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Masks of Respectability

I blame the Patels for getting me into this fix. If they'd made it more difficult to nick stuff from their corner shop I wouldn't have gone in there in the first place and seen the advert in their window.

Assistant Private Investigator wanted, it said. Flexible hours. No experience necessary. Driving licence and some knowledge of digital cameras required.

So, it's all because I fancied a Mars bar that afternoon that I'm sitting in a farmhouse style kitchen straight out of House and Home magazine, waiting for Mr Grimshaw to come back and kill me.

I'm not sure how he's going to do it but, judging by the amount of plastic sheeting he's spread on the floor around me, it's going to be messy. He said he'd be back in a few minutes. Needed to get another roll of gaffer tape from the garage, he said. He's already used up one roll taping me to this chair.

In the meantime, apart from admiring the Shaker style units and reclaimed flagstone floor in his designer kitchen, I've been mulling over the events that brought me here and, more significantly, why he's going to murder me just because I saw him run over a dog. I can't ask him. I've got about a yard of tape wrapped around my chops.

Not being the most reliable type of person, I was a stranger to steady employment before Rockford Surveillance took me on, but the owner wasn't fussy. He said I had an instantly forgettable face and was completely unremarkable. Ideal qualities for the job. The office was two rooms above the Patel's shop and I think he filched the

name from some old TV detective show.

I spent the next couple of years following cheating husbands and wayward wives, sitting in a clapped-out Fiat Uno with a camera at the ready. I was paid a per diem pittance and the assignments were boring but I soon found a way to supplement my meagre income.

Most of Rockford's clientele were reasonably wealthy middle class professionals living in the upmarket suburbs of the city. BMWs, Jaguars and big detached mock Tudor houses or barn conversions were the norm. They provided a rich source of improprieties.

The first time I decided to do a bit of freelancing was more out of sympathy than avarice. I'd been keeping an eye on a bloke whose wife reckoned was having an affair. He had all the appearances of a model husband, but she was right. I clocked him coming out of a hotel one afternoon with a stunning brunette. To make sure it wasn't just a one-off I decided to keep up the surveillance for another few days. One morning, while I was waiting to check if he stopped off for a quickie on the way to work, his wife followed him out of the house. 180 pounds of shapeless dressing gown capped with dirty blonde hair, yelling her head off while managing to keep a cigarette stuck to her lower lip. He got into his car without a word as she stood there glowering, hands on broad hips, shouting at him like an overweight drill sergeant.

I decided he deserved an out. As soon as he parked up, I pulled into an adjoining slot and approached him. I spilled the beans and offered to let him delete all the photos from my camera if he gave me a grand in cash. I would report back to my boss that there was no evidence of an affair. We did the deal as soon as the banks opened and he was as grateful for his good fortune as I was for my small one.

After that I quickly learned that a heck of a lot of well-to-do people wore a mask of respectability to hide their true characters, and I discovered they were willing to pay to keep their masks from slipping.

I always chose my targets carefully. Individuals with a reputation to uphold. People in positions of responsibility. Outwardly upright citizens who would be horrified if their indiscretions were revealed.

It's surprising what you find out when you observe someone closely for a few days. I uncovered all manner of misdemeanours,

from the manager of a lower division football club who was placing bets against his own team, to a county councillor who was upskirting women on escalators.

I never demanded ridiculous sums of money. Enough to make it worth my time and effort but easily affordable for my 'clients'. Five thousand was the most I ever asked for, and avoiding embarrassment is a powerful motivation to pay off a blackmailer.

Mr Grimshaw was different from my usual clients in that I came across him quite by accident.

I'd been shadowing a trophy wife whose old man had become suspicious. She was dead easy to tail either in her flashy red sports car or tottering around on killer heels.

On that particular evening, September 4th, I'd followed her car to Brampton Woods, a seldom visited local nature reserve. It definitely looked fishy to me so I switched my dash cam on and filmed her as she bumped along a rough dirt road to a parking area.

She pulled up alongside the only other vehicle, a late model Mercedes G-wagon with a personalized number plate. I slotted the Uno between two overhanging trees at the side of the track and started snapping away.

She climbed into the Merc and the two of them were soon at it. I could see the G-wagon rocking on its suspension and the windows misting up. As soon as the light began to fade I decided to leave them to it and reversed until I found a place wide enough to do a three-pointer.

It was on the way back down the track that I first encountered Grimshaw. His silver Range Rover shot out of a firebreak right in front of me. He seemed to be in a hurry but once clear of the woodland he slowed down a bit and I caught up with him as we both headed back towards the city.

We reached the suburbs and that's when he hit the dog. I can't say he was at fault, the stupid mutt ran out into the road, its owner nowhere in sight. However, Grimshaw didn't even slow down. It was like he didn't know he'd run the thing over, or didn't care. The dog looked extremely dead so I didn't bother stopping either, but I knew that you had to inform the authorities if you ran over an

animal, and I guessed that wasn't going to happen.

I checked my dash cam. It was still recording. Sensing an opportunity, I followed the silver Range Rover to its destination, a standard issue detached mock Tudor on a pleasant tree-lined avenue.

Early the next morning I went back and got my first good look at Grimshaw. Middle aged, wiry, clean shaven with thinning hair, expensive suit and briefcase. I followed him to a modern dental surgery where I found out his name from the plaque next to the door. I confirmed it with the receptionist when I went inside to make enquiries about the price of fillings.

He was the ideal mark. Wealthy with an image to protect. I was sure he had plenty of dog lovers on his patient list.

A letter would be the best method of initial contact I decided after a few days' contemplation, so I wrote a simple note by hand to avoid leaving any clues on my laptop if anything went wrong:

I followed you from Brampton Woods on September 4th. I know what you did and have it on video. The evidence is for sale for £2000. If you are interested, message me on this number.'

I included the number for one of my cheap burner phones, wrote his full name with all his post-nominals on an envelope marked confidential, and hand delivered the letter to his surgery.

Two days later the phone pinged and I read his text message:

'Bring all copies of evidence to 14 Cavendish Avenue at 6 pm tonight. Come alone. Cash waiting.'

He was inviting me to his home address, which must mean he was either single or, if he had a wife and kids, they'd be out.

"Have you got everything with you?" he asked me on the doorstep. "Does anyone else know about this?"

I told him yes and no and, as he stepped aside to let me enter, I felt a sharp prick on the side of my neck.

I would have assumed it was an insect bite if I hadn't glimpsed the movement of his arm. The effect was instantaneous and amazing. Within seconds I felt woozy and my knees buckled. Grimshaw had to hold me up and half drag me into his kitchen. I was euphoric, enjoying the best trip ever as he sat me down and began gaffer taping me to a chair. I was too happy to object.

“Midazolam injected straight into the jugular,” he offered by way of explanation as he strapped my wrists to the wooden chair arms.

“Wears off after about half-an-hour. I use it as a pre-med when I do major reconstructive work. Nice isn't it?”

“Wha ... wha ...” I managed, unable to form any coherent words.

“Sorry about this, but I can't risk you disturbing the neighbours,” my captor said as he used more of the tape to gag me.

Grimshaw emptied my pockets and placed everything, including the burner phone, on the grey soapstone countertop. He rifled through my wallet and found my Rockford business card.

“So, a snoop eh? Or should I say private investigator? I suppose my wife hired you to keep an eye on me. Well, whatever you've found out isn't going to do either of you much good now is it?”

The effect of the midazolam was wearing off but what he was saying still didn't make any sense to me. He picked up the SD memory card I'd removed from my dash cam to fulfil my part of the bargain.

“I assume this is your video evidence, yes?”

I nodded enthusiastically and mumbled agreement through the tape, hoping he'd be satisfied and let me go.

“Well, we better get rid of that straight away.”

He lit one of the gas rings on the six burner range and, holding the tiny plastic card with a pair of stainless steel tongs, incinerated it.

After he'd flushed the ash down the sink he blew out the pilot lights for the gas burners then dragged me closer to the range before spreading plastic sheeting around and between the legs of my chair, all the time keeping up a nervous chatter.

“I don't want a repeat of last week. My wife made a terrible mess. She 'let go' if you get my drift. I hope you don't do the same. I can't have your DNA spread all over the floor... took me hours to clean up after her.”

“What the hell is going on?” I demanded. “All you did was run over a dog. What's it got to do with your wife? I'm only asking for a couple of grand to save you any embarrassment!”

Unfortunately, it came out as *'Whuummmph, mmmrrph, Mmmmmppphhh!'*

“I could finish you off with an overdose of midazolam,” Grimshaw explained, ignoring my pathetic grunts, “which would be much more pleasant, even enjoyable, but if your body is ever discovered and traces found it would throw suspicion on me, being a dentist. The tiny amount I gave you will be undetectable after a few hours.”

I felt sweat break out on my forehead as I realized he really did intend to murder me ... and that’s when he went off to get more gaffer tape.

Grimshaw has just returned and is prattling incessantly as he’s taping a huge polythene bag around the range, carefully sealing all the gaps.

It’s obvious to me now that he’s going to seal me inside and then turn on the gas. Not quite as messy as I feared but just as terminal.

He tells me that he used the same *modus operandi* to dispatch his wife on September 4th and then buried her body that same evening in Brampton Woods. He can’t understand how I know about it. He thought he’d been exceptionally careful.

Not being the sharpest arrow in the quiver, it finally dawns on me that Grimshaw thinks that’s why I’m blackmailing him. It’s all a terrible misunderstanding.

“*Mmmrrrrphb ... whhaammph!*” I plead, meaning: ‘I only know about the dog ... I had no idea you’d murdered your wife!’

Grimshaw takes no notice whatsoever.

So that’s the reason he’s going to kill me and I have no way of putting his mind at rest. Even if I could, it wouldn’t make any difference because, of course, now I do know.

“We only bought the new mattresses last month,” Grimshaw says cheerily as he drapes the bag over me and begins to tape it down.

“Lucky I kept all the packaging, it’s come in really handy and is rather appropriate don’t you think?”

My eyes fill with tears when I notice the irony of the brand name ‘*Heavenly Sleep*’ emblazoned multiple times across the polythene.

He reaches in and twists the knobs for the gas rings before quickly sealing the last few inches. I hold my breath as long as I can and shake my head violently, feebly trying to overturn the heavy wooden chair.

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I'm forced to take a breath and the stench of rotten eggs fills my nose making me retch and I see Grimshaw through the hazy plastic, smugly watching me die. Then my consciousness ebbs away and I'm left with the bitter certainty that he'll go on hiding behind a mask of respectability long after I'm lying in an unmarked grave, somewhere in Brampton Woods