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Tenacity

Written by J. S. Law

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TENACITY

J.S. LAW

headline

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1

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To all my brothers and sisters in the Armed Forces who are deployed away from their loved ones around the globe – be safe, look out for each other, and remember, never let the truth get in the way of a good story!

Prologue

Tuesday Evening – 2nd November 2010

‘How did you know?’

Dan froze and then swallowed as she heard his voice, but she didn’t turn around. She placed him as being some way away from her, across the dusty, grey-stone garage floor, next to the door, the only door. She knew that she had some time; this wouldn’t be quick.

‘Answer me please, Dan,’ he said, his voice calm, without any real trace of menace, even though it echoed in the open space.

Dan turned to face him, slowly. The nausea she’d felt on hearing him speak hadn’t yet diminished and it needed to be under control when he saw her face.

‘So?’ he said, his head cocked slightly to the side as he watched her.

Christopher Hamilton’s Royal Navy uniform was neat, his shoes polished, and the toecaps bulled to a dark sheen. His white shirt was immaculately pressed and it contrasted perfectly with the black and gold of the Lieutenant epaulettes he wore on each of his shoulders. He was clean-shaven and

J. S. LAW

his hair was cropped short, neatly gelled in place. His eyes didn't bore into her as she might have expected, they weren't reminiscent of a cat watching its prey; they were cool and blue, inquisitive. He looked so calm, was speaking as though he had all the time in the world.

Looking at him and seeing that, seeing the relaxed smile on his face and the way his hands were loosely thrust into his pockets, was, to Dan, the most terrifying thing she'd ever witnessed.

He raised both eyebrows.

'It's a civil enough question, Dan. I just want to know why I've had to come home and find you interfering with my belongings, snooping around in my garage?'

Out of the corner of Dan's eye she could still see the blue-grey skin of Amanda Waller's forearm poking out from beneath a dirty green tarpaulin. The forearm was bent back on itself at a repellent angle, both the ulna and radius clearly snapped and pushing hard against the mottled skin.

Dan had pulled back the tarpaulin, had seen the three women beneath it, their bodies marbled with bruising. The life had long since been drained from them, but the marks gave an insight into the suffering they had endured prior to their violent deaths.

She looked at the door, her eyes involuntarily flicking that way for just a moment.

'Locked,' he said. 'The whole house is locked now. Seems like you just can't be too careful these days; never know who might come calling.'

He reached towards a workbench that ran along the wall next to the door. The tools looked old and dirty, unused in a long time, and they were laid so randomly across the bench that Dan wondered if they'd been arranged that way, as though he might have taken time to try and create the appearance of chaos.

TENACITY

She tensed, watching to see what he would pick up, her eyes scanning and spotting a hammer and a hatchet among the mess.

He smiled, seeming to sense her discomfort as he dragged an old stool towards him.

The sound of the metal legs grating against the bare floor made Dan shiver. It was loud, highlighting how silent all else was around them, how alone Dan was in this house set in the countryside away from disturbances and traffic noise, away from dog walkers and cyclists, away from any realistic chance of help.

She felt cold, frozen, and she knew that feeling this way, feeling frightened, could only lead to defeat; she had to keep going, to find a way to move forward. She looked again at the tarpaulin and felt her stomach lurch for the girls beneath it. The shape of their bodies, dumped in the corner like next winter's firewood, was imprinted on her vision, slipping across her eyes like bright shapes that had been flashed at her in the dark.

'Dan,' he said, easing himself up onto the old metal stool. 'Come on now. I'm being friendly and you aren't.'

'It doesn't matter how I knew, Chris. It only matters now that I do know,' she said, glad the words had come out strong and clear, but struggling to swallow as her throat seemed to stick to itself whenever she tried. 'And I'm not the only one that knows.'

He smiled and shook his head.

'You knowing doesn't matter at all,' he said, and looked at her in such a charming way that Dan was sure he must have practised it.

She could imagine him rehearsing the way he tilted his head and how far he opened his mouth; everything he did now seemed, to her, to be a carefully practised movement, all designed, developed and delivered to hide what it was that propelled him underneath.

‘Let’s not pretend anyone else knows you’re here,’ he continued. ‘John Granger would be standing at your heel, panting and awaiting his mistress’s orders if he even had an inkling of what you’re doing.’

Hamilton tilted his head again; a look between friends that said Dan must know he was right.

‘And Roger Blackett would hardly send his golden girl into the breach so poorly prepared. I think even he would realise that you versus me is a fairly obvious inequality of arms. Don’t you think?’

Dan managed to swallow.

‘Come now, Dan, we don’t send investigators out alone to scrutinise their colleagues; we don’t let them break into their colleagues’ homes and search through their colleagues’ personal waste. We certainly don’t send little girls out on their own to catch the bad men, not with the sheer number of poor young things that have gone missing this past thirty years or so.’

He smiled at her as though they were sharing an inside joke.

‘So I know you’re freelancing here, and you do too. So, I’ll ask again, how did you know?’

He was watching her so closely that Dan was frightened to look away from him, knowing that he could follow her eyes wherever they went, but she needed to know her surroundings, needed to look around and form a plan. She needed a weapon. She would have to fight for her life.

Hamilton was a big man, gristly, not bulky.

Dan knew he spent a great deal of his time compulsively training for triathlons that he rarely did, and disappearing alone onto the moors fell running and camping.

He was physically superior and his manner said he knew it.

Standing in his garage with the faint scent of decaying

TENACITY

flesh touching at her nostrils, Dan realised that she barely recognised this man, the same man that she'd worked with on and off for almost ten years.

'Don't let your mind wander, Dan,' he said, 'just answer my question, because I really and genuinely want to know – you might say that, at some point in the future, my freedom could depend on it.'

'How many did you kill?' Dan asked, using the question as permission to turn away from him, to look in the direction of the tarpaulin and the bodies beneath it, to let her eyes dart around and catalogue everything that was near to her. There was a spade leaning against the wall a few metres to her left. It looked big and heavy and used, albeit some time ago. There were large clumps of dry mud stuck to the surface of the dull metal blade. There was space around her, enough space to swing it, and the only other potential weapon was a pair of hedge shears leaning against the wall only a foot or so closer to her than the spade.

She looked back to him and knew that he'd seen her looking, had read her intent.

'I just want to say now, Dan, that, for the record, I decided several years back not to take you; oh, but how we come to regret these decisions,' he said, chuckling and shaking his head. 'I don't want you to feel bad about that, that I didn't want you; I just thought that you might like to know that you could have lived your life out in safety, from me at least.'

Dan looked at him, unsure of what she could possibly say in response.

'A stunned silence?' Hamilton said. 'Or a stunned gratitude, perhaps? But don't be shy, Dan, tell me how you knew and I'll promise you that you'll be glad you did.'

Dan looked around the garage, then at Hamilton, calm and smiling; she needed time.

'The team at Operation Poacher had suspected it was someone from the armed forces, and probably the navy, for some time,' she said. 'But you know this stuff. It was the pattern of disappearances, the sudden series after long gaps without any.'

'Without any being detected,' he corrected.

'Of course,' said Dan. 'I started to suspect it was someone who had some – but not always complete – knowledge of the investigation; a police officer, crime scene technician, or one of us.'

He nodded, made to ask a question, then seemed to decide against.

Dan waited.

'Why?' he finally blurted the question out, seeming agitated as though he couldn't wait a second longer, as though he might forget what he wanted to know if he didn't ask right away, like a child.

'Changing patterns,' said Dan, taking a small step further away from him to her left. 'I wanted to look at the investigation from a different angle. So, I looked right back over the whole case and I began to map, as best I could, when the various pieces of information were released, and how quickly after that the next event occurred.'

Hamilton frowned at her.

'You not keeping up?' Dan asked, taking another small step away from him and towards the spade.

'Carry on please, Dan,' he said, his eyes narrowed as he focused on her.

'Well, when I looked back it was clear that whenever the Operation Poacher team worked up a victim profile and it became any kind of knowledge within the investigation, the killer would change something, or an event would occur to throw the team off again, to put doubt back in their minds.'

She nodded towards Hamilton, trying to appear as though

TENACITY

it were grudging admiration. 'I'll give you your due; you were good. Some of the subtleties you used to keep them guessing – the spate of young men around Aldershot, the children in Plymouth and later around the Clyde area. You had them believing there were more important cases to look at, that there were other killers operating that they might actually be able to catch.'

He smiled again and nodded appreciatively. 'You made that link. Very good, Danielle, very good indeed.'

'Thank you,' she said, sliding her foot slowly along the floor and taking another step. 'I just started to focus on the investigation, trying to imagine that everything else that could affect or influence the investigation team was done deliberately with that aim in mind.'

'All very interesting, Dan; sounds like the genesis of one of your fascinating papers, which I'm sure would have been widely published, but, in truth, almost impossible to put together. So how did you really know?' He paused and looked at her. 'And be quick now. I'm getting bored and you're easing yourself further away from me all the time, despite knowing you're locked in here with me, which seems a little daft.'

Dan swallowed and stopped her foot from sliding across the floor again.

'I'm telling you,' she said, trying not to let fear creep into her voice and finding it easy to do. 'I started mapping, and yes, I did think it would be a worthwhile paper, to compare the time at which information was released against any incident that then caused that information to be called into question. I specifically looked at the time between the two data points.'

Hamilton was frowning again. He looked upwards as he thought about what she was saying, and Dan took another small step.

'It became clear that there were times when the delay

between information release and some subsequent act that decried it was relatively short, too short. That for the killer to react to what had been released meant that he had to have had the information earlier, and that meant an insider. You were too jumpy.'

Dan tried to make the last comment sound conspiratorial, gently chiding.

He snorted at her last remark and shook his head.

'There were times when you were reacting so quickly that you almost confused the Operation Poacher team by pre-empting what they were going to release.'

Hamilton smiled again and nodded. 'It was a lot of fun.'

'Yeah, I can see that,' said Dan. 'But I'm stunned that I was the first to see it. The last few years you lost your subtlety, got sloppy. You really weren't that smart, but then, me being here proves you're not all that smart.'

He continued to watch her, a long, steady stare. 'You walking out of here would prove that I'm not all that smart,' he said. 'Now keep your feet still.'

Dan registered the first real sounds of stress in his voice, the first cracks that told her she might be unsettling him, and she stepped again despite his order.

'So, everyone else was looking at the bodies we found and trying to decide why you seemed to torture the blondes more than the dark-haired girls.'

He laughed again, but it was different this time, more forced.

'They were wondering whether your mum was blonde, or your sister, or your wife. You know the sort of thing, right? You've been involved in these investigations before; hell, you worked on Operation Poacher twice, hunting for yourself.'

He nodded and snorted again. 'As I say, a lot of fun.'

'You did seem to be having fun,' said Dan, and she took another small step, the shovel and shears now six feet away.

TENACITY

‘Full of shit, the lot of them,’ he began, his eyes leaving her as he looked around the garage. His hands started to fidget as he thought about what she was saying. ‘Morons. Always trying to figure out why this and why that, why blondes and why strangulation, why signs of violence pre- and post-mortem. As though knowing that makes any difference at all.’

‘Yeah, exactly, all that stuff,’ said Dan, hoping desperately to keep him talking. ‘Trying to figure out why you do it.’

She pursed her lips and let her eyes flick in the direction of the shovel; he saw her do it, but he didn’t approach.

‘Do you know why I do it, then?’ he asked, smiling, less fidgety, as though he were back on home turf. ‘Surely the amazing Girl Wonder has a theory on this – something for one of your lauded papers. Some shit that’d fit on the back page of an equally shitty journal? Do I need to go and clean up at your house? Delete some waffling paragraphs of you dispensing wisdom about why I do these things?’

Dan didn’t speak.

‘Because I can tell you,’ he continued. ‘Not that it’ll help you very much, but I can tell you why I do it. I can also answer all the little questions like, “why predominantly blondes?” and all that jazz if you want me to.’

Dan shrugged, flexing her fingers to warm them up for a fight that she knew she couldn’t win by force alone.

‘Educate me,’ she said.

‘I just like screwing blondes, Dan,’ he said, and mimicked her shrug. ‘Given a choice between blonde and any other hair colour, I’d stick my cock in a blonde any day of the week. But, I’m just a normal bloke, right? So if there’s no blondes, well, I’ll fuck a brunette, black hair, ginger, whatever.’

He stood up, took a step towards her, but just one.

Dan felt her stomach go hollow as she saw him move

towards her. She spaced her feet shoulder width apart, trying to carefully work the soles of her shoes against the dusty floor to ensure they would grip when they needed to.

‘Do you know why I choose women?’

Dan shook her head. ‘Because you hated your mummy?’ she said, watching him, hoping he would look away for just a second to give her an advantage, any advantage.

‘Because I’m straight. See, I don’t really like screwing men, although any hole’s a goal and all that, but women are soft and smooth and weak and small. They’re easy to grab, easy to control. You’re trusting, honestly, stupidly trusting; your whole gender just cries out “victim”, and, well frankly, your whole gender are just disappointingly dumb.’

He was watching Dan carefully now and he seemed to have regained his calm. His hands were firm and he looked ready. ‘I think that’s your problem, Dan; you think you’re smarter than everyone else around you, but you’re not.’

‘I found you without too much trouble,’ she said.

‘And then came here by yourself to try and prove it; I think that’s one for the prosecution.’

‘Chess puzzles,’ said Dan, forcing a smile that she hoped he wouldn’t like. ‘There were some other things that gave you away, but chess puzzles was one of the most hilarious.’

His breathing started to quicken, his hands moving again, flexing and balling, as the agitation visibly built inside him.

‘You love to try and talk as though you’re some kind of genius, as though you’re very, very intelligent and can predict what people will do, as though you’re thinking umpteen moves ahead of everyone else, but I watched you with those chess puzzles you try to dazzle us all with, and I know you can’t do them; you use a computer programme on your phone to solve them and then pretend you can just see it through natural talent.’

TENACITY

She laughed, a deliberately challenging laugh, as though he might join her in realising how ridiculous she found him.

He was moving more, his face no longer calm, his eyes tracking her.

‘That’s why I brought in that puzzle from home a few weeks ago, because I knew you wouldn’t be able to do it. But what I found really interesting, is that you hadn’t even considered that someone might do that to you; you hadn’t thought ahead, hadn’t calculated what you’d do if someone openly challenged your intellect.’

Dan slid her foot towards the spade, watching him all the time; she was certain that he couldn’t attack her until he’d heard what she had to say.

‘You just floundered and tried to make excuses before you walked away. Once you were gone, we were all laughing so hard. Not just me, either – all of the other investigators, and especially the admin girls, we were laughing our asses off behind your back.’

‘And yet I seemed to be able to outthink you, Dan,’ he said, his voice low. ‘I seemed to be able to calculate that you’d come here and that you’d be alone, that you’d tell no one else, that you’d save the glory for yourself.’ He raised his hand to his ear. ‘Still no sirens, Dan, still no help arriving for you.’

She glanced at the spade, letting her eyes linger on it for a few seconds before she looked back at him.

He was watching her, had seen her eyes moving.

‘Time,’ he said, and moved forward.

His arms seemed to vibrate by his side as he tensed up, as though readying himself for action. The veins on his neck were standing proud and his fingers started to flex again and again as he watched her, the blacks of his eyes seeming to expand like a predator focusing on its chosen prey.

He started to move again, not towards her, but off to the

side, towards the spade. His eyes seemed to have a physicality of their own, as though she could feel them pushing against her, sharp and hard. His mouth was set, but she watched his hands and saw them ball into fists as the rage built up inside him and manifested itself there.

He was closing the distance between them; maybe twelve feet of open space remained.

Dan forced another laugh, bending her knees slightly as she did and readying herself.

He stepped closer again, the spade now equidistant between them.

‘You’re going to die horribly,’ he whispered.

Dan stepped forward. She made a sudden lunge towards the spade, and was sure she saw a slight smile cross his face, as though he had watched her and predicted what she would do. But Dan didn’t hesitate. She faked for the spade, turning and lunging for the shears instead. She had them in her hand in a second, light and easy to manoeuvre, and swung them at Hamilton as he was still reaching down to grab the wooden shaft of the heavier spade.

The tip of the blades scraped down past his ear, drawing blood, and Dan made sure not to over reach as she watched him grasp the spade and swing it in one hand, aiming for her head, the fingers of his other hand clasped against his torn and bloodied ear.

Dan, smaller and more agile, ducked below the spade and grasped the shears properly, opening them and driving up towards him as she pressed them shut on impact. The blades bit into him, tearing across the cotton of his white shirt, and penetrating deep into the flesh beneath it.

He dropped the shovel but brought his blood-covered hand from his ear down in a hard arc, landing solidly on Dan’s shoulder and sending her to the ground, the force of the blow taking the wind from her.

TENACITY

Hamilton was bigger and much stronger, and even though he was now wounded, Dan knew that the longer this fight went on, the smaller her chances of survival became.

He swung a kick and it landed against her hip, almost lifting her from the ground with its ferocity, the pain excruciating.

She gritted her teeth, fighting to hold onto the shears, even as she saw him ready himself to kick again.

In the instant of him drawing back his foot again, Dan remembered her father speaking to her outside of school as she sat with a bloody knee and a fat lip, sobbing quietly.

The last few children who had watched the altercation had drifted away and she remembered her father's philosophy on life, imparted to her and her sister in fleeting visits between the military operations that so often took him away from them. 'Fights aren't won by the bigger man, Danny. Fights are won by the man willing to escalate the violence the furthest, the fastest. If you're not willing to go the distance, to go further and harder than your opponent will and to do it faster than they're able to, then you've already accepted defeat.'

Dan braced herself for the kick to come and knew that she had to be willing to kill Chris Hamilton if she were to have any chance at all of escaping from this place, of not joining the corpses under the dirty green tarpaulin.

'Please,' she shouted, tensing as the boot hit her and bolts of pain shot throughout her body. 'Please, Chris, I'm sorry, you're right,' she yelled.

He looked down at her, paused for just a second, and then spat on her. He looked as though he was faltering, trying to think of something to say.

It was then that she kicked out, aiming for his ankle and drawing his eyes towards her foot as he easily dodged the kick. Dan immediately drove the shears with all her strength into the already open wound on the side of his abdomen.

His mouth opened wider than Dan could ever have thought possible as she leaned up and pushed the double blades into him as far as she could.

He doubled over, as though trying to close the wound like he might a door, and took a step away from her.

Dan rolled away, moving to her knees and grabbing the spade. In what felt to her like a single movement, she stood up, raised the spade to shoulder height and swung it as hard as she was able to, into Christopher Hamilton's face.

He went down hard.

Dan heard a loud crack and saw a theatrical spatter of blood land across the dusty concrete.

The shears fell out of Hamilton's wound and dropped onto the floor, lying still, as though they'd given up trying to run away from the growing pool of blood that crept across the concrete to catch them.

Dan stood back, watching as Hamilton's chest jerked and spasmed, listening as his breathing crackled and stalled. Then she stepped towards him, put the blade of the spade against his neck and placed her foot on the shoulder, as though she were about to break soil.

'How many?' she said. 'How many are there?'

He said nothing, made no effort to answer.

'You'll bleed out within minutes if I don't get help, so tell me, how many?'

This time she heard a rasping sound and she leaned slightly forward so that she could hear him.

'Lots,' he whispered, just before a cough racked his body, blood gurgling out of his mouth like bubbles from a blocked sink. 'Lots and lots.'

'Where?' she asked, pushing her foot onto the shoulder of the spade. 'Tell me where they are.'

He was starting to go limp, his breathing becoming shallower.

TENACITY

'Tell me where!' she shouted, putting pressure onto the spade and seeing his body react to it.

'Don't know,' he said.

'What?' said Dan, taking the pressure back off the spade. 'I said where are the other women? Where are their bodies?'

He was dying as Dan watched. He was bleeding out, starting to shiver, the gaps between activity and peace seeming to extend with each cycle.

'Do you want to die here?' she shouted. 'Tell me where they are! Where were you going to take these women? Where?'

He laughed, blood coming out of his mouth like a Halloween zombie mask, but the rasping unmistakable. 'Don't know,' he whispered.

'Then you're going to die here in the same place they did,' said Dan, taking her foot off the spade.

It clattered as she tossed it to the floor several feet away, the noise of metal striking concrete drowning out Chris Hamilton's dying breaths as it echoed around the garage.

Looking down at him, Dan knew he deserved to die. Felt nothing for him as she watched him creep slowly towards his end. But the information he had, the women he'd hurt and the closure he could bring to their families if he talked . . .

'If you want me to call for help, then tell me where you hid those women's bodies. Tell me how many there are. Or I swear I'll watch you bleed until you die, just to be sure you do.'

He laughed again, the sound like sandpaper on rough wood. 'I don't know where they are,' he said, each word taking longer than the last. 'And you haven't got it in you.'