

## Bags and Gloves

Jenny took the shortcut via accessories to the food corner in Marks & Spencer. Hey, isn't that Dawn? She thought. The slender figure with a tussle of blonde hair stood in the middle of the bags, gloves and hats. Even from a distance, it was unmistakably Dawn. Jenny wavered a moment, did she feel like talking to her old school friend? When Dawn turned round, an expensive leather bag in her hands, Jenny had to say, 'Hi Dawn, I thought I recognized you, it's been a long time.' She had the impression, that it took a while before Dawn remembered her name. Then a smile appeared around her pretty lips. 'Jenny, what a surprise to meet you here. How are you.' Like so many times before, she was swept along by Dawn's beauty and couldn't think of anything more profound to reply than, 'Fine, and you.'

'Must be six years ago since we last saw each other.' Dawn shook the golden curls around her head. Jenny nodded awkwardly, remembering how she used to shrink next to lissome, long-legged Dawn when they were teenagers. After all these years, she still felt the same.

'Dawn, how can you afford a bag like that?' Jenny tried to joke to hide her discomfort.

'I can't, but you know I became a fashion designer. I'm checking out the latest models of accessories, I just entered a fashion contest on hats, bags and gloves, that sort of thing and need some inspiration.' Dawn laughed. 'And you? Became a nurse as you wanted?'

'Yes, I work in the plastic surgery division of the Northbay hospital.'

'You like that, what does it involve?' Dawn asked.

'We mainly do cosmetic operations. Breast enlargements and reductions, facelifts and skin replacements after burns. You have no idea how many people are unhappy with their bodies, women as well as men pay a fortune for a smooth skin.' Jenny saw that Dawn listened attentively, so she went on. 'Or, after they lost weight they want to get rid of their surplus skin, you wouldn't believe it.' Jenny was amazed that she was being so open with Dawn, who then said eagerly, 'Cool, sounds a fantastic job to me. I want to hear more, why don't we have a coffee and catch up.'

'Uh, I would love to, but not now, it's my birthday today and I've invited a few friends tonight. I'm a bit of a rush to get my shopping done,' Jenny said, wondering if she would like to have a coffee with Dawn.

'Yeah, I remember, 15th of March, well I have nothing on tonight, what if I come too?'

Of course, Jenny couldn't resist Dawn's blue eyes, laughing mouth and dominating attitude.

'Sure, sounds fun, come too,' she said. Dawn produced a tatty till receipt and a pen and held it under Jenny's nose. Reluctantly, Jenny scribbled her address down, gave the piece of paper back to Dawn, waved goodbye and hurried to the wine and food division.

While choosing wine, French cheeses, crackers and pâtés, Jenny was not so pleased with herself. The appearance of Dawn at her party could spoil her plans. She never usually celebrated her birthday but today she would. To her friends she had said that turning 30 was something to celebrate. However, her main reason was that she could invite Doctor Hennessy. Last week over an operation, he had said, 'Jenny, call me Hank.' She had seen a special light in his velvet eyes. He was so handsome and of course, the subject of her dreams; but he was married. The photo on his desk of a happy woman with two little girls playing on the beach was clear enough. Hank was nice to her, he regularly touched her arm or her cheek and she hoped, silently, that it was more than the usual attention a doctor paid to his nurse.

That evening Jenny ran nervously around, re-filling glasses and offering her guests the tasty morsels she'd made. Her small apartment was packed with people: friends, colleagues, her brother and his wife, even her parents were there. It was almost eleven but still, neither Hank, nor Dawn had showed up. Jenny didn't mind Dawn staying away, but she felt awkward about Hank. When the piercing tone of the doorbell cut through the party buzz, Jenny almost shrieked. Who would it be? Hank or Dawn.

As she waited in the open door, she heard two people coming up the narrow stairs. Dawn's gurgling laugh was followed by Hank's deep warm voice behind her. Dawn offered Jenny a bunch of daffodils. Hank came with empty hands.

'Hi Dawn, you haven't changed one bit,' said Ron, Jenny's brother.

'Well, you have,' said Dawn rather ruthlessly. 'You became a fatty, man.'

'That's what I say all the time, but he says he's not.' said his wife. Ron gave her a withering look and turned to his father with whom he went on discussing business. Jenny handed Hank a glass of wine and asked, 'So nice you could come, was it okay with your wife?'

'My wife? No problem, she thinks I'm in the hospital.' Jenny saw his eyes wandering in Dawn's direction. Not knowing what else to say, she moved into the corner where her kitchen was placed. Dawn did look beautiful, in a leather dress of her own design. The neckline was cut very low and closed with a shoelace. She had fluffed her hair, her lips were painted dark red and her blue eyes were surrounded by black kohl. Jenny watched the scene in the sitting room from behind the safety of her kitchen cupboard.

'Jenny was my best friend at school, she did my homework; she taught me to climb up and down drainpipes and she took over my boyfriends when I was tired of them.' Dawn was saying to her friends and colleagues. Everybody laughed, particularly Hank. Jenny bit her lip, she did do Dawn's homework, though her own marks were always lower, and she did help Dawn climb drainpipes to the bedrooms of the boys in their class, but she never took them over. The only boyfriend Jenny ever had was taken over by Dawn.

Soon Hank was absorbed in Dawn. 'How interesting, Hank' Jenny heard her say. 'Tell me all about it, how do you know transplanted skin won't be rejected?'

"You don't, you just have to try,' he said. Jenny came along, offered them her salmon sushis, but they hardly noticed her. Their simultaneous arrival may have been a coincidence but their departure; half an hour later was certainly not. Jenny saw them go with jealous eyes.

The next morning, Hank was far too late for surgery, supposed to start at nine thirty. With red-rimmed eyes and unshaven, he looked as if he had not slept.

'Was my wine so bad that you couldn't sleep?' Jenny asked. Hank lifted his eyes for a fraction of a second, than looked down again, his hands carefully stripping the skin of a young woman's belly.

The moment Hank had mounted the stairs behind that beautiful woman the other night he was hooked. Of course, he loved his wife and his daughters, but that was home. In the hospital, in bars, at parties he flirted. It was his secret target to sleep with as many women as he could. One a week was the average, but sometimes he scored six or seven different girls a month. That he was unfaithful to his wife meant nothing to him. After meeting Dawn, however, he felt different. The blood in his veins was boiling and he felt he would do anything for this woman. Her smell of cloves

and cinnamon was still tickling his nose, her whispering smiles caressing his ears and her perfect breasts blurring his eyes. After they left that party of silly, plain Jenny he drove behind Dawn to her house. He stepped into the elevator next to her, before the doors had closed they were embracing. Before they reached the seventh floor, he had removed her tiny underpants. In Dawn's hallway, he loosened the shoelace holding her breasts together. In her sitting room, she'd ripped off his shirt. They'd fallen into the soft cushions on her couch, kissing hungrily; hands everywhere. They never made it to her bedroom but rolled from couch to floor and vice versa all night.

When Dawn met Jenny in Marks & Spencer and heard about her work she got the idea instantly. For days she had been wandering about, feeling creatively frustrated. Now Jenny provided her with the perfect idea, but how would she obtain a patch of human skin? Jenny was too straight and too honest to be of any use. When she met Hank that night at Jenny's party, her problem was solved. He would be very valuable to her. It was dead simple to wind him around her little finger. He sure was good-looking which made it easier for her, but at the end of the day he was not her type at all. After that first night on her couch, they'd met daily, they often lunched together while Dawn interrogated him about his work.

'How big are these patches of skin people have taken away?' she asked.

'A few inches,' he illustrated the size with his hands.

'What do you do with them, with the rejected skins, I mean. Are they used again?

'Sometimes, they go back into the fridge in a special solution. Jenny keeps meticulous files. There are many different skins to be catalogued,' he said, yawning behind his hand. Then, 'Oh come on Dawn, let's talk about you, this is so boring.'

'No, no, Hankie, tell me everything first and you'll be rewarded, you know that,' she caressed his hand briefly and went on, 'So, nothing is thrown away.'

'No. Well yes, the damaged parts, very burned or heavily scarred skin, of course, is thrown away.'

'Where?' She asked, as casually as she could, her excitement mounting.

'In the dustbin, I guess,' he answered with growing surprise at her interest.

'Oh, that simple,' she said and then changed the subject.

'Hank, do you have a clue how skin is tanned?'

'Of course, but I have no tools or preparation liquids,' he said.

Dawn saw herself as a girl again, staying with her grandparents during long, lonesome summer holidays. Granpa was a tanner and she endlessly watched him, in his big leather apron, in his workshop, an old wooden shed in the back garden. Along the there were stuffed owls, foxes, and rabbits, even dogs and cats covered with cobwebs. The cleaned skins hung tightly together on huge racks, the dusky light in the stable giving the flattened forms of cow or pig something macabre. She looked in Hank's eyes, the sweetest smile on her lips, saliva glistening on her teeth, 'If it was only possible to have a piece of such skin,' she said dreamily.

'What skin, what for?' Hank asked alarmed.

'To touch, or to look at,' she said.

'Ha, I have something much better for you to touch and look at,' he said. He found her leg, his toe crept up under her skirt, he choked. 'Let's go, Dawn I need you, now.'

'Oh darling, if I only could have a piece of human skin,' she murmured.

'Dawn, let's go, let's have a quickie here and now,' he urged.

'No,' she said suddenly brisk, 'tonight ok, but only when you bring me a piece of skin.'

'Dawn, how can you be so perverse, I simply can't bring you a patch of human skin?'

'Fine, than there is no tonight, Hank.' she said, standing up, leaving the restaurant. He followed her, but was held back by the waiter to pay the bill. When he came outside he saw Dawn disappear around the corner.

Around eleven, after Hank had fulfilled his paternal duties, he stood in front of Dawn's porch, without the skin, of course. She opened the door, but closed it quickly again when she saw him empty handed.

'The skin, Hank, any skin, just give me the contents from the dustbin,' she said through the closed door. Hank waited, knocked again, but she didn't reply. He left with his head drooping between his shoulders. In the elevator, he felt how much his body yearned for her. He'd never felt something so strong, so profound for a woman. The only thing he could do was to try get her a patch of skin. He went to the hospital, got past the sleeping doorman and went up to his surgery unit. There was no nurse in sight. He looked in the fridge, but everything was coded and locked. Than he looked in the dustbin, which was not emptied. Was Jenny slacking? A few patches of severely damaged skin of

a black boy that he'd operated on that afternoon were still in it. The smell of decaying flesh and stained blood filled his nose. Around twelve, he was back at Dawn's door. She opened it somewhat sleepily but once she saw the plastic bag in his hand, she was fully awake again. He had made a big sacrifice, he thought, but it was worth it. She was delighted. She spread the scarred pieces on her kitchen table, not at all bothered by the smell. Hank was not interested in the skin, he wanted her totally and started to penetrate her from behind. Dawn remembered her promise and offered her body, opening herself as wide as a ripe fruit. He sucked on it endlessly, unaware that it was only the beginning of many such errands.

In bed, Jenny remembered that she hadn't emptied the dustbin the night before. First thing in the morning, she thought, before falling asleep. When she entered the operating theatre the following day, she saw the dustbin emptied and lined with a fresh plastic bag. Strange, Hank would never have done that, besides, he left before me, she thought. But she soon forgot about it and started work. It was a busy morning with many smaller transplantations. Hank looked haggard and somewhat chastened. Jenny wondered if he still saw Dawn. Of their former intimacy was nothing left, she thought sadly.

That evening Hank found the door barred to him again. Dawn wouldn't let him in. "I want a bigger patch, smooth and soft, preferably a female's breast or buttock." she whined. 'But Dawn, please, I can't,' He sounded desperate. She opened the door, and said with a sudden metal look in her eyes, 'get me a bigger patch'. Hank slinked off. He again drove to the hospital. Once in, he went directly to the computer to find the codes Jenny used for the skin stock. He had to delete the relevant entry for the piece he took. He couldn't open the file, of course, she'd used a password. He just tried typing in: 'Jenny', nothing. Then, 'Hank', and the file opened. Flabbergasted he realised the girl used his name as a password, what for? He scrolled through the list, now he could delete any patch he wanted. He scribbled the code of a patch on a piece of paper and shut down the computer. In the fridge he found the coded skin in the solution. He dried it and wrapped it in plastic foil. Hank remembered the woman with her massive tits he'd operated on a few days before. She came in the surgery room with a size double E and left with size B. 'Well, that was damn easy, Dawn, here I come,' he said aloud.

This went on for a few weeks. Hank paid Dawn for the most satisfying, addictive sex with patches of skin, until Jenny began to suspect something. Things had been altered at her list. Beautiful, donated skin for cosmetic purposes was missing. Jenny changed the password, locked the fridges and after each surgery made sure she emptied the bin.

One morning, Jenny saw, just before Hank slipped his hand in the gummy glove, that his middlefinger was missing.

Meanwhile Dawn worked like crazy. As Hank was providing her with so much skin, she had now made several bags, pairs of gloves and a few large hats. She first cleaned and dried the skin, then tanned it. Sometimes she dyed it with elder juice or onion peel, sometimes even with blood. She cut the skin in stars, moons and other bizarre forms and stitched them together with brightly coloured silk threads. Little pearls and teeth of animals were used as shiny dots. Although heavily embroidered, she kept the strange texture of the material visible. She used every piece Hank brought her, until that day when the source dried up. He couldn't produce the material she needed for the finishing touches. She was angry at first, she screamed and shouted at him, 'get me more, now, or you will never see me again.' Hank sat desperately on the couch, his head in his hands. He still wanted her, but this whole thing went way past his idea of having an affair. His wife had started to suspect things, Jenny had her suspicions and besides he felt so damn tired of it all. Without thinking he said, 'Dawn, you know I would do anything to help you,'

'Okay what will it be?'

Anything, I even give my finger if it would help you to finish the job.'

And there she stood right in front of him, with bright shiny eyes, her pupils wide over the irises, with a huge kitchen knife brandished before his face. 'What a good idea, Hank, such a good idea, that's just what I need. Give me your hand.'

The exhibition on fashionable accessories was open to the public, Jenny had seen in the paper. She went to have a look. When she read the judges verdict report she was horrified.

*'The first prize caught our attention because the seemingly familiar material is manipulated so cleverly. Every inch has a slightly different texture it is beautifully embroidered and dyed and it reminds us at times of velvet, suede or even tattooed skin.'*

Two elderly ladies next to Jenny exclaimed their admiration for the first prize.

'What a beautiful bag, don't you think, Grace?'

'I wonder what material is used, it isn't leather, is it, Bea?'

'No, I don't really know, but look at that fastening clip, it looks a bit like a finger tip. How clever!'

August 2005 © Maryet Maks