

Target

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Extract

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Prologue

Two weeks ago

Sir Henry Portman was a man who liked his vices. He drank like a professional, gambled like an amateur, and still managed a pack of cigarettes a day, the odd Cuban cigar and a good four thousand calories of the kind of rich, fatty food that makes dietitians tear their hair out, and everyone else salivate.

But his favourite vice – the one he could least do without and the one, if truth be told, that kept him at a half-reasonable thirteen and a half stone rather than the twenty he'd probably otherwise have been – was extra-marital sex. In twenty-eight years of marriage, Sir Henry had enjoyed a total of 347 sexual partners (348 if you included his wife), a figure he kept constantly updated in a small black leather notebook he'd bought for that

express purpose. Even now, in his mid fifties, his appetites were showing no signs of diminishing.

What had diminished, however, were his looks, so more and more these days he had to rely on the services of prostitutes. This didn't bother him unduly. He found that paying for sex had many advantages. There were none of the complications associated with having secret lovers, nor the potential embarrassments caused by asking them to do things that might be considered unusual. Because where sex was concerned, Sir Henry's tastes were somewhat eclectic, which was why he was currently tied to a bed wearing a shiny PVC blindfold and not much else in an upscale Islington brothel, waiting for a svelte nineteen-year-old beauty called Nadia to come in and tease and torment him to the heights of sexual ecstasy.

He heard the door opening and Nadia making her soft, slow entrance. As she approached the bed, Sir Henry licked his lips and swallowed, barely able to stand the incredible sense of anticipation he always experienced in these first moments.

'You've been a bad boy,' she whispered in her heavily accented English, her fingers stroking his thigh, the touch so light and soft it sent him into paroxysms of ecstasy.

'I know,' he hissed back. 'God, I know . . .'

Nadia's fingers moved away and she made a

strange mewling sound, which stopped almost as quickly as it began.

The room fell silent. Sir Henry moved about on the bed, waiting for her to touch him again.

Something warm and wet dripped heavily on to his chest and belly, moving down towards his groin. What was she pouring on him? It wasn't candle wax. That was hotter.

The dripping stopped, and he heard movement by the bed. He felt the first stirrings of concern, but it was still mixed with a sense of excitement. Was Nadia suddenly becoming more adventurous? Normally she followed a set routine.

The silence continued. Still she didn't touch him.

'Nadia? Are you there?'

Nothing.

'Nadia?' Louder now.

The PVC blindfold was ripped off him in one movement and he was left blinking hard against the brightness in the room.

Nadia stared down at him blankly. She was pale and naked and beautiful, and a narrow stiletto blade jutted out of her chest. Sir Henry saw the thin curtain of blood running down her body. There was blood on him, too. Lots of it, splattered in an angry pattern.

For several seconds he was struck dumb,

registering but not understanding the terrible sight in front of him. Nadia wasn't moving. She was just standing there, her pale eyes wide open yet utterly sightless. Then, as he watched, she gradually slid down the side of the bed and disappeared from view.

A man in a snarling wolf mask that covered his whole head stood in her place. In one gloved hand he held the bloodstained knife that had just been used on Nadia. It glinted wickedly in the light from the overhead lamp. Behind the mask, the man's eyes were wide and staring.

Sir Henry opened his mouth to cry out, terror surging through him, but a gloved palm was slammed hard across it.

Then, very slowly, the bloody knife moved towards his face until the tip of the blade took up his whole field of vision.

'Do you want me to cut your eye out?' asked the man in the mask. His voice was harsh and guttural. Sir Henry recognized the accent as Northern Irish.

Sir Henry made desperate 'no' noises under the glove. He shut his eyes as the blade advanced, felt it touch the skin of his eyelid.

'I'm going to remove my hand now,' continued the man, his tone even, almost conversational. 'If you scream, I'll blind you. Do you understand?'

Sir Henry's muffled yeses seemed to convince

him and he took away both the hand and the blade in one movement.

'Please don't kill me,' Sir Henry begged, hugely aware of his utter helplessness. God, he should have known that this would happen. These people were animals . . . and somehow he'd allowed himself to get involved with them. It was like some kind of terrible nightmare.

'We hear you're getting cold feet, Sir Henry,' continued the man in the wolf mask, running the blade gently down his belly, scraping up Nadia's blood.

'No, no, I'm not. I swear.'

'Don't lie. If you lie, you lose an eye. Do you understand that?'

'Yes, yes, I understand. I do.'

'Good. I executed the girl so you'd know to take what I say seriously.'

'There was no need to do that. I would have taken you seriously.'

Sir Henry had a feeling that the man was smiling behind the mask.

'No,' he said, 'I don't think you would have done. But you do now, don't you? If I can kill a young woman, imagine what I could do to you. Or your wife. Or your daughter. What's her name? Jane, isn't it?' He twirled the tip of the blade through the mass of Sir Henry's pubic hair. 'She's a pretty thing. I saw her coming

out of your house the other day. Yes, very pretty.'

At the mention of his daughter, Sir Henry felt his guts clench savagely. At that moment, incredibly, he didn't even think about the knife. 'Please. Not Jane. Hurt me instead if you have to, but leave her alone. I'm begging you.'

'There's really no point in begging, Sir Henry. If I have to, I'll slaughter your family one by one and feed you the pieces.'

'What do you want?'

'I want you to answer all of my questions truthfully. One mistake' – he paused, the blade touching the base of Sir Henry's penis – 'and I start cutting.'

'I'll tell the truth, I swear it!' And he meant it too. Once again, he was gambling. Making the snap judgement that he was better off to them alive not dead, and guessing that they knew everything anyway.

'Good. Now, you've been getting cold feet, haven't you?'

Sir Henry nodded vigorously. 'Yes, yes, I have, but I haven't spoken to anyone, I promise. I went to Kensington police station and I went inside but I came back out again five minutes later because I knew that it was too risky to say anything. It's just that I'm terrified things are going to go wrong, and I'm going to get caught—'

'There's no need to be,' said the man in the

mask, his tone surprisingly sympathetic. 'I'm looking after the operation, and it won't go wrong on my watch. But you were right not to say anything. It would have cost you your family.' He removed the knife from Sir Henry's crotch and bent down, lifting up Nadia's corpse by its long auburn hair. 'And you can see that now, can't you? What happens if you attempt to fuck us? We can get you absolutely anywhere.'

'Please,' whispered Sir Henry, 'put her down. I can't bear to look at her.'

The man in the mask let the body go and it dropped to the floor with a dull thud.

Sir Henry swallowed. He felt nauseous. He'd had no great feelings for Nadia, but the thought that it could just as easily be his beautiful daughter lying there made him want to throw up the three-course meal he'd enjoyed only a few hours earlier. 'What are you going to do with her?' he asked.

'Don't worry about it. We know the owners of this establishment. She'll be made to disappear. If I were you, I'd worry about yourself.'

'I will.'

'I know you will. The lives of your family depend on it.'

With a sudden movement, the man's knife hand darted out and the next second Sir Henry felt a sharp pain at the base of his penis, and the warm

sensation of blood trickling down on to his balls. He started to cry out, afraid of what had been done to him, but the man put a gloved finger to his snarling wolf lips, stopping him instantly. He knew better than even to think about defying his tormentor.

‘It’s just a little taster of what might happen, Sir Henry,’ he said casually. ‘No permanent damage.’

He leaned over and cut the bond securing Sir Henry’s right wrist to the bed, then turned and walked out of the room, leaving him there, naked, bleeding and alone, wondering whether his conscience would ever forgive him for what he was about to do.

Sunday

One

Sometimes a person's fate rests on a single, seemingly innocuous decision. For me it was the moment I agreed to go out for a quick beer that Sunday afternoon with my neighbour from down the road, a balding hipster called Ramon who taught salsa at the local community centre and who, against all the evidence, considered himself a magnet for female attention. I'd been cooped up working at home for most of the weekend, and although I didn't tend to like being seen in public with Ramon, who always wore a red or black bandanna, the idea of a relaxing afternoon drink round the corner from where we both lived in the bland but pleasant north London suburb of Colindale seemed like a decent enough idea.

But we all know what it's like. Where alcohol's concerned, things rarely turn out like you expect them to, and our relaxing drink quickly turned into

four or five, followed by a cheap all-you-can-eat Chinese meal on the high street, and finally a trip into the West End, which was where I found myself at half past ten that night, wandering round a sweaty, heaving bar just off Long Acre, having lost a salsa-ing Ramon somewhere among the crowds a good twenty minutes before.

By this point, I'd had enough. At one time I'd liked this place. Back in the old days, when I was working in the City, I'd come here most weeks, and had even known most of the bar staff by name. But plenty of water had passed under the bridge since then, and now, at thirty-four, I felt old and out of place, the booze making me maudlin as it offered up memories of times when life was fun and easy and I was the same age as everyone else there. It was definitely time to go, but as I put down the half-full bottle of Becks I'd been nursing for the best part of an hour and headed for the exit, I spotted her coming the other way.

I hadn't seen Jenny in close to a year but the moment she caught my eye she grinned and came over, giving me a hug and landing a sloppy kiss on each cheek. 'Rob Fallon, long time no see,' she shouted above the noise, taking a step back and looking me up and down. 'You look good.'

I doubted if that was the case, not in my current state, but I wasn't going to argue. 'So do you,' I answered in that inane way people tend

to do, except in this case I was telling the truth.

Jenny always looked good. She was tall and pretty with long blonde hair that was at least four-fifths natural, and the kind of golden skin the experts like to tell you is unhealthy for Caucasians, but which in her case looked anything but. I think she was twenty-seven or twenty-eight, but she could easily have passed for five years younger. It was her eyes that were her standout feature, though. They were very big and very brown, and when she fixed you with them it took a supreme effort to look away. Not that many men would want to.

If you're concluding from this that I was in love with this girl, then you'd be wrong. There was definitely an attraction there – from my point of view anyway – and we'd always got on extremely well. But there were two things that had always held me back. One: I was still in love with someone else, although after two years I knew my ex-wife Yvonne was never going to take me back. And two: I would never have met Jenny if it hadn't been for the fact that she'd been my best mate Dom's girlfriend. Because of this we'd only ever spent time together in situations where Dom was present, and since they were no longer an item, we'd lost touch. Until now.

It could have been a brief throwaway conversation, the kind people who don't really know

each other have all the time, but I'd been feeling pretty lonely lately, and maybe it was the booze too, because the attraction that had probably always been there began to kick in again, and pretty hard too. So, as we shouted in each other's ears over the noise and I caught the soft scent of her perfume, I took the plunge and asked her if she fancied going somewhere else.

To be honest, I wouldn't normally have been so forward, but again, I think it was the booze. I wasn't expecting a yes either. The chances were she was here with friends who were more reliable than Ramon, and she wasn't going to leave them to go off with her ex-boyfriend's mate.

But she said she would.

And in that one moment, my fate was sealed.

We went round the corner to a quieter, more traditional pub where there were plenty of spare tables. I bought the drinks – sparkling water for me, a dry white wine spritzer for her – and we caught up on things.

Jenny worked for a web-based travel agency and she'd just come back from a nine-day trip to Mauritius and the Seychelles checking out hotels, which she told me, rather unconvincingly, was harder work than it sounded. That was the cue for us to talk about travelling and share the usual backpacker stories.

The thing I found about talking to Jenny was that the conversation always flowed naturally. I never felt like I had to put on a front, or be someone I wasn't. Maybe that was because as Dom's girlfriend she'd always been untouchable so there'd never been any need. But tonight we both avoided any mention of Dom, and when we finished our drinks Jenny bought another round, insisting I have something alcoholic so she didn't have the guilt of drinking alone. I plumped for a vodka Red Bull, hoping it would perk me up.

'So,' she said, returning to the table with the drinks, 'did you ever finish that book you were writing?'

A little bit of background here. In the days when Jenny was seeing Dom, I was working on a book. In fact, I'd been working on it for a grand total of three years, ever since I'd cashed in my share options and left the investment bank where I was employed to begin a new life in rural France with Yvonne and our then one-year-old daughter Chloe. It had always been my ambition to be an author, and I'd done enough writing in my spare time to think it was worth trying to make a go of it. It was going to be my retirement plan. Pen a succession of popular and critically acclaimed novels while growing organic fruit and vegetables on our idyllic patch of Burgundy countryside.

Unfortunately, it hadn't worked out quite like

that. The book in question – *Conspiracy: A Thriller*, a high-octane page-turner set in the murky world of high finance (that was my tag line) – turned out to be one hell of a lot harder to write than I'd thought. I just couldn't get the plot right, and when I did, the end result was seven hundred pages long and possibly the most unthrilling thriller I've ever had to read in my life. During all this I'd become almost impossible to live with, and the idyllic Burgundy countryside, all those hundreds of square miles of it, had begun to drive me mad. Worse still, Yvonne loved it.

You can probably guess the rest. We argued like crazy as my dreams, held for so long during those long-drawn-out days in the office, steadily fell apart. I was selfish. I kept threatening to up sticks and head home. One day, Yvonne decided she'd had enough and told me I was welcome to go. We agreed to have a three-month trial separation. I returned to England, staying in Dom's spare room, hoping that the change of scenery would provide the inspiration I needed for *Conspiracy*. But it didn't. Instead, just as I was about to ask to move back in with Yvonne, having finally realized that living without her and Chloe would only make me unhappy, she announced that she'd met someone else. His name was Nigel, and he was another ex-pat. She and Chloe are still living with him, except now they've moved south, to Montpellier.

And my high-octane page-turner set in the murky world of high finance?

'No,' I told Jenny, a rueful smile on my face. 'I never did finish it.'

'That's a pity,' she said, looking disappointed. 'After all the work you put into it.'

'Sometimes you've just got to know when to quit.' I took a decent gulp of the vodka Red Bull. 'But,' I added, keen to keep her interest, 'I'm not the kind to give up. I'm writing another one now, and guess what?'

Her face brightened. 'What?'

'I've got an agent, a guy who thinks he can sell it. I sent him the first ten chapters and he took me on on the basis of them.'

'Can you tell me what it's about?' she asked, leaning forward in her seat, sounding genuinely interested.

So I told her all about Maxwell.

Maxwell was something of a legend in north London underworld circles, a former loanshark and enforcer now in his fifties who was reputed to be as strong as an ox and possessed of the highly useful loansharking talent of being able to punch open doors. In other words, not the kind of man you wanted to cross. I'd met him a few months back at a party in Hoxton hosted by one of Ramon's salsa students. Maxwell was standing around dealing coke and generally looking

menacing, and somehow I'd ended up talking to him.

When I told him I was a writer (which strictly speaking was true, even though I'd never been paid a penny for it), Maxwell had suddenly become very interested. 'I've got plenty of stories to tell,' he growled, following this revelation with the immortal line 'you could turn my life into a book', which, even as a rank amateur in the literary world, I must have heard a hundred times before, usually from people whose lives would have made a bloody awful book. But in Maxwell's case, I'd seen a degree of potential.

By this time, *Conspiracy* was already pretty much down the pan, so I'd gone to the cottage in Berkshire where Maxwell had retired on his ill-gotten gains to interview him, not entirely sure what to expect. What I got was a friendly charismatic guy who was a hugely gregarious storyteller with a never-ending stream of original anecdotes, who'd clearly lived the kind of life that would make a perfect book. I envisaged it as a kind of British riposte to *Goodfellas*: a thug's journey through Britain's seedy underbelly from childhood to middle age, encompassing the crimes he'd committed along the way, and adding in a few he hadn't, including a couple of murders, just for good measure.

Maxwell hadn't taken much persuading. Since

he loved talking about his exploits it stood to reason that he'd jump at the chance to make some money from them. And so, a couple of months earlier, we'd finally got down to work, and I'd produced the first ten chapters, focusing on his early life, which was the part that got me my agent. Since then I'd been ploughing slowly through the rest of it, trying to ignore the fact that what little money I had left in the world was rapidly running out. I'd even contemplated tapping Maxwell for a loan, but had quickly thought better of it. My front door was flimsy and I didn't think he'd grant me any special favours if I didn't pay him back.

When I'd finished talking, having thrown in a couple of choice Maxwell anecdotes, Jenny shook her head in amazement. 'God,' she said, draining the last of her second spritzer, 'it's incredible to think people like that exist.'

'I can promise you they do.'

'He sounds awful,' she said with a mock shudder, but I could tell from the look in her eyes that a part of her had found hearing about him exciting.

'He's like a lot of criminals,' I answered, trying to sound authoritative. 'They can be great fun right up until the minute you piss them off. Then they're not very nice people at all.'

She looked at me and smiled, and I was sure

there was something suggestive in her expression. The pub was shutting and, apart from the barman who was collecting up the glasses, we were the only ones left.

I suddenly realized that I didn't want this evening to end. I hadn't been out on my own with a woman for months, and I was enjoying her company. 'Do you fancy going on somewhere?' I asked, trying to sound as casual as possible. 'I know a couple of wine bars round here where we can get a late drink.'

'I would do, but I've got work in the morning and I could do without the sore head.'

Jenny got to her feet, and I followed suit. I was disappointed, but I didn't show it. It was probably for the best: she was Dom's ex-girlfriend and it didn't feel right being too interested in her.

But as we stepped out of the pub and into the chilly night air, she surprised me by asking if I fancied popping round to hers for a nightcap. 'I'm only a five-minute taxi ride from here.'

It was difficult to tell from her tone and demeanour whether she meant the invitation as an extension to our chat or something more, but either way I forgot my earlier inhibitions, hesitating for all of a second before answering, 'Sure, that'd be great.' After all, it could do no harm. Just a drink. See what happens.

How wrong I was.