

IF A THING LOOKS TOO GOOD...

(1198 words)

Wanted: Warehouse Night Caretaker

9pm to 7am Mon-Fri

\$10 per hour

Open to Homeless Men Only

Accommodation included

Apply Within – see Clara

‘Another one?’ said Nick, reading the ad. ‘That’s the third in two months. What’s the deal?’

Nick tightened the blanket around his shoulders against the driving rain. Cars speeding home splashed through puddles, pooled water reflected the streetlights.

He shuffled towards the skip-bins behind the warehouse. His spot for the last few months.

‘My wet dog smelling blanket and cardboard boxes versus mother nature tonight,’ he grumbled, ‘I lose.’

Swirling wind and rain made sleep impossible. His socks squelched in his old army boots. *No worse than a night on manoeuvres.* Nick hunkered down resolutely under the pulping cardboard.

By morning the storm had passed. *I’m done.* Leaving the wet blanket folded neatly, he squeezed the water from his mismatched clothes and slicked back his hair. Pain from near frost-bitten toes spurred his faltering steps to the warehouse door. *Nothing to lose.*

The warehouse was a cacophony; steel pallet trucks and mesh bins clanged. *Everything's metal. Must be good for the fruit, but wow.*

'Excuse me mate,' Nick called, 'Where can I find this Clara? About the job.'

'Up there,' the man pointed over his shoulder.

Nick looked towards the mezzanine with its wall of windows, and snaked between numerous workers, pallets and forklifts to climb the staircase. *I'm being watched.* Inside the comfortable office was a stunning woman, all dark beauty: hair, clothes, eyes. She opened the door before he knocked. *Roger, surveillance confirmed.*

'I'm Clara, please come in. You're here for the job?' she looked him over, indicated a leather chair and walked to the kitchenette. 'Coffee? Let's get warmed up before we chat.'

Nick hadn't yet spoken but moved from "at ease" to the proffered seat.

'Thanks, coffee would be great. It was a cold night,' said Nick.

'You poor man, I can't even imagine,' she said, passing the coffee over the desk between them. 'Tell me about yourself.'

'Nicholas Xavier. Nick,' he said, shaking her hand. 'I meet your criteria and could use a roof over my head.'

'Excellent. Many on the streets need a break to get on track,' she explained, 'That's why the Caretaker job's for the homeless. Our way to help.'

'Very charitable,' said Nick flatly, unhappy being lumped with the homeless population. He was between lodgings. *OK for six months, but whatever.*

Clara gave a tinkling laugh and sipped her coffee, still watching him.

‘Yes, but useful here too. You will ensure local thugs don’t break in overnight and notify me if they do. Nothing more. No hands-on stuff, just observing and reporting,’ she explained, ‘It’s not onerous work, but you’ll work in isolation and must stay awake.’

‘No worries, I’m used to being stag on night watches,’ replied Nick.

‘Ex-Army then? Even better,’ she said, ‘You can follow instructions. What’s your story Nick?’

‘Time served. Got out six months ago. Not welcome at home anymore. You know how it is.’

‘A man of few words. Well, that’s fine. You’ll be on your own,’ said Clara, ‘The pay’s minimal, but you get the accommodation seven days a week.’

‘Great.’

Clara went through the job details.

‘You’re alone after I leave, usually around eleven, until six when the warehouse opens. Your last hour you’ll give them a hand,’ said Clara leading them downstairs. ‘Help yourself to fruit anytime and you can start tomorrow night. Here’s \$200 today to get what you need. That covers your last two day’s pay when you decide to leave. OK?’

‘Sounds fair.’

They walked through the warehouse to a set of steps leading to the basement door.

‘Here you go. Bed, kitchen, lounge and bathroom,’ she explained smiling, unlocking the door. ‘Previous Caretakers didn’t want to go.’

Waving him in, Clara returned upstairs. Nick did a full spin, grinning more and more. Fridge, microwave, TV, bed, and a shower. *Hot food and hot water. Bliss! First. Shopping.*

Jeans, t-shirts, jumper, boots. Check. Toiletries, shaving gear, towel. Affirm. Microwave meals, coffee, family size packet of cream biscuits. Oh yeah!

Walking back in with bulging shopping bags, Nick grinned at the pallet-driver, 'Got it! Start tomorrow.'

'Congrats,' said the man, 'Word of advice. Lock your door when you're not working.'

'Roger, thanks,' said Nick, walking swiftly down to the studio and stowing his gear. Now for his first hot shower in weeks.

Next evening, he received the hourly security rounds checklist and fell into a routine, which suited him. Nick wondered about the previous caretakers and searched the warehouse. *Clear!*

Over the weeks, Clara regularly stayed after midnight, mostly chatting with Nick. Even at two or three in the morning she looked immaculate. He'd asked about the other caretakers, and their late-night chats ended abruptly. Clara clammed up.

Something's brewing. I can feel it.

Nick awoke one afternoon to see Clara tiptoeing silently towards him.

'What are you doing? This is my room.'

'Replacing air fresheners. Sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you.'

This wasn't on. It was his space. *Note to self, get a better lock.* But now, his curiosity was piqued.

When she left, Nick methodically searched for the air fresheners, discovering a concealed door behind the fridge. *I know that smell.*

Nick's shopping was different that day. *Second-hand suit, new lock, broom handle and knife sharpener.*

The following Saturday he went out for a couple with a mate. Returning, he didn't bother to switch on the lights, flopped on the bed and quickly fell asleep.

Clara waited. When his light snoring began, she slid from under the bed and knelt beside it. His head was turned, exposing that long, muscular neck she admired. Slowly reaching to push back his hair, she lowered her mouth, closing her eyes anticipating his warm, sweet blood in her mouth. It had been too long. Three full months since the last one.

Nick's eyes flickered and breathing became quiet. As her razor-sharp teeth grazed his skin, she was flung across the floor. He towered over her, knife in hand, ready to strike.

'No, Nick it's me!' she pleaded, 'Please don't.'

'Clara,' he yelled, 'Not this time. I know your game.'

As Nick stepped back to snap on the lights, Clara jumped up. She latched onto his shoulders, straining to reach his jugular. Nick's training kicked in and he tackled her to the sofa, pinning her with one broad forearm, knife glinting invitingly.

'I quit. And you're finished too,' he said, sinking his own sharpened teeth into her porcelain skin.

Eyes wild, Clara howled, realising her mistake.

'Once, I thought you beautiful,' Nick admitted, 'But now?'

Swipe left. The knife swished. The budding red flower opened, cascading from her throat.

Nick reached under the sofa for the broom handle he'd whittled to a point.

‘Just to make sure, you understand,’ he explained, pushing it deep into her chest.

Nick dragged Clara into the hidden room, filled with corpses of less wary caretakers, attaching a new lock.

‘Good job I don’t need a reference,’ he chuckled, packed his bag and walked out of the warehouse into driving rain. No change there.

‘Hah! Another one gone,’ Nick laughed out loud.

Where next?