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When She Was Bad

Written by Tammy Cohen

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WHEN SHE WAS BAD

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BLACK SWAN

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For Michael

1
Anne

Imagine we could see the damage inside ourselves. Imagine it showed through us like contraband on an airport scanner. What would it be like, to walk around the city with it all on view – all the hurts and the betrayals and the things that diminished us; all the crushed dreams and the broken hearts? What would it be like to see the people our lives have made us? The people we are, under our skin.

I thought about that when I saw you on the news just now. I recognized you right away. '*Such an ordinary person*,' those people said. '*I can't believe someone like that could do something so terrible*.'

When I got the text this afternoon from Barbara Campbell telling me to turn on the news, I couldn't work out what she meant at first. The news was full of the usual stuff – the Republican leadership contest, the price of fuel, Syria, Russia. Nothing that meant anything special to me. I wondered whether Barbara was going a little senile. She retired a while back, so it's possible. Then I remembered that, of course, living over in England she meant the *British* news. Well, that flummoxed me. In the end I had to call Shannon and she popped in on

her way home from work. She fixed it up in five minutes flat, running a cable from my laptop to the main TV screen so I could watch the BBC live.

I waited for Shannon to leave before I put it on. Before heading out, she hugged me for a long time, as is her custom, and I was grateful all over again. So many daughters grow out of that kind of close contact as they get older, as I did when I learned to recognize my mom's distinctive scent as last night's sweated-out booze. Parents are always a disappointment to their children, that's part of our role. But Shannon has never held it against me.

From Barbara's text, I'd guessed the news wouldn't be good. But when I saw the photographs, when I heard what you'd done . . . I had to stop myself from pouring out a large glass of white and drinking it down in one as if it was a shot of something short and strong and slammed on a bar. Instead, I took a deep breath in and tried to count to seven before releasing it as, on-screen, a woman in a blue raincoat stood outside a courtroom and recited the stark facts of your case.

'First court appearance,' said the woman's thin-lipped mouth. 'Confirmed name and address.' And, 'Judge set a date for trial.' Then the scene changed to a wide, tree-lined London street where a different woman was adding a bouquet of flowers to an impressive pile outside a glossy black gate, in front of a smart-looking Georgian townhouse. 'Crime that shocked a city . . .' the voiceover said. 'The accused worked with the victim . . . particularly brutal nature of the killing.' Then the focus skipped again to a modern office building in the financial heart of London. A young man interviewed on the sidewalk

outside the main entrance shook his head in disbelief. 'Such an ordinary person,' he repeated.

But I know. I know the truth. And ordinary doesn't come into it.

2
Paula

'I still can't believe it.'

Paula knew it wasn't helping Gill to keep saying the same thing over and over, but the phrase seemed to be stuck in her throat. Every time she opened her mouth, up it came again.

'I wouldn't take it, if I were you, Gill. Find a shit-hot lawyer. Sue the arse off them.'

Typical Ewan. Always thinking there was something that could be *done* about everything. But he was still young. Hadn't yet learned that sometimes things happen to you, and there's not a damn thing you can do about it.

'I already talked to an employment lawyer, and the head of HR was in the meeting,' said Gill, smiling bravely, although her large brown eyes seemed to swim beneath a glaze of unshed tears. 'Yes, I could try legal action but apparently the money they're offering me on top of my statutory notice period is more than I'd get if I won an unfair dismissal claim, so it's not worth it.'

'But it's so unfair,' said Chloe, who'd already gone through three tissues which were scrunched up on the table in front of her, next to a near-empty glass of wine.

‘We’re such a good team, all of us. Why would they want to go and break us up?’

It wasn’t surprising Chloe was taking her boss’s dismissal so hard. Ever since Gill had taken her on as a junior she’d had an almost Svengali-type influence over her.

‘They say we’ve been underperforming, Chloe,’ said Gill, a telltale wobble in her voice. ‘And they need a scapegoat. Which is me.’

Paula didn’t think that was entirely fair. Of course she was sorry Gill was going. They’d worked together for eight years. They were friends. But the truth was, as Executive Manager, Gill had been coasting during the last couple of years. And productivity and profitability had definitely suffered as a result. So for her to claim to be some kind of sacrificial lamb was a bit much.

Directly across the table from her, Amira, who’d already downed two gin and tonics in the time Paula had taken to sip a third of her bitter lemon, leaned forwards conspiratorially so that the ends of her thick black hair trailed in a little puddle of lager.

‘I bet Mark Hamilton patted you on the shoulder straight after he sacked you and said “no hard feelings”,’ she said to Gill. ‘Am I right?’

Gill visibly winced at the word ‘sacked’ and Paula’s heart went out to her. Amira could be so insensitive sometimes.

‘Yeah. I think he did say something like that,’ mumbled Gill. ‘But I was in shock, so half of the things he said went straight over my head.’

‘How about if we all refused to go back to work,’ said Chloe, her cheeks flushed with earnestness and Pinot

Grigio. 'They couldn't sack us all, could they?'

'They've probably sacked us all already. Just for being here and not heads down at our desks like good little workers,' said Amira.

Paula tensed. She supported Gill, of course, and she hadn't needed persuading to accompany her to the pub after she got the devastating news of her dismissal that morning. But she couldn't put her own job at risk. Not when she was the only one in the house earning any money. Sweat prickled on her spine and she surreptitiously reached her arm behind her to peel the material of her top away from her back. It was so hot in here. Or was it? Paula's hormones were so haywire she'd lost the knack of regulating her own temperature and could lurch from cold to scorching and down to freezing again in a matter of seconds. Sometimes she got so hot it was as if her own blood was boiling inside her veins.

'Sorry about the wait. The Small Child is on bar duty again. Must be an Inset day at school.' Charlie put down the drinks he'd been carrying and slid back into his seat. Then he reached across the table and wrapped his surprisingly delicate fingers around the top of Gill's hand.

'Don't let the bastards grind you down,' he said softly. 'There are plenty more companies out there who'll snap you up. We'll all give you a glowing reference.'

Gill nodded with that fixed half-smile people use when they're trying not to cry.

Sarah broke the silence following Charlie's comment, arriving at the table breathless, mobile phone in hand.

'Sorry. Sorry. Childcare emergency. All sorted now.'

Charlie cleared his jacket off Sarah's chair so she

could sit down. Paula used to envy those two their closeness, always slipping away after work to go drinking, arriving at their desks the next morning with raging hangovers and vague memories of pubs visited, random strangers met, cocktails downed. But since Sarah had had the boys, such outings had become a thing of the past. Nothing was ever the same after having children, was it?

The ends of Sarah's red hair had formed damp ringlets. Must be raining outside. That figured. Paula looked around the table – Sarah, Charlie, Chloe, Ewan, Amira, Gill, her. Already she was mourning the solid unit they'd been. Gill might not have been the most dynamic boss, but they'd all rolled along quite happily together on the whole. No fallings out. Minimal office politics. A dream team, as Chloe said.

Amira's phone beeped loudly, a kind of squawking noise that made them all jump. She glanced at her screen.

'Holy shit,' she said. 'Just got a message from Juliana who works in HR. You'll never guess who's going to be our new boss.'

'Who?' came a chorus of voices. Paula glanced at Gill, whose smile had got tighter, as if someone was stretching it out.

'Rachel Masters.'

Oh. Well. Pauls tried to avoid industry gossip, but she'd heard the name through the grapevine. Difficult. Demanding. Divisive. Those were the sorts of words that preceded Rachel Masters. Still, she got results, apparently – and that's what counted in the end.

'Hang on,' said Sarah. 'I'm sure I heard some rumour about her. Some kind of trouble in the office.'

Gill nodded. 'I heard that too.' Her voice sounded almost gleeful.

Paula fought off a fierce wave of heat that surged up from somewhere beneath her ribcage and burst into flames around her lungs, blazing up into her shoulders and throat. Anxiety was like a spiteful child pinching her insides. They'd been here in the pub for over two hours, ever since Gill had come back from a meeting with Mark Hamilton, white-faced and shaking and accompanied by a security guard who stood watch while she gathered up her things from her glass office, partitioned off from the main office floor. It had been nearly lunchtime, so they'd all gone with Gill to the pub to find out what was going on. But now Paula couldn't stop worrying about what Mark Hamilton, the company MD, would say when he came down to talk to them all, as he surely would, and found no one there. What if he brought *her* with him, Rachel Masters? Unease spread through her like the prick, prick, prick of a tattooist's needle. She was the deputy. She ought to be setting an example.

'Sorry, Gill,' she said, feeling around under her chair for her handbag. 'We ought to be getting back.'

'No. We ought to stay here. Show Hamilton that he can't just do exactly what he wants,' said Ewan, passion making him look younger than his twenty-eight years.

'Er, I think you'll find he can do exactly what he wants,' said Amira. 'Mark Hamilton Recruitment is his company. The clue's in the name.'

In the end it was Gill who decided things.

'I need to get going anyway. I'm going to give myself

the afternoon off and then I'll get on the phone, start ringing some contacts about a new job. I'm not worried. I've had so many approaches over the years.'

Paula had worked with Gill long enough to recognize her brand of quiet bravado. Poor Gill. Though she had a steely side that she kept carefully hidden, this must be a terrible blow to her self-esteem. Still, thank God she was going home so they could get back to the office. Paula sneaked a quick look at her watch, and her stomach gave a savage lurch.

'Come on,' she chivvied the others while trying to free her arm which had become trapped in the sleeve of her raincoat.

'Yes, you lot go back,' said Gill brightly. 'I'll call a taxi to come and pick me up, with all my stuff.' She gestured to the cardboard box containing notebooks, a spare pair of shoes, the framed photograph of Gill with her two young nephews. 'Just make sure you keep me updated on what's going on. I shall expect a blow-by-blow account from each of you. And pictorial evidence of the infamous Rachel Masters.'

By the time they arrived at reception, five floors down from their office, Paula was out of breath. She really ought to start going to the gym or something, she thought, try to get rid of the extra two stone that seemed to have attached itself to her in the last couple of years without her even noticing it, so that now, at fifty-five, she hardly recognized herself. In the lift, she kept her head down, for fear of seeing her own mother looking back at her from the mirrored walls.

Why had she worn that awful old top today? The shapeless blue T-shirt was made of the kind of thin

cotton that clings damply to clammy skin. If she'd known she was going to meet a new boss, she'd have made more of an effort. And she certainly wouldn't have worn these black trousers. At least the waistband was covered by her top, so you couldn't tell it was elasticated.

Bustling through the door of the office, her coat already half shrugged off, Paula's nerves were on edge. Please don't let Rachel Masters have arrived already. But a quick glance towards what used to be Gill's office confirmed her worst fears. The door was shut. Someone was in there.

For five minutes, Paula sat at her desk not knowing what to do. Though the blinds were down there was a narrow gap between the slats, through which she caught a glimpse of a woman bent over the desk that until that morning had been strewn with Gill's personal effects. Her face was partially hidden by a curtain of glossy dark hair. She couldn't get a good look, but she could tell immediately that Rachel Masters was ten, maybe fifteen years younger than her. That meant Paula had all the advantages of experience. Rachel would be glad of a safe pair of hands.

Emboldened, Paula took another peek and felt herself relax. Rachel Masters looked so alone there in that office. She was probably feeling much more nervous than they were and desperate for someone to come and introduce themselves. And as her new deputy, it really ought to be Paula herself.

Taking a deep breath, she crossed the few feet of blue carpet to her new boss's office.

'Yes,' came the reply to her knock.

Paula stepped through the door.

'I just wanted to welcome you—'

'Is it normal for the entire staff to take a two-hour lunch break?'

Rachel didn't look up and Paula was conscious of her smile shrivelling on her lips.

'No. We were just—'

'Can you call everyone together, please? I'd like to have a few words.'

'Of course. Out on the main floor?'

Finally Rachel glanced up at Paula from eyes of palest blue offset by spiky black lashes. Paula felt her cheeks burning.

'Well, unless we sit on each other's laps, we're hardly about to squeeze seven people in here, are we?'

Rachel's mouth, a red lipsticked slash, flattened into a tight smile.

Paula was aware of the sweat prickling under her arms and made a note to herself to keep her hands clamped to her sides. She felt her cheeks burning.

'Will do. You'll find we're a pretty friendly bunch.'

Again the smile that failed to reach the eyes.

'I'm not here to make friends.'