

Maxwell's Daughter

Part Six

Four Years later...

Stephen rose and wandered into the kitchen, rubbing his eyes from sleep. The smell of bacon and eggs had pulled him from sleep and into the kitchen like a zombie. He came up behind Andrea who was stood in front of the stove and kissed her on the cheek.

'Morning Dear,' Said Andrea a little taken aback, not at her husband's sudden presence but rather at his demeanor. 'Sleep well? You were up rather late again.'

'Yeah, not bad. Had to fix the bugs and finish up the report to send off on Friday. I'll work on it some more tonight.'

'Hmmm,' Andrea frowned a little but Stephen had already sat down at the table and poured himself some steaming coffee. She wondered why he didn't just work during the daytime. She was out from ten till four thereabouts Monday to Friday yet Stephen insisted that he worked in the evenings when she would have liked to spend some time with him. Still, she thought, it gave her an opportunity to relax and she had really been getting into a book recently that she had picked up from the small village library opposite the bank where she worked during her lunch break. She made a personal note to resume that later this evening, maybe in front of the fire with a box of chocolates and one of the soppy romances that she liked to watch when Stephen wasn't in control of the Television.

She had grown accustomed to their new life, it wasn't the same and she still didn't quite understand Stephen's impulse to move away but she was surprised at how comforting it was to be alone in a warm cottage with no one around. She thought to herself that Stephen perhaps did not quite grasp his own desires, perhaps it was a psychological thing; he had begun to feel suffocated and claustrophobic in the city. His job also allowed them to move, once a week, sometimes a fortnight, he had to travel to the nearest big town but he didn't mind that too much. During the week though, he sat

in his office at the back of the house and worked at numerous software packages, which Andrea's mind could not even begin to understand. He also liked to go out a lot she noted, she didn't mind though. If the fresh air made him feel good, she was more than happy for him.

Robbie had done some growing up and although they lived in such seclusion, the village school was only twenty minutes drive and the roads were reasonably good. A generic morning consisted of raising Robbie, making breakfast for both boys and then dropping Robbie off at school before heading further into town where she worked as an accountant at the only big branch bank the village had to offer.

And now there was another big part of her life; she was three months pregnant. For the most part, she had been well, only the occasional morning sickness and she saw a mid-wife every few weeks but she could not help thinking about when she needed time off, would Stephen step up and look after her as he had with Robbie, and even when it was born would he be the same Dad? He wasn't quite the same anymore, and to say it scared her would be a tragic understatement. Still, she was happy in life and loved her family. She would be strong for them and for herself.

'Right come on Robbie. Coat on. No, don't forget your bag. Come on quickly into the car. Good boy.' She looked over at Stephen.

'See you tonight babe.' She said letting a smile draw her lips apart at the edges.

'See ya hun.' He said, not taking his eyes from the television, on which the national news was playing as usual.

She felt her heart drop a little and her throat dry, she couldn't help feel a little disappointment.

Stephen listened to the sounds of the car engine fade from earshot then got to his feet and took his black trench coat from the hook on the inside of the door. He left the house and followed the garden to a small shed on the outskirts where he took his rifle and then left the garden via a small green wooden gate and crossed the field to the large wood. And hence played out the rest of his usual routine, he would walk for maybe fifteen minutes, ten on a good day until he reached a small clearing in the forest where, only he knew, but if one cleared the leaves and dirt from a specific point with a

heavy boot, one would find a large wooden trapdoor that leads to a hidden underground room, the likes of which were used back in the war time, similar to bomb shelters but for those that couldn't afford to have commercial ones. There was an old man whose Dad used to make them for people back in the day who told Stephen how one might install such a shelter. He checked the animal traps in the close proximity of the shelter to find only one rabbit, mangled in a bear trap in the shadow of a large oak.

Maxwell descended the steps to the underground room and flicked on the lights. On a squat bed, slowly roused the girl, whose body had grown subsequently but whose general disgust was as prominent as ever. Her right ankle was chained to a large metal weight on the side of the room. She could move around fairly freely but never too far. The chain wasn't long enough for instance to allow her to reach the large supply of fresh and frozen meat at the end of the room. From experience Stephen knew she would just devour it all but still need feeding shortly after. Therefore he had to give her regular portions of flesh in order to keep her satisfied. Stephen had even given the girl some forms of entertainment. The girl liked to touch rough things, she ran them across her face and body and in a strange way, Stephen beamed looking at the child's happiness. She could not speak, a throat mutilation from birth and even if it had not been, Stephen doubted she would have much connection to her surroundings. It was as if her mind was somewhere else, somewhere that often made her extremely angry. But sometimes her mind went completely blank; she just stared into nothingness as if her mind was asleep but her body in wake.

Stephen slung the rifle off his shoulder and propped it up against the wall of earth. He tossed the rabbit towards the bed and she reached out her long clawed fingers and snatched it from the air in a flash. She snapped the rabbits back with a crunch and sunk her teeth into the dead flesh. Stephen took some more meat from hanging hooks and tossed it to the girl's mercy. She tore the flesh apart until blood dripped down her chin and onto the already stained bed. Stephen Maxwell felt a mixture of pity and disgust looking at his daughter and without consciously realizing, Stephen had stepped backward and taken the rifle from behind him, raising it at the girl. She continued feasting on the meat indifferently. He aimed up the shot, if his finger had squeezed just a fraction, less than a second later, her brains

would be dripping down the wall behind her. His finger tightened on the metal trigger, he felt the power at his fingertips but his soul was too full of the milk of human kindness. He alternatively turned the barrel and rested it just under his chin. His finger now resting over the trigger, a small push away from him and... Maxwell blinked, the girl had stopped devouring the meat, in fact it hung limply in her grasp but her eyes were wide and fixed on him. There was what Stephen could only imagine to be pity in her eyes. Stephen closed his eyes to block out the image of her own and began to close his finger on the trigger. He felt it push back against the spring.

There was a frantic flapping sound and Stephen's eyes snapped open, his finger falling off the trigger. A pigeon, from where Stephen did not know, had made a dash for the light streaming through the ceiling doorway but instead turned and flapped in mid-air with nowhere to go. Stephen slung the rifle over his shoulder and stepped up to the door to push it open. The pigeon let out a noise as the girl jumped for the bird and snatched it before it could escape. More cracking and more dripping blood. Stephen hurried from sight.

'Stephen?' Andrea's face positively lit up. She quickly closed the distance between Stephen and the entrance to the bank, from which she had just left.

'So I thought we could go to that nice restaurant in town, the one we went to for our anniversary?' Stephen asked as he led Andrea up the road to where he had parked.

'Can we afford it?' She asked nervously.

'Of course we can.' Then after a little hesitation; 'I'm sending the new package off tomorrow, we'll have money coming in for that very soon.'

Andrea nodded in only half-reassurance but smiled and climbed into the car.

'Work good?' Stephen asked getting in beside her.

What the hell was up with him? Andrea thought. Meeting her for lunch? Asking how her day was?

'What have you done?' She laughed. Stephen turned, a concerned, one might even add guilty, look about his face before Andrea laughed and pecked him on the cheek.

‘It’s getting much colder and there’s a bad wind coming in. I think we should get the oil re-filled in the next few days. It seems people in the village are worried about a heavy snowfall. Worst Winter ever last, apparently everything just ground to a halt.’

Stephen nodded, although a different concern had begun to nibble away at him.

With the winter came snow and with the snow came standstill. The animals went into hibernation and major transport routes were cut off. After a week, Stephen stood before his daughter and reluctantly threw her the last steaks. He had to drive to the village to see if the supply had arrived but he was doubtful. He has been feeding her little recently and his health had really begun to suffer. He didn’t know for how long he could hold out.