

Claire ate yesterday's squashed breakfast sandwiches. A medly of egg, tomato and parsley on damper although it was by now mid-morning. She'd woken early this morning with a mood that said she had whole day and all the years alone stretching in front of her with nothing to fill them.

The kind of mood to get into the cleaning-up, and she washed and polished everything in the cabin followed by the walls and floor and windows. She moved down to the tiffany shelter and gave *that* a good scrubbing while the animals stood watching on the slope and snatching mouthfuls of hay hanging untidily from the rafters. After she pulled out the hay, rolled it into biscuits, and re-shelved them, that mood still hung over her. *I might as well go to the house and do the same sort of things there.*

The stove had to be ashed-out and the fire rekindled. It all seemed a long time to wait for just a cup of tea. Hence the sandwiches from her pocket, eaten while she worked. She screwed the lid back on her water bottle. *Still no tea. And all the available food will have to made up from scratch.*

Or should she go and sneak a look at the Timpson's yard? Allie arriving like that was a worry. Her babies would be just a few days old and she abandoned them already?

But remember the times that Allie said she'd go find Tim as soon as she'd dropped the twins? That started Claire thinking about Tim, trying to imagine that scene again, where he was dragged out by a foot ... *at least Nalbo is safe from that ... What am I thinking?!*

She dropped onto the daybed. Wept. Kicked off her boots.

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Woke to a scratching sound.

*What is that? Where's it coming from?* On sock feet she ghosted through the house, listening.

*Scritch. Scritch.* Down low, near the bottom corner of the back door. She crouched, barely breathing. *Not Hokey again? Jess? Haven't seen her for days.* She frowned. *Jess is missing? Allie? Doubt that.*

The scratching stopped.

She didn't move. Nor did the creature outside. She listened for more sounds further away. Nothing. Inside the house? Not even the walls ticked while they cooled. Dusky light. *Fire's burned through the log I put in and it surely can't be dusk already? What time is it?*

"Clai-are?!"

*Her* name on a wavering sob.

*Oh no! Oh no! It's ...* Ckaire yanked open the door. "Belle? What are you doing here? Where's Matt? Ushen?" She helped Belle inside, slammed the door with her foot. Belle to the daybed, still warm. Covered her with the blanket, then a rug. *What happened what happened what happened?*

Belle howled, gasping between her words. "They took Matt they took Ushen, they ... stopped the car. *She* was with them. She told me they need Matt. ... And that they wanted Ushen for if

it doesn't work. And something laid its hands on me and ..." Belle gasped.

Took a breath. "They laid their hands on me and squeezed my Callum unborn and ... Ushen screamed." Belle sobbed out the story. "My baby girl and my Matt ... She took them both ... That woman said for them stop the car ... Hands all over us ... Hands tearing Ushen my baby from me... Left me there!"

She screamed. "They left me there, Claire! They left me there! How will I live, Claire? How will I live?" She sank into a half-consciousness.

*Cold, she's too cold!* Claire sprang to the stove. *Embers still alive?* She stoked them up. Threw on kindling and wood. She snarled at the stove, *make an inferno!* Raced through the house, grabbing grabbing towels blankets pillows. Warm nightgown. She made a nest for them both by the stove, fetched Belle to it. Lay down with her, Belle's baby-belly between them.

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Hugged Belle all night. Belle might've slept at times but Claire lay awake. Worried. *Belle isn't safe here. Allie knows this house and my habits as well as her own. The alien biddies laid their hands on Belle so they will know about Callum. Belle isn't safe here.*

She helped Belle to the toilet and back. They froze and listened for danger after every noise they made.

Claire swore. "We are a pair of nitwits. If they are listening they'd be more suspicious about the way we're behaving. Let's get the mattress from the bedroom on the way back."

Back in the nest—rebuilt on the mattress—Claire's mind continued its racking. *The aliens will not enter the forest. So would the shed be a better place? When is the best time to leave the house?*

*Dawn? No. Early morning? With Allie in the picture too? No. Where will Allie hang out when the many of them have gone food hunting? They're having to go further and further from home because at home the larder is just about empty, she thought darkly.*

Claire recalled Allie's naps straight after lunch. Allie was a morning person who slumped in the early afternoon. But would she sleep as deeply while in the hall of the monsters? And now that she's not pregnant? Claire chuckled even though she invited a nemesis.

Allie's *body* would be thinking that she was caring for two bubs. *She'll be leaking milk.* The not-so funny thing would be Allie's womb still bleeding, still repairing itself. And that amongst a bunch of blood-thirsty cannibals. *Nope. Not cannibals, they're not eating themselves.*

Whatever. On with the planning. She planned that after an early lunch they would scurry to the shed. *How will I get Belle on board?* Claire looked at her daughter-in-law sleeping restlessly beside her, trembling and weeping even in her sleep. *Her grief is raw but mine is scabbing over despite the two new losses? Not so. Nalbo's with me every step of the way. He gives me strength. I'll grieve later, when I'm safe, and for always. What do we need to take from here to the shed? How will I get Belle on board? Think about that.*

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They sat at the kitchen table with a mug of tea each, and with the frying pan between them with a large pancake in it. "Eat," Claire said. "We need to keep body and soul together. As well as the baby still inside you." Belle obediently forked up a small piece of the cooked dough. "Lemon would be good," she said.

"We've got vinegar. How many days have you to go?" Claire said.

"I wrote Maeve," Belle said. "She said, forget about counting the days. Baby will come when it's done. Or sooner. Or later."

*That does sound like Maeve.* "What do you feel like? In yourself?" Claire said.

"What's it matter?"

"Straight after lunch in a matter of five or so hours I want us to move to the shed. The monsters will not enter the tea-tree forest. Means there will be a kind of safety."

"I can make that," Belle said. Her voice trembled and she cleared a lump from her throat. But she sat up. "What'll we need from here?" She blew her nose and scrubbed her eyes. "But we're still as scared as rabbits though, aren't we?"

"Yes. But even rabbits will fight to stay alive. The question is how much we can carry into the forest in one trip. Once in the forest, I can make multiple trips and anyway the tiffanies can help."

"I promised Ushen a ride on a tiffany," Belle said, swallowing a sob. "Matt is always saying I shouldn't make idle promises."

"We'll get them back. Matt and Ushen. She *will* get her ride," Claire said. *We will get them back.*

"Is this you making an *idle* promise?" Belle said.

"How I see it? Ushen is two years old. Not a replacement for the little girl the aliens are losing, who was probably about five years old when they first got her. Ushen does not know plants, what she can eat, what not. She won't be any use to them. And they didn't eat Matt the first time they met him so why would they now?"

"Who *is* Allie to the monsters?" Belle said.

"It's more what the aliens are to Allie. She believes the aliens to have cloned her husband the way they cloned Nalbo's hand."

Belle looked disbelieving. "After that man shot their little girl?"

Claire nodded. She glanced at the clock. "In the shed we have two sets of bedding, linen, towels and tea towels. A change of clothes each. All things we can mix and match as we need."

"Have you got a water supply there?"

"There's a two-person tank, water from the roof, but three tiffanies also needing to drink."

"I'll need to take nappies and baby clothes, a wrap or three," Belle said. "Is there moss? I

mean I could always wrap him in moss.”

“No moss,” Claire said. “We’re not that badly off yet.”

“My clothes with a change. Matt says they stripped him. So, a change of clothes for Matt and a few sets for Ushen.”

“A few sets for Ushen, yes,” Claire said. “Matt can wear Nalbo’s. Most of our luggage needs to be food. I doubt we’ll be able to come back.” *And Allie will be into the food as soon as she can get the door broken down, and I aim not to leave her a thing.* Adding, *Call me a vindictive bitch if you want,* to herself.

Claire filled every bag in the house with food and set it ready at the backdoor for loading herself up. She went to have a look at the load incrementing on the kitchen table where Belle brought the things she’d listed. “Let’s see if you can carry all that?”

Belle demo’ed Matt’s pack on her back and the bags strung along her arm.

They both looked at the clock for the time. *Nearly time to go.* “Should we take that too?” Belle said.

“The battery will run out and then it’ll be useless. In the shed we’re on suntime. Might as well make a start,” Claire said casually. She helped into Matt’s backpack, and carrying two bags on each shoulder. Plus the baby in her belly.

*Now see how I go.*

They moved to the backdoor. Claire opened it a crack for Belle to hold for Claire to have a look. *Anybody in the scene?* She ran to the corner of the house, peered around. Just cold breeze from the east. And clouds coming from there too. *We’ll hope the biddies are all nicely tucked up in the Timpsons’s front yard.*

She ran back to the house. She’d wedged Nalbo’s backpack on the little hall table by the door. Slipped her arms into it. Hefted it from the table. *Oof. Going to be a struggle.* She’d tied six bags together in two lots to carry them in her hands. *Them too.* Nodded at Belle for her to step outside.

Claire had to set down the bag bundles on the floor, step down to the stoop holding onto the door jambs like the bent old woman she was with a huge pack on her back, and pick up the bag bundles. “Let’s go.” Barely able to get the words out.

Belle could only manage a stiff walk. At ten paces they drew level with the wood pile. If she’d had a hand free, Claire would’ve picked up the axe. Why was it even out here?

Twenty paces and they gained the drive, the place where Maeve normally parked. Claire had to set down the bag bundles and rest the pack on her bent back, hands on her knees.

“If I didn’t have my belly I’d have done the same,” Belle said. She let *her* bags slide down to her hands. “We need to go, Claire,” she said. “I can’t last much longer.”

Claire picked up her bag-bundles, jogged for the next place to stop—the end of the zig—set down her bag-bundles. Returned to Belle who was barely plodding along and took her bag bundles. “Just make for the plantation from here.”

Belle put her hands back and under the pack, trying to lift its weight from her shoulders. "What've I got in there, I was so bare-bones?"

Claire checked this side of the house. Then that side. *No one. We're okay for now.* She picked up Belle's bags. Heard a slight ting as of a toy. *Belle brought toys?* She shook her head. The bag by itself wasn't all that heavy, but with the pack already weighing her down, the idea she was carrying toys was like the second last straw.

She jogged with little steps past Belle walking heavily, and set Belle's bags down in the paddock ten meters from the trees. Ran back to get the food-bundles from the zig. Starting to feel they should be under cover soonish. *Just a feeling!* Picked up her bundles. *Run, Claire. You can do it.*

Within the forest she dropped everything and shrugged off the pack. *Not just a feeling, birds have stopped.* Ran back out. Gathered all Belle's bags on her own left arm and hustled Belle mercilessly. "Hurry, Belle! We need to get under cover sooner!"

"I'm trying!" Belle puffed. "My best!"

Claire pushed Belle in under the trees, wrenching Matt's pack from her back. Pushed her down on it, being gentle at the last moment.

"Claire! Claire!" they heard Allie calling at the house. "I know you're in here!"

Then someone pounded so hard on the kitchen door that the house resounded like a drum.

"Shhh," Claire said with a finger on her lips. "Allie is at the backdoor. I need to see. Here's some water." She folded Belle's hands round the bottle.

