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Opening Extract from...

Tastes Likes Fear

Written by Sarah Hilary

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SARAH HILARY

TASTES LIKE FEAR

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Two years ago

Rain had blunted all of London's spires, flattened her high-rises, buried her tower blocks in puddles of mud. Even the chimneys at Battersea Power Station were laid low, their long reflections boiling in the water. Not just days, weeks of rain. Pillars of it coming down, stirring up a stink, shifting the ground under your feet, not letting you forget that this city was built on burial pits.

The rain found its way into everything, bleeding through brickwork, shaking the glass from broken windows, filling the empty can Christie put out for the rush hour. She ran her finger around its ragged lip, inviting blood – proof that she was still here. A Guinness can, its top taken off with a blunt knife, stones weighting the bottom. Coins did the same trick, but it'd been days since anyone dropped coins. She sucked at her finger, tasting meat and copper. Raw inside, an empty ache, but *I'm still here*, she thought. She wished she had better proof than a bloody finger in her mouth.

The world was a wall of umbrellas. She knew the commuters on this route, had seen them sweating in their summer dresses and shirtsleeves. Scowling now, heads down, shoulders up. Angry at her for taking up space on their

pavement, sticking her dirty feet in the half-shut door of their conscience. The rain was an excuse to hate her more than they already did.

When she was new to this game – how long ago? Months? – she'd searched the crowd for kind faces. But she'd quickly learned it wasn't kindness that gave coin. People threw change at her the way they'd toss it at a toll-gate basket. To get past, away. Soon, they wouldn't have to pretend not to notice her. She'd be see-through. The rain was washing her away.

'Do you mind?' a woman demanded, meaning Christie's feet, which were in her way apparently, even though they weren't. She'd made herself so small, no part of her was in anyone's way. 'For God's sake find yourself somewhere to go.' Thin and furious, her fist fierce with rings, clenched around the handle of a yellow umbrella.

Christie had tucked herself into a doorway where it was almost dry, but the rain still found her. Pricking through old bricks, a trickle and then a stream. She felt its fingers tickling her neck.

'There are *places*, you know.'

She didn't know. She wished she did. She was scared of the rain, the way it ruined everything, her clothes, her sleeping bag – everything she had. Rain scared her worse than fire.

When she was new to this, a young couple would come with leaflets. They'd stop and crouch, faces working hard. Talking about Our Lord and what was coming and 'Are you ready?' Christie expected it from old people, though most shook their heads as if beggars hadn't existed back in their day. Only once did anyone over the age of sixty give her a second glance. The young couple had pamphlets with pictures of grinning people. The colours ran, making her hands dirtier. When she asked for money, they got mad. They pretended they weren't – 'We're on your side' – but she saw it under the surface of their skin like a swallowing of snakes.

Worse than the snakes was the little man who came and sat beside her. He never spoke, just sat dropping change into her can, one penny at a time, so she couldn't get up and go or tell him to piss off even though he was freaking her out. He smelt funny. Not poor-funny. Rich-funny. Being rich didn't help, the young couple said, it was about being ready for what was coming. Death or Jesus, she didn't know, but there was a whole moment when she thought she could do it – pretend to be religious so they'd save her from this. Being nobody, nothing, invisible.

When the rain started, they stopped coming.

Everyone stopped, except the little man. In a plastic cape that ran the wet off him into her doorway. Splashing coppers

into her can, and she knew she couldn't afford to be picky but when he went, she shoved her hand in and scooped out his coins, flinging them away from her, sucking rusty blood from her knuckles. He'd be back for more tomorrow. She should move, somewhere he couldn't find her. Her whole body hurt like it was being squeezed.

Where would she go?

Who should she be?

She could make herself smaller for the woman with the rings, pretend to believe in Jesus for the religious couple. Go with the creep in the cape and be … whatever he wanted her to be. Just to get out of the rain for a day, an hour. It was washing her away, all her colours, everything. She wasn't *her* any more. Empty inside, scraped out. Missing.

That was when he found her, *where* he found her …

Right on the brink of being lost.

He wasn't like the little man. He was tall and fair and he smelt of the rain that was bluing the shoulders of his shirt. He didn't have pamphlets, or questions. He wasn't angry with her.

His hands were empty and open, like his face.

When he stood in her doorway, he blocked the umbrellas and the hiss and spit of tyres in the street. His shoulders stopped the rain from reaching her.

Strong fingers, wet like hers, but his palms were dry and warm.

Safe, he was safe.

There are places*, you know*.

She hadn't believed it, until then.

1

Now

Noah Jake was running late. He grabbed a bagel for breakfast, leaving the house with it held between his teeth, hands free to search for his Oyster card and keys and his phone, which was playing the theme tune from *The Sweeney* …

'Jake.' Remove the bagel, try again. 'DS Jake.'

'Shit, mate.' Ron Carling laughed. 'You sound like a dirty phone call. What've I interrupted?'

'Breakfast. What's up?'

'Not *you*, by the sound of it. Late night?'

'The late nights I can handle. It's the early mornings that're killing me.' No luck finding the Oyster card. He had a nasty feeling his kid brother Sol had swiped it. 'I'm on my way.'

'The boss wants you in Battersea.'

'Where, exactly?'

Ron supplied an address Noah recognised. 'When?'

'Ten minutes ago. Better get your roller-disco skates on.'

[#]

Forty minutes later, the traffic on York Road was being diverted by police accident signs. A snarl of cars ate the streets to either side of Battersea Power Station. Noah walked in its wide shadow, the tilt of its chimneys like stained fingers flipped at a

blue sky. Out of commission for years, the power station was sometimes home to film shoots or exhibitions, but empty for the most part. Dan had worked here when it was an art venue, said it made the Tate look like a maiden aunt's curio cabinet. Now it was being hauled into a new shape, one chimney gone, hobbling the building like an upturned table. Penthouses were on sale at six million, and there was talk of private clubs and restaurants. Noah was going to miss the old power station. Sunset Boulevard with a savage facelift, still slyly smoking sixty a day …

He heard the police tape before he saw it, switching back and forth.

Black smell of scorch marks from the smash site. An SUV had hit an Audi, the impact piling both cars into a concrete wall, taking a lamp post along for good measure.

DI Marnie Rome was with a traffic officer, her red hair tied back from her face, her neat suit the same shade as the gunmetal Audi, bits of which were still being removed. The SUV was gone, just the shape of its shoulder in the wall. 'DS Jake. Good morning.'

'Sorry I'm late.'

'Everyone's late,' the traffic officer said, 'because of this.'

'How bad is it?' Noah asked Marnie. 'Ron said no one died.'

‘Not yet. Four in hospital, two critical. Our eyewitness says a girl walked out into the road.’

No mention of a girl in the early reports online. ‘She’s one of the critical ones?’

‘She walked away. Not a scratch on her, or not from this. The driver of the Audi was lucky. His wife wasn’t. Nor was the passenger in the SUV.’

‘Which two are critical?’

‘Ruth Eaton from the Audi. Logan Marsh from the SUV. He’s eighteen. His dad was driving him home from a friend’s house. Head injuries. It doesn’t look good.’

‘But the girl doesn’t have a scratch? Where is she?’

‘I wish I knew.’

‘So when you said she walked away …’

‘I meant it literally. We need to find her. From the description, she’s at risk of harm. Half-dressed, covered in scratches. In shock.’ Marnie was studying the scars left by the crash. ‘The Audi’s driver is our only eyewitness. Joe Eaton. He’s at St Thomas’s with his wife.’

‘How old was the girl?’

‘Sixteen, seventeen?’ She pre-empted Noah’s next question. ‘Red hair, not blonde. It doesn’t sound like May Beswick.’

Twelve weeks they'd been looking for May. Noah had hoped …

'This girl's skinny,' Marnie said, 'and half-dressed. No one in Missing Persons matches her description.'

'It's not much of a description.' Twelve weeks was long enough for May to be skinny, and to have dyed her hair. 'Didn't he notice anything else about her?'

'He was trying not to run her down.'

'I was in a near-miss accident once. A kid ran into the road, after a ball. I hit the brakes in time, just. He got his ball, vanished like that.' Noah snapped his fingers. 'I only saw him for a second, but I can still see the freckles on his nose, scabs on his knees. Like a photo. It happened two years ago.'

'Flashback memory …' Marnie's eyes darkened to ink-blue. 'Perhaps Mr Eaton remembers more than he realises. Let's find out.'

2

St Thomas's smelt the same as always, a squeaky top layer of clean with sour base notes of bodies. Noah breathed through his nose from force of habit. He and Marnie walked down a corridor where trolleys had left skid marks on the walls, and the floors had a frantic shine, to the room where Joe Eaton was waiting for news of his wife.

Eaton was in his mid thirties, could've passed for twenty-eight. Darkish hair. Grey eyes, the left spoilt by a subconjunctival haemorrhage, bleeding into the white. Natty suit ruined by a neck brace for whiplash. A shade over six feet tall. Blank fright on his face when he saw Marnie and Noah.

'Mr Eaton, I'm Detective Inspector Rome, this is Detective Sergeant Jake. How are you?'

'Fine.' He brought his shoulders up. 'I'm fine. Ruth's in surgery. They think a ruptured spleen.'

'I'm sorry,' Marnie said, 'but we need to ask some questions.'

'How's Logan? I spoke with his dad last night.' Joe put a hand across his mouth. 'It sounded bad, worse than Ruth. And he's just a kid.'

'We haven't spoken with Mr Marsh yet. Shall we sit down?' Marnie drew up a chair, settling her slim frame to face the man.

Joe nodded, following her lead. Noah could smell his stress: stale sweat under CK1; green hand gel from one of the hospital's dispensers.

'I was hoping you could tell us about the young woman you saw last night.'

'She stepped right in front of me. I didn't have any choice but to swerve. I'd have killed her otherwise.' He pushed a hand through his hair. Winced. 'Has she told you what she was doing?'

'She's missing,' Marnie said. 'We're looking for her.'

'You mean she ran off? After the crash?' He looked stricken, scared rather than angry. 'She did *that* and then she ran?'

'We're looking for her. You thought she was injured?'

'She was covered in scratches. But she's okay, she must be, otherwise how did she run off?'

'We'd like to go over your description from last night. In case we missed anything.'

'There's not a scratch on *me*, that's what I don't get. Just this thing for the whiplash.' Joe touched the neck brace then put out his hands and stared at them. 'Even Logan's dad … We walked away, both of us. But I'm the only one without a scratch to show for it, and I caused the bloody thing.'

Marnie and Noah waited, not speaking.

‘She walked right in front of us. If I’d hit her, she’d be dead. I was doing thirty tops, but that’s enough to kill someone. I *had* to swerve.’

‘Which direction was she coming from?’ Marnie asked.

‘My left. I suppose that’s … west?’

‘And she was walking east.’

‘There’s an estate on that side of York Road, maybe she lives there? They breath-tested me, I wasn’t over the limit. I’d had a glass of wine with Ruth, but we were eating spaghetti. I was stuffed full of carbs and I’d had two coffees. We’ve got *kids*. They’re with Ruth’s sister, too little to understand what’s going on with their mum.’

‘How old are they?’ Noah asked.

‘Sorcha’s two. Liam’s ten months. Carrie’s great with them. They love their auntie.’ Joe wiped his eyes, settled his hands on the lip of the table. ‘Okay. The girl, last night? She looked seventeen, maybe a bit younger. Hard to tell because she wasn’t dressed properly, just a man’s shirt, too big for her, white. And her skin was really pale, except for the scratches. She was moving like a wind-up toy. Not fast, but like she wouldn’t … *couldn’t* stop. Her face was … scary.’ He blinked. ‘She wasn’t going to stop.’

‘Was she calling for help?’

‘No, but her face… It was like she was screaming.’ He grimaced, moving his head as if he wanted to get rid of the image he’d conjured.

‘Mr Eaton.’ Marnie held out a photograph. ‘Was this the girl you saw?’

‘Isn’t this … Mary Beswick?’ He held the photo by its edges. ‘The missing schoolgirl?’

‘May Beswick. Yes, it is.’

Noah held his breath as Joe studied May’s face, but …

‘It wasn’t her.’ Joe handed back the photo. ‘Sorry.’

‘Are you sure? She could have lost weight since this was taken. Dyed her hair, changed her appearance. How tall was the girl you saw?’

‘Shorter than Ruth. Five foot? Not much more than that. Just a kid, a teenager. Maybe she’s nearer to fifteen. And really skinny. Bony knees. Red hair.’ A glance at Marnie. ‘Not like yours. Red red, like paint.’ His eyes flicked back, frowning, to the photograph. ‘It *was* dyed.’

‘Long hair, or short?’

‘To her shoulders. But it was crazy, like she’d back-combed it. Really wiry and wild.’

May Beswick was five foot one, not skinny but not fat. In the photo, her blonde hair was waist-length, brushed smooth. She wore a green jumper over a white blouse, and she was

smiling, her top lip coming away from her front teeth, soft brown eyes crinkled at the corners. Noah didn't need to look at the photo to be sure of those details. He'd been seeing her face in his sleep for twelve weeks.

'What else was she wearing,' Marnie asked, 'apart from the shirt?'

'Nothing. Knickers, I think.' Joe flushed. 'No trousers, no shoes. No bra. Maybe she was seventeen. I can't tell. She should've been wearing a bra.'

Somewhere a door slammed open. Joe turned his head towards the sound. His hands were clenched on the table, his neck red inside the brace.

Marnie said, 'Tell us about the scratches.'

'All … all over her. Her legs, her stomach, her chest.' He grimaced. 'Everywhere.'

In the photograph, May's face was smooth, like her hair. Round cheeks, a wide forehead, no acne. Not a mark on her, twelve weeks ago.

'Was her face scratched?'

'Not her face. But everywhere else, from what I could see.'

'Were the scratches recent?' Noah asked.

'I don't think so. Hard to tell in the headlights, and I only saw her for a second. They looked black, not red, not like fresh blood.' He drew a breath. Held it in his chest. Let it go. 'Ruth got

a better look than I did. The girl came from the left, her side of the car. If …' He pushed his hands at his eyes. '*When* she wakes up, she'll be able to give you a better description. Ruth always notices stuff. She's brilliant like that.'

He pushed harder with his hands, knuckles bleaching under the pressure. 'I can't forget her face. Maybe it *was* May Beswick, I don't know. She didn't look like her, but she didn't look like *anyone*. Whatever happened to her … she looked … *terrorised*.'

He dropped his hands and looked up at Marnie and Noah. 'She wasn't making a sound, not a sound, but her whole face was *screaming*.'