

Michael, 38

FAYE CHAMBERS

HE KICKED HIM in the face, then placed a handkerchief over his mouth, making the captive pass out long enough to get him ready. Michael did the nails first, clipping the edges and filing the centre into sharp points. His clothes were removed next. There were patches where Michael had to tease the material away from where it had stuck to the flesh, still bleeding from the struggle. Finally he placed the black collar around the neck, neatly fastening the buckle and unfurling the leash. Michael stood back and looked on, satisfied.

He secured the leash to the hook on the wall and bound the wrists and ankles. After all, he didn't want his pet to run away.

"Are you gay or summat?" the cretin said, groggily, as he awoke.

His collar was tightened for that. Never in his life had Michael been so insulted. He kicked the beast once again, and spat into his bloody face. He left, locking the manbeast in the loft.

No. He was not gay. He went to the music room and burned all of his Elton John records, just in case.

Alice, 37, never expected anyone to respond to her ad. In fact part of her had hoped they wouldn't. But when Michael, 38, wrote to say how amazing it was to find a partner who shared his passion for photography, animals and crocheting, she couldn't believe her luck.

She finished plaiting her hair and tied it with a baby blue

ribbon to match her cardigan. She remembered how Michael had said he liked her blue cardigan on their first date. That was almost three months ago now.

“This could really be it,” she said to her cat, nuzzling its ears with her delicate ivory hands. “Goodbye Mr Snufflekens,” she called, and left, locking the door behind her.

As she approached she felt nervous – she had never been to Michael’s house before. But he welcomed her with his winning smile and she felt at once like she was home. They sat and talked, fondly, as they always did. On Alice’s request they had been taking the relationship slowly. She grew embarrassed as Michael edged closer to her, and in a panic, excused herself to the bathroom.

She took some time to calm herself down. Finally, she plucked up the courage to go back downstairs and join Michael. She was ready to take the next step. She dragged her timid feet out from the shelter of the bathroom and headed for the stairs.

But she stopped.

Alice stood, frozen. She could hear words creeping their way down from the loft above and into her ears, her mind.

“Help me,” they said.

“Run,” she thought, but her legs didn’t listen.

There was a thud, and the voice slithered closer, a snake in the grass. Then silence.

It appeared suddenly, startling Alice. It was a face which resembled the face of a man, but could not have been. The thinning dark hair was matted and falling out in patches, the way it does on a stray cat. All light had been extinguished from its manic, grey eyes. Snarling jaws revealed the owner of the voice. A voice that wasn’t really a voice at all, just ragged air rattling through the hollow shell of where a man’s face should have been.

Alice felt hot and cold all at once. She looked upon the creature, fearing, pitying, and she thought the sight of it may drive her mad. The ringing of the voice inside her head deafened her to the footsteps coming from below. Shiny black shoes announcing their fanfare on a polished oak floor. Ascending

the stairs to Alice purposefully, each 'clip clop' kept the tempo with clinical precision.

Michael felt a little dejected. He had liked Alice; she had nice feet. He had much grander plans for her than this. But it did not matter. The man beast had been seen. It must be dealt with.

The creature began wailing, putrid, animal sounds unlike anything she had ever heard before. It cowered against the magnolia wall, staining it with sweat, and cradled skeletal arms around its wilting body. The fear and hatred emanating from its gaze was directed somewhere over Alice's right shoulder. She felt a cold hand upon her back. Michael's hand. Spit started pooling in her mouth, and she barely resisted the urge to vomit.

"Ah, Alice..." he said, playfully. Sickeningly. "I see you've met my pet."

Michael reached between the sheltering arms of the creature and pulled on a black leather cord, which curved its way across the torso and up around its neck. Alice looked upon the collar and understood.

For three days, Alice had been trussed up like a turkey on Michael's bed. He had taken away her clothes, and bound her with thick red ropes that ate into her soft pale skin. Four times a day he came to photograph Alice, experimenting with different lighting. He decided dawn was his favourite. He liked to watch the shadows dancing on the wall as her body squirmed in the half light. On the dawn of the third day, he had knelt at the foot of the bed and began to lick Alice's feet, exploring the gaps between her toes with his tongue. But he did not touch her anywhere else. After all, he was not a monster.

The fourth day was a Tuesday. Alice's screams had torn up her throat like an old newspaper, and were now only occasional whimpers. The manbeast had not been fed for six days. It was time.

When he cut the ropes from around her limbs, Alice dared to hope that she would be freed, but that hope was misplaced. She felt the familiar tang of bile rising in her throat as Michael led her to the foot of the loft stairs where the manbeast dwelled.

As they approached the door she could hear him scratching, clawing at the wood between them. Michael opened the padlock and pushed a reluctant, shivering Alice inside.

She locked eyes with the manbeast, his grey stare more disturbing than the last time their gaze had met. The creature still seemed hollow, devoid of humanity, but starvation and madness had taken hold. Eyes that were once vulnerable now peered at her with unmistakable bloodlust. The beast was hungry.

“Hush now my precious one,” he cooed. So calmly. “Dinner time.”

And then it began.

Michael made a circular incision around her left breast, and peeled the skin back from the flesh as though it were an orange. He put it to his lips and toyed with it, as though it were the breast of a lover. Or at the very least, still attached to a human. The manbeast tried to break free from his chains and claim his meal, panting with anticipation.

“Beg,” Michael demanded of the snarling beast at his heel. It obliged.

He inhaled deeply, then tossed it to the beast, who tore at it wildly with his jaws, howling like a jackal. As Michael put the knife to the right breast, Alice’s body was overwhelmed by convulsions of pain and terror. She kicked out, at nothing in particular, and Michael slammed his body into her fragile leg, shattering the bone.

As the snarls grew louder, she heard a loosening of chains, the panic rising in her like the heat of an Indian summer. All at once the claws and limbs and teeth and sweat of the beast were upon her. Their eyes met one final time as the creature lunged for Alice’s jugular in a frenzy, and she passed out.

Four months later, Michael was sat in his squashy armchair enjoying a nice cup of tea. He glanced at the framed picture of Alice on the mantelpiece – day two, twilight – sighed contentedly, and took a bite of his toast.

There was a flapping in the letter box, followed by some

grunting, and moments later the manbeast appeared with the morning paper in its mouth.

“Good boy,” Michael cooed, patting the beast on the head and taking the paper. It nuzzled against his knee in response.

A headline caught Michael’s eye. Something about shocked ramblers at Cromwell Bottom. The discovery of body parts. Thought to be a local woman. *‘large scale enquiry...’* Blah blah blah, *‘appealing to witnesses...’* Blah blah blah, *‘Raped and murdered...’*

Well that was plain misrepresentation.

Shaking his head, he shuffled his way to the personal ads at the back of the paper and, taking a pen from the desk beside him, put a large black ring around ‘Sandra, 36’.