

Claire parked the station-wagon in front of the double garage added later and making an L of a house. Neither of the dogs came to welcome her home. Nor Nalbo to put her mind at rest that he was all right and don't worry about the windows.

The whole row of windows under the eaves on this—the southern side of the house—showed black and without reflections. Only glass shards remained in the frames. The roller door into the garage was shut and with no electricity, impossible to raise. She left the car in front of it.

She ran along the long back of the house, and round the laundry at the end, crunching broken glass into the ground with every hurrying step. They were probably deafened by the blast, both man and dogs, and they hadn't heard her drive up.

She almost fell back at the sight of all the sliding glass doors shattered beyond repair. They'd be waiting years for replacement glass if the whole district had suffered the same. "Nalbo?" she called. Her voice quavered.

The old dog started barking. Telling Claire I am in the garden shed.

*No windows in there, she thought. So no glass. Nalbo shut the dogs in there to keep them safe while he ... is he hurt? Not hurt because he must have shut them in after the event. Why? And where is he?*

The shed door wasn't locked. The young, silly dog wasn't there. Meaning Nalbo told them to stay here. To stay safe and that someone else had unlatched the door, and the young dog followed him or her. Claire patted Jazz. She suspected Timpson. He'd taken a shine to the pup.

Jazz followed her out. "Where's Nalbo?" she said.

Jazz sniffed the grass, smelling where Nalbo apparently passed, and Claire followed the old dog to the top of the terraced gardens. Jazz stopped, and pointed into the swamp with her nose. She whimpered.

"Stay, Jazz," Claire said. She waited until the dog sat on her haunches. Claire retraced her steps and tiptoed into and through the house through the sparkling grit.

The hall cupboard was open. Nalbo's bush-walking gear was gone. Should she think that he'd gone to find a meteorite? She shook her head. "Men!"

She fetched the outdoor-broom with the stiff brush as the soft, indoor-broom would pick up shards. *Might as well get started.* She swept the house terrace, gathering the detritus of solar panels and the bedroom and living room windows.

Repurposing everything twice or three times was second nature, but she was stumped for a use for all the broken glass. In the end she shovelled up the piles and dumped them against the west wall of the garage. There to wait for further consideration. She was worrying, couldn't think straight.

Now there were just the splinters to sweep up. No vacuuming obviously until Nal rewired the solar panels. And forget that anytime soon with the coming dearth of any glass. They should probably go to help their friends in Hillet, do the Emporium's refrigerators first.

Next, she'd fetch Jazz inside and make herself a well-deserved cup of coffee. *Huh, I'll have to start a real honest to goodness fire. Is it worth the effort?* Yes, she decided. Plenty more reasons they'd need a fire. *So lucky we didn't toss out the old wood-burning stove when we moved in.*

She and Jazz collected firewood and twigs for kindling in the timber plantation down the slope and to the southeast of the house. As they stepped from the forest, Jazz clung to the back of her legs again. As if there was danger was out here, round the other side of the house. *Give the poor dog some credit. All that broken glass.*

*Ha-ha-ha*, she still had the trick of starting a fire with just one match when she had paper as a starter. A page torn from her wool dye journal. She filled the stove-top kettle and set it to boil. Milled the coffee, their one addictive luxury and set the steel eight-cup jug brewing. *A day's supply.* She smiled wryly. No refrigeration meant all ice had to be kept to keep perishables from rotting, which meant no ice for little luxuries like iced coffees.

Never mind, she had a hot cup now, in her stainless steel camping mug. She turned her dye journal upside down and back to front. Opened it to write on the back page. Call her vindictive, but she wanted to be able to remember exactly what Allie said. *Nalbo can read it in the observatory where he won't be influenced by my facial expressions and body language.*

She sighed. *Where is he?*

Jazz whimpered under Claire's chair. Then was up, barking at the kitchen door.

Claire yanked it open and Jazz was off, running toward the northern slopes, Claire after her.

She met Timpson pulling a rough sled with Nalbo tied to it. The pup pranced around them as if he did all the work. *Up the garden path*, Claire thought irrelevantly.

Timpson pulled past her in his usual inscrutable way. He didn't acknowledge her. Timpson never greeted anyone.

Nalbo caught one-handed at her legs. He begged. "Claire! Claire!"

He was red-brown all over, wore a slightly loose tourniquet on his left arm and had his left hand bundled in a red-brown rag. Fresh blood seeped from a fold in the wraps. He shuddered. Groaned. Shivered feverishly.

But he *was* conscious. And he *could* still speak. Even if it was only her name. "On the day-bed in the kitchen, please Tim," Claire said.

"His own bed would be better," Timpson said. He wrenched Nalbo up by his right arm and slung him over a shoulder.

Claire briefly reconsidered. The way Timpson treated him, Nalbo might only be sick and slightly injured perhaps. *Whatever.* "The day-bed," she insisted.

"Suit yourself." Timpson dumped Nalbo uncaringly on the day-bed. "I'll put the kettle on."

"No," Nalbo mimed. He rolled his head side to side. "No. No. No." He mouthed. *Please not.* Gaped. Retched. Wiped bloody spit from his lips. He stared wildly around the room as if he

searched for escape.

She frowned first at Nalbo—maybe it wasn't all theatrics—then at Timpson's back.

Nalbo nodded hard. "Please?" he mouthed. Gestured with his head. "Get him out. Out! Out!"

Making up her mind, she said, "I'll deal, Tim. I'm very up-to-date with my first-aid."

"Don't get hung up on the fact that I shot him," Timpson said. "I told him and told him that the government ..."

*Timpson shot Nal? What on earth ...?*

Nalbo snorted. Turned to the wall. Lay there shuddering.

*Her stoic husband wept?* "Tim! I insist! Go home. Be a husband. Allie wasn't very happy when she got out of the car."

Timpson frowned at her. "Something you said?"

"Something Allie said. It seems like you're both as amoral as the other."

Tim looked blank.

"Cuckoos do it too," she said tartly.

"Oh. That."

She herded him to the door by getting into his space. "Thanks for saving Nalbo from bleeding to death, Tim. And thanks for bringing him back."

"What friends are for." He shrugged. "See you again."

Claire buttoned her lips and listened to his footsteps fade toward the gate to the track over the headland. "Stay!" she heard him say before the gate clacked.

"The young dog?" Claire said.

"Timpson made that dog his," Nalbo said on a sob. "Tracked me with it."

"You went hunting with that gun-toting idiot knowing you were sick and you expect me to believe your fevered excuses?"

Shivering non-stop, Nalbo hugged his hurt hand to his chest with his other hand. "I found a little girl in the swamp. Four years old, no older." He plucked at his clothes. Stiff with something. "He shot us. This is her, all over me. Has to be. Too much blood to be just me."

Now Claire shuddered. *If that was true?* "Why?" It came out soft, huskily.

"I don't know. Or at least, there's a fall-ground. Where something came down from the asteroid."

"What kind of things?"

“Why do you think all the glass broke?” he said evasively. “Even the generator is boggled.”

“That satellite that crashed?” she said in a neutral tone.

“A satellite?” he said, considering it because he knew her well enough to know that that neutral tone meant she didn’t believe him. “Who thinks that? Someone at the dye workshop knows someone at the astronomy place? What kind of satellite? It’d explain the fall-ground. Just not what fell.”

The young dog whimpered under the house.

Nalbo shuddered. “Timpson made that dog his. He tracked me with it,” he said again. “Shot us. She was the same age as Marina when ...” He wept.

“I’m not having a gun-dog around the place.” Claire pressed her lips together until they became bloodless lines, her having seen that effect in her mirror a few times. Bloodless lips were part of steeling herself. She’d have to hurry now, because usually, she lost her bravado soon after.

“Stay here!” she said as if he was going anywhere. “And keep Jazz here with you!” Likewise the dog. Though Jazz didn’t need to be told. She flopped down belly-first and wriggled in under the daybed. Lay there with her nose where Nal could touch it if he wanted.

Claire left the house through the laundry, where they kept the rifle, on the high shelf. Out of sight until needed. She loaded it and stumped to the east of the house. “Hokey!” she called, demanding its presence.

For a wonder, he came. Sheepish. Wagging his tail uncertainly.

She shot him through his eye.

She met Nalbo coming. “Get back to bed! I’ll bury him later. Where he’ll do some good.” She replaced the rifle and sank into her chair. Cried.