

A Tale Etched in Blood and Hard Black Pencil

Christopher Brookmyre

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Extract

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Prologue

Friends Reunited

'Are they deid? Jesus Johnnybags, are they both deid? Fuck's sake, man, answer us. Fuck's sake.'

'Naw. Wee Elastoplast an they'll be fine. Whit does it fuckin look like? Ye any aspirin?'

'Aspirin? Whit, is that gaunny fuckin revive them?'

'It's for ma heid. It's fuckin thumpin. Cannae think straight.'

'*You* cannae think straight? Fuck's sake, how d'ye think I'm feelin? Whit a mess, man. Whit a fuckin mess. Whit the fuck happened? I mean, for fuck's sake, that's . . . that's . . . '

'I know who it is.'

'Well in the name ay the wee man, I know you liked him about as much as me, but you're no tellin us ye . . . '

'I'm no tellin ye anythin. Ye're free tae draw your ain conclusions, but the fact is, the less I tell ye, the less ye can tell any cunt else.'

'So why the fuck did ye ask us tae—'

'I need help. Ye gaunny give us a hand, or whit?'

'Or whit? Or you kill me as well so I cannae tell any cunt?'

'Don't be fuckin stupit. I'm desperate here. Does it no look pretty fuckin desperate tae you?'

'Naw, it looks like I missed desperate and came in well past dia-fuckin-bolical. Jesus God. Whit the fuck?'

'Aye, well, the worst's yet tae come. That's how I need your help. If ye cannae dae it, I understand. It's no like I'm askin for a loan ay your lawnmower or somethin. All I'd request is ye keep your mooth shut. Your shout. Stay or go, but if it's go, go noo.'

'I'm stayin. I'm stayin. I am. I just need a wee minute here, but.'

'We've no got a wee minute.'

'Naw, right enough. So whit is it ye want us tae dae?'

'Detective Superintendent Gillespie, looking the picture of elegance and poise, as ever.'

'Aye, you'd best get that in before I see the bodies. I tend not to be so elegant when I'm poised over a lavvy bowl. I always know I'm in for a treat when I spot you Forensics boys walking about wearing face-masks.'

'I love the smell of corpses in the morning.'

'Funny nobody ever asks if you're single, Alex.'

Karen is standing under a small cluster of trees, offering relief from the light drizzle. It gets more heavily wooded further ahead, where Alex's cybermen are resplendent in their coveralls, making the scene look like cheap BBC sci-fi. It's a copse of trees, she thinks, but the word wouldn't come earlier, because it was too close to 'corpse', and she doesn't want to cement the association. Doesn't want to create another word or sight that can only ever after make her think of human remains. There's no end of beauty spots and isolated idylls of tranquillity that have been utterly ruined for you if you're in the polis.

She's not kidding about the face-masks, but, on the whole, Alex is nonetheless a welcome sight, because he's good at reminding you it's just a job. The thought lasts for a wee while, at least; though probably works better for him. He's

a pathologist. He sees meat and evidence, and while she's talking to him, so does she. But afterwards, she's the one who's got to put the pieces back together until they form a picture of a human life, one that ended in the worst possible way.

'Story I heard, you were offered the chance to pass on this one, let Keith Fox handle it, and yet here you are.'

'This is my old native soil, Alex.'

'You're from Carnock?'

'Naw, naw, Braeside,' she says, looking down the valley to where the town she grew up in sits hugging the foot of the hills. 'Couldnae resist the lure of the home fires.'

'Apposite choice of words, Detective, under the circumstances.'

'Crispy critters?'

'Double body-barbecue, aye. That's what attracted the farmer's dog. Buried bacon, probably still warm when Rover smelt it.'

'Buried?'

'Aye, but not very deep. I'd say your killer dug a shallow pit to burn the bodies in, then ran out of time, or petrol, or both. Dawn's breaking, maybe. Whatever. Doesn't want the smoke spotted. So he just fills it in and fucks off. Job's definitely only half done. I mean, no much chance of an open-casket funeral for either of this pair, but your boy wanted more than to ruin their looks.'

'Tried to make them unidentifiable. Did he smash the teeth?'

'No. I think he had his sights set on complete obliteration, no evidence of remains whatsoever.'

'What? Just by burning them in a pit?'

'Aye. I said that's what he set his sights on. I didnae say he was any good at it.'

'Right. We've got tae get rid ay these bodies. We need tae get rid ay that fuckin BMW fae outside as well, but that can wait.'

'Whit about Tempo's motor?'

'That can stay. It's meant tae be here.'

'Is emdy due here that would be lookin for him? Whit about the rest ay these lodges? Whit if there's a bookin? Whit about a cleaner, mibbae?'

'The cleaner's no due unless the lodges are in use.'

'How d'ye know.'

'I just know, awright?'

'Whit about bookins, but?'

'Don't know. Never bother. We've got time tae work, but we've no got time tae waste, ye get me?'

'Aye. So whit are we daein wi the bodies? Gaunny bury them somewhere?'

'Naw. Are ye fuckin daft? Bury them? Dae ye no read the papers? Some cunt oot walkin his dug ayeways finds them when bodies get buried. Or some cunt sees ye cairryin a shovel, an that's you fucked again. Nae danger. We've got tae make sure they're *never* found, an the only way tae guarantee that is tae make sure there's nothin left tae *be* found.'

'Aw fuck, man, you're no talkin aboot choppin them up an bungin them through a mincer or somethin, are ye? I couldnae handle that.'

'D'ye think I could fuckin handle that? Are ye forgettin who these cunts *are*, lyin there? Naw. I'm talkin aboot dissolvin them.'

'Dissolvin them? Where the fuck are we gaunny get somethin that'll dae that?'

'I'm no quite sure, but I thought we'd gie B&Q a try.'

'Fuck, man, it's no workin. Stinks tae high heaven an aw.'

'Need tae gie it mair time.'

'Mair time? It's been two hours an aw we've gied them's a fuckin rash.'

'At least that's mair than the first stuff we bought did tae them. Thank fuck we kept the receipt.'

'Well, we cannae go back tae B&Q a third time. It'll be shut by noo. This stuff isnae workin.'

'Mibbae need tae leave it overnight.'

'Overnight? Whit, so oor next move's in broad daylight? Come on. If this stuff was gaunny dae the biz, it would be fizzin an bubblin like somethin oot *Doctor Jekyll*.'

'Well whit else dae ye suggest? Mibbae there's a big cheese-grater through-by we can use.'

'Stop actin the cunt. I'm tryin tae help here.'

'Sorry.'

'See, whit we need is, hingmy, yon super-acid . . . Mate ay mine used tae work at Redhill Plastics, an he says they had this fuckin nasty stuff they used, called ololeum.'

'Linoleum? Whit, we gaunny wrap them up in it?'

'Naw, no linoleum: ololeum. Any cunt got a wee splash on them an they were straight doon the burns unit.'

'That sounds mair like it. You still got thae wire-cutters?'

'Back at the hoose, aye.'

'Whit we waitin for, well?'

'See, he just lay down the bodies and the clothes in here, poured on the fuel and chucked in a match. As a result, the under-sides are undamaged; well, unburnt. Or, rather, that's not true either. They *are* burnt, but by chemicals, not flame. Superficial blistering, almost certainly sustained post-mortem. I can test for specifically what was used when I get them back to the lab, but from what I've seen right here, I'd wager your man's first attempt at getting rid of the evidence was a shot at the old Crippen jacuzzi.'

'Yuck,' was all Karen felt like contributing.

'But whatever he used didn't do the trick. Unsurprising, really. The chemicals required aren't exactly the kind of thing you've got lying around in the garage, you know?'

'Crippen?' asks one of the local Dibbles. Karen would say

he was hanging about like a bad smell, but that particular role has already been adequately filled by what's inside the Forensics tent. McGowan, she thinks the Dibble's name is. 'Is he the one that dissolved the bodies in acid?' he goes on.

'Correct, Constable,' says Alex.

'It's just that, for what it's worth, there were two eejits apprehended the other day, breakin intae Redhill Plastics, over at the Nether Carnock industrial estate. I'm pretty sure I heard somebody say they were tryin to steal oleum.'

Karen stares at him. 'My Higher Chemistry was a long time back. Remind me. Oleum?'

'Super-concentrated sulphuric acid,' the Dibble tells her.

Alex nods. 'The very dab.'

'Who was it? Do you still have them?'

'Cannae remember the names. I think they were released late yesterday evening.'

'Get on it. Now.'

'You awright?'

'Just about. Never been shittin maesel so much in a polis station; no even the first time I got put in the cells. Jesus fuck, man.'

'But ye never said nothin?'

'Aye, I tellt them the lot. That's why they let us walk right oot, ya fuckin tube.'

'Just thinkin oot loud. Fuckin bad score, but. Thought they could see right through me, man.'

'Whit did ye tell them?'

'I stuck tae the story. Says I've a blocked drain and I heard this stuff would save us a plumber.'

'Me as well. Your drain, obviously. It was savin on a plumber that sold it, I reckon. Could see it in their faces, thinkin: "Aye, right enough, thievin bastarts thae plumbers."''

'Whit d'ye think we'll get?'

'A fine. If it's anythin custodial, it'll be a jakey sentence.'

'Aye, well, we better get a shift on if we don't want some-
thin a bit longer, eh?'

'Nae kiddin. And nae fuckin about noo. Whit time's it?'

'Hauf nine. Bastarts hud us in there the whole fuckin day.'

'At least it's dark. That'll help.'

'Whit's the script?'

'We get back an clean up the lodge. That shite we bought
at B&Q does at least have wan decent use: it bleaches the fuck
oot ay carpets, so we can cover up the bloodstains.'

'Whit about, ye know . . . '

'We get them intae the boot ay the motor, take them up the
braes, intae the woods. Dig a wee pit an burn them in it till
there's nothin left but ashes.'

'Will some cunt no see the fire?'

'No if it's deep in the woods. Come on. First stop's the garage.'

'Whit for?'

'Ten Regal an a scud book. Whit d'ye hink? Petrol, ya daft
cunt.'

'Two of them, then,' says Alex, watching the Dibble walk briskly
away, dialling his mobile as he goes. 'Makes sense, I suppose.
Hard to imagine one person being capable of so much stupidity
on his own. To be this incompetent would require a pooling
of efforts.'

'Gives us a timescale, though,' Karen observes.

'Indeed. If they were released late yesterday, we can back-
extrapolate their movements prior to arrest. Puts the murders
at Tuesday at the latest. Then once they got out – practically
dancing with relief, I'd bet – they had to work fast on plan B,
which was to get up here with a can of petrol and try a spot
of DIY cremation. Have you any idea what kind of tempera-
ture is required to consume human bone, DS Gillespie?'

'About as much idea as these two.'

'Quite. So I'm picturing the pair of them with the jerrycan empty, the sun coming up and their victims still medium-rare. They've got no choice but to fill in their wee hole and run away before anybody wakes up and clocks them leaving the area. Off they pop, along comes the farmer and his faithful companion, and *voilà*, that's where we come in.'

'What about the victims? Are we looking at a dental records job? You said they didn't smash the teeth.'

'Yes, the teeth are intact. Like I said, I believe they thought they could completely destroy the bodies. By the time it came to considerations such as rendering them unidentifiable, it was too late. That's if it even occurred to them at that point.'

'So is there anything you can tell me about the victims right now?'

'Oh yes. Both shot execution style, close range, single tap to the head. Younger one to the right temple, older one through the forehead. Both male, as you know; both white. I'd put the younger one at thirty-six years old—'

'Thirty-six? Not "mid-thirties"?''

'Thirty-six,' Alex reiterates. 'And a Taurus, in fact. Dark hair—'

'Tau . . . Right, you're taking the piss.'

Alex smiles. 'Not at all. See, they set fire to the victims' clothes, but they forgot to pat them down first. I told you we were dealing with a unique level of incompetence. There was a heavy-duty leather wallet among the remnants of a pair of jeans. His condoms are probably past their best, but the driving licence is still perfectly legible. His name was Colin Temple. Liked his designer gear, by the look of it. He's got a store card for . . . DS Gillespie, are you all right?'

She nods, swallows. Okay, yeah, this was always a possibility. Probably why she wanted the case, if she was being honest. It still feels pretty heavy, takes a second or two. 'Sure.'

'You knew him?'

'Not for a long time, but we were at school together. What about the other one?'

'Not quite so generous with their clues this time, but they left him all his jewellery. He's got the initials "JT" on a ring. Could be the missus, of course, but—'

'Johnny Turner,' says another of the local plods. Spiers, this one is called.

'What's that?'

'We found his motor all burnt oot, up the dams yesterday. Rang up to tell him but naebody was home.'

'Johnny Turner,' she repeats. 'Rings a bell.'

'Bampot,' says the plod. 'Hard man turned drug dealer. Runs things around Braeside for the bigger boys over in Paisley. Sons are bampots, too. Auldest yin's inside for murder. Next wan doon won't be long behind him, if somebody doesnae murder him first.'

'And what can you tell me about Colin Temple?'

'No much. Runs a hotel in Paisley and owns some lodges by the fishing loch a couple of miles the other side of the hills. Never in bother wi us is the bottom line, and if he was linked tae Johnny Turner, it's news tae me.'

'And Johnny Turner? Age, height, build, anything that can help give us a quick positive?'

'Mid-sixties, medium height, stocky build,' says Spiers.

Alex nods, but shrugs to convey that it's hardly distinguishing. 'Anything else?'

Spiers looks to Alex. 'Big chunk oot his skull where some bastart hit him wi a hatchet way back when?'

Alex barely suppresses a grin as he nods affirmation.

Spiers gets a call on his radio and takes a couple of steps away to hear the message better. There are a few long, garbled volleys on the remote end of a one-sided conversation, with Spiers' contributions limited to 'okay's and 'really?'s. Alex shakes his head in mild amusement.

'What?' she asks him.

'Good job he said that. Saves me trying to work out where that particular wound fits into the bigger picture.'

'No, that'll be my treat,' she tells him.

Spiers has turned back around and is looking impatiently at her. He's got news. He waited deferentially for her to finish speaking but the inverted commas were already coming through his lips.

'DS Gillespie, maam, it's the oleum pair. Constable McGowan called the station and they sent some officers out. They've got one in custody, but the other is . . . Well, they've got him, but he's been stabbed umpteen times and has apparently got a six-inch blade through his skull. Ambulance is taking him direct to the Southern.'

The Southern General. Major neurosurgical centre. Not good.

'Did you get the names?'

'Yes, ma'am. Both members of Braeside Nick's Frequent Flyer programme. Sergeant Reilly at the station suggested you'd know them better yourself as Noodsy and Turbo.'

'Noodsy and . . . Christ. Which one's in the ambulance?'

'Turbo.'

'More Friends Reunited?' Alex asks.

'Yeah. They were both in mine and Colin Temple's class at school. But that's the lesser of the connections here.'

'What's the biggie?'

She nods to Spiers for him to break it to the pathologist.

'Turbo is Johnny Turner's youngest son.'