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The Damage Done

Written by James Oswald

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The Damage Done

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For Stuart MacBride, who many years ago suggested
I stop writing fantasy and turn my hand to crime.

I

Silence fills the old house like a pool of stagnant water. Sunlight filtering in through the thick ivy clogging the fly-spotted windows picks out motes as they dance and spin in the heat. There is a stillness to the air, as if nothing has disturbed this place in decades. Only ghosts walk these abandoned rooms. Only spirits haunt the long, cobwebbed corridors. Even the rats avoid it and the only bird anywhere near lies dead in the hallway, trapped and starved and rotted to feather and bone.

She treads lightly on the wooden stairs, footsteps leaving imprints in the dust. Light fingers caress the bannisters as she descends from high above. If she notices the dereliction around her, she doesn't show it, stepping across the litter-strewn hallway without a care. She walks through a library filled with rotting bookshelves, their books collapsed into piles of decaying paper and leather on the floor; broken furniture worn down by time more than use. The fireplace in the drawing room is filled with ash and twigs, a small sapling growing where its parent was long ago put to the fire. The dining room is laid out for a meal, the food on the plates half-eaten and now turned to dirt. A fern unfurls in the corner where water has leaked in through a broken window. Its primeval fronds are delicate and pale, a home for insects and spiders. She stops for a moment, taking one leaf lightly between finger and thumb like a seamstress eyeing up a piece of fine cloth.

'I heard a noise. Did something disturb you?'

She turns slowly, recognising the voice of her brother.

'I woke up. I was asleep for so long.' She stretches like a cat, long arms reaching for the cracked, damp-spotted ceiling. The bones in her back and neck click and pop as if she has not moved in a very long time. She yawns wide, revealing pure white teeth in a mouth as black as the night.

'We are needed in the city.' He emerges from the shadows, her double. She leaves the fern, steps through piles of dried leaves and the skeletons of long-dead animals until she is standing directly in front of him. Together it is clear they are twins, but the embrace she drapes around him is far more intimate than any sibling greeting. He wears her like a coat for long moments before drawing away, pushing her back. He is dressed for the road and lifts a heavy leather bag as if its meaning is obvious. 'We are needed in the city.'

'I know. I felt it too.' She wipes at her lips with a slender finger, slips it into her mouth as if to taste whatever is there. The slightest of pauses as she looks around the derelict room, then with a shrug of her shoulders she turns for the door.

2

'All units check in.'

Detective Inspector Tony McLean sat in the driver's seat of the unmarked police car, staring across the dark street at a row of Georgian terrace houses. A few lights shone out through chinks in the curtains, but most of these buildings were offices, their workers long since gone home. Further up the street, scaffolding clung to a facade like ivy, skips filling up with seventies Artex-covered partitioning and mile upon mile of outdated wiring. Whether it was being turned into flats or just one rich person's home, he couldn't tell, but slowly this part of the New Town was being reclaimed as residential.

'Everyone in place. Might as well get this show on the road.' Beside him, Detective Chief Inspector Jo Dexter stared at her chunky airwave set. In the confined space of the car, all McLean could smell was stale cigarette and mint. Not overwhelming, but enough that he'd rather be outside. In truth, he'd far rather be directing the operation from the front, but that was sergeant work.

'All units proceed as planned.' Jo Dexter placed the airwave set on the dashboard in front of her, tuned to the channel designated for the operation, then settled back in her seat.

'Christ, I could do with a fag right now.'

'Thought you'd quit,' McLean said, even though he knew better.

'Aye. Thought I had too. Thought you'd gone back to CID as well.' Dexter peered out of the windscreen at the activity across the street. A dozen uniforms poured out of an unmarked Transit van, their hi-vis jackets reflecting the street lights as they clattered up the stone steps and in through the front door their colleagues had just rammed open. A few muffled screams of alarm wafted out on the night-time air.

'Seems like none of us get what we want these days. Except maybe DCI Spence. Never thought I'd look back on Dagwood's reign with fondness.'

Dexter opened her mouth to say something, but her airwave set squawked an interruption.

'Scene secure, ma'am. You might want to come over now.'

McLean climbed out of the car, feeling the autumn chill in the air. At least it was fresh. Across the road, the house that had been the centre of attention was ablaze with light now, shutters thrown open and curtains drawn to reveal whatever sordid secrets lay within. He looked up and down the street, only slightly surprised to see another car parked with two people sitting in it, the silhouette of a long lens. This raid was meant to have been kept quiet, but someone always told the press.

'Paps?' Dexter asked, seeing the direction of his gaze.

'Almost certainly. Nothing like getting a snap of someone important being hauled out of a knocking shop by the rozzers, is there?'

'Aye, well. We can send a couple of constables over to

distract them. Let's go see who's been caught with their troosers down first.'

The inside of the house was warm and bright. McLean stepped through the front door into a large reception hall filled with bustling police. Comfortable sofas lined the walls, low tables in front of them scattered with magazines and a few half-empty glasses. It might have been a posh boutique hotel rather than somewhere people paid for sex. Chances were that would be a line the lawyers would try, if it got that far.

Detective Sergeant Kirsty Ritchie spotted them and pushed her way through the melee. She wore a stab vest over her dark blue suit, but it was hanging open. If there had been any threat it was now long past.

'Exactly what we were expecting, sir, ma'am.' Ritchie had an airwave set in one hand and shoved it into her pocket as she spoke. 'There's a couple more reception rooms on this floor, a dozen bedrooms upstairs. We're still working on the basement.'

'I thought you said the scene was secure,' Dexter said.

'Oh it is, ma'am. Very.' Ritchie smiled, something McLean hadn't seen much of lately. 'It's going to take a while to get some of the people out of their . . . restraints.'

'Anyone important?' McLean asked. 'Only the press are here already. We'll need to be careful getting people out. You know what the lawyers are like. Any suggestion we've set someone up and the whole operation's bust.'

Ritchie's smile faded into a frown. 'Press? How the fuck did they find out?' She shook her head. 'No matter. We can get a van in the back, take everyone out that way. I'll sort it.'

'Good. We'll need to talk to them all first. Keep them separated until we've taken statements.'

'Shouldn't be a problem. All the johns are in individual rooms. Well, most of them. I've got a uniform on each door. No one in, no one out.'

'Good work, Sergeant.' Dexter gave Ritchie a friendly pat on the shoulder, then turned to McLean. 'Guess the sooner we get started, eh?'

McLean looked around the hallway. A few of the girls had been brought through and sat on the sofas. Some were in tears, some defiant, most just head down and shoulders slumped in resignation. What struck him most was how ordinary they looked. They weren't especially young or particularly old, not noticeably thin or fat. Some looked like they had dressed for a particular kind of party, but mostly they were just a bunch of women, shocked and frightened by a visit from the local constabulary in the middle of the night.

'Top down or bottom up?' he asked, getting a look of puzzled horror from Dexter and Ritchie both.

'Shall we begin with the basement and work our way to the attic, or do you want to do it the other way round?'

'Oh, right.' Dexter let out a short bark of a laugh, startling a couple of nearby uniforms. 'Let's split up. I'll take Ritchie and start at the top. You can have the basement. I'm guessing DC Gregg's still down there?'

'She was last time I saw her.' Ritchie gave McLean a naughty wink as she and Dexter headed for the stairs. 'Have fun, sir.'

He watched them go, then asked one of the constables for directions to the basement. Through the back of the house, the decor was much the same, a couple of large

reception rooms either side of a narrow back hallway, window looking out on to what might once have been a garden but was now a concreted parking yard. Steps worn smooth by age led him down into a stone-walled corridor, neatly arched ceiling surprisingly high overhead. The flagstone floor had been covered with a narrow strip of dark red carpet, and what looked like heavy iron sconces hung at regular intervals like an unconvincing film set. The torches in them flickered in a way flame never would, and closer inspection showed them to be made of plastic with electric bulbs concealed in their tops.

McLean was looking for the wires when a shriek of alarm distracted him. He rushed to the nearest open door, and as he took in the scene beyond it, he understood Ritchie's wink.

It was a large room, with a vaulted ceiling held up by squat stone pillars and lit by more of the fake torches. Two uniformed officers, one male, one female, stood with their backs to the door, staring at a metal cage suspended from an iron ring set into the ceiling. Perhaps a little over six foot long and cylindrical in shape, it was only just large enough to contain the fat man locked within it. His feet were a few inches off the ground and apart from a black leather face mask he was completely naked.

'Ah, sir. I was hoping someone senior might get here soon.'

McLean dragged his attention from the dangling man, seeing the familiar form of Detective Constable Sandy Gregg emerge from the shadows on the far side of the room. As his eyes adjusted, he saw yet more strange apparatus and what appeared to be another man.

'What's going on in here, Constable? Why's this man still locked up?'

'Key's snapped off in the padlock, sir. Don't know if it was done on purpose or not.' Gregg walked up to the cage and rattled the offending article, close to the man's flaccid member. Perhaps feeling the movement, he threw his head from side to side, mumbling something.

'Think he's gagged under that hood.' Gregg let go of the padlock, reached up and patted the man's arm through the bars of his cage. 'Try to stay calm, sir. We'll have you out of there in a jiffy.'

'If he's gagged, who made that noise?'

'Oh, that's Mr Jefferies.' DC Gregg pointed over into the dark corner, where McLean could now clearly see a man leaning uncomfortably over something that looked a bit like a coffee table made of Meccano.

'What's wrong with him?'

'I think he's taken too many little blue pills, sir. Either that or he's just really turned on by a uniform. We've been having difficulty, um, extracting him. Attached by a rather sensitive part. Doctor's on the way.'

McLean looked from one man to the other. No doubt the women who had been ministering to them were in the group upstairs. Well, these two weren't going anywhere in a hurry. He could come back to them later. He turned to the uniformed officers.

'You two stay and wait for the doctor. Gregg, you're with me. Let's go and see what other delights this place has in store for us.'

3

'You've got no right. This is a private house. We've not done anything wrong.'

If McLean had a pound for every irate man who uttered those words as he worked his way slowly up the building, he'd have had enough for a half-decent bottle of wine. He'd have needed something considerably stronger to erase the sight of puffy white flesh, the smell of things best left unidentified. People were endlessly creative in their sexual adventures, it would seem, but ultimately it all boiled down to the same thing. This man was like all the others he had interviewed so far, nondescript, swore he had no previous record. Even his name was average, so much so that they'd had to check his driving licence when he'd told them. John Smith. Utterly ordinary, except perhaps for his sexual proclivities and his estuary Essex accent. Two women had been in here with him, although from what McLean had heard they'd been more interested in each other.

'You deny that you were paying this woman—' McLean consulted his notes. 'Sorry, these women, for sex?'

Mr Smith sat in his boxer shorts and shirt on the edge of a large, comfortable-looking bed. The room they were in was large, too, with a floor-to-ceiling bay window that looked out on to the darkened street. Or would have done had not the shutters been closed and a heavy set of curtains drawn. Given the situation he had been found in, it

was perhaps for the best. As yet he hadn't shown any sense of shame at his behaviour, something McLean had noticed of the other clients he'd interviewed.

'There's no law against it, you know?' Mr Smith's voice rose at the end in the tiniest hint of a question. It was the first sign of doubt McLean had heard all night, other than the endless loop of it going around in his own head. There was something very wrong about this whole set-up, and he had a nasty feeling the raid might well backfire on the police if they didn't play things very carefully.

'Against paying for sex? No.' McLean studied Mr Smith's face for signs of embarrassment, found none. 'But brothels are illegal and your use of this one will have to be noted. Your name and details will go on record with the sex industry department.'

Now Mr Smith looked worried. 'What does that even mean? Can you do that? I mean, I've not committed any crime here. This isn't a brothel.'

'So everyone keeps telling me, and you know what? I don't believe them. As to whether or not you've committed a crime here? Well, Mr Smith. We'll see about that. Once we've got the results back from the PNC check.'

'Look, you've got it all wrong. These girls. I wasn't paying them.'

'Lucky you. It makes no difference.'

'No, see. They're not prostitutes. I've not done anything wrong.'

Almost word for word it was the same claim he had heard in all the other rooms. McLean didn't want to think of the implications should it turn out to be true. He turned away, spoke to the uniform PC on the door. 'Let him get

dressed, then bring him downstairs. Everyone's going out the back to avoid the press. We'll carry on this conversation back at the station.'

'The station? Press?' Mr Smith's voice rose an octave. Well, everyone had something to hide. 'But you can't . . . my rights . . .'

'Your rights, Mr Smith?' McLean paused at the door, caught DC Gregg's eye. 'Read him his rights will you, Constable? I'm going to have a chat with the DCI.'

Halfway down the second flight of stairs, McLean's concerned musing was interrupted by a loud shout from an open doorway. He bustled down and stuck his head into another bedroom, larger even than the ones he had seen already. It was different, too, though he couldn't quite work out how. The bed was as big as all the others, and doors led off to what looked like an en-suite bathroom and a dressing room. One wall was dominated by two tall windows that looked out on to the blackness of the back lane behind the building. Between them, an antique dressing table much like the one in his grandmother's bedroom was heaped with heavy-looking academic books, a spiral-bound notepad open in suggestion of study. Detective Sergeant Ritchie stood with her back pressed against the edge of the table, pushed there no doubt by the strident tones of the woman making all the noise.

'This is an outrage. Have you any idea who I am? Who I know? You can't just break down my door in the dead of night.'

'Running a brothel is against the law, ma'am. As is living off immoral earnings. Does the taxman even know about

this?' Ritchie gestured towards the open notebook, then noticed McLean standing in the doorway. 'Ah, sir. I wonder if you could explain the situation to Miss Marchmont here. She doesn't seem to want to listen to me.'

'Sir? About bloody time I spoke to someone in charge.' The woman whirled around, mouth open to tear McLean off a strip. He braced himself, seeing the fury in her eyes even as he noticed her sensible clothing, thin face hung with straight black hair. There was something hauntingly familiar about her eyes, but he couldn't for the life of him think where he might have met her before.

'I . . .' Her voice died as a puzzled frown spread across her face. Or maybe it wasn't puzzlement but something else. Fear perhaps. Whatever it was, the woman's anger seemed to leach away like air from an old party balloon.

'Miss Marchmont, is it?' McLean strove to sound conciliatory even as he racked his brain trying to work out where he knew her from. Certainly the name meant nothing to him. She didn't reply, giving instead the faintest of nods.

'We're acting on good information that this house is being used as a brothel. I have a warrant to search the premises for evidence to that effect, and given what is going on in the basement I don't think I need to justify my actions any further.'

Marchmont let her head droop forward, as if the muscles in her slender neck had grown too tired to take the weight any more. Her long black hair slid across her features like a stage curtain. 'You've got it all wrong.'

Something about her words, the way she spoke, made McLean believe her. It wasn't a happy thought, the ramifications all too easy to imagine.

'I'll be the judge of that,' he said, and at the same time realised what it was about the room that had been bothering him. Not that the bed was made, or that Miss Marchmont had clearly been discovered in here alone. It was the smell. The rest of the house reeked of sex, of cheap aftershave and booze. But this room smelled like a room in a house this old should. Like the spare rooms in his own house that he rarely had any need to visit. Not a place anyone spent much time.

He walked to the dressing table and picked up the notebook. Miss Marchmont's handwriting was neat but tightly packed, difficult to read. The words weren't any kind of book-keeping, though, nor a tally of names and addresses. McLean put the notebook down and picked up one of the heavy leather-bound books. On the outside it claimed to be a manual of corporate law, and a quick flick through the densely printed pages within showed that it wasn't lying. He put it back down again, a sinking weight dragging in his gut. Turning around to face Miss Marchmont, he saw her hand covering her stomach, as if protecting herself against this invasion of her privacy. Her face was a white mask, emotionless and unreadable, her eyes locked on him, peering from behind that curtain of straight black hair, and for a moment he thought he knew where he had seen her before. Then she dropped her hand to her side, shook her hair from her face and pulled herself upright, and the moment was gone.

'You won't find anything untoward here. None of my guests are doing anything illegal.'

'And yet you're not – how shall I put it – joining in?'

The hand went up to the stomach again, the ghost of a smile appearing on Marchmont's lips. 'What can I say?

These parties take a lot of organising, but this evening I really wasn't feeling up to it. Didn't want to put everyone off just because I'm a bit under the weather, so I let them get on with it. We're all friends, after all.'

'Think we might have a problem, Jo.'

McLean found DCI Dexter in the kitchen, at the back of the house on the ground floor. It looked surprisingly like the kitchen of any large, modern house; the sort of thing you'd probably find in the pages of a glossy lifestyle magazine. It was bright and shiny and didn't feel all that homely to him compared with the lived-in warmth and omnipresent cat hairs of his own kitchen, but at least the coffee machine worked.

'You're telling me, Tony. We had it on good authority this place was operating as a brothel, but now I'm beginning to have my doubts.'

McLean pulled out a tall wooden stool and sat down at a long breakfast bar. Dexter was leaning against the other side of the counter, cradling a mug in both hands.

'It's got to be, though. I mean, I may be new to things here, but the last time I checked, a house where more than one sex worker was trading counted as a brothel. OK, a lot of the customers here are claiming they never paid for anything, but that's not meant to matter.'

'Not meant to. No.' Dexter took a long swill of coffee, then placed the mug down on the perfectly clean work surface. 'Bloody stupid law if you ask me. I wish people didn't buy and sell sex at all, but I'm a realist. It happens and my job's making sure nobody gets hurt. It'd be much easier to do that if these women could all club together and run

things themselves, but the law says no. So here we are, busting open a brothel and turfing a bunch of sex workers out on to the street where no one can keep an eye on the sick bastards abusing them.'

'At least we get a few more names and photos for the records.' It wasn't really any consolation at all, but McLean didn't know what else to say.

'That's the thing though, Tony. All those women in the hall there. Not a single one of them's on our database. Far as I can tell we've never seen any of the men before either.'

Without thinking, McLean reached out and took up the mug. It was still half-full, the dark liquid warm but bitter. Jo Dexter liked her coffee black and strong.

'What are you saying?'

'I don't know. You know as well as I do that you can't have a brothel without sex workers. What if none of these women are?'

McLean looked around the room again, taking in the decor. The counter Dexter was leaning against housed a large gas hob and a small preparation sink. The worktop was polished granite and oiled wood. The rest of the kitchen units were stylish, the built-in appliances all top names. Half of the room was taken up with a dining area that he could imagine young professionals chatting around while they sipped chilled Pinot Noir or ridiculously strong craft beers, waiting for their hostess to serve up something that had probably been prepared by a local restaurant but which she'd pretend she had slaved for hours cooking. It was, in short, a designer kitchen. Not the sort of place a dozen working girls might use to reheat their pizza, or as a retreat from the steady flow of johns through the front door.

'Do we know who actually owns the house?' he asked. Dexter gave him a stare that said quite clearly just how much of an idiot she thought him.

'I wasn't born yesterday. And if you'd been paying attention at the briefing you'd know anyway.' She snatched back the mug and downed the coffee in one, grimacing at the taste.

'The notes just said it was rented. Who owns it? And who's paying the rent?'

'It's owned by a letting company. Sanderson Holdings. Probably part of some pension fund or something. Name on the tenancy agreement's Heather Marchmont.'

McLean recalled the young woman alone upstairs, her strange familiarity. 'Aye, I just met her. Not sure what to make of her, really.'

'How so?' Dexter raised a quizzical eyebrow, dragging the other one up with it into a comical frown.

'Well, she's up there in her room all on her own, fully dressed, working on something that looks a lot more like contract law than running a brothel while all around her there's people . . .' McLean tailed off, not quite sure how to describe the myriad ways in which the people they had found had been pleasuring themselves and each other. Not quite sure how they could have got something so simple as a raid on a brothel so spectacularly wrong. 'I think we need to get her out of here and into an interview room. Quick as. Is it possible this really is a private house? These people are all just here having sex with their wives and girlfriends? I don't know, some kind of swingers' club?'

Dexter's look of incredulity changed as her gaze shifted from McLean to a space just behind him. He turned to see

DC Gregg standing in the doorway. She had her airwave set in one hand, an electronic PDA in the other.

'Think I might have something, sir, ma'am,' she said.

'Is it proof these women are sex workers? Because if it is I'll kiss you.' DCI Dexter crossed the room with alarming speed, bearing down on the hapless detective constable like a seagull spying a poke of chips. Gregg backed away, out into the hallway.

'No, ma'am. Sorry.'

Dexter stopped almost as quickly as she had started. 'What is it then?'

'It's one of the . . . um . . . clients?' Gregg held up her PDA even though the tiny text on the screen was impossible to read. 'We got a hit from the PNC.'

Judging by the noises coming from the front hall, the women the police had found in the building had mostly recovered from the shock of the raid and were now moving into the angry stage. The sooner they were taken to the station and processed the better, really. Except, having met Miss Marchmont, McLean had a horrible feeling that wasn't going to go as well as planned. He ignored them anyway, following DC Gregg as she led them up the stairs and back to the room where Mr John Smith was getting fully dressed. A bored uniform PC watched from the doorway and stood to one side to let them in. Smith was pulling on shiny black leather shoes and looked up as they entered.

'Did you really think we wouldn't find out, John?' DCI Dexter asked.

'Who're you?'

'See, that's what the N in PNC stands for, isn't it?

National. That's National as in the whole of the United Kingdom. Not just Scotland. You're a long way from home now, aren't you?'

'Who is this?' Smith turned his attention to McLean. 'What is this?'

'This, Mr Smith, is my boss, Detective Chief Inspector Dexter. You'd do well to answer her questions. Just bear in mind we probably already know the answers.'

Smith switched his attention back to Dexter, his head sweeping up and down as he appraised her, the slightest of sneers forming on his face. McLean watched and started to understand. It hadn't been there before, when it had just been DC Gregg and him conducting the interview. There the woman had clearly been the underling, in her proper place. Now, presented with the senior officer conducting the entire operation and finding out that it wasn't a man, Smith's true colours were beginning to show. How was it he'd been found? With two women? The man probably thought one was too few to be worth bothering about. What a wonderful specimen of unrepentant misogyny.

'Why didn't you tell us you were on the sex offenders' register, Mr Smith? Did you think we might miss a little thing like that?' Judging by Dexter's tone, she'd got the measure of the man too. He opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again, shoulders slumping.

'There's the small matter of forgetting to check in with the local constabulary when you moved here too. That detail slip your mind?' Dexter nodded at the uniform constable. 'Get him down to the van. Sooner we get this lot all processed, the sooner we can all go home and get some kip.'

She stood to one side as the PC produced cuffs that were decidedly not fluffy, ordered Mr Smith to stand, put his hands behind his back. By the way the man complied, McLean guessed it wasn't the first time he'd been through the routine. He was almost out of the door, pushed rather than led by the constable, when Dexter stopped him with a light touch to one arm.

'Thanks, by the way,' she said, receiving a puzzled scowl in return.

'What for?'

'For being here. I was beginning to worry we'd cocked up, if you'll excuse the bad pun. Finding you's enough to justify the raid, even if we can't pin anything on anyone else.'