

Breaking Point

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1

Something stopped Danny Pavey dead still.

He glanced down at the heavy pool cue gripped in his right hand. A thick redness was dripping off it and falling rhythmically on to the floor. The cue was cracked in a couple of places. Small splinters of wood had grabbed at grey hairs, which were now tangled in the red. The blood kept falling, running along the underside of the tapered implement.

Danny ran his eyes along the dark floorboards, following the trails of blood, which hunted out the gaps and sank into them. The man on the floor wasn't moving. Danny was scrambling to catch up. He felt like his brain hadn't been consulted about the last five minutes of his life. Like the volume had been muted and he hadn't

understood what was being said. But now the volume was coming back strong, his ears ringing, amplified noises crashing off the walls.

Danny dropped the cue, his hand jerking open, suddenly aware of what it had been holding. It clattered on the wooden surface, setting off sharp echoes around the bar. He scanned the room, sense slowly beginning to return. He saw the faces of his friends, the ones he always went out with. His closest pals and their wives, people he had known for most of his life. They were staring back at him. Pale, open-eyed, mouths slack. Like he was someone they didn't recognize.

Still no movement from the grey-haired man. Danny squeezed and unsqueezed his fists. There was a rumble of traffic outside. No one spoke. And then he caught her eye. She was near the toilets. His wife. Victoria. The single best thing about his life. Hair that shone, eyes that sparkled, lips that curled right up when she grinned. The face he gazed deep into every day, amazed that she gazed back in exactly the same way. But her face was different now. Shaking her glossy hair back and forth, the shock in her eyes, questions on her puckered lips. Why, Danny? Why? What on earth happened to you?

His brain was starting to fire again, images of

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the last few minutes flashing before him. A spilt drink. An inadequate apology. A look that seemed out of place. And then everything changing for ever. Being possessed by something, something almost inhuman, something that had been lurking in the shadows all these years, never quite making its presence felt. Until now. It had leapt out and taken control, engorging his muscles, clenching his fists, and making him beat another human being to a bloody pulp.

Danny glanced around, imploring. At his friends, at the bar staff, at Victoria. Stillness, fear, the air solid with shock. The music playing uselessly on. Starting to recognize the song that had been on all along, blows of the pool cue to beats of the drum. He felt like he was surfacing, coming up for air from deep below. He shook his head again, blinked his eyes, and stared at the unmoving man.

Then Danny Pavey glanced quickly at his wife, and bolted for the door.

2

Dr Reuben Maitland stared momentarily through the window, watching a JCB gouge strips of brown from a surrounding area of green. It continued its metallic progress, dumping rocks and earth on to grey concrete, disdainful and without pity. To the right, men in hard hats wrote notes on clipboards and studied plans. Their fluorescent jackets proclaimed an uneasy mix of demolition and safety.

Very soon it would be time to abandon his laboratory and set up a different one somewhere else, where the diggers weren't circling, where cranes weren't hovering, where nothing needed to be redeveloped. In London, this was no easy task. The JCB was fifty metres away, and was scraping and clawing closer every day, dragging

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itself forward with its mechanical arm, taking soil, concrete and vegetation with it. The abandoned block of flats that housed his equipment would only be standing for another ten days, a fortnight at best.

Reuben turned back to what he was doing, letting his eyes wander around the converted flat with its fridges and freezers, its small centrifuges and large sequencers, its grey machinery that stood on white benches and scrubbed floors. Less than five months, and already he was going to need to move again. Reuben cursed, running his finger across the screen in front of him. He could hardly call Pickfords. This had to be done quietly, carefully, without the knowledge of the significant number of people who would be thrilled to discover his whereabouts. And that included a sizeable section of the Metropolitan Police force. Whatever side of the law they were on, Reuben appreciated that his continued safety depended on only a handful of allies ever knowing where he lived and worked.

Reuben tapped a couple of commands into his laptop and waited. He loosened his watch and rubbed his wrist. A pattern of the strap lingered deep in his skin, red and entrenched. His computer beeped and Reuben trained his

full attention on the screen. There, in numbers and letters, in greens and reds, in thin peaks and elongated graphs, was the answer. Psychopath Selection was coming to life before his eyes.

A small beaker of 100 per cent ethanol sat beside him on the lab bench. He took a swig. It burned like it was alight. Even now, after years of laboratory-grade alcohol, it hurt. Still, it had a purity that appealed to him. No additives, or flavours, or alleged essence of peat. Forget single malt. This was the real stuff. Absolute ethanol. Nothing more, nothing less.

Reuben glanced up as the door opened, and quickly glanced back down again. Moray Carnock walked over and slumped on to the laboratory sofa, which sighed in recognition of his sheer bulk.

‘I guess you’ll be wanting your results,’ Reuben muttered.

‘Aye,’ Moray answered. ‘If I must.’ He shifted his considerable belly, trying to get comfortable. ‘Does it work then?’

Reuben continued to focus on what he was doing, his brow furrowed, his lips shaped in a silent whistle. ‘Hell, yes,’ he said.

‘The same as before?’

‘Better.’

Reuben picked up a black plastic square the size of a stamp and stared into it. Multiple DNA fragments were spotted on to a barely visible grid, a readable code that spelled the word p-s-y-c-h-o-s-i-s. This was the end product, the culmination of three years of work, meticulously typing the DNA of known psychopaths. Whole genome scans, pattern matching, trawling for similarities and differences, bulky algorithms that had ground through vast datasets night after night. By liaising with forces around the world, Reuben had been able to build a bar code of behaviour, the genotype of a pure, sadistic, cold-blooded killer.

Moray scratched himself liberally, his corpulent face caught halfway between pain and relief. ‘Why better?’

‘Not all killers have the same aberrant genes, but most have some. The key, when it comes down to it, is essentially just five major ones. About a hundred more have minor influences. It’s those other smaller genes I think I’ve been able to tweak a bit.’

‘So most psychopaths, the proper ones they make films about and fill Sunday newspapers with, have five fucked-up genes?’

Reuben replaced the DNA chip on the

bench and grimaced through another slug of laboratory-grade ethanol. 'It's not that simple.'

Moray scratched himself one more time. 'I didn't think it would be.'

'Look, possess one or two of the major aberrant genes and you're probably entirely normal. Three of the five and it could go either way. Four and you're more likely than not to perpetrate a violent crime at some point in your life. And if you have all five, it could just be a matter of when.'

Moray dragged a battered newspaper out of his scruffy overcoat, and struggled to unfold it. 'Bout bloody time you got the thing back up and running,' he muttered.

Reuben had developed the technique during his days at GeneCrime, the elite UK forensics centre that pioneered new methods of crime detection. Before things all went wrong. Badly wrong. Now he was resurrecting it, building it up from scratch, having walked away from it when he was sacked, just one of the tangle of loose ends that never got fully tied. He pictured those days, the amphetamine hours, the pressures from above, the temptations of the technology, crossing the line that should never be crossed. And now, out of GeneCrime, on his own, a civilian, a forensic scientist for hire, free to do just what the hell he

wanted. Reuben stared back at the Psychopath Selection chip he was testing, and tried not to get too excited. This could, he was well aware, be world-changing.

‘You know what the newspapers would call this?’ he asked Moray. ‘The genetics of evil. A gene profile of pure human sin. Biological, pre-determined evil.’

‘You believe in all that?’

Reuben rubbed his face. ‘I believe a tiny proportion of society is hardwired to kill and to rape, to mutilate and to destroy. Seemingly normal people with normal backgrounds and stable existences. Ones who live within reasonable bounds of behaviour, but then suddenly dive into the aberrant with no second thoughts, no remorse, no guilt, just a desire for flesh, blood and conquest.’

‘Stop it,’ Moray said from behind his paper. ‘You’re scaring me.’

Reuben was quiet for a second. The potential was enormous. If you could predict future evil, if there was a test for nascent psychopathic behaviour . . . He took another slug of ethanol and peered across at Moray. They had been through thick and thin together. Moray, the enigmatic slob who could change in an instant, coming

to life and turning situations on their head. He owed him a lot. Maybe it was the ethanol talking, but Moray had saved him more than once.

‘So,’ he began, ‘I’ve got your chances of violence, read from your DNA on this chip. Are you ready?’

‘As I’ll ever be.’ Moray fought his sizeable mass to sit up straight. The exertion added to the fine sweat that lined his forehead.

Reuben switched screens and scrolled slowly through a list of red and green numbers. ‘Sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘OK. Here goes.’ Reuben squinted at the digits. ‘The answer is . . .’ He paused, churning through the calculations in his head.

‘Look, there *will* be some fucking violence if you don’t get a move on.’

‘One in four lifetimes.’

Moray appeared less than impressed. ‘Is that it?’

‘That’s it.’

‘Well what the hell does that mean?’

‘That on average you would commit a serious act of violence once in every four lifetimes.’

‘And is that good?’

‘It’s all right.’

‘You’ve factored in my Celtic ancestry?’

Reuben grinned. ‘If it wasn’t for that, it’d be one in forty.’

Moray made a mess of folding his newspaper and dumped it on the floor. ‘So, if I’ve got your scientific mumbo-jumbo right, once in every three hundred years or so I might get myself involved in some serious bloodshed?’

‘That’s if you lived to be seventy-five each time.’

Moray grunted. ‘Back in Aberdeen, seventy-five gets you a telegram from the Queen.’ He slumped down on the sofa, his excitement ebbing. ‘Who else are you going to test?’

‘DCI Sarah Hirst. Judith Meadows. Anyone else I can think of.’

‘And what about you?’

Reuben paused. ‘Scientists shouldn’t get involved in their own experiments.’

He fixed his eyes on the distant JCB again. It continued to gouge its way forward, almost like it was coming directly at him. He swallowed another mouthful of pure alcohol. He knew he was almost there. Just another couple of weeks of testing and Psychopath Selection would be ready. And then crime detection could change for ever.