to do, and why he was doing it. This action had been a long time in the planning, as these things go – six months – and now that the time was upon them he couldn't help but feel – not scared. Never scared. But nervous. A little bit nervous.

Mind you, that was healthy. You couldn't go into these things without a decent shot of adrenaline to keep you focussed on what was important. If he wasn't nervous he wouldn't have the edge. Wouldn't be quick enough, sharp enough, to do what was necessary. Nerves, he knew from experience, turned quickly into decisive action. And that was what was needed.

Still, he wished it hadn't taken so long to get things sorted. Six months was more than long enough for something to have leaked out. So Simon's mouth was dry, and his hands clammy. But he wasn't afraid.

He squared his shoulders, wiped his palms on his jeans, flexed his fingers, and started the car. Time to go.

Tim

"No."

"No what?" Frank was grinning at him, with that beatific air that had at first been so attractive. Right at the moment it was pissing Tim off.

"No, you can't have a bloody drink." Tim reached over and removed the bottle from Frank's hand, firmly screwing the lid down, and replacing it to a high shelf. Frank pouted, and ran his fingers through his tousled blond hair.

"Oh, it won't do any harm," he wheedled. "It might even help."

Tim looked at him, with something approaching despair. He knew what that baby blue-eyed look could mean. Right at the moment Frank was trying to make a game of it, batting his lashes in a "shy Di" manner. It used to make him laugh. He wasn't laughing now. Tim was sick of playing Martin Bashir to Frank's princess. And if Frank didn't get what he wanted, little boy blue could turn very nasty.

"How the hell could it possibly help?" Tim asked. "We don't know exactly what we are doing tonight, but we do know we have to be on the ball, and how is being pissed going to help us rescue any animals?"

"I'm not going to get pissed," Frank was getting surly. Perhaps it was his public school accent, but his pettish voice was almost a cliché. 'Brideshead Revisited' or some such nonsense. Tim used to think it was a put on job, until he met Frank's mother. Another crystal cut character. "I just want a drink, that's all," Frank entreated, trying to be coy. "Take the edge off."

"That's what I'm worried about."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I'd sooner you stayed at home than came on a liberation pissed."

"I am not going to get pissed." The voice had lost its humour now. Tim felt he was on thin ice. He carried on regardless.

"No you bleeding aren't getting pissed. What do you need a drink for anyway?"

"I don't need one." Frank's eyes had narrowed now, looked like blue chips of glass. Tim knew from experience that if he pushed any more there was going to be either a big fight or a massive sulk.

"I know," he said in a conciliatory voice, and cursed himself for the lie. These days Frank needed a drink more and more often. However, the dishonesty had the desired effect. With relief Tim watched Frank relax a little. "We'll have plenty of time to celebrate later," he continued. "But now, we need to go. You got everything sorted at your place?"

Frank looked out the window. "Yeah."

"What do you mean 'yeah?' You did get someone to look in at Mrs Chips didn't you?"

Confusingly Frank shook his head, while flapping his hands in a 'yes' manner. Tim paused, concerned.

"Have you been drinking?"

"No I bloody haven't. You just put the bottle away."

"Only, you smell of peppermint."

"So? I'm giving up smoking. Would you sooner I smoked?"

For a moment Tim teetered on the edge of telling him not to come. Then he imagined the screaming match. If Frank wasn't going, he couldn't go either. He would have to stay at home and baby sit him. Frank pissed and alone might put everything in more

jeopardy than if he came along for the ride. And as Tim wasn't sure that Frank had been drinking, it seemed a bit unfair on the others not to go himself. He imagined that being two men down wouldn't exactly help the raid. *If everyone cries off for personal reasons there'll be nobody to do the job. Besides. Frank would never forgive me.*

"No," Tim looked away. He made a choice to let it go for now. "I'm glad you aren't smoking."

"Yeah." Frank was looking at his shoes, and Tim stared at him for a moment, trying to judge his mood. There was something Frank wasn't telling him.

"Look, do you not want to go? I won't hold it against you if you decide to stay..."

"Of course I want to go. I'm just..." Frank looked up at him, and for a moment Tim thought he was going to tell him the truth. The moment passed.

"Just I worry about Mrs Chips, that's all."

"But you got a dog sitter, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Mrs... Doughty. You know, the woman who lives in the flat underneath."

"That's alright then. Chips likes her."

"Yeah." Frank was sinking into gloom, so Tim tried to cheer him up.

"Anyway. I checked what was on at the pictures, so if anyone asks we were watching reruns of Bogart films, okay? There's always people in there, and no one ever bothers to check who they are. No security cameras either. I paid in cash if they ask, and no, we don't know where the receipt is."

"Yeah right." Frank smiled again. "And if we are finished in time maybe we could even watch a movie. 'Casablanca.'"

"'African Queen,'" Tim suggested with a smile. "We're less likely to cry at the end." He put his arm around Frank as they left the house and walked together to the car. *It's not his fault*, he thought, remembering the Frank of six months ago. Funny and bright and busy. *It's that mother of his. Screwed him right up. He just needs time to get over it. If I look after him we can still be all right.*

Frank got in the passenger side, lay back in his seat, and closed his eyes. Tim looked over at him anxiously.

"You alright love?" he asked.

"Yeah," Frank flapped his hand vaguely, and sounded bored. "Drive on Jeeves."

Christ, I married a character out of 'Withnail and I,' Tim thought, and smiled, a little sadly, as he started the car. His heart was a tight knot. He might not know the ins and outs of it, but he had a fair idea what tonight would involve. He cursed the bad luck that had Frank going through one of his rough patches when he needed to be at his best.

He's not been drinking much though, thought Tim as he drove into the gathering gloom. *I could smell it if he had, even through the peppermint. At least it's good he's not drunk.*

Karen

Karen went through one last mental checklist. Yes, she had everything she needed. Drill, battery pack, foam, torch, and of course the necessary clothing. She even had spares, since she knew from past experience that at least one of the other raiders would come without gloves or head covering. She glanced in the boot, and smiled briefly, before she covered it all over. She was ready.

From having been terribly nervous in the run up to this night, she now found herself feeling supremely calm. Everything was now in order, and would be fine. Whether things would go like clockwork or not was beside the point. However it went, the night would pass. At the end of it things couldn't be any worse for the prisoners they were going to free – and they would almost certainly be better.

As she drove to the meeting point she put the window down, and felt the wind on her face. She tried to imagine how it must be to have never felt the weather. Wind, rain, sun. The creatures they were going to save had never felt wind or rain on their bodies. After tonight they would. Yes, she knew that they would never be completely free. They would have to live with humans for the rest of their lives. But at least these would be humans who treated them with decency and respect, and allowed them to live according to their natures.

Although she was calm Karen's eyes were wet. Maybe it was the wind coming through the open window, or maybe it was something else. She didn't know. She never really had time to observe her feelings on these things. She noted the phenomena, and set it aside for later. Ahead of her she saw the white van Simon had hired. Work to do. Time to think about things later.

THE MOTHERCAGE

Rick

"I don't fucking believe it," groaned Rick as the police car increased speed and switched on the blue light. "They've put their fucking 'woo woo' light on. Silly bastards."

The transit van pulled over, and the patrol car pulled in beside them. A constable got out of the panda car, and casually strolled around the vehicle. He paused behind it, taking notes. Rick sighed. *Unbelievable,* he thought, and shook his head. *Just unbelievable.* It was that knob Stapleton, trying to justify his job again. Apologetically Rick looked around at the seven other occupants of the van, assessing their mood. Sally, sat next to him, he wasn't worried about. The hunt sabs would know to keep their mouths shut. Of the two first timers that the sabs had brought with them it seemed that the young lad would probably be okay. But the lad's girlfriend... Suddenly he wasn't so sure of her. She was gnawing her lower lip. "Don't say anything," he addressed the van in general, so as not to single her out. "It is probably nothing. Just routine."

She looks nervous, he thought. *Hope she doesn't blab.*

The policeman rapped at the window.

"Hello there Mr Sharpe."

"Hello there Mr Stapleton." Rick sounded breezy on the outside, but his heart dropped into his boots. *That's us out of the liberation,* he thought. *And I won't have time to tell the rest before the mobiles go off.* As one of the organisers of the event he was aware of how much trouble a glitch like this could cause at this stage in proceedings. The most frustrating thing was that the van he was driving should have been safe. He had specifically driven an unknown vehicle so that the police wouldn't follow them. Was he under official observation then, or had Stapleton taken it on himself to become Rick's personal stalker? *That Stapleton can go hang himself,* he thought, bitterly. He and the copper went way back. This was just standard Saturday night harassment, that they could have done without, tonight of all nights.

"Shouldn't you be keeping the peace or something?" Rick was light, and sarcastic, as usual. No point doing things differently. It would make Staples suspicious if he behaved differently from usual.

"I couldn't help noticing that your licence plate was slightly obscured."

"It can't be that obscured. It's a new van, and I just washed it before we set out." Rick leaned his head on his arm, and smiled out

of the driver's window, waiting for the comeback.

Stapleton stroked his moustache with his fingers, a now familiar gesture that many of the local group had started using to indicate the presence of a policeman. Rick tried not to laugh. "How very cleanly of you," Stapleton observed. "Well, the front one is fine. It's the back one that is wrong."

"It was fine when I set out."

"Come and have a look."

"That's alright. I am sure you had time to obscure it for me when you were scuffling around back there."

The policeman raised his eyebrow. "Are you accusing me of wrong-doing Mr Sharpe?"

"I wouldn't dream of it Mr Stapleton. Just give me the producer, and let me get on with it."

"And what is it that you want to 'get on with?' You're not off to harass a respectable businessman are you?"

Not now we bleeding aren't, he thought, but didn't say.

"We're off to the pub," he replied. "And before you ask, I am the designated driver, and I won't be drinking."

"Fine. Now, if you could just show me some ID... "

"I don't have any. Give me the producer."

The policeman smiled, and started filling out his form. Inside Rick was seething. *Smug bastard*, he thought. *We could have done without this.*

After Rick had wiped the mud off the back licence plate (a suspiciously boot shaped mark) he turned the van around and set off to the nearest pub. The other sabs were laughing in the back of the vehicle, one of them waving at Stapleton as they went. *This isn't funny,* thought Rick annoyed by their levity. *There won't be enough people now to finish the job.* He imagined the distress that would be caused to the other organisers when they realised that their original plan to liberate an entire shed of animals was now impossible. He just couldn't see how it could be done now. Alright, he could seem cheerful enough – the situation called for a positive spin – but his heart was in his boots all the same. The plan had – not exactly failed, but it wasn't going to come off the way it should do.

"What are we going to do now?" the nervous young woman asked.

"We are going to have curry and beer, though I will have to stick to cola," he said. "We are going to go for a walk down the high

street so we can have our ugly mugs on security cameras, and then we are going home to get mightily pissed."

"You mean we aren't going on the raid?" The lad who was sitting next to the new girl sounded disappointed. He looked at his girlfriend, and squeezed her hand.

"We can't now, can we?" Rick shook his head in frustration. "What do we do if that stupid git follows us straight there? He's obviously been following me – there is no way he should have known about this van. We're out of it now."

"Shit." The lad sounded bitter. Rick glanced at him in the mirror, and sympathised.

"Look, it could have been worse," he pointed out.

"How?"

"PC Stapleton could have searched the car and knicked us all for going equipped." There was a burst of laughter. Rick shrugged and said, "Just think how pissed off he'll be if he ever realises what he missed? You think he'd have complained the false number plates were obscured?"

The nervous woman tittered behind her hand. Then, as they turned into the car park, she asked, "what did he mean about harassing businessmen? Do you think he knew?"

"Nah," Sally smiled back at her. "He just thought we were going on a home demo to some company director or something. You know – someone whose business pays for vivisection. If he'd known what we were really up to he wouldn't have stopped us. He'd want a reason to nick us."

As they parked up Rick leaned over. "It's Emma, isn't it?" She nodded, and he continued. "Don't worry about a thing, okay? Even though we won't get there tonight, at least we've distracted a policeman, who – sad bastard – is probably still following us. Just think how much worse it would have been if Stapleton had pulled us over with a van full of animals? So really, it's a good thing we got stopped, okay?"

Emma gulped at the thought of what might have been, and nodded. Rick smiled. "And this isn't the only way to help animals you know. You just carry on doing what you do best, okay?"

"What's that?" Emma sounded dejected.

"Well, I understand you do school talks, and you are really good at them."

"I like doing them," she said shyly.

"Good. Cause you know what? I'd piss myself. You don't have to prove anything you know."

"I know. But I really wanted to help..."

"You do help. Every time you do a stall, or talk to a kid. And maybe next time things will work out better. But for now, ladies and gentlemen, we've been taken off the board. So get in there with you," he pointed to the pub, "and drink up everyone."

As pep talks went it nearly convinced him.

As they crossed the car park Sally patted Rick's shoulder. He nodded at her, acknowledging the gesture, then thinking no-one was looking, pecked her on the cheek. He'd ask her to try and get word to the others, but for the moment he would have to lie low. Too much depended on not getting caught for them to go off half-cocked now.

"I'll pay for the first round," said Rick. "What we having?"

Ann

Most people seemed nervous as they hovered, shuffling by the trees. They had gathered in a car park by the playing fields. Ann was perched on the fence, trying to appear calm. Simon started by counting heads, then stood in the centre of the assembled semi-circle. After checking that everyone had switched their mobile phones off and taken the batteries out at the back, he began.

"We are a few men down," he started. Ann raised an eyebrow, thinking, "men?" then laughed internally when a women in her thirties, with a labret piercing and shaven hair, repeated the thought out loud. Simon rolled his eyes, and nodded, acknowledging the interruption. "Okay, then. We are a few *people* down," he corrected himself. "Two vehicles haven't turned up, and unfortunately this means that nine people are no shows. We can't afford to wait any longer. The other people may turn up, they may not. The police may be on their tails. They may have got lost, or the engines may have conked out. We don't know. And it is going to look suspicious if we hang around here too long. Plus which, it's just past eight o clock now, and we have a timetable to keep to. We need to be away from here soon. So we are going. But quickly, before we do go, a few things. As you probably all know, by now, we are going on a liberation."

There was a moment's pause. The atmosphere was suddenly charged, electrical. Although she had known all along what the night was for, Ann felt her stomach tighten, and she squeezed her hands

between her knees. This moment was the fulfilment of her dreams – yet now that it was definitely upon her, she was scared. *I don't believe it,* she thought. *I need to go to the bloody toilet.* She smiled to herself. *No you don't,* she thought firmly. *You don't need anything of the sort. It's just your brain playing silly sods.* She felt the urgency recede, and relaxed. Simon was still talking.

"Everybody has got to work quickly, and effectively. When we are in there we have a few rules to obey. One. Keep your face and hands covered at all times."

"Oh Christ." Ann looked around, and saw a blond young man with faint white scars on his cheeks burying his head in his hands.

"What, no gloves?" Simon asked.

The lad looked mortified. "No gloves, no bally."

"Jesus, Frank. You knew what we were doing..." Beside Frank another man in his twenties with curly black hair was squirming with embarrassment. "You told me you were ready..."

"S'alright." The woman who had arrived with Simon stepped across and passed a bundle of clothes to Frank. She smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry mate. It happens, specially if it's the first time you've been out. I always come with spares."

"Thanks," the young man muttered, and looked furtively at the rest of the group. His neck had gone red, as had the back of his ears.

"Sorry," he spoke to the gathering in general. Ann felt terribly sorry for him, and relieved that she had gloves and headgear of her own. Not a balaclava, but at least a hat and scarf that could completely cover her face.

Katriona hadn't been impressed when she saw that her mum was going out to dinner dressed entirely in black – trousers, tee-shirt and jacket. *'Do you want him to think you're a bag lady? At least make some kind of an effort.'* Ann smiled at her daughter's sartorial astuteness. Like mustard, that girl. Around her she saw another couple of people furtively checking their supplies.

The only person who seemed perfectly serene was the woman who had just spoken to Frank. Ann glanced across at her, admiring her cool demeanour. She supposed that she was Karen, Simon's girlfriend. Late thirties, early forties, irritatingly attractive and calm as a placid lake. As Simon continued to talk the woman bound up her long hair, scraping it into a tight bun, from which none of her corkscrew blonde curls could escape. Ann gnawed her thumb

nervously, even though the nail was now so short it was bleeding.

"Right," Simon continued. "Rule one we all have now. Mask up when we are there, gloves on as of now. Not just fabric gloves, but latex gloves inside as well. You can sweat through fabric, and that could leave DNA traces. Double gloves will reduce the chance of you leaving DNA evidence they can use. It also means you won't leave fingerprints. Keep your face covered at all times. It'll reduce the risk of you getting recognised by any witnesses." He passed out plastic foot coverings. "Put these over your boots as soon as you arrive at the scene, and before you get out of the car." Ann smiled. She had acquired these herself, from the sports centre she worked at. All staff had to wear them when in the swimming pool area. Simon recommenced his instructions as soon as everyone had a set of the blue plastic coverings. "If they feel lose on your feet, if you have very small feet, then tie on shopping bags instead. Do that in the car. Alright? Who wants bags?" A few of the women put their hands up, and Karen silently handed out shopping bags. Simon continued. "We're going to have rain tonight," he pointed out. "These will help to obscure your footprints, which will make it harder for them to get evidence. Also, it will reduce the amount of earth etc that you track back home with you. I know people should get rid of their clothing after a raid, but in my experience there are always people who tend not to." He flashed a grin, and joked. "'Cause we're all such tight gits and can't afford new clothes." There was nervous laughter and an elderly woman looked rueful.

"I wish you had said," she spoke in a gentle accent that Ann couldn't quite place. "I just brought a lot of old clothes to Oxfam."

"Sorry," Simon smiled at her. "I'll remember next time." He turned back to the group. "Now, none of us are so bloody poor we are going to run out of clothes, are we? Just remember, putting it through the wash won't help if you left fibre they can match to your jacket on a barbed wire fence, or wherever."

"What about shoes," a man of about thirty in an ALF sweater asked.

"Up to you mate. I just took rubbish old shoes that I won't miss."

"Yeah, but I only just bought these."

Simon looked at them. "Well, I suppose you could argue that lots of A.R. people wear shoes like that. The tread isn't worn down yet to any distinctive pattern, so I suppose you could get away with

it. So long as you don't get them coated in mud." He looked up at the speaker, and paused. Then, looking embarrassed he said, "do me a favour mate."

"Yeah?"

"Loose the sweater. A great big white ALF logo is going to stand out like a sore thumb."

"Shit yeah. Sorry." The guy pulled his sweater off and turned it inside out. "That do?"

Simon nodded and continued. "Rule two we obviously don't all know." He looked sternly at everyone, and particularly at the curly-haired lad next to Frank. "Don't use each other's names. Even though we all know at least some of the people here, and a few of us know almost everybody. If we use names we run the risk of being overheard. So as of now we don't have names. Okay?"

Ann and several others nodded. It was sound advice. Ann's earliest involvement in animal rights was through hunt sabotage. This was how she met Simon, who was a close friend these days, though to her regret, nothing else. *Poor Katriona,* she thought, *wanting me to meet someone, when the only person I am interested in is happily with someone else.* There was no way that Ann was ever going to fall for another bloke while she nursed a secret crush for Simon. She had to admit she was a bit ashamed of herself. She should have grown out of this kind of schoolgirl thing decades ago. Still, at least she had Simon as a friend. They had looked out for each other in difficult situations, and she presumed this was why he knew he could trust her with a thing like this. When the sabs were on the field, surrounded by antagonistic hunters, it made perfect sense for the small group to be as secretive as possible, to stick together, and to protect each other's identity. Occasionally at a demo Simon would call her over, and forget that he could call her by her given name. She was convinced that there was a copper somewhere in Cambridgeshire who wondered why so many people in animal rights were called "Sab."

"What do we call each other then?" the lad called Frank asked.

Simon smiled. "Whatever you like. 'Mate.' 'Missus.' 'Oy you.' Just so long as it couldn't be used to identify people in court." Frank looked nervous. "Don't worry. It won't get that far. It never does." Simon looked around at everyone, reassuringly. "For the most part the police don't bother with liberations. If they can't solve it in a couple of weeks they let it slide. So just don't panic. Do what we are

here to do, get home, and forget about it."

Somewhere someone cracked their knuckles loudly.

"Any other rules?" The skinhead woman who had commented on the word "men" was pulling her gloves on. Ann thought she looked relatively calm too, though she suspected she was the knuckle-cracker.

"Yeah. When we get there, there'll be a bit of waiting around while we get the door open. Nobody panic, or make a run for it, or talk too loud. There is nothing to panic about. Everything has been planned. We picked today because the police will be busy with the football. We're starting early so that our finish time coincides with the end of the match, and also so that nobody is out too late at night when it might look dodgy. Even if things go wrong we have enough flexibility that the plan won't fall to pieces." He paused and cleared his throat. Ann sympathised with him. She knew he felt awkward sometimes speaking to a large group of people, although he was anything but shy in other circumstances. "We will be relatively near where people are living," he carried on. "So don't make too much noise. We will have lookouts. Every now and then we may all have to stop what we are doing and keep our heads down. Don't panic if that happens."

"Okay," the bald woman pulled her bally on.

"And get that off. If we get pulled now we have to look like normal people, not like we are in the ALF."

There was a wobbly attempt at laughter, and ruefully the woman removed her headgear.

"Sorry mate. Me head's cold."

Laughter rippled out again, and the bloke who had been wearing the ALF sweater tried to make a joke of it. "And try not to sound too Scouse," he said. "That's bound to alert the authorities." People laughed again, but this time Simon looked irritated, as did Karen and the bald woman. "We are here tonight to do a job of work," Simon said, pulling the group back to order. "So we work as a team, whether we know each other or not. Try not to get separated. Stick with at least one other if you can. By the end of tonight we will have saved a large amount of animals from a life of absolute hell. And whatever happens, that will be worth it. Any questions?"

"What animals are we going for?"

"Guinea pigs. Anything else?"

The young man next to Frank put his hand up.

"Yes?" Simon looked at him.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll know in a minute. Who here has vehicles?" There was a brief show of hands. "Alright then. If you, you and... you could drive your own vehicles following these maps." The blonde woman started to hand out photocopied sheets of paper. "Everybody is going to be a bit squashed, since we are short on cars. Don't worry though, we're short on people too." He shrugged one shoulder in a show of nonchalance. "We'll just have to work harder. When you get to where I've marked it on the map, park up, and someone will tell you where to go. It's not too far from the target. Hang on. Here's maps. All got gloves on? Good."

"Where are we taking the animals to?"

"After the raid we will be meeting up somewhere safe, so that animals can be transferred into another vehicle, which will take them to safety. I will tell you when you need to know. For now, we just need to make sure that they get removed safely. When it is time for us to go, I'll tell you where we are meeting up, and I will take it from there. Okay? Everyone sorted?"

Frank spoke up again, nervously. "Are you sure we are okay talking around here? I mean, mightn't the police have the place bugged or something?"

"Only if they did it in the last half hour." Simon grinned. "I only just decided we were meeting up. So don't worry."

"What if one of us is an undercover police man?"

The blonde woman turned her head abruptly, and glared at him. "If one of you is, all I can say is, 'thanks for helping us tonight.' Okay? That kind of thing doesn't matter now. You were all chosen because you're known and trusted. So yeah, it is possible we might have made mistakes. We just have to live with that risk. Looking over our shoulders all the time for the police is worse than actually having one with us. You know why?"

"Why?"

"Because you are acting all the time like there is a problem, and there isn't one. You end up creating your own bogeyman, and that does as much damage as a real policeman – only we are the ones doing it to ourselves. So if there is one, forget about it. If you want to get out, and I mean if *anybody* wants to do get out, anybody at all, now is the time to do it."

She glared around the group. "No-one?"

There was a furtive moment of silence as the assembled group shuffled in their ranks. No-one spoke, or met each other's eye.

Simon nodded. "Right. Everyone ready? Drivers, got your maps?" Nods, and muttered affirmatives. "On the top left hand side is my mobile number, only to be used in case of dire emergency. It isn't going to be used during the raid itself, largely because the phone masts aren't likely to work where we are going. Also, even if there was reception, it is a bit dodgy using a mobile, alright? And this number is going to be no use after we have all gone home, because I am dumping my phone."

"Why?" The elderly woman with the soft accent looked puzzled. "Last I heard you could just replace the sim card."

"They have new technology. They can tell now what sim has been in a phone."

"Oh dear." The old lady looked alarmed. "Some day soon we won't be able to take any kind of a phone at all, will we?"

"Nope. However, we are working on our counter weapon – telepathy." The weak joke lightened the mood, as it had been intended to, and Simon continued. "So everyone, try not to use them." He sighed, and looked around the group, making eye contact with as many as possible to get his point home. "Remember, the signal can be used to prove you were in a certain location. If any of your phones are registered, or on a contract then they could blow your alibi. So remember. Keep your mobiles off when we are there, keep your batteries out of them. Phones can still be used to trace you if the batteries are in. If you have to use it, be prepared to get rid of your sim card and the phone itself at the end of the raid. Split them up if you can and dump them in different places. While we are on the raid itself, we will keep in touch with walky talkies. Okay?"

"Do we all get one?" Frank asked.

"No. The lookouts get them, the drivers, and later on a couple of people inside the shed. The rest of you should have your hands full. By the way..." He crossed over to Ann, and handed her a bag, smiling. "You're camera crew. Okay?"

Ann smiled back. She had filmed several hunts, so she knew she would be able to do this.

"Anything else?" Now he was looking impatient, itching to be off. Again no-one said anything. "No? Then we'll go."

Sally

The nice thing about pubs, she thought, apart from the alcohol, was the fact that they were noisy, warm and nobody paid any attention to you. As she made her way over to the phone she felt soothed by the jukebox, and the blokes shouting at the football. This wasn't a pub they usually went to, so she was certain the phone was safe. Even so she would be circumspect on the phone as always, assuming anyone picked up the phone.

She checked her list of numbers for the night, and dialled. Simon's phone was off. So was Karen's. She swore slightly under her breath, and phoned Sam. It was a long shot – he was barely in the twentieth century most of the time, let alone the twenty-first. He had a mobile of his own, but it was hardly ever on. She wouldn't be at all surprised if he had forgotten to switch on this night's temporary number.

Astonishingly, and to her delight, this time she was wrong. The phone rang, and Simon picked up.

"Hi there mate. How are you?"

"Fine. Running a little late. Trouble with traffic. Where are you? Sounds like a pub."

"Yeah. Staples pulled us over, and we got a producer. Pathetic really. I don't know what he was thinking. We were just going for a night on the town anyway. Show the new kids the best place for curry and all that."

"Ah, right. Well, it's a shame I couldn't make it. I'll tell everyone I know that you lot are off partying and we weren't invited, okay?"

"Yeah," she laughed. He had definitely got the message. "Next time we'll make a proper party of it. Have a good time with your feral cats, okay?"

"Will do. Don't get too drunk."

"Not sure about that one. Bye now."

The phone went dead. With a sense of relief Sally realised that all they had to worry about was removing incriminating evidence from the back of the van, in case the police got an injunction to search it. Since one of the sabs had contacted a mate to take care of that side of things she could relax now. Not her problem any more. Now all she had to worry about was Rick exercising his boyish charms on the new girl.

As she wandered back over to where Rick was attempting to

hold court over the group she smiled. God, he was so predictable. Most of the sabs were immune to his charms by now, but Emma had loosened up, and was flirting somewhat. Her boyfriend hadn't really noticed, as his team was playing, and were one nil down. *I see I'll have to keep an eye on Rick,* she thought, raising an eyebrow. Not that she blamed the girl. Rick deserved his reputation after all. Besides. One of the pleasures of Rick's company was the challenge of keeping him in line.

As the Blues equalised a cry went up in the pub, and Sally smiled. It should be a nice enough evening after all. At least, it looked like a good game.

Jenny

There was a nip in the air, and she huddled down in her coat as she started towards the car. Perhaps shaving her head hadn't been that good an idea in the run up to winter, she thought to herself, but still, she had felt like it was time for something different. Jack put his arm around her in a brief reassuring cuddle, and she tolerated it.

For some reason he was really pissing her off. A couple of days ago she had told him about the plans for tonight, and he had started coming out with his war stories. Although she knew he could trust her, she still didn't think it was a good idea to talk about actions with anyone, unless there was a need for it. He had been on a lot more of these things than she had been, yet he was coming across as a total divvy. She shook her head. Her heart had sunk when she turned up at the meeting place to see him with the ALF logo splashed across his torso. What was he thinking? What was he trying to prove? If she hadn't known better she would have thought he was anxious, that he was bullshitting to cover the fact that he didn't have a clue what to expect from tonight.

Maybe she was being unfair. Not everyone would react to these things in the way she did. Last time she had done this – well the first time she had done this – she had been more anxious, less sure that she had what it took. It turned out that all it took was common sense, and the ability to channel her energy into action. When she had first walked into that battery unit she had felt like hitting someone, screaming. Of course, she hadn't done that. She had just got on with the job in hand. Smashed cages and eggs. Got the hens out, until it was finished, until they had as many as there were homes for. She'd had a few bad nights afterwards, her brain turning

and turning over the images of dead and decaying birds. Then she had pulled herself together and got on with her life.

"Hi," Karen came up behind her and gently tapped her on the shoulder.

"Yeah?"

"Can I have a word, just before we go?"

"Okay," Jenny was doubtful, and it came out in her voice. "What's up?"

"Nothing serious. Just..." her voice trailed off, and she smiled at Jack, meaningfully. "A word in private."

"Oh, right. Yeah, whatever love."

Jenny winced. Calling someone you didn't really know 'love' could seem insulting, but calling one of the main organisers of this event 'love' was plain condescending. Karen drew her off to one side, casting an anxious glance at the cars.

"That is Jack from the zoo campaign, isn't it?"

"Yes," Jenny looked puzzled. "Why, is there a problem?"

"Just, do you know who invited him?"

"Uhm, it was me actually. I thought because he had a bit of experience of this kind of thing..."

Karen pulled the kind of face that looked like an embarrassed attempt not to laugh.

"Well, I've never heard of it. Sorry."

Jenny blinked, and looked over at the car. Jack was looking nervous, waiting by the back door. "He told me he's been on a few raids. That hamster one a couple of years back when the police arrested all the wrong people, and had to pay out loads of compensation..."

"Oh," Karen shook her head in a categorical '*no.*' "Sorry, but I can definitely tell you he wasn't on that."

Jenny opened her mouth, about to ask how Karen knew, then stopped. It was obvious, wasn't it? Karen knew, because she had been there, maybe even organised it. If she said Jack had been nowhere near the place, then she knew what she was talking about.

Karen looked at her sympathetically. "I know he likes to brag a lot, but that is why he never gets asked on these things. He can't keep his gob shut."

Jenny put her hands up over her ears and shook her head. "Ugh," she said.

"What?"

"You must think I am such a fool," she said.

"Why? Other people fall for bullshit."

"Yeah, but I've been going out with the lying bastard."

"Oh." Karen looked away to cover her embarrassment. "Sorry."

"Not as sorry as me."

"Well, look, just keep an eye on him. He might shape up okay. Just, you won't be bringing him along next time will you?"

"No I bloody won't." Jenny glared across at Jack, and saw him shuffle nervously. *Yeah, that's right,* she thought. *Look bloody frightened. We are talking about you, and you know it.*

Karen patted her shoulder. "Do me a favour though," she asked.

"What?"

"I know it's hard, but don't let personal shit get in the way of the job."

Jenny nodded, and tried to pull herself together. "Right," she said fiercely. "You can count on me."

Jack

Jack's ears were still hot. *Fancy coming on a raid in an ALF jacket. What a prat. Bet that's what the girls were talking about and all.* Still, he could live with a bit of embarrassment. After tonight Jenny would see him as he really was. She had been a bit short with him for the last few days. Probably nerves – women were more emotional about these things. It was to be expected. Once it was over things would be back to normal again. He smiled at Jenny as she brushed past him. She didn't make eye contact.

As he followed her into the back of a car he saw a man running across the street towards them. For a moment his suspicions were raised. Then he recognised the running man. Sam.

"Hi," he called across. There was a sharp jab in his back.

"Shout a bit louder, why don't you?" Jenny was already wearing her seatbelt, looking pissed off with him. Jack blushed again. *Christ, I should be better at this,* he thought. Everything about tonight was freaking him out, from Jenny turning up bald – what the hell possessed her – to the fact that everyone else seemed to know what they were doing a lot more than he did. He had an uncomfortable feeling that he was going to get found out on this raid. For years he had been dropping hints to people that he was a hard man. He hadn't out and out lied to anyone. He just didn't mind it if

people thought he had a past.

Now, for the first time ever, someone had approached him to do the sort of thing he liked to brag about – and that someone was Jenny. At least until recently she had unreservedly believed the bravado. Now that he had to prove himself to her he was ashamed. She looked at him with doubt. Buried deep down inside, so far down that he could barely bring himself to admit it, he was wondering if Jenny had made a mistake asking him.

Sam made a beeline for the car. "Where's Simon?"

Jenny gesticulated to the van. Sam nodded and dove off towards it.

"What's that about?" Jack wondered aloud.

Jenny cast a withering look in his direction. "I don't bloody know. What am I? A mind reader?"

He looked at her, and felt a slow dread creep over him. *Even if this goes off okay,* he thought, *me and her are splitting up.* Her contempt for him radiated out too blindingly, too obviously. Maybe it was something Karen had said, maybe it was something he had done wrong, or failed to do right. It was a sign when she did her hair, he thought. Always a bad sign when women have a radical hairdo partway through a relationship. Whatever it was, the hair or something else, at some point in the last hour she had lost respect for him. His fear had been realised. She could see through him now.

As the driver, one of the gay blokes, started the engine Jack slumped back in his seat. He looked at his reflection in the darkening window, and tried to pretend that his heart wasn't hot with shame, and his stomach wasn't full of butterflies. If he passed through this night okay he would feel fantastic. He could even tolerate losing Jenny if it came to that. He knew that in the long run he would feel fine. But right now he felt like the school dunce.

Every now and then the other four occupants of the car spoke up. Make a left here – it looks like we are heading this way – answer that walky talky – anyone want a biscuit and so on. Jack didn't want to look any more of a fool than he felt already, so he just stayed quiet, squashed up behind the driver's seat.

He wished he was home, watching the football. He wished Jenny was in another car. He wished it was safely tomorrow morning, and he could feel good about tonight. But most of all, and he hated admitting it even to himself, he wished he hadn't come.

THE MOTHERCAGE

8.30 pm

Simon

At least now they knew what had happened to Rick. Worst time it could have happened of course, but bloody typical of the Old Bill. Typical of Rick and all. Not quite the unluckiest man in animal rights, but getting there. *He's going to get his house raided first thing in the morning, he is,* Simon thought to himself and laughed.

"What's funny?" Sam asked, yawning.

"Just thinking, at least Rick won't say anything when the Old Bill turn up." Simon glanced across at the other occupant of the van, and smiled. He had known Sam for years, and always felt easy with him. For a while, after his wife died, Sam had retreated, and seemed on the verge of dropping out of the movement. Then, all of a sudden, he was back. Maybe a little grimmer, but determined as ever. The man might be a crotchety old git, who looked more like a grizzly bear than a respectable citizen most days, but he was one of the best. He had been around forever – and although most of his time was taken up in welfare work he still could be relied on to take action where it was needed. Like tonight, when they needed all the good people they could get.

Sam yawned again, toothily, humorously acknowledging that, "Yep, Rick's in for an early morning wake up call."

"God's sake man," Simon wafted his hand in front of his face against Sam's garlic breath. "Do you never clean your teeth? What are you expecting to find in the sheds tonight? Vampires?" Simon was exaggerating a little, for comic effect. Sam obliged him by laughing.

"Who's the girl anyway," Simon asked as he focussed again on the road ahead.

"What girl?"

"That gorgeous girl driving your car. I mean, some guys have all the luck, if you know what I mean."

"Ah, you mean the beautiful, talented, young *woman* driving my car."

"That's the one. She told you to say that did she? Lesbian feminist or something like that?"

"Well, if she was do you think she would tell her old dad?"

"Christ." Simon nearly choked with embarrassment. He was glad to have an excuse not to look at the passenger, since he didn't

know if Sam was laughing or about to get offended. "Sorry."

Fortunately Sam laughed. "That's a lovely colour you've gone mate."

"Extreme humiliation does that to me," Simon retorted, with a grateful sense of relief. "Hey, I tell you what though," he swiftly changed the subject from the charms of Sam's daughter. "I was never as glad to see anyone turn up as you two. Two drivers down was pretty dicey. We shouldn't be completely up the swanny now. Though we are still nine people short. Plus, a lot of the bags are missing, and some tools – Rick had the stuff in the back of his car. S'pose we can improvise."

"Well, you know me. I am a handyman by trade, and I did happen to bring some kit in the boot of my car. Quite by accident you know."

"Now *that's* what I call handy." Simon laughed again. He was actually beginning to feel calm now that things were moving at last. "Hey, last time I saw your daughter she was still at school. Awful braces. What's she doing now?"

Sam laughed. "Probably thinking, 'shit, that's the last time I offer to spend more time with Dad.'"

"What, has she never done this kind of thing before?"

"I don't know. Hope she'd have more sense than to tell me though, just for the sake of telling it. But, to be honest, probably not. She's been getting her nursing degree, so she wouldn't have had time."

"So how did she wind up on this gig?"

Sam pulled a face. "She rang me up today saying she's got something to tell me, and she was coming round. I did tell her I was busy, but she said she didn't mind. I reckon she thought we'd be spending the night at the train station catching injured pigeons, or trapping ferals, or something like that. Hung up on me before I could make an excuse and put her off."

"Oh man," Simon cracked up. "Bet she's pissing herself."

"Probably not. She might be a bit annoyed with me though. Should have seen her face when I told her what we were doing."

"You trust her though, don't you?"

"Course I bleeding trust her. Not just cause she's my kid either. If it was her brother I wouldn't trust him as far as I can throw him."

"Is it true he's eating meat these days?"

"Is it hell. Bastard eats eggs and milk though."

"Ugh."

"I know. He says it upsets his girlfriend if he's too different."

"Get a new girlfriend, if she complains about his diet."

"Nah, he's spent too much on this one. Wants to get his money's worth."

Simon looked sideways at Sam. "You can be a horrible old man sometimes, do you know that?"

"Yeah, but I did do one thing right."

"What's that?"

"Fiona." Sam grinned. "Great girl. She's the one who turned me vegan you know. When she was eight. We were on holiday in Wales, and the farmer whose field we were camping in took us to feed the calves. That evening we were having supper and she says, 'Dad, why are we drinking milk? Don't the baby cows need it more than we do?'" Sam scratched his bristly chin and grunted with satisfaction. "Always made me think, that girl."

Simon nodded thoughtfully. "Nice to know some parents listen to their kids though. A lot of people would have told her to shut up."

"Yeah, but I was already veggie. My mum's fault really. She would have loved to be here."

Simon laughed. "I can just see your mum on a raid. She'd be bloody brilliant."

"Did I ever tell you about one time she came out with the sabs? She was map reading for us. Had tonnes of butties and hot cocoa in a flask. Master of the hounds came up at one point, abusing us and calling us names. He had the whip out and went for the girl with the gizmo. Anyway, mum got out of the van and whacked him with her walking stick."

Simon laughed out loud. "Was it that baldy git from the Forest? Name of Frederick Bates?" Sam nodded, and Simon laughed again. "Master Bates we all called him. Boy, he hated that."

"Who wouldn't?" Sam made a humph noise – a trademarked guttural laugh that only a fool would take the micky out of. In front of Sam at least. "That guy used to go mental when the gizmo came out," he continued. "'That's noise pollution that is,' he'd say. 'It's cruel. You're confusing the hounds.'"

"Confusing him more like."

The two men laughed again, and drove on. Time had flown, and they were nearly at the winding path down the woods where the van was going to be holed up while they went about their work.

Simon was grateful that he had got to travel with Sam. His nerves had completely receded, and he was ready for whatever the night might bring.

Fiona

At least it takes my mind off things, Fiona thought to herself, as she drove through the countryside. *Not quite what I thought me Dad meant when he said he was busy, but then it's not like he could have told me on the phone.* She smiled wryly. *What will the head nurse think if she ever finds out?* It amused her to imagine the look on Nurse Heath's face if she ever discovered what her favourite prodigy had been up to.

"You alright?" The map-reader broke into her reverie. Fiona looked at her, then smiled, remembering her name from way before University.

"I'm fine, Karen."

"No names," a balding man on the back seat pointed out.

"Oops. Sorry."

"That's okay." Karen smiled reassuringly. "You weren't here for the pep talk."

"Never mind. What did I miss?"

"Just, you know. Try and stick with at least one other person. When we are getting in, keep quiet, and don't run off screaming into the woods. We're near somebody's house, so don't go knocking on the door asking to borrow a cup of sugar."

"Right."

"You've got gloves and head gear don't you?"

"Yeah. Dad is great you know." She laughed. "I turned up thinking we were going badger watching, or catching feral cats or something. Get to the car, and he says 'right love – take these.' Way to break the news you know? I'm still not quite sure what we are doing. Like, what animals are we saving?"

"Guinea pigs."

"Excellent." She could feel a smile spreading all across her face. "I love guinea pigs."

"Good. Well, you'll help some tonight."

Fiona nestled in the warm and pleasant glow of this unexpected turn of events. It had come as a bit of a shock, but as shocks went this was one she could live with. She was going to make a difference.

"We take a left at the next turning," Karen pointed out.

"Okay," Fiona had to concentrate on her directions now. She was grateful. It meant she didn't have time to worry too much about how her Dad would take the news. She gnawed her lip. At least she was storing up some good karma, she thought. And to be honest, she might need it.

Jenny

"We're here."

The car came to a stop, and Jenny looked out, rather surprised. She had been dozing with her head against the window, and her left ear and cheek were numb. She hauled herself out of the car, and felt her knees pop. They had pulled up down a dirt track, off the side of a green road. Looking back over the bumpy way that they had come she wondered how she had dozed at all, even uncomfortably. The area looked remote, the back of beyond. All she could see were fields and trees. No buildings. So where was this place they were raiding?

"Where are we?" she asked. "Where are we supposed to be going?"

"Across some fields." The dark-haired young man, the driver, sounded anxious. "We'll have to wait until one of the others turns up, okay?" His boyfriend, Frank, muttered "Great," and stalked off behind a bush. Even in the dusk Jenny could see the dark lad's face reddening as the sound of urination started up. She cleared her throat and looked away, then thought this might embarrass him even more. She looked back and smiled at him, in an attempt at reassurance, but he turned his face away. "Sorry," he said.

"No need."

He shook his head and smiled, painfully, before catching up with Frank, who now appeared from behind the tree. "Christ, that was good," the blond lad declaimed in an affectedly prissy tone of voice. "Pissed like a horse. You should try it Tim."

God, is that kid on something? Jenny shook her head, feeling guilty that she had nearly laughed at the incongruously Oxbridge tones of the blond lad, while hoping her suspicions were unfounded. *Poor Tim.*

"Hi there." Jack came up behind her, and put his hand on her waist. She flinched it off, and walked a few paces away. Jack followed.

"What have I done wrong?" he wheedled.

"Nothing," she shook her head. This wasn't the time or the place. She would go into it later. For now they had a job of work to do.

"Just, you seem so – angry with me."

"Look, not now. It doesn't matter."

"Yes it does. I want us to be all right together. You know. Like it was."

"Well, it won't be."

"But I love you."

Fuck off, she thought, but didn't say.

"What's wrong? You've been so off with me the last few days." He paused, then condescendingly lowered his voice. "Is the stress getting to you?"

"Oh shut up you creep," she snapped, then bit her lip. "Just leave it. We'll talk later."

He looked, understandably, a little bewildered. She may have snapped with him before, but she had never previously been out and out rude. "If there's a problem," he asked cautiously, "we need to work things out."

"I have worked things out. I don't want to be with you."

Jack opened his mouth to speak, then stopped. The middle-aged man who had been crammed between them in the back seat was smiling cruelly.

"Thank fuck I don't have a girlfriend," he said, and smiled wider, showing more teeth. "Between you two love birds and them two nancy boys it's like an episode of bleeding Neighbours."

Tim cast a withering look at him. "And you wonder why you can't get a girlfriend," he said.

"Yeah," Jenny threw in. "And why there's so many lesbians in the world."

"Ooh dear. Struck a nerve did I?"

"Ooh, bless you pet," said Frank, deliberately camping it up, "I didn't know that Bernard Manning was part of our party." With a big smile on his face he patted the man on his forehead.

"Gerroff me," the man lashed out, and Frank skipped back, laughing.

"Ignore him," Tim said, grabbing Frank's arm.

"Yeah," Jenny gave "Bernard" a contemptuous look, then put her balaclava on. "Wanker isn't worth it," she muttered through the

fabric.

"What's that?"

Fortunately at this point another car arrived, and Simon's girlfriend and four other people hopped out. They started pulling knapsacks out after them, until there was a large heap of them. The woman who had been driving handed out torches, and the bags.

"Ready?" the blonde woman looked at the assembled group. "All here. Good."

"Yeah." Jack rubbed his hands in an overtly eager manner. Jenny could tell he was putting on a brave show, and turned away, ashamed of herself that she had ever believed such a transparent liar.

"Where are the others?" she asked.

"They'll be there. Right. Hoods up. Away we go."

Simon's girlfriend pulled her bally down over her face. With her bright hair hidden, dressed entirely in black, she was barely distinguishable in the shadows. Hunched low, with a heavy bag on her back, and four on her left arm, she moved forwards, hooking her free hand in a "follow me" gesture. Jenny crouched down, clutching six bags to her chest, feeling exactly as she had the first time – completely unprepared, frightened she would do something wrong, and yet hopeful. She crept after the silent figure, feeling her heart hammering in her throat, and the hissing of blood in her ears.

Frank

Beneath his balaclava he was grinning. This was it, this was what he was born for. He could get used to this, he thought. Running through dark woods on a moonless night. Yeah.

Mind you, he couldn't exactly dine out on it, could he? If he told people what he had done either they wouldn't believe him or someone would go running to the police. Shit. He scowled, then cheered up. Tim would know though. He would show Tim what he was made of.

Just recently Tim had been looking at him like he was ashamed. *Catholic upbringing – what can you expect,* he told himself. *He thinks there's something wrong with my mother – at least she admits she has a problem with us.* He wrinkled his nose in displeasure at the memory of his claustrophobic visits to Tim's parental home. *'Do you want a cup of tea dear?' What a hypocrite. She might at least be honest enough to admit what she thinks of*

us, Frank thought, sourly, as they pushed through the trees. Nobody was that good. And the worst of it, from Frank's point of view was that Tim fell for it! Thought his mum didn't mind! No wonder he was such a little old maid. He was a little old mumsy himself, Tim was. *'Don't do this,'* he'd say, or *'You mustn't say that,'* or *'You're always showing us up.'* That last comment still burned. It just showed how insensitive Tim could be. Like when they were sabbing, and Tim got beaten up. He could tell Tim thought it was his fault. *Stupid bastard. Is it my fault he didn't bloody run?*

"I wouldn't have had to run if some idiot hadn't stood there swearing his head off, and then legged it when the heavies turned up. We're there to stop them killing foxes, not to tell them they like fornicating with horses."

Frank laughed at the memory. He had stood on the top of the sab van and really mouthed off at the arseholes. Mind you, that old git Sam hadn't liked it either. *'There's only five of us, and at least sixty of them. Don't make it harder for us to do what we're doing.'* Sanctimonious old know it all.

Still, it was a shame about Tim getting beaten up like that. He had lost a couple of teeth, and was black and blue all over. Covered in whip marks. Could have been worse. Frank wasn't sure he would want to go out with someone whose nose had been broken. *Call me shallow, but some of us have standards,* he told himself, and swallowed a giggle. *Don't be silly now. You know you don't mean it.* Vodka on an empty stomach could definitely make you a bit silly. And maybe he had gulped it a little bit fast behind the bushes there, but he'd be fine in a minute. Anyway, he was definitely buzzing along happily now. See, he'd been right to take a little. Dutch courage. Maybe he should have put some in Tim's tea. Mind you, he'd only complain if he realised. And of course he would realise. Tim would freak out if he was happy, he'd be bound to know something was wrong.

Miserable bastard. Telling me I couldn't have a drink.

The annoying woman who had put herself in charge of everything stood up at the edge of the trees, and gestured for everyone to gather round.

"We're here," she said. "That's the building we are going into. We will have to keep calm, and wait while I get the door open..."

"Why you? Anyone can give it a good kicking." Frank was feeling cocky. He didn't like the woman, and thought someone

should put her in her place.

"Well, feel free to kick the door down, and set off the alarm, if you think it will help. If not, just wait a while until I disable the mechanism."

"Then we kick down the door."

"No. Then we carefully drill round the lock, so we can open the door nice and quietly without waking the bloody farmers."

Frank felt an angry twist in his chest, and a burning sense of embarrassment. Smug bitch. Tim put his hand on his arm in a calming gesture, and Frank shrugged it off. "Don't do that," he snapped.

"Quiet." The woman sounded stern. "This isn't a game. We are all going to have to be patient for a while."

"When are the others turning up?" A female voice that Frank didn't recognise spoke out. Had she been at the meeting earlier? He didn't recognise the clothes – too smart for a raid really. The windcheater was fine, but the trousers and shoes seemed more designed for walking through town than crawling through woods. Frank didn't trust this. He didn't like people turning up out of the blue like that.

Before he could voice his unease with the situation another voice cut in – Mr ALF. "Yeah" he demanded, "Shouldn't they be here already? They weren't parked up where we were." Frank nodded his head in agreement with what the man was saying.

"Good point," he said. "Where are they?"

"Some of them have parked elsewhere. That way even if the police were after us they couldn't stop us all." The woman gazed around the group, inscrutable behind the cloth of the balaclava. "Right. Last call everyone. You all got your footwear covered?"

The female newcomer who Frank still didn't trust crouched down, and started tying plastic shopping bags to her feet. Everyone else had already slid on their blue plastic foot coverings in the vehicles.

"You'll have left prints all the way to the car," said Frank. "They'll be able to prove you were here."

"Not if I get rid of the shoes they won't."

Frank sniffed. She seemed calm. Silly cow.

"Right now. Everybody take some bags. What we'll do is, empty each cage, putting the animals safely into a bag. Don't just jumble all the animals into the bag. Try and put only littermates in together. This is going to be very stressful for them, and we need to

minimise the stress. If we put two males in together who have never met each other before, they may fight and kill each other. Specially if they feel like they are protecting their harem. But to be honest you won't get too many adult males, because vivisectors prefer to use females. Easier to handle and so on." She paused, giving them time to assimilate the information. Then she continued. "Even so, be sensitive to the animals' feelings, okay? When you have a whole hutch stowed away, bring them to your car, put them gently in the boot. We should have room for them on our laps too."

"How long is this going to take?" Frank asked.

"Hard to say. It might take me half an hour to get us in. We don't have as many people as we had hoped for, and some of the tools we needed were in the missing vehicle. But we can still do it."

"What about lookouts?"

"Sorted. Yer man here," she jerked her head at a masked figure, "is watching from this approach, and there is someone at the other end too. Don't worry, alright?"

"Not worried. Just, this is a right balls up, that's all."

The woman shook her head curtly, climbed over a barbed wire fence, and ran towards the shed. *Damn,* thought Frank, feeling a bubble of panic in his stomach. *I don't want to do this.* He twisted his fingers together, and watched as everyone except the lookout ran ahead. The lookout stared at him. *"It's not my fault,"* he wanted to say. *"It's not that I'm a coward. Just, I can't really be here. I'm supposed to be at home. With Mrs Chips."* Ahead of him one of the runners paused, and looked back. Frank felt a hot rush of shame, as he realised it was Tim.

"Fuck the lot of you," he swore, startling the lookout, and ran.

Manjit

This was it then, the loneliest job of them all.

As the others disappeared into the woods, followed by the last straggler, he steeled himself for the long watch. *Hope that lad doesn't crack up,* he thought, watching the boy who had just cursed vanish through the trees. *Well, nothing we can do about it now. Just have to hope he pulls himself together.*

From his position behind the long hedge he could see down the narrow lane, and clearly along the main road, but not himself be seen. Far off, on the other side of the A-road, the lights from the next farm shone. Probably he would have nothing to do tonight, other than

sit and brood. It was easier to break into these places, he thought, than to sit and watch. Still, it needed to be done. Someone had to watch.

I'm going to catch a cold and all, he thought, looking up at the sky. Something else for Dapinder to nag him about when he got home.

He paced slowly up and down, guarding his watch. No car engines in the distance, just endless rain. This was what nature sounded like, he thought. Branches creaking in woods. Hedges dripping water in sullen slaps. The constant background hum of rain.

Everything in his normal life, machines, music, television, was just empty noise really, covering the louder silences behind.

He wished that he could be sure he was not alone in it. After a shaky start he thought he was falling in love with Dapinder. He hoped she was falling in love with him. But still, there were things he didn't know about her. Did she nag him because she worried about him, or because she resented the way her life had turned out? Did she see his efforts to inveigle his way into her affections as a sign of love, or just creeping? Until he knew he couldn't really tell her about a thing like this.

He shook his head, considering. Maybe he should have told her. He thought up the pros and cons. She was vegetarian at least. She couldn't stand the smell of meat when they walked through the shopping centre. She averted her eyes from the butchers' windows, and last Christmas as they passed the rows and rows of turkeys in Tesco's she had burst out in Punjabi, and had to leave the shop. Unfortunately Manjit didn't really speak Punjabi all that well – to his Grandmother's eternal disappointment – only Hindi, so he wasn't quite sure what she had said. She had apologised to him when he asked her about it.

"I did not mean it," she told him, leaving him none the wiser. But after that incident she wouldn't shop in supermarkets anymore.

So yes, all of that was in favour of him telling her, but then again...

Her father had been horrified after the wedding to discover that his new son-in-law had been convicted of affray at an animal rights demonstration. Manjit was convinced that if that had come out before the deed was done then the wedding would have been off. It didn't matter to Dapinder's family what the circumstances had been. Their darling daughter was now cast in the role of an angel, tied to a

hoodlum. And perhaps she would agree with them. She loved her family after all, and he didn't want to seem too critical of them. Besides all of which, she had a responsible job now. She might think that this kind of action could put her career in jeopardy. She worked free-lance as a translator for the council, and was called in by them to help interview asylum seekers, patients, police suspects, amongst other things. She might not be too pleased if he got nicked by someone she had to work with.

Ah, but sometimes he felt like all that didn't matter. He should just trust his gut, and be honest with her. As he paced up and down an image of her face floated to the surface of his brain, and he found himself brooding again on her many attractions, and smiled at the thought. She was the more lovely to him because of her imperfections – the slightly too wide mouth in an otherwise flawless face, the pugnacious jut of her chin when she had her mind made up. He supposed that she was everything he could have wished for – beautiful, intelligent, and kind. But still, she was a stranger. He wished he could have got to know her gradually, that they could have unfolded each other to each other over days and months, fallen in love first, the way his sister had before she married. That had worked out, despite his mother's misgivings.

I must be in love with her, he thought, and smiled, wryly. He couldn't stop thinking about her, even now, when there was so much else to think about.

It's going to be a long night, he thought, as he shrugged his collar up against the weather and rain dripped down his neck. *Try not to think too much,* he told himself, and laughed.

Since when had that ever worked?

Tim

Frank caught up with them as they got to the doors of the shed. It was a large brick building, with high windows, blackened out.

"Why can't we break in through the windows?" asked Frank.

"Can you shush," Tim felt his patience fraying at the edges, but still managed not to say the first thing that came into his mind, which was, *"shut up you bloody loony."*

"Don't you shush me..."

Karen turned and glared at them both. "I'll shush the pair of you if you don't put a sock in it. If I have to lock you both up in the boot myself to do it." Frank opened his mouth to protest, then thought better of it. *That's unusual,* thought Tim. The mood Frank was in tonight he seemed unlikely to back down on anything. *Maybe I need a bolshy female to move in and keep him in line.* As soon as he thought it Tim chastised himself for the uncharitable comment. Karen ticking him off stung a little, especially since they had been friends for so long, but she had every right to be annoyed with both of them. Squabbling like kids in a sandbox. In fact, Frank was more likely to do as he was told if he felt he wasn't being singled out for a telling off. Frank didn't know Karen after all – somehow their paths had never happened to cross in the year that he and Tim had been together. It was hard enough for Frank to take criticism, let alone from a stranger.

Tim put his hand on Frank's gloved hand, and tried to seem supportive, even though a big part of him wanted to smack a little sense into him. *It's not his fault after all,* he told himself. *Anyway, there are far more important things going on tonight than us two falling out.*

He turned his attention back to what Karen was doing. She was standing on a sawn off log, so that she could reach a box above the door. In her hands she held a drill, and she had fastened on a head strap with a torch attached. She reminded him, incongruously, of a miner, working on a coal-face. Except of course it wasn't usually drizzling underground. "Should have brought a brolly," he murmured, in an attempt at humour, and squeezed Frank's hand. The beam of Karen's torch was pointed on the box, and she was drilling a hole into the metal casing.

"Lucky that log was lying around," said Frank sarcastically.

"Yes," Karen threw back dryly. "You would almost think we had cased the joint before we strolled in, wouldn't you?"

Please shut up, thought Tim. He could just imagine the lower lip and jaw thrust out behind the balaclava. He wasn't surprised that Frank carried on.

"So why all this rigmarole? You didn't answer my question. Why not just go in through the window?"

"One, flying glass. Some might shatter onto the enclosures below and hurt the animals. Two, breaking glass makes a noise, and we could wake up the house. Three, the windows are so high up and

awkward to get to that we would be bound to hurt ourselves trying to pull our way in, and DNA in blood is a great way of getting yourself caught. Four, the alarms would go off. This way takes longer to get going, but we will have more time when we get in."

"How much time do we need though? I mean, realistically speaking. Just get in, get out."

Karen moved the drill bit up, and started another hole above the first. After a second of concentration she asked, "How many liberations have you organised?"

"I wouldn't like to talk about it."

Jesus. Tim felt like crawling into a hole. Frank was really on form tonight.

"Well, do me a favour mate, and don't talk about it."

Tim put his hand on Frank's arm to restrain him. Frank slapped his hand off, and marched back a little way, muttering.

"I'm really sorry," Tim said as Karen started on the third hole, set to form a triangle against the first two.

"S'alright. Not your fault. I shouldn't have snapped at you earlier."

"He isn't always like this. I don't know what's wrong with him..."

"Don't worry. Stress gets to people in different ways. And he's young."

"I know."

"Mind you, so are you," she added, "and you're not coming across as a total prick."

Tim shook his head and looked at his feet. He was aware of a huge weight of shame, as all these masked strangers observed him and his boyfriend fall to pieces. He wished he could sink into the ground.

Just as Karen finished the third hole, and in time to distract him from his humiliation, another group approached, creeping through the trees from a different direction. Frank came back with them, looking at his feet. One of the new comers was squirming along commando style. Simon (obviously Simon to someone who knew him) tapped him on the shoulder and said, "get up mate. We aren't in the bleeding SAS." The man got up, and Tim noticed his jacket was on outside in. *It's Mr ALF,* he thought. *So it's not just me having a rotten time.*

Sam

Karen was just finishing the third hole as they approached. Quickly Sam loped across to her. "Good job," he grunted. "How's your arms?"

"Killing me," ruefully Karen rolled her shoulders.

"D'you want me to take over?"

"You don't mind do you?"

"Nah, I'm taller, so I should find it easier."

Karen hopped down from her log, and stretched out her arms. Sam knew from experience how heavy that drill was, particularly if you had to hold it for any length of time over your head. Karen passed him the torch, and he stood up on the log, and got a good look at the drill holes.

"Yeah, that's fine. Pass me the foam stuff."

Karen passed him a tube of styrofoam. Carefully he inserted the nozzel into the first hole, and squeezed, rotating the tip slowly so that the foam would fill the casing in different directions. The idea was to pack in as much as possible, so he didn't rush it. After a few moments the white liquid started to pour out around the edges of the hole, so he removed the nozzel, still squeezing so as to close the gap. Then he repeated the operation in the higher hole. As he was doing so he heard a male voice saying: "you know this is going to work, do you?"

"Yeah," Karen sounded curt.

"So you've done this often?"

Sam looked briefly over his shoulder at the figure who had asked the question. He smiled at him, then realised that of course no-one would see it. Still, he couldn't resist. "Nah, mate. We saw it on the telly. It worked for Clint Eastwood."

"Shit," the man sounded nervous.

Sam chuckled to himself. It wasn't fair really, but he did like winding people up.

Not that he knew for certain this would work. This wasn't exactly the kind of device he had seen before. The box was deeper, and he wasn't sure the foam would fill the whole thing. Besides, wouldn't you expect the security companies to get wise to the fact that people were using bleeding Styrofoam to disable them? The stuff swelled up inside the casing of the alarm system, insulating all the wiring, and stopping any electrical signal from travelling along the wires. That is, if it worked. Which it would do. Probably.

He finished filling the last hole, then turned and hopped down off the log. He looked at the people waiting, and dramatically crossed his fingers. Simon laughed. "Stop pissing about mate. We'll all have kittens by the time we get in if you keep this up."

"You're no fun anymore." Sam caught sight of Fiona, standing right beside him, and winked at her. She wriggled her fingers at him, then gave him the thumbs up. *Good girl,* he thought. At least she wasn't jittering like a ninny. *Mind you, she is a nurse,* he reminded himself with pride. *You wouldn't expect her to fall to pieces.* For a moment his mind wandered, distracted from his job by family matters. *Wonder what her news is...*

He didn't have time to think about it now though. Karen was crouched down, drilling around the handle and lock mechanism. Every five seconds or so she would stop, to prevent the motor from whining and making too much noise. *Bastards would do a metal door,* he thought, then glanced at the group of people watching. The person who had asked whether he knew what he was doing was pacing up and down, flicking his hands in a nervous gesture. *That fellah looks like he could bolt.* He clacked his tongue, annoyed with himself. Simon was right, he shouldn't have joked around with a kid like that having a panic attack. After all, he knew himself how anxious you could get on these things. For a fraction of a second his heart clenched in a furious spasm, revolted by what he knew awaited them behind these doors. He took a deep breath and blew out the anger. The important thing now was to get the damned doors open.

"Right," he said. "Now all we have to do is sit down and wait."

He sat, and a lot of the others did too, despite the damp grass. He noticed a few people using the bags as cushions, and shook his head. *Typical me,* he thought. *Got a wet bum for nothing. Nice thick waterproof fabric lying around and I decide to give meself a good soaking for no reason.* Well, it wouldn't do him any harm. He had been wetter.

As he looked around he counted heads. Only fourteen, not counting the lookouts, another two. Shame about Rick. *We're going to have to stop using him on raids. He's too high profile.* He shuddered to think what would have happened if that daft copper hadn't pulled him. *If he had even half a brain Stapleton could have followed him right to us. Christ, that was a close shave.*

This was the time on a raid that tensions ran high, when only one or two people had something to do, and everyone else was left

to brood over what might go wrong. At the moment people seemed okay, except for the young man pacing about. Sam was just wondering how to calm him down, when the walky talky crackled.

"Yo. What is it?"

"Farmer moving in the yard. Everyone be quiet."

Karen sat back down and sighed. Sam moved forward and grabbed the anxious boy's hand. "Sit down," he whispered. The boy sat. For ten nerve-wracking minutes nobody said a word. Sam kept hold of the lad's hand, and noticed approvingly that the man sitting next to him had his arm over his shoulder. *Kid might be scared, but at least he has friends with him.* He could feel calmer than most of the people there, because he knew that they had friends inside to distract the farmer. Of course there was no way that could be mentioned to any of the others, to protect the couple staying at the bed and breakfast. He wished he could calm down this lad though. Never mind. Things would work out, he told himself. Just a little hiccup.

The walky talky crackled again.

"All clear."

Karen jumped up again, and continued drilling. The frightened lad stood up, and shook his arms and legs out. His friend stood up and whispered something to him. Whatever it was, it seemed to irritate rather than soothe. He walked up and down in a nervous figure of eight. Suddenly it clicked. Sam recognised the lad's body language, and nearly laughed. It was that lad Frank, the idiot who went out sabbing with them, and nearly got his boyfriend killed. *Jesus, who invited him?* That must mean that the lad with him was Tim. Well, Tim was sound as salt – Sam would trust him on anything. But they had their work cut out keeping Frank under control. Just what they needed.

Karen

Karen was sweating under her bally, and her face and head were itching like mad. Her shoulders and upper arms were aching, and the bloody drill was taking forever. At this rate they would be lucky if the battery held out. *Prat,* she thought. The spare battery was in Rick's vehicle. Why hadn't she thought to put it in her car? Christ, she couldn't half be a wally at times.

Simon came up and tapped her shoulder. "Me take over love?" She could see his eyes crinkle up in a smile as he spoke, quietly,

so as not to be overheard.

"Yeah." She moved back gratefully, and squeezed his hand covertly as she passed the to him. She shook her head, and gulped air in as he took over. She had been holding her breath with the effort, and was feeling a little giddy now as she watched the drill slowly creep along its alloted path. Nearly three quarters of the way done. She blinked, easing her eyes of the tension that had built up in them as she had squinted at the lock. They were getting there, she reassured herself. It was just that it seemed to be taking longer than it actually was. It usually played out this way. Time would slow to a turgid crawl, and tension rose inside her to a shrill pitch that made her feel like she could scream. Still, she knew the value of patience. Experience had taught her that once they were inside twenty minutes would fly by in five.

Some of her most intense memories were from liberations. At one and the same time they happened so fast that you were barely in when you were gone, and on the other hand those few moments were so packed with incident that they filled her memory more than whole year's worth of her life before. Rows and rows of animals in cages that she could never save. The wrenching sense of being a traitor when she had to leave them. Rabbits. Rats. Lines of chickens hanging to be slaughtered. Caged kittens and pups and piglets. Endless.

She shook her head, to clear out the images. She couldn't think about that now. Not now. She had to be clear, focussed. Damn. Her eyes were wet.

Simon stopped drilling. He was a bare centimetre off the edge. Now he pushed the metal inwards, bending it to give him space. Then, holding the metal piece in his left hand to stop it from falling with a thud (as had happened once before) he drilled the last bit out. They looked at each other. They looked at the alarm.

"It'll be okay," she said, hoping he could hear her smile. "It worked for Clint Eastwood."

He groaned, and pushed open the door.

Simon

The alarm didn't go off. He felt his shoulders slump as the tension went out of them. As Karen packed away the drill he stepped through into the shed.

"Shit."

"What?"

"Another door."

"You're kidding."

Frank came in after them. "I told you this was a balls up."

Simon turned around, about to tell him where to go, when Sam came in behind the boy. He dropped his hand on his shoulder. Frank jumped, startled.

"Look, kid," said Sam. "I need you to hand me tools while I get this door down. It's not as bad as it looks."

"Okay."

As Sam handed Frank a bag of tools Simon took a calming breath. When Frank wasn't looking he gave Sam the thumbs up. Sam nodded briefly, and got on with it.

Fortunately this particular door wasn't alarmed, and wasn't made of metal. Sam started drilling around the lock again, a much smaller affair than on the outside door. Simon crinkled up his nose at the smell of burning wood. The metallic fumes had made him feel queasy, and he already knew what the shed would smell like.

Last time he had been in a place like this the smell had almost caused him to throw up. Later, he thought he was coping quite well with the memory, until he realised that he was getting flashbacks – not the visual flashbacks so beloved of Hollywood movies, but sensory flashbacks – smell. For weeks afterwards, usually when he was trying to eat, he would suddenly be overwhelmed with the smell of urine, faeces, and semi-decayed corpses. That place had bred mice. Thinking of it now he felt the gorge rise in his throat. *Stop it,* he told himself sternly. *It won't help anyone if you throw up now.*

"Shit." Frank's voice was high, whiney. "Your batteries died."

"Don't worry. Nearly there."

"Yeah but..."

"Root around in there son. You'll find a hand saw. I can finish it off with that."

"Okay."

"Thanks mate."

Simon shook his head. That lad Frank, what a liability he was turning out to be. He rated Tim highly – everybody rated Tim. That lad had been working like a maniac for nearly ten years, since he was fourteen. Turning up on demos, sabbing, doing street stalls, pub collections. Nobody had a bad word about Tim. In fact everybody was really pleased when he met someone – particularly since everybody thought Frank and Tim were made for each other. Besides, Karen had nothing but praise for Tim, and she was usually an excellent judge. The lad's dedication was in no doubt. At three-o clock one morning, on a trip to check out badger runs in Cornwall, he and Karen had curled up in their sleeping bags, head to head and discussed who to approach for tonight. Tim had been an obvious choice. Simon had kept his unease about Frank to himself, since he didn't know anything directly against the lad, and he had at one time seemed just right for this kind of thing. When Frank first turned up, maybe over a year ago now, he and Tim had been peas in a pod. Well, Frank was more outgoing than Tim, but other than that...Would Tim tolerate him if he was an idiot, after all?

Now he was regretting the fact that he had given him the benefit of the doubt. Frank may have been a hard worker at one point – not so long ago even. But now it seemed he was cracking up, or burning out. Simon had seen it happen before. Sometimes people just lost it. After Tim was beaten up Frank went quiet for a bit, but if tonight's show was anything to go by he was right back on form. Seemed to think he was here to show off, not to save lives. Maybe the lad needed help, but as far as Simon was concerned the local AR group wasn't the place to get it. *We're not effing psychiatrists,* he thought. Though Sam seemed to be doing a good job of containing the boy's terrors.

Finally the door came open. Simon put his hand over his mouth, and stepped backward and out for a brief moment. He took a deep breath – his last clean one before plunging into the darkness of the shed. "Come on," he told the others still waiting outside. "We're in."

THE MOTHERCAGE

9.32 pm

Tim

The smell was what hit him first. He had heard about the smell in places like this, but hadn't expected it to be so strong. He had only just stepped in and already his eyes were watering. He hadn't even seen the animals yet.

Behind him a woman was filming. There was a light on the camera that picked out the contours of the room. Long, barren, tables waist height with runs upon them. He couldn't see any animals. Was the place empty? Had they made a mistake?

Behind him someone tripped, sending their torch rolling under a table. The figure scrabbled to retrieve the torch, then scuffled back upright again.

"Hey, is this the light switch?"

"Looks like it," Tim suggested.

"I don't want to put it on in case I trip an alarm."

"Yeah, right." A female voice, sounding rather annoyed, cut in. A beam of light jabbed at the light switch, then the woman leaned across and switched it on.

Blue and white flickered for a moment. Then the room was illuminated.

Behind him the man and woman started to argue. Their voices blurred, and faded. Timid squeaking started up, as the animals responded to their fear. Tim was rooted to the spot for a moment, horrified by what he saw.

Rows upon rows of deep enclosures, walled in on all sides, stretched to infinity. What he had originally mistaken for scrumpled up rubbish, maybe white paper, was revealed as huddles of albino guinea pigs, trying to hide beneath each other. There was no straw for them to burrow under – but plenty of faeces, smeared over the metal of the barren boxes, over the floor. Nowhere for the animals to escape from their own stink, or from unfriendly eyes.

For a second, just a second, a wave of dizziness rushed up on him, and he felt like he was going to fall. Then he opened one of the bags, and started scooping the animals up, as quickly and gently as he could. All he had to do was reach in. It looked like the farmer had never expected to be raided, and all the runs were open-topped. Each unit was labelled with the genders of the animals, numbers of females, litter sizes. As the organisers of the raid had

suggested, the animals were mainly breeding females and their offspring.

There were so many of them...

He turned, reflexively jumping as a bump came behind him. It was Simon, stumbling against cages.

Cages. Stacked one on top of each other, with frightened animals trapped inside.

"Oh my God," Tim whispered, and dropped to his knees, gazing into the tiers of cages, as the animals scrabbled inside. He looked up and met Simon's gaze, saw his shock reflected back as anger.

Simon lifted papers, and started to read in a low voice. "Savage brothers, to take delivery of 160 gravid guinea pigs..."

"Pregnant, you mean pregnant?"

Dumbly Simon nodded, and continued to read. "Invoice for said delivery to be sent to... " Simon crunched up the papers in a fit of rage, then took a steadying breath and flattened them out again. "These ones here," he pointed at the cages, "they're all packed up to be taken tomorrow. We have the customers, the transporters, all the details you could think of."

"We have to get these ones out."

"I know. We have to break open the cages though." Simon spread his arms apologetically. "We won't have room for all the others if we fill up with all these cages, as well as the ones we already have."

Tim turned his head, looking for something to break the locks with.

"Wait," Simon reached down and placed his hand on Tim's shoulder. "I'll get something. Don't worry. We *will* get these ones out."

"Okay." As Tim sat on the ground waiting for some tools to come he started to bend and rend and twist at the bolt on the cage. It was stronger than it looked, but not strong enough to withstand his pressure. With a dull bursting sound the door snapped open.

Breathing rapidly, heart trembling like a trapped bird, he reached in and gathered the frightened mothers to him. One cage down. Dozens to go. And all the open topped runs as well. He closed his eyes for a moment, but still saw impressed upon his inner vision cage after cage after cage.

He opened his eyes and continued. Part of him was calm. The

part that ensured his hands were gentle as he held animals, the part that stroked them as he put them in each bag.

Another part of him was trying not to cry.

Jenny

Jack was really pissing her off now. While they were waiting he had been muttering alternative suggestions on how to run the raid, and it was all she could do to stop herself from giving him a slap. At least he wasn't as obviously embarrassing as that idiot kid – but only because he was keeping his opinions relatively quiet. She had to hope that no one was paying too much attention to his conversation, and that if they were no one thought they were going out together anymore. *People must have thought I was such a prat,* she told herself, shaking her head, as he expounded on his theory of blowing the door down with explosives.

As if that wasn't embarrassing enough, the moment they stepped into the shed he went arse over elbow. She groaned and shook her head, then cringed as she heard him saying that putting on the light switch might trip off an emergency alarm. *Christ's sake,* she thought. *It's not that bleeding high tech. There aren't even security cameras, are there? It's not like we're breaking into a high-security military compound or anything like that. It's a bleeding shed.*

Not that she said all that. Still, the way she felt right now, she probably thought it loud enough for someone to hear.

"Oy," he said, as she flicked the switch and the light began to flicker. "That was a bit of a risk that was. You should have checked with the rest of the crew first."

"Now we're in a crew are we?" She squared up to him, hands on hips and glared. "God, get a grip," she hissed through grated teeth. "If you're 'so solid' how come you fell over your own feet, dropped your bags, your torch, and made a noise like a bloody elephant? I can't believe you. Now you're saying I shouldn't put a light on? Get real."

"I'm just saying you should be careful what you do. We don't know what we're getting into here, new environment and all that..."

Jack's voice trailed off. The lighting had strobed and settled to a bleak and washed out grey. Jenny stared around her, and looked at Jack. His eyes were a mirror.

Silently she handed him a bag, and opened her own. They started work.

Fiona

Fiona was transfixed. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. The prisons spread out to the furthest extent of her vision, swallowed up by the gloom. An endless tunnel. She could believe it stretched on forever. She'd taken a wrong turning in the world, gone left where she should have gone right. One day she had been preparing for the rest of her life, making plans. Then she'd stumbled behind the scenery, seen the bones of the world, the world of pain that most creatures inhabited. This was reality. The only reality for all those doomed to live out their lives in the dusty darkness. She could be trapped here forever.

Around her masked figures flitted, picking out islands of suffering by torchlight. All around her people were in action. She couldn't move. Her feet were cold, as though she was sinking through concrete, turning to stone. She couldn't breath. She could hear the air whistle in her lungs. *I haven't had an asthma attack in bloody years. Not now.* Tears were coming to her eyes, and she didn't know if it was what she was seeing, the asthma, or the nausea. *Typical timing, to want to puke now.* She shut her eyes and squeezed them tight, as though by not seeing it she could make it disappear. *Breathe slowly. Calm down.* She could hear herself crying. She was actually crying. How could she cry at a time like this? How could she be so self-indulgent? She had nursed people dying in the hospital, and hadn't stood there crying. She had done something for them. That was the whole point of being alive, wasn't it? Not to stand around feeling sorry. Lot of good tears ever did anyone.

But all those mothers and babies...

At just that moment she felt her own baby kick, for the first time. Her eyes flew open, awed. Crystal clear in her mind Granny's voice spoke up. *'What a time for the child to quicken. Now, get some bloody work done.'* Whether it was imagination, nerves, or something else was completely irrelevant.

Fiona did as she was told and started.

THE MOTHERCAGE

Sam

As he stepped inside the shed he left himself outside. Joking, cheerful friendly Sam would have died in here. Once upon a time he would have been shivering, in tears, seeing what he saw here now. Better in the end to leave half of himself outside, in the cold. The part of him that remained, that was in here now, could cope. But only if he was frozen.

He didn't mind the cold.

He watched himself, on autopilot, moving down the aisles, picking up one animal after the other. Each individual life that he held wriggling in his big hands was precious, unique, terrified. He was huge to them, a monster, one of the enemy. A hateful frozen creature moving through the ranks of hell.

There was nothing he could do to redeem himself, to make himself other than Human, the killer, the destroyer of life. He didn't fool himself. He knew what his species was. Carefully he picked up each animal, and heard around him the pathetic squeaking of mothers hopelessly battling giants to protect their young. He lifted squirming frightened babies, so small that he was afraid to crush them, and felt nothing. He wouldn't feel. He couldn't feel. If he felt he would stop moving. He would stand there and shake, tumble into bits, like a pile of marbles, scatter in a thousand directions and never come back. He had to carry on. He had to do what he had come here to do. He had to not feel a thing, to never feel a thing.

Cold, emotionless, even his anger frozen, he kept on moving. There was nothing else to do.

Frank

In and out. We get as many as we can, then scram. He was smiling again, briefly back in his warm place. The glow from the vodka lingered. He had taken a quick nip just before he followed the others in, and didn't feel too bad about it. *You see, it doesn't get me drunk. Just takes the edge off. Like I told him. Just takes the edge off fear.* He shook his head. *Idiot. I'm not afraid. I'm fine. See I'm here, aren't I? I haven't panicked. I can do something right.*

That big bloke, the one he had helped get the door down, that bloke respected him, he could tell. Seemed familiar from somewhere, but you couldn't out and out ask someone if you had met him before. *Bet the guy knows me, bet he recognised my voice,*

and that's why he asked for my help. Knew he could trust me. See, I'm not useless.

Tim was being a right wanker. All that huggy huggy nonsense earlier on. Like he wanted to comfort him or something. Frank could see right through him. He knew why Tim really hugged him. It was because he was scared himself. *I'm not scared,* he thought. *I'm just realistic. I've got more sense than most of these idiots. I know the risks more than they do. That's all it is. I'm sensible. They're just prats...*

He looked at the bag he had been filling. Full. Another couple of bags, and they could go. He dumped the bag down by the door, and watched as a couple of individuals picked up the bags, and ran out the door.

"Where are they going?"

"To the car," the bloke with the outside in sweater answered. "They're doing the animal run."

"Hope they don't run off and leave us."

"Why would they do that?" the man sounded puzzled as he put down his bag, and picked up another one, empty.

See? They're all so bloody stupid. Naïve is the word. 'Why would they run off?' These idiots don't know a thing.

Frank shook his head at the idiocy of people. *Still, we'll be home soon,* he told himself. He could have a proper drink, and curl up with Mrs Chips on the sofa. Maybe Tim would unwind a little, and they could watch that old film together. 'The African Queen.' Not shout at each other, for one night only, not call each other names.

Frank blinked back tears. *Silly,* he thought. *Silly to think he'll ever want me again. It'll never be the same now. He doesn't know it yet, but he doesn't love me anymore. That's why we fight. It's over.* His face ached as it twisted in an anguished frown. *Mother will be pleased,* he thought bitterly.

Still, even if his daydreams didn't come true, even if he and Tim couldn't relax in each other's arms, at least Mrs Chips still loved him.

Poor Mrs Chips. He imagined her scratching around the house, whining under the bed, scrabbling at the door. If he wasn't gone too long, if he got back before midnight, she would be okay. She'd probably sleep through the whole thing in her basket under the bed, in her own safe den. He'd left music on for her, so that loud noises from the street wouldn't startle her. He'd left out chew toys. She'd

have finished her food by now. She'd be okay. If he got back in time.

Christ I need a drink.

Ann

She thanked God she had been given a job to do that required concentration. Away to the left of her a slim woman in a wind-cheater was crying. That could have been her.

At first the animals she filmed seemed to lunge up as she zoomed in on them, emerging and receding into a dark sea. White against black, little shaking bodies trying to hide. Then the lights came on, and the whole shed was exposed. A long gloomy building, utterly functional. As she adjusted the lighting levels on the camera her breath caught in her throat. *My God, and the guy has four of these sheds.* Designed for sterility, to let in no light, no fresh air, no sign of a better world. A concrete box. A tomb. This was going to take forever. How could they ever get so many out?

It was still gloomy in the shed, so she kept the camera's overhead light on, but now she had to be careful not to go into close-ups on any of the other activists' faces. Although everybody was masked up, some people's body types could give them away, or their manner of walking. Sam was particularly distinctive. Six foot three, barrel-chested, striding along with his feet sticking out like a duck. When she caught him on camera she rapidly moved the shot.

Around her people were filling bags, including the woman who had been crying. Two men were decimating metal cages by the door, putting all their effort into twisting at the bolts with a metal wrench. As she focussed in on the scene a muffled grunt came from one or another of the two men just as the cage door cracked open. Tenderly one of them reached in to remove the occupants, securing them in a bag, before moving onto the next cage. One of the men – she realised suddenly that it was Simon and dropped the lens so that it missed his face – held a piece of paper towards her. She focussed in on the writing, narrowing the beam of the camera's small overhead lamp, and felt her stomach churn. The document detailed the destination to which these animals had been assigned. She swallowed as she recognised the date. Tomorrow morning. These animals were to have been sent for vivisection tomorrow morning. She felt sick as Simon turned back to his work, and she swung the camera around to take in the rest of the action.

Next to her a masked figure held open a bag while another

lifted the animals into it. Ann closed in on their hands, then gasped as she saw an emaciated body in the run. She swallowed, and focussed on the corpse. As the light of her camera narrowed down on the animal, it twitched, and moved its legs. Ann cried out, and the camera jumped slightly. This skeleton, more pink than white it was so bald, was lying on its back, moving its legs in a slow rowing motion. *The light,* she thought. *It's scared of the light. It's trying to run away.*

For a moment she was dizzy, but she carried on filming. She saw her gloved hand reach into the shot and sorrowfully cradle the animal, lift it away. This life was all but guttered out. He or she would almost surely die – there was no way this creature could be bundled in with the others. But she put the little body into the breast pocket of her fleece jacket anyway. Where it was warm.

The man who was holding the bag put his arm around her. "I'm sorry," he murmured. She nodded, grateful for their shared understanding, although she would never know who this man was. "Thank you," she whispered. "I'm sorry too."

Perhaps she should leave the creature to die here. She didn't know. Maybe it would die in fear because of her action now. But surely it would die in fear anyway – and the thought of it dying alone was too much to bear.

Karen

She was shaking a little as she stepped out of the shed into the rain. It was drumming down now, straight down, as (small mercy) there was no wind driving it. The rain fitted her mood. It slapped the running puddles like lead-shot, clacking as it hit, hard and bitter and cold.

They had promised themselves originally that they were going to get all the animals out. That had been the whole point of this raid – that this time they weren't going to leave any victims behind. Not this time. They had planned to clear out one shed entirely, destroy the breeding records of all his stock, so that he couldn't start up again. Put the bastard out of business. It didn't look like it was going to happen. Too few people, not enough equipment, since half the bags hadn't arrived, and too little time.

She had done so many raids over the years, and images buzzed in her head as she ran with a satchel over her shoulder and two bags in her arms. Each liberation scooped her out, left her

hollow. Even though all the raids she had been on had ended in success, in liberation for some of the animals at least, she came away from the experience feeling like dying, already dead inside. When the anger passed she was left with a dull ache, a grief that wouldn't go away.

It was never-ending, she thought, as she pushed branches aside, and shoved her way through the undergrowth. The whole world was an endless machine, a mincer, just there to grind living creatures into – what? Money? Blood?

It was beyond her, how so many people embraced this world, this horrendous prison that they were all trapped in. How they took out loans for holidays, worked nine to five to pay off the mortgage, got swallowed up in all the distractions, all the lies. She just couldn't understand. Everybody, her parents, her old friends from work, could accept it. *This is the way the world is, always has been, always will be, time out of mind, forever and ever, amen. Nothing will change it.*

Ah but even if she believed that, she couldn't act like it was true. She had to try to change things. The problem was that most people wouldn't even try. She wasn't unreasonable. She didn't expect people to do the kind of things she did, to give up their lives for animal rights. But no-one from her old life would even go veggie – and that was such an easy thing to do. *'Why set yourself up for disappointment,'* her brother said to her once, when they were still on speaking terms. He had walked past a street stall, then recognised her and come over. *'People are like me. They don't want to see all this stuff. You'd be better beating your brains out against a brick wall than taking on the whole world.'*

She couldn't change the world. She knew that now. It had cost her so many friendships, her marriage and her home. On the far side of that battlefield, now that she had rebuilt her life, had new friends, a new home, she could finally look back and see where her brother had been coming from. Yes, her whole world had changed completely, but it seemed that everyone else remained the same.

The fact that he had been right didn't change a thing. She still had to try. One animal at a time, one day at a time, she had to try. Even though she knew that she would never see true animal liberation in her lifetime. It could come in hundreds of years – or never. But still, she had to try.

Beyond the trees the field was slick with mud. She skidded, and landed on her bottom, not using her hands to break her fall, as

they were protecting the bags. These clothes were definitely getting disposed of. She must be leaving clues all over the bloody place. The problem was that the mud had congealed all over her feet, and it was like she was running through treacle. It would be bad enough in the daytime, but with visibility down to practically bugger all things were atrocious. At the car she popped the boot up, and placed the satchels next to four others. They were all secure enough, with enough air. After the next run someone would have to take the car to the van, place the animals in the cages there, so that they could reuse the bags. Get more out. She put the door down, wincing at the little "phut" noise it made as it connected. Then she turned, and made her way back through the wood.

Just as she approached the edge of the trees she stumbled over a root, and caught herself just before she went crashing to the ground. "Damn," she hissed, then froze.

There, just within her sight, parked opposite the entrance to the farmer's drive on her left, was a police car. With a sick feeling of horror she allowed herself to sink back into the darkness. Jack was jogging towards her, already amongst the trees, head down, with fresh satchels cradled in his arms. Swiftly she turned her head, and made a gesture: *Stop.*

Puzzled he waited, barely visible in his black clothing against the shadows of the wood. All that showed was the glint of his eyes through his balaclava. *Enough noise though to wake the dead,* she thought as she crept – much more carefully this time – towards her colleague.

"What?" whispered Jack.

She jerked her thumb up the drive. He looked. Then he looked back at her.

"Bollocks," he groaned.

"Where's the lookout?" she asked, annoyed, just as her walky talky crackled.

It wasn't the lookout.

"Sierra Oscar to Charlie Bravo..."

"Oh my God," Karen whispered. "We're picking up the police frequencies..."

"They'll have heard that in the shed won't they?"

"Hope so. He might have it switched off. When we send a message we do a triple beep first. This guy doesn't, or if he does it doesn't come through on our sets, so maybe they haven't switched

it on in the shed."

"What should we do?"

"I don't know," she gnawed her lip, thinking rapidly. Nothing like this had happened before. What the hell had gone wrong with the walky talkies? You weren't ever supposed to be able to pick up police signals on them. Alright, it might be useful in another situation, but this was not the time. *Damn,* she thought. *Worry about that later.*

"Can you get to the car," she asked. "He won't be able to see you from there..."

"Hang on..." Jack dug around in his pockets, and pulled out a small pair of binoculars. "For bird watching," he muttered, and passed them to her. "What's he doing?"

Karen watched for a moment, then laughed. "Having a picnic. He's got his butties out, and he's just poured himself a nice cup of tea."

"Right. I'll stow these fellahs away safely, see if I can find the lookout, then I'll come back here."

"Yeah. Tell him to change the frequency to number four by the way!" She laughed. "He may already know about the copper, but not be able to warn us because like idiots we're on the wrong frequency, and the policeman would definitely overhear. Stay with the lookout though, keep him company while we are waiting for the bobby to scram."

"OK." Jack disappeared into the wood, and Karen smiled appreciatively. From appearing first off to be a right bloody plonker, he wasn't shaping up too badly now. Unless he hijacked the car of course, but she didn't think he'd do that. Might talk a lot of shit, but he couldn't be that much of a divvy.

Keeping low, in fact mimicking Jack's commando scrabble from earlier that evening, she moved rapidly towards the shed, heart hammering, holding the walky talky as near to her ear as possible. Difficult manoeuvre, but at least it meant that if the policeman spotted her she would hear about it first. Just as she got to the door it opened, and a figure began to step out. She flung her arms around him, grabbing him by the knees, and wrestled them both back into the shed.

"Hang about love, time for that later." She recognised the voice – it was Ian. Although she knew him reasonably well – in fact it had been her idea to invite him – he seemed to be winding people up on

this raid. For some reason the group who had travelled up in Tim's car were all calling him 'Bernard Manning,' and it gave her a bad feeling. The fact that he took this opportunity to grope her gave her a bad feeling too. "Fuck off you dozy bastard," she hissed, and slapped his hand off her thigh. "There's a policeman outside."

Ian span on his heel, and ran back into the shed. "Everyone quiet," he said, in a hoarse whisper. For a moment everybody stopped what they were doing, and looked at them.

"There's a police car parked down the drive," said Karen.

"Shit," Frank stamped his foot, and turned around in little circles. "I knew this was a mistake."

"Shut up," someone, Karen didn't know who, snapped. "Who is this clown anyway?"

"Oy, calm down everybody. No need to start calling people names. Anyway, look, there's only one of them in a patrol car, and he's just having a sandwich that's all. Thing is, don't use the walky talky. He's on our frequency."

"What do you mean he's on our frequency?" Simon's voice was puzzled more than worried. "The police have their own frequency don't they? They don't make walky talkies to pick up police signals..."

Sam groaned and raised his hand. "They're American," he said, "friend of mine ordered them over the internet. Police there must be on a different frequency."

Simon let out a noise like a muffled implosion, then shrugged. "Well, at least we know where we're up to now. That'll teach you not to buy British." The attempt at humour fell flat amidst the tension of the room. Simon cleared his throat and switched the machine on to listen to the voices. "Sounds perfectly random stuff to me," he said after a moment, cautiously optimistic. "Don't think they're on to us."

"Why's there only one of them then?" Frank asked. "Aren't they supposed to be paired up? The other one might be sniffing around."

"How come you can't hear anything about it on the radio then?"

"If they were here checking the place out do you honestly think the guy in the car would be sat there drinking tea and munching butties," Karen snapped. "It's a bloody coincidence." Around her she could tell people were nervous, edging away from the enclosures. "Besides, we can hear what they are saying. They aren't

on to us. Get a grip."

"Someone needs to go tell the other lookout," Simon pointed out.

"I'm tuned in to number four," Karen suggested. "I sent a message to the lookout on the west side to change the frequency. Do you want us to try him?"

Simon nodded. Karen fiddled with her walky talky.

"Hello," she said in a light tone, deliberately unlike herself. "You never turned up for our pyjama party. Did you lose your way?"

There was a crackle, then a response.

"Yeah, my Dad wouldn't let me have the car."

Karen smiled. That was Manjit.

"Oh, that's such a shame. Think you might be able to make it later?"

"Dunno. I'm grounded. See if my Dad goes out later on."

"Can you wait till then?"

"Yeah – I think he'll go off soon. He's just having his dinner now. But don't worry. It doesn't bother me being grounded. Dad's half-asleep anyway, and I've got a mate over here. We're okay for now. See you later yeah? Give my love to your friends, and tell them not to worry. The party can go ahead as planned."

"Will do. Over and out."

Karen smiled at the others. "See? He's not panicking either. Now all we need to do is warn the other lookout."

Simon smiled. "You don't know where she is. Anyway, maybe she already knows."

"Maybe she doesn't."

He lifted a shoulder in a shrug. "So I should go tell her. Everyone, keep busy and keep calm."

"Right. Remember, we are on frequency four, okay?"

"Fine. See you all later." He held his hand up in a swift farewell, and lunged out the door.

Karen picked up a bag, and joined Tim, who was still breaking open cages, and started filling her bag with animals. After all, that was what she had come here for originally. Around her others also started to return to their work. She sensed fear in many of them now. At any moment the policeman might see a masked figure moving in his mirror. They could have barely seconds left, or another fifty minutes. Then again, they could be stuck in here until morning, when the farmer might find them all. Her stomach churned with

panic, but she gritted her teeth and ignored it. There was nothing to do other than turn her anxiety into action, to work against the clock.

She jumped as her walky talky cackled again. She relaxed as she heard Simon's voice saying,

"Hey, you ever read Alice in Wonderland? I just stepped through the Looking Glass, and it is all fine."

"What are you, on drugs?" she asked, and laughed with relief. They had been in worse positions, she reminded herself, and she wasn't about to panic yet, just because some copper had decided to have a very late lunch on a country lane.

Ahead of her the figure of Sam started to spray paint a wall, and others started to complain as they realised they had run out of bags as the last lot of satchels were filled up. The woman filming had the camera back on, recording the writing on the wall. Her own last bag full, Karen stripped off her jacket, knotted it firmly into a secure hold all, and started filling it with the guinea pigs from one last cage. At some point more bags would be released, and they could come back for the others.

Leave no prisoners, she thought, and kept on going.

Manjit

The only thing that broke the tedium of the night was the occasional person turning up with bags. As Karen crept back through the woods Manjit glanced in the boot. It had been left unlocked for ease of access. He could hear the animals cheeping, and resisted the temptation to look at them. The poor creatures would be terrified enough.

He thought a prayer for them to a deity he didn't really believe in, and hoped his atheism was wrong. *What god would ever have let this happen anyway,* he thought, bitterly, and gently let the door back down.

As he turned he saw yet more confirmation that there wasn't a god – or that if there was a god he was an out and out bastard.

A police car was parked on the farmer's drive.

"Shit," he muttered and pulled out the walky talky.

His faith in a benevolent deity took another battering when he heard the police frequency coming through on his handset.

"Great," he said, "just great." With a fair degree of fear and trepidation he started running to the trees.

Frank

The worst thing about waiting was how helpless, how useless he felt. Here they all were, stuck in a shed, a policeman outside, and he had no idea what would happen next. All they could do was carry on like nothing had happened, even though they could be caught at any second. He had a feeling in his mouth and chest like he had swallowed metal and the horrible notion was dawning on him that he was sobering up.

He could see the animals now. Oh, he had seen them before, but they hadn't really registered. He had been safely cocooned. Now he could see them. Absolutely helpless. How could he save them? He couldn't even save himself. As the alcohol burned off in the panic of the moment he could see where he was, what he was and who. There was nowhere he could hide.

If a policeman comes in now, all these animals will be caught, we'll all be caught, and Mrs Chips will be locked up in the house for God knows how long. She might end up in police kennels. She might be put down.

They had run out of bags. They should be leaving, now, right now. But they were stuck. Idiot coppers crawling around, and everyone else seemed to think it was okay, that they would just go away. As he stood, twisting his fingers, Tim finished what he had been doing and joined him.

"Here," Tim was tying his sweatshirt into a knot. "Try this."

"That won't work."

"It will if you do this." Tim tied three of the four corners together, and started to put guinea pigs into the pouch. Once it was full he tied the fourth corner together, then used the sleeves to tie around the top again.

"Thanks." Frank stripped off his own coat, and repeated the operation, with the slightly exaggerated caution of the drunk. As Frank started placing guinea pigs into the makeshift bag Tim held the coat for him, surreptitiously tightening the knots. Frank was ashamed, and didn't want to look at Tim. Then he shook his head. "Sorry."

"What for?"

"For being an utter arse."

"It's okay. You've been upset."

"I should have told you."

"What?" Tim had removed his sweatshirt, still with a shirt

covering him, but no more layers to offer. As his back was slightly turned to Frank it was easier to talk. Still removing guinea pigs Frank continued.

"Mrs Doughty couldn't have Mrs Chips today. She was pulled back into hospital for a biopsy."

"Why didn't you say? So who did you ask?"

Frank didn't say anything. Tim turned, and looked at him, the latest makeshift bag dangling from his hands.

"Oh, you didn't." It was less a question than a statement. Tim laughed, incredulous. "I can't believe you asked her. What the hell were you thinking of?"

Frank hung his head. "Sorry."

Tim turned his back again, carried on removing guinea pigs.

"What did you tell her? You stuck to our story did you, or did you tell her you were going out with a girlfriend?"

"She wouldn't have believed me."

"She would have. She'd have wanted to."

"I know. I told her I had a date. She wanted to know who 'she' was, and I couldn't... I fluffed it. So she went off in a huff. And Mrs Chips is by herself."

Silence. Tim moved on to the next cage. He sighed. "So you're worried about Mrs Chips?"

"Yeah." Frank moved across and removed his sweater.

"Well, we'll try not to be too long. You know she'll be okay. You baby her sometimes you know."

"Maybe." Frank could feel his eyes hot with tears. "But this is getting to me. All of these. They're just the same as her."

"Can you tell me something honestly?"

"Yeah."

"Have you been drinking?"

"Yeah."

"Jesus." Tim shook his head, and secured the knot. "Well, stick with me, and you'll be alright. We won't be long now."

Frank shut his eyes and felt swallowed in shame. He didn't know how Tim could ever bring himself to even look at him again.

THE MOTHERCAGE

Simon

The rain was getting heavier. It was good in a way, as it made it less likely that the policeman would see anything, but equally it meant that they would leave more tracks, more clues for the police the following day. On a previous raid a friend of Karen and himself had got caught because the tracks in the mud were so clear, and were matched to his boots long after the event. Which was why Simon always bought himself a pair of shoes from a charity shop before a raid, and then stuck them in a shoe-recycling bin afterwards. Karen wouldn't even risk that. Her old clothes always ended up in a bonfire somewhere.

As swiftly as possible he circumvented the policeman, going the longer way through the woods. Once he knew he was out of sight, and had got the reassuring communication with the shed out of the way, he put his head down and ran up the slope to where he had left Rose. For a moment his heart dropped. He thought she wasn't there.

There was a tap on his shoulder. With a gasp he turned around, to see the old woman standing behind him, with her hood up over her face, but her balaclava off.

"So you know about the policeman do you?" she said. "I was just coming to tell you, then I looked behind, and saw you up here, so I came back."

"Yes, we do know. Christ, you gave me a turn."

"Didn't mean to."

"Anyway, what would you have said if he had seen you? What have you got your face bare for? He could have identified you later."

"Aye, well. I reckoned to myself that if he saw me in a balaclava he would know rightly what we were up to, and we'd be in a lot of trouble. But if he saw an old woman with her hood up on a rainy night he wouldn't puzzle himself too much about it. And if I had to I was going to wander up to him and pretend to be lost and senile, so he would have to drive me into town, looking for whoever owned me. That would have given you time to get away."

Simon looked at her admiringly. And for a moment he had thought that she had scarpered. He should have known better. That was the whole reason why he picked her in the first place. There had been some question about the wisdom of taking a sixty-eight year old woman on a raid, but he had argued that where a younger and less experienced person might run, Rose could be relied on to stand

her ground, and if necessary think on her feet. Well, she had certainly justified his faith in her.

"You're a great woman, do you know that?"

"Oh, be quiet, or I'll tell Harold on you."

He laughed, and gave her a quick hug. "We're on number four by the way," he said. "I'll let them know I found you."

"Right. I'll stay here then shall I?"

"Yeah. Listen in on the police frequency, and use four to tell us if he goes anywhere."

Rose raised her hand cautiously. "Wait," she said. The two of them listened attentively to Rose's walky talky as the voices scratched and fizzled in and out of hearing.

The two of them looked at each other, then laughed.

"I love football," said Rose. "Can't say I understand it one wee bit, but I do love it when the police over-react at the end of a game like that."

"Well, maybe they aren't overreacting at all. Maybe they really do need all available units..."

Beneath them the police car could be seen, moving off.

"Poor man," said Rose. "I wonder if he got to finish his sandwich."

Simon shrugged, laughed again, and ran down the hill.

THE MOTHERCAGE

10.00 pm

Jack

It had to be admitted that standing around watching was even more nerve wracking than being in the shed. With just the hiss of the rain, the groaning of trees and one very taciturn lookout for company things played on your mind.

He had run into the lookout on the way through the trees. After explaining the situation to him they returned to their post, and he tried to ease the tension by making conversation. Just being friendly, after all. But the other guy was positively rude, and told him in no uncertain terms to shut up. "Don't take it the wrong way mate, but I am trying to listen to this," he said, waving the walky talky in his face.

After the brief conversation with the people in the shed things settled again to a nervy silence. From this angle they could see the police car, the main body of the road, and a little bit of the drive. They couldn't see the sheds, or the farm. Apparently the other lookout could see the farm clearly. Jack tried to imagine the anxiety occasioned by seeing lights turning on in bedroom windows, figures moving behind the curtains. Christ, he was nervous. And as time crawled Jack began to realise that the policeman, even if entirely ignorant, could still pose a serious problem.

"How are they going to get out of the shed?" he hissed at his companion.

"Carefully," came the dry response.

Jack spent the subsequent moments screwing his courage up to ask a question that he knew might seem selfish, but which never the less had to be asked. Better start off cautiously. He didn't want this guy thinking he was scared.

"How many bags we got in the cars?"

"Dunno. Forty odd."

Jack nodded, and let this information sink in. Tentatively he continued.

"Shouldn't somebody get those animals to safety?"

"Yeah. Someone who knows where they are going to go to."

"But if the police come along and nick everyone in the shed then none of the animals are saved."

The lookout didn't say anything, and Jack could tell his words were sinking in.

"Well?"

A triple beep sounded out and the lookout hissed, "shut up," as he lifted the handset to his ear. "Yeah, what is it mate?"

Jack couldn't quite hear the walky talky over the rain, so he turned his head and stared towards the police car. It was moving, away from the farm and the sheds. He felt his stomach turn to water. Christ, that was a close one... He hadn't realised quite how frightened he had been. Then he realised that he had just made himself look like a right coward to the lookout, and all for no reason. The crisis had passed, at least for the time being. If he had only kept his mouth shut for a moment more he wouldn't have had to look bad.

The lookout put the walky talky back into his side pocket, and gave Jack the thumbs up. "He's been called back into town for the football match," he said. "Now you can go back down and get the other animals out."

"Look mate, about what I said, I'm sorry but someone had to think about..."

"Just go down there," the guy sounded exasperated. "It doesn't matter what people say, does it? It just matters what you do. Just go down and get them out."

As Jack started to run he was already forgetting how difficult he had thought the lookout's job was. "Why doesn't he come and help then, if he knows so much about it?" he muttered as he ran.

As he broke from the bank of trees on the far side of the fence a masked figure crashed into the woods coming from the other direction.

"Great," he snorted to himself. *Like a bloody tank had gone through. I thought we were meant to be keeping it quiet...*

Frank

As soon as the message came through that the policeman had gone Frank made up his mind. That had been too close by half, and he didn't expect to get so lucky again.

"Tim, can we go now?"

"No we can't. We're not finished."

"Yes we are." He was shaking, and trying to keep the fear out of his voice. He didn't understand how Tim wasn't feeling it. Jagged, and painful, little shots of terror. "How do we know this football story isn't a ruse, and they aren't going for reinforcements?"

"If there were reinforcements coming, don't you think he would

have stayed there? He wouldn't just drive off to let us get away."

"So we should take our chance, and get away now."

"Not till we've finished."

Frank stared despairingly as Tim wandered off, totally preoccupied. He shut his eyes and shook his head. When he opened them again Tim and a slim woman were sliding satchels by their handles onto a long broom. Presumably this was to enable them to carry far more bags at a time, bearing the pole between them with about twenty bags dangling from it. Good idea, if it didn't look so dodgy to any policemen or farmers who might be passing by.

Shit, this is on me then. Frank realised that he was about to do something that would make him instantly hated by anyone who ever heard about it, but it was always up to somebody to make these unpopular decisions. He was thinking about the guinea pigs, not glory. He had given Tim his chance. If that chance was thrown back in his face then no-one could blame him. Tim had only himself to blame.

Quietly he gathered up the makeshift bags he had made out of his clothes (these were too hit-or-miss to be risked on the pole) and left the shed. He started to run towards the woods. A figure burst out of the bank of trees, startling him so much that he almost dropped his precious cargo, but he kept himself together, and ran on. Torn by branches, tripped by roots, slipped by mud, nevertheless he passed the lookout, got to the car, and deposited his load into the back seat.

The other two cars were also full of animals. Briefly he glanced at the vehicles, and only hoped that the drivers would have the same kind of good sense that he was showing.

He got into the driver's seat, and stared at himself for a moment. Blue eyes staring through a slit in a black mask. *What a piece of filth,* he told himself, then pulled off the balaclava. He had to look ordinary if he was pulled over... *Shit.* He didn't look ordinary. He looked pale and frightened. His eyes gleamed with fright. Even his hair was standing out at all angles, trying to draw attention to itself. An astonished dandelion look. He brushed it down with his hands, desperately trying to flatten it.

Calm down, he thought. He squeezed his gloved hands together in a knot, and rested his head on the clenched knuckles, as though he was praying. He was ashamed, and overwhelmed with

fear. Why had he come? He should have known he would be like this. He was always like this over anything that mattered.

"Shit," he muttered, and pulled out his mother's gift to him, the hip flask, and drained it to the last bitter drop. How the hell had he got through so much? And why was he still drinking, when he had told himself he was going to stop?

Don't go now, he told himself, with his right hand on the door handle. *They still need you.*

Go now, he told himself, pulling out the car keys with his left hand, *or you'll all get caught.*

He looked at the car clock. It was getting late, if he wanted to be back before Mrs Chips needed to be let out for her wee. And anyway, there were other vehicles. It wasn't like people were going to be stuck here...

At this point the lookout came and rapped on the window. Frank humiliated himself by screaming out loud.

"What are you doing?"

"I've got to get them somewhere safe," he flustered. The lookout pointed in the window, at the flask on Frank's lap. "Are you pissed?"

That's it, fuck you, he thought, suddenly furious, and started the car.

"Oy," the lookout smacked the window, and ran around to the front of the vehicle. The engine hiccuped and stalled as the man leaned over the bonnet, as though he could hold the vehicle back by main force. Frank yelled, and started the car again. As it lurched forward Frank pulled it jerkily into reverse, splashing backwards, revving and turning the car, driving as fast as he could. The lookout stumbled, then righted himself, and started to run, half hopping, after the vehicle. Frank put distance between them, then, as suddenly as he had started, stopped the car. Guilt chewed at him, as he glanced in the rear-view mirror. The lookout was still staggering along. Frank rested his head on the wheel.

"What am I thinking," he said aloud, and smacked himself on the back of the head. "It's this fucking stuff. I can't think anymore."

He wound the window down, and threw the flask out, in a moment of self-loathing. The spiralled monogram glinted briefly as it turned in the headlights before splashing in the mud. Frank saw the lookout, gaining ground on him, and imagined the scene when the self-righteous prick caught up with him.

That did it. He put his foot down.

In the rear-view mirror the lookout stopped running and held his arms out in a gesture of despair.

Manjit

As the noise of the engine kicked in Manjit realised that the blond young man was really going to do it.

"Oy," he shouted, striking his palm against the side window. The lad looked daggers at him, and the car hopped and stalled. Manjit ran around to the front of the vehicle, and flung himself over the hood, stretching his arms out wide to hold on. It was slippery with rain, and he slid partly, twisting his leg painfully as the car jerked forward again. "Shit," he cried, and scrabbled forward. "Get out the bloody car," he yelled. "What do you think you are playing at?" He looked up, but the rain filmed and fractured the windscreen. He couldn't see the driver's face. If only he hadn't been wearing a balaclava, perhaps the kid could see how desperate he was. Perhaps a human face would make him realise what he was doing, make him feel less alone.

Fuck it, I don't care what the kid thinks so long as he stops. The car lurched away from him as the boy went into reverse. Manjit slid off the bonnet, and caught himself on his hands and knees, just avoiding going completely flat on his face. Red pain seared through his right leg and he cried out. The car was getting away. He lurched to his feet. *Think about the leg later,* he told himself, as he started to hobble and drag himself along after the car. Normally he could run for miles. He could certainly try to run now – this was more important than keeping fit.

Ahead of him the car paused for a moment. Manjit's heart lifted with the hope that the driver was having second thoughts. *Come on, come on. Do the right thing.* He put his head down, and pushed himself in a charge, as though he were running to head butt a wall, trying to break it down with sheer effort. *Come on.* He was no longer clear whether the thought was directed at the boy in the car, or at himself. His body just wanted to sit down for a moment, to rest a while – even if it meant lying in the mud. Anything so that his leg wouldn't burn.

His leg didn't matter.

Faintly over the rain he heard the engine start again. He looked up and his heart sank.

"Oh you're kidding," he groaned. The car was speeding off again. He stopped, and stood, and swayed in the rain. *Perfect,* he thought, *just perfect.* He looked towards heaven, and reached his arms out in an ironic gesture of defeat. "Thanks a lot, you bloody bastard," he shouted up at the wall of water which engulfed the sky. "If you're listening, thanks a bloody bundle."

He turned, and limped back to the vantage-point, pulling out the walky talky to break the bad news. He was glad he wasn't in the shed. Morale was about to plummet to an all time low.

Fiona

They had just run out of bags, pockets, spare coats, and there were still animals trapped in the deep metal trays.

"Dad," she whispered as he went by. He stopped and stared at her.

"Yes love?"

"Are there any other bags in the cars?"

"No. But if we hurry we may be able to get these animals into the transport cages, and then bring back the empty bags to do another run."

He looked around the shed and let out a whoosh of air. His shoulders slumped. "Though I think a lot of these have just about had it. I think people are too shaken up by that police thing to stick with it for much longer."

"How long will it take us to get all these bags up there?"

He looked around the shed, then clapped his hands, a muffled noise because of the gloves.

"Not too long." He passed her a sweeping brush, and slid a bag along it, so that it rested against the broom end. "Get as many of these on as you can. Then get someone to help you carry it to the car. Still got the keys?"

"Yeah."

"Good." He squeezed her on the shoulder reassuringly, and in the dim light she could see his eyes crinkle in a smile – sad but a smile non-the-less. As he turned to walk away he bumped into a young man holding a bundle in his arms.

"Hey mate," he said. "You I can trust. Can you help this lass here?"

"Sure," he nodded, handing over his bundle of clothes. Fiona smiled, recognising his voice. She remembered Tim from when they

were both teenagers, and she'd had a big crush on him. He had very gently broken the news to her, in such a way that she hadn't felt silly for very long. She still had a soft spot for him.

Between them they had slid as many satchels onto the pole as possible, and were about to head out the door when Karen came up and tapped Tim on the shoulder.

"I am really sorry," she started off by saying.

"What?" he sounded nervous. "What's happened?"

"The lookout just phoned. Fr... He just drove off in your car."

There was a horrified silence. Several other people had overheard the remark. Although it was dim in the shed, and like everyone else Tim was masked up, his body language radiated a shock so complete she could feel it. Fiona felt her heart go out to him as he let himself sag for a moment in the dark.

Suddenly people started speaking. A man who had just come in swore loudly, and started ranting about cowards who disappeared when the going got tough. Another man started making objectionable comments about "queers" in a nasal whine, and several people started grabbing bags and making a dash at the door. Into the panic her Dad stepped, blocking the door.

"Quiet," he said. Although he didn't raise his voice the word resonated, and everyone stopped what they were doing. He stood there, a massed shadow with arms outstretched, barring the way.

"You don't panic, you don't run. Everybody, calmly, finish what you are doing. "

"Yeah, but what are we doing?" The man who had just come in out of the rain spoke up. "What can we do now?"

"What we came to do."

"That fucking wanker ran off and probably betrayed us," cut in the querulous tenor. "We have to get out of here. That kind of scum probably is going to tell the police to save his own hide."

A female voice interrupted. "Shut up Mr Manning – or come out of the closet. One or the other."

"All of us, shut up and get on with it. We don't know why he ran," her Dad said. "Probably he ran for what he thought were good reasons." He paused and pointed at the bundle of bags by his feet. "He must have thought the animals were in danger, wanted to save those we already have out. That's what some of us were just thinking now, when we made a dash for the door. We aren't scum, are we? But we are going to have to hurry it along now. We have to

leave after the next run. We can't get them all out. We don't have time anymore."

Karen groaned, and turned away.

"But if we keep our heads down and don't panic we can still get another lot out."

"That's right," Simon agreed. "You two," he pointed at Fiona and her miserable companion. "Get over to the vehicles, stow these animals safely, and then drive to here." He handed Fiona a piece of paper with instructions.

"Okay," she whispered.

"What the hell are you thinking?" Mr Manning raised his voice again, and Fiona felt her hackles rise. "That bloke there is the wanker's boyfriend. They'll do a runner."

Simon turned on him and snarled. "I trust both of these people a lot more than I trust you," he said. "If I ask them to do it, and it needs doing, I know they'll get the job done.

He turned to the rest of the room, and started pointing at people. "You, you and you. Go with them. You can help them when they get there, and come back as quick as you can. Now, go," he ordered them.

Her Dad moved aside. Followed by a downcast Tim and three unknown strangers, she passed through the doors, and out into the rain. She kept her head down, and tried not to start crying again. The other sheds were full, and even this one would not be emptied in the end. They would leave so many behind.

Simon

It wasn't as bad as it first appeared. Simon surveyed the room critically, weighing up the aftermath of Frank's desertion.

Out of thirteen people in the shed only five had reacted badly – and four of them were ones he had originally expressed reservations about anyway. Three were very young and inexperienced – well-meaning and passionate, but just not tried yet. Mr ALF – well he had been an obvious wally from the get go. He had checked with Karen, and it turned out that he had come through on Jenny's word of mouth. Well, it was fairly obvious that the young woman had seen for herself the error of her ways. Jenny wasn't bad – she had carried herself off well the first time she had been out. But her taste in blokes left a little to be desired.

One or two of the younger three who had made a dash for the

door might well gain a bit of steel from tonight's excursion, he considered thoughtfully. At least they had all picked up bags before they thought to run. And they had all pulled themselves together, or at least allowed Sam to bring them back in line. Mr ALF of course would never be asked again. Simon crinkled his brow. It was no surprise to him that Jack turned out to be a Mr ALF type – there were a few of them about after all. He would never have invited him, and hadn't realised that Jenny's boyfriend was the infamous Jack, a braggart from London who pissed off everybody in the end. No doubt he was trying to impress her with tonight's show of machismo, and win back her affections. Well, unless she was totally daft (and Simon didn't think she was) that didn't seem too likely to work.

No, it was Ian who was the surprise – or Bernard Manning as he was now indelibly characterised in Simon's brain. He had been an unknown quantity. Karen knew him from years' back, when Simon was still happily married, and working in advertising. While he had been working out ways to sell products he didn't believe in Karen and Ian had worked in a rescue together, gone hunt sabbing together, done raids together. Either he had changed, or Karen had been very naïve. After this was all over he was going to ask Karen what the hell she was thinking of, asking such an out and out homophobe on the raid. Had she not realised that the man had a problem with gays?

He was pleasantly surprised though that Fiona didn't panic. Or perhaps not surprised – just gratified. It justified his faith in her. The first raid she had ever been on, and she had been completely unprepared. Despite the fact that tonight was a bolt from the blue, she just got on with it. You had to admire that in a girl. He remembered her as a young teenager on demos, bringing the occasional school friend to a protest, writing essays and doing presentations for English and General Studies about why vivisection should be banned, or why everybody should go vegan. Didn't seem to bother her that some of the teachers marked her down on point of principle. She had still got into University. Nice to see she had grown up a good one. It gave him hope.

Yes, he thought as he looked about the shed. *The dust is settling.* Karen was passing out spray cans, and some of the group had already turned back to work, painting on the walls. Sam was searching through the filing cabinet at the bottom corner of the shed. There was only one problem. Jack had started following people

around, still cursing Frank – even by name now. Simon tapped him on the shoulder.

"Over here mate," he said, drawing him out of the hearing of others.

"What?"

Simon lowered his voice. "When I was talking to the lookouts just now, the one at your end said we were lucky only one person bolted. So, if you don't mind, tone down the rhetoric, and do something useful."

For a moment there was a flustered silence, then Jack stuttered out, "He's got no right implying that. I just said..."

"Stop saying and start doing. We need to leave a message. Here."

He tossed a spray can at the other man, and started to walk off.

"What am I to do with this?"

"Leave a signature, Mr ALF."

Simon shook his head as he moved through the group, passing out the remaining spray paints. Although he gave out words of encouragement to people as he took full bags off them, he didn't feel positive. He didn't like how angry he felt, even with people on the same side as himself. He seemed always to be rubbing people up the wrong way, making enemies. All he wanted to do was get everybody out safe and sound, without a panic, to get as many animals as possible out without a panic. With everybody this antsy there was a lot that could go wrong. Anyone could make a mistake ... including him.

Tim

Soaked through to the skin, as unhappy as he could ever remember being, he trudged through the mud and rain wishing he'd never met Frank, never thought he was in love with anyone at all. He should have seen the signs. He was responsible for Frank's failure, precisely because he *was* responsible, and Frank wasn't. Not anymore.

Oh God. He was out there, driving drunk, with all those animals in the car. He wouldn't have anywhere safe to bring them, could easily draw attention by his idiot alcoholic antics – the animals were more likely to be recaptured in Frank's hands than they had been when the policeman had been here. The stupid

bastard might even crash, skidding in the rain and the dark, killing himself and all those innocent passengers. *Jesus,* he thought, *by bringing Frank along I might still have ruined everything.*

The lookout approached the group, dragging his right leg. Tim was glad that everyone had their faces obscured. It meant the man couldn't see his shame.

Fiona spoke. "We are going to drive off, but don't worry," she laughed, presumably to lighten the mood. "We'll be back."

"Yeah, I know you will."

As she and Tim placed the pole of bags onto the ground, Tim nervously asked, "why are you limping?"

"When that prick drove off I jumped in front of the car, like a right idiot, trying to stop him. Twisted my leg."

"Sorry."

"Why are *you* sorry?" The lookout shook his head and tutted. Tim didn't enlighten him. "I tried running after him," the lookout continued, "but the bloody thing feels like it's turned into a hot water bottle." He slapped his leg, then hissed.

"You don't think you've broken it, do you?"

"I don't think so. But my knee's going fat as a football. I'll have to think up a good excuse for my wife."

"The truth won't do then?"

The other man laughed. "Are you kidding? She nearly had a nervous breakdown when I wouldn't eat at her mum's place. 'I know you are vegan, but you mustn't offend them. It is only a little bit of milk.' And that's a woman who's been veggie all her life! Never even eaten an egg."

"What was her problem then?"

"Her mum."

"Yeah, I know that one." Tim laughed.

"Silly woman goes on about how everybody needs milk to build a big strong body. Mind you, to be fair to my wife, she's been trying to go vegan since. She read up on the dairy industry, and it knocked her sick."

"Well then, she might be proud of you."

"Oh yeah, she might be – if it wasn't me. I get the impression she thinks people should do this kind of thing – just not her husband."

"What do you mean 'you get the impression'? You should know, shouldn't you? I mean, you married her."

"Yeah," the man said thoughtfully. "Yeah, I did."

By now Fiona had the doors of the vehicle open, and the three people Simon had picked from the shed were squeezed into the back seat. Sighing Tim started to hand in the bags of animals. These three had already been carrying bags, so things were getting quite cramped for the back passengers. They reached over the back seat and gently placed some of the bags into the boot, but it was already so full that they obscured the back window.

Finally in the passenger seat himself, with one bag on his feet, two bags on his knees, and a broomstick riding uncomfortably over his shoulder (forcing the woman behind to sit, like Quasimodo, with her head squeezed onto her right shoulder) the car set off. He shut his eyes, and tried to breathe without it hurting. He had a pain in his chest like he had been kicked in it, and his heart ached like an old tooth.

At least, he told himself, at the very least he could do this much right for the animals. He could keep it together for as long as it took. Try to make up for Frank.

Rose

Rose watched the ford fiesta approach, then ran stiffly towards them. Everything creaked a little in the rain, but not enough to grumble about. She wouldn't be winning any Olympic golds, but at her age it was a matter of pride (not to mention a miracle) that she could still run at all. When she reached the car the five occupants were out, already unloading animals. Tenderly she filled her arms with a bundle of clothes containing guinea pigs. As she cradled it to her chest she could hear the peeping and squeaking and feel the wriggling of the frightened animals. "Oh," she whispered, feeling her heart swell, as she counted the sheer number of satchels and bundles coming out of the vehicle.

At last they were ready. It had seemed to take an age, yet in reality barely moments had passed. She glanced around. "Follow me," she said to her fellow conspirators, and turned, trotting through the dripping woods. She could hear the others following, but didn't bother to look. They would keep up or they wouldn't. If they couldn't keep up with an ould lady like herself, then they shouldn't be on this kind of thing, should they?

She slowed down at the edge of the trees, and peered through before stepping out. As she got to the van she unlocked the door at

the back and rolled it up. The young people started to slide the bags back off the pole and she started to pull the cages out of the back.

"Keep them in families," she said. "Don't muddle them up, we're likely to lose animals if strange males get jumbled in together."

"We didn't get many adult males," the young man who had been carrying the broom said. "About one to every eight adult females. It's mainly mothers and babies."

Rose sighed. "The males aren't as popular with vivisectors. They are harder to handle, because they fight each other when they are in a stressful situation – they can kill each other. So the breeders tend to kill off excess males, once they are old enough to be sexed. I suppose in a way they are lucky, not to be tested on like that. If it was me, I would sooner be killed than tortured. However," she tried to put her smile through in her voice, as no-one could see her face. "At least tonight it's neither death nor torture." She sat in the mud, and started to sort the guinea pigs out into cages, as rapidly as she could.

"Don't worry about putting the boxes back," she said, when all the bags were empty. "I'll do that. You lot get back to the sheds."

A young woman shook her head. "No," she said. "We need you back as a lookout as soon as possible."

Rose shrugged. She supposed the girl had a point. Swiftly then, they started to reload the van, full cages at the back, so that the next lot of rescued animals could be quickly stowed away.

"Alright then," Rose said, as she pulled down the back door. "Go on with you. Run."

Jenny

She could just see them being pulled over now. *'Hello there officer, there is a perfectly innocent explanation for all this... Just not quite sure what it is now.'* Her nerves bubbled out as laughter. The man she was sitting next to looked at her.

"What's funny?" he asked.

"Just, if the police catch us and all else fails, do you think we can all fit on the broom handle and fly off?"

It wasn't funny, but a couple of other people laughed too, breaking the tension in the vehicle.

"Here we are," the driver spoke up, as they parked in an indentation in the line of trees that surrounded the farmstead. "Look, here comes the lookout."

Jenny opened her door, and wriggled out from under the broom handle, sliding the bags onto the seats. For a moment she gratefully stretched her neck, then she leaned in and started to pull bags out. Tim – she was sure it was him – got out of the front passenger seat, and started to load up the broom with bags. *I wonder how he's feeling,* she thought, but didn't ask. Somebody being sympathetic at the moment could make him feel an awful lot worse. She had an inkling that she might have been in the same position as him if things had been just a little bit different. How would she have felt if someone she had brought on the raid had bolloxed everything up? She would have felt horrendous, even worse than she did now, realising what a fool she had been. Tim must be feeling it to the power of ten. *He's still working though,* she thought. *How on earth did he end up with a loser like Frank?*

It was almost comical, she thought, as she started piling bags onto people. The two who were carrying the pole also had bags strapped to their backs, hanging from their elbows and wrists. By now she had lost count of how many bags she had attached to her torso – and she was carrying cloth bundles in her arms as well. Every one of them, even including the lookout lady, was now so bundled up that it would have been nearly impossible to guess what species of animal they were from their silhouettes. *Never mind,* she thought, as the lookout called them to follow her. *We're getting it done. We're doing fine, despite everything. We're doing fine.*

Every animal that they stored in the van was a life saved. Her heart was light as she worked in the rain. For all the stress of the night, it felt as though fear was sloughing off her in the rain.

She was filled with tremendous hope.

Karen

Doing the graffiti didn't make her feel better. While she had been bagging up the animals she had felt that she was doing something, achieving something. Now that she knew that they wouldn't have the time to get all the animals out she felt as though her strength had gone out of her, as though she had no marrow in her bones, no courage left herself. Gutted, literally. People used that phrase – *'I'm gutted'* – without knowing what it meant, without knowing how it felt.

She was gutted.

How could she possibly have been so mistaken, so blind? Her

dismal judgement had put everything out of kilter. Ian astonished her. At some point in the last fifteen years he had turned into a whining, pompous, argumentative bigoted bastard. *Yeah, but you can't just turn bigoted. He must have always been like that.* She wracked her brains, trying to remember something that should have alerted her, but couldn't think of anything. All she could imagine was that when they worked down south they had been so busy that they never really got to socialise, to know each other's opinions, other than where they stood on animal rights. But she would never have expected an animal rights person to express the views she had heard tonight. People got chucked out of the movement for less than that. How could she have been so blind?

She slashed and jabbed with the spray can, leaving angry scrawls over the brickwork. Her self-confidence was at an all time low, and she felt like she hadn't an ounce of courage left in her. Still, she knew from experience that she didn't need courage to endure. She had never failed a job, even when her fortitude had long left the building, and there was nothing there but fear. However, she also knew from experience that tonight would always play on her mind. In the loneliness of three twenty two a.m. she would wake, maybe a week from now, or a year, or two or three, and think that maybe they did have time to finish it, but not enough confidence as a group to stay until the end.

Oh shut up, she told herself as she sprayed the ALF logo further along the wall. She knew that what she was doing now was important. This might be the straw that persuaded the farmer not to bother incurring the ire of ALF activists again, but she couldn't feel happy about it. She never felt comfortable doing it. This concrete box still housed prisoners, and she couldn't stand to hear them, to see them, while she applied slogans to the wall. There had to be something more that she could do. There was always something more.

Her heart was trembling, and she felt sure that things had gone belly up, that the group who had been sent with the animals wasn't going to come back. Grimly, jaw set, she carried on, feeling more and more angry and despairing as time crawled again to a near stop.

The mood in the shed was one of shared foreboding and cynicism when the five activists returned from their errand. Never had Karen been so glad to be proved wrong. She ran up to them, as soon as they were in the door, and grabbed several bags,

immediately starting to fill them up again. To her surprise she was shaking. Her anger was bubbling dangerously near the surface – not near enough that she would crack, but enough that she was dizzy with it, enough that her eyes and heart were hot with it. There was so much to do, and never enough time to do it. She was so angry it hurt.

This time people worked faster, more methodically – perhaps a little more desperately to cover their fear. No muttered gasps of horror, no questions or comments. Just business. Just an ordinary day in hell.

Ann

She roved around the sheds filming again, taking in a combination of the graffiti on the walls, and the continuing liberation. Big Sam had finished doing whatever it was he had been doing at the bottom corner, and the bags were nearly filled up already in the hurry. There was an air of palpable dread around her, but still people worked on. *That's enough now*, she thought. *Plenty of footage. Get this thing switched off, then do some liberation yourself.*

She packed the camera away, and slung it over her shoulder. She shut her eyes, and rubbed them briefly, trying to get some moisture back into them. The contact lenses were burning her eyes – particularly the left one, which sent random needle-like stabbing pains to the back of the orb. *Stop whinging,* she thought. *More important things.*

She grabbed two of the remaining bags and started to fill them. In the pocket by her left breast she felt, occasionally, a little movement, which reassured her that the skeletal victim she had earlier plucked from the cage was at least still alive. The sooner she got him home the better.

That eye was killing her. She wished that she had worn her glasses. She had actually decided to wear the lenses because she thought the glasses were too distinctive, and that anyone seeing a woman in a bally, with beer bottle lenses wouldn't find it too hard to identify her in a line-up. Unfortunately she hadn't realised what the air was going to be like in the shed – the filth itched behind the lens horribly.

Both of the bags were now full. Furtively she reached up and shoved her fist into her closed left eye, rubbing it. Better.

She opened her eye.

"Jesus," she cried out, and doubled over.

"What?" Simon came up behind her, and took her arm. "Are you okay?"

"I've just lost my bloody contact lens."

"Oh. Shit. Give me those bags, and take this torch. Try and find it. If you leave it behind you and the police find it, they'll work out your prescription and might be able to track you."

"Not just that. I got nicked a month ago, and they took my DNA."

Simon straightened up, and groaned. She squinted up at him.

"Don't worry," she said. "Worst comes to the worst, I'll get sent down. It's not the end of the world. Anyway, I don't have time to look, do I? We need to fill the bags."

"These are the last. All full now. We'll be going in a minute."

He crouched down, and scrabbled in the dirt, putting his torch back on and beaming it into corners.

"No," she said, as the search proved fruitless. "No luck. We'll just have to go."

"A couple more minutes," he said. "They need to load up the pole first."

On hands and knees they swept the ground, back and forth, looking for the missing lens. Finally she straightened. With her good eye she could see that everyone else was almost ready.

"Come on," she said. "I'll take my chances."

"You sure?"

She looked across at everyone else leaving the shed.

"Yeah, we got to go."

He took her hand and squeezed it. "Sorry," he said. "Good luck."

"Thank you." She smiled, her face hidden by fabric, then stood abruptly.

There were still animals in here. She looked around, and saw them, in double vision, clear and smeared like a run watercolour, one image over the other, as though there were depths behind depths to this nightmare. All night she had been looking at these animals – through a camera, trapped in torchlight, en masse and one at a time, scooped up in a gloved hand to be dropped into darkness. Now that she would never see them again she felt grief well up in her. No-one would save these animals. No-one else would ever see them again as she did, as the others had done tonight. They would be

given up for the slaughter, sacrificed to the great god of money. Whether the farmer would kill them himself to claim back the loss on insurance – after all, these animals were no longer sterile, and had lost their "market value" – or whether they would end up in a lab, their future was short, characterised by more indignity, more pain.

She wished bitterly, selfishly, that the image of the suffering billions had never come into focus for her at all, that they could always have remained blurred in the background, out of the way of her comfortable life. That she and Katriona could have been a typical mother and child, laughing and crying, and arguing about homework and boyfriends, and whose turn it was to watch what on the telly.

"Come on," Simon said, and put his arm around her shoulder.

"I don't want to leave them," she whispered, "not like this."

"I know," he said, and started to lead her to the door. "I know."

"Wait," she ran back and grabbed more guinea pigs, put them in the side pockets of her coat. As she turned she saw Simon reaching into the same enclosure to take the rest of the family. They looked at each other and nodded.

"Now we can go," she said.

THE MOTHERCAGE

10.47 pm

Simon

The three vehicles were now parked right next to the van, and everybody was working flat out. Karen had taken over as lookout, and Rose was in the van, lifting the cages up as they were filled, stacking each one carefully on top of the lower cages. There had been a bit of an altercation as he arrived. Jack was asking Sam why it was necessary to put the animals into cages.

"Can't we just stick the bags in? It's a lot quicker."

"Yeah, but it's also a lot less safe for the animals. In the cages, if they are properly loaded, they won't rattle around loose in the back and get injured. It's not like transporting potatoes or coal you know. You can't just chuck them in the back and hope everything is going to work out."

Sam's on form, thought Simon, wryly, as he got out of the car. *Never one to suffer fools gladly – or, come to that, at all. That's our Sam.*

Jack stepped towards Sam, with his finger pointing straight at him. *Uh oh. Bad sign.*

"Oy, you two," Simon butted in before things got out of hand and Sam was forced to do something he might later regret. "Stop gabbing, start packing. You got that?"

"Yes sir," someone snapped back in a military fashion. There was laughter as one figure straightened from leaning over a cage and gave a flippant salute. Under cover of the distraction Jack withdrew from the confrontation, picked up a bag, and started doing his bit. Sam was already handing a cage up to Rose.

"Good," Simon gave the group the thumbs up, then saluted back in good humour. "Nice to see you all know your place in this here army."

More laughter and Simon quietly blew out the tension that he had been holding in his chest. Thank god people seemed to have loosened up. He smiled to himself as he started to fill cages. There had been stress tonight, and things going wrong, but at least there hadn't be stupid wars between individual activists wasting everybody's time. War may have occasionally threatened to break out, but in the end they had all done what they were there to do. It just confirmed what he already knew – the most important thing was to pick the right people. There had been a major mistake tonight,

and a few others beside Frank would also never be approached again, but most of them had done a really good job. That was what mattered.

Manjit had come out worst, he thought, watching him as he propped himself against the lip of the doorway to the van. His leg was held out at a stiff angle, to take the pressure off it as he handed cages up to Rose. That knee would definitely need looking at.

As there was no-one left in the sheds, and no external sign of damage, it had been considered safe to leave that approach unguarded and Manjit had finally been persuaded to leave his post. It did however mean that this part of the operation, loading the vehicle, had to take minutes only. It was unlikely that anyone would drive by the farm at this time of night, and even if they did then chances were high that they would drive right past the place without seeing anything amiss. Even so, there was still a risk of discovery. Some random chance might bring the farmer into his shed to check up on something – not likely perhaps, but equally, not impossible. Even the presence of activists inside the farm couldn't protect them against all eventualities. However, despite the risks Simon had taken a unilateral decision to get Manjit out now.

"It's not like you can hobble along to catch up with us when we decide to drive off," he had said, "not with that leg anyway. And you know yourself, we aren't driving back in this direction. If you could have run that would be okay – but look at you. You can barely walk."

Manjit had shrugged his acquiescence, and gratefully got into the car.

And now it was coming to an end for most people. The last cage was filled, the activists were turning around, shaking hands, laughing, looking at each other with pride. For a group of people who had been so stressed only half an hour ago there was an almost party atmosphere. Even 'Bernard Manning' joined in, clapping Tim on the back. "No hard feelings mate," he declared, to the amusement of onlookers. Tim made an embarrassed noise in the back of his throat, and Bernard moved on.

Simon stood up. "Time to go," he said. "All you have to do now is go home, have a bath, get a good night's sleep. Dispose of your clothes though. And take your masks and foot protection off as soon as you are in your cars."

"Right." Jack was nodding. "Makes sense."

"Stick everything you want to dispose of in a bin bag, and

chuck it at the first opportunity. That's it really."

"How will we all get home," a woman asked. "There aren't enough cars."

"Squeeze in," someone else said. "We all managed to get up here with about a thousand guinea pigs on our knees. It should be easier on the way home."

"Yeah," someone else spoke up. "We are the greatest!"

Again there was a brief burst of celebratory high fives and hugs, and clapping on the back. Then all of a sudden everybody seemed to be getting into a vehicle and leaving.

Only four of them remained. Simon, Rose, Manjit, and Sam.

They didn't applaud each other yet. They still had a lot to do, and until it was over it wouldn't be time to celebrate.

Frank

He sat outside his flat with his eyes shut, as the rain gave way to drizzle, and drizzle faded to fog. This moment encapsulated his life. Sitting in a stationary car, that didn't even belong to him. He felt numb. Well, that was what he had wanted, wasn't it? It was just that he hadn't expected numb to feel quite so cold, so dead.

He had made this choice, he told himself, bitterly. He couldn't pretend it was anyone's fault but his own. The world tilted and little lights burst behind the dark of his eyes as he sat in Tim's car, slightly queasy, coming down to earth. He supposed it was over for Tim and him now. In the morning Tim would be around, demanding his keys back. Well, who could blame him? After all, he had used his keys to steal Tim's car, to leave him in the lurch. To leave the animals in the lurch. *Christ, I'm despicable.* It was all his fault. His nausea, the bitter taste in his mouth – that was his fault too. Everything that had gone wrong tonight was because of him. Well, that was for him to deal with. But once he went into the house it would be an admission of his failure, that the night's work was over and he hadn't done his bit.

He had to go in though. Mrs Chips was waiting for him, and the guinea pigs needed to come in out of the cold weather. He had to stop drifting. Be a man.

As he climbed the stairs he heard Mrs Chips scrabbling at the door, whining excitedly. Despite his desolation he smiled. Mrs Chips could always make him smile.

"Hi Baby," he said, as she flung herself on him the moment

the door was open. He could tell by the lack of a smell that she hadn't made a mess. "You're a good girl, oh yes you are." He crouched down to let her lick his head, and put down the bags of guinea pigs as he energetically stroked her back, then her belly as she rolled over with her legs in the air. Her tail swooped around in big happy circles, she was wagging it so hard. He found he didn't feel so bad anymore.

"No, no, don't do that!" he remonstrated laughingly as Mrs Chips finally started snuffling into the bags. He had previously had rescued rabbits in the house, and Mrs Chips had shown a remarkable tolerance of these interlopers, after an original sniff. One of the rabbits had sat back on his haunches, and calmly dealt Mrs Chips a left hook that took her completely by surprise, and ensured that she henceforth remembered her place in the pecking order – somewhere below the rabbits. Frank still chuckled at that one – most people would expect a beagle to have a killer instinct when it came to rabbits. He could imagine the surprise of hunt supporters if they had seen a member of a "killer" breed lying on her back, gently licking a rabbit's ears. He occasionally wondered if Mrs Chips even knew she was a dog. She gave every indication of thinking that she was the mother of every animal that ever came through the door. Well, every animal that wasn't a cat anyway. That was why he and Tim didn't share a flat. Tim used to come and spend the night here, or Frank would visit Tim when someone could dog sit for them. Usually Tim's Mum or Mrs Doughty. Not anymore. They wouldn't be spending time together anymore.

"Come on now," he gently chided Mrs Chips as she started licking a bag, and stroked her head, glad of the distraction. "They've been through enough."

He stood up, and took the bags again. He still had hutches in the living room. He supposed the guinea pigs could spend the night in there. Get them sorted out, then take Mrs Chips for a short walk. He would decide what to do with the rescued animals in the morning. Gently he lifted one of them out, and looked at her as she scrabbled over his hand. Still a little woozy he brushed his face against her fur, then stopped himself. *I'm still pissed,* he thought, suddenly incredulous that he had done something so insensitive. The poor bloody creature must be terrified.

"You give me ten minutes lady Chips," he said. "Then I'll take you out for your wee. These babies have been to hell and back, so I

have to get them sorted first. It wouldn't do to rescue them from being vivisected on just to have them die of fright now, would it?"

Mrs Chips bounced against the living room door, and he opened it. He looked down at her puzzled. "How did you lock yourself out of the living room," he asked. "I left you asleep on the sofa."

"I don't like dogs on the sofa."

Frank felt the bottom come out of everything. He looked up, and she was there. He stumbled back a step and hit the wall. Shock rendered him completely speechless.

"Well," she said, approaching him, with a scornful expression on her face. "I suppose at least you didn't spend the night with that 'creature' you pretend is your boyfriend. Though I can't say this is much better. What were you thinking of young man?"

Frank slid down the wall and cowered in a sitting position, holding the bag in the crook of his knees. He shut his eyes, hoping this wasn't real, but when he opened them his mother still loomed over him, a grim statue. He became as small as possible, vanishingly small – but still not small enough. She showered scorn on him, and he flinched from it. In his hand the guinea pig was struggling to get out of his grasp. He leant over it, trying to shield it with his body, to protect it from her gaze.

"Look at you," she sneered, "thinking this helps animals. If I hadn't decided to come around then poor Mrs Chips would have had to wee on the floor. Go on," she mocked. "Explain yourself."

"I can't," he managed to whisper.

She took three rapid steps towards him, and sharply struck his face.

"Stupid boy," she said.

He covered his head with his free arm and cried.

Manjit

Rose tutted as she bound up his leg. "Sit still will you," she chided him. "It's not going to get better if you don't let me treat it ›perly."

"It's not so serious," he said.

"Bad enough. You'll need to go to the hospital tomorrow. They'll need to x-ray that leg, in case you've damaged the patella. And they'll either have to drain the fluid out or put you on tablets."

Manjit groaned, and shook his head. "What am I going to say

to Dapinder?"

Rose looked up thoughtfully. "I'd consider telling her the truth. She's a lovely girl so she is, and just because her parents wouldn't like it doesn't mean that she wouldn't."

Manjit smiled. "I wish her Mum was more like you."

"Well, we were both nurses after all."

"Yeah, but she's more like the head nurse out of 'One Flew Over the Cuckoos Nest.'"

Rose laughed, and finished binding his leg. "You are a very naughty boy. You do know that, don't you?"

"I'll take your word for it." He pulled his trouser leg down, and stood up tentatively. "Better," he said. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Now, if you and your lovely wife are still speaking to each other come Sunday, would youse like to come around for dinner?"

"She'd like that," Manjit nodded. Rose and Dapinder had clicked instantly, despite the age difference. Dapinder had been dropping off clothes at the second hand shop for the sanctuary to sell when she ran into Rose. It turned out that Rose had worked as a midwife with Dapinder's grandmother, and had met her mother when she was tiny. *Small bloody world,* thought Manjit. As coincidences went that one was still his favourite.

"Is your leg okay?" Simon approached, with his hands thrust into his back pockets.

"It'll do."

"Okay then, you'll have to help us with getting the sign on the side of the van, you know."

"No problem." Manjit got up and half hopped, half walked to the side of the van where Sam was waiting with the lettering. He had the sign draped over his arm, and was holding one corner up, with a distrustful look on his face.

"You sure this'll work Manjit?" He sounded dubious. Before these things he was usually a picture of calm. Once inside the shed, or the slaughterhouse, or the lab he would do his job perfectly, but shrink into himself to do it, and come out a nervous wreck, doubtful of everything. Apparently he had been reacting like this for years. Since his wife died, according to people who had known him that long. Sometimes Manjit wondered whether Sam should just stop, cut himself some slack, since liberations seemed to hurt him. A lot of people would come out feeling like heroes, cock-a-hoop, over the

moon. Sam came out looking like a shell-shocked soldier, staggering with battle fatigue.

"Yeah, course it will work. That's why I brought it." Manjit put his hand on Sam's arm, and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Don't worry mate, it will stick."

And it did, after a few tries. Manjit showed them how to peel the letters of the backing, while Simon measured up with chalk (the previous markings having smudged off in the rain) and Rose dried the sides with spare towels.

"Ready?" Manjit stuck his corner down, and smoothed along, while Sam worked from his end. They met in the middle, then patted down to the bottom of the sign. One slight bubble needed to be chased out. Manjit nodded to himself. That side was smooth. Simon and Sam repeated the operation on the other side of the van, a little more confidently this time, now that they knew it worked. Then they all stood back to admire their handiwork.

The panels on either side now read, 'Heath and Son's Overnight Delivery Service. For all your transport needs.' Manjit laughed. It had worked well. Declan, the boss, was happy for Manjit to print out whatever he wanted, so long as he paid cost price for the materials. Fortunately Declan never really asked what he was printing, or why – he just assumed that Manjit was helping to produce banners for animal rights demonstrations, and was quietly happy with that. Exactly what the guy would think if he learned that one of his trainee sales managers was involved in this kind of thing didn't bear thinking about. He would have no choice but to sack him. Printing companies wouldn't like being implicated in so-called "terrorist" activities.

Sam walked around the van, looking at the effect critically. "Yeah," he said. "That should do it. I don't see us being stopped once we're on the motorway, not with that plastered across it." He glanced across at Manjit apologetically. "Unless the bleeding signs fall off."

"They won't. And there'll be no sign of anything ever having been on the van – not once it's been through a car-wash."

"Alright, I admit it. Brilliant. Good thinking batman."

"We all ready?" Simon was sitting impatiently in the driver's seat.

"Yeah, we're going now."

He nodded curtly as they jumped into the vehicle. Manjit slid

between the seats, and lay down in the space between their backs and the cages. Sam joined him. Two people sitting in the front looked a lot less suspicious than four. Hopefully nobody would think it too odd that one of the two was an elderly lady, and wonder why she was riding around at this time of night in a delivery van. Rose had offered to sit in the back, but the men refused to let her.

"I'm not fragile you know. I shan't break."

"Rose, I love you," Simon had said, "but just this once do as you're told. I feel bad enough you being stuck here as it is. If we hadn't needed a nurse you'd be well on your way home by now. Anyway, you're old enough to be my Mum, and I wouldn't leave her bobbing around back there."

"Alright then," she graciously shrugged her shoulders. Manjit laughed inside himself. He had known Rose for years, and she could make anything seem elegant. Even an obscene gesture aimed at a passing vivisector.

As the engine started, Manjit shut his eyes. The motion of the vehicle soothed him and despite the throbbing in his leg he began to relax. Rose had insisted on giving him a painkiller, and he could feel it taking hold. Tonight wasn't over yet, he reminded himself, but still, he felt fine. Probably it was the painkiller – he didn't really know. But whatever it was, he really felt that everything would be okay. In fact he was so confident of this that despite the pain he fell asleep.

Karen

On the way back into town most people were chattering happily. The radio was on, and everybody cheered when they heard the football results (three - one) even though most of them had no great interest in football. Karen turned her mobile phone on, noting happily that there were no messages, and the very fact that she had been free to put her phone back on was seen as a fresh cause for celebration.

"Don't let's all put our phones on though," she said. "You know, just on the off chance one of us gets nicked and they discover there was a whole bunch of mobile phones travelling along the road at sixty miles an hour in the middle of the night."

"Okey dokey," came a cheerful male voice from the back of the car, followed by a ripple of laughter.

Tim was the only one who didn't seem in a particularly celebratory mood. To be fair you couldn't really blame him.

"You alright?" she asked.

He gave the kind of smile that didn't reach the eyes, and nodded. *Liar,* she thought, but left it. She'd talk to him when she had dropped everyone else off.

As usual Sally wanted to be dropped right back on her doorstep. *Should have guessed,* Karen thought resentfully. After every demo Sally would sit there demanding to be taken straight back home, even though it meant taking everybody else out of their way, and added at least half an hour onto her journey. Karen bit her tongue. It always annoyed her when people did that, but tonight somehow it seemed even more selfish than usual. As the car slowed down she asked, without much hope, "do you have any money for petrol? Tonight's been quite expensive."

"Oh," Sally looked furtive. "Can't you like get it out of stalls? I didn't know we needed to bring petrol money."

"Yeah you did," a bloke with blond dreadlocks disagreed with her. "I told you, remember?"

Sally shook her head, and gave him a dirty look. "I've got no money anyway."

"Right," Karen clacked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. "Well, you were in luck then, weren't you, that you had your own door to door taxi service tonight."

"What's that meant to mean?"

"Just that we always ask you for petrol money, and you always 'just forget' to bring it."

"I didn't 'just forget.' I didn't want to bring money tonight because of what we were doing."

"That makes no sense at all."

"Here," the guy who had just spoken to Sally leant forward and gave Karen a bundle of notes. "That's from a stall, and here's my contribution."

"Thanks mate," she smiled at him. Tim and the other lad pulled out notes and handed them to her.

"Right then, see you." Sally jumped out of the vehicle and ran to her door. Karen shook her head. *No shame at all, that woman,* she thought, once again astonished at the selfishness of some people. *She has a job for pity's sake. What the hell is she playing at?*

"Does she never give any petrol money?" Tim watched her go dully, seeming only vaguely distracted from his inner conflict.

"Not a penny in all the years I've known her," Karen said, sourly. "I reckon next time we dump her in the next town and force her to make her own way home."

There was a ragged sputter of giggles, then the lad with the shaven hair stopped himself and spoke up apologetically. "Other than that you know, she is okay. Just a little bit mean. Because she has so many animals."

"We all have animals," the blond man said. "And last time I was out with her, on a demo, she refused to pay petrol costs, then bogged off down the pub afterwards. So if she had money for a drink, why didn't she have money for the animals?"

"Who knows?" Karen sighed. "If anyone figures out the answer to that one, let me know. It's been bothering me for years."

The bald guy smiled and shrugged. "She's not that bad though," he reiterated. Karen caught his gaze in the rear mirror and smiled at him.

"Well," she admitted as she started the engine again. "At least she was there for tonight." Not again though, she thought to herself. Sally had been one of the ones who had made a run for the door when everyone had panicked about the policeman. That wasn't something that was going to be forgotten in a hurry.

Fortunately the trip was nearly over now. The two remaining passengers in the back seat were happy to be dropped off in town and make their own way home.

"See you," Karen waved at them as they ambled off down the high street.

"Reckon they're going to get pissed tonight, don't you," she asked Tim in an attempt at levity.

"David will."

"Which one was he? The one who fancies Sally?"

"The one with the dreads. The other guy doesn't fancy Sally by the way. He just likes to think the best about everybody. He's a Buddhist, so I don't reckon he'll be getting smashed." Tim sighed.

"Are you alright?"

"No, it's just... Frank was drunk tonight you know."

"Jesus, I didn't know that."

"Is it okay if we see where he stopped, my place or his? Because we need to get those animals somewhere safe."

"I know. Don't worry – I don't mind driving you around." She smiled.

"We should try his place first. I've got cats – I can't imagine him being stupid enough to go there. Besides, I reckon he'll be wanting to avoid me."

"He'll have to avoid a lot of people after tonight. I know what happens on a raid needs to be kept quiet, but these things still get around. Rumours you know. Maybe people won't say exactly what went down, but enough will be hinted at. Nobody will ever trust him again."

"I know."

"Did you realise he was drunk when you came on the raid?"

"No. He was on the super strong mints though, so I should have guessed."

"Don't beat yourself up about it."

Silence fell, and she concentrated on her driving as she tried to calm down her angrier comments. If it had been anybody else but Tim who had brought a drunk on a raid she would have been livid, and thought he was a plonker. Tim however was anything but a plonker. He was one of the best activists she had ever known. Frank hadn't just fooled Tim, he had fooled everybody else. And perhaps you could say that Tim should have known the score better than anyone – but then at least he had the excuse that he was in love with the man. Maybe if she had met Frank before tonight she would have been clear sighted enough to see the signs. But it was easy to say that with the benefit of hindsight. Fact was, she never had met Frank, so she wasn't in a position to judge Tim, or anyone else. Besides, she wasn't so perfect herself.

"You know, I feel a bit stupid about tonight too, you know."

"Why?" Tim was looking away, out the window, his shoulders set in a miserable slump.

"Well, you know that guy you were all calling 'Bernard Manning?'"

"That idiot," he laughed bitterly.

"Yeah. That idiot. My fault he was approached for tonight. Can you believe I have known him nearly sixteen years, and I didn't realise he was like that?"

"Maybe the subject of us 'nancy boys' never came up."

Karen tutted and pulled a face at herself in the side mirror as she checked it. She deserved that. "All we ever talked about was animals," she explained. "Sabbing, the rescue we worked at, the raids we went on. I never went down the pub with him, never really

knew him. And it turns out he was a jerk. I can't believe I fell for him."

Tim laughed mirthlessly. "How do you think I feel? At least you didn't *'fall'* for him."

The car turned at a slow glide into Frank's street. Tim straightened in the seat. "There's my car. Can you park up behind it? If there's any animals in the boot we can get them out quicker."

"Alrighty. You want to run upstairs and check on Frank?"

"I don't want to, but I will."

Tim jumped out before she had finished reversing, and ran to the boot of his car. He turned and looked at her, gesticulating angrily at the boot. As she got out and approached him he opened the back door and handed her some bags.

"The tosser left them in the car," he said. "I can't believe he left them in the car."

"I'm sorry," she said helplessly. There wasn't much else anyone could say. For a moment he looked like he might cry. Then anger won out over misery.

"Bastard," for the second time in minutes he cursed uncharacteristically, and shook his head.

The bags didn't take long to swap over. "I'll check upstairs to see if he brought any up before he passed out," said Tim.

"Yeah, well, don't stay too long arguing with him. If you aren't down in five minutes I'm coming up."

"Don't worry, I'll keep hold of myself."

She smiled. "I know you will."

He held his hand out to her, palm facing, in a kind of salute, then ran up the steps to Frank's place. She settled in the driving seat and waited, looking at the light in the flat upstairs.

Fiona

She had dropped everybody off now, and was driving back to her Dad's place, reeling slightly, stunned by everything she had experienced tonight. Her grasp of things was skewed and slipped from what she had thought was real. Strangely she kept thinking of the night her mother died. *They dangled by their seat belts in the car, hair hanging downwards to the crumpled ceiling.* She had survived with bare scratches, while Mum suffocated in the airbag.

Why this played through her mind now she couldn't understand. Perhaps it was because she was driving. Carefully,

always carefully. But normally it didn't register on her consciousness, even when driving. Why now, why tonight?

The baby kicked again, and she stopped the car suddenly, pulling up on the side of the road.

Christ, Mum's dead. I'll never see her again. All of a sudden she was crying, for a grief ten years old.

She opened her eyes again, looking through that fractured window at people dressed in yellow, running upside down.

"No," she said, and stepped out of the car – Dad's car, parked on a street in suburbia. *Don't cry now, don't crack up now. Nothing you can do about it. It's done, it's gone.* The night her mother died the world had changed, changed utterly. When the car flipped over on the motorway, everything else flipped with it. The world was just wrong. Everything she had known was wrong. How could someone just die like that? Moments before they had been arguing about earrings. *'I don't want somebody sticking holes in your ears,'* Mum had said. *'You can't have an earring until you are sixteen.'* She had been going to plead, and then it was too late. Of course, she never did wear an earring after that.

She sat on the shiny wet bonnet of the car, and looked up at the sky. The clouds had separated, and could be seen scudding against the vaster black behind them. The odd star. Of course she was thinking about her mother. Her mother and her grandmothers. She had something in common with them now. She was like them now. Now she was a mother.

She sucked in her breath, and wiped her eyes on the back of her hand. Then she went back to sit in the car, and pulled out her phone. She still had a piece of paper with Simon's temporary number. Dad would be with him. Would they have the phone switched on? She had wanted to tell him face to face, but it had never been the time. Perhaps because it hadn't seemed real until tonight. Maybe now was the best time to tell him, now that she knew it was real. This wasn't like watching white turn blue on a strip of card. She knew it in her soul now, in her body. She was already a mother, although it would be six months before she saw the child. The girl.

She started to dial the number.

Tim

He ran up the stairs, head down trying not to think about what might be upstairs. Frank crying, drunk, a room full of guinea pigs running willy-nilly everywhere? His heart was a tight fist, punching his ribs. Each blow a punishment for his stupidity. His stupid blindness, his idiot love. He was angry, so angry with himself, with everything. In his head his voice raged at him. *Don't think, don't wallow, don't feel.* He had only moments to get in, and out. The police could find out about the break in at any time. He had to hold on. He had to get the animals to safety.

The door to Frank's flat was open. He flew in. Mrs Chips was whining in the living room. He would look in on Mrs Chips last, so as not to be distracted by a happily bouncing dog looking for a midnight walk. He turned his head left, right, up and down the corridor, for a disjointed moment feeling that he was watching for traffic, about to cross the road. *Get a grip.* Nothing. He poked his head into Frank's bedroom. Nothing. He looked in the bathroom. Nothing. He looked in the airing cupboard, opposite the bathroom. Nothing. He opened the door to the living room.

"Shit."

Frank was huddled on the floor, and his mother was standing over him, with her mouth set in a grimly triumphal smile.

"You are in a lot of trouble young man," she said, directing a basilisk glare straight at Tim.

He ignored her, reaching instead to the bags by Frank. Frank looked up at him, dazed, as though he was in a glass bottle, and had only just noticed there was anyone outside.

"Tim," he whispered.

Tim took the little animal that was nestled in Frank's arms, and put her in his pocket. He didn't know which bag she had come from, and didn't want to scare her anymore than necessary by putting her in with strangers.

"Is this all of them?" he asked, his voice flat in his ears.

"Yes," Frank grasped Tim's jacket, and started to pull himself up. Roughly Tim shook him off and made to the door. Frank followed after him, and grasped his arm. "I'm sorry," he said. "She was here when I got home..."

Mrs Whitely was standing in the doorway, arms folded.

"Where do you think you are going, Tim?" She spat his name out, as though it was sour. Tim could feel the anger in his chest

rolling into a tight little ball of fire. Even his eyes were hot with rage.

"Get out of my way," he hissed at her.

"Oh no you don't," she pushed him in the chest, sending him back a step. "You have to answer to me."

Tim's head was light, full of white noise, buzzing. He didn't recognise himself. He was famous for being calm. Once before tonight this woman had made him lose it and swear in her face – only once, and him a goody two shoes whose worst language was "oh bother," or "damn." *I'm hyperventilating*, he thought, trying to be rational. *That's why I feel like this. Keep it together. You have to get out of here. She doesn't matter. She is an irrelevance.*

She pushed him again, harder, and he stepped back. "Go on, explain yourself," she jeered, her lip curled disdainfully. She pushed again, but this time he was prepared, and stepped into it. She moved backwards, an expression of surprise on her face. "Don't you push me," she snapped. He brushed her aside. She stumbled and grabbed him by the wrist. "How dare you walk away from me?" She shook him, wrenching his arm. He pulled himself through the door and marched down the corridor, as though struggling against a strong wind. She hung on, and he dragged her. *Christ, this woman is mad, totally mad. And she thinks I am the freak.* It would have been funny in any other circumstance. Frank stumbled after them. "I'm sorry," he said, "please don't go."

"Can you get your mother off me?" Tim could hear himself, the curt tone of voice, and he hated himself. But he couldn't help it. He was trying not to hit the woman. No matter how bad it was, he didn't want to hit somebody, unless they hit him first.

Mrs Whitely let go of his arm, and swung herself into the doorway, blocking his way to the stairwell. Frank grasped hold of him. "Please don't go." His eyes were wide and frightened, and despite his anger, despite the destruction of all his hopes, Tim felt sorry for him. For the briefest moment he put his hand on Frank's face. Frank sobbed and kissed him. Trying to be kind Tim gently removed himself from Frank's embrace, and murmured, "I've got to go, you know I do."

"Get back in there now," Mrs Whitely commanded, sticking her index finger straight into his chest. His stomach turned, and he felt himself blanch with fury. He turned, and from somewhere else he heard his voice talking to her.

"Fuck off you stupid old arrogant whore,"

She gasped, and he thrust past her. Frank ran after him, and threw his arms around him.

"I'm so sorry," he said.

Tim shook his head. "It's too late," he said bitterly, and pushed Frank back towards the door. For a frozen moment they looked at each other.

"But I love you," Frank moaned. Tim felt his heart stagger and lurch. Love was a distraction. Love could destroy you, if you hung onto it when the one you loved had changed past recognition, when there was nothing left to save. Frank hadn't learned that, had hung onto love and let his mother devour him. Tim had to learn from Frank's mistake. There was nothing to do but leave him.

"I don't have time for this," he said, and ran down the stairs.

Above him he could hear the woman yelling, and Frank start to cry. He shut his ears and his heart to it, and made it out the door.

Rose

"Get that would you?" Simon passed her the phone, not taking his eyes off the road. Rose peered at the keypad, before pressing okay. She always had to think before using a mobile, even after all this time.

"Hello?"

"Hi," it was a woman's voice on the other end of the phone, timid sounding. For a moment Rose couldn't place it.

"Hello?"

"Is my Dad there?"

Ah, she thought. *Fiona.*

"Hello there darling, yes, give me a minute and I'll get him."

"Is he okay?"

"Yes, he's fine. A bit tired, but fine."

"Okay. Uhm," she sounded nervous. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead."

"I came to see him tonight because I wanted to tell him something – I wanted to tell him I was pregnant. I didn't get a chance to, because, you know... Anyway, do you think he'll be okay with the news?"

Rose felt her eyes go damp. Pregnant. My god, she remembered that girl when she was toddling. "Oh, that's wonderful news," she said. "He'll be fine."

"Okay," Fiona sounded relieved. "Thanks. Can you pass me over then?"

"Right enough. Here he is."

Sam was sitting up behind the seats now, looking anxious. "Is that Fiona," he whispered. Rose nodded, and handed him the phone, with a smile. "Don't worry," she said. "Good news."

Sam took the phone, and sat back. Rose pinched the bridge of her nose to stop the tears, and patted out the slight dampness in her eyes with a tissue. Although she had spent her entire professional life looking after other people's babies and bringing them into the world, she never got used to it. Birth was still a miracle.

She had chosen not to have children herself. There was so much sorrow and pain that she couldn't bring herself to inflict it on somebody else. Everyone who was born would die, cause death, suffer and cause suffering. Yet still when she heard of new life coming, she would find herself yearning for a baby to hold, for that fresh life, the hope of all the world coming through. She would never tell Fiona how divided her feelings were, how she felt torn between celebration and mourning. A new inmate for the madhouse. Even so, to be a mother... Fiona would be a good mother. Sam would be a grandfather. Something to celebrate. Life.

Simon glanced at her as they drove down the motorway. "Everything alright?" he asked.

"Yes," she smiled. "I'll let Sam tell you."

"Okay," he nodded, and returned to watching the traffic. Rose sighed, a shuddering half breath. *Life goes on,* she thought, *despite nights like this, despite all the hidden suffering. Individuals struggle on. Sam, Fiona, the new child. All the mothers and fathers, the daughters and sons. Human and animal, the generations keep sweeping up, one after the other. On and on and on.*

I've found a new benefit of age, she thought as her tears dissolved, and she smiled against the grief. She had told no-one yet, but Harold had just learned that he was dying, and she felt his loss already like a knife wound to her heart. In the darkness of the night she leaned her head against the back of her seat and wept for Harold and the child they never had. And yes, she was right. It was a blessing to her now that her tears were lost in the soft wrinkles of her face. It would never do for the young to see her cry.

Karen

Tim looked a washout as he came out the door. Pale and ragged looking. He checked his car, then approached shaking his head.

"I was just coming to get you," she said.

"Yeah, well, glad you didn't."

"Why, is he in a state?"

He laughed bitterly. "That's one way of putting it. Sorry. I'm in a state myself. You'd better get going. He left the engine running on my car, so it's out of petrol. You'll have to drop me off somewhere."

As she started the car she glanced at him sideways. He had the shakes. Should she leave him be, or should she draw it out of him? He would need to talk eventually.

"I've got some shit news," he said.

She raised her eyebrows. Not the worst language she had ever heard, but truly startling coming from Tim. And it wasn't the first piece of bad language she had heard pass his lips tonight. She remembered when he had been beaten up by the hunt, when people who knew them both started to say that Frank was acting weird. He hadn't sworn then. The events of tonight seemed to have upset him more than having his teeth knocked in and a few bones broken.

She sighed. It must be really bad news if it had Tim swearing.

"What is it?"

"His mother was there. She knows about the raid."

"Oh, you are kidding!" Karen had once had the misfortune of meeting Frank's mother. She had actually come around to be introduced to Frank on Tim's request, but had ended up missing him as she stormed off in a huff before he could arrive. The mad woman who paraded as his mother (and never had a mother been more horrendous in Karen's opinion) had dropped elephantine hints that her son needed someone to make a man of him. In fact Mrs Whitely went so far as to offer a financial incentive to any young woman who would comply. Karen tersely pointed out that in the first place, she was not a prostitute, in the second place she was in a relationship thank you very much, and in the third place she was old enough to be Frank's mum herself. Mrs Whitely refused to believe her, insisting that Karen could only be in her early thirties, as though blatantly flattering her could in some way made up for the initial insult. Karen had made her apologies to Tim and left before she succumbed to temptation and slapped the woman – thus missing Frank for the

umpteenth time.

"What was the mad old hag on about this time?"

"Oh, she says 'I am in a lot of trouble.' I think we can safely assume she'll go to the police."

"Well, we can't be sure of that, can we? I mean, she might hate you, but she won't want her son to go to jail."

"Look, you know yourself the woman is insane."

"Yeah," she sighed. "We'll just have to assume the worst, and hope for the best."

"Like she drops dead."

Karen glanced at Tim again. He really didn't sound like his usual self. He sounded angry, but he was looking more upset than anything else.

"Look, if you let me out here, I'll walk home," he said. "That way I won't know for sure where you have taken them, and also, if that stupid woman does phone the police, and they are looking out for me, then I won't be with you and the animals, will I?"

She sighed. "If you are sure you'll be okay."

"It'll help me clear my head. Anyway, its safer for the animals."

She nodded. She couldn't deny that.

"Listen," he said, as she pulled up the car, "thanks for all your help."

"That's alright. Besides, you've been great tonight, even with all the rubbish that's been happening." She smiled at him fondly, then leaned across and gave him a hug. "Look after yourself."

"I will." He hugged her back, and paused. "This one here was out of the bag," he said, as he passed her the guinea pig that had been in his pocket. "I didn't know where to put her back, so here she is."

"Oh," she took the little creature tenderly, and squirreled it away. "Thank you." He smiled sadly, and got out of the car. She watched him for a moment as he walked off down the street. He was so young and vulnerable, and looked so alone as he disappeared into the darkness. It dawned on her with an abrupt and aching poignancy that the next time she saw him he might be in prison. If he was right, if that horrendous woman informed on him, then he could be raided first thing in the morning. All it would take would be for Frank in his confusion to let something slip that he shouldn't, something that could be corroborated after the event, that could not be challenged in court. If something like that slipped out then Tim

really was in trouble.

That's the worst case scenario, she thought. *Things might still be alright.*

No way of knowing. All she could do now was get the remaining animals to a safe place.

She started up the car, and started moving again.

THE MOTHERCAGE

11.25pm

Sam

Not a long conversation, he thought, as the call came to an end. They finished on practicalities, and he handed the phone back to Simon. He was dazed. A brief few moments that signalled a change in everything.

He smiled painfully, almost a grimace. Something hurt. Christ, he was going to be a grandfather.

"You alright mate?" Simon asked.

"Yeah. Fiona is having a baby."

"Cool," Simon nodded. "She wants any help, send her my way. I remember those sleepless nights. I don't mind babysitting."

Sam nodded, dazed, trying to maintain his emotional distance. As a matter of courtesy, and to deflect the conversation from himself, he asked,

"How old are yours now?"

"The eldest has started University. The other two are still at home with their mother. One of them is veggie."

"Does your ex still tell them you're a terrorist?"

"She's what, fourteen?"

"Yeah – a clever girl too. Doesn't believe a word Barbara tells her. And Bee's story is perfect, you know? Could be a best seller. The disastrous marriage to the ad-man who had a nervous breakdown and got sucked into a dark and sinister network of loony militants. That's you lot that is," Simon laughed.

"Charming," Rose chipped in. "You must be pleased that your daughter at least has a brain."

"Well, as a family I think we only had about one to spare, and she seems to have it on permanent loan."

"I'll remember that and make allowances for you." As Rose's wind-chime laugh tinkled out Sam lay back down. His head was light, and something was stirring inside. Beyond numbness, or grief, or regret, he felt something. Curled up in the frost that first settled in his chest ten years ago, that hardened every time he did a raid, was a nugget of heat, spreading warmth. He shook his head. *Don't feel anything,* he told himself, trying to ward off the feeling of incipient panic.

Manjit was sleeping in an almost foetal position, with only the injured leg sticking out straight. How could he be so relaxed, Sam

wondered, enviously. How could he actually fall asleep? How could he trust so easily that everything would work out okay?

Sam let Rose and Simon natter on, and stretched out on his back, with his head turned to the guinea pigs in the cages. He could see white furry bodies, huddled up over one another, heaped in protective mounds, and hear their reedy cheeping voices. They didn't know they were saved. They were still afraid, and had every right to be. They didn't know where they were going – they didn't know what would happen to them. All they knew was that they were utterly powerless. Something could take you at any time. Anything could happen, and there was nothing you could do to stop it. Sam closed his eyes. Until they had arrived at wherever they were going, the guinea pigs were unsafe. The police could pull the van over, return them to the farmer at any moment, return them to a man who claimed to own them, as though anyone ever owned anything, except maybe themselves.

Useless, he told himself. *All this worrying, useless. Utterly useless. No point worrying. Whatever happens just happens. Nothing anyone can do to stop it.*

He couldn't have foreseen Tracey dying on the motorway because of a defective airbag. He couldn't have foreseen the way his life would crack apart because of that random, vicious accident.

He looked back up at the roof of the vehicle, and tried to empty his brain out again, to get rid of the thoughts spinning around and around in his skull. This was why he lived alone, why he never let anyone into his life, other than his daughter and the animals he protected. Even his son was outside his safety zone now, because Adam chose to despise him. *Get a better job Dad. You should take out a mortgage. Dad, why can't you be more normal?*

I don't want to be normal. Sam could never explain it to his son, though he wished he could. He didn't have to explain it to Fiona. Fiona knew. *Normal is dead to the real world. It's dead to the pain of others. It's happy when you should be sad, quiet when you should be screaming. If I was normal I would eat corpses, and call it food. If I was normal I would have remarried. And then Tracey would be really dead.*

It was comfortable, allowing himself no close friends, keeping everybody at a sociable arm's length. Being a comedian, who nobody had to take too seriously. Because then no-one would offload their feelings on him, their concerns. He could laugh, joke, go

down to the pub with mates, but only if they knew the line not to cross. He didn't want to have to think too much, get too close, to share his life with anyone. He didn't want his feelings, his thoughts, to be out of his control. Right now they were bobbing around in his brain like apples in a barrel. If you loved someone and they suddenly weren't there anymore, it was like a limb had been wrenched off. If he let himself feel too much he was opening himself to that pain again. He couldn't expose himself like that. Not again.

Too late.

My daughter is going to be a mother, he thought, and squeezed his eyes shut against tears. Tracey had been so happy throughout her pregnancies. She had awaited the birth of both children as though they were long expected guests, people she had known and loved for years, finally coming home. Was that how Fiona felt? That someone was coming home?

"Oh," an involuntary groan escaped him, and he rolled onto his side. The little noise thankfully went unheard over the sound of the engine. Manjit muttered in his sleep, and threw his arm up over his head. Sam rolled into a ball, covered his face and wept.

The block of ice that he carried around in his chest was melting, and it hurt. Too late to stop any of it now – the thaw had begun. Whether he liked it or not, his heart was beating again.

Frank

Tim was gone. Running down the stairs. Frank followed him, then stopped, leaning over the banister, and watched him go.

I'm a fool, he thought, *I tried to stop him. I should have realised. I had to let him go. The animals are more important than my little dramas. I couldn't keep them here. I couldn't keep him.*

His mother was screaming at him. He blinked. She had become quite hysterical, as she used to when he was a child, before she sent him away. It used to upset him. Now he hurt too much from other things, and he let it just float by. She came at him, teeth bared, and her understated but elegantly manicured fingernails drew blood. It didn't matter. He flapped her away and stumbled to the door. He could hear a noise coming out of his chest, a deep wrenching sobbing noise. He couldn't seem to stop it. That didn't matter either. He dragged himself along the wall of the corridor as his mother screamed and railed.

In the living room he grabbed a bottle, and drank from the neck

as he walked around the room. The bottle was already nearly empty. *Get it over with, disappear,* he told himself, hatefully. *You don't have the guts to do it for real, so kill yourself this way instead. It will just take a little longer.* She was punctuating her insults with blows now, and he allowed himself to drop like a sack of coal onto the sofa, finishing the bottle between slaps and punches. She never really hurt. These chaotic attacks hadn't hurt him since he was about eleven – she wasn't strong enough anymore, or he had become immune. She stood back now, shouting, as he pushed the empty bottle into the gap between the arm and the cushion, and closed his eyes. Was she still taking her medication, he wondered blearily, or was this a symptom of withdrawal? He could never keep up. He opened his eyes, and saw her in fragments, a powder grey presence made up of a shouting mouth, a jabbing finger, white teeth against too red lips. He shook his head. He didn't want to hear, or see his fractured mother. She had fallen apart years ago, after his father died, and never put herself back together right.

Mrs Chips darted her eyes between the two of them, and ran out of the room, whining. He heard her scrabble and hide under his bed. His fault. She was as scared of him staggering around drunk as she was of his mother shrieking. His eyes shut again. Without anything to look at he felt himself sliding and spinning down a long dark tunnel.

Tim had gone. Tim was never coming back. *"I don't have time for this,"* he had said, and broke away. But then, Tim had also touched his face, with such tenderness. For a moment there had been something between them. At that moment Frank had dared to hope. There had been a glimmer of sympathy in Tim's face. But sympathy wasn't enough. How could it be? What he had broken tonight, the bonds of trust, needed more than sympathy to glue back together. He laughed abruptly, mocking himself for his poetic pretensions. Bonds of trust. The 'Glue of Sympathy' for god's sake. Christ, even when he kept his thoughts inside his own head he was too stupid to live.

Mother kept on shouting. Dimly he wondered why Mrs Doughty wasn't banging on her roof. Then he remembered that she was in the hospital. Lucky it was just a set of two flats then. Most neighbours wouldn't be tolerant of this level of noise. Maybe Mother wasn't getting louder, but the longer it went on, the worse it felt, the worse it sounded. She could keep this up for hours. He knew from painful

experience.

Please stop shouting, he found himself thinking, over and over again. The old mantra had worn a smooth track in his brain that he slid back into easily. He was frightened. He was in danger of turning into a boy again. She carried on shouting. "Please, stop shouting," he asked out loud. She carried on shouting. "Please," he was crying again, and started smacking himself on the head. "Stop it, stop it, stop it."

Suddenly she was all consideration, sitting by him, with her arm over his shoulder, holding his arms to his body so that he couldn't hurt himself anymore. "I know it's not your fault," she said. "I know he seduced you, I know you are just confused."

"How do you know I didn't seduce him?" he asked, abjectly.

"He's older than you," she answered. "It's a classic case of a gay predator."

"He's eighteen months older than me," Frank said with heavy sarcasm. "Dad was twenty years older than you. Does that make him a straight predator? And if you must know, I asked Tim out first."

"I don't believe you. I think you are only saying that to shock me."

"I don't care anymore what you think about anything." She released her grip from around his shoulders, and sat back, observing him critically.

"You don't mean that," she stated with certainty.

"Yes I do. You're stupid." The words came out crystal clear, and he marvelled that he was drunk enough to say what he really thought, but not so drunk that the words slurred and slipped on his tongue. "You still bet on the horses," he continued, "and you know exactly why you shouldn't. You know those beautiful racehorses you spend your money on are slaves. You know that hundreds of them die every year, just so people like you can have a flutter, watch them run fast." He spat the words out, aggressively, as though he could hurl them away from himself, make his anger with her not part of him anymore. Tears slid down his face, and he struck them violently from his cheeks, stinging the scratches she had left across the skin. "You know animals have feelings," he sobbed, "but still you eat them, for no better reason than that you like the taste of their flesh."

"You're drunk."

"Yes." He shook his head to wake himself up, and lurched to his feet. Grinning humourlessly he said, "Not drunk enough though."

He walked across the room like a sailor aboard ship, as though it was normal for the floor to tilt like that. When he got to the kitchen he took out two glasses, and poured two drinks. "Do you want one?"

She shook her head. He downed one glass, then the other. It felt like he was still hitting himself on the head. Maybe that was why they called it a "belt." The alcohol was punishment. He didn't even enjoy it anymore. He poured himself a third. As he turned towards her, swallowing more of the stuff, he caught a hard and calculating look. It lasted only a moment. Then she smiled. "We can still be friends," she said. "We can sort this out."

"I'm still gay, you know."

"You don't know that yet. You haven't tried not being gay."

Frank laughed, and walked towards the sofa. The room angled downward at a slope, a long slide. "Yes, I did try," he corrected her as he navigated his way through the undulating furniture and his words finally began to slur, "and no, it didn't work. Not for me, you know." He bumped against the edge of the sofa, and knocked the glass against his teeth with a harsh chink. It felt like it would have hurt if he hadn't been so drunk. He collapsed over the arm, slid onto a cushion and closed his eyes. When he opened them again his mother was there, handing him another glass. He emptied it, then the next.

Part of him knew that he was damning himself by going down this road, but he was too sick, and disappointed, and tired of the whole thing to put up any kind of a fight by now. If she had been handing out pure poison, he would have downed it in one.

Karen

She had no real option but to drive to Rose's house with the remaining guinea pigs. She didn't know where Simon planned to take the other animals, but Rose was the only person that she could think of at such short notice with enough room for possibly a hundred guinea pigs.

She was tired, and blinked hard to keep her eyes from shutting. The adrenaline, having worked its way through her system, had left her feeling weary, suddenly exhausted. As soon as she got back home she would crash out. It wouldn't be until the following night that the nightmares, the brooding thoughts, would keep her awake.

The lights were on in the house. As she turned up the winding

lane to Rose's place dogs started to bark in the house, and lights came on. Harold was still awake then. Well, it was obvious that he would be. Harold and Rose doted on each other. They must have seemed such an odd couple when they were young, the ex soldier, and the vegetarian Irish nurse – now they were just right for each other. Like an old pair of boots, you couldn't really imagine one without the other.

Lucky the rain had stopped, she thought, as she saw Harold in his wheelchair crunching down the drive.

"Hello there," he looked concerned as he realised who she was, and that Rose wasn't with her. "Everything alright?"

"Yeah, so far so good. Don't worry, Rose is just looking after someone who picked up an injury. She was the only nurse available you see. But she's fine, so don't worry."

"I won't," he lied automatically, and she smiled.

"Got some guests for you," she said. "Don't know how long they'll be staying, but I reckon you should be pleased to see them."

His face lighted up, and he pushed the button that allowed the gate to open. She drew her head back into the car, and drove through. Further down the drive she parked, and got out, grinning, just as he caught up with her.

"Where to?" she asked, opening the boot, and beginning to remove the bags.

"Follow me, young lady," he said, gathering the rescued animals onto his lap. "I have just the place."

Ann

As she expected Katriona was still awake when she got home. Her own mother was asleep in the living room, in front of the television. Katriona was sitting at the kitchen table, working out simple equations. Ann smiled, despite her worry and her grief, consoled by the expression of intense concentration that knotted her daughter's brow. When she had been at school maths had always been a doddle to her – she found Katriona's difficulties with the subject charming, almost like a lisp. Not that it was much comfort to Katriona.

Katriona looked up, and caught her mother's smile. A glad expression radiated across her face. "It went alright then?"

Ann felt her face drop. It had not gone okay. When she last checked, just as she crammed herself into the larger of the two

remaining cars, the little creature in her pocket had died. And besides, there was all the other stuff to worry about. Oh yes, she knew. It might never happen. But still - now was the time. She would have to tell her daughter the truth. She sat down heavily.

"Oh god, he hurt you."

"No," she shook her head. "Nothing like that."

"What then?"

"I'm sorry, I lied to you."

"What about?"

Ann spread her hands onto the table, and swallowed. This was so hard. "I didn't go out with a man tonight..."

"You're a lesbian." Katriona looked so solemn that Ann burst out laughing.

"No. Not that either." She swallowed down the laughter, and continued. "I went on a liberation tonight, to save some animals. It went okay. Some we saved." She turned her head, and looked out the kitchen window, past the dark reflection to the night beyond. "Some we didn't."

Katriona looked at her bewildered, as though she had been hit. "Why didn't you tell me?" Her young face looked vulnerable, as it always did when she was tired. She sounded like a little girl. Upset, betrayed.

"You didn't need to know," Ann looked her daughter straight in the eye, with a helpless expression. What else could she say?

Katriona pushed out her lip in a plump babyish expression of disappointment that tugged at her mother's heart.

"So why now," she asked. "Why are you telling me now?"

"Because..." Ann shook her head, disgusted with her own stupidity that she even had to say this, "because I probably left DNA at the scene, and the police can place me in the shed we liberated."

"Did you not wear gloves?"

"It's not a fingerprint. It's a contact lens."

"Oh, Christ Mum." Katriona pulled an anguished face. "It's my fault. I told you to wear the lenses because I thought you were going on a date. I wanted you to look okay."

"It's not your fault. I would have worn them anyway – that way if anyone had seen me I would have stood out less. Glasses plus a balaclava stand out a bit as a fashion combination, you know?"

"What animals did you save?"

"Guinea pigs."

"How many?"

"I didn't stop to count. We should hear in the next few days."

Katriona looked down at her maths homework, and scowled. "If you do get arrested, how long are you going to be in prison for?"

Ann shrugged, helplessly. "Might be three years. Get out in half that for good behaviour."

Katriona looked at her, and tried to laugh, to lighten the mood. "You, good behaviour? You have to be kidding."

Ann laughed back, then stopped. Her daughter was crying. She got up and walked around the table, knelt by her, and held her in her arms. Katriona wept on her shoulder. "I love you mum," she sobbed, her voice muffled into her mother's arm.

"It's not the end of the world," Ann murmured, consolingly. "Besides, I love you too."

Fiona

"That's alright love." He sounded calm and collected. "I thought something awful had happened. You sounded so scared."

"Not scared, exactly." Relief welled up inside her. "Just – I thought you might be upset."

"Why?"

"Well, I thought because I don't have a regular boyfriend..."

He laughed, a gravel rumble, reassuring as his laughs always were. "Only because men are stupid. No, it's wonderful news, the best. I was worried you were going to tell me you had cancer or something. It's a baby. That's great." She felt a lump build up painfully in her throat, and gulped it down. She guessed what he would say next. She was right. "Your mother would have been happy."

"Maybe she is."

"Yeah, maybe."

Silence for a moment.

"Look, I'm going to have to get off the phone now. Just a quick thing –" he sounded cautious. "You'll have to buy a new phone now. Call it a present for your good news." For a moment she was a little confused by the change of topic. Why would she have to buy a new phone? Was it something to do with tonight? But she was nowhere near the shed anymore. "It's not registered or anything," she said, dubiously.

"Yeah, but better safe than sorry." Suddenly she remembered that Karen had told her in the car on the way to the shed that the phone companies logged everyone's phone calls. No doubt that was what Dad was thinking of – that if he was stopped with a truck full of guinea pigs and the police took his phone, then all the incoming calls would be on the handset. Obviously he couldn't say that though – it would sound too damned suspicious if anyone was listening. "You know," he started again, "the signal on these phones can be a bit strong sometimes. For the baby you know, you don't want something leaking microwaves, do you?"

"Okay then," she replied, understanding him now. "I know what you mean – the signal is so strong, it's a wonder everyone doesn't hear what we are saying." She could practically hear his sigh of relief down the phone. "Don't worry," she continued, reassuringly. "I wanted a new one anyway. I'll get it myself though. You should save up for baby booties."

He laughed. "I'll do that. See you love."

"Yeah, see you Dad."

As she walked towards her house she removed the back of her mobile phone, and took out the sim card. Casually she let it drop out of her hand, down the slats of a gutter. As she passed a wheely-bin she lifted the lid, and – quickly wiping it for fingerprints – she dropped it in between the bin bags. *Ah well,* she thought. *Small price to pay when you consider the risks.*

As she got into the house one of the other trainee nurses was sitting up watching reruns of 'Black Adder.'

"Hi," Jody waved at her as she passed by the living room door. "Did you tell your Dad?"

"Yeah."

"How did it go?"

"Fine."

"See. I told you there was nothing to worry about. Your Dad is the coolest."

Fiona smiled, as she allowed herself to re-submerge in ordinary life. It felt odd that she could do this. She wasn't sure yet that she could. Not really. How could she get back to normal, after seeing what she had seen? And yet...Yes, she thought. Her Dad *was* the coolest. After all, there weren't many people who did what he did, and risked what he risked. All this time, and she had never even suspected. From what she had seen tonight he was an expert

at this kind of thing. He managed to live a halfway normal life. And anyway, she told herself, her life had already been on the cusp of changing. Maybe it was fate that she should have gone on a raid now, while she was pregnant, to remind her what she was fighting for. Not just her baby, the life she carried now, but all life, whatever shape it came in.

In the kitchen she paused, and listened to the noises of the house. The fridge humming, that irritating clock chipping away the seconds with its exaggerated tick tock, Jody in the next room, laughing at the telly. For a moment as she closed her eyes she felt an obscure dread creep up on her, that when she opened them she would still be in the shed. That there wasn't an outside world – that the shed went on and on forever.

"No," she said firmly, and opened her eyes. The microwave still blinked, the painted wall by the oven was still stained with chip fat, the dishes still sat draining by the sink. Fiona looked at the comforting world around her, and let her breath out in a long sigh. Her hand floated down to the very slight mound of her belly and rested there for a moment. "It will be alright," she murmured to her daughter. "It will be alright. All manner of things will be alright."

She put the kettle on for a late night cup of cocoa, and went to talk to Jody while she waited for the water to boil.

Simon

A headache was banging rhythmically against his forehead, and his eyes were beginning to smart. He could do with some nice cold water. He'd drunk far too much coffee today, and at this point in proceedings it showed. He grimaced at his reflection in the rear-view mirror. Quite why he had drunk so much coffee he couldn't remember at this precise moment. It wasn't as if he didn't have enough cause to be anxious tonight. *Oh, I know, I'll have another cup of coffee,* he mocked himself, *because I really need to be tense.* He clacked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. There was plenty enough to worry about without caffeine withdrawal adding to the general hilarity. As he concentrated on his driving he reassured himself that they were probably away and clear. *Don't worry.* After all, it was a completely unremarkable vehicle, with markings on it that justified its being out on the motorway so late at night.

However, there was still a palpable risk. In many respects the raid itself was the easy bit. Getting the animals home free was the difficult part. If the rest of tonight went off okay and he got the guinea pigs to their safe haven, there would still be weeks of work involved in the eventual relocation and distribution of these animals to safe and loving homes. He knew the homes were there – it was just a matter of organisation. *Never mind,* he told himself. *One thing at a time.*

It was unfortunate that Manjit had been injured. It had thrown some of the organisation out of sync. Since Karen had been forced to take Rose's car she was now, obviously, elsewhere, which meant that Sam had to stay on a little longer than he had originally intended to, in order to help unload at the other end. Rose and Manjit would now have to drive back in Sam's transit van, which meant that.... Oh God, it probably meant nothing. Sam's vehicle wouldn't be traced back to him, because the number plates were changed, and could easily be switched over again in a private garage that, as far as anyone could tell, the police knew nothing about. Rose would have to drive it, since it wouldn't be much fun for Manjit trying to manage the foot controls. She would have to drop it off for someone else to pick up at a suitable little lay-by. Which meant that he, Simon, would have to phone someone – probably Karen – to pick up the van, which meant yet another mobile phone would need to be replaced. Both Manjit and Rose would have to get out and walk a little way towards her home – Manjit would have to hobble of course – and let's face it, that would look bloody odd. *Mind you, who the hell is going to be looking at that time in the morning?*

He grinned to himself. *Make a mental note, for future raids.* He laughed at his own punchline. *Insist that people don't throw themselves in front of cars in a misguided attempt at stopping them.*

He realised that even despite the risks, the things that had gone wrong, he was feeling good. Optimistic. They were on the road, with hundreds of liberated animals, and in these circumstances people were hardly ever stopped. He supposed there was more to worry about regarding the animals that the stupid boy Frank had run off with, but Simon had every faith in Karen and Tim, and was sure they would track the animals down.

"We're coming off the motorway here," he said to Rose. "We're going to park up near to Sam's van. You got the keys?"

She nodded, and held them up for him to see.

"Right. Now, we parked far away from any cameras. Nowhere near the petrol station, or the services themselves. Whatever you do, if you feel the need to buy petrol or anything like that, pay with cash."

"I filled the tank," Sam growled from the back of the van, coming back to life after a long silence. "I'm not a total prat."

"Just checking," Simon threw back over his shoulder.

"S'alright."

"Now, you know that lay-by near where you live?"

"The one by the oak tree?"

"Yes, that's the one. If you could leave the vehicle there, and get back to your place."

"I'm not sure Manjit will be able to walk by the time we get back there. The leg will have stiffened up, and I gave him one of Harold's painkillers. It will have knocked him out a bit."

Simon glanced over at Manjit, still curled asleep, and laughed. "Oh right. I wondered what it was. I was thinking, 'wish I could do that.'"

Sam in the back laughed. "So was I and all. I don't suppose I could have one could I?"

Rose shook her head, looking prim. "Not unless you hurt yourself. You aren't planning on cracking your patella?"

"What's one of them?"

"Knee bone."

"Oh yeah. Connected to me shinbone. No, reckon I'll give it a pass."

"What were you doing with painkillers anyway?" Simon interjected.

"I'm a nurse. I came prepared."

"Sounds more like a Boy Scout," Sam contributed glibly. Simon raised an eyebrow, and quirked a grin at her. "Were you in the Girl Guides then?"

"No, they had to swear allegiance to the Queen."

"Thought you were Irish?"

"Northern."

"Is that why you're ready for disaster? We've never needed painkillers before."

"Well, I'm a little paranoid. Just as well this time."

"I suppose." Simon glanced in the rear-view mirror and pulled in to park alongside Sam's van. "Right. I'll try and get someone to be

there and pick you up when you get to the lay-by. If there is no-one there, just hop."

"We'll think of something."

"Okay, here we are." As Rose opened the door and stepped down from the vehicle Simon leant across.

"Thanks for being lookout," he said, and kissed her on the forehead.

"Oh, nonsense." She flapped her papery hands at him, to distract from her embarrassment. "Thanks for organising this." She nodded towards the cages in the back of the van, where Manjit was blearily pulling himself together. As he hauled himself over the seats she smiled meaningfully back at Simon. "I don't know how many animals we got, but if it had been only one, it would have been worth it. Thank you."

Simon smiled, and raised his hand as Rose and Manjit made it to Sam's vehicle.

"Hang about Rose," Sam clambered over the seats, and pulled some bags out from under the front passenger seat. Rose turned, and smiled. "These need delivering to a friend of mine," Sam said. "I can't do it now, so do you mind dropping them off for me?"

"That's grand," she said, taking the bags. "Ooh, heavy. I take it these are all the papers from the shed?"

"Yup. And the video as well. They need splitting up from the animals ASAP."

"No problem." She dumped the bags in the back of the van."Where do you want them taking to?"

Sam grinned, and wrote down directions. "When you've delivered these, " he joked, "you have to eat the paper, okay?"

"Indeed," she replied dryly. "And then I will self-destruct. Alright?"

Sam gave her a quick hug, laughing, and waved as he stepped backwards to the van. Rose smiled and blew him a kiss.

"Hope she's used to driving something bigger than her little car." Sam said fondly. Despite the affection in his voice he still sounded slightly concerned as he climbed into his seat next to Simon.

Simon smiled to himself. Sam's van looked and handled (to the uninitiated at least) like a heap of junk, but he was too fond of the thing to get rid of it. Not until it fell to pieces anyway. And given the amount of time Sam spent tinkering with the engine the inevitable

was being put off almost indefinitely. "Don't worry mate. She won't crash your baby. She used to drive a Red Cross van you know, when she worked in India. Rose is one in a million – she can do most anything."

Sam smiled, wistfully, and watched Rose and Manjit out of the window as they receded in the distance. "Yeah, she is a great old lady, isn't she?" He crinkled his brow, slightly concerned as Rose disappeared onto the motorway. "That vehicle does have clunky gears, but she handles it well I suppose."

"Don't tell me you are criticising the love of your life. Clunky gears? I thought she was the smoothest drive on the road."

"Well. If you know how to handle her. I suppose Rose knows what she's doing though."

Simon smiled in agreement with his friend. He knew Sam well enough to recognise that his cranky protection of his van and his affectations of humour were mainly there as a defence mechanism. Sam had always been touchier since his wife died. The best thing to do now was to allow the silence to grow comfortable between them, until his friend wanted to talk.

In companionable silence, preoccupied with their own thoughts, the two men drove off on the next leg of their journey.

Jenny

As she got out of the car and prepared to make her way home, Jack caught up with her. He grinned, and clapped his hands. "Well," he said. "What about it? Don't you feel different? Don't you feel great?"

She shrugged her shoulders, and stretched her hands in a manner expressive of her complete bewilderment. She didn't feel particularly angry with him anymore. She was just tired, and slightly dazed, and wanted to go home to bed. The last liberation she had been on had been such a shock to her system. She had expected to be more used to it this time. It hadn't worked that way. She was still knocked sideways by the whole experience. "I don't ... I don't know what I feel. Not great. Just... " She shrugged. "Dunno. Nothing yet. I don't feel great anyway." She hadn't felt great last time either, but Jack didn't know about that.

"Ah," he nodded wisely, and strode up beside her, putting his arm around her in a possessive manner. "Let it sink in. I can tell you now, you can get hooked on doing this kind of thing. It really gets to

be a buzz – it's just a great sensation knowing that you have risked your own liberty to save animals from a life of..." He stopped. She was laughing. "What's funny?"

"Please, don't be upset. It's just..." she swallowed laughter, and tried to look solemn. She wished she didn't have to hurt his feelings, but she couldn't keep a straight face. "You're no more an expert on this than I am."

"How can you say that?" He sounded huffy, offended. "You don't know what I have done."

"I know, but I saw you tonight. It was a first for you."

Jack pulled a face, and drew away from her. "Whatever," he said. "I don't care what you think."

"Oh," she made a sympathetic moue. For some reason, despite his pretentiousness she felt sorrier for Jack than usual. He was still play-acting, even in the face of something real. Tonight they had been brought face to face with suffering on a scale she couldn't completely comprehend, and he was still pretending to be James Bond.

She knew she should be angry with him, but at that precise moment she didn't have the energy. With a sense of surprise she considered that maybe she had never really been angry with him, just with herself for having been silly enough to swallow his anecdotes, tall stories and carefully dropped hints. If so she would save herself a lot of energy by just letting her anger go. Of course, another possibility was that she was so tired that her intolerance for bullshit was temporarily out of order.

Not so much so that she would let him into the house though. She could tell he hoped to get lucky tonight, and even if she hadn't learned tonight that he was a total prat she wasn't in the mood. She shook her head and pulled a slight face. She knew what he was like – she couldn't politely ask him to leave. He never responded to politeness. She had to put him down. As gently as possible, yes, but she still had to be firm. She had to put him off in such a way that he never came back trying it on again. In other words she had to be rude. Earlier that evening she would have happily been rude to him. In fact she had been rude. Now that the impetus of her anger was spent she felt flat, tired. All she wanted to sleep.

The only way she could think of to get rid of him was to embarrass him.

Well, here goes.

"Look, I didn't mean to upset you," she said, pitching her tones in a deliberately reasonable, placid voice, a kind that she knew from experience wound him up. "I don't think you did too badly anyway." Deliberately she dropped a note of condescension in her voice. "Not for your first time anyway. Come here." She dropped a chaste kiss on his nose as they got to the front door of her house, then propelled him backwards with the flat of her hand against his chest as he tried to step in. "That was for old time's sake," she said, passionlessly. "Goodnight. I'll see you around."

There's no getting away from it, she thought. *I've pissed him off. Probably a good thing in the end. He won't come chasing me now.* Jack looked a little bit bewildered, a little bit offended as she swung her way into the house, waved, then shut the door in his face.

Jack

Jack scowled at the door as it swung shut.

"Bitch," he muttered, then turned on his heel and sauntered off down the road. Too late for the pub, so he would have to go home to bed. He still felt wired. He wasn't sure he could sleep. Shame really that he couldn't tell people about it. Still, at least he had done it now. He could let people know, through hints as it were. It wasn't vanity that made him want to talk about it. It was like a duty. People needed to be encouraged. That was it. Encourage people. The right people. Not folks who would tell on him, but people who mattered. People who knew the score.

As he walked home he narrated to himself the thrilling tale of the night's raid, with himself cast in the most favourable light possible. He had suffered stress, yes, but equally he had held everyone else together through thick and thin. That stupid woman Jenny laughing at him, well, she had nearly jeopardised everything by turning the light on. It was only random good luck that had saved them there. Jenny couldn't work in a unit with other soldiers. He was the one who dumped her – not the other way around. He hadn't realised until tonight that she was so weak. So silly. Not his type at all. Not that it was her fault really – some people couldn't take direction. Just as well he had been there. People needed camaraderie, leadership, to keep them focussed on a mission like that. He dreaded to think how things would have turned out if he had not gone on the job.

He was feeling better. Jenny's laughter and her patronising last

kiss didn't rankle as much against the warm glow provided by his story telling. Within a week Jack wouldn't really remember what had happened at all. The fiction he would internalise was so much more satisfying.

Tim

The walk home was the longest fifteen minutes of his life. He couldn't quite get his head around the events of tonight. He had suspected that he would feel hyper, overemotional – it was, after all, his first liberation. He had expected powerful feelings – he hadn't known quite what, but he had known that it would have an impact on him. But he hadn't expected the horror he felt at the suffering of the animals to be in competition with his own deep sense of betrayal, of personal loss. Did his grief for Frank, his anger that it was over – did that make him selfish? Was he a bad person, because he could think about his own personal problems at a time like this?

He walked with his hands shoved far down in his pockets, shoulders hunched up, looking at the reflective sheen of water that still slicked the pavements and the tarmaced roads. It would be some time before he knew that all the animals were well away. And by tomorrow he could be in police cells anyway. He really didn't see Frank's mother turning down this opportunity to get him put away.

Well, if he *was* nicked he would use his one phone call to get someone to come and mind his cats – not someone who had been on the raid. His Mum, or the neighbour in the flat opposite him, Naomi. Of course Naomi would be ideal. She was veggie, so he wouldn't get back to find his fridge full of animal products. His Mum had a tendency to forget what a vegan actually was – though at least she tried. Whoever he chose to mind his cats, he would be better to avoid talking to Karen, Simon or Sam on the phone, at least while he was in police custody. It would look suspicious if he suddenly stopped talking to his friends completely, but the less he did at this moment to draw attention to them the better.

What if Frank was nicked? He wasn't sure how that would work out. A year ago he would have trusted Frank implicitly. Even this morning he would have given him the benefit of the doubt. Well, he had done just that, hadn't he? Now though he was not so sure. Maybe if he was sober he would be okay, but Frank was anything but sober at the moment. Surely in his current state all of his worst personality traits would come to the fore. Tim squeezed his eyes

shut against the sudden image of Frank in an interview room, bragging to the police. *No, don't think about that now.* Hopelessly he tried to hope. *Things may still work out.*

Outside his flat he paused, and peered in through the bay window at Tyger, who lay sprawled across the window ledge with his belly to the glass. He smiled, for a moment forgetting his worry, and let himself into the house.

Three of the cats ran up to him, and started clambering around his legs, purring and rubbing themselves up against his ankles.

"Give me a minute." Carefully, so as not to tread on the cats that twined about his ankles, he made his way to the kitchen to put out the food he had made for them earlier on.

As he served them their meal he looked at the clock. Late, very late. So late it had technically become early. And no doubt the police would be coming soon. While the cats ate he stripped, and dumped all his clothes into a bin bag. "Not be long darlings," he said, and left the building by the back door.

Trying not to look too furtive he put several streets between himself and his flat, then glanced around, to see if there were any vehicles parked, anyone who might be watching. He couldn't really tell. He sighed as he pushed his clothes far down into a wheely-bin. It stank of cigarette ends, and scraps of decaying meat. He gagged slightly, but still covered his own bag completely with theirs. The police would have to search every bin in the area to hit the jackpot, and to be honest, if the police did have to scrabble through garbage to pin this on him, they had only themselves to blame.

Once back home he took a quick, but thorough shower and changed into his pyjamas. He stood looking at his fresh clothes, then decided to shove them with a load of bedding and old socks into the wash. If the police turned up they would probably think that he was washing his incriminating clothing, which would slow them down in their search of the bins. And tomorrow morning the bin men came. By the time the police realised that the clothes in the wash had nothing to do with the raid, it would be too late. He was grateful that someone had thought to bring the foot coverings to prevent mud from getting into the treads of their shoes. He hadn't tracked any mud into the flat, and now that the clothes and shoes were gone there was nothing really to link him to the scene. The foot-coverings had been disposed of by Karen on the way home, along with the gloves, both plastic and fabric, and the balaclavas.

Finally, having done everything he could, he sat and hunched himself down miserably in the sofa, trying not to worry. As his brain scratched and picked over the same points, he heard the cats purr. The noise mingled with the hum of the washing machine, as it swirled and whooshed in the next room. Despite his worry, it comforted him. He curled up. As he dozed the cats gathered, and stretched alongside and around and on top of him. Eventually, despite himself, he slept.

Manjit

"Good luck," he murmured to Sam and Simon, as he limped jaggedly and somewhat woozily around to the passenger seat. Rose was at the steering wheel, grey and tired in the dim light. He looked at her concerned.

"Are you okay?"

"Oh, I'm fine. It's just past my bedtime, that's all. Another hour and I'll turn into a pumpkin."

"Sorry, I can't drive." It wasn't just his leg – whatever painkiller she had given him had knocked him for six. Although he could force himself to stay awake now that he was sitting up he still felt slightly giddy, queasy. At least the pain had reduced to a dull throb though.

"Never mind," Rose started the engine. "I wouldn't expect you to. Anyway, we should be back at my place within about an hour. I have to drop something off first, then we'll be fine."

"Okay then."

"When is Dapinder expecting you back anyway?"

"Tomorrow morning. I told her I was meeting up with my old mates to watch the football."

"You had better check the score before you get home you know."

"Oh yeah. God, that would have looked suspicious." He laughed, and grinned sideways at her. He was very fond of Rose. He had always felt easy talking to her. She didn't talk or think like an old woman – despite an occasionally brittle whispery quality to her voice he could often forget when they spoke on the phone that she was forty odd years older than him. "You've been great tonight, you know," he confided. "It's not just that you fixed my leg. It's just, I would have panicked if someone hadn't been there who knew Dapinder." He grimaced. It was a little hard to explain what he meant, but he might as well try. "I mean, it's obvious I have to tell her

something. If it had been just Simon say – well, I don't think he likes her, because he just can't understand why I married her."

Rose wrinkled her brow thoughtfully. "Well, no-one ever knows why anyone is with anyone else," she said. "You should have seen the look on people's faces when I told them I was marrying Harold."

She stopped what she was saying abruptly, and made a tisk noise. "By the way, go see your doctor tomorrow." She shook her head in a cross manner. "Don't you go telling me I've fixed your leg. You still need it to be seen."

Manjit shrugged. "Yeah. Don't worry, I will take it." He looked out at the lights skimming past the darkened side window. He felt slightly hypnotised by the motion of the car. Usually he was the one driving. He had forgotten what it was like to be a passenger, not in charge of where he was going. He wondered how the animals they had rescued that night felt. Not knowing anything about what had happened – just swept up into something outside of their experience, outside of their control. Gut fear, or falling in love. They both felt the same.

"You know what one of the problems is," he admitted. "A lot of people were really shocked when I got married. I mean, I know it isn't the way most people do things in this country – but I just wanted..." he sighed. "I wanted to marry someone who I knew was veggie, but also someone who knew a bit about my own culture. Someone who wouldn't sneer at my Grandmother. Also, someone my own parents wouldn't disapprove of. And you know, she seemed so perfect. I know I didn't know her but..." He stopped, lost for words. There was really no way he could explain it. He had gone out to India with his parents' blessing and approval to find a wife. He hadn't even been sure he would find somebody, but when he saw Dapinder that first time he had felt... Oh, it was hopeless really. He couldn't puzzle it out, no matter how much he revisited the moment. How could you just look at someone for the first time and fall in love? Ridiculous to think it. It must have been a dream.

"I think I understand." Rose smiled at some memory of her own. "It's the romantic idea, isn't it? You fall in love with the idea of being in love. But being in love to begin with, for the first few months or years, that isn't what matters in the end. What matters is if you learn to love each other. When you grow together, that's when love is real, when it lasts. First love, romantic love – that isn't real. I know people who are in love, and they absolutely hate each other."

He nodded his head, feeling drowsy.

"To be honest," she continued, "the way you managed things doesn't sound that daft to me. No dafter than marrying someone you have only known six weeks, because you like the way he looks in a suit."

"Is that why you got married?"

"Oh, I got married because he seemed like such a gentle soul." There was a pause as she overtook the vehicle in front, a slow crawling mobile home, then pulled back into the lane again at a more reasonable fifty miles an hour. She continued wistfully. "I'd found a duck in the park, that a child had been throwing stones at. I was having a hell of a time trying to get her. Even though she was injured she kept getting away from me. Then along came this fellah, in a fine suit, and offered to help. Well, he came out into the pond with me, knee deep trying to catch the poor thing. His clothes got soaking wet and he didn't care. He caught her, and carried her in his jacket, all the way back to my place."

"Did you have room for animals back then?"

"Oh, just barely. Shared accommodation, and a big garden, and all the other trainee nurses complained. Nearly got me kicked out at one point."

"People don't change, do they?"

"No," she shook her head. "We're the same all over the world." She sighed, then cheered up and continued her story. "Anyway, myself and this strapping young man agreed to meet again. He came around on the Sunday, and we released the duck back into the park again. We watched her stretch out and sail onto the pond." She smiled, and even though she was old he thought her face was beautiful. "I remember," she said wistfully. "I was so happy. I looked up at him. He was smiling too, but he had tears in his eyes. Of course I fell in love with him then."

"Oh," he laughed, and reached his hand over to squeeze her shoulder. Her eyes were damp, and she was blinking slightly. "You and Harold are so sweet you know? That's what I want in life. To end up like you and Harold."

For a moment she grimaced as some thought twisted behind her face. "We all end up the same," she said, and drove on in silence.

THE MOTHERCAGE

Morning

Frank

With a sickening jolt he was awake. For a moment he couldn't tell where he was. There was banging, and people shouting. As things came into focus he realised that it was mainly his mother shouting. The room was full of people, looking in cupboards and under furniture, and Mrs Chips was barking frantically, hackles raised.

"What the fuck is going on," he said as he pulled himself to his feet. It took him a dizzy moment perceive that the strangers were police. His mother had somehow backed herself into the corner of the room, and although she was shouting at the police he saw something in her that he had very rarely seen. Fear. Having let the genie out of the bottle she was alarmed at its ferocity. Too late to put it back in though.

She looked across at him. "I know it looks bad," she declared, twisting her fingers anxiously. Uncharacteristically she was stammering. "But it's for your own good," she insisted. "If you co-operate they can help you."

In front of him stood a large, surly looking policeman with a beet-red complexion and a face like a King Edward potato. "Yeah, right. You want to help me, don't you?" He grinned at the copper, and patted his arm flirtatiously. "You lovely man you."

The policeman, if anything, got even redder and looked away. Then he turned back, squared his shoulders and said, "I am placing you under arrest for suspected burglary. You have the right to remain silent, but anything you do say will be..."

Unexpectedly Frank puked. It was so sudden that he didn't even have time to feel nauseous. The whole stream of foetid matter hit the policeman right in the chest, and spread down his uniform. "Sorry mate," he giggled, and slumped back into the sofa. "You going to take that in evidence?"

The policeman bunched his big fists, then looked at Frank's mother, standing in the corner, and relaxed them. She was shaking a little, but was visibly trying to calm down.

"What were you shouting about anyway Mother," Frank asked, in a derisory tone. He couldn't take it seriously. In a way he was glad. He deserved to be arrested. Not for the burglary, but for running out. "Didn't you call these fine strapping men for me? You know it's

not my birthday."

She shook her head in exasperation. "You are impossible, you force me to take extreme measures."

"Fuck off."

"If you talk to me like that I won't look after Mrs Chips for you."

Suddenly Frank felt a little more sober. He slapped his leg heavily, and called to Mrs Chips. She stopped her frantic skipping from side to side, and ran over. Head down she attempted to bury herself into his lap. He put his arms around her, protectively. This was his fault, his stupid drunken failure to protect. Thick bastard. She whined as she crowded her way into his belly, trying to be as small as possible.

"What do you have to barge in here for and scare the dog for?"

"Actually, yes." His mother was well on her way to recovering her composure now. It was almost impossible to remember that just moments ago she had been a shrieking harpy gibbering in the corner. She continued, in precise tones that grated on him, like nails dragged down a blackboard. "That is a good question. I made it quite clear when I phoned you that I would open the door."

"You stupid woman," Frank shook his head lethargically. "How do you expect the police to behave?" She made a hissing noise, and placed one talon in front of her lips. He shuddered at the unwelcome memory of it raking down his face. "Don't hush me," he snapped. "You don't have the right." He shut his eyes as his mother stormed out of the room. When he opened them a policewoman was crouched down, stroking Mrs Chips' head. Mrs Chips seemed to be calming down now. He sighed, relief at his mother's absence from the room relaxing him, even though the police were still there. Then came the bombshell.

"I think we are going to have to impound this dog," the policewoman said. "You see this tattoo? It looks like it might be a stolen laboratory beagle."

"No she isn't," Frank sat bolt upright, and clutched Mrs Chips to him. "She was released when that beagle breeder closed down. I've got the documents somewhere in the house. All you have to do is check the number. There must be records somewhere..."

The policeman he had vomited on walked up to Mrs Chips, grinning. "Yes, I'll take it down to the kennels now."

"No," Frank was standing now, "you can't do this. She's been through enough in her life."

"Looks to me like he is resisting arrest," said the woman, smiling.

Before he was entirely aware what was happening, two of the policemen who had been quietly rummaging through his bookcase were on either side of him, holding his arms. "I'm not resisting," he snapped, "but what the hell are you arresting my dog for? She's done nothing wrong." To his shame he realised he was crying. *Fuck this,* he thought. *They'll say I did it anyway.* With a hoarse cry he hurled himself forward and kneed the policeman who was trying to take Mrs Chips straight between the legs. As the man doubled over one of the police officers behind Frank clubbed him on the back of the head.

He fell into a dark place.

Karen

As it happened, she was right. Rose and her fellah did indeed have room for the guinea pigs. One of their stables was empty, and with a minimum of effort the stalls could be made secure.

"I'm sorry I can't help you love," Harold said, watching her work. "My hands have really seized up. They get worse as the day goes on."

"That's alright," she said, her words slightly mumbled by the nail she was gripping between her teeth. She was fixing close meshed wire to the bottom of the first stall, pegging it in tight, so that the guinea pigs couldn't escape out into the dubious freedom of the yard, where no doubt they would be beset by cats, foxes, possibly rats. In a perfect world of course they would be able to release them – but this was not a perfect world, and they were not in Peru. So, regretfully, she secured them a larger cage, while wishing for a world without cages.

"How are we going to make sure rats can't get in," she asked as she worked. She paused, and considered it. "Rats can climb, so we'll have to put mesh across the top."

"This building is alright. We had rats come in here before, so we got someone to come along and plug all the gaps. We had rabbits in here for a while." Karen nodded. She thought she knew where those rabbits came from. They had all been safely re-homed. "That isn't to say it's one hundred percent secure," Harold admitted, "but where is?" He looked down at the bag on his lap. "Anyway, they are going frantic in there," he said sadly, stroking the bag, and

glancing across at the others by her feet.

There was a moment's concentrated silence as she finished off the job. "Right," she said, and stood up. "All we need now is the hay and water." Harold nodded towards a neighbouring stall. "Hay in there," he said. "All bagged up, specially for guinea pigs. It's not for us, it's for the rescue centre." He laughed, "Lucky it was in. You'd almost think we were meant to have them."

"Or that Rose was hoping."

He cocked his head, like a stiff old bird on a frosty branch, and raised a quizzical eyebrow. "That too," he conceded. "It may seem stupid, but I had never thought of that." He laughed. "She always was a crafty old girl."

As Karen spread straw over the concrete floor Harold moved off to fill the water dispensers from the tap against the outside wall. Slowly he rolled back to her, lifting up some shallow food trays along the way.

"We're lucky," he said. "Rose keeps all the animal sundries in here, which makes everything easier."

Once the water bottles had been firmly attached at regular intervals around the walls, and food had been dispersed throughout the area Karen was finally finished. She stood up, flushed, with straw in her hair, and smiled at Harold over the half door.

"Done," she said, triumphantly, looking at her handiwork. She stretched her arm out across the partition. Painfully he lifted the bag from his lap and handed it over to her. Gently she put it down. As he passed the other bags across she reigned back her instinct to do it for him. The man had pride, she thought, dignity. She wouldn't stop him now from making this gesture for the animals. She imagined herself or Simon, years from now, in this position. Still caring, feeling the same urge inside to help, but unable to step up – at least not in the same way. For an instant heat prickled in the back of her eyes, as she realised how vulnerable people were. She had seen pictures of Harold and Rose when they were first married, young and handsome. He had been a big strapping six footer back then with an easy smile. No pain in it back then. Oh, he still smiled a lot, but there was hurt in it now, suffering. He hadn't let pain harden him. He had seen suffering, and suffered, and let it open up his heart.

As he handed her the last bag she turned in a seemingly casual gesture, and hid her face from him. It would never do if he saw her cry and guessed the reason. She stooped down to the floor

and began opening the bags.

For a terrible moment nothing happened. Then, suddenly, one of the guinea pigs darted out, and spun around in the hay, emitting high-pitched cries. She looked up at Harold now, not ashamed of her tears, and saw that he was crying too. Tenderly she removed the stragglers, and backed away from them. Harold rolled back his chair as she climbed over the wooden barrier. She turned and looked back in, as he returned to watch with her. Groaning he pulled himself up, and leaned heavily on the top of the little door.

She put her arm around him, and they watched the creatures scurry around their new environment.

They never before felt hay, she thought, marvelling at the perfection of their natures. Already they were dividing up into family groups, making nests for their young, sorting out which baby belonged to whom.

And human beings would have stolen their lives from them, she thought, bitterly. *What makes us think that we have the right, any right at all, to take their lives away?*

Simon

Simon's headache had receded. His travelling companion had cheered up remarkably from the gloom that had dominated while he sat in the back. They were talking now as they sped down the motorway. Sam was filling him in with details of what he had found in the filing cabinets at the bottom of the shed.

"Well, we happen to have a list of all Farmer Fitzwilliam's suppliers," Sam was saying, "as well as the people he supplies to. We have his orders from different laboratories all over the country. And we got his daily log sheets. Makes interesting reading. You should see how many of those animals wind up dead from so called 'natural' causes."

"Nothing natural about it," Simon scowled. The euphemisms that animal abusers used disgusted him as much as the lies – in fact he thought they might even be worse. Expressions like "natural causes" meant that people became desensitised to suffering – they could think about it, accept it, without ever really understanding what such suffering actually was.

"You know that idiot Jack," Simon asked.

"Yeah," Sam groaned. "He was on my back all night."

"Did he seriously ask you why you didn't just burn all the

papers?"

"Yup. 'Fraid so."

"Jesus." Simon laughed. "And he claims he's done these things before."

Sam shook his head, equally incredulous. "I had to explain myself to him all the time while I was working. I could have done without that. He said, 'the fire won't spread to the other animals, because the floor is concrete.' No idea."

"Did you explain it to him?"

"I did. Don't know if he understood." There were obvious reasons why Sam couldn't have used fire, even though it could easily have been contained to the filing cabinet. Firstly, they needed the documents to find out information on other animal abusers. Jack's notion that they could take digital photos didn't hold water, because in the poor light, and with the equipment available the pictures wouldn't come out. Secondly fire could all too easily have set off alarms that weren't connected to the intruder system. However, the third reason was as important as the first in the long term. Even though the fire would have consumed itself once the paper ran out, and there was little risk of it spreading across the sterile concrete of the shed, the fact was there were still live animals in that place. The press would have had a field day. He could just imagine the articles. *'Animal Liberation Front tries to burn down shed with live guinea pigs still inside.'*

"Do you know did it all go off okay with their computer records?"

"Oh yeah," Sam chuckled. "About that. Had a word with our friends a couple of days ago. They were still at the B and B tonight, so I wasn't too worried Fitzwilliam would turn up."

"Yeah?"

"Well, as you know, one of them happens to be a close personal friend of mine, and I understand that while Mr Fitzwilliam was out doing whatever farmers do – milking the cows..."

"Playing with their mammaries you mean."

"Yeah," Sam snorted his derision. "Well, my friend tells me that a computer virus found its way onto Fitzwilliam's computer, and that it should be kicking in anytime about..." he looked at his watch and smiled appreciatively. "Now."

"That's fantastic."

Sam rolled his head on his shoulders in a characteristic

gesture designed to ease the stiffness out of his neck. "Yeah," he said as he stretched. "Next time he puts his computer on everything will crash. His whole system is going to be wiped clean."

"So he'll lose his breeding records, his contacts, his financial records. That'll make it difficult to run a business." Simon laughed with relief. This was as profound a blow against the corrupt breeder as the liberation itself, he thought as he reached across to put on the radio. He could begin to relax now, since despite the ups and downs of the night things seemed to be back on track.

The music channels scratched between signals for a while, then the men reached a station they could both approve of. As they sat there, heads nodding appreciatively to the Stranglers, Simon decided it was now safe to ask. Cautiously he broached the question that had been playing in the background of his mind. "How are you anyway? You know, about Fiona's news."

Sam went silent for a moment, then smiled. An uncommon ray of sunshine. Not that Sam was a surly man – not as surly as his reputation anyway. In fact, he could be quite a fun person to be around a lot of the time. But he hadn't grinned like that in years.

"Dunno. I'm looking forward to being a granddad." Suddenly he glowered at Simon, a mock scowl on his face. "Anyway, stop distracting me," he said, pointing to the radio. "Turn it up."

"Righty ho. We'll have to turn it down when we get where we are going. It's not her kind of music."

"Do I know her?"

"No. Not really. Nobody does. That's the way she wants to keep it. Very private person."

"Right."

"Tell you what though," Simon couldn't help chuckling. "You'll be surprised when you see her."

"Why?"

"Well, let's put it this way. She's not what you'd expect."

Tim

"Jesus Christ, what's that?" Tim sat up bolt upright on the sofa, and cats scattered as an unholy thumping noise came to his front door. Then he realised. Police. He stood up and scrubbed his eyes hard. *Wake up,* he told himself, and padded to the corridor, shutting the living room door behind him so that the cats, in their alarm, wouldn't bolt out into the street. Just as he got to his front door it

cracked in and swung open. The shared hall beyond his door was filled with a ridiculous amount of police.

For a moment the surrealism of the situation, himself barefoot in his pyjamas, facing at least a dozen men in riot gear, made him laugh. What had they been expecting? A terrorist? The laughter only lasted a moment. The two policemen nearest the door were carrying something that looked more like a miniature battering ram than anything else. Tim raised his eyebrows at the invaders, and said, "I hope you are going to pay for the damage."

"What goin' on?" The unmistakable tones of Naomi, his favourite cat-sitter, rang out over the police attempt at a response. Tim craned his head, and looked over the mass of shoulders and visors. Naomi was standing in her doorway, with Ben on her hip. He was sucking his fist, and wearing a one-piece pyjama outfit that made him look like a telly tubby, while his mother sported pink fluffy slippers and an unflattering beige coloured dressing gown, which looked as though it might once have belonged to her Granddad.

"It's okay Naomi," Tim said. "Sorry about the noise."

"What you sorry for darlin'," she said. "It these bastards the problem." Tim smiled. Her Jamaican accent was stronger than usual. He wasn't sure if she was putting it on to wind up the police, or if she was someone whose accent got stronger when she was angry. He hadn't seen her angry before. "You want I do something?"

"No," he started, then changed his mind. "Actually yes. You could keep an eye on my flat. If these clowns decide to arrest me, could you feed my cats?"

"You know I will honey." She stood with one arm cradling Ben on her hip, and pointed with the other hand, jabbing with her forefinger, an incongruously bespectacled Madonna with attitude (despite the awful clothes.) "You tell me, officers," she asked. "What you arrestin' this man for? He not black."

"If you could stay out of this Missis," one of the policemen said. "It has nothing to do with you."

"Actually, yes it do have to do with me. He invited me in. You lot, you just breakin' and enterin'. If I did that you would lock me up an' throw away the key."

"Look, just back off, and let us do our jobs."

"You let me in to check you don't go killin' the cats, and there won't be any trouble," she said. "You carry on like you are doin', and I will have all my brothers here in no time. And my family is a big family."

"Are you threatening us?"

"I wouldn't threaten you. I just came out because you made my baby cry. If you had rung on the front door I would have opened it, but no, you have to smash it down."

"We did ring."

"I didn't hear you. And I was awake. I was doing my homework."

The argumentative policeman turned around and walked towards her in a determined manner, then stopped. Other doors along the corridor were opening. He decided to step back.

"Sally," Naomi called sweetly to one of her neighbours. "Could you keep an eye on my cutey pie while I check Tim's cats?"

"Okay." Sally, one of Naomi's best friends, came eagerly to her door, and took Ben in her arms. The sleepy child dropped his head on her ample shoulder, and started to suck her pyjama top, before suddenly dropping asleep. Naomi straightened herself, and stalked across the corridor with her head held high.

"You stay cool Tim. I won't let anythin' happen to your babies."

Tim smiled. "I know," he said. "That's why I asked you."

Karen

Harold looked tired, she thought, as they drank tea together. He had insisted on putting out a late snack for her, and she was grateful as she ate the simple meal. She hadn't realised before the raid that she was hungry – as usual she had been too nervous to eat properly for several days. Now though her appetite had caught up with her, and she had eaten baguettes, humous and green salad with pleasure. She was rounding off with tea, because it was Harold's beverage of choice, and she wanted him to be looking a bit sprightlier when she left.

"Well dear," he said, as she pushed back her empty mug. "I suppose you had better be going. I'm sure you need to get your rest."

"Aye, well. It was lovely talking to you as always. I'll be around in the next few days for my tea, so..." she paused as her phone rang. "Sorry, I have to get this." Irritated she pulled her phone out, and saw the word "red" on her screen. She had saved Simon's new number in her address book with that code for just such a contingency as this – so that if he had to phone in the small hours of the morning his name wouldn't come up on her inbox. Not of course

that the word "red" was going to come up, since she would now have to dump the phone.

"Hello?" Her voice rang tersely in her ears, and she bit her tongue, annoyed with her sharpness. If he was calling it must be important, she thought. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. You know the lay-by near where you are?"

"The one by the oak tree?"

"That's the one. Our mate's car is there – you couldn't go pick them up could you? Bring them back to where you are now? It's too late to get a garage out, you know?"

"Okay. Are they there now?"

"Should be. Let me know in twenty minutes or so if they aren't."

"Right. I'll give you a ring to let you know it's okay." She cleared her throat. She imagined he had been worrying about the guinea pigs Frank had absconded with earlier. "Everything is okay here too you know. Our friends who got lost earlier, I found them okay, so don't worry."

"Oh, that's fantastic." The relief in his voice was palpable, and she smiled to hear it. "Look, I have to get off now," he said, "but see you soon, yeah?"

"Yeah. See you soon love. Bye."

She clicked off the phone, and lay it flat on the table, blowing air out through her lips in an explosive rush. "Bugger," she muttered.

"Everything okay?" Harold looked at her astutely from under his bushy brows.

She shrugged. "I don't know. I have to go pick someone up from the lay-by and bring them back here. He couldn't tell me anymore, so I suppose we'll just have to see."

"Okay, I'll wait here for you."

She stood, and leant over to kiss him on the brow. "You're lovely, do you know that?"

"Oh yes," he replied tongue in cheek. "Rose tells me that all the time."

"She's a lucky woman you know."

"Oh, get out you flatterer." He rolled the chair backwards, then around to circumnavigate the table. She grinned though. Despite his protestations he was smiling. She could see how happy he was at tonight's events, and thought that it had been worth it, amongst other things, to see him smile.

Rose

Manjit stumbled as they got out of the car, and steadied himself on the passenger door. She put her hand behind his back automatically to stop him from falling over. He had slept as she dropped off the papers and video with Sam's friend, and was only now resurfacing. He grimaced, and hopped away from the vehicle, towards the hedge beneath the oak tree. "Sorry," he said. "I don't mean to be a nuisance.

"Ah no," she reassured him, "you're being fine." It shouldn't be too much longer, she thought, with a sense of relief. She had just spoken with Simon, and he had reassured her that in no time the emergency services would be out to pick them up. She knew what that meant.

As she waited she locked up the doors, then slid the keys up into the exhaust pipe – a place activists in the area had been using for years. There were various other places she could have hidden the key, but whoever was going to pick up the car would (or should) know better than to expect her to be crawling around under the thing at this time on a wet night. Besides, she wasn't entirely sure she would know what she was looking for, and she didn't have any packing tape.

"Shouldn't be long now," she said reassuringly to break the silence. Manjit was still inside himself, and she assumed it was a combination of the effect of the painkiller, the pain itself, and worrying about Dapinder. She wished she could persuade him that it was the right thing to tell his wife. But then, despite her own certainty, how could she really know anyone else for certain? It was just possible that she could be wrong. *Well,* she thought, as she strolled anxiously up and down, *people do decide to trust people after all. And if you can't trust the person you are married to you are in big trouble.*

Still, she conceded, there was a lot at stake here and not only for the humans, who, after all, would only have to go to jail for a few years if the worst came to the worst. For the animals it was life and death.

No wonder the lad has gone so solemn, she sympathised. *He must be wondering if he made a mistake getting married at all. And the way he did. Well, we get married because we are lonely, and the other person makes us feel complete. If he doesn't feel that with her, then it was a mistake. We'll just have to wait and see.*

Dipped lights swept round the corner and slowed. She stood, bracing herself in case it was a sympathetic member of the public offering help, and rehearsed her lies. Then a smile broke out all over her face. "Karen," she said. Karen walked swiftly up to her, and embraced her. "Rose," she said. "It's so good to see you." Manjit hobbled up, and Karen took his arm. "Ah, now I understand," she said. "Allow me to show you to your carriage, ladies and gents. Then you can visit your guests."

"What guests..." Manjit was a little dazed still, but then he smiled, and his eyes caught Rose's. Her heart lifted. "Excellent," he said, and gave her the thumbs up. "Your Harold must be over the moon."

"He is that," Karen confirmed. "Come on, we're heading back."

As Rose eased herself into Karen's car she felt the tension she had carried all night start to dissolve. She closed her eyes, and let weariness and relief wash over her. The night was over, and she was finally coming home.

Frank

He sat sullenly in front of a policeman whose name and number had passed completely over his head, and refused to answer questions. Dehydration was causing his head to hammer in time to his heartbeat, and the hangover from hell had kicked in early, but still, he would not speak.

After the things I have done tonight, I might as well get this one thing right, he told himself bitterly.

No comment, no comment, no comment. The phrase rang through his head, whether he said it or not. He clung to it like a mantra, the only thing he had left. Tim would finish with him now, no matter what else happened. He was sure of that. But at least he could do this much, to prove to Tim, to prove to himself, that he wasn't a complete failure, that he wasn't an utterly spineless creep. Even when the policeman returned to the room after a short break and gloatingly showed him his hip flask, discovered at the "scene of the crime" he didn't crack. "Your mother confirms that this was a gift from her," the policeman said, waving the evidence bag under his nose. "Do you think we are going to find any DNA on it?"

Frank gazed up at him coldly, and curled his lip. Slightly more sober now he suddenly realised that if they followed his footprints up to a certain bush they would find plenty of his DNA all over the

place. *There should be a manual somewhere telling people not to piss on a raid.* For a moment he laughed, wondering what lucky member of the police force would have to scoop up mud with his piddle in it. *Yeah, no two ways about it. I'm going down.* He shrugged. *Fuck it.* "No comment."

"Who else was with you? Your boyfriend?"

"No comment."

"If you co-operate with us we may be able to help."

"No comment. No comment. No comment."

And so it went on. The worst had happened, the worst had been done, and if it hadn't been for his worry about Mrs Chips Frank would have been relieved. He deserved prison for what he had done. For having left any of the animals behind.

Sam

As Simon had said, the lady they went to see was not at all what he would have expected.

As they glided down the long drive to the extensive outbuildings Sam glanced across at Simon's profile. Yep – he was biting down laughter. Sam shook his head, in a species of wonder.

"You know what mate," he said, incredulously. "I knew she was a veggie, but even so," he snorted, still having difficulty with the concept. "I would never have believed it if you had told me, not in a million years."

"Why not?" Simon shrugged. "The rich and famous can have consciences as well."

"Yeah, but... Still. You expect them all to be Lady Mucks, don't you? Baroness Hoity Toities. Don't care, don't give a damn about anything."

"That's why no-one will ever look here."

"Why not? What about the paparazzi?"

"They can't be bothered with her anymore. If she was the kind of woman had plastic surgery and a new husband every other year then maybe, but she's kept a low profile." Simon chuckled. "Despite the security fences around here."

"Won't that guard think it's odd though, someone delivering parcels at this time of night?"

"Not that guard. That's her son."

"How about that," Sam said admiringly, as they pulled to a halt. "I dunno, I never thought she was old enough to have an adult kid."

"She's older than you, you know, and you're old enough to be a grandad." Simon pulled to a halt in an enclosed courtyard, surrounded on all sides by sheds, and rubbed his hands together while they waited. "It's enough to make you feel old when someone you ogled as a youngster starts showing the cracks."

Don't I know it, thought Sam, and watched, fascinated, as a tall slender woman walked towards the vehicle. For a moment, just a moment, Sam saw the shadow of her younger self, floating as though it superimposed upon the image of the grey-haired woman in denims, waterproofs and welly boots. Then the image decayed. She was infinitely better looking now than she had ever been on a catwalk. Her smile was real this time.

As the two men got out of the vehicle she grasped their hands, one after the other, and shook hard. More like a man's grip, Sam thought, as he returned her grasp.

"You've got them safe?" she asked.

"Yes," Sam mumbled.

"Wonderful," she smiled, and opened the doors to one of the sheds. Sam descended from the vehicle and followed her in. As he looked around his eyes prickled with tears for the second time that day. It was a haven. Everything was as he would have wanted it.

"Temporary accommodation, of course," she said. "Some of them will be staying here, but we've got plenty of homes lined up. Don't worry. People with outdoor runs so they can feel the fresh air, and plenty of space for them move around in."

He met her eyes and nodded gravely. "This is perfect. Thank you," he said, and turned to the van, as Simon backed it in. She came up beside him, and as they started to pass out the cages she took them in relay to the extensive runs, and released the prisoners.

Tim

As his lawyer completed formalities Tim gathered his thoughts, and looked at his hands. Those black smudges were a pain to get off, he observed to himself irrelevantly. He had been fingerprinted before. The police used to make a big thing about how they would get rid of the prints if the charges were ever dropped. Nobody ever believed them. At least now they admitted that once they had your prints and DNA that was it, you were tagged for life.

Be calm, he thought. *Nothing to worry about.* He sighed, and looked at the drab wall opposite. There was stuff to worry about,

obviously. If it was just himself here, then things might be alright. He could trust himself not to give anything away. It was Frank that was the problem. He had been so drunk. And he knew that Frank was here. As he had been booked in by the desk sergeant that awful woman who called herself Frank's mother came up and started screaming at him. Must have given someone a chuckle, when they dragged her off. "Do you know her?" the desk sergeant had asked. Tim hid his irritation with the man to answer irreverently, "Yeah. Widow Twanky."

Unfortunately Mrs Whitely overheard, and had practically needed to be sedated. Tim shook his head, even now, thinking about it. Perhaps it wasn't her fault. She was obviously mentally ill. But still, doolally or not, the way she treated her son was unforgivable.

You're still making excuses for him, he told himself. *If he spills the beans tonight, it's nobody's fault but his own.* Tim sighed again, cracking his knuckles. That was what worried him. Not the prospect of prison, not even the fact that the most serious relationship of his life had gone down the drain. The thing that was really twisting in his gut now was the possibility that all their efforts tonight had been for nothing. That the guinea pigs were going to be given up. That after everything those poor victims were going to be killed.

The door opened, and finally the police left the room. Oliver, dressed in a crumpled grey suit that looked as though he might have slept in it, seemed slightly bleary-eyed after his late night call out. Tim smiled as his lawyer sat opposite him. He was glad it was this man. He had met Oliver before. Most people trusted him. He and his firm had been doing Animal Rights cases for years, and on a couple of occasions had turned up at the local rescue centre with injured hedgehogs or foxes. Another point in his favour was the fact that he wore fake leather shoes.

Of course, there was always the occasional paranoid individual who would come out with comments like, "he tries to look like he's fitting in too hard you know. When I was at his office, he had soya milk in the fridge. I think he's a cop." The fact was, Tim didn't know. He thought it was rather unlikely, but even if Oliver was an informant, there came a point when you had to behave as though you trusted someone, even when you didn't. Not that he would ever spill his guts to him – no-one should ever do that, he thought, not where the law was concerned – but at least you had to trust people enough to ask for help occasionally.

Oliver opened his brief case, briefly disappearing behind it, then closed the lid and pushed the case back down on the floor. He pulled a lop-sided smile at his client, and shook hands. "How are you bearing up," he asked in a slightly crisp accent, that painfully reminded Tim of Frank, before his association with "commoners" like himself had taken some of the starch out of his mannerisms. He wondered if Oliver came from the same kind of moneyed background as Frank, or if he had picked the accent up at University. Not that it mattered. He shook himself miserably and shrugged, an empty gesture.

"Fine," he said. "What you got?"

"Well, first... " Oliver paused, then patted Tim's hand reassuringly. "No-one's listening, as you know. So don't worry."

Tim dipped his head, acknowledging the signal of friendship, but withdrew his hand nervously. He couldn't read Oliver, and he just needed legal advice, not friendship.

Oliver looked at him sympathetically. "I'm not coming onto you, so don't worry," he said. Tim flushed, and cleared his throat in embarrassment. The lawyer smiled and continued. "You know what you are charged with, burglary, criminal damage, conspiracy – so I'll go through those charges in more detail later. But I have found out something that should help you for now."

"What's that?"

"So far the only evidence that they have against you is the word of Mrs Whitely. Now, am I right in thinking she is a rampant homophobe?"

Tim laughed. "Yeah."

"If she is their only evidence you may well get off."

"It's a big if."

Oliver nodded, with a soothingly calm expression on his face. "I understand also that Frank has given a no comment interview."

Tim looked up in surprise. "Really?"

"Yes. Unfortunately he was a little bit too drunk to see the value of having a lawyer present, but he didn't do too badly."

"How did you find this out?"

"The doctor they got on call tonight is sympathetic. She told me what she thought of Frank's injuries, and..."

"He's injured?"

"A slight concussion. Scratches to his face, and bruises to his back and ribs. To be honest, that is all in his favour, since the police

report doesn't declare his injuries. It makes it seem like they have something to hide. However, the police say he attacked them, which isn't so good, and the fact that he is drunk doesn't help. On the other hand a good lawyer can argue that he shouldn't have been interviewed until he had sobered up. He'll probably go down though. They found evidence which places him at the scene."

Tim stared across at the door to the interview room, and pondered this new information. Frank was coming through. Just when Tim had completely given up hope on him, Frank was coming through.

A little noise burst through, a laugh. Tim smiled, painfully. *That'll teach me to be so judgmental,* he thought. *Unless he is just looking out for himself. Shame he couldn't have kept it together on the raid.*

"I could have sworn he would have told them everything," he said regretfully. "I mean," he backtracked a little, "if there is anything to tell."

Oliver smiled in unspoken understanding. "The only thing to worry about now is, do you have anyone who can get Frank's dog from the pound?"

Tim looked up, startled. "Mrs Chips is in the police kennels?"

"Yes, they tried to claim that she was a stolen dog, but her tattoo matches her to the dogs from..."

"Yes, of course they do," Tim interrupted. "Frank had all the papers at home. My Mum has a copy from when she's looked after her before. And all they had to do was make a few phone calls anyway. They're the police for god's sake. They must have known she wasn't stolen." Tim shook his head, and stifled the urge to hit something. These people, these petty spiteful vindictive people, they made him sick. He took a deep breath. "My mum," he said. "Get my mum to collect her. If we say that she is my dog as well as Frank's then won't they release her to Mum?"

"I'd think so," Oliver murmured reassuringly. "Especially if your mum has documents to prove it."

"Mum keeps everything in order, she'll have them in no time."

"Well then, they have no legal grounds to keep her."

"Okay then. Well, Mum's back from Wales tonight, she was on holiday. She can have Mrs Chips until I am out of here."

"Alright then. At some point I will try to get that message to Frank." Oliver smiled. "If he ever decides to trust me."

"Thanks." Suddenly Tim felt his face go hot, like he was about to cry. *Poor Mrs Chips,* he thought. *To be flung back in a cage after the terrible life she's had.* "Can you phone my Mum now," he persisted. "I mean, we need to get Mrs Chips out as soon as possible. Because..." he covered his eyes with his hand. He really was crying now. "Because she'll wonder what she's done wrong. It's not like when a human is locked up. She has no idea why she's being treated like this. Can you get her out? Please?"

"Yes," Oliver nodded. "Yes of course I will." He pulled out his phone, and started to make calls.

Manjit

As the taxi pulled up outside his house he saw the curtains move. "Oh no," he groaned. The taxi driver looked over his shoulder and laughed at him. "The little woman giving you grief is she?"

"Hope not," Manjit said lightly. He didn't feel right discussing Dapinder with strangers. "Might be me giving her grief you know."

"Right. That's why she's waiting up for you at six o clock in the morning."

Manjit smiled, and paid the fair. "I'll know to worry when she stops waiting up for me. That would mean she didn't care."

"Fair point."

"Yeah. See you mate." The taxi pulled away as Manjit limped up to the house. Just as he reached out for the handle Dapinder opened the door. He looked at her, and his heart sank. He couldn't tell from her expression if she was angry or upset, but she certainly didn't seem overjoyed to see him.

"What is wrong with your leg?" She stood with her arms folded and stared at him.

"Uhm, I fell down some steps."

"No you did not."

"Excuse me?"

"You have not been to the pub, because I cannot smell any smoke on you. You have not been to your friends, because nobody answered the telephone. So what is it that has happened?"

"Look, I hurt my leg. I need to get it seen to. I came home first because I didn't want you to worry..."

"Of course I worry," her eyes flashed brightly with tears, and he suddenly felt very guilty. "I thought you might have had an accident. And you did have an accident! And now you will not tell me

how it happened."

Manjit turned, and started to hobble out of the house.

"Where are you going to now," she asked.

"Hospital," he snapped.

"Don't be silly," she said. "I will drive you."

In the car the silence between them stretched out like a taut wire on the point of snapping. Manjit turned on the radio, and they pretended to listen as they drove through the early morning. Suddenly an item caught his attention. He leant across and turned up the volume.

"The news team have just received a press release from a local farmer, Mr Fitzwilliam. He woke this morning to the discovery that sheds containing guinea pigs, which he was breeding for medical research, had been broken into overnight by extremists from the Animal Liberation Front. Hundreds of animals have been removed, vital records have been stolen and destroyed, his computer has been hacked into and the sheds themselves vandalised.

Mr Fitzwilliam had this statement for our station..."

"What is going on..." Dapinder glanced at him anxiously as she drove.

"Hush," he hissed imperatively, flapping his hand in a shushing motion. "I've got to hear this."

"... feel I am unable to risk my family and business, so I am regretfully terminating the side of my business which deals with the breeding of animals for the vivisection industry..."

"Yes!" Manjit punched the air enthusiastically. This time Dapinder hushed him.

"... feel it would be appropriate at this time for the animals to be re-homed to members of the public, and therefore I have decided to release the guinea pigs to the care of appropriate animal welfare organisations..."

"Yes!" Manjit cried out again ecstatically, completely forgetting where he was in the heat of the moment.

Dapinder pulled the car to a sudden halt. She turned in the driving seat and stared squarely at her husband. He froze, and stared back. For one trembling heartbeat he knew that she knew, but didn't know how she would react.

"Manjit?" Her voice was quiet, slightly shaky, as it often was when she repressed the strength of her feelings.

"What?" Cautiously he watched her to see which way she

would jump.

"Come here." She reached out and grabbed him, gathered him into her arms and pressed her warm lips on his face.

Ann

Katriona and herself buried the guinea pig in the shade of a woodland alongside the canal. It was brief, unceremonious. This moment wouldn't help the dead animal, it was more for them, to mark their own grief. Even so, as they patted the earth down and murmured futile words, Ann realised how glad she was that she was here, that she could do this with her daughter.

Afterwards they sat on one of the benches by the bank, watching the water slowly moving beneath the early sun. The day seemed flat, lifeless, and Ann put her arm comfortingly around her daughter. Katriona rested her head on her Mum's shoulder, as though she was still a little girl. Deep down Ann felt it was only a matter time before the police matched up the evidence they found in the shed, and came to her.

As they sat Mrs Murphy, an old lady who dog walked for her daughter every morning, stopped for a chat. The frisky little poodle, known as Zippy, was jumping happily around, and nearly drew a smile from Katriona. The old woman looked at her concerned.

"Heard some news this morning that might cheer you up," she said. "You look like you could do with cheering up."

"My exams," said Katriona, "I'm just worried about school."

"Well dear, don't worry. There's worse things than school you know. I just heard on the news about this person who used to breed guinea pigs. Well, he's shutting the place down, because someone robbed him, and all those guinea pigs are being taken off to good homes. How's that for good news?"

Ann stared at Katriona, speechless. The best news ever, the best result they could have hoped for. Her heart was suddenly so full, so happy that it ached. It threatened to overflow into tears. *"Oh my God,"* she murmured, so low only her daughter heard. Katriona put her hand briefly up to her mouth. Her eyes were glittery and wet, but she smiled. Joyful laughter suddenly bubbled up between them, and Ann grabbed her daughter's hand.

"Mum," Katriona's face shone with pride as she looked at her mother. "Can we have some guinea pigs?"

THE MOTHERCAGE

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