

It had started in Starbucks, where she'd been crying into a tasteless Latte. She was only in there because she had nowhere else to go. Zak had been two timing her, breaking her heart and when she confronted him instead of apologising and telling her he loved her he had...

She had to stop to control herself: this bit still hurt more than it should. Instead of telling her he still loved her, he dumped her. Told her she was too clingy and it was time to move on, and that's what he did. He moved on without paying back the student loan she'd lent to him to part finance the car and sharp clothes he said he needed to break through to the big time. Then with no money and non-attendance at exams, she found herself out of uni and crying in Starbucks. It had changed her life and she knew the mother had caused it, made it happen for her.

Her first awareness of the happening had been a gentle touch on her arm. Looking up she saw a large Nordic looking blonde woman standing over her, a look of concern on her handsome, strong-jawed face.

"Forgive me, but you looked so unhappy, would you mind if I sat down for a moment?"

Thus she met Olga, her first contact with the community. She couldn't remember much of their conversation, only that at the end of it she was left with an address and an invitation to the house for that evening: it was fate.

She took the 157 bus from the city centre to the end of the line. The ride took well over an hour as she moved through inner city regeneration, decaying inner suburbs, affluent outer and satellite suburbs and at last into the country. The bus stopped in a lay-by next to a rural pub, opposite there was a church and nothing else but fields. A couple of miles away a wooded escarpment reared up sharply out of the plain; the bus pulled off quickly as if it wanted to get away. It was growing dark.

Kelly had the instructions Olga had given her but it was assumed she'd be driving. She didn't own a car and hadn't the money for a taxi. By foot and public transport it wasn't so easy. She found

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the lane leading to the track that led to the house but the five minutes that Olga had told her this would take was more like an hour on foot.

It was hard to tell where she was, high hedges obstructed her vision either side of the lane. Only once did a car pass her and for that she was grateful as she had to scramble into the hedge to get out of its way. The further she walked the darker it grew and the more uncertain she felt: what was she doing here? The day had already been bad enough. How much more gullible could she get? It was the story of her life over and over again. Some night bird was making a noise in the branches over her head and there was rustling in the hedgerow.

Now she was frightened, she could have been lured here to be murdered or raped or both and no one would miss her. She felt the tears start again but it was the thought that no one would miss or care if she died that kept her going. There was nothing to go back for anyway, so pulling up her coat collar she trudged on trying to shut out the sounds.

Seconds later she found the track snaking away to the right. It was narrower and darker than the road and uneven underfoot. She wondered how cars would get down it in bad weather but she followed it. It was dead black now: the moon and stars were swaddled in thick layers of cloud and no light came from streetlights or windows. There were no streetlights or windows out here.

She could hardly see her hand in front of her face. Then she hit a thorn hedge; the track had ended. She groped around before realising that it had veered away to the left and she followed it keeping her hand on a field fence that marked its right boundary. This time she didn't miss the turn: she just followed the fence line concentrating on the ground beneath her feet. She was congratulating herself on this when she realised it had become brighter and looked up.

It was there, a few hundred yards ahead of her, three stories, massive, the windows pouring out light; something out of a fairy tale. She stopped worrying about how she'd get back: she wouldn't be going back.

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The track had become a drive, emerging from the claustrophobic confines of the hedge and sloping gently down towards the house. Her arrival was no surprise; security lights picked her out as she made her way along the gravelled path. Before she reached it the front door opened. Olga, dressed in a dark green dress, waited for her in the open doorway. To Kelly's relief, she was smiling a welcome.

It was the smell of the house she noticed first, a mix of scents, beeswax, perfumed candles and fresh cut flowers. Olga ushered her into a huge, softly lit room with a massive old fireplace and some type of raised platform next to it. There were seven women in the room; all of them older than her. Standing in the centre was a tall, red haired woman who looked to Kelly to be in her late thirties. She was wearing a long, clinging black dress and was holding a wine glass. Olga steered Kelly over to her.

"Kelly, this is Margaret, she's the head of our rather special little group."

She leant across and kissed Margaret on the lips almost proprietarily as she said this, which struck Kelly as strange.

"Welcome to our community, Kelly, from what Olga has told us you will fit in perfectly."

And apart from the introductions, that was it. Someone gave her a glass of white wine and not long after, dead tired, she was shown to her room, she was in. But it hadn't been as simple as that, nothing ever was, there had been a price. Something she hadn't expected and could never have imagined.

Looking back they had tried to prepare her for it, but she'd been too naive to pick up any of the hints. So, when Olga and Margaret took her to one side to put the proposition to her she'd been shocked, and then outraged. Her first reaction had been to storm out, but where would she go? The thing that hurt most wasn't the ethics of what they wanted but the fact that during the three months she had lived with them she had filled the role of baby in the house. She had been petted

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