

# Skin and Bones

Tom Bale

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# PART ONE

*Come, dip on in  
Leave your bones  
Leave your skin  
Leave your past  
Leave your craft  
Leave your suffering heart*

James, 'Sound'

# One

A glance to her left was all it took. A simple glance as she pushed open the door to the village shop. If she had kept her eyes straight ahead, or looked to the right instead, she might never have become involved. She might have been spared.

Her conscious mind, bruised by the experience of the past month, refused to believe what it had seen. But her subconscious knew and understood.

There was a dead man in the street.

It was the third Saturday of January, not quite eight in the morning. She parked outside her parents' cottage on the outskirts of the village and decided to delay the day's grim task by a few minutes. The store was no more than fifty or sixty yards away, tucked around a bend at the foot of the High Street: a ludicrous name for a place with only one shop and one pub.

Julia was thirty-one, a tall slender woman with dark shoulder-length hair. She taught at a junior school in Newhaven, and like the best teachers she had perfected a good-natured toughness that equipped her to cope with the worst that any ten-year-old could throw at her. In the past few weeks she had needed that resilience more than ever.

Her breath rose in clouds as she walked along the edge of the narrow road. A clean shimmer of frost lay over the grass verge. Roof

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tiles sparkled in the late Downland sunrise. The air tasted clean and sharp, and made her wish she was out jogging. Made her wish she had the day free to do as she chose.

It took her less than a minute to reach the shop. In that time she didn't see or hear another soul. No traffic, no tradesmen, no walkers or cyclists. But it was a Saturday, she reasoned. It was January. It was cold.

At the point where she glanced to her left, she had a clear view along the High Street, all the way to the Green Man pub at the north end of the village. There was a Royal Mail van parked at the kerb up by the church, facing towards her. She vaguely noticed the rear doors were open. If there was a body, it was lying in the road just beyond the van, only the feet visible.

Telling herself she must be mistaken, Julia entered the shop.

A bell rang as she stepped inside. The air was deliciously warm, with an aroma that always prompted a smile: a cosy blend of bread rolls, sliced ham, newsprint and mailbags. The kind of smell you'd like to bottle for nostalgia. *Essence of village store.*

The shopkeeper, Moira Beaumont, was a small twitchy woman in her fifties. She pulled her baggy cardigan together in response to the draught.

'Hello, love. You're an early bird. Don't tell me you stayed overnight?'

Julia's curt shake of her head disguised a shudder. 'I've just driven here,' she said, adding, 'I can't keep putting it off.'

Moira nodded sadly. 'It's Lewes where you live, isn't it?' She spoke as though the county town was some distant exotic locale, when in fact it was less than ten miles away. But then Chilton was the sort of place where people still returned from Brighton, outraged by beggars in the street and the brazen display of homosexual love.

Julia browsed the newspapers for a minute, aware of Moira's sly scrutiny. Trying to spot a crack in the facade. A couple of weeks ago

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it would have bothered her, but she was used to it by now. All things considered, she felt she was coping pretty well.

*So why the body in the street?* her subconscious piped up. Hallucinations were hardly a sign of robust mental health.

Pushing the thought aside, she picked up the *Guardian*, a carton of semi-skimmed milk and on impulse a packet of chocolate biscuits. She had a long and difficult day ahead: she deserved a treat.

When she reached the counter Moira leaned over and grasped her hand. Even before she spoke, Julia knew she was going to use the gentle hushed tone that people reserve for the recently bereaved.

'I just want to say, I'm dreadfully sorry for what happened. They were such a lovely couple.'

Julia swallowed and nodded tersely. She had learned just how easily such expressions of sympathy could unlock the grief.

'Is your brother not coming to help clear the house?' Moira asked, taking Julia's five-pound note and prodding at the till.

'He offered, but it seems ridiculous when he's up in Cheshire.'

'I suppose so. What a shame you and Peter aren't still together,' said Moira, blithely unaware of her tactlessness. 'I know your mother always thought you were made for each other.'

'So did I,' said Julia. *Another subject she was keen to avoid.*

'But you've a new feller now, haven't you? I can't remember his name . . .'

'Steve.'

'That's it. Steve.' Moira gave a rather disdainful sniff. Probably remembering Mum's verdict on him, Julia thought.

'I'm not sure it's got much future, to be honest,' she said.

Moira clicked her tongue. 'You've really been in the wars, haven't you?' There was a moment when Julia felt sure she was going to say something about bad news coming in threes, but perhaps thought better of it. Instead she puffed out a breath. 'I'd give you a hand myself, but Len's away to Leicester to watch the football. Time off for good behaviour,' she added wryly.

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Julia grinned. 'I'll be fine. And if I don't get it finished today . . . well, there's no great hurry.'

'You'll feel better when it's done, believe me.' Moira pressed her hands together as if in prayer. 'In my experience, it's the most unexpected things that can catch you out. If they do, you know where to find me.'

'Thanks.' Julia propped the biscuits under her arm and picked up the milk. For the sake of conversation, she said, 'Quiet round here this morning.'

Moira took a moment to consider. 'I suppose it is. I had a couple of folk in when I opened at seven, Mrs Collins and Tom Bradbury with those ruddy dogs of his. But it's freezing out there. I bet everyone's decided to stay in bed, lucky beggars.'

'I expect that's it,' Julia agreed.

When she reached the door, Moira called, 'Keep in touch, won't you? Don't be a stranger!'

Julia trapped the door with her foot and turned back, smiling. At that moment, with her own heart weighing so heavily, she would never have believed Moira had less than twenty minutes to live.

Leaving the shop, her attention was caught by a poster in the window of the house opposite. Another of Philip Walker's campaigns, she guessed from the headline in bold four-inch letters. Because of what was to happen next, the words would be forever imprinted on her memory.

**This is OUR village!  
Don't let them DESTROY IT!!**

She snorted. Walker was the outspoken leader of a group of local activists, waging a war against developers seeking to expand the village. Probably a futile endeavour, if history was any judge, but Julia had a sneaking sympathy for them. If nothing else, her parents had been enthusiastic supporters of the cause.

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And then, unable to resist the nagging voice of her subconscious, she turned to look north once again. She had to know if she had imagined it.

There was still no sign of activity in the village. The Royal Mail van remained in place. The rear doors were definitely open. And the body still lay behind the van, feet angled up on the pavement.

Oh Christ.

Shielding her eyes against the low morning sun, she squinted and took a few paces forward. She could feel her mouth going dry, her heart speeding up. She pictured herself slowly climbing the stairs in her parents' cottage. She couldn't go through that again, couldn't expose herself to—

*And you can't let him die*, a stronger voice spoke up. *He might have had a heart attack or a stroke. He might be epileptic.* Her knowledge of first aid was only rudimentary, but she could at least raise the alarm and keep him warm.

Her confidence wavered as she drew near the van. It looked as though he'd collapsed and rolled partly beneath the rear doors. A bundle of letters lay in the gutter, the breeze not quite strong enough to tease them free of the rubber band that restrained them.

*Maybe a hit-and-run*, she wondered, steeling herself for an unpleasant sight.

But it was far worse than a hit-and-run. The postman had gunshot wounds to his head and chest. One eye was missing, and the other stared lifelessly at her, wide with surprise that this could happen in such a privileged enclave of Sussex. The van was splattered with blood and brain and skull fragments.

Julia gasped and dropped her milk. The carton split open and leaked across the pavement, mixing with the blood in the gutter.

## Two

Must have been a robbery, she thought. She peered into the back of the van, but it told her nothing. There were several grey sacks of mail, but plenty of space where other sacks might have lain.

The blood on the road was fresh, glistening like resin in the sunshine. That meant it had happened recently. She hadn't seen or heard any vehicles, so the killer must have escaped on foot.

The implication of this wasn't lost on Julia. She turned slowly, searching for signs of anything else out of place.

The village was roughly rectangular, with the cottages she'd just passed forming the eastern flank from the shop up to the sturdy Norman church of St Mary. Next to the church was the Rectory, and then the Green Man, a handsome Tudor inn. Then Hurst Lane, a private road which ran north for half a mile to Chilton Manor and Hurst Farm.

On the other side of the lane was the Old Schoolhouse, home to NIMBY activist Philip Walker. After that came Arundel Crescent, a line of grand Georgian houses which ran down the western flank and gave way to another terrace of smaller homes, ending opposite the shop back at the southern tip.

Chilton's centrepiece was the village green, complete with pond and a magnificent yew tree said to be over six hundred years old. The pond was partially frozen, and a couple of seagulls paced the perimeter,

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jostling smaller birds like hooligans on a day trip. They were the only living things in sight.

It's too quiet, Julia thought. Eight o'clock on a Saturday, someone should be out here, walking their dog, going shopping, ferrying the kids to football. Her brother and his wife were like a full-time taxi service for their children at the weekend. And surely someone would have heard gunshots and come out to investigate?

Something's very wrong.

Because she'd only intended to pop to the shop, she had left her handbag and mobile phone in the car, along with the cardboard boxes and plastic sacks for packing up her parents' belongings. Not that her mobile would have helped, she remembered. The village action group had fought off plans for a phone mast. She would have to find a land-line.

*Or you could walk away*, a tiny, shameful voice spoke up. The postman's dead. You can't help him. Just turn round and go back to your car. It doesn't have to be your problem.

For a moment she might have succumbed. How wonderful to get in her Mini, start the engine and drive away. She'd been through enough trauma lately. Let someone else deal with this.

Then she imagined how her parents would have regarded such cowardice. She didn't really believe in an afterlife, but since their deaths she'd often envisaged them watching over her, judging her or passing comment on her choices and decisions. Now they would expect her to do whatever she could to help.

She ran on shaky legs to the nearest house, in the terrace next to the churchyard. The garden gate creaked as she opened it, underscoring the oppressive silence of the morning. The front door was painted a cheery red, with a small handwritten sign at eye level: *Doorbell not working. Please knock.*

So she did. Leaning close to the door, she could hear music playing inside: something melodic, with a Sixties twang.

There was no response. She knocked again, thumping the door

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hard enough to rattle the hinges. 'Please!' she called. 'It's an emergency!'

Her cry provoked mournful cawing from the rooks in the trees around the church. Julia felt her skin crawl and cast an anxious glance over her shoulder, suddenly convinced she was being watched. Had she sensed movement in Hurst Lane?

She waited a few more seconds, debating whether to run back to the shop. She knew Moira was a nervy creature, and certainly not the coolest of heads in a crisis. Besides, the postman might be a friend of hers. Better to spare her than if she could.

St Mary's was a safer bet. Someone was bound to be up and about by now. And if not, there might at least be a phone.

The churchyard was enclosed by a waist-high wall of Sussex flint. She passed through the lych gate and followed the gravel path to the entrance porch. Her route was lined by weathered gravestones, listing at drunken angles.

To her relief, one of the heavy oak doors was open. She stepped into the vestibule and saw another of Philip Walker's posters on the noticeboard, alongside lists of services, cleaning rotas, an advert for a jumble sale.

Pushing through a second set of doors, she entered the nave and immediately felt calmed by the soft light and atmosphere of peaceful reflection. The air smelled of dust and damp stone. And possibly something else, but she refused to acknowledge it.

A wave of dizziness swept over her. She grabbed the back of a pew and eased herself down. Leaning forward, she rested her head against the pew in front, her hair falling across her face like a fan. Slowly the other smell permeated her senses: something sharp and foul and metallic.

This is no good, she told herself. You have to find a phone.

She repressed an urge to vomit, made herself breathe through her mouth, slowly and deeply. It was at the mid-point, the breath suspended in her lungs, when she heard it.

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A soft, scrabbling sound. Something moving on the ancient stone floor in front of the pews. Quiet, stealthy movement.

She sat upright, eyes locked on the point near the altar where the noise had originated. Every muscle was rigid with terror. She couldn't even release her breath.

If the killer was here, lying in wait, she would never outrun him. She would never get out in time.

It was a simple, inescapable fact. If he was inside the church, then she was already dead.

## Three

She heard it again. A scraping noise, a heel scuffing over stone.

Then a man's voice. Very weak, barely intelligible.

He said: 'Please . . .'

Then: 'Uhh.'

It was such a distinct exhalation, Julia immediately understood what it meant. The man who made that noise had just lost his life, not twenty feet from where she was sitting, paralysed with fear. She had sat and heard a man die and done nothing.

She began to shake. She felt she might be going mad, and for a few seconds it was almost a temptation. In shedding her sanity she could shrug off all responsibility along with it.

Then the moment passed, and she rose to her feet and approached the front of the church. She tried not to remember how the postman had looked. Tried not to think about what she would see this time.

There were two bodies, lying several feet apart in the space between the front pew and the chancel. The vicar was curled in a foetal position, one hand reaching for the altar as though in a plea for clemency. He'd been shot several times in the stomach. There was a smear of blood on the floor where he had dragged himself towards the aisle.

His eyes were open, staring at Julia with sorrowful reproach. *You didn't help*, he might have been saying. *You heard me and you didn't help.*

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A few feet beyond him was the body of a heavy grey-haired woman in sweat pants and a blue fleece. She'd been shot in the back of the head. The resulting debris lay around her like old porridge. A tin of Pledge rested at her side, a blood-speckled yellow duster still gripped in her hand.

Julia backed away. Her imagination hardly dared to conclude what was happening here. Paradoxically, the words that leapt into her head made no sense, and yet they made perfect sense.

This wasn't a robbery. It was a massacre.

Slowly she came back to the present, aware that a few minutes had passed. She had no recollection of returning to one of the pews, but that was where she found herself. She was shivering, clutching herself to try and stop the trembling.

Visions flooded her mind: a grisly panorama of the bodies she had seen, jumbled together with news footage of Hungerford, Port Arthur, Dunblane. The perpetrator invariably male, white, a troubled loner nursing real or imagined grievances in a cauldron of paranoia.

She imagined him walking from house to house, knocking quietly. The villagers readily opening their front doors, expecting to greet a neighbour or perhaps the postman with a parcel. And instead, he was killing them all. Wiping out an entire community.

*Moira.*

It was the jolt Julia needed, the adrenalin rush like a blow to the stomach. She jumped up and quickly checked the vestry, then a small office next to it, but there was no phone. She knew she couldn't remain in the church, but leaving by the main entrance was too risky.

Instead she made for the side door in the east chancel. It meant passing the bodies of the vicar and the cleaner, but she forced herself to do it. She had to keep moving, had to stay focused.

The heavy door creaked open, sounding horrifically loud. She stepped out, blinking in the bright sunshine, and followed the path diagonally across the churchyard. A gate in the wall led to a footpath that ran behind the cottages, parallel to the High Street.

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She was level with the first house, the one she'd tried earlier, when she noticed the back door was ajar. She'd been intending to make straight for the shop, but now she stopped. She could phone the police from here.

There was a low fence at the back of the property, easily vaulted. The garden was a narrow strip of turf, strewn with partially deflated footballs and a plastic cricket set. There was a soiled cat litter tray by the door.

Julia could hear the radio playing in the kitchen, the mindless chatter of a DJ. She stepped inside and called, 'Hello? I need to use the phone. Is anyone there?'

No one answered, but the sound of shifting crockery made her jump.

The dishwasher. According to the display, it had eight minutes left to run. There was a mug of herbal tea on the worktop. Julia felt it with the back of her hand. Still warm.

Someone should be here.

She crept into the narrow hallway. The door to the living room was open. She spotted the phone and the bodies simultaneously.

A young woman in a towelling dressing gown was sprawled over her child, a small boy with glorious white-blond hair. Playmobil fire trucks and figures were scattered around them. There was blood everywhere. The woman had obviously tried to shield her son, and then covered his eyes with her hand. She couldn't stop him dying, but at least she could make sure he didn't see it happen.

Julia wobbled again. Felt she was breaking apart. *No one would blame me*, she thought.

Turning away, she snatched the phone from its perch on the wall. There was no dialling tone. She stabbed the call button. Listened. Stabbed it again. Nothing.

The phone was dead. It couldn't be coincidence. It was part of the plan.

Movement outside caught her attention. She took a cautious step

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towards the window. Across the green, a door had opened in Arundel Crescent, causing a flash of reflected sunlight. The man who emerged was short and stocky, with spiky straw-coloured hair, wearing a denim jacket and camouflage trousers. He held a pistol in one hand, and there was a shotgun slung over his shoulder.

He closed the door behind him, then stopped and slowly surveyed the scene. For a moment he seemed to be staring right at Julia. When he smiled, she thought her heart would stop beating.

Then she realised he was looking at the postman's body. Admiring his handiwork.

He strode away, disappearing behind the massive yew tree. The direction he was taking would lead him to the shop.

In desperation Julia tried the phone again, but she knew it was hopeless. The village was cut off from the rest of the world, just as the killer intended.

She was on her own.

She ran back through the kitchen. On the radio the Rolling Stones seemed to be mocking her: *You can't always get what you want*. The words echoed in her head as she retraced her steps through the garden. Again she thought of her parents. She hoped they would be proud of her for overcoming the urge to flee.

She sprinted towards the shop, praying she would make it in time. The path was a mixture of gravel, earth and weeds, and the crunch of her pounding feet seemed to reverberate around the village.

The shop backed on to a yard containing several wheelie bins, a stack of cardboard boxes and an old plastic crate. There were two small opaque windows, protected by metal grilles. The back door was solid timber and couldn't be opened from the outside.

Julia knocked as loudly as she dared. Another bout of giddiness made her sway on her feet. Black spots danced in front of her eyes. Her heart was thudding so loudly she thought it would explode from her chest.

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Then a voice: 'Who's there?'

Julia forced herself upright. 'Moira, it's Julia Trent. Open the door.'

She feared Moira might argue, or tell her to come round the front, but she heard the thud of a bolt being drawn back. The door opened and Moira peered out, reacting with alarm at the sight of Julia's face.

'Oh my word. What's happened, love?'

Julia tried to speak but was overcome by a flood of nausea. Her chest heaved and she turned away, clutching her stomach and spitting bile on to the dusty cement.

'You poor dear,' Moira said. 'Come on, let's get you indoors.'

Julia nodded, turned back and stepped into the stockroom. Moira stroked her arm. 'You've had a shock. I told you it could happen, didn't I?'

Julia tried to put her right but could only stammer, 'No, I . . . I've g-got . . .'

Moira shushed her. 'Don't try and tell me yet. Just rest a minute.' There was a clipboard lying on an old chair in the corner of the room. Moira picked it up and dragged the chair towards Julia, causing a bell to ring from somewhere. A *eureka!* moment, Julia thought, and wondered if she had finally lost her mind.

Moira said, 'Here, sit yourself down while I pop the kettle on.'

Julia frowned. Why would moving a chair cause a bell to ring?

Then she understood, but panic overwhelmed her, short-circuiting her brain. She knew what she had to say and do, but her body wouldn't respond.

Some sort of noise must have emerged from her throat, for Moira turned towards her in a strange kind of slow motion. At the same time Julia had a clear line of sight through the shop. The man with spiky hair was walking towards the counter. She saw he was young, no more than mid-twenties. He had very pale eyes and an uneven growth of bristles on his chin.

He saw her and smiled. His teeth were yellow and crooked, with a distinctive left canine jutting out like a vampire's fang. He raised

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the gun and Julia noticed the thick cylinder attached to the barrel. A silencer. That's why no one had heard gunshots.

Maira was speaking again, making clucking noises of sympathy. She noticed Julia's terrified gaze and turned to see what had provoked it. There was a spitting noise and a spray of blood blew from her neck. Maira's eyes widened, her mouth a perfect circle of surprise as she toppled forward.

Another *phutt* and Julia felt the bullet brush past her hair, thudding into the doorframe behind her. Then there was a moment where Maira's falling body obscured her view of the killer. A third shot hit the shopkeeper as she fell, and by then Julia's survival instinct had kicked in.

She leapt out of the stockroom, dragging the door shut behind her. Grabbed one of the wheelie bins and pulled it across the door. It wasn't heavy enough to prevent him getting out, but it might gain her a few seconds. But which way should she go?

She had two options. Back up the lane towards the church, or along the alley by the side of the shop and rejoin the main road. That was the one she favoured. Once on the High Street she could make a run for her car. Fifty or sixty yards, she'd cover that in no time.

It was the wrong choice. She knew it when she heard the bell ring again, but by then it was too late. She was only yards from the main road, running too fast to stop. Her forward momentum sent her skidding on to the narrow pavement just as the killer emerged from the shop.

He had outguessed her. Then she registered his surprise and realised it was worse than that. He'd just been lucky. Sometimes that's all it came down to, she thought. He'd struck it lucky. She hadn't.

They stood a couple of feet apart, facing each other. There was no way she could escape. This was the end.

She stuck out her jaw and tried to look defiant. She wasn't going to beg for her life. In any case, she didn't trust herself to speak.

The killer made a dry snickering noise that brought to mind some

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half-remembered cartoon character. He examined her for a long second, his attention lingering on her body. Her jeans and jacket couldn't disguise the fact that she was tall, slim, shapely.

Finally he met her gaze, and seemed to come to a decision. His pale eyes gleamed. His smile hinted at the pleasures of anticipation, and she knew all too well what that meant. He liked what he saw. He wasn't going to kill her straight away.

She understood this perhaps half a second before he spoke.

A single word in a low, guttural whisper.

'Run.'