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Ash and Bone

John Harvey

WARNING: THIS EXTRACT CONTAINS EXPLICIT LANGUAGE!

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Maddy Birch would never see thirty again. Nor forty either. Stepping back from the mirror, she scowled at the wrinkles that were beginning to show at the edges of her mouth and the corners of her eyes; the grey infiltrating her otherwise dark brown, almost chestnut hair. Next birthday she would be forty-four. Forty-four and a detective sergeant attached to S07, Serious and Organised Crime.A few hundred in the bank and a mortgaged flat in the part of Upper Holloway that North London estate agents got away with calling Highgate Borders. Not a lot to show for half a lifetime on the force.Wrinkles aside.

Slipping a scarlet band from her pocket, she pulled her hair sharply back and twisted the band into place. Taking a step away, she glanced quickly down at her boots and the front of her jeans, secured the Velcro straps of her bulletproof vest, gave the pony-tail a final tug and walked back into the main room.

To accommodate all the personnel involved, the briefing had been held in the hall of an abandoned school, Detective Superintendent George Mallory, in charge of the operation, addressing the troops from the small stage on which head teachers since Victorian times had, each autumn, admonished generations of small children to plough the fields and scatter. The fields, that would be, of Green Lanes and Finsbury Park.

Climbing frames, worn and filmed with grey dust, were still attached to the walls.New flip charts, freshly marked in bright colours, stood at either side of a now blank screen. Officers from the Tactical Firearms Unit, SO19, stood in clusters of three or four, heads down, or sat at trestle tables, mostly silent, with Maddy's new colleagues from Serious Crime. She had been with her particular unit three weeks and two days.

Moving alongside Maddy, Paul Draper gestured towards the watch on his wrist.Ten minutes shy of half five.'Waiting.Worst bloody time.'

Maddy nodded.

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Draper was a young DC who'd moved down from Manchester a month before, a wife and kid and still not twentyfive; he and Maddy had reported for duty at Hendon on the same day.

'Why the hell can't we get on with it?'

Maddy nodded again.

The hall was thick with the smell of sweat and aftershave and the oil that clung to recently cleaned 9mm Brownings, Glock semi-automatic pistols, Heckler and Koch MP5 carbines. Though she'd taken the firearms training course at Lippetts Hill, Maddy herself, like roughly half the officers present, was unarmed.

'All this for one bloke,' Draper said.

This time Maddy didn't even bother to nod. She could sense the fear coming off Draper's body, read it in his eyes.

From his position near the door, the superintendent cast an eye across the hall, then spoke to Maurice Repton, his DCI.

Repton smiled and checked his watch. 'All right, gentlemen,' he said. 'And ladies. Let's nail the bastard.'

Outside, the light was just beginning to clear.

Maddy found herself sitting across from Draper inside the Transit, their knees almost touching.To her right sat an officer from SO19, ginger moustache curling round his reddish mouth; whenever she looked away, Maddy could feel his eyes following her.When the van went too fast over a speed bump and he jolted against her, his hand, for an instant, rested on her thigh. 'Sorry,' he said and grinned.

Maddy stared straight ahead and for several minutes closed her eyes, willing the image of their target to reappear as it had on the screen. James William Grant. Born Hainault, Essex, October twentieth, 1952. A week then, Maddy thought, off his fifty-second birthday. Birthdays were on her mind.

Armed robbery, money laundering, drug dealing, extortion, conspiracy to murder, more than a dozen arrests and only one conviction: Grant had been a target for years. Phone taps, surveillance, the meticulous unravelling of his financial dealings, here and abroad. The closer they got, the more likely it was that Grant would catch wind and flee somewhere the extradition laws rendered him virtually untouchable.

'It's time we took this one down,' Mallory had said at the end of his briefing. 'Way past time.'

Five years before, an associate of Grant's, ambitious enough to try and freelance some Colombian cocaine conveniently mislaid between Amsterdam

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and the Sussex coast, had been shot dead at the traffic lights midway along Pentonville Road, smack in the middle of the London rush hour. After a trial lasting seven weeks and costing three-quarters of a million pounds, one of Grant's lieutenants had eventually been convicted of the killing, while Grant himself had slipped away scot-free.

'What d'you think?' Paul Draper asked, leaning forward. 'You think he'll be there? Grant?'

Maddy shrugged.

'He fuckin' better be,' the Firearms officer said, touching the barrel of his carbine much as earlier he had touched Maddy's leg. 'Feather in our fuckin' cap, landing a bastard like him.' He grinned. 'All I hope is he don't bottle out and give it up, come walking out with his hands behind his fuckin' head.'

As the Transit veered left off Liverpool Road, someone towards the rear of the van started humming tunelessly; heads turned sharply in his direction and he ceased as abruptly as he'd begun. Sweat gathered in the palms of Maddy's hands.

'There pretty soon,' Draper said to nobody in particular. 'Got to be.'

Conscious that the man next to her was staring more openly, Maddy turned to face him. 'What?' she said. 'What?'

The man looked away.

Once, after a successful operation in Lincoln, her old patch, a good result, she and this officer who'd been eyeing her all evening had ended up with a quick grope and cuddle in a doorway. His hand on her breast. Her hand between his legs. What in God's name had made her think about that now?

'We're getting close,' the driver said over his shoulder.

One side of York Way was derelict, half-hidden behind blackened walls and wire fencing; on the other, old warehouses and small factories were in the process of being converted into loft apartments. Underground parking, twenty-four-hour portering, fifteen-year-old prostitutes with festering sores down their legs and arms a convenient ten-minute stroll away.

From the front the building seemed little changed, a higharched wooden door held fast with double padlock and chain, its paintwork blistered and chipped. Small windows whose cobwebbed glass was barred across. Maddy knew from the briefing that the guts of the place had already been torn out and restoration was well in hand. A light showed dimly behind one of the windows on the upper floor.

Either side of her, armed officers in black overalls, the single word 'Police' picked out in white at the front of their vests, were moving silently into position.

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No sweat in her palms now and her throat was dry.

'You bastard!' Laughing.

'What?'

'You know.'

'No.What?'

Wary,Vicki walked over to where Grant was stretched out on the bed, cotton sheet folded back below his waist. For a man of his years, she thought, and not for the first time, he was in good shape. Trim. Lithe. He worked out. And when he'd grabbed her just now, fingers tightening about her wrist, it had been like being locked into a vice.

'C'm'ere a minute,' he said. 'Come on.' A smile snaking across his face. 'Not gonna do anythin', am I? So soon after the last time. My age.'

She knew he was lying, of course, but complied. Vicki standing there in a tight white T-shirt and silver thong, the T-shirt finishing well above the platinum ring in her navel. What else was it about but this?

When she'd first met him, a month or so before, it had been at the Motor Show, Birmingham. Vicki not wearing a whole lot more than she was now, truth be told, a couple of hundred quid a day to draw attention to the virtues of a 3.2 litre direct-injection diesel engine, climate control and all-leather interior.

He'd practically bought the vehicle out from under her and later screwed her on the back seat in a lay-by off the A6. 'Christen the upholstery,' he'd said with a wink, tucking a couple of fifty-pound notes down inside her dress. She'd balled them up and thrown them back in his face. He'd paid more attention to her after that.

'I've got this place in London,' he'd said. 'Why don't you come and stay for a bit.'

'A bit of what?'

The first time he'd seen her naked it had stopped him in his tracks: he'd had more beautiful women before but none with buttocks so round and tight and high.

'Jesus!' he'd said.

'What?'

'You've got a gorgeous arse.'

She'd laughed. 'Just don't think you're getting any of it, that's all.'

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'We'll see about that,' he'd said.

Fingers resting lightly just below her hips, he'd planted a careful kiss in the small of her back. 'Who was it?' he'd said, hands sliding down. 'Pushed in his thumb and pulled out a plum? Little Jack Horner? Little Tommy Tucker?'

After that he took her face down on the polished wood floor, bruises on her knees and breasts that smelt of linseed oil.

'Will, don't,' she said now, shaking herself free. 'Not now. I have to go and pee.'

'What's wrong with here?' Pointing at his chest.

'Over you, you mean?'

'Why not? Wouldn't be the first time.'

'You're disgusting.'

'You don't know the half of it.' He reached for her but she skipped away.

'Don't be long,' he said, leaning back against the pillows and watching her as she walked towards the door.

There was access from a courtyard at the rear, stairs leading past three balconies to the upper floor. The loft apartment where Grant lived was entered through double doors, a single emergency exit leading to a fire escape at the furthest end.

Draper close behind her, Maddy turned a corner into the courtyard and flattened herself against the wall. Weapons angled upwards, armed officers were in position at the corners of the square, others scurrying towards the first and second balconies, and she waited for the signal to proceed. When it came, moments later, she sprinted for the stairs.

The walls were exposed brick, furnishings tasteful and sparse. Shifting his position, Grant poured himself another glass of wine. Dusty was still in the CD player and he clicked the remote.

'Why do you listen to that old stuff?'Vicki asked from the far end of the room.

'Greatest white soul singer ever was,' Grant said.

'History,'Vicki replied, approaching.

Grant grinned. 'Like me, you mean?'

'If you like.'

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One knee on the bed, she ran her fingers through the greying hairs on his chest and, reaching up, he kissed her on the mouth.

At the head of the stairs, Maddy waited, catching her breath, Draper on the landing below.The outer door to Grant's apartment was in clear sight. Mallory appeared level with Draper and then went on past. There was armament everywhere.

'After a little glory?' the superintendent whispered in Maddy's ear.

'No, sir.'

He smiled and Maddy could smell the mint and garlic on his breath. 'Second fiddle this time, Birch. Sweeping up the odds and ends.'

'Yes, sir.'

'You and your pal Draper. Down a floor. Just in case.'

Mallory moved on towards the door, Repton at his back, two officers wielding sledgehammers in their wake.

Volume high, the interior of the loft pulsated with sound: French horn, strings, piano, and then the voice. Unmistakable.

Vicki reached down and touched Grant's face, straddling him. Arching his back, eyes closed, Grant found her nipples with his fingertips.

Dusty swooped and soared and swooped again.

At the first crash, Grant swung Vicki on to her side and sprang clear, one hand clawing at a pair of chinos alongside the bed, the other reaching past Vicki's head.

The outer door splintered inwards off its hinges.

Fear flooded Vicki's face and she began to scream.

The pistol was tight in Grant's grasp as he turned away.

From the landing below, Maddy heard music, shouts, feet moving fast across bare boards, the slamming of doors.

'What the fuck?' Draper said.

'Move,' Maddy said, pushing him aside. 'Now.'

Positioned on the balcony opposite, one of the police marksmen had Grant in his sights for several seconds, a clear shot through plate glass as he raced down the emergency stairs, but without the order to fire the moment passed and Grant was lost to sight.

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'In here,' Maddy said, kicking open the door and ducking low.

Draper followed, swerving left.

Maddy could feel the blood jolting through her veins, her heart pumping fast against her ribs.The room they were in ran the length of the building, iron supports strategically placed floor to ceiling. Some of the floorboards had been removed prior to being replaced. Building materials were stacked against the back wall,work begun and then abandoned. Low-level light seeped through windows smeared with grease and dust.

Maddy reached for the switch to her left with no result.

Voices from the stairs, urgent and loud, descending; more shouts, muffled, from the courtyard outside.

'Come on,' Draper said. 'Let's go.'

Maddy was almost through the door when she stopped, alerted by the smallest of sounds. She swung back into the room as Grant eased open the door at the far end and stepped through. Bare-chested, barefoot, pistol held down at his side.

Maddy's voice wedged, immovable, in her throat.

'Police!' Draper shouted. 'Put your weapon on the ground now.'

She would wonder afterwards if Grant had truly smiled as he raised his gun and fired.

Draper collapsed back through the doorway, clutching his neck. Instinctively, Maddy turned towards him and, as she did so, Grant ran forward, jumping through a gap in the boards to the floor below.With barely a moment's hesitation she raced after him; when she braced herself, legs hanging through a gap a metre wide, the boards on either side gave way and she was down.

Grant had landed badly, twisting his ankle, and was scrabbling, crab-like, across the floor, seeking the pistol that had been jarred from his grasp. A 9mm Beretta, hard up against the wall. As he pushed himself up and hopped towards it, Maddy launched herself at him, one hand seizing his ankle and bringing him down. Flailing, his hand struck the squared-off butt of the pistol and sent it spinning beyond reach.

'Bitch!'

He kicked out at her and she stumbled back.

'Fucking bitch!'

Grant was on his feet and moving towards her. No smiling now.

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Maddy heard movement behind and then the sound of a weapon being discharged close to her ear. Once and then once again. As she watched, Grant skidded backwards, then crumpled to his knees, his face all but disappeared in a welter of blood.

'Textbook,' Mallory said softly. 'Head and heart.'

Maddy's skin was cold; her body shook.

'You or him, of course. Didn't give me any choice.'

Vomit caught in the back of Maddy's throat. Her eyes fastened on Grant's pistol, still some metres away across the floor.

The superintendent bent low towards the body.'Ambulance, I dare say. Not that it'll do a scrap of good. He's bleeding out.'

When he stood up, a second weapon, a .22 Derringer, was close by Grant's inturned leg, small enough to hide inside a fist. Now you see it, now you don't. No matter how many times Maddy would run it through in her mind, she would never be sure.

'Trouser pocket,' Mallory was saying conversationally.'Small of the back.' He shrugged. 'There'll be an inquiry, routine.' His hand on her shoulder was light, almost no pressure at all. 'You'll be a good witness, I know.'

Armed officers were standing at both doors,weapons angled towards the ground.

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