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Truth Dare Kill

Written by Gordon Ferris

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**TRUTH
DARE
KILL**

**GORDON
FERRIS**



CORVUS

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To my mother, Jenny Ferris [1929 – 2011] for the genes;
and to Sarah for never doubting.

A dead man is the best fall guy in the world.
He never talks back.

Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye*

ONE

I stopped typing and listened to the sound of high heels heading my way. They clipped up each rise on the toes, then clacked across the landings, heel first: Morse code for “this could be your lucky day”. But who needed my services on New Year’s Eve? I hoped they wouldn’t stop at any of the two lower floors. There was a long moment’s hesitation on the second; I thought I’d lost them to the chain-smoking old woman who lives below. Then they came on.

I stopped pretending I was busy. The only person I was fooling was me. For the past couple of hours I’d been stabbing the keys and banging the return as if I hated the battered Imperial. I’d twice reached into my drawer and fingered the neck of the bottle like a lover. I’d twice closed the drawer without taking a swig. If I started I’d never see midnight: a prospect that had grown more tempting by the minute.

The stairwell is visible through my open door. Her hat appeared first, then she climbed round out of sight and up to the top landing. The tap-dance continued until she stood in the doorway. Her slim shadow flung itself across the lino towards my desk. She was hesitant, as though she’d never done this sort of thing before. Few had; Finders Keepers had only been going for three months.

She could see me at my desk but not clearly enough to make out the details. Her veil wouldn't help, but nor would my lamp. I keep the light low because of my face, and because I don't like being silhouetted: a habit I got into in my previous line of work. But whether I was scared of being laughed at or shot at, it meant that visitors had to get right up close before they could see my expression. Especially on a winter's night with only the dim glow from the street lights drifting in through the window.

"Hello?" she said, not sure what this creature in the shadows would do.

It said, "Come in," in as inviting a voice as it could muster. I stood up, hoping she wasn't lost and looking for directions.

She gathered herself and strode forward like an amateur modelling clothes for the first time. It took her just five strides to arrive in my pool of light. With a practised sweep she pulled the veil up and on to her hat. She might have been a model, but she was no amateur.

I wouldn't have guessed the eyes. They were grey, as though the blue had leached away. Her lips were a perfect red, retouched on the stairs – *that* was the pause. With the pale eyes came the blonde hair, that special soft gold-white that no bleaching can ever mimic without turning the hair to straw. It was pulled back so tightly from her face it must have hurt. A small blue hat was skewered to her head at the angle of an airman's forage cap. I've known women take an hour in front of a mirror to get all those effects just so.

The rest of the outfit must have cost a year's ration coupons and twice my annual income. Though twice nothing is nothing, I reminded myself. And the suit bore the same relation to an off-the-peg Utility dress as men to apes. It was likely a pre-war ensemble cut short to the knee. Quality lasts. This woman was

top drawer. And what was Philip Marlowe wearing? A worn cardigan with elbow patches.

“Mr McRae?” The vowels matched the classy outfit, soft but beautifully shaped. I wanted to hear her say it again.

“Danny McRae. Can I help you?”

“I hope you can, Mr McRae. I hope you can.”

“Take a pew, Miss...?” I waved grandly, as if she had a choice of seating.

“Graveney. Kate Graveney. How do you do?” She lifted a languid hand towards me. I leaned over my fourth-hand typewriter and took it. It was sheathed in white leather so fine you could have sworn it was her own skin. The handshake was short, almost perfunctory, but it left a sensation, as if I’d been stroked. I imagined her bare fingers touching my face.

She sat down, parked her bag in her lap and crossed her legs. I realised how long it had been since I’d heard the sound of real silk sliding on silk. The everyday stuff rasps, like sandpaper on wood. A faint but distinct perfume reached me. I’m no connoisseur, but I know what I like. I liked this smell of warmth and undiluted femininity. It raised an echo in me, then drifted away tantalisingly, like so many memories since I got back.

I shoved the typewriter out of the way so we had clear space between us. I made a play of ripping out the report I’d been typing: another stray husband. I removed the carbon and slid the thin sheaf into my in-tray. My only tray. I straightened my new phone. Its shiny black curves said, I’m here for you, you just have to call. It said commitment, I’m here to stay – for as long as I can pay the rent. I was the pro, busy, tidy and ready for business in my model office.

“Now, what can I do for you? It’s a funny time of year and I’m just closing up. Don’t you have better things to do?”

“It *is* a funny time.” She smiled, and that made the time perfect. “Do you mind?” She was already reaching into the bag and pulling out a silver cigarette case. She took one out and waited. I got the message and dug out my matches. She pulled off her gloves and leaned forward with the cigarette perched between those red lips. There was a ring, but on her right hand. She drew deeply and pursed her mouth and blew the smoke out in a steady stream. It unfurled and floated out of the cone of light, to add to the tidemarks on the ceiling.

“But I need help *now*.” There was a petulance; she was used to getting her way. I bet her dainty little heel came off the floor just then, ready to stamp.

“This can’t wait. Not even till tomorrow. I can’t rest until I know I’ve at least got something going. A new year’s resolution, if you like.” She looked down, then up again. She knew how to gain attention. She smiled and gave me a look with her grey eyes that made me realise I hadn’t given up hope of a woman smiling on me again without being paid for it. And how I’d never been with a woman like her.

“Well, I’ve got a party to get to this evening Miss Graveney.” I hadn’t, but I wasn’t going to look any more desperate than I had to. “So why don’t you tell me why you’re here.” I leaned back in my chair and tried to look nonchalant, as though classy women dropped into my hovel every day of the week, including New Year’s Eve.

“May I ask you something first, Mr. McRae?”

“By all means, Miss Graveney.” I realised I was beginning to raise my vocabulary and soften my Glasgow accent to stay level with her precise words and BBC tones.

“Your advertisement. It said you were discreet. That you were a professional and you respected client confidentiality. Is that right?”

She must have seen my ad on the front page of *The Times*, offering unique experience and guaranteed results. Who says advertising doesn't work? But it had cost me ten of the hundred and fifty quid the Government gave us heroes for setting up a new business.

“This sort of business depends on discretion.”

What I didn't say was that she was the most stylish piece of business that had come my way. The others amounted to lost dogs or lost loves. Only the dogs seemed pleased to be found. What had *she* lost?

She nodded and took another deep pull on her cigarette. “What about the police?”

So it wasn't a poodle. “Do you mean do I work with the police or that you don't want whatever you say to be heard by the police?” I knew the answer, but I wanted to see how she responded.

She chose her words with care. “I may need to involve the police. But not yet. Not till things are... clear.”

I thought about Inspector Herbert Wilson who'd paid me a courtesy call a few weeks back, and how he'd love to be a fly on this wall. And how I'd love to have a fly-swat. But that's another matter.

“You have my word. Everything you say to me tonight is privileged. It goes no further.”

“Good. That's good. Because what I have to tell you is... unpleasant.” She stubbed out her cigarette halfway through and lit another one – herself – using a silver lighter with the power of a flame-thrower. I could see her hand tremble a little

this time. Her eyes stopped meeting mine. *Unpleasant* didn't sound nearly enough.

“I think I've killed a man.”

TWO

It was a bad start to a new year. Not that I could say '45 had been much of a year either. Not for me. Or maybe that's being ungrateful. They gave me a medal and said I was a hero, that I nearly died for my country. I don't know; literally I don't know. All I want is a year of my life back. Some days I wake and don't hurt too much and then it doesn't matter. Like a scratch on a record. The needle jumps and I miss a word or a beat. Then I catch up with the song, and I'm back with the melody as if nothing has happened.

Other days, bad days, when the ache wakes me, and it takes till midday and a big shot of scotch to make it go, it feels like the song will never be right, not with that missing piece, and I can't bear it to go on. They've done all they can, but I'm left with just the bass line, not knowing if the singer has paused or gone.

In the meantime I have to live. Heroes don't get paid any more than cowards. And jobs don't come any easier if your trade is subterfuge and you can only ply it on good days. I'm a copper. *Was* a copper. Now I'm a thief. I steal people's cover from them. I pull them blinking into the light and nick their happiness, those libertine days and nights that the war permitted. I hand them back to their loved ones to exact their

revenge in small cuts every day until they've had their pound of wayward flesh. Which explains why I was sitting here, flustered by a pretty girl's smile, on this night of all nights.

At least I was alive. Sort of. A lot of blokes like me didn't make it. I should have been out there rejoicing with the rest of the world. The war was over, it was New Year's Eve, and though London wasn't much more than a pile of rubble, there were enough pubs still standing to make for one helluva party. And like VE Day (I was otherwise engaged for that, but I'd seen the newspaper photos of folk hanging off lamp-posts) the streets would be jammed with hugging and kissing strangers.

There was a sense out there that the world had changed for ever. For the better, of course, was the official view. And in truth, it had to be an improvement over the Blitz. But we'd lost something too: an identity, a purpose. Like a really good party that had gone on too long and we were all creeping home in the cold daylight, embarrassed at how we'd let our hair down. Days of reckoning when we had to stomach the hangover and explain the inexplicable pregnancies and challenge the evasive eyes until our infidelities were soaked from us in great confessional homecomings.

Maybe tonight of all nights, I should have gone home after all. Caught the overnight sleeper back to Glasgow, then the branch line down to Kilpatrick. Tracked down my old pals and got blind roaring drunk like we used to. Three days of parties, everyone your friend. No doors closed. Maudlin tears for the old year and Celtic fear for the new one.

I remembered the last time, just as we turned into the year when our lives jumped the rails. Me and Archie and Big Tam rolling a barrel of beer down the Cowgate. We mowed down other drunks in high good humour. And we got to Kilpatrick

Mum was rooted to the floor, twisting the handle off her handbag. She scanned the faces on the beds looking for mine. Her scared eyes slid over me, not once but twice. The bandage round my head didn't help, but neither did the sunken cheeks and rictus grin, my feeble effort to smile at her. Then she found me and through the greetin' – no English word has quite the sense of heartfelt sobbing – she told me about my pals and how lucky I was.

Big Tam hadn't made it. He died on Gold beach with half his regiment during the landings. And Archie was missing presumed dead according to the telegram to his mum. Somewhere over Germany. His plane falling out of the sky into the cauldron they'd stirred up. I wondered how he'd felt, the air shrieking over the fuselage and the tracers coming up, diving into their self-made funeral pyres. Was it like our boyhood suicide runs, free-wheeling and screaming like banshees down the forty-five-degree slope in Burns' Park? Archie and Tam and me on bone-shakers with no brakes? Death or glory? Seems I got the glory, but it didn't feel like it. Not with a steel plate in my head.

And now I'm scared to go home to Scotland. Scared of what I'd find and who I wouldn't find. Scared of how they'll look at me now, those glad girls from my boyhood. Scared that I'll see in their eyes what my own don't want to tell me. That the head wound goes deep. That I'm *no a' there*, as they'd put it. So, I'm here in London, prowling my last haunts, looking for clues to my lost time, asking the folks round about who I was. Seeing in their eyes the wariness of the sane for the demented.

“I think I've killed a man.” The words sat between us like a newly dealt card in a game of poker. Call or raise. But the blonde had said it as though she was reporting a broken nail.

I did up the bottom button of my cardigan and sauntered over to the fireplace. I tapped the dying briquettes with my toe to encourage more heat and put another one on for show.

“You *think*?” I asked with a little sarcastic edge. “Let’s take this step by step, shall we? Is he dead or not?”

“Probably.”

I sighed. “Let’s – for the sake of making progress – assume he is. My condolences, miss. But did *you* kill him?”

She wrinkled up her nose and smiled sweetly. “Well, that’s the trouble. I’m not sure. That is, I can’t remember. Not exactly. We were celebrating.”

Christ, that’s all I needed. The amnesiac leading the amnesiac. I adjusted my desk lamp to throw stronger light across the desk and across her face. Maybe it would have an illuminating effect on what she’d been telling me. So far, it wasn’t clear at all.

I saw her glance at my face and her eyes widen a fraction. I knew what she was seeing. My thick red hair, combed now on the wrong side for me, hides most of the damage, but the main scar runs like a wide ribbon from the hairline to above my left eye. It looks as though someone took a steel bar and hit me with it full on, bending it round my skull, and then didn’t bother to stitch the sides back together. Which is pretty well what happened.

The other wounds around my nose and right brow would have looked dashing on a duellist from Heidelberg. They made me look like a hard man from the Billy Boys, one of Glasgow’s finest razor gangs. They help if you want elbow room at a bar, but not if you’re hoping for a dance at the Palais.

“You may have to give me a wee bit more information than that so I can see if there’s some way I can help, Miss Graveney.”

I tried to keep the vinegar out of my voice but it was hard. “Excuse me asking, but just how much had you been celebrating?” I left it dangling. Pretty young things like her would have access to the best that the black market could offer: booze or cocaine.

She looked at me strangely, as though I’d overstepped the mark or said something she wasn’t prepared for.

“We might have had a glass or two of bubbly, but I most certainly wasn’t drunk. Or anything else for that matter,” she admonished, reading my mind. “We were visiting a friend. In Pimlico.” Her eyes shifted, then came back to mine. “Actually, we’d borrowed his flat.” Her tightened mouth challenged me to find any fault. I didn’t change my expression.

“We had a bit of a row. Oh, if you must know, it was over a woman. I’d just found out he was married. The swine.” Quiet venom. I would not like to have been on the receiving end of her bit of a row. Beneath the perfect femininity was a wildcat. Just how much, I would learn later, but the hint of danger already hung in the air alongside her perfume.

“So I had it out with him. His wife was in the sticks somewhere. He operated from his club in Jermyn Street. He was a Major working in Whitehall; hush-hush, you know. We were introduced at a party.” I noticed the past tense. “Anyway things got a bit het up, you see. I’m afraid when I get mad I get a bit demonstrative. And he was trying to deny it, you see. So I was throwing things at him and he was ducking and I think his foot tripped on the carpet because next thing he’s down and he’s moaning and groaning. He’d hit his head on something, I suspect. And then the wall is coming in and the curtains are flying at me and I hear the bang and that’s it...”

“The bang? When was this? We haven’t been bombed for...”

a year now, is it?" I wasn't around – one way or the other – so couldn't be sure.

"That's the crazy thing. Just crazy." She shook her head. I wondered what it would be like to hold it steady between my hands and put my mouth on those red lips. "It was a month ago. Thirtieth of November, to be exact. I remember it precisely. It was supposed to be my birthday celebration. We had a table booked at the Carlton." Her grin was rueful.

"The bomb was a left-over. Unexploded. No one saw it land. Or had forgotten about it. They think it had a delayed fuse and during the clear-up that day a bulldozer started it up again. Anyway, when I came to, I was wrapped in these huge curtains. Great black velvet jobs. All lined. I thought – it's silly, I know – for a moment I thought I was dead or buried alive. You know, in a velvet-lined coffin. I was in a perfect state. Couldn't move my arms or legs. The velvet was so heavy and it had wrapped itself around me. Like a shroud." She shuddered. I didn't tell her that I knew exactly how she'd felt.

"But I could shout. A bit. And I heard people talking and walking about, and they heard me and unwrapped me and I was completely all right you know. Not a mark. Though my shoes had gone. Funny, that. We never found them. They were good shoes too. Anyway, they took me off and it wasn't till we got to hospital that I remembered Phil – that's the chap I was with. And I asked them if they'd got him too, and they said they hadn't seen any other body but they would look under the rubble."

"Did they find him?"

"That's the silly thing. I don't know. So I'm just wondering – well – if I knocked him down and then the wall fell on him and he died and was... bulldozed away." She lit another cigarette. I let the silence settle to see what else she'd come out with.

“I was fine. I kept telling them that. A bit of a shock but otherwise absolutely fine. I stayed in hospital overnight. Called Mummy to tell her what had happened – well, some of it – and not to worry. Next day she came round and whisked me off to Surrey, and that’s it. I left messages at his club telling them what had happened – not everything, you understand. And one time I called and they said someone had been in to collect his things from his locker. So...” She shrugged.

“Anyway, I keep thinking I’m going to hear from Phil any day now. You know, that he’ll just ring up and say sorry, old girl, got hit on the head and wandered off or something. But nothing. Last week I even went back to the flat – the one we borrowed so we could meet. But it was cleared. I mean just a big hole where the house had been.”

“Did you report this?”

“Just the bare bones... sorry... to his club. And not the bit about the fight and Phil falling. It didn’t seem... relevant somehow. And I couldn’t very well call his wife and ask if she’d retrieved the body of her husband from the flat, could I? Even if I knew where she lived. That’s why I’m here. I want you to find out what’s happened to him and let me know. Do you see?” She took a deep pull on her cigarette and eased back in her chair, uncrossing and re-crossing her legs.

“I mean, I wasn’t in love with him. Especially when I found out about his domestic arrangements. But I do think I ought to find out. One way or the other. Don’t you?”

I wasn’t sure. It all sounded too unlikely and messy. But I gave myself a mental kick in the pants; mess was my business now. And I might just get a decent bit of cash out of this. God knew, I could do with it. I had no other clients; maybe they’d all made new year resolutions to be nice to each other. Thankfully

it wouldn't last. Human nature guaranteed my business would pick up before January was out. But that left me a short-term cashflow problem and some difficult choices between eating, smoking and drinking. Good job I wasn't a big eater.

"My God!" she cried as the lights went out.

This never happened to Marlowe. "Sorry. Don't move." I scrambled to my feet, dug into my desk and found the tin. I took out a couple of bob, and walked smartly out the door to the meter on the wall. I stuffed a shilling in and then another, swearing all the time under my breath. The lights came back on and I strolled back to my desk as nonchalantly as was possible in the circumstances. I sat down and steeped my hands.

"Now, where were we?" I tried to smile even though the perspiration was beading my spine. I needed this work and here I was looking like a rank amateur down on his luck.

She looked shocked, as if I'd just asked her to take her clothes off. Then amusement filled her eyes. I preferred shock.

"Do you think you can help? I can pay you in advance," she said in the caring way of the rich for the poor. Her accent was beginning to wear down my very recent infatuation with her grey eyes. Though we Scots consider ourselves amused onlookers to the English class system, it doesn't mean we can't spot when we're being talked down to. But this was no time to stand on my dignity.

"My rates are twenty pounds a week plus expenses. And – as you suggest – I prefer in advance."

She didn't flinch, even at twice my normal rates. She wrinkled her fine forehead, reached into her bag and tugged out four large notes from a splendid fold of white fivers. She handed them over. I should have gone higher. But I had a client. A paying client. Maybe my luck was turning, a good

omen for the new year. I tried not to grab the money, and coolly slid my drawer open and dropped the notes in it, as though fivers went in there every day. I decided she'd earned some professional attention.

"Let's start with some details." My hand went back in the drawer again and dug out a pad of paper and a pen; the good fountain pen the "office" had given me to mark my return, and my hasty departure.

"What's Phil's full name?"

She looked coolly at me for a second. "Philip Anthony Caldwell. Major."

My pen stopped, frozen over my pristine pad. "Did you say Caldwell? Philip *Anthony* Caldwell?" My scar was throbbing and hot.

"Yes. They *said* you might know him." She wanted to see my reaction.

"They?"

"Sixty-four Baker Street."

Head office of the Special Operations Executive. They'd told her more than they seemed ready to tell me. I played for time to get over my shock.

"Maybe. Can you describe Major Caldwell to me?"

She did, and in my mind's eye the sketchy figure took on three dimensions and emerged clearly as Major Tony Caldwell. I met him two years ago. Clever Tony, Tony with the affected smile, and the knowing eyes, who wouldn't take no for an answer. The man who might have the key to the locked door of my mind. The man I'd been searching for, ever since they let me out of the loony bin.

*

“Good morning, Sergeant McRae.” The voice is bright and breezy.

I struggle fully awake and ease myself up on my elbows on the bed. At the foot is an officer, a Major sporting the winged Mercury badge of the Signals Regiment.

“Morning, sir. Sorry, didn’t see you there.”

“It’s perfectly all right Sergeant. I should be apologising to you. I’ve disturbed you and you need your rest, nurse tells me.”

“I’m sleeping too much. Catching up, they tell me.” The hospital ship from Salerno took six days to get back to Portsmouth, and Biscay was bloody. I push myself back and up so that I’m sitting, a bit bleary-eyed, but receptive. I presume this is some sort of visiting rota he’s on. To buck up the troops or something. I preferred the kip.

“Mind if I sit?”

“Of course not, sir.”

“And, Sergeant, do you mind awfully if we drop the rank stuff for a bit? I’m Tony, Tony Caldwell. Can I call you Daniel?”

“Yes, of course, sir, I mean Tony. I’m Danny.” He’s not wearing padre duds, or doctor’s insignia. What’s he after?

“I ’spect you’re wondering who I am and why I’m bothering you?” My eyebrows give him the answer.

“I’m actually doing a spot of recruiting. Not for my regiment.” He points at his shoulder flash. “I’m on secondment to a unit in Whitehall and looking for more talent.”

His accent is hard to place. To my untutored ears it’s just posh English, the accent of officers, the natural enemy of the working class. I inspect the man more closely. About five feet ten, I guess, strong shoulders, open face. Blue eyes and gingery moustache under a nose with a bump in the middle. His hair is lighter than his moustache, more sand in it, and

it falls across his forehead in flat lines from a severe side parting.

“How’s the leg, by the way?” He points at the tent covering my lower body.

“Better, thanks. They think they’ve got all the shrapnel out, but I think they took some of me with it.” I try to joke, but I know the bone got pretty smashed up and can’t see how they managed to put it all back together again. Even with the steel pin I was likely to be lopsided. And I’d never play for Scotland now.

“Look, Danny. Fact is you’ve been shot up enough not to have to worry about the war any more. Find a nice desk for you somewhere, eh? Or go back to your old work in Glasgow. Policeman, weren’t you?”

He knows that. But I play along till he tells me what he’s here for. “A sergeant in civvy street and a sergeant in the army. Seems like I’ve found my level.”

“No, you haven’t. You stayed on at school. Passed the entrance exam for Glasgow University. Made Detective Sergeant by twenty three. And you’ve twice been recommended for officer training.” There’s a sudden toughness in his eyes.

“Officers lead from the front. And get shot first.” It’s my standard defence. I just feel more comfortable with the lads.

“You’ve got the wrong war.” He smiles. “When you’re fit, we could use a chap like you. With your sort of background. You’ve got pluck and intelligence. And you’d get paid as an officer. Lieutenant. Wartime commission obviously. Like mine.”

“Why should I take a pay cut?” A top sergeant gets paid more than a first lieutenant.

“We might be able to swing Captain.”

Captain Daniel McRae has a ring to it. But no doubt it comes at a price.

“Doing what, Tony?” I can use his name more freely now if we’re to be brother officers. But I’m already feeling a con coming on. You don’t get officer’s pay for sitting behind a desk.

He leans closer. The ward is heaving with nurses and soldiers. “Heard of an outfit called Special Operations Executive? The SOE? Yes? Well, keep it simple, old chap, we train you and then send you to France or Greece or somewhere Jerry is. Then you link up with the local resistance and mess things up a bit. Blow up bridges, trains, give Jerry a hard time of it. We’re building up a big operation for when we go back. SOE’s role will be to cause havoc behind the lines until the rest of us get through. Absolutely vital stuff. And great fun.”

Fun! This was his idea of fun? It wasn’t mine, thank you very much. At least that had been my first reaction, and my second and third. But Tony Caldwell was a determined character and liked getting his own way. Insisted on it. And, as I was about to learn, to hell with the consequences for anyone else.