

Chilled

by
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The first one. Isolated farmhouse, middle of nowhere, middle of winter. You're with the others. You don't know them that well yet, but you have to trust them. You go into the house late at night, after dark, dressed in black. Masked.

You surprise the adults as they sit in front of the telly. Two adults. You get their phones first. You wake the kids, bring them from their bedrooms. Three kids. One's only a tad younger than you. You gag and tie them in the living room. There's a little dog yapping in the kitchen. You'd wondered whether you'd be able to when it came to it, but you kill it without a second thought. You can tell the kids are upset, they're crying or something, but you don't care.

You all get involved. Cindy, Steve, Kevin, Beth, Jim. Looking through wallets, taking credit cards, taking cash. Finding out where jewellery and bank stuff is hidden. Kevin gets pin codes by cutting the youngest kid. Doesn't need much to make them talk. Not a rich family, but you knew that already. This first one is kind of a test.

Then you kill them all. You sort of know it is weird even as you're doing it. You use knives and razors. You slit their throats, all of them, even the kids. No witnesses. Then you make your escape, all of you.

Snow is just starting to fall. That's not too good; could leave tracks. The van is there, waiting, the driver locked safe in his cab. That is good.

That's how it was in the chilled gang, Miss Tyrrall. You're right, by the way, it is good to talk about it.

We only started coming down as we drove around, miles and miles and miles of sodium lights A- and B-roads, back into London but not the most direct way. The driver had his instructions.

We all of us began quivering, shivering, just like the times when we'd taken chiller before, when there was no operation. Steve cried a little; well, he sniffled, but he soon stopped. I felt sick, my stomach slimy and clenched and full of water, but at the same time I felt high, like I was up on some kind of a tightrope with the wind in my hair. And I felt I was somehow connected with the world, too, rooted in its earth. But then I felt sweaty, edgy.

Odd. Mixed up.

I guess we were all like that. The drug, and what we'd done, both. I closed my eyes and remembered the dead, the horrible blood spurts, the evil way the kids twitched afterwards until, thank God, Beth finished them off half-properly. We weren't any of us real experts, see. That's partly the point. It all kept revolving in front of me, bright and scarlet and pumping. The terrified kids, their eyes wide. I think one of them shat himself. I think I was going to vomit.

But I didn't. It didn't seem real. As we were doing it it didn't seem real. That's also the point. But it wasn't like one of those videos, either.

I checked the others. They all seemed scared, wobbly-lipped. Not wanting to look at each other. We were each in our own heads, thinking about what we'd done.

A mobile ring-tone gave me hell of a shock in the silence. Kevin answered. It was only the driver, up front. The boss had made contact. He's told him it worked. He wanted to meet.

We swapped vans, Luton or Watford or somewhere near the M1, made it to the rendezvous down miserable damp roads, a safe house in Hammersmith. It was still dark, an endless night. The guy we knew as the boss came, masked, shades on, with his bodyguard. Maybe he wasn't the real boss, taking no chances. He didn't seem to want to speak. Kevin reported exactly what we'd done. He looked at us oddly. Like he was proud of us, of himself, but also a bit wary. Even a bit sick.

He still took the money, the credit cards, the pin codes, the usernames. He gave us each £500 in used notes! He said nothing about another job.

His people took our stained black shirts and stuff, gave us back our normal clothes, our wallets and normal lives. Well, sort of.

Just before dawn, washed and changed and looking like a bunch of students and junior typists, we left the house, in ones and twos. I remember the ground was white with thin crunchy snow and the sky was utterly clear and cold, the last stars fading away. It was going to be my favourite kind of sunny blue crispy cold January day. Fabulous. A good-to-be-alive kind of day.

We were supposed to split up, go our separate ways, not contact each other, but I needed some company. Cindy obviously felt the same, and we took the tube to Leicester Square. I didn't really like her that much. She was boring and whiny, skinny and her head was too big. I actually prefer women like you, Miss Tyrrall, if you'll forgive me, but then you're high-powered and live in a big house and I bet you don't pay much attention to people like me. Normally.

We got a coffee in Old Compton Street. Both of us wanted to stay out where there were crowds of people, I guess. We wanted to talk about what had happened, but we didn't, as well. But what else to talk about? What did you get for Christmas? No chance. Not now. So we sat in silence, watching the shops rattle open, people start working, black cabs driving past. Drinking coffee after coffee.

As soon as the pubs opened we were in one. I had a pint of lager. Cindy said she thought about a Bloody Mary, but she had a vodka and orange; reminded her of Florida. Not sure why, she says she's never been. And anyway she's too young to drink over there. We found a quiet corner, cool and dark far from the bar. We had a second drink.

Finally we talked about chiller and what it did to us. Not the techie malarkey about the drug suppressing the neural metabolism in the super giro limbic forebrain or whatever, blah blah - Beth was into that, but then she'd been a trainee nurse till she dropped out. I said it was like being behind one-way glass, or wearing rubber gloves. Cindy said, no, it was like you're deaf, your eyes wide open but your ears full of cotton wool.

It's odd, I try to imagine things. Don't you? Try and imagine what it must be like on a plane you know is going to crash, you know you're going to die. What were those people thinking as we killed them and their kids one by one? The fear, the despair when they knew that there was absolutely nothing they could do to stop us killing them. What did they feel? Looking at oblivion....

Death is coming.

No way out.

Death comes.

Where does all that fear go? Into the universe? Into me? What's it really like? Does it really matter?

I'm just glad it wasn't me. I was amazed I'd done those things, amazed at the power of chiller. But that's the point. It distances. I told Cindy that part of me felt disgusted by what we must have done... but it was already hard to remember. Like being drunk, but not wiped out - you know what you're doing at the time, even if you forget a lot of the details in the morning.

Finally, Cindy admitted that she was glad she'd done it. She actually enjoyed the killing, thinking back. It excited her. And you know what? I had to agree. And we agreed it made our tiny hard-core so-called "video club" pretty tame. And redundant.

We ended up in bed that afternoon, in her tatty place in Tower Hamlets. Bit of comfort really, but she was too bony and scraggle-haired for me. I guess alcohol does that to you. Makes you do things you might not do otherwise.

Sorry, Miss Tyrrall. Mind if I have another drink?

The next day I was on a high. I didn't talk to Cindy, or anyone. Well, I called in sick at work, but I couldn't sit alone at home... a one-room flat, and damp, too. No, I walked and walked, all over London, the Eye, Oxford Street, Tower Bridge, looking at all the people. Alive, somehow because I let them stay alive. It only takes a second... I felt excited, like I'd been in a war and lived through it and learned some secret. We got away with it!

But also the whole thing felt like it happened to someone else, years ago. Finally, I realised I was really looking forward to another job.

And I wondered if I could kill without taking chiller first. I guessed not. I did briefly consider offing Mrs Ayres' fat black cat, from the flat above me, as a kind of test. But it had a personality of sorts. And Mrs Ayres needed the thing, since her husband left. If the cat died, she'd just come round pestering me. The kitten the boss had got for me to train on before, I don't where that came from. He got me to kill it, slowly. I could never have done that without chiller.

Clever, he was. Reeled us in. Did it carefully, slowly. Sort of knew what we'd be like, chilled. From the club. He matched us, made us a team.

Anyway, best not try anything, not without the planning. The boss was good at the logistics, made sure we hit an easy target and would get away. He'd thought it all through.

No one would suspect us. A normal bunch of young kids. A junior office worker, a failed nursing student, a redundant printer, a comic book collector, a TV junkie. Not petty crims, not really known to the police or social services. Not gun nuts or anything. Polite enough, respectable enough, fade-into-the-crowd types, who needed a bit more money than they had.

Most people would say we were incapable of harm or violence. But isn't that often the way? If they'd only known, eh, Miss Tyrrall?

The second day the bodies were found. Turned out it was a place in Essex that we'd hit. Huge story in the *Evening Standard*; one of the guys worked in the City. Big even in the nationals - pages 1,2, 4,5,6 and 12-15

in one, and all over the telly. They could tell it was something special, I guess, something new.

I recognised the farmhouse, from the photos and the useful maps in the papers, but it wasn't like it was something I was part of... not really.

I wanted to go there, hang around the police lines with the other gawpers. I knew it was stupid idea but I couldn't help it. I took a train to Witham and walked half way out to the location - Gretney Farm, near Little Braxted, remember? - before coming to my senses and turning round and going back into London again.

I think I'd have looked a bit obvious. Maybe you give yourself away by being too interested, by knowing too much about the place, being a city stranger in a country place. They're a bit weird out there, know each other's business too well.

And maybe some other idiot in the gang would have been there too, and the police would notice us glancing at each other or something stupid like that. You can feel guilty even when you aren't, like when you go through customs, even though you don't even have a single packet of cigarettes or bottle of whisky.

I mean, it wasn't me that did it, after all. I was there but it wasn't me.

In the days after, the details faded more, despite the fact I read all I could about it. And you know what? I still wanted to do it again. I think the boss knew that would happen, in time. We were all shocked and quiet immediately after the first attack, disgusted even, and if he'd asked us then, we'd have refused.

But in time, left alone, he knew we would all want to do it again. I guess it is like being rebellious at school, like pushing the teachers... no bad comeback, you do it again. You get a sense of power..able to do things. We're kind of like soldiers. We're in another zone, another place.

So I was pleased when we got the message. We were all there. I guess we were all a little wary of each other at first. Cindy smiled at me, though. I thought, why not? I wasn't seeing anyone else, then.

Once we'd chilled up again, we worked like an oiled clock. We did a couple of jobs in the next week, both small, not too rich or special. More tests, I guess, compared with what came after. Don't want to talk about it too much. Then we had a week gap.

Then we did two more jobs, bigger ones, same MO, families but rich and high-powered. Not enough to have armed guards, though, or us-proof alarms. The first was a senior guy from an American GM company. Genetic modification. These people, you know, they think they can just come over here and pollute the world with their seeds. That's what the boss said. He also said it was a contract from Friends of the Earth, but I didn't believe that. Anyway, as well as killing everyone in the house, we left calling cards. "For the poor, the impoverished. It's War!" I wasn't so keen on that, maybe it was supposed to make us feel better, but it distracted attention, I guess.

Did another job, this time an oil company man and, of course, his family. Global warming tax, the boss called it. We had to leave calling cards again, that time accusing the family of profiteering from the destruction of the climate. Also, of course, we took all their wallets and cards and laptops and rings and trinkets and passwords and stuff. We did pretty well from that one. Got paid a lot. I could afford a nice car now.

One problem I expect you heard about, Miss Tyrrall, we killed almost everyone, the granny, the baby, all the pets, their visiting house guest from the States. But we missed the au pair from wherever, Greece, I think.

Hid in a cupboard or something. The boss went ballistic, but what could he do? Our first witness.

The papers had a field day. It was one of them came up with "Chiller", called us a "Chilled" gang. The au pair reported how we looked before we killed her clients, you see. On drugs, expressionless. Cold. Chill. Fits well in a headline. But "chilled"? Sounds like we didn't know to come in out of the cold. We preferred chilled - more like something we did deliberately. Anyway, we were in the papers every day... Well, not us by name, but you know what I mean. It was exciting, sure. Manson II, that was another label.

But again... it was like doing something underwater. It was like being drunk. I wasn't really there. Not like I'm here, now. But after the fuckup and the publicity I was worried the boss was going to pull the plug on us. But no, not yet anyway.

It's a big one, more complex a job, this one. Worth it. An attack on a business meeting of high-ups at one of those fancy country houses where they have corporate strategy meetings and so on. Big prize, pharmaceutical stuff, and we're trusted to pull it off. Different MO, see. Like the other jobs were red herrings.

And just adults. No kids. So when we get our syringes from the boss, I think, if I'm ever going to do it, now's a good chance, see what it's really like, killing people when you can feel their pain.

We dress, in black, freshly washed. Black masks, just our eyes showing, like rioters. The vehicle this time is a blue van with tinted rear windows. We're trusted to see out. The streetlights dance on the sides as we head out of town, somewhere along the M11. Then we park up for a while.

I think all of us are fretting a bit. Kevin bites his lip, like a kid worried about an exam. Beth fiddles with her hair. Jim cracks his knuckles. I shift my bum on the cold van floor. This is an odd job. The timing is strange. More targets, a bigger space. And someone else is watching the target zone for us, deciding the best time to hit. Another team is on, doing the security people and the CCTV. Not chilled though.

We move off, it's time to take the shot. The others do. I go through the motions but pocket my syringe. I feel excited as all hell. The others, they put their heads back, close their eyes. The driver is on the lookout. He doesn't shoot up, of course... he's got to think of us.

After a while it hits them, one after the other. They look up, look around. And their eyes are cold. It's true. Like blue ice. Suddenly, I'm a bit scared just being with them. I can feel my heart thump, feel cold sweat. Suppose they realise that I'm still fleshing it? Will they kill me? I can see why the boss is wary. Not too late to jab up... but I don't. I've made a decision and want to go through with it.

The van parks up again, we pile out. Security is taken out, as promised. The house is big, comfortable, maybe 200 years old, set in fine gardens. Warm yellow lights blaze at the windows. I can smell wood smoke from a log fire. It smells like Christmas, old Christmases anyway, and suddenly I'd rather be somewhere else.

The targets are mostly all together, in a big lounge, drinking wine and champagne. It's an easy hit; we go in through the door. They're slow, and fuddled. We take their phones easy, they're punched and tied up. So far so good, it's a thrill. I can do it.

Kevin counts them. Shit, one science type missing. He tells me to go find her, bring her here... if she resists, don't kill her unless you have to.

We gotta get information from all of the victims. I try to nod dispassionately, like I'm like him, like one of them, but my fucking heart is jumping. I can see the business types are scared, too.

I surprise the missing woman coming out the loo down the corridor. She's blonde, wide-eyed. Try to talk to her politely, but she gets it straight away. Well, you would too, weird nervous guy in a black mask carrying a big knife... She tries to leg it, tugging out her phone. Runs into the enormous kitchen. Shit. I follow. If I'd been on chiller I'd have slashed her, but I mess up, drop the knife, knock her over. She smashes her head against the door jamb as she goes down, drops the phone, she's dazed. Thank fuck for that.

But there's worse. A couple of old bags in the kitchen, staring at me as I fumble on the floor for my knife. And a bloody kid, mouth open, staring. Who the hell are you? Cooks, cooks! they say. I don't know about them, they're not part of the plan. What should I do? Get out! I yell. But one of them picks up a cleaver, looks like she might attack me. Idiot!

I'm in a bit of a panic by now. You'd be too. The woman is coming round. Mum, she says, please don't kill me, she says. I don't know what to do so I knee her in the face but the bony crunch is sickening. I can barely think. Get out! Get out! I'm screaming to myself. I should go, I can't hack it. Then Kevin comes in, through the other door.. He sizes the situation up. He points to me. Put her with the others.

They're only cooks, I gasp. Kevin looks at me, a bit weird. I mean for him to let them go, they have nothing, but he doesn't give a shit, he slices one. I don't know what to do. He tells me to get gone. I go. I can hear the shrieks as Kevin finishes off the kid and the other woman.

I want to take a shit, I'm shaking like a leaf by this time. I can't work like this. I can't work like this. It's too late to jab up, it won't kick in in time. There's no way out. I push my mark back into the main room, roughly. I can smell her fear, sweat under her blouse. I can taste it on my tongue.

They're all tied up. Two are already dead, their stuff being packed up. They're 30-something, perhaps with kids. One minute, having a good time in drinking wine in deep sofas surrounded by paintings of fat old men in red coats chasing foxes, the next they've crossed over into death. They already know what it's like on the other side and all their laptops and PhDs and amex cards couldn't help them. I can't look. Another guy is spilling the beans. Cindy's over the other side, saying to him, yes, tell us, and you won't die like these guys. Hold out, and you will. He's talking, his tongue is loosened. The others are wide-eyed with fear, but they're ready to talk too.

I get my woman to sit down, tie her up, but I can hardly do it, my fingers are numbed and wobbly. Why doesn't she fight back? But she's practically fainted, she's out of it, can hardly see us. I splash her with water, least I think it was water, perhaps it was champagne.

The interrogation continues. As well as the usual credit card details, the boss is after safe combinations, financial info, insider stuff, anything really, but mainly drug formulas. Their files are there, dumped into sacks. Some great anti-cancer drug, the boss is going to pirate it. Or his boss. Or someone. Payoff for the guy who labbed him chiller, maybe. I don't understand that stuff. Steve does. He knows what he has to get. He can work well under chiller, keeps his head. I think he's pretty chilled naturally.

Finally my woman is up enough for talking. She sees that if she cooperates, she won't be killed. She has lots to tell, apparently; she's some kind of project scientist with all sorts of good stuff on her laptop. Steve's happy.

Then we're ready to go. The remaining poor saps look like they're relieved, they made it. But of course they haven't, not when the Chilled gang is hitting them. Cindy waves over, signing I should top my woman. It's the moment of truth, and of course I can't do it. I can't put my knife in among the muscles and sinews and voicebox and gristle of her neck, I can't plunge it into her jelly eye or her heart or anywhere.

I just can't.

I say something, I dunno, that I'm not feeling well. Cindy can do it. She comes over. And this is weird - my scientist stares at Cindy and makes a soundless word with her mouth, Cindy? it is I saw later. But Cindy's away with the fairies, she plays with the woman, cuts the scientist's ear first, then traces a line down her arm and blouse, cutting deep. The woman screams and cries and snot dribbles from her nose. I look away, say, for fuck's sake Cindy! Let's go!

So Cindy slices the woman's throat. She can see it happening in front of her, she can see she is dying and all she's ever done and ever wanted to do is pouring away like water from a bombed dam and will be gone in seconds, for ever. It's all I can do not to throw up. Meanwhile Kevin is doing one of the other guys, smiling absently to himself. And Steve, I don't want to say what he's doing. He has a thing about genitals. His guy dies in pain. A hell of a lot of pain. And they're all gone now.

Kevin throws down some more cards. Something to do with global pharmaceutical companies and the evil practices they do in Africa, testing their drugs on poor people before trying it out on Westerners.

Revenge of Africa, we were called that night.

Every job a different cause, eh, Miss Tyrrall?

Back in the van, I didn't want anyone to look at me. I guess we normally each do someone. But Kevin did at least four this time, maybe more. And I did none. I kind of stick out. When you're there, doing it, seeing it done, it's disgusting. The others, they were like zombies. I could see they weren't really seeing, weren't really feeling.

There was blood all over us. I felt drained, disgusted. But, Miss Tyrrall, at least I knew I couldn't kill without the drug. I just couldn't do it. It wasn't in me.

I didn't want to kill again. But how to get out, get away from these nutetrs?

The others came down quicker this time. I noticed that before, it getting quicker. Seems to be wearing off. Or perhaps its smaller doses. Anyway, they stopped being supercool and started looking like kids again. Weird. Even Steve.

But Cindy, she starts crying, shaking, like she can't stop. This was more than coming down off a high, though. She turns to me, quiet, pale, shocked. That woman I killed - it was Megan. Mom's sister. My aunt. Jeez. And she even played with her before killing her.

You'd think that's not supposed to happen, she could get recognised or bottle out or something. But turned out the boss knew. That's how they became a target.

And I sort of knew what I'd have to do. We can't just go on killing like this. Like it's not us. It's not right. Where's it going to stop? I tell you where

- the boss is going to set a new chilled gang on us one day, or something. Do away with us all in some basement. It's kill or be killed. I've got to get out. I've got to kill him.

But we've just found I can't kill without help, haven't we? But I still had my chiller shot.

I timed it right, no problem. We were parked up in town, another new safe house. Muswell Hill. Cindy was still sniffing, in shock. The rest of us didn't like to say anything, but I think we all felt it was the end of something. It's real people. Not a dream. Not a movie made by other people who weren't there.

Chiller kicks in.

The boss opens the door, looks round. You guess he is a bit complacent, now. He sees most of them are coming down. But he notices that you have not. His eyes narrow as he looks at you.

You know what you decided to do as you stand and pull your knife. But Cindy shrieks at the boss about her aunt. Hush. You wish she wouldn't, it will make things hard. And the bodyguard blocks her. She is crying, wailing; it is an irritating, distracting noise. You have to think, quickly. But Kevin has hold of your knife arm, his eyes wide. You stop him hard, efficiently. And Cindy's in the way, wailing. You silence her, too hard. The boss's bodyguard is slow, he pulls a gun. You cut his arm, he drops the gun. Steve flails at you without a weapon, he's mouthing stuff you can't hear. He is not thinking. You waste time turning and hitting him.

Beth and Jim are gone. The boss and his bodyguard are gone too. This is not supposed to happen.

You wanted to kill the boss, but it's a big mess and you're in the middle of it with the dead bodies of two people you know. So you run too.

What can I say? It didn't work out how I wanted. But you were right, Miss Tyrrall, it is good to get it off my chest. Get my ducks in a row. Confession is good for the soul, eh?

What now? Now, I want and need chiller, but I'm a little scared of it and anyway, I can't get it now, can I? Would I take it if I could get any? Dunno. If only I could've killed the boss then and there, as a man, with my eyes and ears open, maybe things would be better. Maybe I'd be some kind of a hero. Maybe Cindy would still be alive. But I'm not, I'm stuck here with you.

But you know, I still gotta get him. It's too late for Cindy and Kevin, and too bad for Mrs Ayres' cat, but I'm working on it, I'm learning. I'm teaching myself to kill without chiller, you see.

Sorry, Miss Tyrrall. It's in a good cause.