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## *The Domino Effect*

The girl was sitting on the bare concrete floor, her back pressed hard against the wall of the underpass as though it might collapse without her support. She was in her late teens; stick thin and scruffy, though she might have been pretty with a wash and some clean clothes. A faded, pink rucksack was clutched loosely in one hand. Overhead, an old fluorescent tube in its filthy Perspex housing flickered erratically, bathing the grimy walls in a dim yellow glow.

The girl paid no attention to her surroundings but simply stared vacantly at the opposite wall with empty, unseeing eyes. The sound of footsteps echoed starkly through the empty underpass. A young man stopped in front of her. He wore blue jeans and a black fleece zipped tight to keep out the early evening chill. He was in his mid-twenties; slim and fair-haired with a pleasant open face.

“Are you OK?”

The girl said nothing, but her fingers tightened protectively around the strap of her rucksack.

“Are you OK?”

“Leave me alone.”

The young man hesitated and then crouched down to face her. He frowned as he saw the livid purple bruise around her left eye.

“Listen. I know a place where you can get some hot food and a clean bed if you want. It’s safe. Nobody will ask you any questions.”

The girl jumped to her feet, the rucksack held defensively in front of her.

“Stay away from me,” she shouted. “I’m not going anywhere with you, you perv. If you come any closer, I’ll scream.” Her voice was firm but the fingers holding the rucksack trembled.

“OK. OK.” The young man stepped back and put up his hands. He smiled with the easy charm that comes naturally to young men blessed with good looks. “It’s all right. Don’t worry. Nobody’s going to take you anywhere you don’t want to go. I just thought you could use a friend, that’s all.”

“Well I don’t. I’m fine as I am, so leave me alone.”

The girl hugged the rucksack closer and the two young people stared at each other for a moment as if in some odd Mexican stand-off.

It was the young man who felt the need to break the silence. “How did you get the bruise?”

She shrugged. “Someone gave it to me.” She offered no other explanation.

The young man hesitated for a moment then reached into his pocket and pulled out a brown leather wallet. He extracted a crisp ten pound note.

“Here. Take this.”

She stared longingly at the note, but made no move to take it. She looked him up and down slowly as if seeing him for the first time.

“I don’t do stuff for money.”

The young man reached out his hand and his eyes held hers for a moment. “You don’t have to do anything. It’s a gift. Just promise me you’ll spend it on something to eat and not drugs.”

The girl reached out cautiously and took the note.

“I don’t do drugs.” There was a defiant tone to her voice.

“Good.” He put the wallet away. “What’s your name?”

She looked at him again as if deciding whether to answer. “Domino,” she said at length.

“Wow! Great name. Well listen, Domino. Try O’Neills, the chip shop on Westgate. They’ll still be open and they do good portions.”

He looked briefly along the gloomy underpass. “And don’t stay here. It’s not the best place to be at night. Try the bus station. It’s got a coffee stall and it’s well lit. If you sit on one of the benches like

you're waiting for the night bus, nobody's going to bother you."

He hesitated, and for a moment she thought he was going to say something else, but he just smiled.

"Look after yourself, Domino." He turned and continued down the dimly lit passage. The girl's eyes stayed on him as he walked away. He had reached the end of the underpass when she called out.

"Why are you helping me?"

He turned and smiled again, the easy charm back on his face.

"Everybody needs a friend now and then."

"So why should I trust you?"

He hesitated and then shrugged. "Just ask people about Jimmy Blue." And then he was gone.

He was right about O'Neills. The portions were cheap and filling. The girl finished her chips and dropped the tray in a waste bin. Not many people bothered to use it; the floor was littered with cigarette butts, drinks cans and sweet wrappers. A sudden gust of wind disturbed the litter and she hunched tightly in her thin cotton jacket. She turned and headed to the bus station. It was as he had described it; a bit shabby maybe, but large and well lit with just enough activity to make her feel safe. She was thirsty after her supper so she headed to the small coffee bar which provided the caffeine to keep the night bus drivers awake. She ordered a hot chocolate and then waited as the tired looking woman behind the counter bustled away to make it.

"Has Jimmy Blue been in?"

The woman, as small and skinny as the girl herself, looked up from the drinks machine.

"You've just missed him, love. He's taken a couple of guys to the shelter."

"The shelter?"

"Yes. The homeless shelter on Southway. Jimmy set it up. He spends most of his spare time there trying to help people from the streets."

She brought the chocolate across and settled herself against the counter, glad of a chance to chat.

"Jimmy found an abandoned church hall a couple of years ago

and set up a kitchen and a few beds. He begs out-of-date food from the supermarkets and gets donations from anywhere he can. The shelter's not official; more like a squat kind of thing. The council turn a blind eye because they don't have the resources to do the job themselves."

She leaned across conspiratorially.

"Word is that Jimmy was on the streets himself a few years back before a friend helped him out. Now he says he has to pay back that friendship. Oh, he's a saint, he is."

She prepared herself for a full description of Jimmy's saintly characteristics and looked a little disappointed when the girl paid for her drink and headed to a nearby bench. She sipped her chocolate slowly and looked thoughtful, as if she was coming to some sort of decision.

It was eight o'clock the following evening and the girl was just beginning to think she'd got it wrong when she heard footsteps echoing down the underpass and she saw the young man.

"Hello, Domino. How are things?"

She smiled. "Better, thanks."

He looked enquiringly at her. "The offer's still open. A bed and a hot meal?"

She looked up. "Thanks. I'd like that."

He broke into a broad grin. It made him look even younger.

"Good. Come with me."

He led her to a small car. She recognised it as a Mini Cooper S; the sporty version. It was worth a few bob. Her ex-boyfriend was a mechanic in a very dodgy garage, and cars had been the one subject he was happy to talk about. The Mini was covered in mud. Even the number plates were completely obscured. The young man shrugged apologetically.

"I keep meaning to take it to the car wash, but I always seem to find something else more important to spend my money on."

He pulled out his keys and then paused.

"I looked up your name, you know. It's really interesting. Did you know *Domino* used to refer to a disguise that people wore at old masquerades? How cool is that?"

He turned to look at her with an open and disarming smile. She returned his gaze with a cool, appraising look of her own. Then he opened the door and she slid in beside him. The inside was clean and tidy. He put the heating on and the girl settled back in the warm seat listing to the hum of the fan. Next to her, the pleasant young man put the car into gear and pulled smoothly away.

Well, that went well, he thought to himself. He was sure that nobody had seen them, and with the number plates obscured, nobody could identify the car. Funny her being called Domino when he was the one masquerading. He stopped at the lights and smiled to himself as he saw a tall middle-aged man talking earnestly to a woman on a park bench. He was there every night; good old Jimmy Blue. Still doing his best to help every pathetic down-and-out he met. The young man really didn't know why he bothered. They were all scum. Useless rejects that deserved everything they got. Like the girl next to him. They contributed nothing and they wouldn't be missed. A thought occurred to him that almost made him laugh out loud. He hadn't even had to lie about his name. He'd never actually claimed to be Jimmy Blue; the stupid tart had just assumed it. He felt the weight of the knife in his jacket pocket and glanced briefly at the girl next to him, his mind already focused on the exhilarating pleasure the next few hours would bring.

Alongside him, the girl suppressed a smile. So *Domino* meant mask, eh? How appropriate. She'd never even thought about the stupid name before she made it up. It was just the first thing that popped into her head when he asked her. She stared out of the passenger window. The make-up around her eye was beginning to fade and she didn't want the young man to see that the bruise was fake. She'd been surprised when she saw him. From what she'd heard, she'd thought this Jimmy Blue character would be older. No matter; the soft do-gooder deserved everything he got. She reckoned he had about a hundred pounds in his wallet. Once she got the cash card and the PIN number, she'd have easy access to more. The car was worth about fifteen thousand. She'd only get a fraction of that selling it to her ex of course, but even so it would be worth a couple of grand. She had to stifle a grin as a thought occurred to her. She hadn't even had to lie about being homeless; the soft chump had just

assumed it. She felt for the Taser in her rucksack and began to plan out her next steps.