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Dead Men's Bones

Written by James Oswald

Published by Penguin Books Ltd

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Dead Men's Bones

A Detective Inspector McLean Mystery

JAMES OSWALD



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park,
181 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published in Penguin Books 2014
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Set in 12.75/15 pt Garamond MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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ISBN: 978–1–405–91709–4

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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This one's for the Bobs – Duncan, Elspeth, Fingal, Hector and Magnus. Thanks for all the Ham Nights and beer.

1

The pain is everywhere.

It pulses through his head as if there's a hole in his skull and someone is squeezing his brain in time to his heartbeat. It shoots through his veins like acid, burning him from the inside. It grinds in his joints even though he is motionless. It smothers him like a blanket made of fire.

He doesn't know where he is. There is only the darkness surrounding him and the echoing roar in his ears and the all-consuming agony. Is he back in Afghanistan? Has he gone the way of Bodie and Jugs? Trodden on one of those towelhead IEDs? No. That was then. He did his tour, survived. For all the good it did him.

He remembers the city, the secret life of the street people. His people. He'd been safe there, for a while. He'd steadied himself, built a life of sorts. Something he could understand, fighting for survival, hustling for the next hit of booze.

Calm. Try to be calm. Let the training kick in. He's been in worse situations than this, surely. Just needs to get his shit together. Easier said than done with the pounding in his head, the itching all over his skin, the sandpaper in his hips and knees and shoulders.

Slowly the panic subsides, leaving just the pain. He can cope with that. Focus beyond it. Try to work out what's

going on. He flexes his hands, grunts as the pain lances up his arms. The noise is a reassurance, something he can understand, and he feels the restraint on his left wrist give a little. Concentrate on that. Use that. Ignore the agony sapping his energy. He works at the strap like a terrier with a rat. Tenacious, stubborn, fixated.

When it gives it's as if someone's put a bullet through his brain. The darkness explodes in a kaleidoscope of colours, swirling and flashing even as he can feel himself going under. He grits his teeth; chokes out a short, sharp bark. Half triumph, half defeat. Lets his freed hand fall down by his side as he gathers his strength for the next battle.

The head strap first. Sweat-slick fingers struggle with a buckle pulled too tight. It seems to take hours before it finally clicks loose. He'd hoped the release of pressure would ease the pounding in his head, but if anything it worsens. Touching his forehead, the skin is rough and puckered, the point of contact exploding in fire.

He has known agony before. Training for Special Forces they did things to your body most people wouldn't believe. This is far, far worse. It's only the straps tied tight around his ankles that keep him from falling when he tries to sit up. The effort of untying them almost kills him. There is nothing he can do to stop himself slithering to the floor. At least it's cold, soothing the parts of his skin that come into contact. He hugs it like a child hugs its mother, desperately clinging to that tiny relief.

It is only transient, the cooling touch inflaming his skin to new levels of torture. As if the stone has become sandpaper, rasped across flesh already raw. Salt and lime rubbed into the wounds.

He staggers to his feet. Steadies himself on the gurney. There is light here. Real light, not the fireworks that have filled his vision since he first tried to move. Soft and low, it barely illuminates the room. Still, what he sees is enough to bring the panic bubbling back up his throat like vomit.

It is a torture chamber. He is surrounded by a collection of apparatus designed only to inflict pain. Needles on long mechanical arms, boxes with wires looped around them, crocodile clips lined up on chrome rails. Bottles of coloured fluids, poisons, acids.

He pushes away from them, recoiling in horror, and as he does so he glimpses movement across the room. Glass, a mirror, an unfamiliar figure echoing his own ungainly movements. It's too dark to see clearly, but he staggers towards it anyway. Closer and closer, not quite able to say what is wrong with the image he is seeing.

And then it is there. Glaring out at him in the half-light. The face. His face. But the face of a demon. Wild eyes staring. Black swirls curling over cheeks and nose, forehead and shaven pate. He looks down at his arms and sees the patterns writhe and snake across his body. They are in him: alien, spectral creatures under his skin, devouring him.

The panic hits full on. Adrenalin sweeps everything else away. There is only running. He crashes through doors, down empty corridors, oblivious to anything but the fear. There is no direction to his flight, no plan beyond getaway.

And then he is outside. White snow blizzarding out of a night sky. He hardly notices his nakedness as he runs

from the building. Barely feels the icy cold on his feet or the ripping of low branches against his battered skin. His terror is so complete that he doesn't even notice when the land runs out. Arms and legs pumping as momentum carries him off the cliff and down and down.

2

'Jesus wept, but it's cold.'

Detective Inspector Tony McLean stamped his feet in the ankle-deep snow, trying desperately to get the circulation going. He stuck his red-raw hands under his armpits in search of warmth, all too aware that he'd come out without really thinking through where he was going. Roslin Glen was a wonderful spot in the summer, the River North Esk burbling through a narrow gorge cut deep into the sandstone. It widened out here, where the road to Rosehall and Dalkeith switched up the hillside, and was normally a sheltered suntrap. Not today though. Today the wind was funnelling up the river, swirling the snow in eddies that stung against any exposed skin.

'Should've brought a coat with you, sir. Gets a bit parky here at times.' Detective Sergeant Laird, Grumpy Bob to friend and foe alike, looked like someone's grandad at Christmas. He was wrapped in a quilted jacket, heavy gloves on his hands and a bright yellow knitted bobble hat keeping his balding head warm. The cold wind had turned his cheeks and the tip of his nose red. Well, it was either that or a lifetime of drink. Or both.

'You any idea where we're supposed to be going?' McLean swivelled on his feet, taking in the entirety of the car park. There were a couple of squad cars, a Scene Examination Branch Transit van and a rusty old Peugeot

estate car parked close by, but no sign of any people. This time of year, and with the snow still falling out of a sky the colour of an old bruise, it was hardly surprising. You'd have to be a hardy dog walker to chance not getting lost.

'River's this way, I think.' Grumpy Bob motioned past the nearest car. A path of sorts had been bashed through the snow, though it was being filled in again. Looking up, you should have been able to see the castle on its rocky promontory. Possibly even the chapel, if memory served. No chance of that today, though. McLean started to trudge along the track, but as he passed close to the SEB van, its side door slid open, releasing a blast of warmth, the unmistakable aroma of real coffee and Detective Constable Stuart MacBride.

'You're here, sir.'

'That much would appear to be obvious, Constable.' McLean peered past him into the van, and saw a couple of scene-of-crime officers huddling around what looked like a portable gas heater, something Health and Safety would no doubt frown upon if anyone brought it to their attention.

'Don't suppose you've got a spare jacket in there or anything?'

It might have been fluorescent yellow with 'Strathclyde Water' written across it in large blue letters, but it was warm. McLean hugged his newly acquired jacket close as he followed MacBride and Grumpy Bob down a narrow footpath away from the car park and deeper into the glen. The trees growing either side linked overhead to

form a tunnel of sorts. They shielded him from the worst of the wind, but threatened to dump snow on the unwary at any moment.

'What are we looking at, Constable?' McLean asked, as the path opened up across a small grass field of miserable sheep.

'Dead body in the river, sir. Must've fallen in somewhere upstream. There's been a lot of water running through lately. Swept it down until it hit the rocks just a ways up ahead.'

They clambered over a broken stile and into a more forested area. Here the snow had hardly settled on the ground but was just a thin dusting, sufficient to make the going slippery. The steep slope down to the water's edge didn't help either. Somehow McLean managed to make it without falling over, stepping on to a flat rock that protruded out into the water. A few paces away, a couple of uniform officers were huddled into their own bright jackets, breath steaming in the Baltic air.

'Down there?' McLean indicated the river where it cut a narrow channel between the flat rocks. He could hear the water echoing below. The nearest uniform nodded. A couple of SOC officers were busy setting up some kind of pulley system and framework over the channel. They both wore heavy-duty wet weather gear and the kind of helmets favoured by kayakers and potholers. No doubt they'd drawn the short straw when it was decided who was going to recover the body.

'Who found it?' McLean asked the constable as he inched closer to the edge, wary of ending up headfirst in the North Esk.

'Local from the village. Walks his dogs here every day. Bloody nutter if you ask me.' The uniform officer looked slightly sheepish, before adding 'Sir.'

McLean said nothing, just peered down into the gully. The whole of the glen had been cut from the sandstone over millennia. In places the cliffs were well over a hundred foot high. Here, the river had met harder rock, and ancient spates had pushed vast boulders up against one another to form a barrier. The narrow channel into which he was looking was just one of many routes the water took around and through this obstacle before carrying on its journey to the Firth of Forth. There was all manner of detritus deposited: fallen trees; plastic carrier bags; even the occasional shopping trolley. And now the naked body of a man.

It was difficult to see in the half-light, but McLean was fairly sure it was a man's body. The water hadn't been kind, tumbling it over, bending arms and legs in ways they were never meant to go. The head wasn't visible at all, wedged hard into a jumble of rocks. He shivered from something other than cold as he contemplated the possibility that it might be missing entirely. It wouldn't be the first time someone had tried to make their job more difficult that way, and it was never pleasant.

What struck him first about the body though was its colour. Not unusual to see a black man in a city the size of Edinburgh, of course, but there was something not quite right about the colour of this man's skin. Or maybe it was the texture.

'You ready for us to bring it up?'

McLean looked up into the face of one of the SOC

officers, much closer than he'd been expecting. The constant roar of the water made it almost impossible to hear people moving about.

'Can't do anything useful with it down there. Yes. Bring it up.'

He stood back and waited while they lowered a small stretcher into the gap. One of the SOC officers played out a rope tied securely to a nearby boulder, while his colleague climbed carefully down to the water. After an age, in which McLean's feet began to lose all feeling, the SOC officer clambered back out again and gave the thumbs up. The two together then hauled the stretcher back, swinging it over, before placing it carefully down on the flat rock surface.

'Bugger had his head jammed right into a crack. Pain in the arse getting him out of there.' The SOC officer was busy coiling up ropes while his colleague dismantled the frame and pulley. They had the look about them of men who wanted to get back to the Transit van and its nice little gas heater. McLean couldn't really blame them.

He crouched down beside the body, still twisted and broken from its time in the river. He couldn't see the man's face without touching the body, but it was very definitely a man. That much was shrivelled and small but evident nonetheless. What was also evident was that the man wasn't, in fact, black. There were a few traces of pale white skin visible on his body, but they were very few.

The rest was covered from head to foot, arms, hands, fingers, and yes, even his penis, in a dark swirl of tattoos.

3

'. . . getting reports of a shooting incident at a farmhouse in north-east Fife. A man thought to be Mr Andrew Weatherly shot and killed his wife and two daughters before turning the gun on himself. We cannot at this time confirm that the man in question was indeed the MSP for Fife West . . .'

McLean thumbed the button on the steering wheel that changed the channel on the radio, searching for some soothing music. He had enough troubles of his own without listening to the woes of other forces. Except of course they were all one big happy family now, Police Scotland. Or Greater Strathclyde, as the wags had it. Not far from the truth, either.

A gap appeared in the traffic ahead and he accelerated, enjoying the surge of power that took him forward a good fifty yards before he had to brake and slow again. Commuting was hell, and not for the first time he missed his old flat in Newington. Being able to walk to work had its benefits, even in this cold and snowy weather. Easier to think to the rhythm of feet on pavement than this stop-start slow-moving car park.

At least the car was working fine, and he didn't have to worry about it dissolving in the salt spread on the roads. His old Alfa was away being restored, and he couldn't help thinking its indisposition had been a blessing in disguise.

He was just about to take a side street, hopeful that it might cut the journey time by a couple of seconds, when his phone rang, loud through the stereo speakers. A less welcome benefit of the modern car; he tapped the button on the dashboard that activated the hands-free.

'McLean.'

'Where the hell are you?'

Good morning to you too, Detective Superintendent Duguid, sir. McLean glanced at the clock in front of him, orange digits showing that there were still twenty minutes to go before eight o'clock.

'Currently, sir? I'm in my car in a traffic jam on Lothian Road. Where are you?'

'Don't get cheeky with me, McLean. You were meant to be at the morning briefing here, half seven.'

That was the first he'd heard of it. He'd been taken off active duty after the incident in his attic, ostensibly while his broken leg healed, but also until he'd completed a seemingly endless series of counselling sessions with his favourite hack psychiatrist, Professor Matt Hilton. The visit out to Roslin Glen the day before had been his first proper case in months. 'Morning briefing, sir? What morning briefing?'

A short pause, as if the superintendent were thinking deep thoughts. 'Ah, right. You're not on that team now, are you?'

Duguid's brief stint in charge of the running of the whole station had been mercifully cut short by the creation of Police Scotland. That was probably the only positive thing anyone in plain clothes could come up with about the whole sorry affair, though. With CID

having now become the Specialist Crime Division and being split into a bewildering number of teams, each specializing in some different facet of the Scottish criminal mind, it was a full-time job just working out where you were meant to be from day to day.

'Never mind.' No apology for his mistake, but then that was never Duguid's style. 'Just come and find me as soon as you get here, OK? I've a job for you.'

The line went dead, the superintendent's voice replaced with a slow fade-up of the radio, playing some chirpy modern pop song McLean didn't recognize. He stared ahead for a moment before realizing that the car in front had begun to pull away. Dipped the clutch and dropped a gear, gunning the engine to catch up. He'd been looking forward to making a start on the investigation into the body found in Roslin Glen. As was so often the case, it looked like life had other plans.

'I know it's a bloody disaster. Couldn't be worse timing either. And it's not as if we haven't got enough on our plates here.'

Detective Superintendent Charles Duguid had somehow managed to keep hold of the big office on the third floor in the upheavals following the creation of Police Scotland. In theory he was meant to be in charge of Divisional Crime and Public Protection for what had once been Lothian and Borders, so it made a certain kind of sense. McLean still wished its former occupant had come back to take up the new post. Alas, wishes had a habit of going unanswered in these parts.

In a small nod to his predecessor, or perhaps because

he had a pathological need to know what was going on, Duguid had taken to leaving his office door open some of the time. McLean stood outside, half-listening to the phone conversation, trying to judge when it would be best to interrupt.

'You know what this is all about?' he asked of the secretary sitting at the desk just outside the office door.

'Something to do with that MSP shooting his family, I think. Horrible, horrible case.' She shook her head and went back to whatever she had been typing at her screen.

'Well, don't just stand there chatting up the secretaries, McLean. Get in here. And shut the door behind you.' Duguid stood just inside the doorway, impatient as ever. He had his phone in one hand and raised it back to his ear as McLean did as he was told.

'No. He's here now. I'll get it sorted, don't you worry about that, sir.'

McLean raised an eyebrow, not really expecting Duguid to explain himself. He wasn't disappointed; the superintendent rang off and dropped the phone on to his desk, slumping into the large leather seat with its back to the window before finally looking at him.

'How's the leg?'

McLean shifted his weight slightly. His hip still ached where he'd broken the bone several months earlier, but it was mending. The cold weather didn't help, though.

'Better, thank you. Still seeing the physio once a week, but it's not a problem.'

Duguid's eyes narrowed. He pulled a sheet of paper towards him, didn't look at it.

'Your initial psych evaluation says you're fit for work.' Almost as if the fact were a personal insult to him.

'I'm glad to hear it, sir. I've been back at work long enough.'

'Don't get all sarky with me, McLean. You heard about Andrew Weatherly, I take it?'

'The MSP? There was something on the radio this morning, but I didn't think it had been confirmed—'

'Oh, it's him right enough. Stupid wee bugger.' Duguid rubbed at his face with prehensile fingers, long and thin and with seemingly far too many joints. 'Looks like he's shot his wife and kids, then turned the gun on himself. Why the fuck would anyone do that?'

'I've really no idea, sir. Was he under a lot of stress?'

Duguid looked up at him like he was mad. 'What am I, his therapist? How the fuck should I know?'

McLean didn't answer. It was always best just to stand there and let whatever Duguid had to say roll over you. Deal with the fallout later.

'He was very well connected, was our Mr Weatherly. Sat on the Police Liaison Committee for one thing. His fingerprints are all over our beloved Police Scotland, too, so you can imagine how well this is all going down with our overlords. They want it tidied away as quickly as possible.'

'Is it not Fife's investigation? It happened on their patch.'

Duguid gave him a contemptuous glare. 'There's no "patches" any more. We're all one big fucking happy family, remember?'

McLean flexed his feet, tried not to bounce up and

down impatiently. Of course he knew about the new structures, but the old regions still existed within the Specialist Crime Division. There was no need for someone to go up to Fife and upset the locals, surely.

Duguid did the finger thing again, then slumped back in his chair. It squeaked alarmingly, tilting back as if it was going to tumble him to the floor.

'Look. Fife are on scene right now. Yes, it's their patch as you put it. But Weatherly's an MSP. He has a house here in Edinburgh, his business is based here. So whether Fife like it or not, we're involved.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'I'd have thought that was obvious, McLean. Do what you always do. Dig deeper than is really necessary. Complicate things.'

McLean frowned. This wasn't what he expected to be told. Not by Duguid.

'But I thought you said HQ—'

Duguid leaned forward, placed his elbows on the desk in front of him. 'Oh, this goes higher than HQ, McLean. Right up to the top. They want it tidied up nice and quickly. Tidied away like it never happened. Well, fuck that. An innocent woman and two young girls are dead. I don't care if their murderer killed himself. I want to know why he did it, and if that means putting a few noses out of joint, then so be it.'

The CID room was its usual hive of inactivity when McLean pushed his way through the door half an hour later. His brain was still reeling from the conversation with the superintendent; the sheer neck of the man never

ceased to amaze. There was the small matter of who would take the blame when it all went to buggery, too. As it inevitably would. Not the first time he'd been set up for a fall; probably not the last.

'Morning, sir.' The voice that piped up from behind the opened door was fresh and eager, much like the chubby, scrubbed pink face that went with it. Detective Constable Stuart MacBride looked up from his desk.

'Morning, Constable. You the only one in?'

'Briefing in the main incident room, sir. DCI Brooks is bringing all the DIs and sergeants up to speed on current investigations.' Even as he said it, the constable's face furrowed into a frown that probably matched McLean's own.

'I must have missed the memo.' Still, it would explain Duguid's earlier confusion. 'Never mind, I've better things to spend my time on than listening to Brooks prattle on. You get anywhere with our mysterious tattooed man yet?'

MacBride shuffled briefly among the ordered folders on his desk, coming up with one that looked distressingly empty. At least it had the official code stencilled on the outside.

'Nothing yet. Body's at the mortuary waiting for a PM. I've had a word with Missing Persons. No one fitting the description. Can't really do much more until we know if it's suspicious or not.'

'He was naked, Constable. That seems pretty suspicious to me. If he'd just fallen in upstream, I'd have expected at least a few clothes.'

'He might've taken them off, sir. Isn't that what people

do sometimes, when they get really cold? The brain goes all weird and they think they're overheating. Think I read something somewhere . . .'

'Hypothermia madness. Yes, I suppose it could have been.' McLean shook his head. 'Well, we'll find out soon enough. You got a time for the PM yet?'

'No sir. I can call and find out.' MacBride reached for his phone.

'It can wait. I've another errand to attend to first. Is Ritchie about?'

'In Brooks's briefing along with everyone else. Anything I can help with?' The look of hope on the young constable's face was a sight to behold. Like a puppy desperate to be chosen from the basket. McLean could hardly bring himself to disappoint him.

'I need her special skills,' he said, searching for a diplomatic way of saying he'd rather not spend a couple of hours stuck in the car with MacBride when there was less eager company to be had. 'And she's friends with some of CID in Fife Constabulary, which might come in useful.'

'Fife?' MacBride's expression went from momentary confusion to wide-eyed understanding. 'Oh.'

'Yes. Oh. Duguid wants me to look into that bloody mess. If you've any sense you'll keep your head down here.'