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Opening Extract from...

The Black Path

Written by Paul Burston

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For Jacqui Niven, with love.

Praise for *The Black Path*:

‘An intense, beautifully calibrated thriller by a writer at the height of his creative powers’ *Huffington Post*

‘Deliciously creepy and surprisingly emotional – Burston has played a blinder with his first crime novel’ Alex Marwood

‘*The Black Path* twists and turns and introduces readers to an exciting new talent’ Sarah Hilary

‘I found *The Black Path* completely gripping and unsettling. Paul Burston has switched genres with confidence and aplomb. This book kept me guessing right up until the end’ Jonathan Harvey

‘Watch out for *The Black Path*, Paul Burston’s unnerving foray into crime fiction. A terrific read’ Mari Hannah

‘This is a glorious read, and has enough twists and turns in the plot that will keep you second guessing throughout. A dark tale of love and lies, obsession and betrayal indeed – everything you would expect from a master storyteller’ Laura Lockington, *Brighton and Hove Independent*

From the reviews of Paul Burston’s previous books:

‘Accomplished entertainment’ *The Times*

‘Witty, dark and insightful’ *Company*

‘A great read – so much so, I read it in one day’ Lorraine Kelly

‘A wise and witty exploration of friendship, ambition, love and loss’ *Attitude*

‘A compelling read’ *Time Out*

‘Wonderfully entertaining’ *Independent on Sunday*

PROLOGUE

Police search for killers of
'loving husband and devoted father'
by *Gazette* reporter

Tributes have been paid to a local man who died at the weekend. Richard Thomas, 35, of St Nicholas Road, Bridgend, confronted a gang of teenagers who were causing a disturbance outside his house on Sunday afternoon. He suffered several stab wounds to the stomach and died in hospital as a result of his injuries. He leaves behind a wife and young daughter.

Detective Sergeant Rhys Williams told the *Gazette*: 'This is a shocking crime and a tragic waste of life. Investigations are ongoing and we are appealing for any witnesses who may have information regarding the attack to come forward.'

Mr Thomas was described as a loving husband and devoted father who died a hero. One neighbour, who did not wish to be named, said: 'It's a terrible loss for the family. They had their share of problems like everyone else, but nobody expects something like this to happen right on their own doorstep.'

Anyone with any information should contact the incident room at Bridgend CID.

The day it happened, Helen didn't make a sound.

She knows that doesn't seem right – there must have been tears, surely? But whenever she casts her mind back to that day, what she remembers is the stillness.

She'd spent the morning with her face buried in a book. That was the phrase her mother used, although in the weeks that followed she chose her words more carefully. Some days she didn't say anything at all, and her eyes would meet Helen's and turn away as if even the sight of her only child made her angry. But that was afterwards. She'd always had plenty to say for herself before then.

Helen still remembers the way her mother kicked off over the rabbit. Two weeks earlier, her father came home from the pub carrying a cardboard box with holes in the sides.

'It's for you, sweetheart.'

Helen didn't know how to react. It wasn't even her birthday.

But her father smiled and said he didn't need a reason to give his special girl a present. The rabbit was soft and white with pink frightened eyes and a fat belly. When Helen held it to her face she felt its little heart thumping and was terrified that her own heart might burst in sympathy.

Her mother hit the roof, turning on her father with that angry face of hers. 'Have you completely lost your mind? A pet is a big commitment. There's no prizes for guessing who'll be the one who ends up looking after it.'

She refused to have the rabbit in the house, so it lived in the back garden in a hutch her father assembled the

next day in the shed he liked to call his office. Helen welcomed any opportunity to see inside her father's shed. It had a small workbench, a filing cabinet, and shelves full of old coins and glass bottles. Her father said the bottles and coins were valuable, which was why he kept his office door locked even when he was inside. He had another office he went to every day, except on the weekends or those days when his stomach was playing up or he had one of his headaches. Helen had never seen that office, but she'd always imagined that it was quite different from the shed.

The garden backed onto scrubland. Beyond that was the river and running beside the river was the Black Path. Helen wasn't allowed to play by the river and she certainly wasn't allowed anywhere near the Black Path. Up the Black Path there were older boys who smoked cigarettes and built bonfires. There was a place called the Witches' Den, where real witches gathered at night. And right at the top was a hospital where people went when they were sad or kept hearing strange voices. Her parents both agreed that the Black Path was no place for a young girl, and since they never usually agreed on anything, Helen had thought about it and decided that they were right.

So mostly she played in the back garden. And it was there that she spent the last few hours before her world was torn apart – lying on a blanket on the warm grass, her face buried in a book while her father potted around inside his shed. Shortly before tea time she heard his key in the lock and he reappeared blinking into the sunshine, promising to mow the front lawn while his wife put her feet up and his daughter gave that poor rabbit some exercise.

'Run, rabbit, run!' he laughed, lifting it out of the

hutch and bundling it into Helen's arms before heading off in search of his mower. She'd wanted to go after him. Her mother always said that she was never far behind her father, that she was like his shadow. Helen has often wondered how different things might have been had she followed him that day, whether she might have been able to prevent what happened.

The rabbit refused to run. It sat on the grass, nose twitching, staring up at her with its bulging pink eyes. She pushed it gently with her hand, but it wouldn't move. She nudged it again. It waddled forward a few steps and then stopped. It wasn't until a few weeks later that she discovered that the reason the rabbit was so fat was because its belly was full of babies. Cleaning out the hutch she found a lifeless lump of them buried beneath the straw, pale and hairless and squashed together like sardines. She remembers crying then – great, uncontrollable sobs that shook her whole body and made her face wet with tears.

She didn't see what happened to her father. She didn't see the fight or the flash of the knife. She didn't hear the boys shouting or her mother's screams. The first sound she was aware of was the wailing of sirens. Then her mother was grabbing her by the arm and dragging her into the kitchen.

'Stay here,' she said, and went back outside. But Helen didn't stay in the kitchen. She ran into the front room and pressed her nose against the window. They were taking her father away in an ambulance. She saw the flashing blue lights and told herself that the doctors would fix him, the way they fixed people on television. Then her mother's friend Jackie arrived and whisked her off to her house and gave her Coke and biscuits.

Helen remembers thinking that she shouldn't have

been playing with the rabbit in the garden. She shouldn't have been at Jackie's house drinking Coke and eating biscuits when her father was lying in the hospital. She remembers wondering if the boys who hurt her father had come from the Black Path.

And that's all she can remember. She was ten years old and it was summertime and it was a Sunday.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

‘Helen?’

She hears her mother’s voice calling from far away.

Not now, she thinks, and reaches under the table for her handbag. A knot of anxiety tightens in her stomach as she fishes inside for the list she prepared earlier. Her fingers close around the folded piece of paper and she relaxes a little. If the phone rings, she’ll be prepared. It’s better to write things down, so she doesn’t forget. She never knows when Owen will call or how much time they’ll have.

‘Alright, love?’ her mother asks, and now there’s a familiar image to go with the disembodied voice. She’s up to her elbows in a washing-up bowl brimming with suds. The remains of the Sunday roast are congealing on a large serving plate on the hob next to her.

‘I’m fine.’

‘Only you looked like you were miles away.’

Helen forces a smile. She’d give anything to be miles away. Anywhere would be better than spending another dreary afternoon with her mother and Frank. She can’t wait for her husband to come home and for everything to be back to normal.

Her mother must have read her mind. ‘Any word from Owen?’

Helen bows her head so that her hair shields her face. Strawberry blonde, her father called it – though not everyone was as kind.

‘Not for a few days.’

‘Well, no news is good news,’ her mother chirps. ‘Isn’t that right, Frank?’

Frank looks up from his newspaper. ‘Have you seen this?’ he says, stabbing his finger at the offending article. ‘Some lowlifes have only gone and desecrated the cenotaph in town!’

‘I don’t think “desecrated” is the right word,’ her mother says. ‘It’s not the same as a grave.’ She colours slightly and glances at Helen.

Frank reaches for his can of lager. ‘Call it what you want. The bastards want stringing up!’

‘Don’t swear at the table, Frank!’ Her mother turns to Helen and rolls her eyes. ‘What’s he like, eh?’

Helen looks away. She has no intention of answering that question. Not now. Not ever. To answer honestly would only upset the peace – and it’s a fragile kind of peace even at the best of times. Frank is the man her mother took up with shortly after her father died. To say that Helen has never really warmed to him would be putting it mildly. The first time her mother brought Frank home, Helen had just turned eleven.

‘Someone told me it was your birthday,’ the strange man said, filling the room with his unfamiliar smell and big bulky body. ‘So I brought you a present.’ He handed her a parcel wrapped in shiny pink paper.

Helen knew from the moment he opened his mouth that he wasn’t really giving her a present for her birthday. He was trying to buy her affection.

‘Thanks,’ she said, placing the parcel on the table.

‘Well, aren’t you going to open it?’ her mother asked. ‘Honestly, Frank, I don’t know what’s got into her lately.’

Of course you don’t, Helen wanted to shout. Because you never ask!

She refused to open the present in front of Frank. It sat on the table for over an hour, until her mother finally lost her temper and sent her upstairs to her room. Listening from the landing, Helen heard them talking in muted voices. Then her mother laughed. It was an unfamiliar sound – high-pitched and girlish. Helen couldn’t remember the last time she’d heard her laugh like that. A few weeks later, her mother announced that the house was being sold and that they were moving in with Frank. ‘It’ll be good for us,’ she said. ‘A fresh start.’

Right from the outset, Helen hated these new living arrangements with an intensity that was almost physical. She hated the new house with its strange furniture and rooms her father had never set foot in. She resented Frank’s presence the same way she resented seeing other girls’ fathers collecting them from school. Why did it have to be her dad who died, and not theirs? For months afterwards, she couldn’t walk past the local petrol station without wanting to tear up the bunches of flowers in their cellophane wrapping. Everything reminded her of him.

Fifteen years have passed since then, but Helen still misses her father with a dull ache that never goes away. She still has the cutting from the local newspaper, the one where he’s described as a hero – a far cry from the forgotten man whose grave her mother stopped visiting years ago. Frank has never said a word against her father – at least not in her presence. But it’s clear that he’s the reason her mother refuses to keep her father’s memory alive. It wasn’t only her surname that changed when she married Frank. Her first husband had called her Mandy. Now she prefers to be known as Amanda. It’s as if she wilfully severed every link with her old life – every link except the daughter who bears such a strong physical resemblance to the man she seems determined to forget.

Helen dreads these Sunday lunches with Amanda and Frank. She hates the forced sense of family occasion and the air of quiet desperation that hangs over the dining table, prompting her mother to fill every pause with inane observations, subtle reproaches and nervous vocal tics. But with her own husband thousands of miles away in Afghanistan, they’re the closest family Helen has – physically at any rate. It’s only a few miles from the house her mother calls home to the terrace she and Owen bought the year after they were married.

‘It’s a bit small,’ was her mother’s verdict, the day they showed her and Frank around. ‘Especially for a young couple planning on starting a family.’

Helen had never expressed any such intentions to her mother. Six years on, there’s nothing to suggest that her plans have changed. But since Owen was sent to Iraq and now Afghanistan, there’s been less talk of babies and more talk about what a wonderful job our boys are doing, out there where wars are fought and heroes are made. Patriotism is a great silencer, Helen has found. It can even silence her mother. Some of the time.

‘You’ll never guess who I was talking to the other day,’ Amanda says, rinsing off the last of the dishes and reaching for a tea towel. ‘Iona Gregory. You remember Iona. She used to live behind us at the other house.’

The other house, Helen thinks. The house where her father lived, where she was happy.

‘Her daughter Rhian was in the year below you at school,’ her mother continues.

‘I didn’t really know her.’ Helen pushes back her chair. ‘Here, let me give you a hand with those.’

‘You stay there,’ Amanda replies, tightening her grip on the tea towel as if she expects it to be torn from her. ‘I’m quite capable of drying a few dishes.’ She lifts a dinner plate from the draining board and goes at it with a furious circular motion, polishing until it squeaks.

‘Anyway, she’s got a baby now,’ she continues. ‘Rhian, I mean. Her mother showed me a photo. A lovely little girl. I say little – she must be almost eighteen months by now.’

Helen sinks back in her chair. ‘That’s nice.’ There are many things she could say, many lies she

could tell to account for the fact that she doesn't have a baby of her own. The one thing she can never tell her mother is the truth, which she can barely admit to herself. She doesn't want a child that might one day lose its father, the way she lost hers.

Her mother stares at her. She looks as if she's about to say something, then her face stiffens and she looks away.

It's better this way, Helen thinks. Better than all the times she blurted out the wrong thing – and there've been plenty of those. She remembers the night they watched a film starring Nicole Kidman. Frank had gone to the pub. It was one of those rare occasions when Helen had actually been looking forward to spending some time alone with her mother. She'd even brought popcorn. Then halfway through the film her mother turned to her and said, 'I don't know why people think she's beautiful, do you?'

'But she's lovely, Mum.'

Her mother sniffed. 'I can't see it, myself. There's something so washed-out and ghostly about redheads.'

It seemed to have escaped her notice that her own daughter had red hair – just like her father.

After he died, Helen felt like a ghost. The feeling lasted for a few weeks, or possibly even a few months. All she remembers is the unbearable pain of missing him and the urge to lose herself in books and the strange comfort of maths homework. Everything else is a blur. There were no after-school activities and few friends. She kept everyone at a distance. Even her mother. Especially her mother.

She looks up at the woman standing a few feet away and wonders if she is any happier now as Amanda than she was back then as Mandy? It's hard to tell. But they seem to be drifting further apart all the time. Suddenly everything – the best tablecloth, the radio burbling away in the background, Frank sprawled in the chair where her father ought to be – everything feels like a sham.

'I should go soon,' Helen says.

'But you haven't let your dinner go down yet.'

'I know, but I've got things to do. Y'know, stuff for work.'

Sundays are when she irons her work clothes, plans what she's going to wear for the week, and arranges the outfits on rows of hangers in the wardrobe. She knows it isn't everyone's idea of fun, but she finds it comforting. It gives her a sense of order.

Her mother begins stacking the plates. 'I don't know why you took that job in the first place. It's not as if you need the money.'

The job is a recent development, fresh enough in everyone's minds for her mother to still find some novelty in voicing her disapproval. And the annoying part is, she has a point. Helen doesn't need the money, not really. She'd always managed perfectly well on Owen's salary. A lance corporal in the British army doesn't earn a fortune, but their outgoings are minimal. And thanks to the life insurance payment she received from her father's estate, she doesn't have a large mortgage to worry about. She isn't well off, but she isn't struggling either – at least not financially.

But when Owen was first stationed in Iraq, and the realities of being married to a serving soldier sank in, she found she needed something to occupy her mind. The job at the training company only provides a modest income, but it gets her out of the house and gives her a sense of purpose and something resembling a social life.

'It's not about the money,' Helen says. 'It's about me doing something for myself.'

Her mother, who hasn't worked a day in Helen's lifetime, clears her throat and gives a wounded look. Her mother has a vast arsenal of looks, and she isn't shy with any of them. This particular look seems to say, 'So what if I didn't go out to work? I had you, didn't I? That was work enough!'

Helen smiles and adds quickly, 'Besides, I'd go mad cooped up in that house all day on my own.'

She makes it sound like she's joking, but she isn't. She needs that job and all that comes with it. She needs to lead as normal a life as possible because how else is she supposed to cope? War isn't

normal. Not knowing if your husband will come home alive isn't normal. Why can't her mother of all people see that?

'You wouldn't be on your own if you'd gone to live in St Athan,' Frank says. 'You could have had a lovely home over at the camp with all the other army wives.'

'But I didn't want to be an army wife,' Helen replies.

Frank grins. 'You married the wrong man then, didn't you?'

Helen glares at him. 'You know what I mean. I didn't want to live in service accommodation. And neither did Owen.'

This isn't strictly true. Owen would have been perfectly happy in St Athan. It was her decision to buy the house. It was enough that the army decided when and where to send her husband. She didn't want them telling her where to live, what furniture to have, or what she could or couldn't hang on her walls. But she has no intention of explaining herself to Frank.

She holds his gaze for a moment, wonders if she should just leave it there, then hears herself say, 'We wanted a place of our own.'

'Well, it's lucky you could afford it,' Frank replies.

'I'd hardly call it lucky,' Helen snaps. 'That was the money from my dad, remember?'

Suddenly it feels as if all the air has been sucked from the room. Her mother stops stacking the plates and stares off into space. She looks lost, like someone who's wandered into a room and forgotten what they came in for.

Helen feels her anger subside and a rush of sympathy take its place. 'I love that house,' she says in a calmer voice. 'We both do. But it can get a bit lonely stuck at home all by myself.'

Frank takes a swill of lager and stifles a belch. 'You should get yourself a cat. A dog's too much trouble. Anyway, men are better with dogs. They're pack animals. They need to be shown who's boss.'

And a woman couldn't possibly be boss, Helen thinks. Her father would never have come out with a sexist comment like that. He always encouraged her to aim high. She was his special girl and one day she would do something truly wonderful with her life. Or at least that was the plan. What would he make of her small house and her little life, married to a man stationed halfway across the world and spending Sunday with her mother and a man who drinks lager straight from the can at the dinner table?

'Well?' she hears her mother say.

'Sorry?'

'I was just asking if you had anything nice planned this week.'

'Not really,' Helen says. 'I might go out for a few drinks with the girls from work on Friday.'

Angela and Kath have been pestering her to join them on a night out for weeks. But she never does. She never goes anywhere. And she's beginning to think that maybe she should.

'You want to watch yourself, going out in town,' Frank says. 'It's not long since that poor lad was kicked to death, up by the railway bridge.'

'For heaven's sake, Frank!' Amanda snaps.

'They should string them up,' Frank mutters. 'Or bring back national service. That would teach them a thing or two.'

Like how to kill someone more efficiently, Helen thinks, then forces the idea from her head. Her stepfather has a long list of people he believes would benefit from national service. To the best of her knowledge, the nearest he's ever come to serving his country is hanging out with his drinking buddies from the Territorial Army base across the road.

Right, she decides. That's it. If Frank thinks that going out with the girls is such a bad idea, then

she's left with no other choice. She'll have to go.

'I'm off,' she says, rising from her chair.

Frank tries to catch her eye but she ignores him and gathers up her jacket and bag.

Her mother insists on walking her to the door. 'I know it's not easy,' she says in a hushed voice as Helen steps outside into the soft summer air.

Helen turns to look at her. 'You mean Frank?'

Her mother frowns. 'I mean with Owen being away. But it won't be for ever. You've still got your whole lives ahead of you. And just think – he'll be able to retire at forty.'

An ugly thought lodges itself in Helen's brain. She tries to ignore it but the thought turns into words and a familiar voice whispers inside her head.

If he lives that long.