

Extract from Tales from the Coast

The Cat on the Stairs

When she had turned twenty-four in January Danielle had promised herself that this was going to be a good year. She planned to get her chaotic life sorted. It had started well. Her boyfriend, Brian, suggested that they get a flat together and they'd found a nice little place in Shoreham. Just the three of them; her, Brian and Lucia. Then she'd got a job temping at Rage Marketing which she loved. She'd been delighted when they offered her a permanent job as a marketing assistant shortly afterwards. And finally, to top it all, four months ago she'd discovered she was pregnant. Brian had been pleased, saying how much he wanted a family. And yet now, with a whole four months to go until her twenty-fifth birthday, it was all falling apart. She was scared, really scared.

Dani came home from work and called a greeting up the stairs. She heard a thud and a moment later Lucia's furry face appeared at the top. Dani smiled, shut the front door behind her and slowly lumbered up the stairs to their first floor flat. Lucia met her halfway, purring and rubbing around her swollen ankles.

"Hello Trip, how are you?" Dani asked her adored pet. "Have you had a busy afternoon napping?" and she stroked the velvety black head.

Dani's previous boyfriend and the purchaser of Lucia, had nicknamed the cat "Trip" because of her natural tendencies to dart in front of their feet. It was short for Trip Hazard. He'd briefly worked for the Health and Safety Executive. Dani thought fondly of him for a moment as she caught her breath at the top of the stairs. He'd

been a lot of fun and made her laugh, but basically he was scared of commitment. Or perhaps it had just been commitment to her he was scared of. Still, he'd brought home a little black kitten two Christmases ago and Dani had been smitten. The man may have left but the cat had stayed, and in hindsight that was the better bargain.

She walked past the bedroom door and noticed that it was ajar. Brian always shut it to keep the cat out.

"Oh you bad girl," she muttered under her breath and went in. Sure enough there was a cat shaped indent in the middle of the duvet. Dani glanced at her watch. She still had twenty minutes before Brian got home. Enough time to disguise the evidence. Muttering under her breath about how she was going to have Lucia made into a hat, she got the Sellotape and started to meticulously un-stick all the fur off the duvet cover.

Two hours later she was worried. She had tidied the flat, fed the cat and put a pizza in the oven for their dinner but Brian still wasn't home. The pizza had been rather crisp by the time she'd given up waiting. He hadn't phoned and she was anxious. She tried ringing his mobile phone but it just went through to his uncharacteristically cheerful recorded message. She knew that he might have had to work a bit late, or more likely he'd gone for a quick drink after work, but she couldn't help imagining car accidents and other catastrophes. She began to dread hearing a knock at the front door. Perhaps it was the pregnancy hormones making her paranoid.

The phone rang and it made her jump. Lucia was also startled and she dug her claws into Dani's lap, causing her to yelp. Luckily it wasn't the police, it was only Daisy and Dani was glad of someone to talk to.

Daisy and Dani had met each other while temping for a big utility company three years earlier. In the canteen on their precious lunch break they'd immediately hit it off and discovered that they had grown up living within ten minutes of each other. Daisy was small, wiry and brash. She would dare you to do anything and was always up for a laugh. Dani was tall and curvy. Some would say plumper, including Dani herself. She loved going out and her passion was clubbing. The two of them had painted the south coast red.

Walking along Brighton beach one morning after a particularly good night, they had pledged to be best friends forever. The only thing they ever seriously disagreed about was men. Daisy could never stand Dani's boyfriends, saying that they weren't good enough for her. Dani couldn't even retaliate by criticising Daisy's boyfriends, because she changed them so frequently.

It was Daisy who'd recommended working at Rage Marketing after she'd started a three-month contract there. Daisy herself had decided to move on after having a fling with the senior partner which made it awkward for her to stay. But she bore no grudge to the company, and she thought that Dani might enjoy it there. So Dani took over from Daisy, miraculously surviving an interview with a bitch called Laurie, thanks only to the briefing that Daisy had given her. Dani had never worked for a marketing company before, tending to do clerical administration for big institutions like the council. There was an awful lot for her to learn. And because it was a small company she was expected to do more than just the usual filing and typing. After a few months she was assigned to a new boss who had just joined. She loved the job and Dave, her manager, was really nice. He had got to know her, and what she was capable of, and he quickly gave her proper marketing jobs, like checking copy and placing adverts. For the first time in her life she felt she might

actually have a career rather than just temp forever. She knew that she was fairly plain and not very clever but she had started to feel that maybe she could be good at this.

Dani let Daisy chat on for ten minutes but her anxiety was growing and eventually she blurted out,

"Look Daisy, can I ring you back? It's just that Brian should be home by now and he might be trying to call."

"Oh, I see." Daisy sounded put out. "You'd rather be waiting by the phone in case Brian bothers to ring you than talk to your best friend. He'll just be at the pub you know. Like he always is. I doubt he's given you a second thought." Daisy knew that she was being a bit harsh but it made her mad how Dani always looked up to these undeserving jerks. Brian particularly made her uneasy. He came across as genuine and caring but Dani had slowly become less self-confident and almost downtrodden since they'd been together. Daisy suspected that he was controlling. And he had a nasty temper when drunk.

After a fairly pointless exchange where Daisy made hurtful comments about Dani's boyfriend and Dani defended him and started to get upset, they agreed that they would talk again the next day. Once the telephone call had finished the flat was eerily quiet. It was now late and there had been no word from Brian. Dani was tired. The pregnancy was wonderful but the extra weight made her breathless and she needed her sleep. Should she wait up? What if he came home drunk like he had two weeks ago? That had really shocked her.

She knew she was lucky to have him. He could probably do a lot better for himself than her. He hinted at it frequently enough. But he stuck with her. Now they

were going to have a baby and she wanted them to be a proper family. But deep down she was having second thoughts. What kind of a father would he be? Was their relationship strong enough to bear the stresses of having a new baby in their home? Before the incident two weeks ago she would have said yes, they would be okay, but now she wasn't so sure.

Trip seemed to pick up on her worries and came purring around her ankles when she went into the kitchen to get some juice. Standing in the stark brightness under the fluorescent tube Dani had a blinding realisation that she should just leave the flat. That instant. Take an overnight bag and the cat, and go to her aunt's. But then the fear settled in again as his words re-ran in her head.

He had been tender at first.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to. It'll never happen again. I love you."

Then more menacing.

"It's your fault. You drove me to it. Why would any man want to come home to you? You've let yourself go, you fat cow."

Finally he'd said.

"If you ever tell anyone about this I'll make you regret it. And don't think you can leave me. I'll kill you and that baby first."

Standing weeping into the kitchen sink, Dani was utterly miserable. If it wasn't for the baby growing inside her she would have been tempted to end her pathetic life. He was right. She was useless. But she so desperately wanted this child. A child to love and protect. She wanted the chance to be a good mum like her mother had been.

No one knew that Brian had hit her. For an unplanned attack he had been very good at only hitting her where it didn't show. Dani glanced furtively around, despite knowing that she was alone, and then took a leaflet out of her handbag.

"Victims of abuse" it said. "Talk to us for confidential support" and it gave a phone number. Dani had rung it twice already but she'd put the phone down when a friendly female voice had answered it.

The cat continued to offer her warm, soft and purring support as Dani wept afresh. Then they both tensed. From outside came a heavy noise, followed by a muffled curse and the jangling of keys. Dani quickly wiped her face on a tea towel and hid the leaflet back in her bag. Trip sensibly made herself scarce, darting into the sitting room and hiding behind the sofa.

A stream of expletives in an angry voice floated up the stairs. Brian had dropped his keys.

"Oy," he shouted through the door, loud enough for the neighbours to hear. "Let me in."

Dani was scared rigid. If she went down the stairs to let him in she'd have to face him and he sounded very angry. But if she didn't he'd eventually manage to get his key into the door and then he'd be furious. Panic and indecision froze her.

"Oy, you stupid cow. Can you hear me? Get your fat arse down here and let me in."

Shaking and fighting the urge to cry, Dani started slowly down the stairs. He was banging on the door by now and Dani was embarrassed by what the neighbours would think.

"I'm coming," she croaked, but when she got to the bottom of the stairs she stood still for a moment. She could see his bulky outline through the opaque glass

panels in the door. She found it amazing that she used to find his stocky build attractive. Then, surprisingly quickly for a woman five months pregnant, she stepped forward, turned the latch and darted back onto the second stair. Brian stumbled in cursing her, but she was out of his reach.

"Where the hell have you been?" he asked. "I've been standing waiting for you for ages."

"I thought you had your keys with you," she said lamely, taking another couple of steps backwards up the stairs. He looked at her, perhaps realising the gap that had opened up between them.

"Come here," he said. His voice was hard and controlling, that of a stranger. She sensed danger but tried to stay calm.

"It's late," she murmured as she took another step backwards up the stairs. "I'm going to bed." Then she turned and took another two steps as he lurched forward. He just missed catching hold of her ankle and stumbled forward at the bottom of the stairs, cursing her again.

She was nearly at the top of the stairs now, trying to stop herself from bolting in panic. If she could just get to the bathroom she could lock herself in. Hopefully he would get tired of banging on the door and go to sleep. She heard him hurl himself up the stairs after her. She glanced back to see the rage in his face, only five or six steps away. As she hauled herself on to the landing and lurched towards the bathroom she saw a black shadow dart past her feet and scamper down the stairs. Later on, when she thought back to this moment she recalled three distinct sounds: a dull thud, a sharp meow and a man's curse.

Dani turned again, now frightened for her cat. As she turned she saw a scene that was to repeat itself in slow motion in her mind for the rest of her life. Brian's face

had an expression of drunken fury mixed with surprise and then panic as, stepping back, his foot missed the stair and he lost his balance. Trip darted back up the stairs, startled and fur standing on end, having been kicked by a heavy boot. Brian clutched wildly at air instead of the handrail and slowly toppled backwards. Then time speeded up again and he was lying in a crumpled heap at the bottom of the stairs.

Dani stood wide-eyed and shocked on the landing looking down. Trip mewed pathetically and slunk up to Dani to rub herself sorely against Dani's ankle.

"Brian?" she called anxiously, and then more urgently "Brian!"

There was no reply from the prone figure. A myriad of conflicting feelings raced through her but they finally settled on relief. Trip looked up at her beloved mistress, seeming to have recovered from her booting, and started to purr.