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Dirty Little Lies

John Macken

1

Dr Sandra Bantam watches as the knife enters her body again. There is a pause, a moment's respite, a chance to sense the burning wounds, to see the seeping red as the blade withdraws.

She lets out a scream, the pain coming out in bursts. She is numb and acute at the same time, dizzy, eyes opened and closed, shivering and sick. The blood which leaks out of her from a swarm of angry wounds seems to take her warmth with it. Dr Bantam has witnessed the handiwork of men like this many times before. Men who gouge and strangle and rape and kill. She has experienced the results and the aftermath on countless occasions. But never the event. The bitter, horrific, terrible event.

At first, almost a whole day ago, she thought there would be sex. Why else attack a lone woman in her home? Why else tie her up in the bedroom, naked and exposed? For an awful second she realizes she would rather have his flesh penetrate her than his steel. But that was never his aim. He wanted information. An onslaught of questions, sprayed out thick and fast. Where is he? Where is Reuben Maitland? What is he doing? Where is he working? What's his address?

Dr Sandra Bantam knows that capillaries are bursting in the whites of her eyes. She knows that she has lost a lot of blood. She knows that her core body temperature is dropping. As she fights for breath she wonders again why he wants Reuben so badly? What has he done? What does he need? And for a second, the only face she can see is Reuben's. In that instant she hates him with a pain which burrows as deep into her flesh as all the cuts and kicks and punches together.

And now there is no curiosity. Sandra considers the fact that the interrogation is drying up. What happens when torturers don't get what they need, she asks herself. The agony comes in a sickening wave and then subsides.

What then?

2

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Sixteen Weeks Earlier

A hair. A dark hair. Kinked in the middle. The root still there, which is good news. He pulls the covers back further and brushes the sheet with his hand. A slight bobbling of the cotton; a warmth of friction against his palm. Another one. Two hairs, almost identical. He stands up and peers out of the corner of the window. The drive is empty. He is safe, for the moment. Suddenly detached, he walks into an adjacent room, telling himself, This is a crime scene. Reuben Maitland rubs some more amphetamine into his gums, pulls on a pair of unpowdered surgical gloves and takes a slim case back to the main bedroom. Using a pair of tweezers, he bends the hairs into a small clear tube and closes its lid.

He spends a further twenty minutes meticulously examining the bed, the pillows, the chair, the floor for any other evidence. The drug dilates his pupils and opens his eyes. His concentration is total and unblinking. The sound of a TV resonates up through the floor, his foot tapping involuntarily along. He finds a number of blond hairs, all of which he ignores. They have been very careful, he decides. The carpet has been hoovered, the pillowcases changed, the chair repositioned.

Through a partitioned wall comes the noise of a baby waking: tentative exploratory gurgles clutching for attention. Reuben Maitland realizes he has got to get out in a hurry. He leaves the bedroom and sheds his gloves, balling them into a pocket. Peering over the banister, he can just make out a childminder talking on the phone, watching TV, a magazine open on her lap. He notes a baby-monitor on one of the sofa arms. Outside the infant's room, he pauses, quickly weighing up his options. At eye level, animal letters spell out the name J-O-S-H-U-A on the door. He tries the handle and pushes it open.

Inside the nursery, a baby stares up, dummy out, mouth agape, oval in the way of six-month-olds. Reuben replaces the dummy and turns off the monitor. As he looks at the child, he is trying to forget twenty years of genetic training. The opaque blueness of its eyes, the wispy brownness of its hair, the blank features waiting to bud. Too young to tell, maybe. But there are other ways.

The infant starts to grizzle, so Reuben bends down and picks it up. He feels a flood of warmth seep into his speed-hardened muscles, the baby radiating unknowing love like a hot-water bottle. But leaking through are words and images and implications that Reuben is fighting to suppress. He tries to stop the ants' nest of suspicion in his brain forming itself into an army of logic.

'Tell me,' he whispers, reading the child's features. The shape of his ears, the width of his nose, the tinge of his eyebrows, the length of his chin all talk to him, but the words are muffled. 'Tell me,' Reuben urges.

Joshua gripes and complains.

'Not without your solicitor, eh?'

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The baby stares over Reuben's shoulder and through the window. Reuben sees the change in the infant's expression and follows its line of sight. Outside, a car has pulled into the drive.

'Fuck,' he says. A dark-haired woman is sliding herself out of the driver's seat. She is pretty but looks hassled, carrying a stack of folders. Reuben has to escape, and fast. He scans the room, making sure he has left no contaminating evidence. He replaces the child in its cot and takes out his mobile, pressing an instantdial button. The front door echoes to the sound of rattling keys. Reuben misses a breath. Then the rattling stops. He hangs up and glances over the banister. The childminder is busy ending her conversation and is rushing to turn off the TV. Reuben walks quickly down the stairs carrying his case. He dials another number as he does so, and the childminder changes direction and heads off to answer it. There are keys in the lock again. Reuben darts along the main corridor in the opposite direction, making for the back door. He hears the baby begin to cry. The woman enters, calls the childminder's name, and both of them ascend the stairs in mutual concern. He hears a brief conversation.

'How's he been?'

'Great.'

'Have you fed him yet?'

'He's just woken.'

Reuben changes his mind. He turns and creeps towards the front door, which he is able to open and close silently. Suspecting that he can be seen from the nursery, he edges to the side of the house, steps over the neighbouring fence and makes his way across the gardens of two more semis before reaching the road. His car is parked a couple of streets away. He places the case on the seat beside him and drives to the lab, focusing through the North London traffic, sweating from the close scrape, the airconditioner struggling to cool his car. All around, vehicles suck in the city air and excrete it, slightly chilled, for the next one to consume. He knows what he has just done is illegal, and that there are other ways to find out. But when investigations have to be solved with one-hundred-per-cent certainty, forensics is almost always the answer.

The ants in his brain are starting to marshal themselves into columns, which march in defined directions. Questions and misgivings whiz around like the angry mopeds and taxis cutting in and out of his line of sight. He turns into the underground car park at GeneCrime. It is dark and forbidding, swallowing cars in the morning and spitting them out at night. Reuben's eyes dart in the rear-view mirror, noting the fairness of his hair, the shallow dimple in his chin, the tilt of his earlobes, the width of his forehead, the creases of his frown. There are other ways of finding out, he tells himself again. But still, Reuben leaves his car squatting in the dark, and swipes through a door marked 'Forensic Science Service'.

Inside, there is quiet. The nine-to-fivers have gone home. A few others remain, waiting for their supervisors to leave. Reuben is greeted almost suspiciously by the members of his staff he encounters. They mill around the extended corridors, chatting in laboratory doorways, unsure whether to call it a day. As he sits down in his office, Judith Meadows enters without knocking. She is petite and dark, and carries with her a look of gentle defiance. It is there in the straightness of her back and the serenity of her face. In the years that he has known her, Reuben has spent a lot of time wondering about his senior technician. He has the nagging impression that he will only ever scratch her surface.

'Judith,' he says, 'tell them to stop hanging about. I'm just catching up with a few things. And go home yourself.'

'Where've you been?' she asks.

Reuben swallows the bitter taste the powder has left at the back of his throat. 'Undercover sweep.'

'Anywhere exciting?'

'Residential address in NW10. Bit of a close one.'

'Any samples you need to hand over?'

He examines Judith for a couple of seconds while he decides. As he stares up at her, she looks like the caricature of a beautiful woman. Reuben has often found Judith attractive from certain angles but not others. At this moment, she appears almost overpoweringly alluring. 'No. I'll sort it. Thanks.' He is hot; the room lacks ventilation. 'Any calls?'

'Eleven.'

'Eleven? Christ. What are they trying to do to me?'

Judith breaks into a sly smile. 'Do you want me to answer that?'

'Better not,' Reuben says, examining a small patch of wetness under his arm. 'Wouldn't want to drag you into all of this. Anyway, I'll see you tomorrow.'

Judith takes her cue, and her face regains its placid composure. She turns and walks back out. Reuben stares through the glass. Eleven calls. They are beginning to turn the screw.

Two adjacent laboratories, which are overlooked by his office, slowly begin to empty, research scientists glancing up at Reuben's window or making a show of tidying loose ends. He takes the clear bullet-shaped tube out of his case and squints at its contents. The kinked hairs are bent double, wrapped around each other like sunning snakes. So who are you? Reuben asks them. Who the hell are you? The only noise is the slamming of doors. Reuben realizes that the course of action he is about to take is

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inevitable. It is dangerous and immoral, and yet every atom in his body is screaming for him to do it. He feels almost like a passenger, being driven by curiosity and doubt, the amphetamine sweeping away misgivings and turning them into actions.

A sharp knock distracts him. Detective Chief Inspector Phil Kemp stands in the doorway, squat, short-legged, shirt tucked tight into his trousers, his pallid face asking the question before his lips get round to it. 'Are we ready to go?'

'Any day.'

'That's all I've heard for weeks. When, exactly?'

Reuben runs his fingers along the polished veneer of his desk. 'When I'm ready, Phil.'

'Look, how much further can you push this thing?'

'No further. Predictive Phenotyping is finished.'

'So what's the delay?' Phil Kemp demands, refusing to be fobbed off. 'This is the country's leading Forensics Unit. We don't sit around waiting for things to happen.'

'Come in and shut the door.'

The DCI obliges and takes a chair, leaning forwards, toes just about touching the carpet, eager and impatient. 'What is it?'

'You know what it is. Sarah's too hungry. And I think you're getting swept along for the ride.'

'Meaning?'

'I don't think Sarah Hirst understands the power of Predictive Phenotyping. She's itching to use it. I can see it in her eyes. There are rumours.'

'What rumours?'

'That someone's been delving about in the lab. That reagents have gone missing, or been used up out of hours. Look, Phil, we go way back, so this is between you and me. I'm sure it's not your CID boys – they wouldn't know a laboratory from a lavatory' – Phil makes a point of holding Reuben's eye – 'it's just I think Sarah's more interested in my invention than she should be.'

'But we all want it out there, Reuben. On the street. You can't blame her more than anyone else. The Area Commander is on to me on the hour. "When the fuck is Maitland going to stop pussying around with this thing?"' Reuben smiles at the impersonation. 'So I have to ask again. When is it ready?'

'And I'll answer you again, Phil. When I'm ready,' he says.

DCI Phil Kemp stands up and paces around. ‘Rube, see this from my side. You know me and Sarah are being judged. At the moment, you manage the Forensics Section, I’ve got CID, and Sarah’s responsible for everything else. But after the restructuring, one of us is going to be given overall jurisdiction.’ Phil allows himself a short, bitter laugh. ‘Since for some ill-conceived reason you said no to the job.’

‘Administration’s not exactly my thing.’

‘The price you’ve got to pay when there’s a lot up for grabs,’ Phil mutters, staring down at his badly worn shoes. ‘Overall commander of GeneCrime. It’s what I want. And it’s what Sarah wants. Badly. Which is what worries me. If she had your technique at her fingertips . . .’

‘Trust me. I’m not taking sides. I just need a bit more time, and we can all benefit.’

‘But time is the problem, Reuben.’ DCI Phil Kemp pauses on his way out. ‘And the longer you delay, the more you’re going to get squeezed.’ He shrugs briskly and leaves the room, his warning swirling in the agitated air which follows him.

Reuben turns away and stares out into the lab, where the last of his staff are hanging up their lab coats and slinking out of GeneCrime. When I’m ready, he whispers to himself. The plastic tube on his desk calls for him. He lifts it up and stares through it. When I’m ready. A number lights up on his mobile, which vibrates its way slowly across the desk, screaming for attention. Reuben picks the phone up and walks into the empty lab, placing it in the rotor of a large centrifuge. It stops ringing for a second, before starting again. Reuben turns the machine on, noting the Doppler effect as the phone begins to rotate, blurring into one long shrill note, the centrifuge picking up speed. Reuben holds his head in his hands. After a few seconds, the ringing is inaudible. He calculates that the phone is spinning at around three hundred revolutions per second. Pressing the Stop button, Reuben waits for it to ease to a halt. The mobile doesn’t look too bad, except that the screen is inky black and the buttons have collapsed. He dumps it in a bin and walks over to a DNA sequencer. An involuntary muscle contraction clamps his jaws together. Maybe, the amphetamine tells him, the time is finally right.

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