



## Junk Yard Jenny

Dry tongue. Fuzzy vision. Discretely thumping head. New Year's Day.

Jenny unfolded herself delicately from the futon in the middle of the lounge and she surveyed the chaos surrounding her. Congealed half eaten food lay sculpted on paper plates. Sticky empty glasses made her throat close over and her uneasy stomach flip. Never again.

Never, ever again.

All around her, stale bodies slept on. Some were tangled up in sleeping bags, some wrapped around each other. One tufty crown peeped out from beneath a large furry pink cushion. Pausing to check that the face beneath was still breathing, Jenny picked her way between the limbs. She made her way to the kitchen, knee length boots retrieved from beneath the coffee table in one clenched fist.

The kitchen was all chrome and stainless steel. Girding herself against the inevitable pain, Jenny opened the blinds so that she could see to fill the gleaming coffee machine.

'Hey, steady on, I'm not sure either one of us is ready for daylight yet.'

Hand to her heart, Jenny took in the stranger. Older than her by a year or two. Hair beginning to thin a little, but with a kink that implied curls. He smiled at her assessment and she looked away rapidly.

'Pete,' he said, leaning across to offer her his hand. 'There is coffee in the stove if you want some.'

His skin was cooler than he expected, but Jenny squeezed his palm enthusiastically. Coffee was already made. Her day had started well after all.

As they sat not making conversation, Jenny heard a whining scratch at the door. Pete raised a single brow.

'They've been doing that. Think they want to get out.'

Jenny smiled but regretted the movement of her facial muscles. 'They'll want a walk. You not a dog person?' She drained her coffee cup and bent to slide on her boots.

'Oh, I'm a dog person,' he said, watching her pull up the foot long zips. 'I'm just not a monster Alsations who wouldn't think twice about eating my Granny for supper person.'

Jenny laughed. 'Ow. They'll be sweethearts. Jan's dogs are always total loves. I didn't know she still had some. Come on, let's take them out. They'll adore you forever if you take them out.'

Pete stood and removed himself from the same side of the table as the utility room door. He inched back as Jenny let the two enthusiastic dogs out of their confined space and he uneasily reached for a jacket from the back of the chair.

'Not sure if I want them to love me forever. Maybe they could just admire me from a distance.'

Jenny pushed the two leather dog leads into Janice's deep pocket and then pulled the waterproof coat on over her party outfit. The heels were less than appropriate for dog walking, but she felt playful all of a sudden. She liked Pete's green eyes and couldn't work out why she hadn't noticed him the night before. He

had a nice voice, deep, intelligent sounding. She was sure she would have noticed him. Maybe he came late, after she was already wasted. She felt herself grow warm as she tried to remember what she might have said and done that she didn't want him to have seen.

'You were fine,' he said suddenly, his voice very close to the back of her head. 'Don't worry. The karaoke was a bit out of tune, but you looked good on the coffee table with that empty lager bottle as a mic.'

She closed her eyes and the sound of his laughter covered the sound of her groans.

'Come on, then. Where are we taking the granny killers?'

He hooked his arm through hers and before she knew it, they were walking down the track outside Janice's parent's house, heading for open fields and air that felt too sharp and fresh to swallow.

'Are you OK?' he asked her once, looked down on her with concern. Shaking her head, then nodding, Jenny laughed. She wished she'd brought her own jacket. There was always lips gloss in her pocket. And mints.

'Chewing gum?' he offered then and she felt herself laughing again, despite her head. She shook his head at her then and she felt like hugging herself. No-one ever thought she was cute and eccentric. No-one ever found her sweet. His eyes wrapped her up and made her feel safe and lovely and warm. She flicked a length of blonde hair over her shoulder and hoped her mascara didn't look too smudged.

'You're fine,' he reassured and he leaned in closer to her as they stepped into the first of the newly ploughed and planted stubble fields and began to follow the bouncing dogs across towards the river.

'I used to live here, years ago. In his part of the village, I mean. Not in Janice's house. Although I probably slept here more often than at home in my early teens.'

He watched her remembering, a smile lifting one side of his mouth. She liked that. And the single dimple that came just above it.

'I didn't think you looked like Jan's usual friends. Have you lived away for a long time?'

'Ten years. Got out as soon as I could. I come back every few months, but this Christmas is the first I've stayed in a while. I'd had a bit of a... disappointment, back in London.'

'So you came home to be looked after?'

She smiled. 'Not likely. I came home to get trashed with my oldest mate. Janice's Mum and Dad always used to go away for Christmas - as long as I've known her she's had a massive New Year's party. I knew I could drown myself in the crowd out here. She always comes to house sit while they're in Spain, living it up with their petty criminal mates.'

He watched her but didn't say anything. It wasn't like Jenny to rattle on like this, but something about his patient expression made her keep talking.

'The dogs are off down to the river's edge, look. They love it down there. Always have. They used to have eight dogs when we were kids, but two got swept away one year and we were banned from playing on the tip. These two must be from the same litter as the two we lost, I reckon. They look just like them. Same markings. Weird. They never got any more after that. Guess these two must be pretty old now. It's nearly all over. A whole era. Gone.'

'What tip?'

'Oh, haven't you been here before? It used to be a landfill site, over these fields. Right down to the estuary. There's a thirty foot drop, down to the shore, we used to sit on the edge, dangle our legs over. On windy days, it would push you back onto the grass, then nearly suck you right over the side and down into the mud. Guess that's what happened to the puppies. They were only six months old. Never came back one day. I always hoped they'd been stolen, but... the river mud's full of quicksand.'

She whistled to the dogs as she walked and they paused, waiting for her, their heads high in the air, scenting the salt on the breeze. They always used to get excited at this part, she remembered suddenly, her memory sharp with the smells, the dense layers of the past peeling away, strip by strip.

'They can still smell the rubbish,' she grinned, beginning to run after the dogs now. She dragged Pete alongside her, the fresh air waking up her mind and pushing energy into her sluggish limbs. 'They've made it a conservation site now. Cleared away the layers of rubbish, taken away the surface badness and laid a ton of turf on top of it all. I bet they didn't get the half of it, though. I bet they left the real heart of the mess down there, under the ground, festering.'

The dogs were nearly out of sight now, just the tips of their tails visible over the rise in the land. Jenny remembered the seagulls, the smell of warm rubbish at the height of summer. The farmer's gun casings they used to collect from the fields along the way, the strange brick chimney rising out of the ground which they used to say came out of a witch's cottage below the soil. They laid their ear to it one year, Jenny and Pete, and they listened closely to the sound of rumbling inside the belly of the ground.

'It's a monster,' Pete had whispered, his black curls tumbling over his eyes. The light flashed deep inside the green and Jenny had held her breath in fear. 'Don't , Pete,' she had said, but her had moved closer to her and his breath had been sweet on her cheek.

'It's uncurling, listen to it. It's swishing its tail against the rocks and roots underneath the ground, can you hear it? Can you hear it coming, Jenny?'

Stunned by the strength of the memories, Jenny felt her breath sob in her throat. Pete. How could she have forgotten so much about Pete? He had been two years older than her. Janice's older brother, but Jenny's special friend. They had used to ditch Janice whenever and wherever possible and run to the tip as fast as they could. They'd spend all day hiding amongst the rubbish, finding treasures, making dens. Rolling the grass and wrestling with the dogs. Pete's lips had been red and soft and warm with summer and lollies and full of sweetness and lies.

Peter had disappeared with the dogs over the edge of the cliff and into the water the year that he was fifteen. He had been full of secrets and darkness that summer. His eyes had sparked with contempt of everyone and everything. Jenny had been lying on the edge of the cliff when they found her, cold and wet and half mad with misery. I couldn't reach him, she had kept saying. They had asked her what she meant, but after three days, they had given up asking. The hospital said she might never remember fully. The fever she had gone in with had lasted almost a week. No-one spoke to her of it since. Not even Janice.

Especially not Janice.

She turned now to say something to the strangely familiar stranger called Pete and he was further away than she had been expecting. He was over the ridge and walking towards the dogs. Jenny could hear them barking on the other side of the

hill. She began to stumble after them in her silly too high heels and she could taste the salt of the river on her lips even before she heard its sluggish churning.

She lowered her head and began the long walk towards the edge of the drop. The dogs raised their wet muzzles to the sky on the horizon and she followed the sound of their playful growling yaps toward the skyline.