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Opening Extract from...

Quieter Than Killing

Written by Sarah Hilary

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SARAH HILARY

QUIETER THAN KILLING



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For my sister, Penny

Six years ago

He's washing the car – slapping water, sloppy. She's in the kitchen, cutting. Not meat and not bread, something that chunks under the knife. Carrots, or onions. The sounds soak up through the house to where Stephen is sitting in the room with the red wall.

Her room. The shelf over the bed is full of her things. Books and pictures, and the dark blue box with its snarl of bracelets. His favourite is the horseshoe charm, silver, curved like a half-finished heart. He wears it under the sleeve of his pyjamas, in bed. They said they'd put her things away into the attic if he wanted but he said no, he didn't mind. He likes looking at her things; it makes him feel safe. He sleeps with her books weighted around him like stones.

She painted the red wall herself. He can see the places she had to stop and stand on a chair to finish, stretching her arm to reach the ceiling's right angles. She was angry when she did it; the paint's too thick and too thin and where it's too thick it's full of tiny holes where air bubbles burst.

She's not been here in years, but it's her room.

Marnie Rome's room.

He finds the shape of her in the bed at night and it's his shape, narrow. He wriggles down into it, imagining a trench dug in the mattress, a place to lie low. Her eyes tracked these same shadows across the ceiling, and watched the sun crouch outside the cracked window.

The crack's at the top corner, in the shape of a hand. He measures it most weeks, to see if it's grown. Stands on a chair and reaches until he's touching the tips of his fingers to it. The last time, it drew blood. He climbed down and stood looking at his red fingers, like hers after she'd painted the wall. The fingers tasted rusty, old. He shut them up in a fist and set its side to the window, thinking about punching, thinking of the noise it would make and the feet that would come running, arms open, mouths lopsided, words worrying at him. Just thinking it makes him tired.

He's lonely. If it wasn't for her here with him, he'd have gone crazy by now.

'Marnie Rome.'

He says her name when he's held down by her books, the horseshoe charm biting at the inside of his wrist. They have the same wrists, thin and square. They're the same shape, lying together in the narrow bed, counting the holes in the red wall, all the places pricked by her anger. Not just anger. Sadness, too. She was lonely here, like him. Hurting, the way he hurts.

A slop of water from outside.

He's making the car shine.

From the kitchen, the smell of onions frying in butter.

She's making a casserole.

Stephen had never eaten a casserole until he came here, when he was eight years old. Now he's fourteen, 'a

growing boy'. In the other place it was all scraps and mouldy sandwiches made with whatever was left in the fridge. Here, they won't stop feeding him. Proper food, she calls it. 'Let's get a proper meal inside you,' as if she can see his emptiness. He's so empty it hurts.

Food doesn't help, stretching his stomach until he has to get rid of it to make more room for her, for Marnie. Food just gets in the way.

He's whistling as he washes the car.

Stephen can hear water running onto the drive. He used to help when he first came here, when he was scared and wanting to please. He's not scared now. Not of them, not of anything, thanks to her.

'Marnie Rome.'

He counts the holes in the red wall, starting over.

From the kitchen—

The yellow smell of onions frying, and the slow chunking of the knife.

1

Now

'Upgrades . . . Another circle of hell successfully breached.' Tim Welland gave up the struggle with his phone and set it aside. 'DS Jake, take a seat.'

Noah did as he was told, puzzling over what had prompted this meeting. First thing in the morning wasn't Welland's style any more than it was his, but here he was in the OCU Commander's office at 7.55 a.m. without a cup of coffee in sight and Welland looking like a double espresso wouldn't even scratch the surface of his mood.

'You and DI Rome make a good team.' He treated Noah to his heaviest stare. 'That's the station gossip. But the trouble with station gossip is I wouldn't stuff my wet shoes with most of it. I want to hear it from you.'

'We make a good team, sir.'

An easy answer because it was the truth, but where was Welland going with this? Christ, he wasn't about to hand out a secondment, was he? It was too early in the morning for dodging bullets and Noah liked his job, wanted to keep working with Marnie Rome and the major incident

team. Ambition dictated that he took any leg-up on offer, but Welland's face wasn't saying leg-up.

On his desk was a sheet of paper, an incident report. Noah wasn't equal to the task of reading it upside down while maintaining eye contact.

'She's got your back, and you've got hers.' Deep lines were scored either side of Welland's nose, as if he'd paid to have censure tattooed in place. 'You've found out things about her you didn't know a year ago. Is that a fair statement?'

'I . . . Yes, sir.'

'From the station's self-appointed agony aunt.' Touching the taut skin under his eye. 'DC Tanner.'

This was a disciplinary? Debbie Tanner had pushed her luck, one piece of well-meaning gossip too many. 'Not just from her.'

'Remind me to dig out my thermal underwear.'

'Sir?'

'If DI Rome's sharing secrets then hell must be icing over.'

'Not . . . secrets. But we did speak a little, about what happened six years ago. Not much, but—'

'Enough for you to know why I don't want her anywhere near a case involving this address.' Welland put his thumb on the incident report and pushed it across the desk. 'Yes?'

At last. They were getting somewhere. Okay, maybe nowhere *good*, but—

Noah read the report, his throat tightening. Definitely nowhere good. 'Yes, sir.'

'Our victims are in the hospital, not the morgue. Robbery gone wrong. Not a major incident, and not homicide. So. We let Trident take this one.'

'That makes sense.' Noah kept his eyes on the paperwork.

Six years ago, Welland had been the first officer on the scene. At Marnie's old address, her family home. This new crime—

Robbery and assault, two victims in hospital. Alan and Louise Kettridge. Her tenants, Noah guessed. The assault had taken place while he was sleeping with Dan curled at his back, around 1.30 a.m. It'd happened in the house where her parents were killed by her foster brother, Stephen Keele.

'Trident have their eye on a local gang, kids. This has their thumbprints all over it, apparently.' Welland sat back, rubbing at his face. 'If we're lucky, *literally* their thumbprints. But even without the kick-and-run gods smiling on us, we leave this to Trident. They've got the contacts, plus some private mediation outfit falling over itself to get the local community onside.' When he dropped his hands, his face held the shadow of their shape. 'DS Kennedy's heading up the Trident team. He'll keep me posted. And I'll keep DI Rome posted, on a need-to-know basis.'

How would he quantify that?

This house, what had happened there six years ago . . .

Marnie's need to know wasn't going to fit Trident's boxes, or not neatly.

Welland reached across the desk for the report. 'You've got her back.'

He nodded a dismissal at Noah. 'I'm glad of it.'

2

Marnie was in the incident room when Noah returned. 'Good,' she smiled at him, 'you can drink one of these.' Two flat whites from their favourite coffee shop. 'You heard, then.'

'About—?'

'The latest assault.' She moved in the direction of her office, unwinding a green scarf from her throat. 'No robbery. Just plenty of violence.'

Noah had thought for a second that she knew the secrets Welland was keeping; she could be uncanny like that. But she was talking about another assault. 'Where?' he asked.

'Pimlico.' She hung her coat and scarf on the back of the door, tidying her red curls away from her face. 'Page Street.'

'Our vigilante's going up in the world. Who's got the crime scene?'

'DS Carling. We'll go over there, but I wanted to check in here first. See what Forensics has for us, whether there's a link yet.'

For weeks they'd been seeing a pattern in the assaults, but what they needed was hard evidence. As it stood the

attacks were random, the victims unknown to one another. No matching DNA at the scenes, no clear motive and no obvious *modus operandi* other than a savage beating.

'Kyle Stratton,' Marnie said, anticipating Noah's next question. 'Our new victim. Twenty-six years old. A management consultant. Works in Westminster, lives in Reigate. Right now he's in St Thomas's with multiple fractures.'

'Weapon?' Noah asked.

'Blunt, heavy. A baseball bat, or similar.' She was checking her emails. 'Defensive wounds in the shape of two broken wrists and a broken elbow. A shattered eye socket too.'

Noah winced. 'Facial injuries again. Like Stuart Rawling.'

'Not like Carole Linton, but yes. All the injuries are front-facing. Our assailant wants you to see what's coming, and isn't afraid of you fighting back.'

'And yet neither of them could give us a clear description.'

This reluctance to ID the assailant had prompted them to look more closely at the victims. Wondering about their lifestyles, whether they were making bad choices, courting chaos.

In the incident room, Noah and Marnie stood shoulder to shoulder, studying the whiteboard.

Two victims, each with two faces: before and after the assaults.

Stuart Rawling wasn't smiling in the first photograph. In the second, his mouth was forced into the mockery of a grin, thanks to a badly dislocated jaw. Carole Linton's was the more disturbing face, despite all of her injuries being below the waist: knife wounds and bruises stamped by feet which had ruptured an ovary and her spleen. Burns too, where her skirt had been set alight. She'd aged

twenty years after the attack, shoulders hunched, bleak terror in her stare.

And now Kyle Stratton, with a shattered eye socket.

Marnie pinned the location of this latest attack to the map.

'Has he been in prison?' Noah asked.

It was the one thing connecting the two earlier assaults; Stuart and Carole had both served time for crimes involving violence, and worse. This fact, and the savage silence they were keeping, had sounded alarm bells. Marnie and Noah had been on high alert for a third assault, fearing a vigilante.

'Yes, he has,' Marnie said.

'What did he do?' Noah studied Kyle's face.

'A spell in a juvenile detention centre for racially aggravated assault, eleven years ago. He and a school friend thought it would be fun to set fire to a younger boy's blazer. They pleaded guilty, said they hadn't intended anyone to be hurt.'

'What part of "setting fire to" didn't they understand?'

'The judge decided they'd shown remorse,' Marnie said. 'Kyle was let out after three months.'

'How badly was he burnt? Their victim.'

'Badly enough.' She put her hand on the new map pin. 'Let's see what DS Carling's found at the scene. And whether Kyle's well enough to give us a statement.'

Page Street was lined with apartments built like a toddler's first attempt at stacking bricks, in alternating blocks of grey and white. Security gates gave the place a penitentiary air not helped by the trio of kids kicking a bald tennis ball around the paved courtyard. Not the nice spot Noah had imagined; hard to believe they were a short walk from the Houses of Parliament.

Ron Carling was waiting inside the police cordon, fielding the kids' antics with a glare. 'Little bastards won't move off. No parents around to make them.'

Marnie ducked under the tape, holding it for Noah who said, 'Is that CCTV doing its job?'

'Three guesses.'

In other words, no. Marnie had lost count of the number of cameras in London that existed purely for show. A deterrent supposedly, like the life-size cardboard police officers propped inside pound shops. 'Forensics have finished?'

'A while back.' Ron stamped his feet, trying to keep warm.

Most of the day's cold had congregated in the right angle where the assault took place, as if the crime scene had sucked a breath six hours ago and was still holding it. Noah measured the short space with his stare, hands deep in the pockets of his coat. It was always useful to see the crime scene, even one as carefully picked clean as this. Blood spatter on the paving slabs, but unless their assailant had got sloppy, it was Kyle's and it would be the only DNA found here.

'He's getting his confidence up,' Noah said. 'Or he knew that camera wasn't working.'

'We're assuming it's him,' Ron said. 'Because of the broken face?'

The kids kicked the tennis ball towards them, dancing away when Marnie looked up.

'Because Kyle has a criminal record,' she said, 'like our other two.'

'Vigilantism.' Ron stamped his feet. 'As if we don't have enough arseholes on our hands without the arsehole-hating arseholes pitching in.'

Eloquently put.

'We're going to St Thomas's,' Marnie told him. 'Keep us posted on the door-to-door.'

'We won't find him.' Ron sniffed. 'Not from this. He's too bloody crafty.'

'He can't stop. That's how we'll catch him.' Noah took a last look at the crime scene, the street light, the blind CCTV camera. 'He can't stop, and he's getting louder.'

The route to the hospital took them past Kyle's offices, close to St James's Park tube station. Marnie pulled up and parked, to consider the layout. A pub on the corner – where Kyle had been drinking? Ten minutes on foot to Page Street.

'He wasn't going home,' Noah said, 'or he'd have headed for Victoria, taken a mainline train to Reigate. Page Street was out of his way.'

'He wasn't going home,' Marnie agreed.

CCTV right around them, a steel circuit of surveillance. Had their vigilante known where the gaps were, or didn't he care? The earlier assaults had taken place in dead ends, dark corners. Last night was hardly broad daylight, but it was a lot riskier. Louder, just as Noah had said.

'I want names.' She considered the tinted windows of the office block. 'Who was he drinking with, what time did he leave, was he on his own. DC Tanner can lead on that.'

'Eleven years,' Noah said. 'Since he set fire to that boy. Over a decade since he was paroled. Our vigilante's playing a long game.'

'Or it doesn't matter to him who he attacks.' Three faces indiscriminately damaged, wiped out. Even Carole's untouched face – wiped out. 'He's happy to attack anyone guilty of a violent crime, regardless of circumstances, or gender, or age.'

'So he's . . . sticking pins in parole records? Using DBS checks?'

'It's possible. You know what Welland would say. We're clutching at straws, seeing connections that don't exist.' Marnie pulled away from the kerb, pointing the car towards the hospital. 'What did he want, by the way? You were in his office when I got to work.'

'Pep talk.' A muscle played in Noah's cheek. 'About our teamwork.'

Welland was heavy work first thing in the morning. And more than usually dour of late, making Marnie worry about his health. For nearly five years he'd been in remission but cancer, like their vigilante, didn't care. Indiscriminately destructive.

'Our teamwork's great,' she told Noah. 'There's no one I'd rather be clutching at straws with.'

'Maybe we're about to catch a break.' He kept his eyes on the other side of the river. 'New victim, new evidence. This could be our first decent ID.'

Below them, the Thames shuddered with the same cold breath trapped in the right angle where Kyle Stratton's bones had been broken.

Marnie took the turning for St Thomas's.

'Let's find out.'