

ALTERED LIFE

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ALTERED LIFE
by
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A Sam Dyke Investigation

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To Liz

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“Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life!”
Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*.

CHAPTER ONE

I WISH I COULD say that the first time I met Rory Brand I knew he was a dead man walking.

But I can't.

At that moment he was just another client eager to get me on his side.

'Dyke, thanks for coming,' he said, pumping my arm vigorously. I didn't want to be outdone, so I matched the strength of his grip and watched him react with a swift competitive grin.

'Nice grip,' he said.

'Call me Sam,' I said.

He was a stocky man a head shorter than me with cropped dark hair peppered with grey. His actions were purposeful and confident, his body language practised at being in charge. He had vitality and life, like most entrepreneurs I'd met. He closed the door behind me with a casual swipe of his arm, then directed me into the room, a small airless office with two large windows and chairs either side of a wooden table. I had the sense that he was used to people doing what he wanted. Well that wasn't going to work with me—not without a good retainer anyway. 'I hope we can get one thing straight right now,' he said. 'Rumour's a bastard in this business so nobody else is to find out we talked, is that clear?'

'I agreed to that yesterday,' I said.

'So call me paranoid. I don't care. You obviously have more faith in people than I do.'

His manner suggested that my opinions of humankind were in fact of no interest to someone as important as he was. So I said nothing. I looked out of the window at the blue rooftops of Waverley, wondering what it must be like to live in a place where your only concern was which colour carpet to lay in the loft.

'Did Carol offer you a drink?' Brand asked.

'I've drunk enough coffee to float a yacht, Mr Brand,' I said. 'Before I sit down, I should tell you how it works. I ask for four hundred a day, plus expenses, with a non-returnable advance of two thousand. I have a standard contract we can work to, but I'll understand if you don't want to put anything in writing. I can give you a full receipt at the end of the assignment.'

He laughed, an open-mouthed and full-chested affair, his eyes turning up slightly at the corners as if astonished by his own response.

'Four hundred a day?' he said. 'You're joking. I'm a management consultant. I wouldn't get out of bed for that. Here's some consultancy for free—put up your rates or people will think you're crap.'

'They've had nothing to complain about so far,' I said.

He looked interested. 'I asked around but nobody knew how to get hold of a private investigator. I had to find you in the phone book. Struck me we could help you with some marketing. That box in the Yellow Pages can't get you much business.'

'It got you,' I said stiffly.

'Christ on a bike,' he said. 'Where's your ambition? I'd never have built up this business with that attitude. You've got to think big just to stand still in my line of work.'

Irritated by his willingness to tell me exactly where I was going wrong with my life, I took out my notebook and headed a fresh page. I don't know whether it's their own guilt or a belief that in some way they're morally superior, but some clients try to pull rank. I gave a

mental sigh and hoped that Rory Brand wasn't going to be one of those difficult customers who wanted me to do something he didn't have the guts to do himself, then give me a hard time for not doing it properly.

I said, 'I'm flattered by your interest in my career prospects, but that's not why I'm here, is it? You wouldn't tell me what you wanted on the phone. So how about we get down to it now?'

'All right,' he said. 'Fair enough. This company is mine. Named after me. You know what it's like – you have to call your company something, don't you?'

'It helps people find you in the Yellow Pages.'

'Good point, well made. I set it up with my first wife, Gill, seven years ago. We started in north Manchester then moved here shortly afterwards. Hey – is this what I'm supposed to do?'

'What?'

'Spill my guts while you write it down.'

'It's traditional.'

'OK. So what else can I tell you? We're in management consultancy. Rather like your line of business—helping people who can't deal with things by themselves. As you can tell, I'm quite passionate about my business. Can you understand that, Sam?'

'You don't have to sell to me, Mr Brand.'

'Oh that's right. You need to keep a professional distance, don't you? Well the end of that particular story is that out of the blue, Gill left me for Australia and the sunshine of Bondi Beach and I haven't seen her since. I can't tell you what a blow that was. She'd been shoulder to shoulder with me and I just didn't understand what went wrong. Still don't.'

'Divorced yet? Or just long-distance lawyering?'

'The whole hog. Divorce with a bullet. A year after she left I married Tara. Lovely girl. Could sell teeth to crocodiles. Works with me in the business as sales director. I know what you're going to say—there was only a year between Gill leaving me and Tara coming on board, but I don't like living alone. I'm a gregarious person, Sam. I don't like going home to an empty house. You don't have to write that bit down.'

First rule they teach you in private eye school: Clients always want to give you context. Usually more than you need at the first stage. And I'd met enough of Brand's type to guess what was coming—something about a pre-nup, or perhaps he wanted me to talk to some woman who was giving him grief, perhaps an old flame who was on the verge of self-combusting and ruining his new marriage with tiresome revelations about his sexual proclivities. To some people in my line of work, rich businessmen were a never-ending source of funds based on marital distress. Personally, and despite the potential increase in my cash flow, I couldn't take the work, but for the moment I was here and, almost despite myself, listening.

'So you've got a good business,' I said. 'You're making loads of money and don't get out of bed for less than four hundred a day. What do you need me for? I told you on the phone that I don't bodyguard the rich and famous.'

He leaned over the table and stared at me with eyes that were as still as a hawk's, and about as friendly. 'Consultancy's a dog-eat-dog business, Sam, with everyone scrabbling for money from the same pot. The competition fries your eyeballs after a while. Gotta win, just to pay the rent and the photocopying bills.'

'I only had to look around here to see your life was tough.'

'Don't get me wrong, I love it. Gets my juices going when we win a bid. Nearly better than

sex.' He stood up, as if he couldn't bear to be imprisoned by gravity. Then he turned and leaned over the desk again and his eyes darkened. 'But we're developing a secret weapon,' he said. 'And there are some people who can't stand that. They're coming after me and my business. They're trying to steal it—with both hands.'

CHAPTER TWO

I GRIMACED INWARDLY at this new information but kept my features neutral. So it was intellectual property, or copyright theft, or industrial espionage. What you might call the conceptual side of private investigation—not my strength. Though to be fair, two years in business and I was still trying to work out what my strength was. When I found out I was going to brag about it in my cheap advert in the Yellow Pages.

‘Who are “they”?’ I said.

‘I’m getting there. You know, I’m enjoying this. Talking it over. Seeing it through your eyes, so to speak. It’s good for me.’

‘It’s an additional benefit of the service I offer.’

He looked at me sideways, then carried on. ‘So anyway, a year ago we had just twenty-three people working here. Twelve consultants, a couple of people looking after the accounts, some sales and marketing whiz-kids and admin. We were growing the company. Making a reputation.’

‘Hasn’t really worked, has it? I’d never heard of you before yesterday.’

‘One-man businesses aren’t exactly our target market,’ he said, rather tetchily. ‘Anyway, I suddenly hit the motherlode. I had an idea for a new direction for the company. That’s what I do – come up with ideas. When you get to know me better you’ll see me doing that all the time. Can’t help myself. So now I needed money for investment, which meant I had to go cap in hand to the people who had it. Long boring meetings, ton of paperwork.’ His eyes closed slowly at the memory—then snapped open. ‘They call it venture capital—nothing adventurous about it. Dot the i’s and cross the t’s till your hands bleed. But eventually we got it.’

‘So you became rich all of a sudden,’ I said. ‘Life is good.’

He ignored this. I wasn’t sure whether he didn’t get sarcasm or that it was just beneath him to acknowledge it. ‘Let me tell you something, Sam. Our target market is largely the people in human resources. Ask them what they do and they’ll tell you they’re “people people”. Unfortunately they know everything about people, but nothing about computers—and they want to know less. But all around them the world’s been changing. Manufacturing, service industries, call centres—everything depends on computers and the web. That’s the new battlefield.’

For some reason, this talk of battlefields made me think of my dad bent double to scrape coal from the Thurnscoe seam. He used to talk about fighting and winning against the Coal Board, and there was always talk of campaigns and tactics and wars. It was a language that pervaded our household. A battlefield to him was a serious place and meant more than a few electrons whizzing across a VDU display. I looked at Brand again, hoping that my disdain wasn’t leaking out.

‘So what’s in it for you?’ I said. ‘If the people you want to sell to don’t understand what you’re selling, why bother?’

‘Three million quid,’ he replied coolly. ‘That’s the capital I got for developing the software.’

I needed him to slow down now. He’d gone a step ahead of me. ‘What software?’

‘That’s what I’m telling you. Our new technology. I bought in expertise from this geek I met, and when we got the venture capital we set about expanding the company. We call the software Compsoft. Because it measures competency.’

'I guess that's consultant speak,' I said.

'I saw a gap in the market. There was a need for software that measured people's abilities at work, then compared them to a national database. I tell you, Sam, the night I came up with this idea was bloody exciting. When you have a brainwave like that it literally takes your breath away. I had to sit down or I would have burst.'

I suddenly saw where this was going. 'So this software means that companies could tell where their folk stood in relation to the competition.'

He smiled slowly, like a father seeing his child take those first unsteady steps.

'That's right,' he said. 'You find out where the skill gaps are in your own company. And then Compssoft lets you see where you are against other companies nationally.'

'You can track what your competitors are doing by looking at the skills of the people they're hiring.'

'There's a bit of educated guesswork, but you can make sure you're never lagging behind. It's called competitive advantage.'

He was too pleased with himself for my liking.

'So three million quid does what,' I said, 'apart from giving your bank manager orgasms?'

He lifted his arm sideways rather grandly, gathering in this office and the people outside. 'Ramped up the workforce. Recruited a couple of dozen programmers and researchers. Designers. Testers. Improved our image.'

'I can see that. Your backsides get to sit on nice comfy chairs. So how's it going—what have you sold?'

His eyes slid away. 'Well, nothing yet. The program's not finished. There's a demo of Compssoft on our website. It just needs a couple of months' more work.'

I stopped writing and put my notebook away. I'd heard enough. Brand watched me, his cologne filling the air with musk as he breathed in and out.

'What's the matter?' he said. 'The dogged detective run out of questions? Don't just sit there looking superior.'

There wasn't an easy way to say it, so I just said it. 'I can't help you, Mr Brand.'

'Why the hell not?' he said, though he looked like he was expecting it, expecting disappointment.

'From what you've said, I'm guessing that you're worried someone's trying to buy out the share of your company held by the venture capitalists.' He nodded warily. 'I can understand that,' I went on. 'After all, you've persuaded them to lock three million quid into it and it might be a quick way for them to get their money back. But what you're telling me is pure speculation. Until something concrete happens, I can't help.'

'I've got to wait until I'm shafted before you're willing to do anything?'

'All you've got at the moment is the suspicion that you might be sold out. But in this game suspicion's not enough.' I spread out my hands. 'People tell me I'm a pretty good detective. But I can't invent a case where there isn't one.'

'Even though I know there is?'

'You go for outside investment, you run the risk they'll sell on their share. Have you talked to them?'

'I don't want to frighten them if I'm wrong. I told you, this conversation is between you and me.'

'Then I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do right now. If a chair or a person or a bit of your software goes missing, I'm your man. I'll chase it up hill and down dale. Until that happens, to be honest, I'd be wasting your money. And while I'm not against that in principle, the

least I can do is tell you upfront.' Sam Dyke, the honourable detective.

He scowled. Like many entrepreneurs, he allowed a full range of emotions to show in his face as an attempt to manipulate the other person: this is important to me, so it should be to you. They acted as though a display of naked feeling was enough to create a commitment to buy what they sold. But I wasn't buying today.

'What if I had more information?' he said. 'Something that would make it easier?'

'It's not a question of easy or hard. It's a question of what I can do. I won't take your money and then sit staring into space waiting for someone to make you an offer you can't refuse. I don't work like that.'

'Right, a code of ethics,' he said mockingly.

'Plain Yorkshire common sense.'

He turned his head and looked through the windows at a ripple of grey cloud that had been slowly advancing towards us, making the room grow darker by the minute. As the weather sometimes does, it seemed to reflect his mood. At last he said quietly, 'I've got a suspect.'

'What?'

'Got your attention, didn't it, Mr Confident? Let's say I know that certain people have been in talks with certain other people, who in turn are interested in having my scalp.'

His phrasing was way up there on the theatrical delivery scale, but nonetheless I felt the question being dragged out of me. 'Who are you talking about?'

He sat back heavily in his chair and folded his arms. It struck me that he was actually quite frightened but I hadn't seen it before. He'd developed a good act to cover it up.

'I don't know who the bastard is who wants to buy the company,' he said. 'But I know who set the ball rolling. Who put out the feelers to see if anyone was interested. Who inserted the knife between my shoulder blades and hammered it home with the end of her expensive Italian shoe.'

'Who?' I asked.

His eyes turned towards me and he blinked slowly, once. 'My lovely new wife, Tara.'

CHAPTER THREE

BEFORE I COULD say anything, the door opened and Carol the receptionist put her head in. She was a woman in her early forties with an over-elaborate dress sense topped by a swirl of dark hair that became lighter as it spiralled further from her head, like cream dropped into coffee. I stared at her in fascination.

'Can I interest anyone in a drink yet?' she asked.

Brand looked up at her. 'Shut the door, Carol. Don't interrupt again unless I ask for you.'

She retreated quickly and closed the door. I waited but Brand said nothing.

'You're sure?' I said.

'It was her,' he replied bitterly, lowering his head to stare at the table. His attitude had changed. When I'd arrived he'd been confidently in control; now he gave off a quiet despair, like a man who'd lost something he knew he'd never get back. I found myself beginning to feel sorry for him. 'No one else apart from me knows the things that she knows,' he said. 'No one else could have set it up. You ever been married?'

'Long time ago. It didn't take.'

'She run off?'

'I don't remember. Look, are you saying that Tara is trying to steal your business?'

He looked at me severely. 'Damn right I am. Do you get it now?'

'Why would she do it?'

He raised his hands and let them drop on the table like dead weights. 'Call me old-fashioned, but I thought it was your job to find out that kind of thing.'

I sat back in my chair and looked at the people in the large room outside. They were mostly in their twenties and casually dressed in denim and tee-shirts. Hopelessly trendy. Behind them, filling each wall, racks of computer modules stood with their lights flashing, like Cubist Christmas trees. Cardboard boxes containing more hardware were stacked in one corner. 'Is she here?' I said.

'No—she's in London, with a client.' He seemed to make up his mind about something. 'Look, if it weren't for the fact that it's Tara I'd be dealing with this myself. But this is too difficult for me. So what I want from you is confirmation, one way or the other. Find out what she's been up to, who else is involved, what the plan is.'

I looked at him for fully fifteen seconds without saying anything. He took the scrutiny. Then he stood up abruptly and said, 'There's someone I want you to meet.'

'It won't help,' I said. I was beginning to feel exasperated. Clients who don't listen are more common than I'd like, but this one was beginning to irritate me with his unwillingness to take heed of what was fairly expensive advice. I added, 'Did I mention, I don't get involved in family disputes?'

'You're on the clock right now. It won't do any harm. Don't argue with a client, Sam, you'll never win.'

Without waiting for my reply he opened the office door and was striding away. I followed reluctantly. I glanced around at the staff. They took no notice of our re-entry into their world. Carol the receptionist showed me a sample from her repertoire of frosty glances as we passed in front of her to cross into the other half of the office, which was almost empty. I gave her a warm smile, just to worry her. 'This is the consultancy division,' Brand said briskly. 'Ah, here's one of the people I wanted you to meet.'

A slim woman with hair the colour of sun-dried straw was sitting on the corner of a desk.

Her head was bent down as she read from a sheaf of papers. She looked up when she sensed us watching her. Her appearance was a neat blend of geometric shapes: her eyes were astonishingly round and almost transparently blue, set in a face that was mostly oval but with two straight and prominent cheekbones that lent her a serious, hard-edged look. Her skin was smooth and appeared to have been recently tanned. She wore a sharp grey suit that fitted her at every place that it touched her body, which was lean and athletic and radiated energy. She held herself at a slight angle and moved her gaze from one of us to the other, calmly expectant. Her large eyes made me feel inspected, measured and noted. What the judgement was, I couldn't tell.

Brand stepped forward. 'Laura—I'd like you to meet Sam Dyke. He's helping with that business I told you about.'

The woman held out her hand and I shook it. Her fingers were so slender it was like grasping a bunch of pencils. 'Laura Marshall,' she said. She looked around and said quietly, in an amused voice, 'Do you buy this idea of Rory's?'

'I don't know enough one way or the other.'

She turned to Brand. 'Rory, Mr Dyke's being diplomatic.'

'That's the first I've seen of it,' Brand said, and took my arm to lead me further into the open space. I shrugged at Laura Marshall as we passed.

Two women in their thirties sat side by side at a long desk looking down into purple Sony laptops and saying nothing. Their fingers moving silently over the keyboards. An older man with thinning hair leaned back in his chair, engaged in a long telephone conversation that was evidently boring him. I guessed these were consultants.

Brand led me to a desk where a large man in a suit the colour of slate was towering over a seated woman with a stiff helmet of white hair. They were talking quietly to each other. Brand walked into the woman's eyeline and the man immediately stood upright and grinned at him with a mouth full of white teeth.

'Well well,' he said jovially. 'Rory Brand comes to visit the little people.'

'Shut up, Eddie,' Brand said. 'Betty, this is Sam Dyke. He might be doing some work for us.'

The woman glanced up as though whatever I did was of no interest to her, so long as it didn't interfere with the smooth running of her own life. She had a face as thin and pale as Eddie's was full and florid. She also had a spiky manner that seemed to match her appearance. 'We've got those newsletters to get out tonight,' she said. 'You have to go over them before we put them in the mail.'

'I know,' Brand said, 'I haven't forgotten. How could I, with you on my back every half hour?'

Eddie took this as an opportunity for a bout of laughter. 'Got your number, Betty!' he crowed. As he turned, I saw a pack of muscle move in his shoulders. He was big, I thought, but he wasn't fat. He looked at Brand, grinning. 'Don't be such a tosspot, Rory. Betty's only looking after business, aren't you, love?'

Brand turned to me, including me in the conversation. 'Betty's worked here longer than anyone else. She's the keeper of the flame.'

'Loyalty's a rare virtue,' I said, looking at her.

She wore large round glasses that slipped down her nose as she found some paperwork on her desk to sort through. She seemed flustered to be suddenly the centre of attention.

'Someone's got to get the work done here,' she said.

'What's this then?' Eddie said, nodding familiarly at me. 'New blood?'

Brand said, 'A special project. Sam, this is Eddie Hampshire, one of our longest-serving consultants. Don't worry, Eddie, Sam's not here to steal any work from you.'

Eddie threw his head back and laughed again, showing the dark insides of his molars. 'Take it!' he said to me. 'Take it all! See if you last as long as I have.'

'You don't look that old,' I said mildly.

'What's that?'

'I said you're bearing up. Being a consultant seems to have treated you well.'

Hampshire looked at me closely. 'Are you saying I'm fat?' There was a sudden tension in the air. Betty turned away; Laura Marshall had come up beside us and looked on with amusement.

I'd seen Eddie's kind of bully before—the type that sets the emotional temperature for everyone else through sheer force of personality. He's happy, everyone else is happy; he's down, everyone else has to watch their step. I didn't like them. And I didn't mind letting them know.

'You're pleased to be here,' I said. 'Why don't we leave it at that?'

He stared at me bluntly for a moment, then allowed the smallest of smiles to lift the corners of his lips. 'The life I've lived, Sam, I'm pleased to be anywhere.' His mouth opened and the laughter came rumbling out again, though there was no sign of it in his eyes.

We turned to go, and I noticed that behind us Eddie stopped laughing at once, as though a tap had been turned off. I felt his gaze following us as we walked away and I wondered whether he always found life so amusing.

Brand said, 'Do you get it now?'

'What?'

'These are real people, Sam. With livelihoods. Betty's been with us seven years. The longest of anyone here. She'd be devastated if anything happened to the company so that it had to be sold.'

'And Eddie?'

'Ah, Eddie. One of our peak performers. Gives delegates a good time on courses. Always out in the hills somewhere, either going up or sliding down a rope. The delegates love him.'

'You're less keen.'

'Let's just say there's only so much bonhomie you can take, isn't there?'

I'd thought he was tiresome after a couple of minutes. I wouldn't have liked to work with him day in and day out.

Brand walked me to the door.

'I can't persuade you, can I?' he said.

'I'm sorry. There's nothing here for me. At this point I'd be wasting your money.'

'I wish I was as sure as you are,' he said. He drew a long breath and stared past me, a look of deep pain haunting his eyes. 'Something's going on and I don't like it, but I can't twist your arm.'

No he couldn't. But he should have tried harder.

The next morning, my telephone rang as I was having breakfast.

'Mr Dyke?'

'In business hours, yes.'

'Sorry to be so early.'

She identified herself as Laura Marshall, the blonde woman from Rory Brand's office. Her voice was cold and dispassionate but held an odd tremor.

'What can I do for you?' I asked.

'They killed him,' she said. 'They got to him and killed him.'

'Killed who?' I said.

'Rory, you fool. They killed Rory. He was found dead in his office this morning. They'd broken his neck. I want you to find out who did it. I want you to find out who did it and kill him. Do you understand?'