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Dead Pretty

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She's blonde, near enough. Hair the colour of an old wedding gown. Skin like stripped twigs. Wolfcub eyes behind misted glass.

Flushed pink, she is. Pink and white and pink and white, like a mosaic of seashells. Like a plate of posh biscuits. Like a porcelain doll.

Sticky arms and a sweaty neck, spilling out of a neat white dress: sausagemeat forced through a veil.

Twenty-something. A plump fly in a web of tangled trees and knotted weeds, swinging her legs, toddler-like, over the entrance to a warm, dark hole in the earth.

Leaves in her hair and ladybirds on her skin. Ladybirds everywhere, gobbling up the last of the summer aphids: something from a fairy tale until you look close and see the green slime on their sharp little teeth . . .

Hannah looks at the ladybirds crawling over her knees. She's stopped being amazed by their number. The collective noun for a group of ladybirds is a *loveliness*. That's what he told her and she had been so delighted with it, and with him, that she has not sought confirmation. Everybody else is referring to the colourful creatures as a plague. Hannah cannot imagine being cross about ladybirds. Cannot imagine anything more wonderful. She likes to imagine that they are tiny faeries, flitting and bustling and delighting in the late summer sun.

She shifts her weight on the hard ground. Watches the thick black shadow of the tree bisect her bare thigh, and apologises to

the loveliness of ladybirds that takes off, pouting and petulant, as their world goes dark.

He'll be here soon. Here to make it better. To make everything right.

Hannah looks at the sports bag at her feet. Wishes she had made the two-mile walk here in her trainers. She quite likes the new summer dress she bought especially for him and has been surprised at the simple pleasure of walking with her skin touching fresh air. But the new Doc Marten boots have rubbed her ankles raw. She should have worn socks, but he didn't ask for socks. Hadn't ever hinted at a fondness for them. And she wants to please. She wants to please him so badly that she sometimes feels like she is transforming into another person entirely. She has felt desire before, of course. She's a young woman with the same wants and needs as anybody else. But she feels something for him that goes beyond the physical. She wants to be consumed by him. To be enveloped. She wants him to be her chrysalis; to bind and contain her as she disintegrates and reforms. Wants him to be the first thing she sees when she emerges and flaps her beautiful wings . . .

She wishes the ladder weren't here. Wishes, too, that the shadows of the tall trees didn't look so much like prison bars. She wants it to be pretty. To be perfect. Things are going to be better soon. Better for both of them.

The ladybirds land afresh on Hannah's bare skin. She looks up and frowns again at the ladder. Half hidden among the trees, it leads up to a rectangular wooden construction surrounded by chicken wire. He told her it was a 'hide' – a place to conceal oneself to observe the animals. It doesn't look very inviting. To Hannah it looks like the steps to the gallows and she does not want that thought to enter the man's mind when he arrives. She wants him to feel nothing but freedom. To feel relief. And then to kiss her. God, how she wants that. They have talked their way through physical acts but he has never done more than push her hair behind her ear or tuck the label back in her sweatshirt. The time hasn't been right. There have been too many obstacles. He can't

give himself to her when he belongs to so many others. She's heard every excuse and wept at each of them, without ever really believing him.

But fate smiles on heroes. The gods intercede on behalf of those with goodness in their heart. That's what she tells herself. It's what he told her too, before she started to piss him off with her texts and letters and her hints and gentle threats. But how else can he see it? This is their chance. The opportunity he needs to get away. And she wants to hold his hand as he runs. She knows he's cross at her. She feels bad about that. Wishes she hadn't had to push quite so hard. But it will be worth it. She knows she can make him happy. Knows how their future will be.

The sound of a car engine from the nearby road causes her to stiffen where she sits. But the driver doesn't even pause. He's not here yet. Might be a little while. She doesn't mind waiting. It's nice here, among the trees. The little church where they first met is almost visible over the brow of the hill. She can hear the trickle of the tiny river. Can hear the birds among the nettles. Fancies she can even hear the badgers snoring in the sett beneath her feet. She likes to think of the animals asleep down there. Can picture them in her mind's eye, snuggled up on crocheted blankets in front of their warm, open fire. Amends the mental picture, in deference to the warmth of the day. Lets out a nervous giggle at the thought of badgers in bikinis, lounging in deckchairs and sipping fancy drinks with long straws . . .

Hannah daydreams for a while. Feels the sweat trickle down the back of her thighs. Crosses and uncrosses her legs. She hopes he appreciates this. She's done it all for him. She's always been such a clean girl. Always brushed her teeth twice a day and showered in the morning. She's shaved her armpits twice a week since adolescence. For him, for them, she has allowed herself to become some kind of cavewoman. She scratches at her armpits. Shudders at the sensation of curly hair. Sniffs her fingers and recoils. Onion skins and unwashed tights. She'd have been bullied for this, at school. Bullied at work, too. And at home. They love her, the bullies. Seem to look at her the way ladybirds look at aphids.

She turns her thoughts back to *him*. To what she's done. It's a strange way to win a man. But she would be the first to admit she does not have much experience of the opposite sex. Has had to do her reading.

Give him what he wants. That seems to be the advice on the glossier websites. *Give him what he wants then take it away again.* She hadn't liked that. Wouldn't like it done to her. She'd had to dig further. Had to get down deep into the nature of desire. Of ownership. Has learned some interesting new words.

'We're all Palaeolithic, under a varnish of sophistication. We're cavemen in socks. Take away the iPods and the SodaStreams and we're just cavemen and it's all still about lust and meat, territory and revenge.'

He'd said that to her the very first day. Had blown her mind with new ways of thinking, even if she'd had no idea what a SodaStream was.

Hannah wonders if he will always want it like this or whether some years from now he will have altered his peculiarities sufficiently for her to be allowed to shave, both above and below.

With a start, she realises she has not done as instructed. She reaches into her bag and pulls out her mobile phone. She is under instruction to destroy it: to take out the battery and bury the parts in separate graves. She stuffs her fingernails into the crack at the back of the expensive mobile, and pauses. She needs to see it again. Needs to see what he did for her, what brought them here.

Deftly, naughtily, Hannah finds the video clip. It looks strange, sitting there among the footage of her friend's birthday party and photographs of horses. It doesn't look like it belongs.

She presses play. Watches again with grim satisfaction as the man in the video spits up teeth and begs to be allowed to live. His face is half in shadow and half caked in blood. He's barely human. His cheekbone is sort of caved in and one eye is so puffy that it looks like the cleft in a shapely arse. The thought pleases her. Makes her giggle, as if she has just done something mischievous. The bleeding man's voice is full of snot and tears. It sounds thick

and gloopy and puts her in mind of fresh batter mixture being stirred with a wooden spoon. He struggles to get his words out. He looks like he's in more pain than he can endure. It's still not enough for Hannah. But he does get his words out, in the end. It's an apology, of sorts. An acceptance of what he has done and a request for forgiveness. Hannah had given it, but enjoyed making him wait. Had liked knowing she could give the man his life, or signal his death.

Her man had given her that power.

He had taken away her bad dreams. Hannah has never been a brave kind of girl. She's always met friends outside the pub rather than walk in on her own. Would turn to liquid if she found herself on a country footpath and saw a man coming the other way. After *him*, that had gone away. She knew she had a protector. Knows, here and now, that she can kill anybody she likes. All she has to do is make up a story. She won't, of course. She's a good girl. But it's nice to know she *can*.

She could have left things simple, of course. Should have, really – that was the deal. Could have said thank you and moved on. But he had given her a glimpse of something she wanted to possess. And what she wanted, above all things, was *him*.

He was kind in his rejections. Told her about the obstacles in their path and not to think too highly of him. He was no good for her. Too old. Too full of bitterness and anger and a blackness that would only swallow her up if she came too close. He said he had simply done what needed to be done but he could not give himself to her. Would not even try. So she had pushed. Pushed hard.

Hannah pulls her hair back from her face. She wants to tie it up but he has told her he likes it down. She wants to be perfect for him. Wants to be a vision so stunning and sexy that he'll know, on sight, that he has made the right decision. That he doesn't need the others. And then he'll tear at her clothes and bury his face in her scents and she'll spill her blood on the forest floor and he'll move inside her so deeply that it will feel as though they are breathing through the same lungs and pumping blood through the same heart and reaching their climax through one body, here,

among the ladybirds and the shadows and the pretty white flowers . . .

The sound of a branch snapping causes Hannah to spin where she sits. The figure is lost in the shade of the tall trees and the glare of the sun as it bleeds through the leaves and the ears of corn that sway in the field beyond the path.

Hannah half stands, wishing she had heard him coming; wishing she'd had the time to compose herself; to lie seductively on the ground and expose the changes she has made to her body just to please him.

She starts to speak. Gives a half-giggle and shakes her head as a ladybird lands upon her lip.

The figure moves forward and Hannah's smile drops from her face like sunlight behind cloud.

'I'm sorry . . . I didn't . . . Where? . . . Look . . .'

And then she sees the knife.

Instinct takes over. Hannah turns to flee. She lunges forward, slipping on her bag, and her dress catches on a gnarled stub of tree root. A long branch whips at her hair and face. Her foot goes into the opening to the badger sett and she feels her ankle twist so violently she half wonders if she has been captured by a snare. It feels for a moment as if she is being pulled into the ground. She cannot find her feet. They slip inside her uncomfortable boots and she feels a toenail tear. She yelps as she tries to stand, and then her face is being pushed into the nettles and the briars, the dead leaves and the earth, and she is shouting for help, for mercy, for forgiveness; one hand suddenly coming free as she twists herself onto her back, revealing the matted hair in the hollow under her arms and the rivulets of sweat that run through the dirt on her skin onto her bra-less chest.

At first she thinks she has been punched. She feels a hard thrust to her bottom rib. She shouts in pain but finds she has no voice. And there is wetness upon her skin. It feels like she has spilled wine on her clothes. She can feel leaves and bracken sticking to her skin. And now there is a weight on her wrists. She is being pinned down, even as the strength pumps out of her onto the

forest floor, so that when the sharp, precise pain shoots through her underarms and into her every nerve-ending, she has no way to express it. She just lies on her back, staring through the trees at the distant sun, watching the world fragment into lines and swirls and ladybirds and feeling the figure above her stick a long sharp blade into her guts again, again, again . . .