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The Secret

Written by Katerina Diamond

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1

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For my husband, without whom I would think about murder a lot less.

Chapter 1: The Pro

The present

Bridget could hear cars passing on the wet roadside below the windows of the listed Victorian building where she worked. The traffic around Exeter's Quadrangle started to change at this time of night, from people making their way back from work, to people seeking something a little more interesting than what they had going on at home. She looked down from her window. The rain had abated for a few moments and the streets were empty, aside from the occasional vehicle. The only other sound she could hear was her flatmate, Estelle, in the room next door, 'entertaining' her client, headboard banging against the wall. She stared at the illuminated face of the clock tower a few hundred yards from her house and waited. Her visitor was late. He was never late.

There was a knock on the door and before Bridget

had a chance to answer, Estelle burst in, half-naked and out of breath.

'I need a solid.'

'Sounded like you were getting one.'

'Good one.' She adjusted her bra and flicked her hair extensions back. 'I mean I need a favour.'

'What kind of favour?' Bridget didn't want to know; Estelle's favours were always a little extreme.

'I've got Hitchcock with me and he wants extra time. I need you to take the Baby.'

'No way, Estelle, he's your problem, not mine. Besides, I'm waiting for someone.'

'Come on, please, Bridge! He doesn't even do anything, he just needs a cuddle and he sleeps the whole time. I'll be ten minutes – tops!'

Bridget looked at her watch.

'Fine, but just this once, Estelle, you know I'm not into all that.'

'I'll owe you one, big time.'

'You will.'

Estelle blew her a kiss and disappeared. Bridget couldn't help but keep looking out of the window, waiting for Sam. He would usually let her know if he couldn't come, and the silence was making her nervous. The city of Exeter was strangely quiet tonight. Generally, everyone went to bed early during the week, preparing for another hard day at work, but on a Friday it was usually busier than this. Tonight definitely had more of a Wednesday feel. She watched a car approaching. It was slowing as it got near. The rain made it hard to discern the make, so she held on to the hope that it

might be Sam. But as the black four-by-four pulled on to the battered forecourt, her hope faded. Through the rain, she saw a man step out of the car and rush to the front door. The buzzer rang, Estelle's buzzer; they had one each, so each girl could tend to her own clients. Two girls per floor over two floors, with a communal kitchen and lounge at ground level. The sound went off again. It was frowned upon to open the door to someone else's bell, but Bridget went downstairs through the communal hallway and looked out of the spy hole in the shared front door. It was too dark to see the man, and his face was shielded from the rain by the collar of his trench coat. She took one last look through the spy hole and opened the door. The man kept his face covered and walked in, shaking off his umbrella.

'Where's Estelle?' the Baby asked.

'Come in, Estelle asked me to take care of you today,' Bridget said nervously, stepping out in front of the man. The Baby must have come straight from the office – she hoped he had his own nappy on underneath that bespoke Savile Row suit because there were some lines she just would not cross, even in the line of duty. As she led him up the stairs and to her room, she got the feeling he didn't much care who was looking after him, just as long as someone was. He was one of the less perverted of Estelle's clients, and that was saying something.

Bridget slowly undressed him, hanging each item carefully on a mahogany clothes horse. She pushed him on to the bed and sat down next to him, pulling him close to her and wrapping her arms around him.

'I'm hungry, I need milk.' He nuzzled into her.

'Oh, um . . . I don't . . .'

'Estelle usually keeps it in a bottle in the fridge. You need to warm it up though.' He seemed annoyed at having to tell her these things.

'OK, sorry, just wait there.' She rushed out of the room, silently cursing Estelle. This was not the deal.

She found the milk in the fridge and put it in the microwave. She pushed the button and stared at the red digital clock counting down. When it got to zero, the clock went back to the actual time and looking at it, she realised with a pang that she ought to be with Sam right now. All week she looked forward to her Friday visits with Sam. They would drive out to the Double Locks pub and huddle together in the corner. She began to worry again; it wasn't like him to be late, he was never late. That feeling was creeping under her skin, the feeling that if she didn't hear from him soon she may never hear from him again.

She took the bottle and shook it to disperse the heat. As she walked back to the bedroom, the door to Estelle's room opened and out walked the man they all referred to as Hitchcock. Bridget had never seen him up close before; he was fiercely private. She could only just see Hitchcock's eyes, very dark, staring at her with a mixture of disdain and scrutiny. There was something familiar about him. She had always assumed that he was called Hitchcock because he looked like the famous director – no one used real names in this game – but he was tall and slim, his dark hair peeking out from under his fedora. He looked nothing like the original Hitchcock.

He turned away quickly and Bridget ducked into her room to find the Baby curled up on the bed in a babygro, sucking his thumb. She rolled her eyes and walked towards him. She could hear Estelle and Hitchcock arguing at the front door before it slammed shut. A moment later, her bedroom door opened and Estelle walked in. Flustered, she took the bottle from Bridget and sat down next to the Baby, beginning to stroke his hair.

'I can take over now; he had to go.'

'What were you fighting about?'

'He wasn't happy about bumping into you, that's all. I told him earlier I had the place to myself. I thought you would be out. Come on, Baby.' She lifted the Baby's head on to her lap and put the bottle in his mouth – he suckled away. Bridget supposed as kinks went, it was a pretty harmless one.

'I'm going to take a shower, then,' Bridget said, before quickly exiting the room.

Their hot water wasn't working again so Bridget gathered her things and went to ask Dee, who lived upstairs, if she could use her shower.

'Are you sure you don't mind?'

'No, it's cool. I was just getting ready to go out. What do you think of this?' Dee did a twirl in what was obviously a stolen dress: blue sequins with a low neckline. She was a notorious shoplifter; some of the gifts she had given Bridget in the past attested to that. Dee was in between flatmates – previous tenants always looked for another house share after spending a few weeks with Dee and her sticky fingers.

'You know those earrings of mine you like, the vintage blue crystal ones? They would look really nice with that dress. They're in our bathroom downstairs, if you want them.' Bridget smiled at Dee. It was always better to offer her things before she took them anyway.

'You're a star. Maybe tonight I'll meet my millionaire,' Dee said, blowing Bridget a kiss as she made her way down the stairs to the floor below.

Bridget loved the feeling of hot water. Living in this house felt dirty, everything felt wrong. She wished she could be back home with her family, or even call her mother, but that wasn't an option at the moment. She washed her hair for the first time in a week, feeling the filth and grime hidden underneath the layers of hair-spray. Dirty hair held a style better. Estelle would make her hair pretty again with rollers and a curling iron. Bridget was never any good with that stuff. Luckily she was naturally quite appealing, in fact she looked better without make-up on, but the men here weren't interested in natural beauty. They wanted the hot plastic on their arm, with the push-up bras and the fake tans; they wanted the glamour-model look, not the girl next door. Mostly Bridget just provided dates, unlike Estelle, who was all about the extra-curriculars – that's where the real money got made, that's where you got to meet the important men. Bridget hadn't proved she could be trusted yet.

She turned off the water and ran her fingers through her hair, it squeaked between her hands as she worked through the tangles. It felt so good to get all that shit off her. She threw a towel around herself and headed

into Dee's lounge, where she spotted several things of her own that had gone missing in the last few days. She didn't begrudge Dee; she knew it was something she had no control over, and none of those stolen things meant anything to her anyway. Nothing in this life meant anything to her, except Sam.

She walked down the stairs back to her flat, wearing just her towel. The door was ajar. Something was off. She pressed her back against the wall and peered through the gap. She could see Dee's foot, her blue patent shoe hanging off at the heel. Bridget crouched down and peered in further, she could hear a noise coming from inside. *Don't panic*, she thought to herself. *You know what to do*. Still, her stomach twisted as she saw what was inside the room.

Dee was laid out on the ground, eyes wide open, her face frozen in an expression of surprise. Bridget could see her body moving as she struggled for breath. Blood pooled beneath her, and her legs were wet with red. Bridget could see a five-inch slash mark high up on the inside of her thigh. Her femoral artery had been cut; she would be dead within minutes. One thought entered Bridget's head.

Shit. They know who I am.

Bridget started to move forward into the flat, knowing she had to get her phone. It was barely six feet away. Dee's eyes moved towards her, flashing her a foreboding look, a warning. She saw a tear falling from the side of Dee's head on to the floor as her eyes filled with an emptiness Bridget was all too familiar with. This wasn't the first dead body she had seen, but it was the first

time she had actually witnessed someone die. She couldn't think about that right now. *Remember. What do you do now?* Whoever had done this was still in the flat. She couldn't risk it. *You need to warn Sam.* Bridget needed to get to a phone. Sam would know what to do.

Chapter 2: The Survivor

The present

First of all, Bridget needed some clothes. She backed up the stairs, trying to make sure she didn't make any noise; she knew whoever had hurt Dee was still in the building, probably hurting Estelle.

She looked through Dee's clothes hurriedly, grabbing a black velour Hooch tracksuit. It was the only thing that went down further than the thighs and higher than the nipples. She crept down the stairs again. She could hear a man talking on the phone, with an accent she couldn't quite place.

'What do you mean it's not her? There're two women here and one bloke dressed as a fucking baby . . . Yeah, one of them has black hair and the other is blonde. I sent you the pictures . . . Well, she's not here then, is she . . . All right, all right, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disrespect you. I'll find her . . . Don't worry, they're all

dead . . . No, no one saw me . . . There's definitely no one else here . . . OK.'

She peered through the crack in the door again. The man was in her bedroom, his shadowy figure facing away from her. She could see her mobile phone on the side table, right above where all her shoes were kept, but she couldn't go in. Slowly, she backed away from the bedroom, back into the communal hallway. Her breathing was fast and erratic but she tried to be quiet, tried not to disturb anything as she walked.

She opened the sash window in the hallway, wincing at the slight sound, and ran quickly down the fire escape. The cold, wet metal was a shock to her feet. She was trying hard not to make noise on the rickety iron staircase; in places the metal had completely eroded, so she had to be careful not to cut herself or put her foot through the steps. She ran down the side alley that was parallel to the back of the building, stopping at a yellow road-gritting salt box. The weather had been mild enough lately that she hadn't needed to worry about it being disturbed for a while.

Bridget opened the box and reached inside. She dug around, the sound of the dirty chunks of rock salt scraping against each other setting her teeth on edge. She felt the leather strap of her backpack between her fingers and tugged hard. The salt displaced with a *crunch*, making more noise than she'd anticipated. She shot a look behind her to make sure no one was there. She was alone. She opened the bag and checked the contents. A roll of bank notes, a phone, a Leatherman multi-tool, an emergency power pack and a spare phone

battery. The battery in the phone was dead so she switched it to the spare. There wasn't a lot of battery left on the emergency one either. If this didn't qualify as an emergency, she didn't know what did. The only number on the phone was Sam's. She pressed the screen.

Straight to answerphone.

'Sam? It's Bridge. Where the hell are you? Are you in trouble? A man came to the house while I was using the shower upstairs, but when I came back down they were all dead.' She tried to keep the panic out of her voice, whispering furiously so as not to attract any attention. 'I only saw Dee's body. I didn't see the others, but I heard him talking. It was me they were after . . . I didn't see who it was though. He had a slight accent, I think, and he didn't sound young, but that's all I can tell you for now. I'm going to go to our meeting spot. Please be there.' She checked over her shoulder, paused and took a deep breath. There was a feeling in the pit of her stomach that told her she wouldn't be speaking to him for a while. 'I love you, Sam.'

Bridget hung up, swinging the bag on to her back. She began walking towards the town centre, keeping one eye on a few drunks on the corner of the street. She wondered if they were who they appeared to be. Were they watching her? She surveyed the cars along the road, searching for a model more than twenty years old, as they were easier to get into. It was a long way to her usual meeting place with Sam. She needed a car.

Her eyes landed on a J-reg Vauxhall Cavalier. She dropped behind it and got to work, removing a paracord bow from the bag. Bridget kept one eye on the road as

she worked, and ducked further down behind the car as she saw a man, walking in her direction. She didn't have long. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw another, younger man emerge from the building behind him. The two men paused in the street, a few cars down from where she crouched. She could hear the rumble of raised voices as they began to argue.

Now was her chance.

She made a slipknot in the cord. She leveraged the door a fraction with the Leatherman and slid the string through the space, moving it slowly from side to side with one hand either end of the string until the loop connected with the bobble on the plastic door lock. She pulled each end of the string until the knot was tight around the lock then yanked the ends quickly upwards, unlocking the door.

The men both turned at the clunk, their faces hidden in the darkness. There was a beat of silence. Bridget waited a few seconds until they turned back to face one another, then carefully opened the car door. She reached under the steering column and unscrewed the cover, telling herself to keep calm. *You've done this a million times before*. She pulled out the wire bundle and stripped the two red battery wires of their casing, exposing an inch of copper with the knife on her Leatherman, then twisted them together. She stripped the brown ignition wire before getting in the car to crank the starter over. The moment that exposed ignition wire hit the battery the two men would know where she was; she had only seconds to get away. She took a deep breath and touched the wires together. As

soon as the engine started, Bridget glanced through the window to see the two men moving, running to get to the car before she could drive away. She threw the backpack on to the seat beside her and pulled out into the road, turning the wheel so hard her hands hurt. If they had any doubts before they heard the wheelspin, they certainly didn't now. Looking through the rear-view mirror, she was just in time to see the pair jumping into a car, ready to follow her.

Chapter 3: The Hunted

The present

Bridget took the road to St David's station, wishing she had told Sam that she would meet him there, where there were people and places to hide in plain sight. She carried on driving, aware that the men were not far behind her. She saw them turn each corner as she reached the other end of the street, their car jolting on to the kerbs as they chased her. Bridget thought briefly about Estelle, and what must have happened to her. *I should have called an ambulance*. She couldn't think about what she should have done, all she could think about was getting away from these men. Her eyes flitted between the rear-view mirror and the road ahead. As she drove down Bonhay Road she felt so exposed; there wasn't enough traffic to get lost in.

They were gaining on her. She drove across the bridge towards Cowick. She would have to get rid of the car.

It was good for distance but they were past that now. She just needed to make sure they didn't get hold of her and she stood a better chance of that on foot. There were some smaller streets coming up, with lots of red brick housing set back from the main road. Glancing behind, she couldn't see their car, and she quickly turned the steering wheel and drove through an entrance into a private car park behind a small row of houses, immediately killing the engine. They wouldn't be able to see the car from the road – not yet, anyway. Bridget jumped out and ran as fast as she could towards the river. As she sprinted, she heard the sound of a car coming. It was them. She ducked behind a large council wheelie bin and waited for them to pass her. They had slowed right down, obviously searching for her. Her breathing felt as though it had stopped as she crouched on the ground next to the bin. She waited for the sound of the car to die, and when she was sure they had gone, she emerged, keeping close to the buildings as she ran down to the river, taking the underpass to the lower walkway that ran alongside the bank. Hopefully they wouldn't see her down here from the road. She had completely forgotten that she wasn't wearing anything on her feet; ignoring the pain of the tarmac, she made her way towards the Cricklepit Bridge. Everything was lit up, but she stuck to the shadows when she could and moved faster when she couldn't.

Bridget looked behind her, sure that she was not alone. Even the pubs along the bank looked derelict. She longed for a crowd to lose herself in, wanting to bury her presence like a needle in a haystack. She felt

as though she was standing on a stage with a spotlight pointed right at her face. Looking to the left, she caught sight of the children's play area, and felt a stab of relief. She ran to it, clambered over the fence and squeezed her body into the adventure castle, grateful that she had grabbed something warm to wear. *Stay out of sight, at least until you catch your breath.*

As she watched the riverbank, a man emerged from the path she had just scrambled away from. He was scanning the area – was he the man who'd killed Estelle and Dee? Was the Baby dead, too? Was he still in his romper? Bridget remembered his wedding ring and wondered how his family would feel when they were notified that he was found dead, dressed as a baby with a prostitute on either side of him.

It was drawing close to the hour. Bridget felt a thud of realisation: *the backpack*. She had left the backpack in the car. There was no way she would make it to the rendezvous on time, and she had to find a way to let Sam know.

Judging by the intense way the man was surveying the bank, Bridget couldn't shake the fact that it was definitely him: the one who had killed her friends. He was a big man, thick set with a beard but no hair on his head; he almost looked like a caricature of a strong man from an old circus poster. He was out of place in the picturesque setting of the river. He walked with sinister purpose, getting closer and closer to the play area. She was trapped in the wooden castle. If he thought to look in there, he'd find her immediately. Her heart stopped when he paused at the entrance to the play

area, but then he carried on to the bridge and walked across, stopping again on the other side. She breathed out. She was going to have to make a break for it before he retraced his steps. *It's now or never*. She slowly climbed out of the wooden structure and, with one eye on the man, she quickly moved back across the playground to the railings and slung one leg over, followed by the other. Losing her balance, Bridget fell, straight on to a broken bottle. The area was a popular spot with disaffected teens from the estates; she'd seen them guzzling their miniature ciders before returning home after school. There were discarded bottles everywhere.

'Fuck!' she said, louder than she should have.

The man's head whipped around; he turned back towards her and sprinted towards the park. Bridget pulled herself to her feet using the fence as leverage; she could feel broken glass digging into her kneecap but she knew she had to shake the pain off. If he got hold of her, it was the last thing she would need to worry about. She could feel the blood draining from her face; she limped as fast as she could towards the Haven Banks housing complex but then thought better of it – she was bleeding and would leave a trail. At this time of night, the silence was so deafening that even the smallest intake of breath would be heard inside that complex – it was a nicer part of town, there would be no late-night parties, no drunks littered in the hallways or dealers pushing their gear. She should have run to one of the rougher estates where it was easier to disappear. She should have gone to a hotel and hidden. What the hell had she been thinking?

Bridget looked around and quickly assessed her surroundings, deciding where the safest place to hide would be. *Where would he be least likely to venture?* Suddenly it became obvious to her as she stared at the black water of the river. A few miles down the river was her meeting place with Sam, if he would just hold on she could make it there, in the water, if she didn't pass out on the bank first. The man was getting closer and she needed to make her move now. She swiftly edged over the side into the water, being careful not to make a noise as her body became immersed in the icy cold. *Breathe*. If he knew where she'd gone he would follow her. She was completely in shadow as she moved through the water, hidden under some overgrowth that hung over from the bank. She was grateful that she couldn't see any swans. That was the last thing she needed. She could hear the man on his phone approaching.

'She was here, I just saw her. Yes. I know how important this is . . . Are you sure? OK, I'll meet you there.'

He was out of earshot again. She would have to stay put for a few minutes, make sure he was gone, because as soon as she ventured out from this spot she would be in full view again. It was cold in the water, so cold; she reached down to her knee and felt the glass poking out of it. She didn't know whether to pull it out or leave it in. Her mind buzzed with stories, thinking of reports she'd read where stab victims were fine until the weapon was removed, at which point they bled to death. She couldn't remember if any major veins or arteries ran through the knee. Sam would know what

to do. The adrenaline was pumping so fast that she couldn't think clearly; was she afraid or just really fucking cold? For now she just needed to concentrate on getting to Sam. She had to get to their place. It was her only chance.

She edged along the side of the river towards the back of the pub where she hoped Sam would be waiting. It'd be shut now, but it was secluded enough that they wouldn't need to worry about being seen together. She was out of breath from the cold. She hadn't heard the man for a long time. Maybe it was safe to get out? She wanted to let go of the edge and just let her head fall beneath the surface. Moving slowly was even more exhausting. She was so tired. *Is this hypothermia?* Drowning wasn't even something that she cared about; she just wanted to fall asleep for a bit. Just a little sleep, then she could start moving again. She tried not to think about what was in the water. Since she had been small and seen a documentary about a giant deep-sea squid Bridget had had a fear of dark water. She could see it now as she blinked. Each blink seemed to last a little longer than the one before. The only thing propelling her to open her eyes again was the thought of that squid with its enormous red head and the tentacles that swept through the water like wet velvet, heavy but effortless. Always just about to touch her as she moved forward beyond its grasp.

Bridget reached the Double Locks pub and dug her frozen fingers into the grass on the embankment, dragging herself out of the water. She had made it. The upside of the extreme cold was that she no longer had

any pain in her knee, or any feeling in her legs at all, for that matter. She was so exhausted; she had to rest for a moment. The damp grass was warm and soft compared to the sharpness of the water. She could barely move and it was so dark that she just lay there, looking up at the moon with the clouds rolling over it. *Don't fall asleep*. Her eyelids became heavy and as much as she wanted to fight it, her body was taking over. It was time to close her eyes.