

Room for the Life by Jaye Morgan

1st April How fucking appropriate that it should be April Fool's Day. I know that I have my off days, but now it feels as though I've cornered the market in fucking *lunacy*.

I *still* can't believe she'd do this. This is crazy. I knew from the get go that she was smart and powerful; I knew that she had lots of bizarre influence. She had all sorts of people working for her, from the doorman onwards, all of them chosen *by her*. Sometimes she hinted at the kind of things her other people would do for her. So here I am proof positive that her people *will* do *anything* for her. Is it the salary; maybe it's the hidden extras in the job description, if any of them *have* job descriptions? Maybe they do what they do because they just plain *love* her. I don't know.

When I came to, on an alien floor, I felt sick and dizzy. They'd allowed for that response, with a loo for me to throw up into and a bottle of mouthwash left beside the sink so that I could wash my mouth out after I'd finished, and was sitting slumped on the floor. I did try to pull the door to, not wanting to share my embarrassment or the simple sound of my vomiting, but one of them – I can't remember her name but I'd seen her with Pandora before – came over and stuck her foot inside the door so that I couldn't close it. Evidently I wasn't to be trusted in any respect, though what could I have done? I wasn't even capable of a *Trainspotting*, diving into the loo. Or did they think I'd try to drown myself? Hardly likely.

While the whole horrid process was going on I could dimly hear them talking. At that moment I confess that I didn't care, didn't give a flying fuck about their conversation, but when I did stagger back into full consciousness I found that they were talking about the boss's new car and wasn't it ace? That was the moment that I began to feel scared: they'd just drugged me and kidnapped me and all that they were going to talk about was *cars*. To them it seemed like there was nothing even slightly odd about the situation; from start to finish they acted as if they'd done nothing more than collect me from the club when the night finished. It was only when I'd stopped heaving and had staggered back into the other room that they began to notice me again.

One of them tossed me a towel. Even in that state, with my head still spinning one way and my stomach in the other direction, I noticed that it was one of *her* towels, with that fucking stupid monogram on it. I remember the first time I went into her bathroom, all mirrors and marble and monogrammed towels. I remember too that I got the giggles when I saw the Jacuzzi. I hadn't realised that she was so...

Oh, forget it. What does it matter what I thought when I saw her bathroom? I'm not there now. Not there with her in that amazing apartment. I have to

admit, her taste in decor was pretty fucking naff; the pictures on the walls looked like they'd been created by a badger on speed. That money was behind it all was obvious: I can imagine her interior decorator – who must have thought they were fucking *dreaming* – looking at the budget she'd been given and having to clench her muscles to avoid wetting herself.

I'm ... surprised. Maybe in some parallel universe I'd feel vaguely complimented. I never thought she'd react this way. How could I? I didn't even realise that she *cared* that much. Ironic to think that if I'd thought she cared, I would never have fucked Connie. We live and learn...

2nd April. At some point in the early afternoon we stopped and they let me out the car. I was all set to run like hell, until I saw that was nowhere to run. All I could see was rough moor-land stretching out in all directions. The sight... The sight did what nothing else could have done, and for a moment I was blind with tears. They'd said that they weren't going to kill me, but just for a moment I had my doubts. All that country and not a soul for miles. A shop we'd passed some ten miles back was the last indication of civilisation, or so I thought, until I looked to the water and saw the boat.

But they *could* have killed me, could have dug a grave there in no time at all, and that would be the end. I could see it all, down to a tombstone they wouldn't be erecting: *here lies Jez Gardner, former barkeep, former girlfriend to the boss. RIP.*

I was just standing there, looking at the grey water and the grey sky above it when one of them – I think her name was Clem – said something about luggage and then hauled this big leather bag out of the boot of the car. She put it on the ground beside me and said that she hoped they'd made the right selection. I tried the weight: the bag was really heavy, and whatever was inside made hard angles through the fine leather. I opened it up and saw that they'd thrown in an armful of the books that stood in a stack beside my bed in the little room-with-sink that I rented. I looked at the books for a moment, all of them poetry, knowing that the momentary reassurance they offered me by their presence had been overruled, entirely, by the knowledge that Pandora's people had been in my room.

Clem – looking past at me, never at me – cleared her throat and said that I wasn't to worry about the bar or about the rent payments, that everything had been taken care of. That sure as *fuck* didn't stop me worrying. Taken care of? Wasn't that what they said when someone had been killed? When I'd thought about the shallow grave on the moor-land I hadn't really taken the idea seriously. Suddenly I did. Suddenly I didn't know what the *fuck* was going on.

There followed a silence that was so awkward I almost wanted to break it through sheer need. But I didn't speak. A few minutes more then Clem said, "She's really pissed at you, Jez." I still didn't respond. She added, "You shouldn't have fucked around. She really hates that."

Why not tell me something I *don't* know? I picked up the bag.

Later still I had dozed off. On waking all I had was the knowledge that I was completely fucked. Pandora had so many people in her life, fucked so many people, that it had never occurred to me that she might mind me falling into bed once, twice, maybe even three times, with Connie. I won't say it meant nothing: it *did* mean something; it meant that I had a friend I was getting to love. It meant that sometimes I could find something less dramatic than my time with Pandora, something simpler, something kinder, something with no profit margin attached.

Never fuck a financier.

It'll cost you much more than you think.

I thought for a minute and decided that I should maybe have those two thoughts chipped into my headstone. Not R.I.P but L.S.D. Or something. What a good thing we hadn't gone with the Euro...

Clem had said, as we drove along that endless road, "You gonna behave, Jez? Or do I need to put you out again?"

I shook my head. I would be good. I couldn't bear another dose of whatever the fuck it was that they'd tipped into my end-of-night coffee. I've read my quota of detective novels: I know that they always put drugs in coffee because the bitterness masks the taste.

I'm full of bits of useless information. Much fucking good they're likely to do me.

4th April I hadn't written anything in my journal because... Why? Because the moment you write things down, they become real, and I didn't want this to be real.

But it is.

I'm *fucked*.

I suppose she couldn't find a desert island for me, but I can imagine now that that's what she had in mind. I'd heard about *The Mermaid*, of course, and I knew that she went out there sometimes when she wanted peace and quiet. But I suppose I'd never given it much thought beyond, so she's got a boat, so what? I'd never been on a boat, apart from that one Channel crossing, when I spent the entire trip with my head over the side of the fucking boat, throwing up for England. I was sick for five hours, straight. When I got off the boat – still shaking, still green – I went down on my knees and kissed the ground. For once I guess I knew how the Pope must feel. I went down on my knees and felt the grit on the causeway through the fabric of my jeans and on the palms of my hands, where they rested, flat down.

The Pope? God. You'd think I was hallucinating already.

Alright, so it's not real until it's written down. I'll write it down. I always had a fair bit of courage; I could stand up for myself, I wasn't easily cowed. I think that was part of what appealed to Pandora, that I wasn't going to be bowled over by who she was, and how much she was worth. The first time we spoke I treated her the way I treated everybody else, every other person I fixed drinks for at the club. I didn't know that she *owned* the fucking club.

Enough prevarication. It's like diving into deep water when you're not sure how cold it will be. You just do it. A deep breath and here goes...

I'm a prisoner.

I'm a prisoner on a fucking *boat*.

Much, much later than before.

The Mermaid was anchored maybe two miles out. Truly anchored, like one of those fixed caravans, where you get a patch of garden by the side, and there are gadgets for water, sewage, electricity. The Mermaid is like a cross between a posh boat and a house boat. Don't ask me for precise terms, 'cos I don't know. My dissertation's on First World War poetry, not fucking *boats*.

If you want a good salient quote, come to me. If you want to talk water clearance and tides, *don't*.

I have found a lot of things without having to look for them, which is unnerving, because it means that she had her people come out here and get stuff ready before this. In other words, she knew what I was doing almost as soon as I did it. The last time I saw her – the night of March 31st, when the wind was howling round London and the wind was lashing the pavements when I came out of the club and into her car – she already knew everything,

and she'd already had her preparations made. All but the books: they must have taken them after I left for work in the early evening.

There are two bedrooms, both made up. There is a lot of food, much of it fresh, but I have a plethora of cans and boxes. It looks like this is no weekend excursion.

There's water, fresh water, and lots of it, mostly bottled. There's stuff for the lights and there are batteries and shit. There's also more of my personal stuff: a pair of pyjamas and so on, all of it arranged in the drawers in the second bedroom.

What I'm lacking is a sail – not that I know how to use one – and a key to start the engine. More than a single key, come to think of it: the radio has been decommissioned and the chain that holds the anchor is just unmovable. The winch that would haul up the anchor has been padlocked. I'm stuck. Becalmed.

Before they left me, Clem asked if I smoked. I hoped that she meant dope and said that I did. I got an ounce, papers and some Greek tobacco. Some cigarettes, too. Later I sat on deck with a cigarette between my fingers, turning it this way and that, until the paper tore through and the black tobacco was taken by the wind.

April 3rd My first swim. You'd think that I was keeping a fucking *holiday* journal, only I can't imagine ever reading from this one while I circulate a couple of dozen colour photographs and pass round the Ouzo. I got up and got out on deck and then I dived in. I don't know why I didn't climb down the little ladder that joins the two worlds, maybe I had forgotten it. But I dived in and the water was so fucking cold that I swear that for a moment my heart stopped. I was so angry. When I started to think about what was happening I was so angry that all I could do was swim and swim: front crawl, which usually wipes me out. I hit the water over and over again, and as I was hitting it, I thought of her.

Back inside, with sticky hair that I had to rinse (the rest of me could go hang) I took another look around. Everything safe is here: I wonder how far they trusted me. There's medicine for the migraines I get – which is a blessing because those just about kill me – and tampons, cotton wool, a bottle of cleanser and a tub of moisturiser, both posh as fuck. What else? Well, there's sun-tan cream (you can dream) and toothpaste. A couple of toothbrushes. Aspirin to be taken if needed – but not enough of them to kill – and soap and hard shampoo (from Lush, scented like saffron: nice) and alcohol (more than *enough* to kill myself). No books other than those in my bag, but that didn't honestly surprise me. I guess Pandora had made a big enough concession by

letting me have most of my course books. Apart from financial statements, I never saw her read anything more demanding than a magazine.

They'd even brought my typewriter, which looked odd and spare when I set it out on a little table that folded out from the wall. And paper, too, enough to write a novel. And my favourite pen, and ink in abundance. My mobile phone was conspicuous by its absence. The fact that I was without computer and Internet access hardly needs mentioning.

But there was a letter waiting for me, a pristine white envelope in the living cabin. I stood there and looked at it for a very long time. I don't know when I decided that it would probably read better drunk than sober, which started me on the road to destruction.

No, actually it wasn't so dramatic. I fetched a bottle, poured a glass and then opened the letter. More a note, really. The only words that were written on it were these: *This is what happens when you screw up.*

I almost smiled. I could imagine her voice as she said those words. Thought: too fucking right I did.

The bourbon tasted bitter, but I drank it all the same. Then I was suddenly so tired that I didn't care about anything any more. I managed to clean my teeth before I hit the bed in the single cabin like a stone dropped into water.

5th April Back on the boat, swim done, immediate frustration expunged. There's a rock, about half a mile or so away, further out to sea, so it'd be no use as a resting place if I threw caution to the winds and tried to swim to land. Besides, the water is too cold: I'd be dead with hypothermia before I got halfway. The Gulf Stream is a useful addition to my way of life, but I'm not Superwoman.

I guess my new home makes a sordid, painful kind of sense. She really didn't have access to a desert island so she went for the next best thing. Out here in the mist – it settled early in the evening and shows no signs of shifting – I'm as neatly marooned as any ancient mariner. At least there's no-one around to witness my fall from grace.

When I started college, I felt out of place. I felt out of place for three years. And then I graduated, and graduated smartly enough to get the option on a further dissertation, maybe even a PhD. A bit of a grant and a year to write it in. The War Poets. I had a part-time job in the bar, working five nights out of six, where the pay was alright and the tips were better. I was poor enough but I was breaking even. I had the bed-sit and my books and that suited me. Over the years I've been guilty of paring my life down to the bare bones. I think that

Pandora was a bit miffed by the fact that I didn't want anything she could give me: not a sports car, not a decent wardrobe, not even a nice boat out in the Gulf Stream. I was honestly happy with what I had.

I've been looking at the rock again, or at least, as much of the rock as I can see from here. The mist does magical things to the light: give me an inch and I'd swear I could see something moving there. But the rock isn't that big, and I don't think there's anywhere there that the seals could lie. Still, it's probably a seal. The thought is oddly pleasing. A seal for company... that I could cope with.

April 9th I don't fucking believe it: I *missed* them. I was up late last night, sitting with half a dozen books scattered around the place. Plus I had a pretty big bourbon to help me sleep. When I scrambled out into the morning air I found the boxes on the deck: a whole fucking week has gone by. I can't believe it. I guess that getting drunk most nights isn't the answer: another night like the last one and the chances are I'll fall into the water and just *drown*.

Well, whatever she has in mind, it isn't starvation: again I've been given a whole selection of fresh fruit and veg, though it's fairly obvious that it's come one fuck of a long way. *They* didn't stop at that little shop that was the last touch of civilisation before leaving the land and taking to the sea. So much for resolutions: there's a bottle of wine. Sorry, *two* bottles. I should have thought to leave them out a list, if I'd known what I wanted, if I'd known they were *coming*.

The mist has shifted again and I can see dry land. Sometimes it's easier if I can't. I wonder how long I'm going to be left out here? I haven't yet shrugged off the idea that she might be going to have me killed – sooner or later – though that wasn't what I thought she had in mind. When we first came out to the boat I almost expected to see her. I can admit now that I did have an awful image of her coming out here to extract revenge via sex. I actually had a little while of wondering if I was set to become some kind of sex slave, with her zooming out here every week or so for a handful of orgasms. The thought appals me now. I can't even remember how we got involved.

The irony is not lost on me: I was having so much trouble with the dissertation when I was on dry land. I think I'd lost the inspiration that had first motivated me. Now I seem to have it back, and it still seems to matter as much. But I don't... I'm becoming so immaterial to myself that it's an effort to keep moving at all. Today I spent mainly in bed. The day was cold and I was cold and I didn't want to have to face the situation. I know that sensation: that's depression, pure and simple, and I don't have any anti-depressants with me. Perhaps I could put them on the next shopping list.

I am afraid of going mad. I know that people go crazy in solitary confinement, and I am willing – if reluctantly – to admit that I’m feeling a bit odd about things. For one: I’m nervous about leaving the boat for even the shortest time because *I’m not sure it’ll still be there when I get back*. Just because the fear is irrational doesn’t stop it from being frightening. If I had a rope, I swear I’d tie it round my waist and then fix it on to the boat, even if the umbilical imagery makes me uneasy. But there’s no rope long enough: were they scared that I’d hang myself?

Later The mist is back and it’s becoming a friendly thing. I remember seeing a horror movie, once, about these creatures crawling up out of the sea in the dead of night. The theme didn’t worry me: monsters in the real world have always been so much worse than anything a film-maker could put together that nothing coming out of the dark scares me. I had a great-grandfather who died in the First World War. He was fifteen when he joined up, and just sixteen the next day when he got shot. It was that that started me off on the poetry. I think that I was so... overwhelmed by the sheer beauty that came out of a thousand hells that I wanted to take the study further. I can’t begin to imagine how fucking awful it must have been for the new arrivals to know that they were taking their place in hell, and that for the majority – an amnesty apart – death really was the only thing to look forward to.

He was the only one of my relations whose memory lasted any length of time. I don’t even know how the Children’s Home came to know that much. But it was a proud memory to have, as well as the only one, and I kept it held tight. I knew that I’d never be that brave.

Later still I can’t get over the idea that a whole week has gone by. Does that mean that they’ll be back again on the 16th? We’ll be coming up to Easter by then, so does that mean I’ll get a chocolate egg along with the fruit and veg? Probably not.

April 13th I’d forgotten the date; I’ve never been good at remembering dates. It was so fucking cold this morning, going into the water, that I nearly turned around and climbed straight out again. I’d promised myself a cup of proper coffee when I got out, scalding hot and laced with rum. The strange thing was that once I was in the water, once it was momentarily over my head, I thought I heard something. I thought I heard a voice.

Sitting here now in the world of simple reality, with a towel over my head and a sweater on over a tee-shirt, my coffee a reality, I can afford to be honest with myself. I *did* hear a voice. At first – for some utterly insane moment – I thought it was Pandora. How strange to think that even in passing: I’d only hear from *her* if she turned up in a speed boat, and there was no sound other

than the lapping of the waves against the side of the boat, and the crying of the gulls.

There used to be superstition that each seagull contained within itself the soul of a dead sailor. *That's* why the Ancient Mariner got it in the neck: he'd killed one of his own. It really doesn't do to kill your brother, no matter how frustrated you may feel.

I... I nearly didn't make it back on board, which bit of knowledge frightens me more than I can say. I was too cold, and stupid with it. When I tugged myself up the first rung of the ladder, I slipped. My hand bashed against the body of the boat – the knuckles of my right hand are all bloody and hurt like hell – and the next wave swung me around so that my head came up against the boat. The pain of my head hitting the fucking wood hurt so much that I could not bear it. There was a moment when frustration, pain and simple clumsiness combined into such a definite attack that I nearly drowned myself just to spite them.

But I'm sure it's not that easy to drown. Maybe I'd need to do a Virginia Woolf and stuff my pockets full of stones. I don't *have* any stones. Of course, I *do* have a whole load of tinned stuff: imagine sinking to my watery grave with a week's supply of canned goods shoved into my pockets.

It doesn't make for a very dramatic picture. And until now I hadn't given much thought to dying.

April 15th I took a break from writing. The more I read, the more the words come back to echo around the boat. I'm beginning to feel like I'm in the trenches, and I have no right to claim that. Oh, and I heard the voice again.

I heard voices.

I don't *think* I'm going mad.

I swam. I always swim. Things have shifted again, and forget worrying about the boat not being here, all I want to do is never see the fucking thing again. Sometimes I wonder just how much thought she gave to sending me out here: did she think that I'd go crazy with loneliness or was she hoping that I'd drown myself? Will I just kill myself, sooner or later? Is my being here a kind of externally-facilitated suicide? Is she going to turn up, sooner or later, expecting me to be mindlessly contrite? I don't have any plans to die: I don't have anything sharp enough to hack into my wrists with; there's not rope enough for me to hang, nor medication to kill me. But what if I just had an accident, like that one the other day, when I bashed my head? What then? Then, I guess, no-one will ever know. She won't admit to my being here: how could she?

I'm really beginning to wonder how I'll be when I do see someone again, which brings me back to the voices.

It was yesterday. Yesterday and this morning. I was in the water and getting closer to that rock. In a way I don't want to reach the rock, because if I do, I'm afraid I'll be disappointed. I'll find that what sometimes looks a bit like a seal is nothing but a lump of gull shit-splattered seaweed on a curving stone. And what if I reach it only to find I don't have the energy to get back here? Years back, I swam from a beach in Crete to a little island a quarter mile away. The current was strong, but I coped with it, until the return swim, when it reached up and just tugged me down. I went down and I didn't think I'd ever get up again, but then the water shifted and I broke free of that thread of tension. That freaked me out: I didn't swim much, after that, until now.

Obviously.

But as I did get toward the rock, I heard a voice. Voices. Except they were not talking to one another. It seemed to me that they were singing.

You die by whatever you live by, I thought. In my case, poetry. I didn't even *have* a copy of T.S. out there with me, but I knew the truth all the same. I was hearing the mermaids. And I knew that if I admitted that I was hearing mermaids, I must be mad. And I knew that I *was* hearing them, and that I wasn't mad at all.

I know that the Sirens called the men to them. I remember reading that Odysseus covered his ears, and had himself tied to the mast so that he would not succumb to the voices that would – otherwise – have dragged him to his death. I guess the Sirens didn't have much chance of singing to other women: how many women *were* there at sea in those days?

April 16th I have the strangest confession to make. Two weeks in and so I expected them today; Clem and whoever. I was up in plenty of time: as a matter of fact, I was awake at four, watching the dawn come up. I had a swim and later, when I heard the sound of their boat I... hid. I found myself ducking down low on the side of the boat away from them. I don't understand why I should have done that when common sense would surely have sent me running out to greet them, arms outstretched.

Eventually Clem called out to me and I stood up behind the half door that I'd been hiding behind. She caught her breath a bit when she looked at me. All I could think was how very unreal they both looked. I wanted to walk over and press my fingers into Clem's arm just to see if she had substance. I didn't say anything: it'd been a fortnight since I last spoke to anybody and even then I

think all I could manage was a lame, “You don’t have to do this, you know”, which got me nowhere at all.

They looked unreal but it was more than that. They looked fixed, stuck like stones on the surface of the deck, cumbersome and awkward. It wasn’t until afterwards that I realised that my world had grown – not shrunk – with the incorporation of the Gulf Stream. I could live in one of two elements: *they* had no such choice.

Clem said, “Uh, you alright, Jez?” She was staring at me. I looked down at myself. I was wearing a pair of cut-offs and a jersey, and I had plimsolls on my feet. Nothing very radical. I’d stopped washing, but so what? I’d stopped changing clothes, too, but that hardly mattered.

I said, “Hullo, again. It must be two weeks.” That was the best I could do.

“Yeah. Two weeks. Look, Jez, I think the boss is maybe regretting this a little. Just wanted to give you due warning: I think that the next trip we make out here, she’ll be with us. Maybe before then you’d like to... clean yourself up a bit.”

I didn’t say anything. I was thinking that if she worried about my appearance, she should see me up-end cans to eat the content cold. I just waited. After a bit she said, “The food... The food and stuff we left you last time: was it okay?”

Yes. It was okay. I remembered to nod. Clem looked really anxious. She said, “So it’s probably only another week. You know how she is; she’ll be out here and probably yelling and then it’ll all be over with. She had this thing about fidelity. Then we’ll all go back together, probably. You know how it is. But you should, you know... get yourself smartened up a bit. If she sees you looking like that...”

I had no idea how it was. What was I to do? Make a mental note never again to fuck any member of the female Mafia? I stood there, frowning. I knew that I was frowning because I could feel it: evidently I didn’t do much in the way of facial expression when I was on my own.

Clem and companion shuffled round the deck a bit until I couldn’t bear their company any longer. I pulled off my shoes and my sweater, dumped them on the deck, and hit the water with hardly a splash. I headed off in the direction of the rock. By the time they’d finished unpacking and worrying, I’d be out of reach.

Later The boat felt odd when I got back to it. So did I. I felt scratchy and odd and wrong-footed. As I couldn’t fix that, I went downstairs – I no longer cared about correct nautical vocabulary – and looked at the food they’d brought me.

This time, after the tins, the fruit and veg, I found two bottles of wine, one bottle of champagne. There was a note in an envelope at the bottom of the box. I recognised the handwriting. I took out the stiff white paper and looked at it for a while before putting it aside.

Out in the water, I'd heard the voices again. They *do* sing. It's not like in the war when that story arose about the angels. It was only fiction but so many people believed it that it might have been fact. Some actually claimed to have seen them. I wasn't interested in angels, only Sirens. Or mermaids.

April 23th Clem, Pandora, and the unknown hired help are due later today. I think that I'm meant to have chilled the champagne, and have it waiting. As I drank it last night, *that* won't happen. It's now dawn and they're singing again. Their songs are like nothing I've ever heard. They're like Night-Scented Stock in the rain: a perfume fine enough to make you dizzy, sweet enough to make you want to dive into it. I've been sitting here all night, only breaking a half-hour ago to fix the coffee that's cooling rapidly in the mug I've wrapped my fingers round. I smile when I look at my hands.

In a minute or two I'll go to them. Now I can see them clearly: they wave to me in welcome; they *want* me to join them.

I doubt that my party will get out here without trouble. All night the waves have been beating against the boat; the constant movement has become hypnotic, but I have out-grown my seasickness. There's another change, too, a present from my sisters, developing as the days went by: fine webs between my fingers. Soft, useful webs. Between my toes, too.

There is a sense of achievement in other fields: on my cabin bed they'll find my completed dissertation. I spent my last day of writing paralleling Machen's angels with Homer's Sirens.

I never did read Pandora's note. I burned it this morning, once I'd taken the espresso machine off the little stove and poured my last-ever cup of coffee. I'm through with the written word. I'd like to *sing*.