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Hard Girls

Martina Cole

Published by Headline

Extract

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Chapter One

Janie Moore was tired out. She had been working for hours. She had a virus, and it had really knocked her for six. She had to keep going though. After all, once she finished, she had a few days off. She preferred it like this. She loved having a bit of time to herself, a bit of time with her kids. She liked the money, but she also liked the hours. It suited her to work all day, then she could have a couple of days off. She was new to the game and still had the wide-eyed naivety, the belief that it was only for the interim. That she would stop once she either found Mr Right, or she found another job that paid enough for her to keep her and her kids. Deep down she knew that was *never* going to happen. Some of the girls who used the flat were paying for themselves through college, or for some kind of education. They were determined to better themselves. Janie knew inside that she was never going to be like them. She was hoping for a man to take her life over, but she saw that, after this job, whoever it was would not only need to be passable in the looks department, but generous in the financial sense. Sex was not something she craved any more. In fact, it was something

best left out of any marriage equation, she had had her fill of it in all its scummy, pretend glory.

But all in all, she thanked her lucky stars for the work because she had two kids under three, and the fathers had both gone on the trot early on in her pregnancies. They'd abandoned her and their offspring without a second thought. Janie had learned the hard way that money was important, and talk was bloody cheap. She'd learned that promises were something that only the rich could afford. She had been promised so much in her young life, and she had believed that the men making the promises would make good on them. Instead, she had been left with two babies, a mountain of debt and a drug problem. She'd been helped off that. She counted herself fortunate because she had not suffered physically after giving birth. She had hardly a stretch-mark on her, and she still looked good in her underwear. She knew how devastating a pregnancy could be on the body, had seen mates who had delivered a child and been left with a stomach that looked like a map of the London Underground. She had carried low and had not put on much weight. She had popped both her boys out quickly and cleanly, and she had loved them both with a passion from their first breaths. She'd nearly lost them over the drugs. She had ended up on the bash for them, to give them everything they needed. To ensure they had a better start in life than she had. She was saving, building a little nest egg, she wanted to take them on holidays, wanted to see them play in the sea, thrive under a foreign sun. They would have everything, and she would do anything to make sure that was the case. She dreamed of a man, a kind man, who would love her and her boys. Who would give her security and love.

Janie was already settled into the life, and she knew deep down that she didn't want a real relationship; the job she had chosen made sure of that. She would accept security over passion. She was too used to strange men climbing on top of her, using her for a given amount of time, and paying her for the privilege. She had her regulars, and she had her appointments. She also had her other life, with her sons, her mum, and her friends.

The only man she would want now was one who could offer her and her boys a good standard of living, and who would not make too many demands on her. A decent man with a few quid and a nice disposition. It wasn't really that much to ask.

Janie Moore repaired her lipstick and waited for her next appointment. She was tired and irritable, but what could she do? Work was work, and she needed the money.

Kate was sipping her tea. She stared out of the window at the cold winter's day. It was freezing. The frost was still glistening on the rooftops, and the wind was loud enough to be heard through the walls. The view from the police station was depressing – it was all cement buildings and car parks.

Every time she closed her eyes she saw the body of Danielle Crosby, saw the way she had been butchered. She could still see the terror etched in her young face. Even the coroner had been shocked by the severity of the attack, especially after death.

The coroner had been specific about the cause of death. It was the acid. The young woman had been drugged with Rohypnol and GHB then, when she had been unable to move, caustic soda had been poured down her throat,

burning her, killing her. The bastard had set about his business, slicing, burning and raping her while she choked in agony, until, finally, Danielle Crosby was a bloody corpse. There was nothing left to remind anyone of the young woman she had been. All Kate saw was the devastation of her young body, the hate that had caused her death, and the reminder of how vicious human beings could be.

What a terrible way to die. How much fear had she endured before she had finally been released to death? It grieved Kate that she would have been happy to die just to escape her tormentor. It was tragic that a young woman had been cut down before she had even had a chance to really live.

Kate knew she was going to have to help Annie, that she would need her to take the brunt of the investigation because she was the seasoned detective and had experienced the bloody aftermath of a violent murderer. This wasn't a spur of the moment killing caused by rage, by anger. Kate knew this was a calculated and cruel death, and she also knew that this was simply the start. Whoever had done this would want to do it again, and soon. They would have been planning this for a long time; they had decided on their victim, and then they had arranged it so that they had not just the *time* to carry out their plan, but also the *privacy*. They had even taken the girl's mobile.

It was the staging of the body that bothered Kate, it was reminiscent of her first murder case all those years ago. George Markham, the Grantley Ripper. He had enjoyed the knowledge that whoever came across the bodies of his victims would never forget how each of them had been placed. That they'd never forget what they had seen, would

never get the image from their minds. It was a form of humiliation against the dead person so, whoever the killer was, he had a grudge. It was this that told Kate that whoever had done this, they were going to do it again. He was already planning the next one, was already coming down from the initial high, needing the euphoria of feeling he had the power over life and death again. He needed to be noticed, and she knew the papers would make sure that he was granted that wish.

It was George Markham all over again.

Annie Carr was nervous, she knew that the press would be all over this murder, that it was gruesome enough to catch the attention of the dailies. She looked into her Chief Super's face. Lionel Dart was not a handsome man by any stretch of the imagination. He was tall, skinny to the point of emaciation, and he stooped when he walked, making him look as if he was on the defensive. That was not the case, however. He was, in fact, a very aggressive man, given to resenting slights, real and imagined, and he was known for his petty-mindedness and his ability to hold a grudge. He was not a man who could be trusted, he'd serve up his own children to further his career. And now he was terrified of the furore that this death would create; it would bring with it too many questions and the spotlight would fall on Grantley Police Station.

'Any idea how we are going to deal with this?'

Annie shrugged. 'In what way? Do you mean the media or the finding of the culprit? Only Kate thinks that whoever did this is not going to retire gracefully, it's not a one-off, and it's going to get worse.'

She felt bad about using Kate in this way, but she knew it was the only way she would get any kind of sense from her boss. He was frightened of Kate and her reputation. Unlike him, Kate was a real police officer. She hadn't wanted the career this man had craved, but she did have the experience and he couldn't argue with that. Kate just wanted the facts, and Annie understood that, it was all she was interested in too. But her limited experience had taught her that the truth was often unwelcome. Especially where this man and his cronies were concerned. He didn't respond, but then that was what she had expected.

'By the way, the place had been tampered with before we arrived. So it's going to be hard to get decent forensics.'

Her boss nodded, as if resigned to his fate.

Lucy Painter was as shocked as everyone else when she heard about the slaughter of Danielle. Though they didn't know each other very well, they worked in the same business. Sometimes they'd even worked out of the same flat. Like most of the girls in the know, she too was wondering if she had inadvertently entertained the nutter who had killed their colleague.

It had suddenly become crystal clear just how dangerous their job actually was. It was a risky occupation and, deep inside, they all knew and accepted that. But, like your house burning down or finding out you had HIV, it was always something that happened to somebody else. None of them really believed they were in danger, after all, they weren't on the pavement, were they? Because they worked out of nice flats and houses, and because they worked with other like-minded girls, they didn't see themselves as prostitutes, let

alone being in any kind of peril. They earned a good wedge for a start and they didn't have to procure anyone; they had a good clientele thanks to the advertising. None of them had ever known life any different. They felt quite glamorous, that they were a cut above the usual brasses. It was a well-paid job, and it was a secret part of their lives. Danielle's death was tragic and shocking but, in all honesty, they were more concerned about being exposed as Toms. If their occupations were to become public knowledge, they would be destroyed. Like the men who frequented their establishments, the girls concerned primarily didn't want to be outed. They had no interest in the men's private lives, their wives, children or work, and they expected the same respect in return. They were a commodity, nothing more and nothing less. They provided a service, and that service was not something they dwelled on. They wanted them in, and out, with the minimum of aggro.

Personally, Lucy often felt a spark of sympathy for the men who used her. Most of them were more nervous than her, and she prided herself on being able to suss them out quickly and easily. She had never really had any trouble from them. Only once had she ever had to assert herself with a client, and that was because he had finished before he had even begun, and then had the nerve to expect a second go for free. He had been a short, bald-headed Turkish bloke with bad breath and a very expensive phone. It was strange what you noticed. She had sternly informed him that he had to pay again or she would call her husband. He had swallowed the bluff and left cursing her in his native tongue.

But, for the most part, the men who frequented her establishment were timid, overawed by her sheer height and

statuesque build, and they tended to come back again and again. Recent events had made her realise she had become a bit too complacent and she was determined to make sure that never happened again.

As Lucy let herself into the flat she heard Janie singing in the kitchen. Taking off her coat, she walked through the hallway calling out, 'Pour me one and all, will you.'

Janie was already dressed in her street clothes, she looked like any other young girl now. Bereft of make-up and in baggy jeans and an oversized sweatshirt she was the archetypal young mum. Hair scraped back into a ponytail, and her feet encased in a pair of Nike Airs, she was still pretty enough to get a second glance from most men. She looked a thousand miles away from the girl she became while at work.

'What would you like? There's white wine or Bacardi Breezers in the fridge. I know you like a few before you start your shift.'

'White wine please. Did you have a nice couple of days off?'

Janie took a deep draught of her drink then she said quietly, 'Too right. I heard about Danielle.'

Lucy nodded. 'It's fucking mad, ain't it? Terri found her, and you know what she's like. Coked out of her fucking nut by all accounts. She reckons Bates cleared the place of anything that could cause aggravation. Wiped the whole place down because of prints, and poor Danni was lying there the whole time, dead as a doornail. She had been really done over and all, but no one can get the full bifta. Terri's frightened of getting involved; Bates told her to keep her nose out, and who can blame her? If her family finds out what she's doing, there'll be murders.'

'What did she tell the Old Bill?'

'That she came in and found the body. She pretended she was a newbie, though if they believe that, they'll believe anything; she's been on the game since she left school. The thing is though, what can she do? If she spills the beans she would be putting everyone in it, most of us do this on the quiet. It's not like the Filth would give us a swerve, is it? Do you think we're safe, Janie?'

Janie sighed heavily, her face as bewildered as her friend's. 'What's safe in this game? What with dogging and the internet, I'm amazed there's anyone who still requires our services, they can get a free fuck in any council car park providing they don't mind an audience. I know one thing though, we're safer here than on the streets, and whoever did Danielle will be loath to repeat it with all the furore it's caused. That flat is closed down, but all the others are still going. Old Batesy thinks it was the ex-boyfriend, she was seeing that druggie for years on and off. I can't see a stranger doing something like that, it's too personal. I heard she had a chair leg shoved up inside her. I mean, what the fuck would make someone do that to her? And if you remember, she had a few good hidings off that idiot over the years. He put her in hospital more than once.'

'Well, if it was him he's going to be collared sooner rather than later. Her mum will see to that, she hated him because he kept taking all Danielle's money.'

'Makes my blood run cold just thinking about it. What a way to die. I think we should consider working in pairs for a while, just in case it's not him.'

Lucy shrugged, her shoulders looking even more impressive than usual because of the sheer material of her

Matalan top. 'Well, let's wait and see. I am on till six and I have a full quota. I'm going to put a heavy ornament by the bed in case of emergencies. But I can't see anything happening tonight.'

Janie poured herself another wine and, taking a large swig, she said sadly, 'I never liked Danielle, she was a flash prat, but I wouldn't wish anything like that on my worst enemy.'

'Who the fuck would? But it will bring heat with it, you can depend on that.'

Jimmy Heart was worried. He had been arrested, but not charged, and he had been sitting in the interview room for over an hour and a half without anyone even looking in on him. He was terrified. He had last had a toot about an hour before his arrest, and he was just about to go and score when he had been rudely detained. Now he was starting to rock; he needed another hit, and he needed it soon. He was sweating and his heart was racing. He knew that there was something serious going down, but he wasn't sure about what his part was in all of it. He was shrewd enough to know that he was going to be accused of something, he was also shrewd enough to know that, whatever it was, he probably was involved in some way because he normally was. Unfortunately for him, he had no recollection of anything that might have brought him to the Filth's attention. He also knew that if he was being detained and ignored by the said Filth, it was a serious tug. But he had not done anything to his knowledge that warranted such a production.

Jimmy was genuinely bewildered, but he was also worried. The police were more than capable of fitting a person up when the fancy took them. He could name many people who

had not only been accused, but put away for a crime they had no knowledge of nor, more importantly, the intelligence to prove their innocence of. It was a worry, but it was also a given. For all his fear, he knew he was nothing more than a junkie, a dealer. In the grand scheme of things he was a nobody. So his sensible head was asking him repeatedly why he was waiting for the big interrogation. He knew he did not warrant this kind of treatment. He talked a big game but, in reality, he had never actually experienced one. He was a ponce, no more, and no less.

It never occurred to Jimmy that he might be there because of his love life, his girlfriend. She was not even important enough to register on his radar, all she was to him was an earn. He supplied her drugs and relieved her of money on a regular basis. It was an arrangement that seemed to suit them both.

So, when he was finally confronted about his personal life, no one was more shocked than he was when he realised that Danielle had been erased. He played the part well; he looked shocked and horrified while thanking the powers that be because he had a cast iron alibi for the time of death.

Whoever had outed her had done it on the quiet. She had always favoured the evening shifts. She would. That was the real allure of her game, the hours. She worked the nights because it gave her the freedom to have the day to herself. She also liked the fact she was paid more on the night shifts. It was mental really, but men were happy to pay the extra for a late-night assignation.

So as Jimmy explained that while Danielle was being murdered, he had been scoring in a very public venue, her actual death didn't register with him at all.

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Jennifer James looked over the books before her with a trained eye. A tall girl, she had the most unusual eyes, a deep blue with heavy black lashes. She had inherited the best of her parentage; her mother's English looks, and her Spanish father's colouring. She was striking. Well built, she had a presence about her. She also had a good head for figures, and she kept the accounts for Peter Bates. She worked her shifts like all the others, but her mathematical abilities were enough to get her a second earn.

The books were not for the tax man, they were for the sole use of the girls and Peter Bates. Most of the men concerned paid in cash and a small number by credit card – only a few of the girls accepted them. Jennifer made sure that Peter got his due from them all, and she collated the customers' details. She noted the purchase price and, where possible, a name and address. It was laughable the amount of men who were willing to part with that kind of information. The girls were booked over the phone, and they were encouraged to not develop any interest in their dates for the obvious reasons. Peter used the information for his own ends, and that was his business.

Jennifer's job was to make sure that Peter got his due. The girls were on a good earn, but they were also more than capable of trying to hide some of their customers. No one minded a bit of it as long as they didn't take the piss. They had to pay for the privilege of working the flats, as annoying as that might be, they had to do it. Peter Bates ran it like a taxi rank; they paid a percentage for the use of the premises.

As Jennifer looked back over the last few weeks of Danielle's appointments she tried to see if there was anything

unusual, but she found nothing. She had wondered if the man who murdered Danielle was a regular. But when she looked over the list it seemed unlikely. They all seemed kosher. It was more likely that the night she died Danielle had to have taken the call herself at some point. There were often loners, as they were known, who rang on the off-chance after seeing the adverts in the local papers.

Sighing heavily, she wondered if she had enough time to get herself a quick meal before she had to take over her own shift for the night. Danielle's murder had thrown them off-kilter, and she knew that they would all have to be doubly careful in the future.

It grieved her that the girl's demise was being talked about in hushed tones, but by the same token, the girls concerned were not about to publicise their involvement in any way. Even though Danielle's death was horrendous, it still wasn't enough to make any of them step out of the shadows. Their whole lives were lived by a code of secrecy and they all had far too much to lose.

'Are you going back in then?'

Kate nodded. She had showered and changed after her meal, and she was dressed in what Pat had always laughingly referred to as her work clothes. White shirt, tailored trousers, and a well-cut, expensive black jacket, the only light relief was the jacket's purple silk lining. She looked good, though. If he was honest, her understated dress sense had always been a big part of her draw for him. But she was looking her age and they both knew it. He wasn't a spring chicken any more either, but as a man that was not really an issue. For women, however, it was different. Pat had the money and

the reputation for women to see him as a viable option, young women as well as the older, more experienced women. His preference had always been for the more mature, sophisticated type of female. But as he looked at Kate's troubled countenance he had to admit that she was looking older these days, and this murder had really hit her hard.

She was already miles away from him, was already gearing herself up for the hunt. It had been her sheer determination that had attracted him all those years ago. Now he was seeing it again and it was frightening him. He knew she was going to find out things that she would not want to believe, and those things concerned him and his business ventures. He could cut Peter's nuts off and laugh while he was doing it, but he knew that would be a fruitless exercise.

'Why are you so sure this ain't a one-off, Kate?'

She shrugged, her eyes already had the haunted look of someone who knows they're about to experience a lengthy and protracted time of difficulty and heartbreak. She was preparing herself for it once more. Pat knew she worked on instinct, and her instincts were telling her that this was the start of something big, something horrendous and tragic. Pat knew that that something could possibly be the cause of them parting company. It was, after all, what Kate did, find out people's secrets. He had to try and sort it all out, and sort it out soon.

'I mean, it could have been a customer she tried to have over or something. You know, as well as I do, how these things can escalate.'

Kate shook her head dismissively. 'Not in a million years, Pat. Whoever did this was well prepared, it was a vicious and bloody act. It was planned, and executed, with precision.

Whoever killed Danielle Crosby has been thinking about it for a long time. I wish these girls would understand the danger they place themselves in every time they entertain some sad fuck. It's a waste, such a waste of a life.' She paused then and looked at him, concerned. 'Are you all right, Pat? You look awful.' She went to him and placed her arms around him. His blue eyes looked tired and he looked old suddenly, it was as if he had aged in a few hours. 'Is this bringing it all back, are you thinking about Mandy?'

Pat's daughter had been brutally murdered and it was the investigation into her murder that had originally brought them together. It pleased them both that something good had come out of George Markham's reign of terror. Pat didn't answer, just held her tightly and enjoyed the smell of her hair, the feel of her body. The familiarity of her was enough to break his heart. He knew she was too good for him on so many levels but, until now, until this moment, he had not really understood just how much he needed her in his life.

'Get yourself off, Kate, I'll be fine.'

'Are you sure, Pat?'

He smiled sadly. 'Go on, I'm fine. Like you say, this is a bit too close to home.'

Annie Carr was glad to have Kate back in the building. The place was a hive of activity, everyone was in, no leave, no days off, and no way of knowing how it would pan out. It was being treated as a one-off murder, but no one believed that. This was the gut instinct of every officer, an instinct that the good ones hone over years and trust to give them a heads-up when needed. It was telling them all that this was the start of something big. Annie knew that Kate's expertise would be

invaluable, she also knew that she was going to be the cause of her friend being deeply troubled within the next few hours. She wished she knew how to lessen the blow. It was laughable really, but not so unexpected, if there hadn't been a murder it would have gone by without a mention.

Oblivious to the underlying tension in the room, Kate looked over the evidence reports and wondered at how no one could have heard anything. The block of flats was small. A low-rise with three storeys and a well-tended frontage, they were not cheap. Well built, they had an entry phone system, along with an expensive alarm system. They were not the type of flats that were easily accessible to the usual burglars or teenage thieves. They were in a nice, quiet road, and they backed on to the woods, from which you had access to the golf course. So someone had to have heard a commotion, had to have heard something.

Kate would talk to everyone who lived there herself. The neighbours would be over the initial shock of the slaying and might open up about the girls' work, the type of clientele that frequented the premises, if there was much foot traffic and, more importantly, how the men got access to the flats and if they parked in the car park or on the road.

They *had* to have seen something, someone. It was amazing what people didn't see, what people ignored, what they became immune to. They must have guessed what was going on there, and yet they were claiming ignorance. Kate had said as much to Annie Carr.

'Well, Kate, you know what people are like. Anyway, they were probably worried about complaining.'

'I suppose so. Annie, have we got the name of the person who owns the flat yet?'

Annie nodded, and passed her a pale buff folder saying pointedly, 'Peter Bates. But, Kate, I think you had better look at who he co-owns it with.'

Kate felt the breath leave her body as the implications of her friend's words sank in.

'I've kept a lid on it, Kate, but I don't know how long before someone else susses it out.'

'Is it Patrick by any chance?'

'I'm afraid so, mate.'

Kate could hear the sorrow in Annie's voice, and that just made the anger mounting inside her colder. She was numb with the shock of Patrick's duplicity. He knew she would find this out, and yet he didn't even attempt to give her a heads-up, allow her to at least have some dignity when the truth finally emerged. She had to be told by a subordinate, by someone who looked up to her and respected her.

It meant that they were living off immoral earnings, that even though he was loaded, he still had to have a dabble, as he would put it. What was running through her mind now was, what else was he up to? What else was Pat hiding from her?

Once this came out she would be implicated in it, and that was the last thing any of them needed. The crime scene had been messed with by either Bates or one of his minions, so that again put a different perspective on everything. Tampering with the evidence suggested to Kate that whoever visited the flat might not be just the usual weirdos, but could include rich, well-known weirdos. People with too much to lose and a lot to hide. It was an upmarket establishment, and that meant their job would be much harder.

Kate couldn't speak, she felt as if all the air had left her

body, she could feel herself deflating with the hot flush of her humiliation. She closed her eyes, she was suddenly overwhelmed with tiredness.

'You OK, Kate?'

Kate shrugged and said flatly, 'Well, I've had better fucking days.'

Peter Bates was nervous, but then he always was. He knew that he was skating on thin ice. He had cleaned the flat up because he thought it was for the best. It was his first reaction, tidy away anything that could tie him to the offence. He was just protecting his interests.

He had assumed the girl had been on the receiving end of a nut-bag, it wasn't unheard of in their profession; after all, they were Toms. As well as the regulars, they took their own calls and arranged their own clients. The days of having a maid on the go were long gone, though a maid did offer them a level of security, he saw that now.

In the fifties and sixties, no Tom worth her salt was ever alone with a customer. Nowadays, there were a few who still employed someone to make the tea and change the beds, but they were a dying breed. Girls today didn't work out of their homes for a start, and they were a different sort to their forebears. When he cut into the game as a young lad, he had learned early on that a good pimp kept his girls chaperoned, not just for safety, but because they kept their eyes and ears open for any extra monies earned on the quiet. They also ran errands, kept the place clean and, more importantly, kept a beady eye out for anything of a suspicious nature.

The women and girls these days were more on the ball, they had lives outside of their work. They weren't as involved

with the game now; it was basically just a job, a means to an end. While they were young and fresh-faced they had the chance to work out of a nice apartment, once the life took them over and they started to look a bit frayed around the edges, he outed them. It was only firm flesh that earned a wedge these days; men were inundated with young girls, and they were available at any time of the day or night. It was a competitive business now, albeit a lucrative one, but it was also a business that was being overtaken by the Eastern Europeans. They trafficked their flesh, and because of that they had most of the girls' earnings. Peter saw himself as far above those fucking thieves, his girls came to him for a job, they were complicit. He had never forced a bird on to the bash in his life. That was an outrageous situation for any man who ran an orderly business.

Peter might have done away with a maid, but he still had a head girl who kept an eye out. As far as he was concerned, he had taken all the precautions needed to keep his girls in the loop. But now the shock had worn off, and the enormity of what had happened had sunk in, he knew he had done a wrong one. But he had protected his business interests, protected his own arse. He had also attempted to protect Pat Kelly's arse, even if Pat hadn't been aware his arse needed protection. And he had the distinct impression Pat was not too impressed about it. And Patrick Kelly had never been a man to take aggravation without some kind of retaliation.