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Birthdays for the Dead

Written by Stuart MacBride

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**STUART
MACBRIDE**
Birthdays for
the Dead



HarperCollins *Publishers*

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please...

1

Flash. It's like an explosion going off in her head, knives in her eyes, broken glass in her brain. Then darkness. She rocks back in the seat; the wood creaks under her.

Blink. Blink. A hot blue-and-orange glow painted across the inside of her eyelids. Tears rolling down her dirty cheeks.

Please...

She drags a shuddering breath through her nose, wet with snot. The smell of dirt and bitter-onion sweat, dust, and something pissy – like when that mouse got trapped behind the cooker. A little furry body hidden in darkness, going rancid with mould, stinking of rotting sausages, roasting every time they turned the oven on.

Please... Her mouth makes the word behind the gag of sticky tape, but all that comes out is a muffled moan. Her shoulders ache, both arms twisted behind her back, wrists and ankles stinging from the cable-ties that hold her to the hard wooden chair.

She throws her head back and blinks at the ceiling. The room fades back in: bare wooden joists stained almost black; spider webs; a neon strip-light, buzzing like a wasp trapped in a glass. Walls smeared with filth. A huge camera mounted on a tripod.

Then the noise. He's singing 'Happy Birthday to You', the words coming out all broken and hesitant, like he's scared to get them wrong.

This is fucked up. Completely fucking fucked up. It's not even her birthday yet: not for four more days...

Another shuddering breath.

It can't be happening. It's a mistake.

She blinks the tears from her eyes and stares into the corner. He's getting to the big finale, head down as he mumbles out the words. Only it's not her name he sings, it's someone else: Andrea.

Oh thank God.

He'll get it, right? That it's a mistake? She's not supposed to be here: *Andrea's* supposed to be here. Andrea's supposed to be the one tied to a chair in a manky little room full of dirt and spiders and the smell of dying mice. He'll understand.

She tries to tell him, but the gag turns everything into grunts and nonsense.

She's not Andrea.

She shouldn't be here.

He stands behind the camera again, clears his throat a couple of times, takes a deep breath, licks his lips. His voice sounds like one of them kids' TV presenters: 'Say "cheese"! Another flash, filling her eyes with burning white dots.

It's a mistake. He has to *see* that – he's got the wrong girl, he has to let her go.

She blinks. Please. This isn't *fair*.

He comes out from behind the camera and rubs a hand across his eyes. Stares at his shoes for a bit. Another deep breath. 'Presents for the Birthday Girl!' He thumps a battered old toolkit down onto the creaky wooden table next to her chair. The table's spattered with brown stains. Like someone spilled their Ribena years ago.

It's not Ribena.

Her mouth tightens behind the gag, tears make the room

blur. Air catches in her throat turning everything into short, jagged, trembling sobs.

She's not Andrea. It's all a mistake.

'I got...' A pause while he shuffles his feet. 'I've got something *special* ... just for you, Andrea.' He opens the toolkit and takes out a pair of pliers. Their rusty metal teeth shine in the gloom.

He doesn't look at her, hunches his shoulders, puffs out his cheeks like he's going to puke, scrubs a hand across his mouth. Tries for that barely there smile again. 'You ready?'

sometimes it's better not to know

Monday 14th November

2

Oldcastle FM droned out of the radio on the kitchen work surface.

'...wasn't that grooooooooooovy? It's eight twenty-five and you're listening to Sensational Steve's Breakfast Drive-Time Bonanza!'
A grating honk, like an old-fashioned car horn.

I counted out thirty-five quid in tens and fives onto the reminder notice from the Post Office, then dug in my pocket and made up the balance in change. Forty pounds eighty-five pence. Enough to keep Rebecca's mail being redirected into my PO Box for another year.

This week's haul was a Next catalogue, three charity begging letters, and the Royal Bank trying to flog her a credit card. I dumped the lot in the bin. Everything except for the birthday card.

A plain white envelope with a second-class stamp and a stick-on address label:

Rebecca Henderson
19 Rowan Drive,
Blackwall Hill,
Oldcastle.
OC15 3BZ

It'd been done on a typewriter, not a laser printer, the words hammered into the paper, the letter 'e' a little out of line with everything else. Just like all the others.

The kettle rattled to a boil, filling the air with steam.

I took a tea towel to the window, making a gap in the condensation, sending droplets running down the glass to pool on the mould-blackened wooden frame.

Outside, the back garden was a tangle of jagged silhouettes – the sun a smear of fire on the horizon, painting Kingsmeath with gold and shadows. Grey-harled council houses, pantiles jaundiced with lichen; the glistening slate roofs of the tenements; a primary school surrounded by chain-link fencing – squat and dour, its windows glowing.

'Haha! Right, it's Straitjacket Sweepstakes time and Christine Murphy thinks the answer is "Acute Polymorphic Psychotic Disorder".' An electronic quack. *'Looks like the voices in your head got it wrong, Christine: better luck next time.'*

The cigar box was rough beneath my fingertips. A little bit bigger than an old-fashioned VHS case, decorated by someone only just old enough to be trusted with round-nosed scissors and glue. Most of the sequins had fallen off years ago, and the glitter looked more like grit than anything else, but it was the thought that counted. The perfect size for storing home-made birthday cards.

I opened the lid. The woody smell of old cigars fought against the kitchen's mildew fug and whatever the hell was wrong with the drains.

Last year's card sat on top of the little pile: 'HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!!' scrawled above a Polaroid photograph – a square picture set into a white plastic rectangle. Thing was virtually an antique, Polaroid didn't even make the film-stock any more. The number '4' was scratched into the top-left corner.

I picked up the latest envelope, eased a kitchen knife under the flap, and tore straight along the fold, then pulled out the contents. A flurry of dark flakes fell onto the work surface

– that was new. They smelled of rust. Some hit the edge of the tea towel, making tiny red blooms as they soaked into the damp fabric.

Oh God...

This year's photo was mounted on plain white card. My little girl. Rebecca. Tied to a chair in a basement somewhere. She was... He'd taken her clothes.

I closed my eyes for a moment, knuckles aching, teeth clamped hard enough to make my ears ring. Bastard. Fucking, bloody *bastard*.

'Stick with us folks 'cos we've got another heeee-larious wind-up call after the news, but first it's a golden oldie: Tammy Wynette and her crash-helmet hairdo, with "Stand by Your Man". Good advice there, ladies.' Another comedy horn noise.

Rebecca's pale skin was smeared with blood, slashed and burned and bruised, eyes wide, screaming behind a duct-tape gag. '5' scratched into the corner of the picture.

Five years since she disappeared. Five years since the bastard tortured her to death and took photos to prove it. Five birthday cards, each one worse than the last.

The toast popped up, filling the kitchen with the smell of burnt bread.

Deep breaths. Deep breaths.

I lowered card number five into the box, on top of all the others. Closed the lid.

Bastard...

She would've been eighteen today.

I scraped the blackened toast over the sink as Tammy got into her stride. The butter turned yellow-grey as I spread it with the same knife. Two slices of plastic cheese from the fridge, washed down with milky tea and a couple of anti-inflammatories. Chewing. Trying to avoid the two loose teeth on the top left, the skin tight across my cheek – swollen and bruised. Scowling out through the window's new clean patch.

Light flashed off the King's River as the sun finally made

it up over the hills, turning Oldcastle into a patchwork of blues and orange. In the middle distance, Castle Hill loomed over the city – a thick blade of granite with a sheer cliff on one side, steep winding cobbled streets on the other. Victorian sandstone buildings stained the colour of dried blood. The castle’s crumbling fortifications looked like broken teeth, perched right at the top.

That was the thing about living here – you could get up every morning and look out across the crumbling concrete boxes of your crappy council estate, at all the pretty parts of Oldcastle. Have it ground in your face every day: that no matter how long you spent staring out at the nice bits, you were still stuck in bloody Kingsmeath.

She would’ve been eighteen.

I spread the tea towel out on the work surface, then pulled the plastic ice-cube tray out from the fridge’s freezer compartment. Gritted my teeth, and twisted. The ice cracked and groaned, a better soundtrack to my aching fingers than Tammy Bloody Wynette.

Ice cubes tumbled into the middle of the tea towel. I folded it up into a cosh, then battered it off the worktop a few times. Fished a used teabag out of the sink and made a fresh cup in a clean mug – laced it with four sugars and a splash of milk – tucked the cigar box under my arm, then took everything through to the living room.

The figure on the couch was huddled beneath an unzipped sleeping bag. I hauled the curtains open.

‘Come on you lazy wee shite: up.’

Parker groaned. His face was a mess: eyes swollen and purple; a nose that would never be straight again; split lips; a huge bruise on his cheek. He’d bled during the night, staining the sleeping bag. ‘Mmmnnnnffff...’

One eye opened. What should have been white was vivid red, the pupil dilated. ‘Mmmnnnnfff?’ His mouth barely moved.

I held out the tea towel. ‘How’s the head?’

'Fmmmmmmnnndfff...'

'Serves you right.' I stuck the icepack against Parker's cheek until he took hold of it himself. 'What did I tell you about Big Johnny Simpson's sister? You never bloody—' My mobile rang – a hard-edged rendition of an old-fashioned telephone. 'God's sake...'

I put the mug on the floor by Parker's head, pulled a blister pack of pills from my pocket and handed them over. 'Tramadol. And I want you gone by the time I get back: Susanne's coming round.'

'Nnnng ... fnnn brrkn...'

'And would it kill you to tidy up now and then? Place is a shitehole.' I grabbed my car keys and leather jacket. Dug the phone from my pocket. The name, 'MICHELLE', sat in the middle of the screen.

Great.

Because today wasn't screwed up enough.

I hit the green button. 'Michelle.'

Her Highlands-and-Islands accent was clipped and pointed. '*Put that down!*'

'You phoned me!'

'*What? No, not you: Katie.*' A muffled pause. '*I don't care, put it down. You'll be late!*' Then back to me. '*Ash, will you please tell your daughter to stop acting like a spoiled little brat?*'

'*Hi, Daddy.*' Katie: putting on her butter-wouldn't-melt little-girl voice.

I blinked. Shifted my grip on the cigar box. Tried to force a smile.

'Be nice to your mother. It's not her fault she's a bitch in the mornings. And *don't* tell her I said that!'

'*Bye, Daddy.*'

And Michelle was back. '*Now get in that car, or I swear to God...*' The sound of the door clunking shut. '*It's Katie's birthday next week.*'

'It's Rebecca's birthday today.'

'No.'

'Michelle, she's—'

'I'm not talking about this, Ash. You promised to sort out the venue and—'

'Five years.'

'She didn't even leave a note! What kind of ungrateful little...' A pause, the sound of breath hissing between gritted teeth. *'Why do we have to do this every single year? Rebecca doesn't care, Ash: five years and not so much as a phone call. Now, have you got a venue for Katie's party or haven't you?'*

'It's in hand, OK? All booked and paid for.' Well, almost...

'Monday, Ash: her birthday's on Monday. A week today.'

'I said it's *booked*.' I checked my watch. 'You're going to be late.'

'Monday.' She hung up without saying goodbye.

I slipped the phone back in my pocket.

Would it really be so bad to just *talk* about Rebecca? Remember what she was like before... Before the birthday cards started.

Upstairs, I slipped the cigar box back in its hiding place – under a loose floorboard in the bedroom – then clumped down to the lounge and nudged the useless lump of gristle lying on the couch. 'Two Tramadol every four hours, *maximum*. I come home and find your overdosed corpse mouldering on my sofa, I'll bloody kill you.'

'...sources close to the investigation confirm that Oldcastle Police have uncovered the body of a second young woman. Local news now, and Tayside Police are refusing to comment on claims that parents of missing teenager Helen McMillan have received a card from a serial killer known as "The Birthday Boy"...'

'What? No, you'll have to speak up.' I pinned the phone between my ear and shoulder, and coaxed the ancient Renault around the roundabout. Dundee was a mass of grey, scowling beneath a clay-coloured sky. Rain spattered the

windscreen, rising in twin streams of spray from the Audi in front. 'Hello?'

'Hello?' DCI Weber was barely audible over the engine, squealing windscreen wipers, and crackly radio. *'I said, how long?'*

'...where Assistant Chief Constable Eric Montgomery issued the following statement.'

Dundee's ACC sounded as if he had both thumbs wedged in his nostrils. *'We want anyone who remembers seeing Helen, when she went missing in November last year, to get in touch with their nearest police station...'*

I turned the radio down to a dull buzz. 'How should I know?' The dual carriageway was a ribbon of red taillights, stretching all the way to the Kingsway junction. An illuminated sign flashed, 'ROADWORKS ~ EXPECT DELAYS'. No shit. I hit the brakes. Drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. 'Could take weeks.'

'Oh for... What am I going to tell the Chief?'

'The usual: we're pursuing several lines of enquiry, and—'

'Do I look like I floated up the Kings River on a mealie pudding? We need a suspect, we need a result, and we need it now. I've got half of Scotland's media camped out in reception wanting a comment, and the other half laying siege to McDermid Avenue—'

Traffic was barely moving, crawling along, then stopping, then crawling again. Why could no bastard drive any more?

'—are you even listening to me?'

'What?' I blinked. 'Yeah ... not a lot we can do about it, though, is there?' A hole opened up in the other lane, and I put my foot down, but the rusty old Renault barely noticed. Should have held out for one of the pool cars. 'Come on you little sod...'

A Tesco eighteen-wheeler thundered past into the gap, dirty spray turning the Renault's windscreen opaque until the wipers scraped it into twin khaki-coloured rainbows. 'Bastard!'

'Where are you?'

'Just coming into Dundee – by the Toyota garage. Traffic's awful.'

'Right, let's try this again: remember I told you to play nice with Sergeant Smith? Well, it's not a request any more, it's an order. Turns out the slimy tosser was PSD in Grampian before we got him.'

Professional Standards? Sodding hell...

Actually, that made sense – DS Smith looked the type who'd clype on his colleagues, then get a hard-on while he stitched them up.

The traffic lurched forwards another couple of car-lengths. 'Why have we got him then?'

'Exactly.'

'Might be an idea if everyone kept their heads down for a while.'

'You think?' Silence on the other end. And then Weber was back. *'Professional Standards. From Aberdeen.'*

'I know.'

'Means they don't trust us to police ourselves. Which – to be honest – is fair enough, but still, there's the principle of the thing. We need a result, sharpish.' A clunk and Weber was gone.

Yeah, we'd get a result sharpish, because that's how it worked. Didn't matter that the official task force had been after the bastard for eight years: Weber needed a result to keep Grampian and Tayside from finding out that all the rumours about Oldcastle CID were true, so one would *miraculously* appear.

I turned the radio back up, and some sort of boy-band crap droned out of the speakers.

*'Ooh, baby, swear you love me,
don't say maybe.'*

Ooh-ooh – say we – can make it right...'

The phone went again, its old-fashioned ringing noise a lot more tuneful than the garbage on the radio. I stabbed the button and wedged the mobile back between my ear and shoulder. 'Forget something?'

A small pause, then an Irish accent, female: *'I think it's yerself that's forgotten somethin', don't ye?'*

Oh God... I swallowed. Wrapped my hands tighter around the steering wheel. Mrs Kerrigan. Sod. Why did I answer the bloody phone? *Always check the display before picking up.*

*'Baby, let's not fight tonight,
let's do it, do it, do it right...'*

I cleared my throat. 'I was ... going to call you.'

'Aye, I'll bet ye were. Yez are late. Mr Inglis is very disappointed.'

'Let's do it right, tonight!' Instrumental break.

'I need a little time to—'

'Do ye not think five years is enough? 'Cos I'm startin' to think ye're takin' the piss here. I'm wantin' three thousand bills by Tuesday lunch, OK? Or I'll have yer feekin' hole in flitters.'

Three grand by tomorrow lunchtime? Where was I supposed to get *three grand* by tomorrow lunchtime? It wasn't possible. They were going to break my legs...

'No problem. Three thousand. Tomorrow.'

'That'd be bleedin' deadly, ta.' And she hung up.

I folded forwards, resting my forehead against the steering wheel. The plastic surface was rough, as if someone had been chewing at it.

Should just keep on going. Drive right through Dundee and sod off down south. Birmingham maybe, or Newcastle: stay with Brett and his boyfriend. After all, what were brothers for? As long as they didn't make me help plan the wedding. Which they would. Bloody seating arrangements, floral centre-pieces, and vol-au-vents...

Bugger that.

*'Let's do it right, Baby,
let's do it tonight!'* Big finish.

A horn blared out somewhere behind me. I looked up and saw the gap in front of the Renault's bonnet, goosed the accelerator and coasted in behind the Audi again.

'You're listening to Tay FM, and that was Mr Bones, with "Tonight

Baby". We've got the Great Overgate Giveaway coming up, but first Nicole Gifford wants to wish her fiancé Dave good luck in his new job. Here's Celine Dion singing "Just Walk Away"...'

Or better yet: run like buggery. I switched off the radio.

Three grand by tomorrow. Never mind the other sixteen...

There was always extortion: go back to Oldcastle and lean on a few people. Pay Willie McNaughton a visit – see if he was still flogging GHB to school kids. That should be worth at least a couple of hundred. Karen Turner had that brothel on Shepard Lane. And Fat Jimmy Campbell was probably still growing weed in his loft... Throw in another dozen 'house calls' and I could pull in a grand and a half, maybe two tops.

Over a thousand pounds short, and nothing left to sell.

Maybe Mrs Kerrigan would go easy on me and they'd only break *one* of my legs. And next week the compound interest would set in, along with the compound fractures.

The car park was nearly empty, just a handful of silver re-mobiles and hire cars clustered around the hotel entrance. I pulled into a space, killed the engine, then sat there, staring off into the middle distance as the rain drummed on the car roof.

Maybe Newcastle wasn't such a bad idea after—

Clunk, clunk, clunk.

I turned in my seat. A chubby face was peering in through the passenger window: narrow mouth, stubble-covered jowls, bald head dripping and shiny, dark bags under the eyes, blueish grey skin. Big round shoulders hunched up around his ears. The accent was pure Liverpool: 'You coming in, or wha?'

I closed my eyes, counted to five, then climbed out into the rain.

Those teeny little lips turned down at the edges. 'Jesus, look at the state of you. Be frightenin' old ladies, face like that.' He had a brown paper bag clutched in one hand, the Burger King logo smeared with something red.

'Thought the Met would've beaten the Scouse out of you by now.'

'You kidding? Like a stick of Blackpool rock me: cut us in half and it's "Sabir loves Merseyside" all the way down.' He pointed a chunky finger at my face. 'What's the other bloke look like?'

'Almost as ugly as you.'

A smile. 'Well your mam never complains when I'm givin' her one.'

'To be fair, she's got a lot less fussy since she died.' I locked the car, rain pattering on the shoulders of my leather jacket. 'The McMillans here?'

'Nah: home. We're keepin' our end low key, didn't think they'd want a Crown Office task force camped out on their doorstep, like.' Sabir turned and lumbered towards the hotel entrance, wide hips rolling from side to side, feet out at ten-to-two, like a duck. 'The father's just about holdin' it together, but the mother's in pieces. How 'bout your lot?'

I followed him through the automatic doors into a bland lobby. The receptionist was slumped over her phone, doodling on a day planner. 'I know... Yeah... Well, it's only 'cos she's jealous...'

Sabir led the way to the lifts and mashed the button with his thumb. 'We're on the fifth floor. Great view: Tesco car park on one side, dual carriageway on the other. Like Venice in spring, that.' The numbers counted their way down from nine. 'So: you here on a social, or you after a favour?'

I handed him a photograph. The doors slid open, but Sabir didn't move. He stared at the picture, mouth hanging open.

A snort from the reception desk. 'No... I swear I never... No... Told you: she's *jealous*.'

The doors slid shut again.

Sabir breathed out. 'Holy crap...'