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Dark Blood

Written by Stuart MacBride

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STUART MACBRIDE

Dark Blood

HARPER

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I

Run. Don't stop. Keep moving. . .

The big, fat moon makes everything black and white. Frost and shadow. Life and death.

Steve stumbles. The churned-up mud's solid – up and down like a roller-coaster. One foot catches the edge of a rock-hard peak, and he goes sprawling across the icy ground. Tries not to cry out as his arm screams sharp-edged pain.

Somewhere in the darkness a dog barks. Big dog. Fucking scary big dog. You know? Rottweiler, Doberman: some bastard like that. Big and black, with thousands of teeth. Coming after him.

'Fuck . . .' The word disappears into the night sky on a cloud of white breath.

Big dog.

He scrambles upright; stands there, trying to get his balance. Feeling sick. Far too much whisky. Makes everything blurry and warm, even though it's so cold out here his fingers ache with it. Makes the world smell like it's burning.

Steve lurches forward, arm clutched to his chest, hugging

the shadows along the edge of the building site. Trees blocking the searchlight moon.

With any luck no one'll see the trail of blood he's leaving. . .

The dog barks again. Closer.

But then his luck's always been for shit.

Steve speeds up. Lurch, stumble, struggle.

His left foot cracks through an ice-topped puddle, and he stops. Holding his breath.

Steve turns, looking back towards the site office. Torches sweep the muddy ground, muffled voices coming this way. That fucking dog yammering and yowling, leading them on.

Keep going.

Keep moving.

One foot in front of the other.

Follow the eight-foot-high fence: chainlink and barbed wire, skirting the building site.

This time when he trips he goes head-first into a ditch, slithering down the bank, branches snapping, pain ripping through his arm, something raking his cheek with thorny claws. A shatter of ice, and then water so cold it's like being punched in the face again.

He splutters to the surface of the little stream. It's not deep but it's freezing. He thrashes against the brambles, pulling himself out of the water. Shivers like he's got a jackhammer jammed up his arse. Teeth chattering hard enough to chip the enamel.

The dog barks again. Definitely closer now. Probably let the damn thing off its lead. Go on, you dirty bugger, find Steve and tear his thieving, double-crossing throat out.

Steve slumps back against the bank, trying not to cry, frigid water soaking his trousers, jacket, socks, every-fucking-thing. Why do these Scottish bastards call it a burn when it's so fucking *cold*?

Rest. Just for a minute. Rest in the darkness, in the safety of the ditch where no one can see him. Not really so bad. Get used to the cold after a while.

Just close his eyes for a second. Catch his breath.

Rest for a moment. . .

And the next time he opens his eyes something's looking right back at him. A big, muscular shape in the darkness, breath steaming out between sharp teeth. Black coat shining in the moonlight.

Nice doggy.

It barks, lurching forward and back with every terrifying sound, spittle flying everywhere.

Oh Jesus fuck.

Knife. There's a Stanley knife in his pocket, but his frozen, sausage fingers aren't working. They fumble against his torn jacket. Swearing. Tears. Cold. GET THE FUCKING KNIFE!

And then he hears the voice: 'Fuckin' hell, Mauser, this better no' be another bloody rabbit.' Footsteps crunching through frozen grass.

Steve drags the Stanley knife out, holds it in his trembling hand, trying to press the metal slider down. Come on, come on, come on.

And then a man joins the monster. The moon's behind him, hiding his face, making him a thing of darkness that breathes brimstone smoke into the sudden silence. 'Hey Steve,' he says. 'Where you goin', man? We're only just gettin' started. . .'

2

'Inspector?' A shivering constable grabbed the blue-and-white 'POLICE' tape, stretching it up and out of the way. 'They're over there, sir.'

Logan McRae plipped the locks on his mud-spattered Audi, then ducked under the tape and slithered his way across the pale sand, making for the knot of figures gathered outside the SOC tent. It sat between a pair of massive sand dunes, the white plastic sheeting flapping in the frigid wind that whistled in off the North Sea. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, but the low sun hadn't made it over the crest of jagged pampas grass yet, leaving the crime scene shrouded in deep blue shadow.

Balmedie Beach wasn't exactly the Costa Del Sol at the best of times, but at half ten on a cold January morning it could freeze the nipples off a polar bear. Aberdeen – two degrees north of Moscow.

If the city had a zoo they'd have to give the penguins bobble hats in the winter.

'Inspector! Inspector McRae!' An Identification Bureau technician, dressed in the obligatory white oversuit and blue plastic booties, waved him over. 'Same as all the others, sir. You were right.'

Brilliant – the one time he actually wanted to be proven wrong.

Logan signed in with the Crime Scene Manager, then struggled his way into an SOC suit. It fought him all the way, the wind snatching at the legs and sleeves, trying to help it escape. ‘Pathologist?’

‘Inside, sir. Photographs and samples are done, so just give us a nod when you want us to remove. . .’ He pointed at what Logan knew was lurking in the tent. ‘You know. . .’

The whole structure creaked and juddered, the wind moaning through the joints as Logan stepped inside. They’d set up a couple of arc lights, the harsh white glare bouncing back off the sand, making Logan’s breath steam as he squatted down beside the pathologist.

She looked up at him, her eyes sparkling above the mask that covered her nose and mouth. Then back down at the head, lying on its side in the pale sand.

It was a woman: early twenties; eyes sunken and glassy; ginger hair bleached almost blonde by the arc lights; freckles dark against her porcelain skin; mouth open. A little drift of sand had built up behind her teeth, something golden glittering away in the depths. Just like the other six.

‘How did you know?’ The pathologist dug the severed head out of the sand. ‘She was right where you said she’d be.’

Logan watched them ease Lucy’s head into a clear plastic evidence pouch, seal, and label it. One more to add to the collection in the mortuary.

‘Time of death?’

Doctor Isobel McAllister snapped off her blue nitrile gloves, removed her mask, and peeled back the hood of her SOC suit, letting her long, dark hair tumble over her shoulders. ‘You know I can’t tell you that.’

Logan opened his mouth to say something, then shut it

as Isobel placed a hand against his chest. Her touch was hot in the cold tent.

She stared up into his eyes. 'I've missed you—'

'Isobel, I—'

'Oh no you don't!' One of the IB techs marched over: Samantha, scarlet hair painfully bright in the harsh lighting. She unzipped her suit, exposing a swell of pale cleavage surrounded by tattoos. 'He's mine. Aren't you Logan?'

Isobel bit her bottom lip. Looked away. 'Oh. I'm sorry, I didn't know.'

'But maybe. . .' Samantha stepped up close and ran her fingertips across Isobel's cheek. 'Maybe I'll let you share.'

Pain jagged across Logan's ribs. 'Ow, what was—'

'Maybe we can all do something . . . *special* together.'

'I'd like that.' Isobel licked her blood-red lips and cupped one of Samantha's breasts. 'I'd like that a – Stop sodding snoring!'

'Mmmph. . .?' Detective Sergeant Logan McRae struggled upright in his seat. 'I'm awake. I'm awake.' Cold. Dark. A lung-rattling cough shook his body, ending with a shiver. 'God. . .' Sniff. He ran his hands across his face, feeling the stubble rasp. 'What time is it?'

DI Steel was almost invisible in the darkness, but he could hear her shifting in the passenger seat of his manky brown Fiat. 'You were snoring.'

The inspector stabbed her thumb on the button for the cigarette lighter, waited for it to pop up, then pulled it out of the dashboard and sparked up a Silk Cut. The orange glow turned her face into a topographical map of wrinkles and shadow. Train-wreck hair hidden beneath a furry hat.

'Bloody freezing. . .' Logan peered at the fogged-up wind-screen, then cleared a porthole with his sleeve, looking out at the moonlit countryside. They'd parked down a small lane

overlooking a sprawling building site, just off the A90 – Aberdeen to Ellon road. He yawned. ‘Need a pee.’

‘Shouldn’t have drunk all that coffee then, should you?’

‘Knew he wouldn’t show.’

‘I mean, what sort of idiot takes decaf on a stakeout?’

‘So where is he then?’

‘If I knew that, I wouldn’t be sitting here in this crappy car listening to your bloody snoring, would I?’

‘Fine, be like that.’ Logan helped himself to one of the inspector’s cigarettes, lighting it with a Zippo as he climbed out into the freezing night.

‘Close the sodding door!’

SLAM.

He stood there for a second, shivering, drew in a deep lungful of smoke, then started down the lane towards a clump of trees. The ground crackled beneath his feet, grass coated in a thick rime of frost, everything turned monochrome in the light of a nearly full moon. Bright as day.

Logan stepped off the lane and into the undergrowth.

God it was cold. Bloody Steel and her bloody CHIS. What was the point of having a Covert Human Intelligence Source if the sodding ‘Source’ was so ‘Covert’ you couldn’t bloody see him?

Zip, rummage, grimace . . . ahhhhh. Oh yeah . . . that was better.

He stood there, in a growing cloud of bitter-sweet steam, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. Twelve days straight without a single day off. No wonder he was knackered.

You could see the whole development from here: a swathe of frozen mud surrounded by chainlink fencing; piles of bulldozed earth; a cluster of pale concrete foundations. Twenty or thirty houses looked almost finished, another half dozen were at the scaffolding and brick stage. Eventually there’d

be four hundred of the damn things, courtesy McLennan Homes. Nasty, boxy, rabbit hutches for people with more money than sense.

Christ knew how the bastard got planning permission.

The site office was a little Portakabin and as Logan watched, someone opened the door spilling pale yellow light across the churned-up earth. A dog barked. The sound of a radio. Then the door swung shut and the light was gone, replaced by the faint circle of a torch, working its way around the perimeter fence. You'd have to be desperate: taking a night watchman's job on a building site in the middle of winter. Knowing that if anything went missing Malcolm McLennan would have your balls.

Literally.

Logan zipped himself up then hurried back to the car, out of the cold. He clunked the door shut behind him. 'Baltic out there. . .' He cranked the key in the ignition and turned the heater up full, holding his hands over the vents.

DI Steel sat and scowled at the windscreen as it started to clear. 'Sod this, he's two hours late. I'm no' bugging about any longer; some of us got pregnant wives to get home to.'

Logan wrestled the gearstick into reverse, getting a loud grinding noise, then turned in his seat and peered out of the rear window, navigating by the light of the moon. The manky Fiat shuddered backwards up the lane. 'Told you he wasn't going to show.'

'Blah, blah, blah.'

'I'm just saying: no one's daft enough to rat out Malk the Knife.' Logan backed out onto the slip road, flicked on the headlights, then stuck his foot down. Hoping for a bit of wheel-spin, getting nothing but a dull groan as the car slowly dragged its rusty backside towards fifty.

'Stop past Asda on the way home, we're out of ice-cream.'

'In this weather?'

'Cravings. Susan wants double chocolate chip, and cheese Doritos. In the same bowl. And before you say anything, I know: I have to watch her eating it.' Steel scooted down in her seat. 'Doesn't this thing go any faster?'

'No.'

They sat in silence as the moonlit countryside rumbled past. Fields of frost-whitened grass, ploughed up earth, miserable-looking sheep, big round bales of hay wrapped in black plastic.

Logan slowed for the roundabout on the outskirts of Bridge of Don. 'Fancy a pint – celebrate my *finally* getting some time off? Dodgy Pete's'll still be open.'

'Pregnant wife, remember?' Steel pulled out her cigarettes again. 'And I want you back at the ranch seven o'clock Thursday morning, bright eyed and bushy tailed. Don't want Mr Knox thinking we're no' pleased to see him, do we? Christ knows what the nasty wee sod would get up to.'