

Angie woke up. She had never been one for seafood. Why she had let the others talk her into trying shellfish she didn't know. It was fine at first but she'd felt funny all evening after that and now she felt her body finally rebelling. She sleepily rolled out of bed and padded to the tiny bathroom. She knew what she had to do and knelt before the porcelain bowl waiting for the inevitable. Just as the first surge hit her she thought she heard someone moving about downstairs. As she paused to catch her breath she thought that it must have been Patterson, the spook, or maybe Zach couldn't sleep either. Angie clutched the toilet gratefully as her body began to relax from the spasms. She pushed herself up and scooped some cold water from the tap into her mouth. She definitely heard a noise from downstairs so she decided that maybe a cup of something to take the taste away would be good.

She padded towards the narrow stairs. As she got to the top, she thought it was odd that there wasn't a light on downstairs. Whoever it was was moving about in the dark. Maybe spooks can do that she thought. But she couldn't so she flicked on the lights at the top of the stairs. The figure she saw at the bottom of the stairs wasn't Patterson. It wasn't Zach either. As she turned the light on the figure spun towards it. It was a long, angular face and as it looked up at Angie the mouth seemed to draw out and back into something like a snarl. Without even realising she had done it, she screamed. A completely reflex action born of sudden and all enveloping terror. As she was expelling the piercing sound she saw the gun in the figure's hand. He turned towards her and the gun was moving up to face her as she lurched away and ran towards her room. A loud bang was followed by an almost imperceptible puncturing sound as the bullet ripped through the old lathe and plaster ceiling of the landing. As Angie reached the door to the bedroom CJ was already out of bed and tearing at her rucksack. Below in the living room, Zach had been wrenched from a restful, dreamless sleep by the pandemonium. It took him a second or two to realise that there was a man standing in the hall that wasn't Patterson. As he registered this the man headed up the stairs. Zach threw off the blankets and looked around in a panic for some sort of weapon. He settled on the first thing that came to hand from the fireside tools and headed to the hall and the stairs.

Angie charged into the bedroom and spun around shutting the door and leaning on it.

"There's someone out there!" she shouted. "And they've got a gun!"

CJ had found the can of mace and was joining Angie by the door as the door itself moved inwards before pushing back with Angie's weight. CJ joined her and leant her weight to the door. They both listened intently. After a second they heard a creak from the landing. The intruder was moving away from their door. They both had the same thought, but CJ was the first to vocalise.

"Gail!" she blurted and they both stepped back from the door and flung it open.

As they crashed out of the door onto the landing, they saw Oculus standing outside the room where Gail's body lay in its protective but delicate cocoon. As they looked, they saw Zach reach the top of the stairs beyond Oculus, brandishing a metal bar with a wicked looking curved hook and spike on one end. For an instant time stood still. Angie and CJ locked eyes with Oculus and Zach took in the scene before him. Then Oculus raised his gun towards the two women but CJ was already taking a stride towards him and unloading a torrent of mace directly into his hollow eyes. The jet from the canister seemed almost to push Oculus backwards but it would be the sudden excruciating pain that did that. He uttered a horrendous cry that was part

animal and dropped the gun to bring both hands to his burning eyes. Zach took a huge swing with the poker and the glancing blow caught the very side of Oculus' head and bounced off his shoulder. Turning towards Zach, Oculus charged him and catching him mid-chest knocked him backwards. Zach's foot missed the top stair and his weight crashed against the wall as he bounced back across and hit the banister. His flailing hands caught the banister and helped slow his fall, but he still toppled backwards and thumped down the stairs until he reached bottom, on his back and temporarily winded.

CJ continued to empty the can of mace towards Oculus who cried out again and began to wildly strike out with his hands, unable to see through the pain. Angie was riveted to the spot and frozen completely by fear. She had realised that Zach had been knocked down the stairs but she also knew that this man, if he was a man, was still there and seemed more dangerous than ever. She wanted to go to Zach, to help him, but her muscles wouldn't respond. As she watched the appalling scene before her, CJ had finally emptied her mace and cast the canister aside. Within a split second, she took a step towards Oculus and aimed a passable karate sidekick, using all the force she could muster, into his stomach. Oculus bent double under the attack and staggered backwards. CJ followed up with another kick, this one less cultured but effective enough to send Oculus beyond the top of the stairs. Grasping at thin air, Oculus resembled, for an instant, those cartoon characters caught with no support before they plunge. Oculus plunged, legs and arms windmilling to arrest the fall but failing. He struck the stairs halfway down and slid the rest of the way, his shoes thudding as they slipped from stair to stair.

Zach had pulled himself up and was standing close to the foot of the stairs as Oculus crashed to the bottom. Zach had dropped the poker as he fell and couldn't see it. He watched in surprise and horror as Oculus raised himself from the floor and turned his twisted face towards him. Streaks of mace fell from his sunken eyes and down his cheeks, giving him the appearance of a demonic clown. As Zach watched, Oculus drew his knife from its sheath. The engraved blade glinted in the moonlit hall. Before Zach had a chance to move, Oculus had sprung towards him. Zach's only instinct was to stop the hand with the blade. Both his hands shot to Oculus' right hand that held the knife. One of Zach's hands grasped the wrist but the other had landed on the blade. The pain Zach felt was instant but somehow subdued. He knew he needed to stop this man and if he relented at all, he was going to die. Oculus' forward motion caused them both to coalesce and fall backwards onto the hall floor. Oculus' left arm was reaching for Zach's face, the bony fingers clawing for a hold. Zach was bracing his bare feet on the wood floor and trying to lift Oculus and roll over. Over Oculus' shoulder Zach thought he saw CJ coming down the stairs, but his only thought was to stop the broad bladed knife from finding a way into his body. Zach felt Oculus' breath on his face as they rolled but as Zach emerged from under the other's weight, he felt the knife shift position; glancing down he suddenly kicked his legs out from under himself and leaned down with all his weight.

When he thought about it later, he couldn't recall if he had felt the knife sink into Oculus' abdomen. He just remembered that the pressure on him eased, his assailant's body seemed to suddenly relax and he rolled off him onto the cool woodblock floor of the cottage hallway. Again, he couldn't remember closing his eyes but the next thing he recalled was CJ shaking him and shouting. As he opened his eyes, he just saw CJ descend on him and clutch him to her, pressing a teary cheek against his.