

SONIC ESTATE

A sound investment.

BY HENRY GEE

The distemper came away in skin-like flaps, dislodging gobbets of plaster and revealing the thin, rib-like slats of wood that made up the partition wall between two cramped attic rooms. Pausing from her labours, she brushed a strand of hair from her eyes and turned the stereo up full. Motörhead. *Ace of Spades*. No need to spare the batteries. Not any more.

He'd taken her to that rock disco. They'd just got their A-level results. The beads in her long hair flailed like maces, creating a space around them. University, then, and then graduate work. They'd parted, but when she set up the company, she brought him back in. Big mistake.

It wasn't long before she'd ripped the entire wall down. The air swirled with dust. Who knows what horrors it contained — fungal spores, shrapnel of horsehair, asbestos.

Early in her graduate work, searching around for something, she noticed how bubbles in superdense, superheated liquids bounced and popped to the metal on her lab stereo. Turn up the music past 11 and the cells gave out more energy than she put in. She was a lot quieter than the music, at least to begin with. Tuning frequencies, optimizing output and then, neutrons. Papers with cautious, noncommittal titles. Graduation. Patents pending. A start-up with her supervisor, who obligingly died, leaving her with the keys to the kingdom.

The house was an adversary, at least to begin with. It deceived in Escherish nooks that weren't in the plans, with windows giving out on to a clipped view nothing like the overgrown, half-wild surroundings she knew to be there. And that shrouded bedroom with the bat-eared gargoyles whose eyes followed her round the room. She could have sworn the horrible things screamed at her. That first-floor bedroom she chose for herself, at first, too huge, but which seemed to get much larger at night. And much colder. The first winter passed with her camped out in the library, close enough to the front door to make an escape should anything ever ...

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He was the only person she knew who could handle the pressure as the company grew. Her skin

crawled remembering the day she phoned him. The catch in her voice, desperation, pleading. He was making big city bucks, marketing, management consulting, something she didn't grasp, but he had what she



hadn't. People skills. She just wanted to be R&D. She wasn't like him — *smooth*. And of course he had his price. He wanted to get smooth again like they were before, when, long haired, leather jacketed, they'd coupled, her screams, silenced in the pounding noise of the stereo. Hair cropped, after hours, across her desk, unguarded in corridors. He was so ... reptilian. But he wouldn't stop when she asked. Rougher, then, her memories, scrambled. Pain. The only way out was to sell the company. She fled beyond his grasp. Beyond anyone's grasp.

This lonely house on the coast amid scrub bent to a constant arctic breeze. Edwardian, ten bedrooms, vacant for years. She got contractors to fix the roof. Then, she decided, she'd be on her own. A life in labs had stripped her of any fear of night-shrieking plumbing or demoniac electrics.

A year passed, then two. She had all her groceries delivered, left at the doorstep. She didn't see another living soul. She broke the house, tamed it. It talked to her, cosseted her, it was all she needed. She smiled just once, when she bought — mail order, under

an assumed name — the fist-sized sonic fusion cell made by her old company. The generator that could power everything in her house for next to nothing, forever. The generator itself was submicroscopic. Most of the tennis-ball-sized, ceramic sphere was aerogel padding. Padding to absorb the noise, the incandescent rage generated by primal forces, trapped. Even now, when you put your ear to it, there was just the faintest hum. Like a rock band in heat, heard from a long way off. She wired it into the meter cupboard in the front hall.

She was wiping dust from her mouth when, through a sudden pause in the music, she heard a scrunch on the gravel outside. Panic. She switched off the stereo and suffocating silence flooded in on every side. The attic room had no window on the front, so she pounded down the back staircase two flights to the fanlight that looked out over the drive. It was just the gravel she heard: the sleek roadster made no noise. Fusion powered. Like everything else. The world she'd created. He was there. Him. No escape.

"Hey babe!" He looked up. Cocky, striped shirted. Leaning, self-assured, against the bonnet of the car. He'd seen her. "Knew you couldn't escape me forever. Don't be shy now, why don't we ...?"

His next words were lost in a terrifying blast of noise. It started subsonic, but almost strong enough, she felt, to turn her inside out. Tiles began to shake from the roof. She felt rather than saw the front doors fly open beneath her, and, as the pitch rose, she knew that the hall cupboard had opened too, and the fusion generator had cracked open to the air. All the lights fused. All except for a blueish beam, directed out the front door, straight at him, straight at the car. She saw him, trapped, as the sonic battering broke both car and man into fragments, atomizing them. A last fizzle and a crack, and then primeval silence.

She stumbled down the stairs. The meter cupboard was as she'd left it, bolted. The fusion generator was entire, whole and silent. She walked out into the deserted front drive. She could have sworn she heard applause from the house. Or maybe it was just the gravel scrunching beneath her booted feet. ■

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