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As Good
As Dead

HOLLY JACKSON



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PART I

Dead-eyed, that's what they said, wasn't it? Lifeless, glassy, empty. Dead eyes were a constant companion now, following her around, never more than a blink away. They hid at the back of her mind and escorted her into her dreams. *His* dead eyes, the very moment they crossed over from living to not. She saw them in the quickest of glances and the deepest of shadows, and sometimes in the mirror too, wearing her own face.

And Pip saw them right now, staring straight through her. Dead eyes encased in the head of a dead pigeon sprawled on the front drive. Glassy and lifeless, except for the movement of her own reflection within them, bending to her knees and reaching out. Not to touch it, but to get just close enough.

'Ready to go, pickle?' Pip's dad said behind her. She flinched as he shut the front door with a sharp clack, the sound of a gun hiding in its reverberations. Pip's other companion.

'Y-yes,' she said, straightening up and straightening out her voice. *Breathe, just breathe through it.* 'Look.' She pointed needlessly. 'Dead pigeon.'

He bent down for a look, his black skin creasing around his narrowed eyes, and his pristine three-piece suit creasing around his knees. And then the shift into a face she knew too well; he was about to say something witty and ridiculous like –

'Pigeon pie for dinner?' he said.

Yep, right on cue. Almost every other sentence was a joke from him now, like he was working that much harder to make her smile these days. Pip relented and gave him one.

'Only if it comes with a side of mashed rat-ato,' she quipped, finally letting go of the pigeon's empty gaze, hoisting her bronze rucksack on to one shoulder.

'Ha!' He clapped her on the back, beaming. 'My morbid daughter.' Another face shift as he realized what he'd said, and all the other meanings that swirled inside those three simple words. Pip couldn't escape death, even on this bright late August morning in an unguarded moment with her dad. It seemed to be all she lived for now.

Her dad shook off the awkwardness, only ever a fleeting thing with him, and gestured to the car with his head. 'Come on, you can't be late for this meeting.'

'Yep,' Pip said, opening the door and taking her seat, unsure what else to say, her mind left behind as they drove away, back there with the pigeon.

It caught up with her as they pulled into the car park for Little Kilton train station. It was busy, the sun glinting off the regimented lines of commuter cars.

Her dad sighed. 'Ah, that fuckboy in the Porsche has taken my spot again.' Fuckboy: another term Pip immediately regretted teaching him.

The only free spaces were down the far end, near the chain-link fence where the cameras didn't reach. Howie

Bowers' old stomping ground. Money in one pocket, small paper bags in the other. And before Pip could help herself, the unclicking of her seat belt became the tapping of Stanley Forbes' shoes on the concrete behind her. It was night now, Howie not in prison but right there under the orange glow, downward shadows for eyes. Stanley reaches him, trading a handful of money for his life, for his secret. And as he turns to face Pip, dead-eyed, six holes split open inside him, spilling gore down his shirt and on to the concrete, and somehow it's on her hands. It's all over her hands and –

‘Coming, pickle?’ Her dad was holding the door open for her.

‘Coming,’ she replied, wiping her hands against her smartest trousers.

The train into London Marylebone was just as busy, standing shoulder to shoulder with other passengers, awkward closed-mouth smiles substituting *sorrys* as they bumped into one another. There were too many hands on the metal pole, so Pip was holding on to her dad's bent arm instead, to keep her steady. If only it had worked.

She saw Charlie Green twice on the train. The first time in the back of a man's head, before he shifted to better read his *Metro*. The second time, he was a man waiting on the platform, cradling a gun. But as he boarded their carriage, his face rearranged, lost all its resemblance to Charlie, and the gun was just an umbrella.

It had been four months and the police still hadn't found

him. His wife, Flora, had turned herself in at a police station in Hastings eight weeks ago; they'd somehow got separated on the run. She didn't know where her husband was, but the rumours circulating online were that he'd managed to make it to France. Pip looked out for him anyway, not because she wanted him caught, but because she needed him found. And that difference was everything, why things could never go back to normal again.

Her dad caught her eye. 'You nervous about the meeting?' he asked over the screeching of the train's wheels as it slowed into Marylebone. 'It will be fine. Just listen to Roger, OK? He's an excellent lawyer, knows what he's talking about.'

Roger Turner was a solicitor at her dad's firm who was *the best* at defamation cases, apparently. They found him a few minutes later, waiting outside the old red-bricked conference centre, where the meeting room was booked.

'Hello again, Pip,' Roger said, holding out his hand to her. Pip quickly checked her hand for blood before shaking his. 'Nice weekend, Victor?'

'It was, thank you, Roger. And I have leftovers for lunch today, so it's going to be an excellent Monday too.'

'I suppose we better head in then, if you're ready?' Roger asked Pip, checking his watch, other hand gripped around a shining briefcase.

Pip nodded. Her hands felt wet again, but it was sweat. It was only sweat.

'You'll be fine, darling,' her dad told her, straightening out her collar.

'Yes, I've done thousands of mediations,' Roger grinned, swiping back his grey hair. 'No need to worry.'

'Call me when it's done.' Pip's dad leaned down to bury a kiss in the top of her head. 'I'll see you at home tonight. Roger, I'll see you in the office later.'

'Yes, see you, Victor. After you, Pip.'

They were in meeting room 4E, on the top floor. Pip asked to take the stairs because if her heart was hammering for that reason, it wasn't hammering for any other reason. That's how she rationalized it with herself, why she now went running any time she felt her chest tighten. Run until there was a different kind of hurt.

They reached the top, old Roger puffing several steps behind her. A smartly dressed man stood in the corridor outside 4E, smiling when he saw them.

'Ah, you must be Pippa Fitz-Amobi,' he said. Another outstretched hand, another quick blood check. 'And you, her counsel, Roger Turner. I'm Hassan Bashir and for today I am your independent mediator.'

He smiled, pushing his glasses up his thin nose. He looked kind, and so eager he was almost bouncing. Pip hated to ruin his day, which she undoubtedly would.

'Nice to meet you,' she said, clearing her throat.

'And you.' He clapped his hands together, surprising Pip.

‘So, the other party are in the meeting room, all ready to go. Unless you have any questions beforehand,’ he glanced at Roger, ‘I think we should probably get started.’

‘Yes. All good.’ Roger side-stepped in front of Pip to take charge as Hassan ducked back to hold open the door to 4E. It was silent inside. Roger walked through, nodding thanks to Hassan. And then it was Pip’s turn. She took a breath, arching her shoulders, and then let it out through gritted teeth.

Ready.

She stepped into the room and his face was the first thing she saw. Sitting on the opposite side of the long table, his angular cheekbones in a downward point to his mouth, his messy swept-back blonde hair. He glanced up and met her eyes, a hint of something dark and gloating in his.

Max Hastings.

Pip's feet stopped moving. She didn't tell them to, it was like some primal, unspoken knowledge – that even one more step would be too close to *him*.

'Here, Pip,' Roger said, pulling out the chair directly opposite Max, gesturing her down into it. Beside Max, across from Roger, was Christopher Epps, the same solicitor who'd represented Max in his trial. Pip had last come face to face with this man on the witness stand; she'd been wearing this exact same suit while he hounded her with that clipped bark of a voice. She hated him too, but the feeling was lost, subsumed by her hatred for the person sitting opposite her. Only the width of a table between them.

'Right, hello, everyone,' Hassan said brightly, taking his assigned chair at the head of the table, in between the two parties. 'Let's get the introductory bits out of the way. My role as mediator means I'm here to help you reach an agreement and a settlement that is acceptable to both parties. My only interest is to keep everyone here happy, OK?'

Clearly Hassan had not read the room.

'The purpose of a mediation is essentially to avoid litigation. A court case is a lot of hassle, and very expensive for all involved, so it's always better to see if we can come to some arrangement before a lawsuit is even filed.' He grinned,

first to Pip's side of the room, and then to Max's. A shared and equal smile.

'If we cannot reach an agreement, Mr Hastings and his counsel intend to bring a libel lawsuit against Miss Fitz-Amobi, for a tweet and a blog post shared on 3rd May of this year, which they claim consisted of a defamatory statement and audio file.' Hassan glanced at his notes. 'Mr Epps, on behalf of the claimant, Mr Hastings, says the defamatory statement has had a very serious effect on his client, both in terms of mental well-being and irreparable reputational damage. This has, in turn, led to financial hardship for which he is seeking damages.'

Pip's hands balled into fists on her lap, knuckles erupting out of her skin like a prehistoric backbone. She didn't know if she could sit here and listen to all this, she didn't fucking know if she could do it. But she breathed and she tried, for her dad and Roger, and for poor Hassan over there.

On the table, in front of Max, was his obnoxious water bottle, of course. Cloudy dark blue plastic with a flick-up rubber spout. Not the first time Pip had seen him with it; turns out that in a town as small as Little Kilton, running routes tended to converge and intersect. She'd come to expect it now, seeing Max out on his run when she was on hers, almost like he was doing it on purpose somehow. And always with that fucking blue bottle.

Max saw her looking at it. He reached for it, clicked the button to release the spout with a snap, and took a long, loud

sip from it, swilling it around his mouth. His eyes on her the entire time.

Hassan loosened his tie a little. 'So, Mr Epps, if you would like to kick things off here with your opening statement.'

'Certainly,' Epps said, shuffling his papers, his voice just as sharp as Pip remembered. 'My client has suffered terribly since the libellous statement Miss Fitz-Amobi put out on the evening of 3rd May, especially since Miss Fitz-Amobi has a significant online presence, amounting to more than 300,000 followers at the time. My client has a top-tier education from a very reputable university, meaning he should be a very attractive candidate for graduate jobs.'

Max sucked from his water bottle again, like he was doing it to punctuate the point.

'However, these last few months, Mr Hastings has struggled to find employment at the level which he deserves. This is directly due to the reputational harm that Miss Fitz-Amobi's libellous statement has caused. Consequently, my client still has to live at home with his parents, because he cannot find an appropriate job and therefore cannot pay rent to live in London.'

Oh, poor little serial rapist, Pip thought, speaking the words with her eyes.

'But the harm has not been my client's alone,' Epps continued. 'His parents, Mr and Mrs Hastings, have also suffered from the stress, and have even recently had to leave the country to stay at their second home in Florence for a

couple of months. Their house was vandalized the very same night Miss Fitz-Amobi published the defamatory statement; someone graffitied the front of their home with the words: *Rapist, I will get you -*

‘Mr Epps,’ Roger interrupted. ‘I hope you are not suggesting that my client had anything to do with that vandalism. The police have never even spoken to her in connection with it.’

‘Not at all, Mr Turner,’ Epps nodded back. ‘I mention it because we can surmise a causal link between Miss Fitz-Amobi’s libellous statement and the vandalism, as it occurred in the hours proceeding that statement. Consequently, the Hastings family do not feel safe in their own home and have had to fit security cameras to the front of the house. I hope this goes some way in explaining not only the financial hardship Mr Hastings has suffered, but also the extreme pain and suffering felt by him and his family in the wake of Miss Fitz-Amobi’s malicious, defamatory statement.’

‘Malicious?’ Pip said, heat rising to her cheeks. ‘I called him a rapist and he *is* a rapist, so -’

‘Mr Turner,’ Epps barked, voice rising. ‘I suggest you advise your client to keep quiet and remind her that any defamatory statements she makes now could be classified as slander.’

Hassan held up his hands. ‘Yes, yes, let’s just everyone take a breather. Miss Fitz-Amobi, your side will have the chance to speak later.’ He loosened his tie again.