

## Soul Mate

**A short story of 11,600 words. A tale of love, loss and grief.**

**Set in Bucharest and West London. A tale of the strange things that happened to Martin Bartlett and the warning it offers to us all. If someone says they will love you forever, pray that they don't really mean it.....**

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Where to begin the story ? No use beginning when Martin was sat in the cell in the depths of the police station, listening to the screams and occasional gunfire. By then it was much too late for him to do anything, his fate was well and truly sealed. No use in beginning by following him around while he fixed franking machines for a living. Someone has to do it of course, but the nature of his job isn't relevant to the story. There was the incident with the moped muggers, but even that is the wrong place to begin. We need to go back before Martin had even met Anna, right back to when his long dreamed of, beer drinking holiday was about to actually happen.

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Martin Bartlett was twenty four and had never fulfilled the dream he'd had since being eighteen. He wanted to go on a holiday to Eastern Europe and spend two weeks getting drunk every night. There was also the question of girls of course, he'd heard some stories from his friends. Probably all fantasy of course, but he quite liked the idea of taking a few of the local women back to his hotel room.

"Prague used to be the place." Owen had told him. "Now they're getting a bit uppity about gangs of Brits running riot."

Owen was his best friends and usual drinking companion in the Duck & Rabbit, the pub about a quarter of a mile from where he lived. It had been the Earl Grey for years, until the brewery had renamed it.

"Romania is the place now Martin. Bucharest is how Prague was a decade ago. Cheap beer, no crap from the local cops and the women....."

Owen had rambled on for some time and probably only half of it was true. Which half though ? Owen had been there, he'd seen the airline tickets and the pictures on his phone. Lots of topless girls, mixed in with snaps of old buildings and the Curtea Veche Palace, where Vlad the Impaler had once lived. The topless girls looked out of place and might have been downloaded from one of the late night soft porn channels.

"Seriously Martin, you can live like a king on a hundred quid a week."

Oh what to believe though ? Several other regulars at the Duck & Rabbit had been to Eastern Europe, mainly to get drunk and pick up the local girls. They all seemed to contradict each other about all sorts of important information.

"Everyone speaks English Martin."

"They all only speak Romanian, but I got by alright."

Martin had Googled Bucharest and found out more reliable information in a few minutes, than he'd learned in months down the pub. Really doing it excited him, the personal two week beer fest in Romania. He'd taken the next step and walked into a travel agent near to where he worked. The woman who took him over to her desk was about his age and understood his real reasons to visit Romania.

"I won't bore you with all the touristy stuff, you don't look to me like someone who visits a lot of old churches."

She'd introduced herself as Fiona and she was gorgeous, way out his league. Martin was currently sleeping with Indra in accounts. Indra was forty eight, though she had looked after herself. He didn't come over well to women, he knew that. The sex was good with Indra, it was just about all they did together. A woman old enough to be his mum, but it was better than wanking off over dirty magazines.

"How expensive is it over there?" He'd asked Fiona. "I do alright, but the rent on my flat just went up again."

Fiona smiled at him, as if she really understood his problems. She probably homed in on all the vulnerable looking guys, but he still felt flattered by her attention.

"I can find you fourteen days in Bucharest at a price that won't break the bank. Maybe not the best airline, or the best hotel, but you'll have the time of your life. Memories are what it's all about. How old are you Martin?"

"I'm twenty four."

"And I bet you've been wanting to do this trip for years."

"Yes, since I was eighteen."

"Then Bucharest is for you Martin. See the sights during the day and enjoy the cheap night life. Don't end up an old man with regrets! All we have left when we're old and grey are the memories of what we did when we were young. Don't waste the years Martin, make some memories."

A few more smiles from Fiona and he'd happily booked a holiday well above his original budget. He could afford it though and still have enough cash to really enjoy the nightlife. Fiona had put all the documents for his holiday in a nice tidy wallet, before seeing him to the door. She even touched his hand briefly.

"Have fun, just don't get arrested Martin and pack lots of condoms."

He was now sat at a desk in the office, eating a sandwich that tasted a bit stale. It was a desk he had no right to sit at, opposite Indra. He had no right to use the accounts office for his lunch, but screwing the company accountant brought a few perks.

"I don't know why I keep buying sandwiches over the road." He said. "They taste funny and I've had bad guts a few times."

"Habit Martin, you're a creature of habit. We all are." Said Indra.

She pointed at the travel documents near his stale ploughman's sandwich.

"So you're going then?" She asked. "On your own?"

It was a sore point. He'd always imagined going as one of a crowd of guys he knew. The others down the pub had mortgages now, some had young children. Even Owen had chickened out when it was time for him to buy a ticket. Martin was still going on his personal beer fest, even if it was a solitary affair.

"Yes, been wanting to go for years." He replied.

"You'll meet some tall blonde Svetlana and forget all about me."

They smiled at each other, knowing she'd just spoken the truth. He did hope to have some casual sex while abroad, who doesn't.

"I'll be back before you've had time to miss me." He said.

"Just don't catch anything. Give me a dose of something and I'll stab you while you're asleep."

She probably meant it, though he could hardly tell her that several packets of condoms were already in his suitcase. Martin looked at the wall calendar and it was just three weeks, until he'd be off on his

trip of a lifetime. He didn't need friends with him, they'd probably end up getting him arrested. Or Owen would chat up all the best looking girls.

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His hotel turned out to be better than he'd expected, a double room with a decent view of the Dâmbovița River. Not that close to the areas of town where you could get drunk for just a few Euros, but there were cabs everywhere. Martin had expected a small town and was amazed by the sheer size of Bucharest.

"Sixth largest city in the EU."

The woman on the reception desk had told him, while checking him in. He wasn't a huge traveller, his passport mainly used as proof of ID. The cover was worn from all the times he'd shown it at the local mail sorting office. There had been an internal flight to Scotland once and a work related trip to Cyprus. Martin really was a bit of a travel virgin and a large new city was beginning to weave its spell over him. He actually found himself staying sober and looking at brochures.

"You have to visit the Curtea Veche Palace of course and we have some beautiful parks."

A different girl on the reception desk, one he hadn't seen before. Long dark hair and eyes that seemed to smile at him with genuine warmth.

"There is so much to see." Said Martin. "I'm sure I'll get lost."

"We have a metro system and trams." She said. "Let me show you on the map."

The brochure was in English, as was the map which unfolded out of it. She was patient with him and her spoken English was perfect. She had an accent, but to Martin it sounded more like French than Romanian.

"Here, if you keep the river in sight, it's impossible to get lost."

He probably fell in love with Anna Drăghicescu at that very moment, though it took him a day or so to realise it. Officially she wasn't allowed to date the guests, though it hadn't started off as a date. Simply a local girl taking pity on a confused and inexperienced traveller. They toured Vlad the Impaler's old home on her day off and were inseparable by the middle weekend of his vacation. His friends had warned him about the perils of girls from the East.

"They're all about money." Owen had told him. "Be carefully or you'll get fleeced."

Anna wasn't like that; she was sweet and had used her own money when they were out. Anna was fast becoming important to him and he only had seven days left with her. They were in a quiet bar, after a perfect Saturday of touring Bucharest, enjoying a moment together. Martin decided to do what he'd never been that good at. He decided to be brave, spontaneous and even a little impetuous.

"Another week and I'll be back in Ealing in London." He said. "I know we haven't known each other long, but I feel like I've known you for years....."

She was giving him a knowing smile.

"Stop blushing Martin, I can see where this is leading. Of course I'll sleep with you."

He hadn't been with that many women in his twenty four years of life. Indra was strictly missionary position and just wanted a lot of thrusting to get the job done. When it was obvious she wasn't going to do it without being asked, he'd hinted at her going down on him.

"Urgh no !" She'd replied.

When he looked in the mirror, he saw a reasonably good looking guy staring back at him. His belly was flat, his teeth reasonably white and shiny. Martin had even discovered a shampoo to get rid of the dandruff that had plagued his school years. For some reason girls had never taken to him. Martin was usually the desperation fuck of the Duck & Rabbit. When all his friends were spoken for, a girl

would agree to go back to his place. They never seemed happy about it and rarely saw him for another date. Only once in his life had a girl gone down on him and even she had run off to the bathroom to spit and wash her mouth out. Maybe the wonderful sex only existed on TV ? He seriously began to wonder if Owen had been lying to him and no woman ever really enjoyed performing oral sex.

"You'll meet the right girl one day." Owen had told him.

Only he never did ! Not until that Saturday night with Anna. A large hotel bed, with a window that overlooked the river. He'd even ordered champagne, though Anna had needed to hide in the bathroom when it was delivered. One girl had been fired for sleeping with a guest.

"I'm falling in love with you Anna."

"Don't be silly, you don't even know me. I bet you can't even pronounce my name."

"It's Anna silly."

They kissed and laughed and sipped champagne.

"No Martin Bartlett, my family name. Pronounce Drăghicescu correctly and I will think of a way to reward you."

It became a game, played while they kissed and fondled each other, while sipping the expensive hotel champagne.

"No that is awful Martin. Like this..... Drăghicescu."

Gradually the play became more serious, their breathing deeper, their bodies hotter. They were naked before he made an attempt at pronouncing her name that sounded right. To his ears it was perfect, though she was still shaking her head.

"Not perfect Martin, but you've tried hard and deserve your reward."

Anna pushed him onto his back and kissed his chest, before moving down. She seemed in no hurry, teasing him by kissing all round his now rock hard dick. Eventually there was a wonderful feeling of warm breath and moist lips. His only other blow job had seemed all scratchy teeth, but Anna knew how to do it properly. For a fraction of a second his mind dwelt on where she'd gained the expertise. Crap ! Martin remembered the one about gift horse and mouth and decided to just enjoy it.

"That feels so good !" He said.

It did, no teeth scratching at his most treasured body part. He wasn't quite sure what Anna was doing, but she didn't seem in a hurry to stop. Her lips moved slowly down the shaft of his dick, before swiftly moving up again, once she'd reached the bottom. After about ten minutes, he came, it felt like gallons spirting out of him.

"Oh Wow !" He yelled.

No running to bathroom to make all those awful gagging noises. She must have swallowed, though she'd done it discreetly. Her face was next to his on the pillow, mischievous dark eyes looking into his.

"I told you it would be a good reward."

"Oh it was."

The sex went on all night, he only remembered sleeping for an hour or so. Always with condoms of course. He loved Anna, but he still had a few nagging doubts about her sexual expertise. She'd taken him to places he'd only imagined and yet she looked younger than him. Her sexual history was none of his concern, but he'd carry on using condoms until he knew her better. Better ! Crap ! He was going home in a week.

"This can't end, it isn't right."

"Then make the most of me while you're here." She replied.

He held her shoulders and entered from behind, feeling her back arch towards him. There was a tattoo of a snake on her shoulder, just above her shoulder blade. A coiled snake, rather odd for a young girl, though he couldn't resist kissing it.

"How old are you?" He asked.

She was breathless when she answered him.

"As old as sin Martin, as old as sin."

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He did make the most of her, though Anna still had her job to do. Their secret seemed to be known to the staff and Anna no longer hid when room service delivered meals. The rule against dating guests was to deter prostitution and everyone knew that Martin and Anna were becoming something beyond a casual holiday romance. They loved each other and everyone could see that. By day he went round an itinerary of galleries and museums, all planned by Anna. At night they remained in his room and fucked each other senseless. There was a desperation about their sex, both trying to cram as much into the remaining days as possible. Her day off was Wednesday and he was quite surprised when she suggested that he might like to meet her mother. Anna, the girl he loved wasn't as old as sin after all. The delightful girl who hurtled everywhere on her cycle, was twenty two and had a mother.

"My father died when I was tiny." She told him. "You'll like my mother, everyone likes her."

"Does your mum speak English?"

"Mum, what a very English word. Her name is Elena and yes, she speaks a little English and I can translate. We'll only stay for lunch, she just asked to meet you."

"Any special reason?"

"She wants to see the man who's been keeping her little girl out all night."

Crap! He wasn't good with parents at the best of times. Anna was playfully punching his arm though, her mischievous eyes laughing at him.

"Don't be scared Martin, she knows I'm not a child. It would just be nice if you met her. In case we do find a way for this..... Whatever it is we have, to last after you return home."

"I'd like that."

"Me too, I'm sure we can work something out."

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Anna left her cycle at home on the Wednesday and met him outside the hotel at about eleven. She took him on a long and confusing journey by metro, tram and finally a single deck bus. It was the sort of route you probably had to be a Bucharester to understand. Eventually the bus dropped them off in what looked to be an affluent area of the city.

"It's a bit of a walk from here." Said Anna. "We should be at my home in about fifteen minutes."

Her home! Of course it was, the hotel was just where she worked. It seemed strange to think of her coming home to such a wealthy area. That was another puzzle for another day though.

"What do I call your mum?" He asked.

"Not mum, that is an odd word. Call her Elena, she'll like that."

"How old is she?"

"Forty three next month."

Crap! Younger than Indra, several years younger. Martin knew that one day they'd have an inevitable conversation about the women in his past. He'd already made up his mind to add a couple of fictitious relationships and now he was going to bring Indra's age down to about twenty five.

"Here we are, my home."

A large set of wrought iron gates, with a crest on them. A coiled snake, just like the one tattooed on her right shoulder blade. This one was larger though and made out of iron by someone with real skill.

“That’s like your tattoo.”

“Yes, a family crest. We’ve been in Bucharest a long time, since the days of Vlad Țepeș, the famous Vlad the Impaler.”

“What did your father do for a living ?”

“Businessman, imports and exports. You know the sort of thing.”

He didn’t, not all. Martin didn’t feel it was the time to push her for details. The house was at the end of a short drive and it looked like something expensive and exclusive. All that and Anna worked at a zero stars hotel ? He could only assume it was her statement of independence. Her family had to be wealthy, extremely wealthy. She must have seen him looking at the magnificent house and hesitated with her key in the lock.

“We’re not crooks Martin. I promise you, we’re not drug barons or anything like that.”

“I never thought.....”

“But you might, once you’ve had a chance to think about it. My family are old Romanian money, wealthy since the thirteenth century. My ancestors helped find money and men for wars long ago and were well rewarded by grateful kings.”

Her key opened the door and a short woman with dark hair was walking towards them.

“I saw you coming from upstairs. So this is your Martin.”

He liked being ‘her’ Martin and hoped to be her Martin forever. The woman was obviously her mother, who looked far younger than the woman he’d been sleeping with in London.

“Mrs..... Elena, it is so nice of you to invite me.” He said.

“Manners too, the English are always so polite.”

Her accent was far stronger than Anna’s, more like the other people who worked at the Hotel.

“Tea, you must have tea.” Said Elena. “I was in England once and there always seemed to be someone making tea.”

A family wealthy enough to have a servant to bring the tea and a selection of cakes. Martin nibbled at one, but remembered Anna’s warning.

“As a child I always ate far too much cake and ruined my appetite for lunch.”

Martin had never really felt comfortable anywhere, apart from the Duck & Rabbit. He felt comfortable in Anna’s home though, with the tea and cake that tasted of cinnamon.

“I hear you’re from West London.....”

The time flew by and Martin found himself enjoying the company of Anna’s mother. The servant told them when lunch was ready and helped him fill his plate from several steaming tureens. The meal was perfect, though Martin didn’t recognise the vegetables. It was Romania, he was abroad, so he trusted they weren’t about to poison him and dug into everything. It wasn’t like him; his own mother had once accused him of having Asperger’s.

‘I just need to know what I’m eating mum, leave me alone.’

Loving someone wasn’t like him though and having fun without a drink wasn’t like him. Martin decided he quite liked not being the old him. The chatter was light and about nothing of note, until Elena caught him by surprise.

“I’m not sure if we have franking machines in Bucharest.” She said. “Though there must be other office equipment to fix.”

She was looking straight at him, over the top of her half eaten meal.

"If you wanted to live in Romania of course ? It's not for everyone I know. Anna could try living in London of course, but with Britain leaving the EU....."

"Mother, you're embarrassing me !" Snapped Anna.

An argument ensued, most of it in a language he didn't understand. He'd only seen Anna's sweet and good natured side and it was nice to see she had a bit of fire in her, if it was required. The servant collected his empty plate, while mother and daughter still argued in what he assumed was Romanian.

"Mother, please we have a guest !"

He recognised the phrase in English, just as another servant brought the dessert. Two servants in the house, maybe more working away in the kitchen. Martin quite liked his upstairs flat in Ealing, but it was just a one bedroom flat, with a crazy old lady in the flat below. How could he dare to ask Anna to live there, after she was used to all..... This ? Supposing Mrs Benson had one of her screechy fits in the middle of the night ? He was used to them, but it hardly made his flat the most desirable residence in the street.

"I apologise Martin, we shouldn't argue when we have a guest at our table." Said Elena.

"That alright Elena, I understand that this has all happened so fast. I've been in Bucharest for less than two weeks and yet here I am, sat at your table and in love with your daughter."

Oh Crap ! His mouth letting him down again. The love word and in front of her mother. Anna had blushed until her cheeks were bright red, but Elena was smiling at him.

"We have a large house Martin. If you wanted to return and look for work in our country, you are welcome to stay here. My daughter loves you, I know that to be a fact....."

Anna was up on her feet, her face now white, as if with shock.

"No mother ! No !"

"Shush child. What needs to be said, must be said."

The desert was ice cream that tasted of mango and something he couldn't quite place. Martin concentrated on that taste to avoid the confrontation going on between Anna and her mother. He'd never been good at confrontation and he really didn't want to take sides.

"Fine !" Yelled Anna. "Tell him if you must."

Elena sighed and waved her hand at her daughter, as if to stop any further arguments.

"Martin, I believe you are sincere about loving my daughter." Said Elena. "She loves you too, which puts you under an obligation to respect and honour her."

"I realise that Mrs Drăghicescu."

It seemed appropriate to address her that way and he was sure he'd pronounced it the right way, or at least good enough to show he'd put some work into it. Elena smiled at him.

"Oh, western girls Martin ! They say they love a man to get him to change the TV to a programme they want to see. I love you has become the most corrupt statement, the biggest lie."

"Mother !"

"Shut up daughter, shut up."

Elena waved her hand at her daughter again. Anna wasn't looking at him at all, which worried him.

"I'm not going to say Romanian girls are saints Martin, oh no. The daughter of one of my friends married for love, or so she claimed. In reality I suspect she was really in love with his Lamborghini and holiday cottage near Mangalia. Our family are different Martin."

Anna was away, nearly colliding with a servant collecting dirty crockery. What to do ? Follow her and upset her mother ? Martin also wanted to listen to the rest of what Elena had to say, so he remained where he was.

“She will be fine Martin, don’t worry. Our women are different Martin, we rarely offer a declaration of love. When we do it is for life, and beyond life, forever Martin. It isn’t something to be taken lightly. Do you understand what I’m saying ?”

“I do Elena and I give you my word to respect your daughter’s love.”

“That is all I can ask.”

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He found Anna outside the house, looking through the wrought iron gates and out into the city beyond.

“Are you ready to go ?” She asked, without looking at him.

“Yes. Look Anna, I’m not messing you around. My feelings are sincere, cross my heart and hope to die.”

She grabbed his hand and began leading him up the road, back in the direction of the bus stop.

“Never say that Martin ! So, are you afraid of the strange girl and her crazy mother ?”

“No. Maybe a little over protective, but she means well.”

“A little over protective !”

Anna was laughing now, the mood gone. He hoped the mood was gone forever, the twinkle in her eyes was far better than the darkness of her mood.

“Come we need to do this properly, somewhere memorable.” She said.

“Do what ?”

“You’ll see.”

Another complicated route with two trams and finally a bus. They were at the river and quite close to a beautiful park.

“Herăstrău Park, I used to come here all the time as a child.”

“Please don’t make me pronounce that, I beg you.”

She chuckled and dragged him through trees and across grassy areas to a quite ordinary bench. They could have been anywhere in the world, walking towards any park bench. It obviously had meaning for Anna though.

“Don’t sit Martin, not yet. This is the bench my mother always brought me to, from when I was quite tiny. It’s where she told me about my love being forever, once it is freely given. She told you Martin, did you understand ?”

An over protective mother who seemed a little strange, talking to him in a language she wasn’t perfect in. Some of it had seemed a little gothic in tone, but he felt sure he’d understood the gist of it.

“Yes, I do.”

“Good, now we can sit.”

The bench was covered in bird muck, but he didn’t care. Anna cuddled him as they sat down and that cuddle made everything perfect.

“I’m no angel Martin, no innocent little virgin. I’ve never given anyone my love before though. You have to believe that.”

“I do Anna. I really do.”

He really didn’t want the conversation about her past lovers at that particular moment. He might enjoy her expertise in bed, but he didn’t want to hear where it had been acquired. He held her away from him and looked hard into her eyes.

“The past doesn’t matter Anna, I love you.”

“And I give you my love Martin. For this life and beyond. I give you my love forever Martin Bartlett.”

Looking back at that moment he knew something had happened, something truly momentous. At the time he'd just felt happier than he had ever felt in his life. For some people every minor piece of good luck is the happiest moment of their life. They throw the phrase at everything from the birth of a child to getting a free sachet of shampoo in a magazine. Martin's emotions that day on the bench had been strong and honest. It really was the best moment of his entire life.

"I'll find a job here and of course we'll get married." He rambled. "Do I need to get down on one knee now ? Is there something I need to do ?"

"No Martin you idiot !"

She was laughing at him, on the best day of his life and that too was perfect.

"Just take me back to the hotel Martin and make love to me for the rest of the day."

Something had happened on that bench and he hadn't felt it. In the police station cell, he'd thought back through every word and emotion and still couldn't spot any sign that his world had shifted slightly out of line. No comet in the sky maybe, but surely there had to have been some sign ? If there was, he'd never spotted it at the time or recalled it later.

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The sex was better than before, which should have been impossible. Could it keep getting better ? He hoped so, but it was also a bit worrying. What if the sex remained the same for a while, would she get bored ? That afternoon there was an added something to their lovemaking, the extra emotion from Anna's declaration of love. At one point she put her hands on his hips, stopping his thrusts into her.

"Rest for a while Martin. I almost thought I was going to faint."

He didn't want to hurt her, yet his day was being made even better. What man hasn't wanted his partner to faint away from the heat of passion. They rested and made love again in an endless procession of snacks from room service and sex. Anna had insisted on leaving at about two in the morning.

"I am on the desk at eight and I have no clean clothes here. Let me go Martin."

He'd been holding her arms, pulling her back towards the bed.

"Only if you promise to be back here tomorrow night."

"Of course and the next night and the next. I need some sleep though and clothes that aren't smelly."

He didn't care if she smelled, but the hotel management might. He let her go and told he loved her for about the thousandth time that day.

"I love you too Martin. I just need to go now."

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He was up before seven, showered and dressed well before eight. He needed to see her, even if only for one furtive kiss. The secret was out, all the staff knew they were lovers. Her friend Crista was on reception and looking tired after covering the front desk all night.

"I haven't heard her old bicycle rattling past yet Martin."

She smiled, understanding why he was in the front lobby at such an early hour. Martin read a few brochures and waited for his Anna to arrive. At ten minutes past eight, Crista was beginning to look worried.

"Two years working together and she was never late Martin, not once."

Five minutes later and the duty manager arrived and started having a conversation with Crista. All in Romanian of course, though Martin did hear Anna mentioned a few times. Not knowing what to do,

he went out into the street and began looking at every young girl on a bicycle. There were a lot, none of them his beloved Anna.

“Anna where are you ?” He muttered.

He had a telephone number for the house, but calling so early in the morning, might make her mother panic. She was just late, maybe a puncture, maybe something else very minor and ordinary. As soon as Martin heard the wail of a siren, he knew it meant his life being turned inside out. He ran towards the siren, trying not to collide with the Bucharesters on their way to work.

Two streets at a sprint and he was out of breath and needed to slow down. There was a crowd in the distance though and a bicycle wheel pointing into the air. He ran again as fast as he could, not worrying about arriving out of breath. Martin arrived before the ambulance and saw what he’d already known in his heart. There was a crumpled cycle he recognised and a van driver crying. The van had a tiny dent, barely enough to scratch the paint. Not far away a man on his way to work, was placing his coat over Anna.

Martin screamed for a while, afterwards he was never sure how long for. The order of events became tumbled up in his mind too. Two American tourists had recognised some of his ranting as English, and had taken pity on him. He finally got to crouch next to Anna as the ambulance arrived. “They need to do their job son.” Said an American voice.

There was so much blood, her face so pale. Not dead though, she looked straight at him and managed to speak.

“Forever Martin, don’t forget.”

“As if I could forget Anna. The ambulance is here, you’ll be fine.”

The American couple scooped him up and took him back to his hotel. He never saw them again, though the woman was adamant that Anna hadn’t spoken a word.

“It’s grief.” She told him. “I could have sworn my grandma spoke to me after she’d passed.”

“It was mercifully quick son.” The man said. “She didn’t suffer.”

Martin didn’t use his return ticket to London. He went to his room and emptied the mini bar. When that that source of booze had run out, he visited the hotel bar, quickly becoming a regular.

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Elena saved him when the hotel finally asked him to leave. They knew what he’d been through and did it reluctantly, but they needed the room for other guests. The manager had met with him and actually cried with him for a while, but was very firm about him packing up and leaving.

“The airline will probably help you.... Given the circumstances.”

They might have, though he hadn’t informed anyone about the situation with Anna’s death. His job probably wondered where he was, and he hadn’t called his mum. A Sunday afternoon ten minutes on the phone was obligatory, missing it almost a capital offence. She’d be concerned and then there had to be bills piling up at home. Martin ignored it all, yet knew the day of reckoning was moving inexorably closer.

“To hell with the greedy hotel Martin, come and stay with me.”

The bill for the extra week vanished, though he always assumed Elena had paid it. She took him home and treated him the way family treat a sick relative. No booze though, that was the only rule she imposed on him.

“Anna wouldn’t want you drunk for her funeral.”

Sobriety and support worked wonders and he called his boss and went through a short version of the story. He was good at his job and had never missed a day through sickness.

“I’ll have HR mark you down as on compassionate leave Martin. You’ll get paid as usual next month.”

There was no added time limit or anything, but he knew they'd start advertising his job if he was away for too long. His mum cried when he told her. A little anger in with the grief, as she wondered why he hadn't mentioned Anna to her.

"It all happened so fast mum. I had less than two weeks with her."

He even called his landlord and simply told them he would be away for a while with a family bereavement. They were fine and even offered to put his mail inside his flat. They knew Mrs Benson's reputation.

"On the mat too long and she might decide to burn it."

His life ticked over, with all the normality that was possible after such a terrible tragedy. Then eleven days after her death, Anna was buried. The funeral broke him again. No booze this time, he just shut himself inside his own mind and spent days in the park. Their park, sitting on their bench. A black fog filled his head for days, even eating regular meals forgotten. A month had gone by when Elena found him in Anna's room, sobbing into his dead lover's pillow.

"I am going to give you some..... what is the phrase ? Tough love, yes love Martin, but tough for your own good. "

"I just need time Elena."

"No, you'll end up crying in this room for the rest of your life. Do you think Anna would want that ?"

"No."

"Of course she wouldn't. I'm going to book you a flight home to London and make sure you get on it. You need to get back to work Martin and be around people you know. A pint at the Duck & Donkey with a few friends. Stay here another month and you'll have no job, another month and you might not have a home either."

"Duck & Rabbit Elena, it's the Duck & Rabbit. Fine, book me a ticket and I'll go home."

They agreed on two small items of Anna's to take as keepsakes. A small porcelain cat from her dressing table and a framed photograph with her mother. Elena did see him to the airport, accompanied by her manservant, who had once served in the army. She seemed to make a point of telling him that, in case he had thoughts of resisting his repatriation. Elena hugged him, before he went into the departure lounge. She handed him a brown envelope.

"Just something to help, until you get back on your..... what do you say ? Feet, yes feet."

Eight weeks after landing in Bucharest and he was on a plane home. It felt like a lifetime since he'd pulled out his passport for Bucharest immigration and wondered about where to buy cheap beer. Martin felt different, a difference he knew would last beyond the years of mourning. He'd found what everyone seeks, his soul mate. Only to lose her ! He remembered a line he'd heard on TV, though couldn't remember which show. It was about some events being so big that they changed your DNA. He felt like that and knew it was permanent. The plane was probably somewhere over Germany, before he took the envelope into the toilet and opened it in private.

"Bless you Elena, bless you."

A bundle of five hundred Euro notes, quite a few of them. He flicked through them and realised Elena had given him enough to take care of his rent for a while and get his utilities reconnected, if they'd been cut off. Seven thousand Euros, with a quick hand written note telling him to call her as soon as he got home. Customs didn't want to go through his bag and the queue at immigration moved quickly. It was strange that after just eight weeks, he had trouble thinking where to go from the arrivals area.

"Taxi or train ?" He muttered to himself.

He decided to splash out on a taxi and arrived home to find he still had all his utilities connected, though there was a telephone bill a day or so overdue. Tea first and much to his delight, there was a carton of long life milk at the back of his fridge. The stuff tasted foul, but it was better than nothing. As he opened his post, he heard the old lady downstairs begin to fuss about.

"I'm ignoring you until tomorrow." He muttered.

It all felt so ordinary after just a few minutes of opening letters. Elena had been right, coming home was the best therapy.

~ ~

Everything was fine at work, apart from everyone wanting to know details. They probably meant well, but going through the story over and over again was too much. He began to tell his work colleagues that it was too painful to talk about. Mrs Benson became a bit of a problem, coming out of her door every time he came home. She needed everything explained and then fussed about what she heard. Every answer he gave bred another dozen questions, until it was intolerable.

"I'm sorry Mrs Benson. I know you probably mean well, but it really isn't any of your business."

She blinked at him, as if disbelieving her ears.

"I have never in all my life....."

He entered his door and closed it, never finding out what she wanted to rant about. Three or four hours of door slamming followed, her usual method of indicating displeasure. She'd call her relatives and the stroppy son-in-law was likely to bang on his door. Martin felt different though and in the right mood to give the stroppy son-in-law a black eye.

"I've had enough of explaining myself to every Tom Dick and Benson." He mumbled.

The stroppy family never did arrive and Mrs Benson ceased jumping out to be nosey. His life calmed down and Martin regretted not asserting his right to privacy much earlier. He ended whatever he was having with Indra. It had always felt a little sordid and after Anna.... No it had to end. She took it far worse than he'd thought, though she'd quickly found another engineer to take his place. The months drifted by, one into another until it was close to Christmas.

~ ~

Martin's first indication that anything was wrong, was when Thelma had rung his doorbell one Saturday morning, late in December. She rarely bothered him and had never called on him without an appointment.

"Can we talk about something ? Are you busy ?" She asked.

Thelma was from the letting company who rented the flat to him, effectively his landlords. There was a middle aged guy in Finchley who owned the house, he'd just never met him. He knew other people at his landlord's office, but Thelma was by far the nicest.

"Of course, come in." He replied.

His rent was up to date and it had been quite a while since any bad words with his downstairs neighbour. They might want the property back of course, that did seem to be happening a lot. He still had some of Elena's gift left though, enough for a deposit on a new place. As they entered his flat, Thelma began to look about, as if searching for something.

"I do appreciate you might need company." She said. "Our rules are quite clear about pets though. Unless it's a guide dog, we don't allow pets of any kind."

"I don't have any pets. A few tropical fish once, but they all died."

She was ignoring him, while looking round his kitchen. Somewhere anger began to emerge. Arriving without warning and going through his home went against the rules on his tenancy agreement.

"Dogs in particular can be noisy and upset others."

He began to realise the problems involved with proving a negative. He almost showed her his tins cupboard, with its complete absence of dog food. Anger was rising though, justified anger.

"I don't own a dog and I don't appreciate being called a liar !" He snapped.

Maybe there was a note on his file, marking him out as a soft touch. Good old Martin who will put up with anything. Idiot Martin who pays a lot of rent for a flat above a problem tenant. By the look on Thelma's face, she was going to alter his file notes.

"No of course not Martin. You pay your rent on time, wish we had more tenants like you."

That was their God of course, money! Getting the rent on time was a letting agent's Holy Grail. Their ideal tenant was probably a nice quiet corpse, who paid the rent early. Anger was still rising.

"Is it her downstairs, lying about me ? You know she's seven parts mad."

"Can we sit down Martin and start again. I really didn't want to upset you."

He made tea, while she made herself comfortable on the ancient sofa that had come with the flat.

He took in the tea and decided to listen to her with an open mind.

"I know her son-in-law is an arsehole." She said. "He's been rude to just about everyone in our office. He recorded the noises though Martin and I've heard them. Growling sounds at three or four in the morning. Then scuffling, like a dog clawing at the floorboards. It was scary stuff and I can see why Mrs Benson is terrified."

"She hasn't mentioned it to me." He said.

"I heard you told her off."

She was grinning at him, as if to say well done.

"Doesn't change the fact that I don't own a dog, or any other pet."

"This is the bit of my job that I hate Martin, but I have to ask. A new girl in your life maybe, one who is a bit..... noisy at intimate moments ? Fine if there is, but maybe you can ask her to keep it down a bit."

He saw Thelma blush and he had to laugh. Such an intrusion into his privacy, yet her reaction to her own question made him chuckle.

"No one since my Anna." He told her. "And there probably won't be anyone else for quite some time. You've made me think though. Twice I've been woken up by growling sounds and just assumed it was Mrs Benson having a weird night."

"So it might be one of the neighbours." Said Thelma. "I'll make a few discreet inquiries."

~ ~

He wandered the streets when he couldn't sleep, unworried by any thoughts of personal safety. That very night fate decided to punish Martin for his lack of caution. Three in the morning and the growling sound had woken him, in time to hear Mrs Benson begin to shriek down her phone. The odious relatives would probably arrive about breakfast time. There was an odd sound mixed in with the growling, like something abrasive being dragged across his kitchen wall.

"Oh fuck this, I'm going out."

After the visit from Thelma, he wasn't ready to listen to Mrs Benson in full screech. He dressed and walked, fairly careless about his destination and those around him. There was cut through that went through a children's play area, though most of the equipment was too neglected to use. There had been a tennis court once, with a chain link fence around it. The court was now a mass of weeds, the chain link fence dangling in loose bundles. It all hinted at a place best avoided, his senses just weren't listening.

"Going somewhere are we ?"

There were about twenty of them and they'd managed to surround him. The press liked to refer to them as moped gangs, but he noticed one or two were on cycles, mountain bikes. For some ridiculous reason he wondered how they kept up with the others. His mind had been like that recently.

"I just want to go for a walk." He said. "I don't want any trouble."

He'd heard rumours about a gang of Turkish kids working the area, though he saw all sorts of faces sneering at him. Blacks, browns, white and all the variations in between. None of them looked older than seventeen. The one who'd spoken to him seemed to be the leader and he had a vaguely Asian look about him. A large muscular looking guy on a pistachio coloured scooter. No wonder he probably had a few anger issues. He was looking around his gang and laughing.

"Our lucky night ! He doesn't want trouble. We can all stop shitting ourselves."

They were young, but there were a lot of them. Martin didn't like confrontation at the best of times and he definitely didn't like fighting. The last fight he'd had was in primary school and he'd lost that. They wanted his wallet of course, his cash and various credit cards. Everything else was a game of macho respect to keep themselves entertained.

"What do you want ?" He asked.

"You know what we want, hand over your money."

Martin was almost ashamed of the worn old leather wallet, which he brought out of his pocket. The stitching had come away from one corner, showing the edges of a few ten pound notes. He held it out like an offering. The leader looked to his right.

"Get it Moses."

Real name, handle or maybe they were just fans of Attack the Block ? Martin filed it away for when he reported the incident to the police. The cash didn't worry him too much, but anger began to build when he thought about the credit cards. Hours waiting to be answered on the phone to cancel them and then it might take weeks to get them replaced. His mind had been odd lately, obsessed with trivia and becoming angry about strange things. Then again, he'd always been worried about the little things. Moses got off his bike and came over to get the wallet.

"Yeah big man, give my boy your wallet !" Shouted the leader.

Part of the game, the transaction almost complete. There'd be a few more insults and then they'd be off to mug the late night delivery guys. Martin became angry and he definitely didn't like the look of triumph on Moses's face as he reached for his wallet.

"No ! Fuck off !" Martin shouted.

To back the statement up he hit Moses, right in the centre of his face. The kid went over backward, actually screaming like a child.

"Vernon ! I think he broke my nose, crap !" Shouted the kid.

Vernon, who the hell was Vernon, the leader maybe ? He expected them to run at him, but they all just sat on their bikes. It seemed that the mugging victim fighting back, wasn't part of the usual scenario. The leader put his light green scooter on its stand and reached behind his back. His right hand came back, holding the biggest machete Martin had ever seen.

"You hit my boy and disrespected me." He said.

No shouting, no hollering, the one probably called Vernon, walked slowly towards him.

"Cut him bad, he broke my fucking nose." Said Moses.

"He's gonna pay Moses, he's gonna feel some serious pain."

Martin was resigned to ending up in hospital with some nasty scars, or maybe even dead. He didn't really care and people who don't care if they live or die, can be difficult to scare. He carefully placed his wallet back in his pocket and put his fists up.

"Let's see if you're all talk Vernon !" He shouted. "I think you're a pussy !"

"I'm going to cut your fucking head off !"

The machete looked a good two feet long and Vernon was holding it as though he knew how to use it. A small explosion took everyone's mind away from their fight, including Vernon's. Two of the gang members on cycles had been thrown against the old tennis court fence by something. One of the mopeds had been crushed too and its fuel must have ignited. Martin saw a confusion of shouting kids and flames. Vernon glared at him.

"Did you bring your crew ?"

"No."

Vernon obviously didn't believe him and raised the machete again. More screams from injured kids and the growling sound he'd heard in his flat. Two mopeds hurtled through the air, their riders thrown about like ragdolls. Something was taking the gang apart and Martin was beginning to have the start of an idea.

"Anna, is that you ?"

"How many did you bring ?" Asked Vernon.

It wasn't people though, no person or gang was fighting Vernon's gang. Martin watched closely and saw a hint of a long scaly body here, a head with fangs there. All out of focus and difficult to see, a huge almost invisible reptile of some kind, probably a snake.

"Now I'm really going to kill you."

Vernon raised the machete, just as his throat was ripped out. The serpent's head looked indistinct, as it bit right through the gang leader's throat, leaving his head to flap about on a few pieces of sinew. It was like a double exposure, or the strange way things looked in dreams. Martin heard the voice then, one he knew very well. Was he mad or dreaming ?

"Close your eyes Martin. Close your eyes."

Anna, he was sure of it. He did as he was told and knelt on the ground with his eyes tight shut. The ripping sounds and screaming seemed to go on forever and when it finally stopped, he stood up and opened his eyes.

"Anna, where are you ?"

No answer from anyone, all the gang members were dead. Not just dead, but utterly destroyed, along with their bikes. It was difficult to recognise a body part in the carnage, the near fusion of bodies and mangled machines. Martin hadn't eaten that much that day, but he threw up what was in his stomach. There were sirens in the distance, of course there were. The fire from the crushed moped was spreading, setting off the fuel tanks of other bikes. Martin didn't want to have to explain the deaths to the police, so he calmly walked back home.

~ ~

Martin expected the Benson family banging on his door the next day, or maybe even the police. Instead he had a quiet Sunday cleaning the flat and listening to music on a very old CD Walkman. It was almost as if the horror of the previous night had never happened, until he turned on his TV. It was the second item on the evening news, after the latest insane ramblings of the American President.

'..... The mayor has denounced the latest gang related killings..... Over twenty feared dead...'

The report went on, telling him what he already knew. The media seemed to think it was a gang fight, which suited him. A tiny part of him felt guilty, but mainly he felt that West London was probably better off without Vernon's gang of thieves. Thieves, muggers and worse, you didn't carry a machete unless you intended to use it. Anna though, had he imagined her voice ?

His life went back to fixing jammed franking machines and a takeaway in front of the TV, until about two in the morning on the following Thursday. Someone was banging on his door, which meant someone inside the outside front door. Even still half asleep, that fact registered. His first thought was that Mrs Benson might be in trouble. Yes, she was the biggest pain the arse he had ever known, but she was about eighty five and vulnerable.

"Ok, ok, I'm coming !" He shouted.

He slept naked and was putting on boxer shorts as the hammering on his door continued. He did own a dressing gown, but couldn't remember where it was. To hell with it, he opened his flat door, dressed in just his shorts. A finger shot out and gave him a hard prod in the chest.

"You bastard, upsetting an old lady !"

He wasn't sure of the son-in-law's name. She'd heard the old lady shouting at someone called Den, though she seemed to shout at quite a lot of people. Once Martin's first word would have been sorry, but he wasn't the same person he once was. A drunken relative of his nemesis banging on his door wasn't something the new Martin was going to tolerate.

"You woke me, what the hell do you want at this hour ?"

"Don't talk to me like that."

Den prodded him again, which was assault wasn't it ? Twice he'd prodded him, both acts of assault. Martin knew he had a right to fight back, as long as it was proportionate. He brought back his fist and hit Den hard across the left side of his face. Den didn't fall over, but he went back a few feet from the door, which Martin slammed shut.

"Come back and you'll get more of the same." He yelled.

Den did come back, hurtling himself against the other side of the door. Martin had always meant to put a couple of bolts on the door, all of Den's shoving and barging was held back by just a cheapo Yale lock.

"I'm going to bash your teeth in !" Shouted Den.

Martin ran into his kitchen, intending to get the large carving knife his mum had given him one Christmas. A huge knife seemed a bit melodramatic, so he grabbed the metal steak tenderising mallet instead.

"I'm armed !"

"Bastard !"

In truth, he almost expected the growling noise to begin again. He'd assumed that love beyond this life was a bit of nonsense that didn't translate well from Romanian. The truth was beginning to dawn on him. There was a scream from the direction of his front door and the sound of something large hitting Mrs Benson's front door. He could have shouted out that she was a harmless old lady, it might have worked. In a part of himself he didn't like, he was enjoying the carnage in the flat below. Lots of crashing sounds and some serious screaming. People can scream to get attention or show they're pissed off. This screaming was from someone who knew it might be their last.

"Christ Anna ! Enough !" He yelled.

A minor explosion of some kind and something electrical must have shorted out in Mrs Benson's flat. The lights in Martin's flat went out, leaving him in the dark, while holding a mallet, dressed in just his underwear. A large torch was in the cupboard under the kitchen sink, which he found by touch. As it

lit up his kitchen he noticed his gown flung over one of the dining table chairs. Still no sign of his slippers, so he pulled on a pair of brogues he usually wore to work. Martin opened his front door, to find the body of Den right behind it.

“Fuck ! Fuck !”

Blood spread over the wall and Den with his throat torn out. Martin used his foot to push the body to one side, so that he could get downstairs. Mrs Benson’s front door was gone. Smashed inwards with such force that it was now at the far side of her kitchen.

“Hello, it’s Martin from upstairs.”

Not that he expected an answer, it just seemed good manners to call out. The TV set in the lounge appeared to have shorted the power out. An old forty two inch Sony Trinitron, now on its side, the picture tube shattered. It was smouldering, the pungent smell of burnt plastic hovering over it. Mrs Benson’s daughter was quite close to it. Dead of course, another ripped out throat and a little nibbling at her face.

“Mrs Benson.” He yelled.

The old lady wasn’t dead, maybe his shout had worked, or perhaps she hadn’t seemed a threat ? Mrs Benson was sat on the floor, leaning up against her bathroom wall.

“Are you alright ?” He asked

Stupid question, of course she wasn’t alright. No one could be alright after what she’d just witnessed. She didn’t seem to hear him, her eyes fixed on the tiled wall opposite. Help was needed, an ambulance and the inevitable conversation with the police. Someone had already thought of that though. As Martin walked back to his flat, two uniformed police were standing where Mrs Benson’s front door was supposed to be. One of them was shining a torch into his eyes.

“Drop the weapon !”

“I don’t have.....”

Crap, he’d forgotten about the large steak tenderising mallet. He dropped it on the floor at his feet.

“Who are you ?”

“I’m Martin Bartlett. I live in the flat upstairs.”

He had no blood on him, just a neighbour carrying a torch. The police obviously decided he was harmless and led him outside into the front garden. The emergency services were arriving, it looked like every police car in West London was trying to park in his street. An ambulance too and a car with paramedic written down the side.

“What happened Martin ?”

“I’m not sure. I heard screaming and my lights went off. Mrs Benson is alive, I saw her. She’s sat in her bathroom at the back of the house.”

One of the police officers nodded at the other and went off, probably to direct the ambulance crew towards the old lady. They were looking at him with such sympathy. A fire engine pulled into the street, siren blaring although there was no traffic in the way. The remaining policeman walked a few paces away and muttered into his radio.

“Sorry Martin, it’s going to be a circus here and they want me to bring you down to the station. I’ll need to come upstairs with you, but there is time for you to get dressed and pick up a few things.”

Martin dressed by torchlight and found his keys and his old tatty wallet. The police had obviously been talking to the neighbours and seemed far less friendly when he left the house. No handcuffs or anything, but two officers almost shoved him into the back of the police car.

“Get Bartlett booked in, the detectives will want to see him when they get in.”

Not Martin now and booked in seemed rather ominous. He'd actually done nothing wrong, though that didn't stop him feeling guilty. Half the street was out to see him driven away.

~ ~

The police who booked him in looked sad, as though they were looking at the aftermath of a train wreck. No one said anything to him about the events at the house, but he could guess why he was being detained. Neighbours hearing him shouting at the son-in-law who was probably called Den. It wasn't the first time, or the first time he'd shouted about having a weapon.

"I didn't do anything."

He told the young copper who took his fingerprints. He wanted to tell them all to let him go, or they'd all be dead before sunrise. They wouldn't believe him of course. He'd probably just end up being restrained, maybe even tranquilised. They took his clothes, dressing him in plastic trousers and a shirt about three sizes too big. It was nothing like TV, even the camera used to take his picture refused to work properly.

"..... we are holding you for questioning..... deaths of two people at....."

He heard it, but most of it went by him like a breeze. They kept talking about the detective arriving in the morning and saying it in a derisive way. By morning they'd have heard stories about his mental state since coming him from Romania. They'd have heard about his long walks in the middle of the night. Soon one of his neighbours would be on the TV news.

"Of course, we always realised there was something not quite right about him..."

Eventually someone fixed the faulty camera. He had his photograph taken and just before being taken down to the cells, he was told something that did penetrate the fog in his mind.

"You may wish a solicitor present..... If you can't afford one....."

"Yes, I'd like a solicitor."

"Hmmm." Said the desk sergeant. "Margaret is on duty, or will be in the morning. She'll probably turn up after the detectives have deigned to make an appearance."

Did all night workers resent the nine to fivers ? Martin had no idea why he'd asked for a solicitor as he knew he'd be gone by the time she arrived. Anna wasn't going to leave him in a cell for long. No handcuffs or any hostility, the police were still looking at him with something close to pity. A young guy with the neighbours from hell, who came home suffering from grief and finally cracked.

"Margaret is good." Said the copper opening the cell door. "She'll make sure everything is done properly."

A young police office, he looked so young. Martin was only twenty four, yet even he was noticing that the police were looking younger. They were alone, he had to try at least.

"You should leave here, death will be coming to this place before sunrise."

A look of sympathy again, mixed with pity.

"Get some sleep Martin, it'll clear your head."

The door closed and Martin was in a tiny cell with just a hard wooden platform to sleep on and a toilet that smelt of stale urine.

~ ~

Martin knew what was happening when the noise started. Doors being broken down, police officers being killed and maimed. He didn't feel guilty, he had tried to save one of them. Not that they'd have listened to him anyway.

"I knew you'd come for me." He muttered.

There had to be other prisoners in the cells, yet the only noises he heard were from upstairs. Maybe he was alone that night in the cells, or the others were drunk enough to sleep through it all.

Screaming at first and crashing sounds, before one of the policemen had found a gun. They had guns now of course, more of them armed than the public probably realised. He heard quite a few gunshots, before everything went silent. Anna wouldn't be harmed of course, you couldn't kill something already dead. He heard the whisper outside the cell and knew it wasn't in his head. She was there, come to save the man she loved.

"Move away from the door Martin."

He did, jamming himself in the corner of the cell, his arms held over his head. The cell door crashed in, destroying the grubby toilet and causing a fountain of water to begin flooding the cell. He walked out of the cell and everything still looked so normal.

"Anna, are you there?"

"Upstairs my dear. I have your things."

Still no sound from the other cells, as he walked along the hallway and up the stairs. The strong metal door at the top of the stairs was open, bent back like the top of a tin can. He remembered the route and turned left, to find more wreckage, where there had been another two doors.

"I didn't even know your name."

The young copper who'd been nice to him, now dead. Throat ripped out, it seemed to be the way she killed, her preferred method of dealing with enemies. She'd even bitten into his chest as though feeding on him.

"Anna."

"Here."

More dead police in the main office, lots of them. He saw something move out of the corner of his eye, a long scaly body a good three feet thick. So annoying that the image vanished, once his eyes looked directly in that direction.

His things were there on the floor, still in the evidence bags. Something else to be dealt with by the nine to fivers, they hadn't been taken away yet. She'd ripped the bags apart to reveal his clothing and belongings. All there, right down to the old wallet, which he was becoming quite attached to.

"Hurry Martin, we need to be gone before others arrive."

"Where are we going?"

"I will take care of you."

He saw her, not as a serpent but as the girl he had loved, still loved. Just a hazy outline before the serpent scales appeared again, but it was a start. He could see her and hear her, it boded well for the future, if he had a future. The serpent vanished as he dressed. There was more noise, this time coming from outside the police station. More gunfire, some of it from automatic weapons, before an eerie silence returned.

"Anna."

"Outside my love, we must go now."

The outer doors were shattered as he walked out of the police station, to be greeted by carnage. Two police vans turned on their side, flames rising out of the back of one of them. A police car already burning, its driver still inside.

"Hurry, more will come, there are always more of them."

Anna, his beloved Anna. She looked almost normal, stood in the street and beckoning him to follow. It didn't matter where she was leading him, he was happy to go. It wasn't that he had nowhere else to go, it was because he loved her. Martin loved Anna then and would continue to love her, probably beyond the span of his human life. Probably forever.

~

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~ The End ~

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