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Something You Are

Written by Hanna Jameson

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HANNA JAMESON

SOMETHING YOU ARE



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So I have no real culture. I am a monster. There are others whom I could be with, but I don't want to be.

Kirsten Bakis, *Lives of the Monster Dogs*

PROLOGUE

2000

There were three of them, standing on the corner between the main road and my house. I knew they were going to stop me. Around here, you just knew these things. My estate lurked in your peripheral vision like an abusive partner, silent until it lurched into spates of motiveless violence.

'Hey!'

I avoided eye contact.

'Oi! Oi, Nic!'

It would have been unwise to carry on walking so I stopped a few feet short of the tallest boy in the grey hoodie.

'All right.' I nodded, not too familiar but not abrupt.

Night was falling, casting long shadows across the pavement and making the boys' already dark skin appear almost black. They looked about thirteen, even the one who was taller than me, though they might have been younger.

'Got any money? My brother needs some fags.' The tallest jerked his head at one of the smaller kids.

'No, just on my way home.'

They made no indication of moving so neither did I. Four pairs of hands drifted into pockets. I had nothing. I had the sense to glare, but felt closer to vomiting or passing out.

'You've got a funny surname, in't ya?'

Silence.

'Cariana? Bit gay.'

'Caruana,' I corrected him.

'*Caruana*…' he drew out the syllables. 'Like *marijuana*?'

'Yep.'

A red Honda passed by. I felt eyes scan the scene from behind a pane of glass and then they were gone.

'I'm going home, lads,' I said, dropping my gaze and taking a step forwards.

'Na na na, mate.' The tall kid stopped me with a hand to the chest. 'Na na na, I asked you whether you had fag money, mate. Nic, mate. Nic, that's you, right?'

'Fuck's sake, I don't have any money on me!' I took my hands out of my pockets to gesture and he punched me in the face.

The street became sky as two of them tackled me around the waist. The back of my head smacked against tarmac and hands went into pockets. I kicked out and connected with shins but I could hear them shouting.

'Stay down! Stay down or I'll shank you, I'll fucking shank you!'

I froze, flat against the pavement with rainwater soaking into my back. It could have been an empty threat but I wasn't going to take the chance. They searched my pockets, relieving me of my mobile while I looked up over their heads at the darkening cloud.

'Take that off,' the tall one said, pointing at my watch, my dad's watch, black leather and silver numbers.

I hesitated and one of the smaller kids kicked me in the ribs.

'Do as he says, bitch!'

'Or we'll fuck you up!'

'Just take the phone,' I said, wondering if I would ever reach my house.

This time the kick was in the face. I spat out blood and rolled on to my side to let it fall to the pavement. They would kill me over the watch; these kids would kill over a postcode.

'All right, fuck, *all right*!'

I tried to undo the buckle with a trembling hand, praying that it was enough.

'Hurry the fuck up!'

The tall kid grabbed my wrist and I saw the knife, an evil fucker of a stiletto blade. I panicked and lunged for the handle. An arm crushed my neck but I couldn't let go. If I let go I was dead; another statistic, a face in a newspaper next to an embarrassingly optimistic list of my aspirations.

At first I thought I was just punching him, slamming my fist against his chest so that I could breathe again, but when he let me go and I was still holding the handle I realized what had happened.

He looked at me with dead eyes. Huge flowers of blood blossomed and spread across the front of the hoodie, bleeding into each other.

The other two kids started to run.

'I'm… fuck…' He turned and tried to limp towards the main road.

'Wait! No, wait!'

I dropped the knife and followed him as he dropped to his knees by the kerb. I crouched beside him and searched his pockets for my mobile.

'Wait, just wait…' I didn't know what I was saying. Words kept tumbling out without coherence.

'I want my mum…' He started crying, holding his stomach. 'Please, you have to get my mum!'

There was blood on the handset as I tried to dial 999.

'Please…'

'Wait! Wait, just wait!'

The line was ringing and ringing and the tarmac I was kneeling on was slick with blood and rainwater.

'Emergency services—'

'Hello? Hello! I need… I need a—'

The kid wasn't speaking any more.

'Hello? Sir, hello?'

I thought I was just punching him.

'Oh God…' A hand went to my mouth to hold back the bile and the tears came instead. 'Fuck.'

'Hello? Can you hear me?'

I ended the call and struggled to my feet. The street was empty but that was to be expected. People would have turned their backs or disappeared into houses. No one wanted to go to court. No one was worth that.

I wiped the blood off my hands on to my shirt, and zipped up my jacket as if it would hide the stains.

I thought I was just punching him.

I went to take him by the shoulders to get him out of the road, but he was too heavy. I could only manage a few steps before having to drop him. He looked his age now, despite his size. His face was that of a child's.

For a few moments, I was torn between trying to lift him again and running back to the knife.

I ran.

The blade was red all the way up to the handle.

It was surprisingly light when I picked it up. It had gone into him so easily that I hadn't even noticed, like sliding it into butter. I retched, threw it away from me and heard it clatter against a drain.

I started walking, faster and faster, towards my house. The buckle on my watch was loose and I slid it back into place. I

couldn't believe how close I had been to getting home; five minutes later or earlier and this wouldn't be happening.

I made it to my front door without seeing anyone else and wondered how long it would take for someone in the surrounding houses to phone the police or an ambulance. I couldn't steady my hands enough to get my key in the lock so I knocked instead. For a second I worried what Mum would say about getting blood on the carpets.

I was only seventeen. That kid had been younger.

By the time my brother answered the door I found it too difficult to speak.

'Tony…' I choked.

'Jesus, fuck, Nic!' He grabbed at me, searching for the wound so that he could stem the blood, and paled as he realized it wasn't mine.

'Tony, we need—'

'Oh, Jesus Christ…' He leant out and scanned the street.

'His mum!' It was all I could get out through the tears as he dragged me inside by the front of my jacket. 'Please, we have to get his mum!'

CHAPTER ONE

2010

The first time I killed someone I wasn't paid for it. Like many other kids I drifted into my career by accident, because it was the first industry to offer me money, because, with my record, nowhere else would have offered me any.

I turned right off Marylebone High Street and into a road of detached houses. Like the stockbrokers and accountants still in their offices I didn't have to be working, but I had dragged myself out of a shallow sleep on my sofa and into my car when Pat Dyer had called and offered me a job.

I pulled into a lay-by, got out into the excruciating cold and squinted at each front door. His daughter had gone missing, apparently. I didn't know much about Pat, having only been introduced once in passing. I knew more about him by reputation, but they were all the same, these types: clever, self-important, predictably psychotic.

A gust of wind went through my coat and I gritted my teeth as I walked up to Pat's house. I noticed, as I knocked, that any space where grass or flowers were meant to be had been covered with concrete.

A blonde woman opened the door and I faltered.

'I'm… Hi, I'm Nic, Nic Caruana.'

She looked at my hand with her arms folded, before shaking it. Her wrists showed traces of white scars and she had the most desolate eyes I had ever seen. Pat sounded like

the type to have a model wife, and she stood at least two inches taller than me.

'Um, Pat called me over,' I said.

'Oh.' She stood to one side, mimicking a smile. 'Great.'

I'd almost rather have stayed outside.

'Look, I know this is awkward but Pat left about five minutes ago,' she said as I walked in. 'I'm Clare, I'm his wife. He said… Well, he said to tell you anything you wanted to know.'

There was a slight accent to her voice; definitely Scottish.

I felt wrong-footed by the change in plans. It wasn't that she was a woman, but their tendency towards overt displays of emotion made me tense.

'When was the last time you saw her?' I asked, driving past the possibility of small talk.

'This morning, when she left. She was meant to be back by four.'

'You know, she's probably just at a party. Most of the time when I get called out to things like this I end up driving a sorry kid back from a rave somewhere.' I smiled. 'You know, begging them not to throw up in my car.'

'Maybe, but I don't think so.' She returned my smile, but with the expression of someone who knew I didn't have kids myself. 'What do you do again?'

'Private detective of sorts.'

'Oh really? I heard you track people down?'

'Yeah, I do that.'

'And make them pay for things?' Not once did her eyes leave my face. 'Pat's words.'

'I…'

'I see.'

'That's quite a… general description of my job.'

'Well, PR has never been Pat's strong point.'

'Yeah, well, most people quite like their kneecaps.' I regretted the low shot and looked back at the front door, willing Pat to return. 'Sorry.'

'Don't be sorry.' Contrary to my reaction she didn't look bothered. I had misjudged her in assuming she didn't know a lot. 'I don't like you. I didn't like you as soon as I heard Pat call you.'

I wasn't sure whether to be bewildered or amused. 'That's OK.'

'Do you want to sit down?'

All of their furniture was a little too big for the house. The gold-rimmed mirror hanging in the hallway gave the impression you were sharing the space with too many extra people. In the living room the sofas were leather and the TV and computer were unnecessarily large. In a few years I could see us watching screens projecting life-sized images; no distinction between fiction and ourselves.

I sat on the edge of a sofa and Clare leant on the arm of another. She had tried to dress down the grey cocktail dress with a cardigan, and she wasn't wearing any shoes. Maybe it was just her height, but she had quite a daunting presence for a woman.

'We called her friend, the one she was meant to be meeting, and according to her she never even arrived,' Clare said.

'Where were they meeting?' I asked, glad to be back on solid ground.

'Tottenham Court Road tube station, I think. They might have been catching the tube from there, I don't know.'

'Did you try calling her?'

'We both tried but she never picked up.'

'What's her friend's name?'

'I don't think you should know.'

I found it hard to meet the suspicion in her face. 'I won't hurt her.'

'You're not with the law.'

'What difference does that make?'

'You don't have anyone to tell you when you're going too far.'

'Why do you think I need someone to tell me?' I asked.

'Everyone does. And if you didn't you'd probably be working with the law rather than outside it.'

I smiled. I couldn't help it even though it would seem patronizing.

'You don't have a very high opinion of people, do you?'

'No, just you.'

'OK.' I inclined my head. 'So I'm not allowed to know her friend's name?'

'No.'

'Did she have a boyfriend?'

'No, they broke up a while ago.' She sat down and pulled her legs up on to the sofa.

'Am I allowed to know his name?'

'No.'

'You ever give people a chance?'

'Do you?'

'Fair enough.' I shrugged. 'Can I see a picture of her?'

She looked at me as if I had asked for pornography.

I spread my hands. 'I can't find her if I don't know what she looks like.'

After a small hesitation she stood up, walked over to one of the bookcases in the corner and took down a framed photo. The girl in the picture looked like a dark-haired version of her mother, I thought, with harder features that reminded me

more of her father. There were the same high cheekbones and dancer's posture that Clare had, but she was nowhere near as interesting without the scars.

'What was she wearing this morning?'

'She was wearing her black and white striped top. Um… jeans, black boots, high heels.'

I decided against asking to keep the photo and handed it back. Clare replaced it on the bookcase and next to it I noticed a sculpture of a woman's body, legs twisted up behind the head, the face featureless apart from an open soundless scream where the mouth was meant to be. It didn't sit comfortably with the rest of the room.

I caught her eyes, tensed and looked away. 'Look, do you mind if I go and speak to some people? I'll call Pat on his mobile but it's probably best I start trying to get some leads.'

'It's what he's paying you for.'

'Try not to worry too much. You know, I'm sure she's fine.'

She nodded. 'She'd call if she was.'

I was about to leave when I caught myself in the doorway, turning back. 'Sorry… What's her name?'

'Emma.' Her face was all shadows and grief, as if she already knew her daughter wasn't coming back. 'Her name's Emma.'

My breath froze in the air on the way back to my car. I could have gone home, but it was a job and sleep was overrated.

I wanted a closer look at her hands.

The level of cold on this night was oppressive and vaguely threatening. I let myself into DC Geoff Brinks's house through the back door. Due to his late-night cigarettes it was never locked.

You would never guess that he had two children, I thought as I sat down at his dining table in the dark. Usually you could see the telltale signs, like drawings stuck to the fridge or family photos, but his house was as void and grey as the man himself.

It was later than usual, a little while after midnight, when I heard him coming down the stairs. I could have given him some warning but where was the fun in that?

Brinks switched on the light and let out a high-pitched cry as he fell against the wall.

I swear this never stopped being funny.

'Evening, sunshine.'

'Fuck! Fuck… *Fuck*, Nic!'

'If you don't lock your door one day you'll get unlucky and it won't be me you find down here.'

'Lucky, pfft…' Brinks, his T-shirt and boxers hanging off the bones jutting out of his hips, crossed the room to the fridge and got out a bottle of Carlsberg. He was slight to the point of emaciated, with small rat-like teeth and slick hair. 'You're lucky I don't sleep in the buff, mate.'

'There would be *nothing* buff about that, mate.'

Brinks sat down heavily across the table, making me want to stand up.

'This has to stop,' he said, rubbing his finger across a stain in the plastic tablecloth.

'Well, when you start locking your door I might start knocking.' I winked, not able to resist fucking with his head. 'Meet the missus, eh?'

'No, not just that, I mean this.' He gestured at nothing. 'I mean this whole thing.'

I snorted. 'And you think I have nothing better to do with my time than cultivate new contacts?'

'Come on, Nic—'

'I need to be kept up to date on this case.'

'Nic—'

'*Stop* bleating my name like some fucking woman!' I reached into my khaki bag and dropped a wad of notes on to the table. It was more likely to shut him up than words.

He looked up from the money, as pale as the notes. 'What case?'

The token pretence at integrity was disgusting. I wanted to smash his head into the fridge and leave him choking in a pool of his own blood but it wouldn't be fair on the family upstairs. Brinks would do anything for money. I doubted it would take much for him to let me do that.

He coughed and fear flickered across his features. Sometimes I wondered whether he could see my thoughts betrayed on my face.

'What case?'

'It's not a case yet, but it will be soon. Do you know who Pat Dyer is?'

He took a gulp of beer. 'I want to say arms dealer…'

'Yeah, he lives in Marylebone. His daughter went missing today.'

'Yeah, I know of him. Daughter is about sixteen now, right?'

I hesitated, surprised at myself for having not asked. 'Um, yeah.'

'How long has she been gone?'

'Since this morning. She went to meet a friend and never arrived. Parents only found out a while ago.'

'Don't want her gone another twelve hours, do we?' he said, looking at me over the huge shadows under his eyes. 'You know I'll only be brought in if we find a body?'

'I know.'

'Ever the optimist.'

I shrugged. It seemed pointless, hoping she would be found. The only alternative I could think of was that her friend had lied. It didn't fit though. Her friend would have covered for her otherwise.

'I'm gonna need things like CCTV footage, case notes, photographs, the usual.'

'Do you have a description?' he asked, counting the money left on the table.

'She's got long dark hair, blue eyes, mole on her neck along her collarbone.' My mind was full of bin liners and mottled skin, blood under broken nails. I wondered how much money it would take to make Brinks do that to someone. 'She was wearing jeans, black high-heel boots and a black and white striped top.'

'Getting ahead of ourselves a bit, aren't we?' he said, rubbing his eyes.

'If she turns up alive it'll be a nice hundred pounds to lose.'

'Point.' He pinched the bridge of his nose as I stood up and wandered towards the door. 'Seriously, this has to be the last time.'

'Heh, whatever.' I smiled back from the doorway. 'Like you have a choice.'

'I'm serious…'

'Thanks, Geoff!' I called back, already outside.

'Go to hell, Nic.'

I dialled Pat Dyer from a petrol station while downing an energy drink in my car, not expecting an answer. It was well into the early hours of the morning and stress was weighing on my eyelids.

After a few seconds Pat answered. There was a dim rumble,

as if he was driving. It was the third time I'd spoken to him, but the picture that was starting to form in my mind was of a man who didn't tolerate contradiction or competition. He spoke like someone who was not only unaccustomed to interruption, but on constant lookout for anyone who seemed as though they might try.

'Yeah?'

'This is Nic, Nic Caruana.'

'Oh yeah? Clare said you were following some leads?'

'Well, it's hard to tell at the moment but what was the name of Emma's ex-boyfriend?'

'Danny Maclaine. Don't worry about him though, I've just seen him. Got a few leads of my own, you know.'

'Do you mind if I talk to him anyway?'

Pat went quiet for a while.

'He doesn't know anything,' he said, sounding competitive.

'I'd still like to talk to him.'

'Believe me, if he knew anything he would have told me.'

'Sure thing, but I like to check these things out myself.'

He waited for me to relent, but I was more at ease with silence than him.

'Fine,' he said. 'But he doesn't know anything.'

He gave me an address in Edmonton and hung up.

I turned the car around, thinking that she was already dead. I tried switching on the radio and grimaced at the onslaught of drum 'n' bass before switching it off again. When I stopped at some traffic lights I shut my eyes for a moment, jerked myself awake and drew a star in the condensation on the window.

She's already dead.

The upper windows of the house in Edmonton were blocked with mattresses. Danny Maclaine answered the door with one

eye swollen shut. His jeans were too baggy and his hair was on the verge of dreadlocks. A ginger cut-price Kurt Cobain.

'Are you Danny Maclaine?'

'Fuck, I already told him I don't know where she is!'

'I just want to talk to you.'

Danny turned his head side-on to look at me. 'Who are you?'

'I'm working with Pat. Don't worry, I don't think you know where she is.'

'So she really is missing then?'

'Yeah, since this morning.'

'Fuck…' He jerked his head. 'All right.'

There was only one lamp in the living room, one sofa, one table, no TV. He sat down carefully, an arm around his ribs. Someone in the street was playing Deftones too loud and a group of lads were shouting their way past the window. On the floor at his feet was a bag of pills.

'When did you last see Emma?' I asked, standing in the doorway.

'About three weeks ago, maybe four, I don't know.' He picked up the bag of pills and let me decline one before knocking back two for himself.

'How long were you together?'

'A year. She was cool. We were together since she was fifteen. Her dad never liked me though, mad bastard.'

My eyes fell across the bruises and split cheek. 'He gave you quite a going-over.'

'Well, he's been waiting for an excuse for long enough.' He shifted on the sofa and looked up at me as if he was about to share something important. 'Look, she's not the sort of girl who would pull a fast one on her parents. She's a good sort, really. If she's missing it'll be… it'll be something.'

‘I don’t want to jump to conclusions,’ I said. ‘Any idea where she would go? Places that she used to hang out?’

‘Only the usual places, clubs and stuff…’ He shrugged, leg jigging. ‘They were only places she would go with me though, cos of her age. I don’t know where her new fella would be taking her.’

The music stopped but the shouting continued.

‘She had a new boyfriend?’

‘Just from what I’ve heard,’ he said. ‘She was seen out with another guy.’

‘Do you know his name?’

‘No.’ His eye narrowed for a moment. ‘I don’t even know what he looks like.’

The shouting outside stopped.

‘She’s… she’s probably dead, isn’t she?’ he said.

I knew he wouldn’t appreciate a lie, even if it would have been kinder to give him one, at least for now.

‘Maybe. Maybe not.’

He nodded and sat back, one eye staring ahead.

‘I need to go but I may need to speak to you again.’

Danny didn’t say anything else. He was rolling himself a joint when I left.

CHAPTER TWO

I glanced at my reflection in the overhead mirror again and pushed it away, embarrassed that I cared.

I was an odd-looking guy by my own admission. An Italian father and Scottish mother had given me features that had taken years to grow into, and even now they remained uneasily arranged on my face: a Roman nose, pale eyes and aggressive teeth against a natural tan. My hair was still short, but starting to hang like Lennon's during his fringe phase.

I sat back in the driver's seat, grimacing.

Across the street the front of Pat Dyer's house was grand and sombre. Everything about it said fuck off. Pat's Mercedes wasn't in the driveway and he wasn't answering his phone.

I got out of the car, eyes on the living-room light.

I called Pat.

Nothing.

I called Pat again.

Nothing.

Fuck.

I walked up to the door, rang the bell and listened to footsteps coming swiftly from the living room. When she opened the door she didn't bother to hide her disappointment.

'Oh, it's you…' She stepped back, masking the worry with contempt, charcoal shadows under her eyes. 'Have you found anything?'

'Nothing yet.' I hesitated, until I realized that she wasn't

planning to invite me in again. 'Listen, I need to search Emma's room. If it's OK with you, of course.'

She said nothing.

'OK, well, let me phrase it another way,' I said. 'I'm going to search her room, because that's what I'm being paid to do. You can be OK with it, or not. I actually don't give a shit either way.'

I expected her to slam the door in my face but she stood to the side.

'Fine.'

I stepped inside and turned. 'Look, it's just—'

'Don't worry, I understood you the first time.'

There was nothing I could say to make the atmosphere easier, I realized. There never was. With my job I only ever met people at their worst; racked with grief or spite or a petty need for revenge.

I walked up the stairs and heard her say, 'It's on the left,' which was as close to an endorsement as I was going to get.

When I switched on the light the first thing that hit me was the realization of how young sixteen was. The walls were baby blue and covered in posters cut from magazines. I didn't know who any of the men were and figured I wasn't missing out on much.

I glanced back as I heard Clare coming up the stairs. 'I'm going to need to move some stuff.'

She shrugged and leant against the doorway.

I tried to forget she was there as I started working my way methodically around the room. First I checked the usual places; on the top shelves of the wardrobe and under the mattress. Burglars used the same logic; anything of value was either high or low.

In her dressing table I found a diary and address book.

'That's private,' Clare said.

I raised my eyebrows at her as I sat down on the stool, picking my way past the lock with one of her hairpins. I scanned the most recent entries, saw a few names and put both the diary and address book in my pocket.

'Do you know if Emma had a new boyfriend?' I asked, looking at the photos stuck around the edges of the mirror.

'No.' She hesitated, as if she felt guilty for asking. 'Have you seen…? Did she?'

'Possibly.'

'Oh.'

Emma looked like the sort of girl who knew too many people, I thought. One of the popular kids, with so many acquaintances that she wouldn't be able to tell which ones were friends.

'I thought she would have told us,' Clare said. 'She tells us everything.'

'With all due respect, that's a myth.'

It was too quiet and the room was too bright.

I reached forwards and ran my hands down either side of the mirror. My fingers brushed against something Sellotaped to the back and I stood up to peel it off. It was a bag of white powder.

'No, she wouldn't…' She stepped into the room.

I put it in my pocket along with the diary and address book. 'Don't worry, it might not even have any relevance.'

'It's relevant to me.'

I looked back at Emma's bedside table and saw on the digital clock that it was almost three in morning.

'I'm going to go home,' I said. 'I think I've got enough information to get started. I'll call round tomorrow… or later today, I mean. Hopefully Pat will be back by then and if the

police find anything in the meantime I'll know before anyone else.'

'Are you just going to take those?' She indicated her head at my pocket. 'She might come back and if she sees we've…'

I didn't say anything.

'I get it,' she said. 'You don't think she's coming back, do you?'

'No, I'm just doing my job.'

She looked me up and down but she seemed too tired to argue further.

'Fine,' she said.

'Cool. I'll check in later.'

I brushed against her shoulder as I walked towards the stairs, but her arms were folded and the scars on her wrists weren't visible.

My mobile started vibrating in my pocket. It was Brinks, and I already knew what he was going to say. He wouldn't call me at this time of night unless it was from a crime scene.

'Yep?'

Brinks sounded as if he was walking, heavy breaths sending white noise down the line. 'We've got the guys from Family Liaison heading over to the parents now. Poor bastards are going to have to identify a body.'

'You found her?'

'Her… it, whatever. If it wasn't for some of the clothes you described I wouldn't even fucking know.'

'Is it bad?'

'Bad? More like unrecognizable. Seriously, Nic, shot and beaten to fuck.'

My thoughts went to the girl's face in the picture frame; red, purple and smashed. I avoided looking back up the stairs

at Clare, but I could feel her expression searing straight through me.

'Who found her?'

'Taxi driver. I'll give you the names and statements as and when.'

'You sound spooked?'

'Yeah, well, you're not here. We'll catch up later; I'll give you some photos and stuff. Just thought you should know.'

'Thanks, I suppose.'

'Laters.'

In a moment of sheer dread I considered carrying on down the stairs, leaving without meeting her eyes and pretending the last thirty seconds hadn't happened. I put my phone in my pocket, with the diary and coke, and looked up at her.

She took a breath and a few of the waiting tears worked their way out. 'Who was that?'

'Listen, don't panic,' I said, marvelling at how ridiculous it sounded. 'Listen to me. In a couple of minutes some officers are going to arrive and ask you to go down to the hospital to identify someone. Can you get ahold of Pat?'

'I've tried, he's not answering…' She came down a few steps. 'What do you mean *identify* someone? You mean they've found something, don't you?'

'I don't know yet.'

Why had I come back? Why hadn't I just stayed in my car? Why hadn't I just stayed at home and avoided this mess?

She came closer but still stayed above me. 'Don't *fucking* lie.'

It would be an insult to deny it. She knew more than that. It was admirable that she found the control to keep talking, even with the tears rolling down her cheeks from red eyes that the grief hadn't yet caught up with.

'I think it's her,' I said, softly, as if that would make it easier. 'Is there any other way of calling Pat?'

She looked away. 'He's not answering. Neither are his friends.'

The tears were still coming but it was just formality, an imitation of a natural reaction to cover the shock.

'How are you sure?' she asked.

'The clothes, he said.'

'Right…'

For a second, I was worried she might faint.

I heard a car pull up outside and she put a hand to her eyes. 'Oh God, where the fuck is Pat…?'

There was a knock, a pause, and then the sound of the doorbell. I moved aside so she could pass me, rubbing her eyes as she opened the door.

The officers were in uniform, young and grave.

'Mrs Dyer?'

She nodded but said nothing. She didn't invite them in so they carried on talking.

'We're very sorry, but we need either you or your husband to come with us to identify a body that was recently found.' The officer glanced at me over her shoulder, hovering three steps up, trying to stay out of sight. 'If both of you—'

'I'm not Pat Dyer,' I said quickly. 'I'm… a friend.'

I could feel the fear emanating from her in cold waves.

'Do you have any way of getting in contact with Mr Dyer?'

'No,' she said. 'No, he's not answering his phone.'

'I can drive you,' I offered. Why, I didn't know. It came out like an attack of Tourette's.

She wasn't looking at me but she nodded.

It was quarter past three.

Welcome to hell, indeed.

*

We were taken to the viewing room. Hospitals all had the same smell as prisons. I looked over my shoulder out of habit, into all the rooms, sizing up the inmates as I had in juvie.

Clare hadn't spoken in the car and she didn't speak now.

The outline that we could see through the pane of glass, under the white sheet, looked smaller than I had expected. I felt sick all of a sudden. She might have looked older in the photograph but she was only a child, really. They always looked their age when they were dead.

They pulled the sheet back and Clare recoiled.

I stepped forwards. The first thing I noticed, which drew me towards the glass in fascination, was that her face was gone. This wasn't the usual purple bruising and fractures; it was total obliteration. I tried to focus on the point where her jaw ended and her neck began but, even with the blood cleaned away as best they could, I failed to find it.

Clare had only needed to look once.

She started crying with her back to the glass and I stayed silent, hanging back. I had tried my best to warn her of what she was going to see in the car but she probably hadn't heard me.

The officers moved away to give us space that I didn't want.

'No no no no no no…'

I saw her knees buckle and managed to get to her in time to slow her descent to the floor. I was on my knees, holding her and unable to stop. I felt her tears stain through my shirt. It should have been Pat here instead of me and I hated him for it. Hate, fear and some alien feeling caught in my throat, making it hard to breathe. I went on to autopilot, doing what

I thought other people would do with another man's wife shuddering with grief in their arms; stroking her hair, soft as I had thought it would be; saying, 'It's all right, it's all right, it's all right, it's all right…' even though it wasn't. It was never going to be all right.

I didn't know how long I went on telling her that before I saw the officers returning and knew it was time for us to go.

'Come on, let's go home.'

No response.

I glanced at the officers, nodded as if to say 'Give us a second' and took a breath.

'Hey,' I said, looking down at her. 'Hey, um… Clare.'

She looked at me but there was only a flicker of acknowledgement in her face.

My breath stopped in my chest and I swallowed. 'Come on, we need to get you home. Can you stand for me?'

Slowly, she nodded.

I helped her up and half walked, half carried her out.

In the car there were no words from either of us. She rested her forehead against the window, watching yellow lights go by.

The clock on the dashboard said 05:48.

As we approached the house I saw that the Mercedes was back. I opened the car door for her and walked her to the front door. Pat answered on the second ring of the bell, stood up too straight in his suit, looking as though he was trying his hardest not to lean on anything.

Clare left my side and slapped him.

He didn't say anything, didn't even meet her eyes.

She looked him up and down, her lip shaking, and walked inside.

I could still smell her perfume on my clothes.

Pat took a long breath through his nose and said, 'You Nic?'

I nodded. 'I'm sorry.'

His face contorted. 'You can… you can go… I'll call you.'

As I walked back down their path I inhaled deeply, trying to clear my head. An unforgiving wind started howling and when I got into my car the temperature read –4. No one was going to find comfort tonight.

CHAPTER THREE

When I woke up I could feel sunlight on my face and my eyelids were encrusted with sleep. My shoulders were aching, propped up with cushions, and when I managed to prise my eyes open I realized I had fallen asleep on the sofa.

I sat up and Emma's diary slid off my stomach on to the floor.

'Ah, fuck.'

I looked at my watch.

'*Wo*.'

It was almost midday and the shock propelled me to my feet. I wavered, blinking, until the room came into enough focus for me to locate my mobile on the coffee table. There were no messages from Russia. My flatmate, Mark Chester, had been away for over a month now and I only had five texts to show for it.

I turned in the direction of the kitchen for coffee, decided that I didn't have time, and went into the bathroom instead. It wasn't good. I had a meeting with Edie Franco about a new job in forty-five minutes, and turning up looking like the casualty of a cheap stag weekend wasn't how I wanted to project my professional image.

'Jesus…'

I dashed some water on my face, took off my shirt and noticed I'd written something on the back of my hand.

'Who is K?'

A recent section of Emma's diary came back to me.

'Went for another p/u with K. Imagining Dad's face, LOL.'

I looked at the reminder again before washing it off, and sprayed some deodorant over the lingering smell of sweat and perfume.

Edie Franco owned one of Mark's favourite nightclubs: the Underground. Direct, impossibly blonde and built like a Valkyrie, she came across as the sort of woman with whom you would be lucky to survive a sexual encounter. She was winking at forty, but you couldn't tell.

I was half an hour late but, as I should have expected, she was later. I managed to drink two cups of coffee at the bar before she arrived with a gust of sleet and freezing wind. She was wearing a red coat that covered everything down to her knees and her handshake was more of a firm stroke.

'I missed those swimming-pool-blue eyes!'

'Edie.' I pulled away briskly after she kissed me on the cheek. 'You want anything to drink?'

There was no apology for the time. 'Coffee, black.'

I nodded at the barman. 'I'll have the same.'

'Move to the sofas?' She indicated her head and started walking.

I followed her to a spot away from the doors and sat down opposite her. It felt better to have a table between us.

'Haven't heard from you in a while?' I said.

'Life's been sweet, what can I say? You get married, you have a kid, you open a club, you think about another kid…' She crossed her legs, slipped off her coat. 'Get divorced, call up a beautiful man… don't worry, that's not where you come in…'

The barman came over and put down two coffees.

I looked at mine, smiling, but didn't touch it. 'I'm, er… sorry to hear that.'

'Sorry about the divorce or the beautiful man?' She raised her eyebrows and her expression became coy, wide eyes blackened with theatrical make-up. 'Well, sometimes people just grow away from each other, or too close to other people, or several, whatever.'

I smiled.

'You ever wanted to have kids, Dominic? Pass on that hot side-profile?' She turned her head so I could admire hers, the same nose and full lips.

'Looks better on you,' I said, picking up my coffee.

Another festive song was playing. I looked up at the fake holly pinned to the spirit shelf. There was still a month to go but Christmas was everywhere.

'Sad, isn't it? Working over Christmas.' There was a pause as she followed my eyeline up to the lights. 'Sometimes the evenings look so beautiful from my office I can barely stand to walk home alone… I rarely do, that's probably why we're here, huh?'

'Sidney.' It had dawned on me what the job was. *Who* it was. 'It's Sidney, isn't it? Something to do with the divorce?'

Silence.

I shook my head. 'Damn, Edie, you know I don't like to—'

'You don't like to know why. Isn't that how you work?'

I put the coffee down, too high on caffeine already and unable to look at her directly. 'Domestic disputes, come on, I thought you were above this sort of thing?'

'He wants my son. What am I above? Love?'

I pointed a finger. 'Now *that's* what I don't like to work with!'

'I can't go to court.'

'You mean you w—'

'I can't go to court!'

'You—'

'I *won't win*!' Her fist slammed on to the table and coffee dashed across the polished surface. 'I… won't win.'

The background chatter waned for a moment and I looked over my shoulder, worried about how much attention we were drawing to ourselves.

Edie sat back, touched her hair and looked at the spilt coffee. When she spoke again every word was controlled.

'I won't win in court.'

'You're the mother, you always win.'

'I won't.'

There was an intensity in her face that I found difficult to match. It was why she was such a good businesswoman; every expression was inherently threatening.

'Why?' I asked, even though I didn't want to, even though I could have done it without knowing.

'He had someone follow me, for quite a while, recording… things. If it gets out, which he has threatened it will, I'll never see Scott again.'

'So what do you want me to do? Just destroy the recordings?'

'I'll pay for whatever you need to do to stop them getting out. *Anything*. Understand?'

I nodded.

'You want anything upfront?'

'No, it's all right.' I picked up my bag and got out ten pounds for the coffees.

'Who are you walking home with?' she asked.

I shook her hand and smiled when she held on to it for much longer than was necessary. 'I'm not going home, and I could do without any dodgy internet tapes.'

'Worked for Paris Hilton.'

'I'll give it some thought.' I kissed her hand. 'Merry Christmas.'

Red Café, Kentish Town.

I stirred four sugars into my tea with a stiff shoulder when my mobile rang.

HARRIET MOBILE.

I ignored it. I always did my best to ignore my sister and it wasn't difficult. She spent most of her time on the floors of council flats injecting smack into her thighs.

My older brother, Tony, was also unreachable but for different reasons. He was flying helicopters in Afghanistan and rarely found the time to call. The last time he had tried I had been on a job and had my phone switched off, and since then I'd heard nothing.

It was for the best really, that we had grown so far apart as adults. We all had our shame to hide. Namely the fact that despite our relatively privileged upbringings, fully functional parents and decent educations, our method of rebellion seemed to be single-handedly fucking our lives up.

Brinks arrived with rain and grease in his hair.

'Why here?' he asked, shaking water off his coat.

'They do great sausage sandwiches.' I pushed one of the plates across the table at him. 'Cumberland, they use.'

Brinks put a folder down next to the plate, fidgeting in the chair. 'I got some of what you wanted. Most of the photos and some of the initial statements.'

Already Brinks was earning his money. The man was a natural double agent and I wouldn't be surprised if there was an extensive list of people paying him for information. If he was classier, less desperate and more educated, he could be doing a lot more with his talent.

I flicked through the folder but decided against taking out the photos yet.

'DNA?'

'I'll let you know.'

My hand hovered over the folder again. 'Toxicology?'

'Shit, it's early days, Nic, calm down.'

I warmed my hands around my tea. 'Can you talk me through the statement? Taxi driver, you said?'

'I can't give you his name yet, not until we've charged him or released him, but he's a strong suspect even beyond what we'd assume anyway. And there's no point looking at me like that. I'm not going to tell you because I'd actually like a chance to question him before you' – he gestured in mid-air – 'do your thing.'

'Do my *thing*?' I raised my eyebrows even higher. 'What? Strut my funky stuff?'

'Stop being a dick.'

It was like winding up a precocious child. I got out my tobacco and started rolling a cigarette. 'Have you talked to the parents yet?'

'I actually just came from there.'

'And?'

'To be expected. Mother's a state, the father's aggressive; all in all not the nicest way to spend the morning.' He looked out of the window at the rain. 'How well do you know Pat Dyer?'

'I wouldn't really say I *know* him.' I started dissecting my sandwich with the cigarette behind my ear, willing him to shut up and leave me alone to look at the folder. 'Seen him around a few times but nothing intimate, if that's what you mean.'

'Oh yeah?'

I couldn't help smirking. 'Stop trying to talk like a DCI, Geoff, it really doesn't suit you.'

Brinks looked back at the window with hurt pride in his eyes. Looking at him was like watching for the onset of rigor mortis in a living human.

I asked, 'You want some tea?'

'Fuck you.'

He got up and walked out.

The man behind the counter brought over another mug.

I smiled at him and got out the photos, face down. When I was sure no one could see them but me I turned them over one by one and ran my eyes over them in detail.

One of her hands had fallen open around a can of Pepsi. None of her nails were broken but her chest was concave, collapsed, as if someone had stamped on it over and over. Her face was the same and her neck, crushed. There was something about the lack of blood, and the way her body had fallen, that made me uneasy. I would have expected more from a head shot.

Everything about it looked rushed, amateurish and chaotic. Why hadn't the killer disposed of her clothes properly for a start? Why leave her in a place that was so easy to access? All that had shielded her from the end of the alleyway was a scattering of bin liners and a skip. She'd been dropped there with the carelessness of someone throwing away dead batteries.

My mobile started ringing and I put the photos back in the folder.

'Hello?'

'Is this a good time?' Pat sounded more docile than he had a day ago.

'Fine, fine.'

'Can you make it round to mine?'

'Are you sure you don't need more time to…?'

'More time to what?'

Silence.

I faltered. 'What time is best for you?'

'Anytime. I'll be here.'

For a second, the dislike gave way to pity.

'OK, I'll be over in a couple of hours.'

I hadn't expected a call this soon. Denial didn't usually set in this early, but Pat struck me as the sort of person who powered through life that way, dealing with adversity by filling his schedule and frantically ticking days off the calendar.

I put the folder into my bag to look at later, wishing that I had switched off my phone and let Edie walk me home.

CHAPTER FOUR

Pat answered the door with a glass in his hand and stubble on his chin.

I suspected that the clear liquid wasn't water. 'You wanted to talk?'

'Yeah… yeah, come in.'

The air inside the house was thick and hot. Pat went into the huge kitchen and refilled his glass. He hadn't changed out of his suit; it was more creased and carried a heavy stench of smoke.

I dropped my bag by the door and followed.

'Want any?' he asked.

'Bit early for me, thanks.'

'Bet you've seen the reports and all… in your line of work?' Grey eyes glared over the rim of the glass. 'You've seen the photos?'

'I've seen a few. Most of it I haven't been able to see yet.'

'But you've seen the photos?'

I knew what he was thinking. No father would ever want another man to see his daughter like that.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'Oh, that's nice,' he sneered. 'I've always wondered about your types. Do you enjoy looking at stuff like that?'

I stayed silent but my chest tightened.

He was rubbing his eyes, trying to rub the image of his daughter out of them.

‘How’s your wife?’ I asked, the question like a lead weight on my tongue.

‘Upstairs.’ He didn’t answer the question but refilled his glass, downing it and refilling it again. ‘Did you see what he did to her?’

‘I know, it’s sick.’

‘Fucking *cunt* puts his hands on her… on my baby…’ Downing the glass and refilling it with shaking hands. ‘I want you to find him. I’ll pay you anything, I just want you to find him.’

Any words of sympathy or comfort were strangled. It wouldn’t help.

‘Do you want some coffee?’ I asked in an attempt to defuse the atmosphere.

He nodded, fingering a notch on the edge of the dining table.

I put the kettle on and opened the window to let some fresh air in. The anger and the fear were clamped around my limbs like a straitjacket.

‘Do you know if Emma had a boyfriend?’ I opened cupboards, searching for sugar.

‘She broke up with Danny.’

‘So she wasn’t seeing anyone new?’

‘No…’ He shook his head, picking at a splinter. ‘She would have mentioned it.’

‘What was her friend’s name?’

‘It was Jenny who she was meeting, Jenny Hillier.’

‘Do you mind if I speak to her, just to ask her a couple of questions?’

He shrugged, his finger bleeding. ‘Sure, I can give you her number.’

I nodded and strained the coffee.

'Black,' Pat said. 'Just black.'

'Shall I take one upstairs?'

'Whatever. She won't speak to you.' He didn't seem to care.

I hovered with two coffees in my hands.

'I'll find him,' I said. 'I don't want more than twenty grand, I'll find him.'

'Don't kill him.' Pat looked up from his coffee with blank eyes. 'You won't kill him until I see him. I want to make him hurt, I want to make him fucking *bleed*.'

'I know.' I glanced upwards again and indicated with the coffee. 'I'm just going to…'

He waved a hand, apparently losing interest in my actions.

I left the kitchen and went upstairs; pictures glared at me from every wall. All the doors were shut apart from one, which was ajar. There was no light inside. I nudged it open with my shoulder and she looked up sharply from where she was sitting on the floor beside the bed, knees brought close to her chest.

'Sorry… It's er, me. I was just bringing some coffee.'

She didn't acknowledge me but looked away again. Her clothes were unchanged but she looked thinner under them. Still the grey cocktail dress and cardigan, still dressed for the missed social occasion.

'Can I get you anything else?' I came inside and put the coffee down on the dressing table. 'Something to eat?'

The side of her face was shiny with tears and the blue eyes were shot with red.

I couldn't put my arms around her this time, not like before, so I sat down beside her instead, mirroring her pose. A few minutes went by before I realized how cold it was. I reached up past her and held the cup of coffee in front of her face.

'You should warm up,' I said.

Eventually, when I refused to move, she took it without looking at me and rested it on her knees. When she brushed her hair behind her ear I noticed a new bruise on her wrist next to the old scars.

I stood up, went back downstairs and saw that my bag had disappeared from where I had left it by the door. I stared at the doormat as if it might appear, rerunning through the memory of letting it drop from my hand.

I whirled around, thinking of the photos, and saw Pat sitting at the kitchen table. As I came closer I saw them, spread out in a collage of blood and open wounds. Pat was leaning over, looking far too closely, eyes right up against the glossy prints, against the bin liners and blood and naked skin that he had once called his daughter.

My bag was by the foot of his chair.

I saw his fist tighten around the glass as he heard my footsteps.

'Hey!' My hand went for the photos.

He grabbed the front of my shirt and the glass hit the floor.

'Fucking *what*!' he snarled.

I slammed his arm into the granite worktop and twisted it up behind him. The alcohol gave me the advantage over his superior height.

'Don't touch me again.'

'Fuck off,' he spat through gritted teeth.

My heart was pounding. 'Don't you *dare* fucking touch me again.'

'I won't! Get off!' Pat wrenched his arm away, swaying. He put a hand to his mouth and vomited a dark grey mixture of vodka and bile into the sink.

I gathered the photos and picked up my bag.

Pat leant against the counter, his lips resting against his fist and his eyes on the window. He was shaking.

'I'm… sorry,' I said.

It took him a while to speak.

'No one's fault but mine,' he replied.

I was parked on a kerb in the Audi, blowing cigarette smoke out of the window in the direction of Edie's house. It was a stylized, calculated assault of modernity, very much like the woman herself. It was all glass and right angles; so modern it was almost ironic.

At least it used to be her house. I doubted whether she still lived there. I didn't know what time Sidney usually got home, but I had no better way to spend the afternoon. He might have been out, taking his son somewhere, maybe visiting family…

Best to have nothing to lose.

That was how I had always done things. Apart from the firearms and the roof over my head and other transient objects there was nothing to become attached to. Friends and relatives and children were for people who could hold a conversation for more than ten minutes without wanting to beat the other person into the floor, who could handle small talk and network and do all of the things people were required to do in social situations.

When I had finished my third cigarette I switched my phone back on to keep myself amused. I sank down in my seat, put my feet up on the dashboard and scrolled through text messages.

The writing on my hand was still visible.

'Who is K?'

Thinking back to the photos now, and the blood, I was almost certain Emma had been moved.

The phone started vibrating and I answered it because I was too bored to ignore it any more.

'Hey, it's me.'

'Yeah, I know.' I shut my eyes at the sound of my sister's harsh cockney twang. 'What do you want, Harriet?'

'Er, I need a favour…'

'How did I guess?'

'I'm not doing too good. I had this fight and I got fired and… I just need a little bit of cash. Just a little bit; I'll pay you back, I promise. It's just until I find another job.'

It was almost funny, the regularity and predictability of these requests.

'Why were you fired?' I asked.

'It wasn't my fault.'

'It never is.' I rubbed my eyes. 'So what happened to the last five hundred I gave you?'

She hesitated. What was most insulting was that she didn't even bother to sound convincing. Like other addicts I had come across she didn't speak for herself any more; everything she said was a stock phrase used on everybody in order to get what she wanted. When one didn't work she moved on to another.

'Um… well, I had to pay off a few debts, and—'

'Don't give me that shit, it went to your fucking dealer.'

There was a silence.

'I only need a couple of hundred, just to pay off this debt and pay my rent and then I'm done, I promise. Oh come on, it's not as if you need it!'

She had managed to go from self-pity to excuses and then on to anger in less than a minute. I had the option, as I did every time, to tell her to piss off and make her own way, but even as I entertained the thought I knew it would never

happen. I hated her sometimes, most of the time these days, but not nearly as much as I hated myself for giving her the money.

'Yeah, you're always a couple of hundred quid away from being *done,* aren't you?' I said. 'It would be nice to hear a promise from you one day that I think you might actually keep.'

'Oh please, I really need to pay this guy off and I don't have anywhere else to—'

'OK, Harriet, *OK*.' I just wanted the call to be over. 'How much do you want, two hundred?'

'Er, could you make it three?'

I shook my head, fist tightening around the wheel. 'Fine, three hundred. You can come and pick it up yourself, I'm not gonna waste any petrol money on you.'

'Thanks, Nic, I promise—'

'Whatever.'

I ended the call. Our parents gave her money too; it wasn't just me, but that didn't make me feel much better. Sometimes I caught myself wishing that our childhoods had been harder, more traumatic from an early age. I wished that Dad had been stricter or Mum had drunk too much, that either of them had done anything to unburden us of the responsibility for how our lives had turned out. It wasn't their fault, none of this was, but that was the problem.

Tony was the only one who refused to pay. I knew she had stopped asking him years ago, way before he went to Afghanistan. She had stopped seeing him because he was of no use to her, and around the same time I had also started avoiding him. I suspected the real reason was that he reminded us too much of our own failures, but I didn't like to dwell on it.

Sidney's car pulled into the driveway across the road.

It was half past four.

I memorized the number plate and watched Edie's son, Scott, walking up the drive holding a gym bag. He looked in his early teens and held himself like his mother. Sidney was tall, Scandinavian, square-jawed. From the one time I had met him in Edie's club a few years ago I remembered that he was quite softly spoken for someone with his build.

I checked my watch again, just to be sure. Time was almost an obsession to me; it had to be, in my line of work. Nothing was more crucial than timing.

Two more minutes had passed.

It didn't look like an easy house to break into, I thought. Someone would have to let me in, or I'd have to find another method of coercion…

I started the engine and pulled away.

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MEET THE AUTHOR



Hanna Jameson started writing the London Underground series when she was just seventeen. She has travelled Europe, Japan and the USA with the Manic Street Preachers and Kasabian.

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