

SHARDS OF GLASS

by

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Novel. Crime / psychological thriller

“Men lie. Men cheat. And now they should be very afraid.”

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SHARD 1

The voices in her head, they kept shouting, yelling, screaming, warning her not to step foot inside the house. Voices she vaguely recognised, somewhere, somehow, somewhen, but couldn't quite place. Young voices. Children. Boys and girls. Far too many to count. Calling her name. And calling it loud.

Kaitlyn Green was first on the scene. She had to go in, it was her job. If she was ever likely to trade her lowly police uniform for CID wear-what-you-please freedom of choice – and boy, did she crave the opportunity to play detective rather than faceless minion – she'd need to pay her dues, earn respect from above and shut away those frigging relentless cries of caution.

The front door of the house stood ajar. Whoever had dialled 999 was openly inviting company. Strange call, even stranger caller, female, no name given, sounding neither youthful nor elderly, aged somewhere in-between, her vocal tone meek and distant, yet at the same time laced with a splash of satisfied closure.

'Don't bother sending an ambulance. It doesn't look like he'll need one.'

Whatever crap had kicked off in this household, it seemed that the caller had got her own way in the end.

From the vague information at hand, the best-guess assumption was a burglary gone wrong. The scenario: Thieving scrote helps himself to the family silver. Homeowner makes an unexpected return. Said homeowner clobbers said thief over the head with the nearest available heavy ornament. Thief is out for the count. Homeowner calls the police, looking forward to seeing her face in the newspaper alongside a local hero headline.

Unless she'd killed the bastard, in which case said newspaper would be running a very different story.

The last headache Kaitlyn needed in her life right now was a second lecture from an irate forensics nerd on trashing a crime scene, last week's mistake, double facepalm, so she slipped on a pair of latex gloves before pushing the door wide open. The WPC hovered by the entrance and peered into a stark, narrow hallway. Wallpaper age-browened and peeling. Woodwork naked and unglossed. Floor uncarpeted, no haven for sensitive bare feet. If this place could speak, it would cry out for emergency redecoration.

'Hello?' she called into the building.

Silence. Weighty, like a sodden blanket.

'Police.' More of a timid squeak than the valiant voice of authority. Shame on you, girl. She cleared her throat, then asked in a firmer tone, 'Are you okay in there?'

Ice-cold, deathly hush.

Hmm, the situation didn't look too rosy.

Then, a child's voice, female, from behind. 'What's the matter, Kaitlyn, are you scared?'

She twisted around. Nobody there.

Rolling self-scolding eyes, she almost emitted a chuckle. It was official. Kaitlyn Green had finally gone bonkers.

Back to the matter in hand, she needed to do something, and fast. Standing alone on the doorstep like an ignored double glazing salesperson was doing nobody any good. She stepped inside the house, gradual, cautious, ever alert. Back against the wall, one hand hovering over the telescopic baton hooked to her belt, she inched a snail's pace along the hallway.

Five feet ahead, the kitchen door stood partly open. Through the gap, the aftermath of chaos. An overturned ironing board. Various items of clothing scattered around it like some kind of laundry war zone. And... shit.

A tiled floor dirtied with blood.

Kaitlyn tentatively unclipped her baton and flicked it to full size. Fearful was an understatement. She was totally bricking it. A proper copper for four short months, this was her debut appearance amid this type of situation. WPC Green had been most fortunate. On her beat, extreme violence hadn't reared its ugly head. A few mouthy binge drinking, middle finger extending, arse flashing idiots on a rowdy Friday night, yes, but nothing like this. Nothing potentially life threatening.

And there she stood. Alone and vulnerable. Like a lost lamb ready to be picked off by a hungry predator. Hmm. Maybe she should have listened to those voices.

Then, a sob, adult, female, coming from the room on her left. The lounge. Defence stance initiated, she raised the baton, stole a moment to prepare herself, then went in.

A lone woman in her thirties sat on the floor, lost, silent, distant, her back propped against the far wall, her face pale and tear-stained, her clothing once virgin white, now spattered with hectic spots of dark crimson. In one quivering hand, she held a damaged steam iron. The electric cord dangled south, missing its plug, clearly wrenched from the wall socket with great force. The iron's plastic-coated body was cracked and distorted, graced with smudged smears of scarlet. And its metal soleplate was dented and drenched in blood. Kaitlyn swore she could also spot tiny part-burnt melts of skin welded on via the searing heat of boiling steam.

Bloody hell.

A sub-zero chill shot up the length of Kaitlyn's spine, then danced a merry jig upon her heart before abseiling south and twisting her intestines with all its might. It was obvious, code-name frigging blatant. The iron had been used as the mother of all weapons. Again. And again. And again. And again.

As the WPC approached, the woman shrank into herself. Kaitlyn lowered her baton and bent into a squat. With gazes levelled, she offered an affable smile to gain trust.

‘It’s okay, I’m a police officer.’ Measured and unhurried, she reached for the iron. ‘Mind if I borrow that?’

The woman hesitated. Then she surrendered the bloodied appliance.

‘Thank you.’ To signify no threat, she placed both the iron and the baton a safe distance away on the floor. ‘I’m WPC Green. Can you tell me your name?’

No reply.

‘Okaaaaay. I take it you live here. Am I right?’

The woman nodded. A definite yes.

Ah. Now she was getting somewhere. ‘Are you hurt in any way?’

The woman shook her head. A definite no.

She indicated to the claret. ‘Do you know whose blood this is?’

Back to no reply.

‘Did you disturb an intruder?’

Stubborn. Mute.

Kaitlyn sighed, tired of the constant flip between compliant and defiant. ‘I can’t help you unless you tell me what happened.’

The woman narrowed her eyes with odious scorn, now a different person. ‘He had it coming.’ More of a hateful growl than a casual remark.

‘Who?’

With the venom of a serpent, she hissed, ‘My husband.’

Well. This plot was certainly thickening.

Maintaining eye contact, slow, steady, gradual, Kaitlyn rose to her feet. ‘You sit tight, okay? I’m just going to check the kitchen.’

The woman said nothing, did nothing, simply stared into space, a return to her former lost and distant demeanour.

Kaitlyn revisited the hallway and spotted a discarded business card on the bare floor. She picked it up and read to herself the opening heading, bold lettering. ‘All Men Are Bastards.’ Stunned by such a damning statement, she followed through with, ‘Charming.’

The card advertised a local support group for female victims of infidelity and abuse, enticing women to stand tall against their men. For sure, this was evidence. There had to be a connection. After all, the lady in the lounge didn’t look the type to include husband bashing with a loaded iron in her list of regular pastimes. Kaitlyn slipped the card into a clear plastic evidence bag and in turn into one of her pockets. Then it was back to creeping towards the kitchen, slow and wary, unsure of what she would uncover there.

She stopped dead by the doorway and spied through the gap. Like a dropped bottle of merlot, splashes of blood fanned out across the kitchen floor in a vivid explosion of crimson. Her eyes widened, her jaw hung loose. Through the swollen vessels of both temples, she could feel her pulse quickening, badoom, badoom, badoom. She swallowed hard. Harder than ever before. Both feet refused to shift forward. They were stuck fast. The only signs of movement registering on her body were involuntary trembles. And then the sub-zero chill returned to her spine, ready to sing its encore.

Oh, that child’s voice again, whispered close to her right ear. ‘Bet you don’t go in, you scaredy cat.’

Kaitlyn turned towards the voice. Once again, there was nobody there. Shaking her head, she dealt an idiot curse. Frigging imagination running riot. ‘Quit this insanity, girl,’ she whispered to herself, ‘or you’ll be sectioned before the day is done.’

She returned her attention to the ajar kitchen entrance. It was then when she heard it. A child’s giggle. And then she felt it. A presence behind her. A young schoolgirl. Aged ten and three quarters, almost eleven. Blue and white gingham summer dress. Blonde hair tied in pigtails. And a wide gap between her two front teeth. Kaitlyn didn’t need to turn around and

lay eyes upon the child to verify her identity, precise age, choice of attire, hairstyle or dental abnormalities. She knew exactly who it was. Oh, God, she could almost taste her very presence. But how could it be her? It was physically impossible.

Numbed by sheer alarm, eyes fixed forward on the kitchen door and whatever horror lay beyond, Kaitlyn croaked to the chilling entity which stood behind her, 'It's you.'

A firm hand from behind clasped the rookie policewoman's shoulder. Argh, she jumped out of her skin and spun around to find –

– fellow police officer Jamie Philips.

'Of course it's me,' he said. 'Who were you expecting?'

Kaitlyn glanced past Jamie. The girl, the presence, whoever, whatever had vanished. That is, if said girl, presence, whoever, whatever had actually been there in the first place.

Probably not. No doubt her mind playing stupid tricks.

Jamie added, 'I thought I told you to wait for me.' It was almost a stern, finger wagging scold of the father to wayward daughter genus.

'You were taking ages,' she replied, defiant. 'I had to respond to the call.'

Jamie had been caught short on the beat and had nipped to the toilet of the nearest pub.

'It was a long queue,' came his response. 'There was only one cubicle available. All the rest were out of order.'

Jamie was twenty-two years of age, just like her. Uniform, just like her. Oh, and rather cute. At least that's what she reckoned. Sod anybody else's opinion. Of course, nothing had ever developed between them. Just good mates. Mates in the traditional sense, not friends with benefits. The pair, however, had lost contact during the wild and reckless latter half of the teenage phase, only to be reunited four months ago on her first day on the job.

Kaitlyn figured it must be fate. A sceptical Jamie blamed a small world.

Jamie peeked into the lounge at the pallid, trance-like woman whose scarlet-mottled attire gave the impression she'd taken up butchery as a hobby. Open-mouthed, he returned his attention to Kaitlyn, not quite knowing for a moment what to do, say or think.

'Is she hurt?' he finally managed to ask.

'Not that I can make out.' She indicated to the kitchen. 'But I think hubby will be.'

Kaitlyn stepped forward. Jamie grabbed her arm.

'Shouldn't I be the one going in first?' he said.

'Why? Because you're the proud owner of a penis?'

Jamie had no response prepared for such a random rejoinder, so he simply shrugged his shoulders, fair enough, and allowed the girl to take the lead.

They found the husband on the kitchen floor, laying on his side in a ruby pool. It looked as though, post-attack, he'd managed to crawl a short distance towards the dining table, or rather the mobile phone which sat upon it, before losing consciousness halfway through the journey. Calling for help had clearly been his ultimate goal.

Clocking the victim's face, Kaitlyn turned away in a fusion of horror, dread, revulsion and everything related. The steam iron had dealt serious damage to the man's features. Eyes blackened. Nose smashed to pieces. Skin torn, bruised and burnt. Oh, and almost all front teeth missing. For sure, this guy was officially unrecognisable, probably even to close family.

'Fuck me,' glurked Jamie, forgetting his professional status.

'You took the words right out of my mouth,' remarked the female copper. 'This was certainly no lover's tiff.'

Kaitlyn placed two fingertips on the victim's jugular. Probably no point, but protocol needed to be followed. Then oh, her eyes bulged with pleased disbelief. 'Jamie, I've found a pulse. It's pretty faint, but the main thing is, he's still alive.'

Her partner in crime prevention looked equally stunned. ‘The lucky so-and-so. I’ll radio for an ambu—’

The iron lady exploded into the room, eyes wild, teeth bared, brandishing Kaitlyn’s baton high above her head. ‘Noooooooo! Diiiiiiiieee!’

Kaitlyn dived for the love of safety as the already mangled husband took further blow after blow from his hysterical wife. Quick-thinking Jamie slammed the frenzied female against the wall, one arm locked behind her back, weaponed arm held tight by the wrist.

‘Drop that baton!’ he yelled, in control, authoritative, meaning business. ‘Now!’

The blubbering woman did as she was told. The baton went into freefall and clattered as it made contact with the tiled floor. Jamie whipped out a pair of handcuffs and shackled his prisoner. He looked across to Kaitlyn who lay on the floor, shaken up, disorientated.

‘Are you all right?’

Kaitlyn nodded, a little unsure. ‘I think I’ll live.’

It didn’t take long for the authorities to break the tranquillity of leafy suburbia. Or rather trash it to oblivion. The road outside the house now staged a chaotic symphony of activity in four movements.

Movement One: A large and pointless rendezvous of emergency services vehicles. Six police cars, one police van, two forensics 4x4 monstrosities and three ambulances. Talk about overkill.

Movement Two: A constant and unnecessary neon-esque lightshow of blue flashing lamps. Why keep them blazing? Nobody needed reminding that the cavalry had arrived. Such

a needless display of blinding illumination could probably be seen from space. It was like a rave party, but without the pill popping, the glowsticks, the apple eyes and idiot grins.

Movement Three: A herd of diligent spacemen in their brilliant white all-in-one jumpsuits, busying around and doing their thing. They looked more like cute children's television characters than forensic pathologists.

And finally, Movement Four: The constant jabber-jabber, hiss, crackle, jabber-jabber of hectic back and forth radio exchanges. No wonder the whole world, his brother and their second cousin twice removed had turned up to pursue their favourite hobby of rubber-necking, all herded like factory-farmed cattle behind the police tape which cordoned off the immediate area.

Kaitlyn sat on the bonnet of one of the six police cars, taking stock of the situation and scolding herself inside for the trio of fuck-ups she'd made today, namely:

1. Going into the house alone.
2. Allowing a civilian free use of a police baton for an impromptu episode of husband clobbering.

And 3. Crawling out of frigging bed this morning.

Oh, why had she shut off the annoyance of her alarm clock when she could have so easily hit snooze every ten minutes right up until bedtime?

She watched two paramedics stretcher the victim into one of the three ambulances, wondering what the poor man had done to deserve such a... such a... The only relevant word that sprang to mind was beating, but even that particular B-word seemed far too tame and insufficient to describe a horrific attack of this calibre.

Jamie appeared, indicating to the heavy surrounding traffic. ‘How many emergency services vehicles for one victim, one assailant? Some onlookers are taking bets on whether the fire and coastguard services will come a’calling, just to make it the full set.’

Kaitlyn managed a faint smile. She then noticed that he was the proud owner of two takeaway beverages, one of which he handed over.

‘There you go, Kaitlyn. Coffee. Extra strong. Just how you like it.’

She dealt a puzzled frown. ‘Where did you get this?’

Jamie grinned as he pointed beyond the frantic flurry of flashing lights and fluorescent yellow jackets. ‘Would you believe a burger van has set up shop over there?’

‘British business acumen, huh?’ she observed.

To which Jamie replied, ‘Just can’t be beaten.’

Kaitlyn passed him the evidence bag containing the business card she’d found on the hallway floor. ‘What do you make of this?’

Jamie read aloud the text. ‘All Men Are Bastards.’ To those four words, he looked as stunned as his police partner had been upon first read. ‘Is he cheating on you?’ he continued to quote. ‘Beating you up? Hurting you in any way? Do not suffer in silence. Join us and together we will kill the abuse dead.’ He returned the bag to Kaitlyn, shaking his head in astounded disbelief at the sheer gall of the message it gave out. ‘Bloody hell.’

‘My sentiments exactly,’ remarked Kaitlyn. ‘Talk about an extremist self-help campaign.’

The shadow of their superior officer then darkened their sun. DCI Ruth Blanchard. Just into her fifties. Three decades on the job had greyed the majority of her locks and carved noticeable lines on her face, but the woman retained an adequate degree of attractiveness. Oh, and judging by the way the cut of her blouse revealed far more cleavage than the average fifty-something would dare to bare, her breasts hadn’t yet plummeted south. To Kaitlyn, this was most surprising. The woman’s general appearance, that is, and not just her bosom

rigidity status. After thirty years of dealing with murders, rapes, serious assaults and whatever else the bustling town of Jillingford chose to vomit all over the senior plod's official threads, it was a wonder the Detective Chief Inspector didn't look another two hundred years older.

'Nasty business.' The half-eaten hotdog in Blanchard's hand betrayed the upkeep of regal authority. 'Excuse the junk food. I haven't eaten since breakfast.'

Kaitlyn removed her buttocks from the car bonnet and stood up straight. 'Ma'am, I found this in the house.' She handed over the evidence bag. 'Figured there might be a connection.'

Blanchard examined the find with interest. 'Indeed there is. Or at least that's what we believe. In the last month alone, we've seen three other violent assaults by women against their partners. On each occasion, the aggressor has been a member of this support group. The meetings are held at the local community centre and chaired by, of all people, Meredith Payne.' The DCI paused to swallow. Rogue saliva, it seemed, and not the devilish work of the hotdog. From her pained expression, it looked as though the quoted name had left a sour taste in her mouth. 'That woman certainly has a lot to answer for.'

Kaitlyn had to ask. It was bugging her badly. 'Who's Meredith Payne?'

Blanchard offered across a grave look. 'Your worst nightmare. Quadrupled.'