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## Secrets and lies

by Victoria Cooper

When I wake up the other side of the bed is cold. It reminds me Rob is gone and I turn my head away, stifling the cry inside my mouth. My restless night mirrored the storm that raged outside and both leave me unsatiated and dry mouthed.

On my commute I consider the job ahead: my first house valuation and jangle the keys in my pocket with anxious anticipation. It's a three-bed semi on a popular leafy street, the right side of town close to the right sort of school. Its tired and needs a lick of paint but it's going to fly out if handled right. The hall is dimly lit from the stained-glass door and the floor littered with bills and junk mail; a discarded life. I start to take photos to slow my racing heart. I hate empty houses. The air is stale and although "Pervy Pete" has told me vehemently it's not a "stinker" my mind conjures up dead old ladies being eaten by wolves.

I find myself in a large reception room with a double aspect over a mature garden and an original fireplace. The stormy night has brought burnt coal down from the chimney and it lays scattered on the hearth. I poke at it absent-mindedly and that's when I see it. A letter fallen presumably like the coal from the chimney, stowed away.

I tentatively reach for it, and his name stares out at me, "Robert Bickerstaff". My heart lurches. Inside are bundles of cash with a note, "will pay the rest later, meet me at the corner of Wardour Street 8pm, don't be seen". I cannot breathe, my head pounds, and as the panic rises, I realise Robert is not dead and I have to find him before he finds me.