

A Romantic Night Out

Louise Sellers

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To my husband and brother-in-law and the truly scary enthusiasm with which they tackled the question “What might you find in a domestic shed that would be useful against a Raptor?”. Not all their suggestions have been incorporated.

Chapter 1

A Romantic Night Out

A Primeval Short Story

Claudia huddled deeper in her coat. Trust Nick to drive a car with broken heating.

“Sorry about the date,” said Nick from the driver’s seat.

“Not your fault,” said Claudia. “We can always have a meal together another time.”

“Tell you what,” Nick told her, “soon as we hit the M6 we’ll stop at a service station. I can treat you to a romantic Burger King.”

Claudia closed her eyes and sighed. “What a week! First the golf course and now this.”

“I think it’s been rather a good week.”

Claudia looked across and caught Nick grinning at her from behind the wheel. She couldn’t help smiling back. On the personal front she hadn’t had a bad week. Nick had asked her out to dinner and kissed her, though not quite in the customary order. Then, of course, walkers had spotted something in the Peak District and all her romantic plans, which had included a (now hastily cancelled) hair appointment and considerable investment in new lingerie had gone to pot. She’d have to see how seductive Nick could manage to be in a motorway service station. She supposed there might still be an opportunity to show off new underwear, albeit her distinctly unsexy thermals.

Darkness had fallen an hour ago. In the headlights she could make out a steep slope on the right rising upwards and a crash barrier to their left. The land was old Forestry Commission by the looks of it. Conifers planted in rows. She wasn’t quite sure where they were. Mercifully far from the main tourist towns and villages it seemed.

"I hope nothing is trapped on this side of the anomaly," she said.

Nick shook his head. "If there is, Stephen and the Special Forces team should find it."

"But you don't think so."

"I'm almost certain the utahraptors were pack animals. From the tracks a big group came through the anomaly and then went back again. It's unlikely there are any stragglers."

"Unlikely enough that you were prepared to let Stephen lead the hunt without you?"

"I had better things to do," he said and smiled across at her again.

Claudia smiled back and wriggled inside her coat. Maybe she could get him back to her place and then contrive some sort of magical underwear change in the bathroom. She probably had enough M&S instant meals in the freezer to throw together something that approximated to a romantic dinner.

A house flashed past in the headlights barely registering on her consciousness and then there was sudden bang. Nick and Claudia both cried out at once. She had a vision of something large on the bonnet of the car. Claws scraped across the cracked windscreen. Beside her Nick was wrestling with the steering wheel and then Claudia heard the sound of metal scraping against metal and the car tipped up at an angle. She screamed as she realised they were off the road and heading down the slope. Nick pulled down on the steering wheel, trying to control the car, and they slewed sideways. Then Claudia felt the car tip. It seemed to hang for a minute and then it rolled. She ducked, shielding the top of her head with her arms as, rollercoaster like, she was first one way up then the other. Then they came to a sudden shuddering halt, car upright. Shaken, Claudia kicked open her door, released the seat belt and scrambled out. In the light of the headlights she could make out a small clump of trees which they'd apparently fetched up against. There was the crumpled body of what looked like a raptor under the front wheels. The back of the car seemed to hang over a precipice.

"Nick?" She peered back through the doors.

Nick was sitting still on the driver's side.

"Nick!"

He looked at her. "Claudia, are you all right?"

"Shaken and bruised but otherwise fine. How about you?"

"My leg hurts."

It was difficult to see anything but it was clear that his side of the car was partially crushed by the trees it had crashed into.

"Can you move?" she asked.

“I think so.”

He started to pull himself towards her, screamed and stopped.

“Hang on a moment,” she told him.

He’d just tossed the regulation backpack he’d been given earlier in the day, into the back of the car. Claudia hauled it out and rummaged through it in the beams of the headlights. First aid kit, food, rope, torch! She came back round the side of the car and switched on the torch to look in. There was a nasty red colour on the driver’s side under the dashboard, but at least she could see everything and it didn’t look like Nick was trapped.

“I’m going to phone Ditzzy,” she said.

“How about an ambulance?” suggested Nick.

Claudia shook her head as she fished her handbag from under the passenger seat. “Raptor under the front wheels.”

“If I die from blood loss, I’m blaming you,” he replied.

The medic answered almost straight away.

“Ditzzy, it’s me, Claudia. Nick and I have been in an accident.”

“What sort of an accident?”

“A Raptor jumped the car and we crashed.”

“What’s your situation?”

“I’m fine but Nick’s leg is hurt. It’s too painful for him to move. The raptor’s dead.”

“Is there any bleeding?”

“Some.”

“OK. You need to stop that.”

“I’ve got one of the First Aid kits.”

“Good, there are bandages in there but first can you see where it’s bleeding?”

Claudia scrambled back in the car. “Where are you bleeding?” she asked shining the flashlight under the seat. Now she looked more closely there was a nasty gash in his thigh near the torn metal of the car door.

“I see it,” she said. “It’s his thigh.”

“What’s the bleeding like? Is it spurting?”

“Errr, no.”

“That’s good. Sounds like he’s missed any arteries. Get Nick to put pressure on it.”

“Did you get that?” she asked Nick.

He nodded and clamped his hands over the wound, crying out as he did so.

“Right,” said Ditzzy, “put a sterile dressing and a bandage on it. You remember how from my First Aid briefing?”

"I'm going to have to."

"Good girl. Now do you know where you are?"

"Err, about half an hour along the road to the M6 from the anomaly site."

"Close enough. I'm going to hang up now, alert everyone to where you are and then come and get you. I won't use this phone so you can ring me back any time if you need help. Get Nick bandaged up and then stay put, OK?"

"OK." She heard a click as the line closed down.

Claudia pocketed the phone and opened the First Aid kit she'd found earlier, pulling out a dressing and a roll of bandages. She scrambled back into the car and leaned across Nick so she could reach his leg.

"What did Ditzzy say?" he asked. There was a tightness in his voice that suggested he was in pain.

"You'll live," she reported. "Help is on the way."

Nick nodded. Claudia ripped the remains of his trousers away from the wound and began wrapping the bandage round his leg. She felt a little self-conscious since the exercise left her half-sprawled across his lap.

"You know," said Nick, "in other circumstances this would be quite enjoyable."

"Hold that thought," she said, scrambling back upright. She paused her face only a couple of inches from his and considered kissing him, at which point the car lurched backwards slightly.

"What was that?" asked Nick.

"The back of the car," she said nervously. "It's not exactly on anything."

"You could have mentioned that!" he said, full of Scots' indignation.

The car shuddered again.

"I have to get out of here," he said.

"You can't move," she objected.

"Believe me, I can if I have to."

Claudia backed out of the car and watched as Nick grabbed the back of the passenger seat and hauled himself across. He screamed again and stopped panting.

"Nick!"

"I have got to get out of here," he said between clenched teeth.

Claudia couldn't disagree. She leaned into the car once more and wrapped her arms round Nick's chest.

"OK, on three," she said, "one, two, three..."

Nick hauled once again on the edge of the seat and Claudia pulled too. He screamed again but Claudia kept on pulling until she felt him slide across the seat and then they both fell out of the car onto the ground. It's front rocked upwards,

freed from Nick's weight, and the whole thing slid backwards but then stopped again. Claudia scrambled to her feet.

"Can you walk?" she asked.

"Mebbe."

She shone the torch around and saw a rock only a short distance from them.

"How about we get you to that rock?"

"Sounds good."

Wrapping one arm round his waist, she hauled him to his feet. He gripped her shoulder and they struggled awkwardly, with much groaning and cursing, to the rock where she set him down. Then she went back to the car and gathered up the rucksack and her handbag from the ground, bringing them to the rock as well. Her phone rang.

"Claudia, it's Ditzzy. How are the two of you?"

"Surviving. Tell me the cavalry are on the way."

"We'll be with you as soon as possible, but you're looking at three quarters of an hour. The road loops close to where we are but we think it'll be quicker anyway to get back to the cars and then drive. Hart's found some tracks. Given that you hit a raptor he says it looks like another small group came through before the big pack. He doesn't think they went back. If you're where we think you are and Hart's timeline is right then they could easily be in your area."

Claudia's blood ran cold. "How many?"

"Four, maybe five."

Claudia looked around her anxiously.

"The whole team will be coming, armed," said Ditzzy. "Stay in the car and, if possible, turn on some heating. I don't want the two of you dying from shock and exposure."

"We've left the car," Claudia cut in.

There was a silence at the end of the phone.

"We've not gone far," she added, "but it's sort of hanging over a precipice."

"How's Cutter's leg?"

"Painful, but we've got it bandaged."

"He can walk?"

"With help."

"It's probably not broken then, which is good news."

Claudia was distracted from replying by the sound of pebbles and rocks bouncing down the slope.

Nick obviously heard it as well because he picked up the torch and shone it upwards. Edging cautiously down the embankment towards them was a second

raptor.

“Ditz, we’ve got company. I’ll phone you back.”

Claudia switched off the phone and dropped it back in her pocket.

“Any ideas?” she asked Nick.

“It shouldn’t like anything too strange. It seems quite wary of the torchlight.”

Nick flashed the torch around a bit and Claudia watched the raptor skitter slightly.

“How about loud noises?” she asked.

“Screaming probably won’t help. It will sound like a distressed animal.”

“I was thinking of this.” Claudia fished her rape alarm out of her handbag.

“Worth a try,” Nick agreed.

Claudia switched it on. The raptor shied away from the high-pitched siren. Claudia switched it off and she and Nick watched as Nick kept the creature in the torchlight. It gave them a fairly wide berth but headed towards the car. Claudia hadn’t actually seen a raptor properly before, not outside Nick’s textbooks at any rate. It walked upright on two legs, about the size of a large man, maybe a little bigger with its arms tucked in to its chest. She couldn’t see the feet properly but Connor had been lecturing them on utahraptors all day so she knew it should have a single pronounced claw. According to Connor the raptor jumped on its prey, held it with its fore-limbs and then kicked with the claws on its hind legs. Claudia suppressed a shudder.

“It’s decided we might be dangerous, I think,” said Nick. “It must be checking out the smell of blood from the car.”

The raptor nosed at its dead comrade on the ground for a bit and then started to investigate the car itself.

“It’s quite curious,” said Nick in a fascinated voice. “It can’t ever have seen a car before but it’s going to climb inside anyway.”

The raptor poked its head through the passenger door, now several feet off the ground. Then it worked its way round to the rear door which Claudia had also left open. She and Nick watched as, cautiously, it squeezed itself inside.

“So utahraptors are not that scared of novel things,” observed Claudia. She didn’t think that boded well.

“Maybe it thinks it’s a sort of cave or something,” hypothesized Nick.

Claudia watched as the car rocked and heard the startled scrabbling from within it.

“Keep the torch on the car,” she said and cautiously left Nick’s side. She scrambled the short distance down the slope until she was standing in front of it. Then, gathering all her strength, she grabbed the front bumper and heaved upwards. She felt the car tilt further, pivoting on whatever had arrested its slide.

Then there was a sound of scraping metal and it skewed sideways from her grip. She staggered backwards as the whole machine started to roll once more and then it was gone over the edge. There was a sound of banging and then a splash somewhere below her.

“That was my car!” said Nick indignantly.

“Put it on expenses,” she said. “I’ll sign it off.”

“We shouldn’t harm them unnecessarily.”

“We’re in the middle of nowhere. You can’t move and we’re completely unarmed. So don’t get all high and mighty with me, Nicholas Cutter.”

“What did Ditzzy say on the phone?” asked Nick, apparently deciding not to argue. Which meant, Claudia thought, that he must be in a lot of pain.

“Stay in the car. Keep warm.” Claudia paused and sighed. “Stephen thinks a small group of raptors came through before the main pack and are still here. Four or five, apparently.”

Nick looked up the hillside. “So there are more on the way.”

Claudia nodded mutely.

“We should get to that house back along the road. We’re too exposed here.”

“Ditzzy said to stay put.”

“He said stay in the car. He also said to stay warm, which we can’t. Phone him and let him know where we’re going.”

“How are we going to get there? You can hardly walk.”

“With your help I’ll manage. Believe me I’d prefer a little pain to being eaten by a raptor.”

Claudia pursed her lips but she couldn’t really fault his logic. She fished out the mobile again and phoned Ditzzy.

“Claudia!” The medic sounded relieved. “Are you all right?”

“We’re fine. Cutter’s car has seen better days though.”

He laughed. “Cutter’s car is not my responsibility.”

“Look! Ditz, we’re right in the open here and it sounds like there are more raptors on the way. We passed a house just before we crashed. We’re going to try to make our way back there.”

She heard Ditzzy sigh. “If Cutter can walk it’s not a bad idea. I still want to get you both warm but, as you say, somewhere you can defend yourself can’t hurt. I’d rather you didn’t have to move but under the circumstances, yes, see if you can get there.”

“OK.”

“Now, there will be morphine in that First Aid kit you’ve got.”

“Morphine?”

“Believe me, on morphine you can walk out of a combat zone with a broken leg. Doesn’t do the leg much good, mind.”

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea,” said Nick suddenly from where he sat.

“Nick’s not convinced,” Claudia relayed to Ditzzy.

“Well, I’m not there so I can’t judge. But you said initially his leg was too painful to move. You can try getting to the house without it but don’t forget you’ve got it. At least check the kit for me and confirm it’s there.”

Claudia did so and realised that the morphine was a small pack of syringes.

“This has to be injected,” she said.

“We covered that in the First Aid briefing. You’ve practised using the Med and Ket antidote. The principle’s the same.”

“That was then.”

“Claudia, there’s no one else going to be with you for at least half-an-hour. You’ve done this in practice. You’ll be fine.”

“If you say so.”

“I do. Now, both of you get moving and don’t forget you have the morphine if you need it.”

Claudia put the phone back into her pocket and turned towards Nick. He was breathing deeply and had a pinched and pained look about his face. She looked at the packet of syringes in her hand.

“No,” he said.

Claudia nodded. She packed the first-aid kit back into the backpack and added her handbag to the mix for good measure. She put the morphine pack in her pocket along with her phone. Nick had the torch. She shouldered the backpack and staggered under the weight. Nick put out his hand, holding her arm.

“I’m all right,” she said and smiled at him in the torchlight. “You ready?”

He nodded and eased himself to his feet. She wrapped one arm round his waist and he slung one over her shoulder adding his weight to the backpack. Nick shone the light ahead of them and they began to struggle the three metres or so they had to travel in order to get up the hillside. It was agonisingly slow going. Although it wasn’t as steep as she had at first feared, it was steep enough and Nick clearly had a lot of trouble putting any weight on his right leg. Mostly he just made small grunts and whimpers but sometimes he cried out inadvertently. Claudia closed her eyes and wondered whether to raise the subject of morphine once more but didn’t.

Slowly they edged upwards. Claudia would take a step forward weighed down by the backpack and then haul on Nick as he half-limped, half-hopped forwards. Before long they were both panting and Nick gripped her shoulder painfully. At long last they reached the torn and broken crash barrier. Claudia grabbed hold of

it with both hands, hauling herself up onto the road, and then reached down and hauled Nick after her. They sat for a moment on the edge of the road, her arms wrapped around him, his head resting on her chest. Then he stirred himself.

“Must keep moving,” he said.

Claudia nodded and clambered once more to her feet, helping Nick up after her. Nick shone the torch around them. Eyes flashed out at them from the tree line.

“Uh oh!” said Nick.

Claudia grabbed his waist once more and they began cautiously backing away. Nick kept the torchlight fixed on the eyes. Slowly and cautiously three raptors emerged from the treeline. Claudia fished her rape alarm out of her pocket and set it off. The raptors backed away slightly but continued to follow. Nick quickly flashed the torch around once more. The house appeared in the light, no more than a couple of hundred yards from where they stood but, given how long it had taken them and how hard it had been to reach the road, Claudia’s heart sank. They would never make it.

“Claudia,” said Nick and his voice had a steely quality to it.

“Yes?”

“I want you to give me your alarm, dump that rucksack, and then make a run for it to the house.”

“No.” Claudia kept edging towards the house half dragging Nick with her.

“Those things will work out we’re injured before too long and then we’re mincemeat. You need to get to the house and find help, or a weapon of some sort if you really must, bleach, chemicals, a good hefty spade, anything.”

“I can’t leave you here.”

“If you leave the torch and the rape alarm with me I’ll be as safe as we both are together. You’ll be the one in the most danger because you’ll be a fleeing target.”

“Oh, thanks!”

“Claudia!”

“OK. But you’re taking a shot of morphine first. At least you’ll be able to run if you have to.”

“I need to be able to concentrate.”

“You *need* to be able to run.”

Nick glared at her for a moment. She wouldn’t normally have been able to force him to back down but the pain was taking a lot out of him, she could tell. After a moment or two he nodded.

She shuffled off the backpack then took the morphine out of her pocket. Getting a syringe out of the packet was a nightmare of cold fingers and the unpleasant

awareness of the raptors close by.

“Buttock or thigh?” she asked once she had a needle in her hands.

“You ever done this before?” he asked.

“No. You?”

“I’ve anaesthetised animals.”

She looked down at the syringe in the half-light.

“Thigh,” he said.

Claudia knelt beside him and placed one hand gently on his thigh, fingers touching the hip bone. She remembered practising this amid a lot of innuendo and giggles. It didn’t seem so amusing now. She drew in her fingers and then straightened them again so they covered, hopefully, the right portion of the muscle.

“Where your hand is,” said Nick.

She nodded, lifted her hand and jabbed in the needle “like a dart” as Ditzzy had demonstrated in the briefing. Nick gasped. Hurriedly Claudia pressed the plunger home.

“Done?” queried Nick.

“I think so.” Claudia withdrew the needle.

“OK,” said Nick. “Go! Now!”

She gave the raptors another blast of the rape alarm for good measure. Then handed it to Nick. Once more he flashed the torchlight towards the house.

“You see the way?”

She nodded.

“I’m going to keep the light on you. It’ll help you see where your feet are.”

She nodded again.

“You ready?”

A third nod.

“Go!”

Claudia ran. Behind her she heard Nick shout. Presumably to get the raptors’ attention. She didn’t dare look back but concentrated on the house. As she drew near she tripped a security light which flooded the whole place with illumination. She reached the front door and began to bang on it, ringing the bell at the same time. She risked a look behind her. She could see Nick on the road, but not the raptors. The rape alarm sounded once more. There was no movement in the house. Claudia swore. They were making enough noise. If there was anyone in they’d have heard.

She looked around her desperately and saw a large garage with a side door and window. She’d seen how to do this on telly and only hoped it was halfway accurate. She pulled off her coat and wrapped it round her hand and then smashed

it hard against the window. The glass cracked in a satisfying fashion. She pushed her padded hand through the window and then wriggled it out of the coat and reached round for the door. Thankfully there was a standard chub style lock which she flicked open. Hurriedly she pulled the door. Alarms went off all around her but she ignored them and groped her way into the interior. Her hand fell on a light switch and she switched it on to reveal a large workshop piled high with tools. Away down at the road she heard the rape alarm sound again. There was a weedkiller spray attached to a backpack by the door which she grabbed and slipped on. Above it, on a shelf, was what looked like a hedge trimmer. She picked it up. There was a switch that looked remarkably like a trigger. She depressed it and was pleased to see the blades whirr on. She left no more time but turned and fled back towards the road.

Nick was seated uncomfortably on the crash barrier and the raptors appeared closer than they had previously. She grabbed the rape alarm from him and put it in her pocket. Then she thrust the hedge trimmer into one of his hands, took the torch and pulled out the nozzle of the weed-killer gun.

“What now?” she asked.

Nick blinked at her slowly and shook his head. “Well they’ve not actually attacked yet,” he said after a moment. Claudia waited but apparently there was no more.

“So we back up to the house carefully?” she asked.

He blinked at her, then nodded. Claudia hooked the hand holding the torch round his waist once more and hauled him to his feet. It caused the torch to shine erratically on the ground and she fumbled with the weedkiller.

“I’m all right,” he said, standing on both legs.

“That’ll be the morphine.”

“S what it’s for.”

Claudia sighed but let go of him. It was certainly going to be easier with both hands free. They began to back up the driveway. Nick looked curiously at the hedge trimmer and switched it on a couple of times experimentally waving it around a little erratically. It suddenly occurred to Claudia that giving a hedge trimmer to a man dosed up on morphine hadn’t been a terribly good idea.

“Careful with that.”

“Sorry,” he said, “I was looking at the...” then he seemed to think the better of it. “Sorry,” he mumbled a second time.

The raptors followed them, one slightly ahead of the other two. Then it stopped and crouched low. “It’s going to jump,” Claudia thought, panicked. She dropped the torch at her feet and grasped the nozzle of the weed-killer with both

hands. The raptor leaped towards Nick. Claudia aimed the spray gun at it's face, hearing the sound of the trimmer being activated. The raptor screeched as the spray from the weedkiller hit it squarely in the eyes. She heard a grinding sound from the trimmer. The raptor started to keen horribly. The sounds of the trimmer ceased. Claudia picked up the torch and shone it back down the path. The other two raptors stood still watching them. She swept it back towards the sounds of pain, where Nick should be. The raptor lay on the ground thrashing to and fro, the hedge trimmer discarded and broken next to it. Nick stood, covered in blood, staring at the horrific site at his feet.

"Are you hurt?" she asked anxiously, moving around the fallen raptor towards him.

"No. None of the blood's mine." He waved his hands slowly in front of him. They dripped blood.

"Come on," she whispered, ignoring the sounds. "Come on, let's get going."

When he still didn't move she took one of his hands and gently pulled him up the path. Once again the utahraptors followed but they paused by their fallen comrade, nudging at it with their heads. Claudia continued to lead Nick by the hand. She guessed that running on Nick's leg would be a very bad idea. However she wanted to get to the comparative safety of the garage as quickly as possible so she set a brisk pace and Nick seemed content to follow along behind her.

Claudia looked around the place as they entered. She'd been in too much of a rush when she broke in to register it properly. The workshop area was more like a large shed containing a handful of power tools and gardening equipment. A door then led from that into what was, presumably, the main garage. She sat Nick down on a stool and shut and locked the door behind them.

Nick looked dreadful. He was covered in blood. His face was pale and his eyes were wide and staring. There was a sink in one corner and Claudia dampened a cloth and began to wipe the blood from his face. He smiled slightly.

"I can clean myself up you know." He took the cloth from her but then stopped, staring at it.

"I'm not so sure," she returned. "You look pretty shaken." She dropped a light kiss on to the top of his head, took back the cloth and finished wiping off the blood. He caught her hand.

"Thanks," he said. "You're beautiful you know," he added smiling slightly drunkenly at her. His hands reached up. "You have starlight in your hair," he said, pulling at strands of it, "like the light from an anomaly."

Claudia shivered. It made her look for her coat which she pulled through the broken window where she had left it. "Ditzy said to keep warm."

“Body heat,” he said.

She grinned. “Sounds like a good idea.”

She moved closer and he wrapped his arms round her burying his head in her chest. Then his hands started to drift upwards towards her breast. She slapped them back.

“Watch it you!”

“I’m still seeing stars,” he murmured.

“That’ll be the morphine.”

“Sounds like a good excuse,” and the hands started to wander again. She trapped them and held them round her waist.

There was a crash of glass. Claudia let out an involuntary scream as a raptor’s head smashed through the window. A clawed foot reached into the garage and down onto the workbench beneath affording Claudia an excellent view of the sharp, curved, specialised slashing claw Connor had been so excited about. It started scrabbling for purchase. Without thinking Claudia broke away from Nick’s grasp and grabbed a spade from beside the wall. She swung it with all her might, crying out as she did so. There was a satisfying crunch and the raptor fell away from the window with a thud.

“You’re wasted in management,” said Nick behind her. “We should have you in the special forces team.” He giggled at his own joke.

“It’s not funny,” she said, angered.

She felt his hand on her arm.

“I know, I’m sorry. Thanks for looking after me so well.” He giggled again.

There was a thud against the door and the hinges shook.

“Give me that chainsaw,” said Nick suddenly.

Claudia looked at it. “Absolutely not. I wouldn’t trust you with that even if you weren’t on drugs. As it is you’re more likely to kill us with it than a raptor.”

“Fire,” said Nick. “We should be able to hold them off with fire.”

Claudia looked around them. There was a small petrol can on a shelf above a lawnmower. She picked it up and sloshed it experimentally. It felt full. She put it on the workbench.

“Wood,” she observed, moving to the back of the shed behind a table saw. “Dust sheets,” she added grabbing a pile from a corner.

She carried them and the wood over to the workbench. The banging against the door continued. Nick began tearing up the dust sheets using a pair of gardening scissors but after he’d stabbed himself twice Claudia took them from him and told him to sit still. She tore them up and tied them round the ends of the scraps of wood. She laid two out on the workbench.

“Let’s get those lit,” she said, eyeing the door, “before we make any more.”

She opened the petrol and poured a little onto each makeshift torch. She winced anxiously as some of it sloshed onto the floor.

“Lighter?” said Nick.

“I don’t smoke!”

“Neither do I.”

Claudia looked around desperately. Nick closed his eyes and rocked on the stool.

“Camping supplies!” Claudia had to pull over a stool to reach up to what looked like a small gas stove. Nick took it from her and pressed an ignition switch on one side. The ring lit up. He smiled. Claudia relieved him of it before he could do any damage.

“Hey!” he said indignantly. “Ooh!” he added, “flame trail!” and batted his hand in front of him.

Carefully Claudia held each makeshift torch over the stove until they were alight. Then she moved to between Nick and the door. It was not long before it gave way with a massive crash. A utahraptor moved through and Claudia waved and jabbed at it with a brand. Suddenly Nick stood and grabbed one of the torches from her.

“Hey!” she said, alarmed. Then he wavered on his feet and dropped it. The spilled petrol on the floor under the workbench caught light.

Throwing her own torch at the creature Claudia snatched the gas stove out of the way. She grabbed Nick’s arm and they backed further into the shed. There was a small domestic fire extinguisher by the second door and Claudia picked it up uncertainly. At the moment the utahraptor was hovering in the doorway, clearly undecided about the fire on the work bench. If she put it out they would have no defence. Nick rattled the interior door.

“Locked!” he reported.

“Crowbar? Saw? Hammer?” asked Claudia.

“Axe!” he said, in a satisfied fashion, hoisting one from the pile of gardening tools stacked by the shelf unit. “Hold me up.”

“Oh! no!” said Claudia. “I’ll have that.”

She handed him the fire extinguisher and took the axe. She braced herself and swung it at the door. It bit into the wood in a satisfying fashion but she lost precious seconds trying to get it free again. Then she stood back for a second swing.

Suddenly a voice sounded clearly outside.

“Duck!”

Extensive drilling by special forces had them both instinctively drop to the floor.

“Down!” Claudia shouted.

There was the sound of automatic weapons’ fire and then Stephen’s voice.

“I hit it. Give the Ketamine a minute.”

The firing stopped. Claudia cautiously raised her head. She couldn’t see the raptor so she hurriedly grabbed the fire extinguisher from Nick, who was sitting on the floor, a foolish grin on his face, and turned it on the workbench. Then Captain Ryan, Stephen and Ditzzy were standing in the doorway.

“Party!” said Nick from the floor and giggled.

“I see you used the morphine,” said Ditzzy.

Six hours later, Claudia and Stephen were manhandling a sleepy but irritable Nick up the steps to his house. The morphine had worn off and he was in considerable pain which the doctor had, rather unsympathetically, said served him right for putting weight on his ankle. Nick had demanded more morphine in extremely colourful Scots which the doctor, an unflappable Yorkshire lass, had calmly ignored. She had suggested Claudia buy some co-codamol however and Nick had taken some before they left the hospital.

“I’ll be fine,” he said for the umpteenth time.

“We know,” replied Stephen indulgently, “but it’ll set our minds at rest if we get you into bed before we leave.”

“I don’t need to go to bed.”

“No weight to be put on the ankle for at least three days!” said Claudia firmly. “I’m going to set up surveillance just to make sure.”

They got Nick into the house and to his bedroom with relatively little difficulty but he then made them wait in the corridor while he got into his pyjamas.

“It’s not like we haven’t shared tents,” Stephen shouted through the bedroom door as they listened to the grunts and thumps emanating from the other side.

“A man has his dignity,” Nick returned, “albeit not much when he’s on crutches. I’m clinging to the few shreds I have left.”

Eventually they got him settled and Claudia was content he wasn’t going to hare off anywhere, not in the next eight hours or so, at least.

“So much for our night out,” he said, a little mournfully, as she sat on the edge of the bed to wish him good night.

She smiled indulgently at him. “There’ll be plenty of time once your ankle is better. Some things are worth waiting for a little.”

She kissed him on the nose and then got up to leave. As she turned she caught a glimpse of herself in the wardrobe mirror. Like Nick had said, there was starlight in her hair as if an anomaly glimmered behind it. She blinked and the image was gone.