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The Dark Road

Written by Ian Rankin and
Mark Thomson

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IAN RANKIN
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DARK ROAD



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CHARACTERS

Chief Superintendent Isobel McArthur late forties, Scottish.
Former Chief Constable

Alexandra McArthur twenty-one, Scottish

Alfred Chalmers mid-late sixties

Detective Superintendent Frank Bowman about fifty

Chief Constable Fergus McLintock (Black Fergus)
retired, about seventy, Scottish

Judith a young female nurse in secure hospital, late twenties

Janice a young female constable, early-mid twenties

Drew a young male constable, mid-late twenties

Young Man about twenty

Sarah McElhenney

Young Male Nurse

Act One

SCENE ONE

Dark. ISOBEL MCARTHUR's sitting room. Homely. Not ultra-modern. Not old-fashioned. Practical, but not furnished without thought and care. Sounds of sex infiltrate.

In front of the sofa a figure or shape of a person appears to be emerging from the floor. Lights crack out. Shouting, and ISOBEL revealed leaping off chair or sofa where she has been asleep. She stands panting. Very slowly and uncertainly she recovers, reflects, looks behind her. She is fully dressed in police uniform.

ALEXANDRA comes through. She is dressed in her nightwear.

ALEXANDRA Mum? Mum? You OK?

ISOBEL What?

ALEXANDRA You OK?

ISOBEL Yes?

ALEXANDRA You sure?

ISOBEL Yes. What time is it?

ALEXANDRA Late.

ISOBEL How late?

ALEXANDRA Late-late.

ISOBEL Right.

ALEXANDRA Need anything?

ISOBEL No, no, I'm fine. It's my thirtieth tomorrow,
 you know.

ALEXANDRA Mum, you are young for your age but—

ISOBEL In the force. Done my thirty. Means I can
 retire.

ALEXANDRA Are you going to?

ISOBEL Not tomorrow.

ALEXANDRA Good.

ISOBEL Is it?

ALEXANDRA I don't know. Is it? *(Beat)* Go to bed. Maybe
 take your uniform off first.

ISOBEL Good idea. Good night.

ALEXANDRA *(Leaving)* You sure you're—

ISOBEL Yes, yes, love you.

*ALEXANDRA exits. ISOBEL sits down. She opens a laptop
and ruffles a stack of A4 printed pages. The sound of
lovemaking again from the next room.*



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SCENE TWO

ISOBEL is in her office. There is the sound of people offstage, laughter, talk. It is ISOBEL's thirtieth. She has a drink in her hand. It's a bare office with some A4 achievement-type things. On one wall there is a board with a mixture of people and cases that she hasn't solved. She is glad to be away from the others. She bursts a balloon with a letter-opener. She puts on the Stone Roses' 'Fool's Gold' and looks out the window. FRANK enters.

FRANK Thirty years in the force and still no fucking taste.

ISOBEL Where were you?

FRANK Sorry, got held up. Miss me?

ISOBEL I told you I wanted you to be there.

FRANK That might be the most sentimental thing you have ever said to me.

ISOBEL Piss off.

FRANK That's my girl.

ISOBEL Show some respect for your chief superintendent.

FRANK All right, boss. You got a drink in here?

ISOBEL Sorry, only coffee.

FRANK Of course.

ISOBEL Know me. Party girl.

FRANK Was a time.

ISOBEL Long ago, Frank.

FRANK Past doesn't just go; s'like carbon – it dates you.

ISOBEL Regular enemas do it for me – try it, Frank, you might be less full of shit.

FRANK That's my girl.

ISOBEL Yeah, well.

FRANK Look who the cat dragged in.

He opens the door. FERGUS enters.

ISOBEL Fergus!

FERGUS Yes.

ISOBEL I'm . . . I'm . . .

FERGUS And I thought I was the only one old enough to keep forgetting my name.

ISOBEL I'm so chuffed you're—

FERGUS Of course I'd be here.

ISOBEL That's great.

FERGUS Can I sit down?

ISOBEL Of course, just—

FERGUS Yes, I know how to sit and can still spot a chair in a confined space: the wheels creak and clank but still turn.

FRANK What do you think, Fergus?

FERGUS She looks a million.

FRANK But the grey?

ISOBEL Thanks, Frank.

FERGUS Tough, well-earned and a little bit sexy.

FRANK Careful, can't say that nowadays.

ISOBEL Yes he can. What are you doing? Not seen you for maybe three years.

FERGUS I garden, I stalk my grandchildren and try and hammer the order and respect into them that their empowering, 'you're the centre of the universe' parents have failed to do. I wear out the hall rug with endless petty trips to the kitchen for tea, put things in the bin, tidy up, and then there's the increasing trips to the bathroom – hard to believe that night-time can bring on so much urine with so little drinking. So—

ISOBEL That's an awful lot of information, Fergus.

FERGUS So my point is, young Isobel—

ISOBEL That now I've done my thirty and am able to get my pension, it's not all it's cracked up to be out there?

FRANK She's sharp.

FERGUS Course she's sharp. She's also a woman, and it's tough here.

ISOBEL Now, Fergus, that is outright—

FERGUS I don't care. I'm bloody fond of you and I'll say what I want – I'm sixty-eight and I don't give a shit. One of the benefits. Probably the only benefit.

FRANK How's your sex life?

FERGUS (*Glares*) My wife's in a wheelchair.

FRANK Not all the time.

FERGUS You've always been a wee bit sick, Frank, haven't you?

FRANK (*Stands next to ISOBEL*) We are what God and Black Fergus made us. We are your spawn, Black Fergus. We are beautiful, sharp, going grey and sick. And we're yours.

They all laugh.

ISOBEL Seven years out. You're proof there's life after being a cop. You're looking good.

FERGUS No, I'm not. Did it bother you not getting the top job?

ISOBEL Didn't get it – over.

FRANK Still Queen of Police in Edinburgh!

ISOBEL Yeah.

FERGUS How's the wee one?

ISOBEL She's twenty-one.

FERGUS No she's not.

ISOBEL She is. Final year at uni.

FERGUS What's she doing there?

ISOBEL Film and TV. Doing her final project. Wants to be Spielberg. Or a kind of documentary Spielberg.

FRANK In the DNA: search for truth.

ISOBEL Seeing you . . . You were a great boss, Fergus. I have everything to thank you for.

FERGUS What am I supposed to do with that?

FRANK Stick it up your jacksie and enjoy.

FERGUS Listen, we're here to fix the shit when it hits the people. *(Beat)* For a wee moment there I actually forgot. Was still here, you know, doing it. Hang in there.

FRANK Will do, sir.

FERGUS I know you will. You've nothing else to do or live for.

FRANK Cracker. Thanks.

ISOBEL So much paperwork before I can get at any bad guys . . .

FRANK Hey – be a chief super and say hello to a big desk of paperwork between you and being a cop.

ISOBEL Broken record. I'm still a cop, Frank.

FRANK I do it every day and I can touch it.

ISOBEL I touch it.

FRANK Course you do. It's under that paperweight.

ISOBEL Don't start your real-police shit again. That really why you stayed a detective, so you could still feel the street, Frank?

FRANK That's why.

ISOBEL Sure.

FRANK Absolutely.

ISOBEL Whatever, I'm still doing it.

FRANK Really, who with?

ISOBEL That's crass.

FRANK That's me. Still got the dirt and mess of the street on my shoes and in my mouth.

ISOBEL Get a mouthwash and a shoe shine and do us all a—

FERGUS Just like old times.

ISOBEL I was the first female chief constable in Scotland. If I want to retire and go on supporting Alexandra, I thought I might write a book.

FRANK What about?

ISOBEL About me?

FRANK laughs.

ISOBEL Thanks for that encouragement, Frank.

FRANK Sorry, I didn't mean to . . . No, well I did. You're a cop, not a writer!

ISOBEL Thought I wasn't a cop?

FRANK Who'll buy it?

ISOBEL It's not uninteresting, my job.

FRANK Course not, but where's the headline? I just don't know if 'Scotland's First Female Chief Constable' is going to put you on the bestseller list.

ISOBEL No, but Alfred Chalmers might.

Beat.

ISOBEL It's just a thought.

FRANK That's a bad thought.

ISOBEL Maybe.

FRANK That's a bad, bad thought. You put that thought out your head.

ISOBEL I don't know how much longer I can keep going at this.

FRANK Not good enough.

ISOBEL It was twenty-five years—

FERGUS —ago this October.

FRANK You've really thought this out. Silver jubilee of his arrest. Fergus, you say something.

ISOBEL It's a long time ago.

FRANK So why drag him back up? Why drag those young women's bodies back up? Have you told their mothers?

ISOBEL You're the first people I've told because I know it's your story too.

FRANK It's not a fucking story, Isobel, it was a real-life nightmare and it was yesterday, I mean yesterday.

FERGUS Have you spoken to him?

Beat.

FRANK For fuck's sake, Isobel, have you been speaking to that piece of—

ISOBEL Not yet.

FRANK Not yet?

ISOBEL Not yet.

FRANK paces.

FERGUS Is there something else, Isobel?

ISOBEL What do you mean?

FERGUS The book. The why.

ISOBEL *(Beat)* I've always had . . . It unnerves me why I am so uncomfortable with his conviction twenty-five years on.

FRANK Oh Jesus Christ.

FERGUS Not the Lord, Frank.

FRANK Sorry, Fergus.

ISOBEL Why does it still bother me? Why can't I file it?

FERGUS When we were searching for each one of those girls' bodies, placed in Chalmers' careful pattern, pulling legs out of trees, scraping heads out of rusting oil cans and reading 'It's in the stars' scrawled in blood on their bellies, the cryptic clue that would lead to the

next part of the human jigsaw; and when we saw that black ugly tar and diamanté jewels where their young shining eyes once had been: well, Isobel, we became participants in his foul quest. He led and we had to dance, or we didn't win. So if then, now, here, you might harbour some doubt (*He physically winces*) about guilt, whether it be his or even your own, like a rattle, loose and unfixed at the back of your head, then distrust it, because it's *his* pattern that makes it.

FRANK Too right. What he said.

ISOBEL (*To FRANK*) You're OK about it?

FRANK Am I OK about him being locked up? You bet your fucking granny's life I'm OK about it.

ISOBEL We only got him on the fourth – we didn't prove the first three.

FRANK So what?

ISOBEL You think that's satisfactory?

FRANK It was twenty-five years ago.

ISOBEL That doesn't make it right.

FRANK It doesn't make it wrong. We got the guy.

ISOBEL Did we?

FRANK Please tell me this is a momentary and irrational burst of conscience. Or a moment of greed to sell your book.

ISOBEL I don't know. I'm in the middle of it.

FRANK Get out of the middle of it. Or you put us there too. You want that, Isobel? I don't want to be there. And neither does Fergus. We don't deserve it. You keep your eye on your job, do the paperwork, we stop the bad guys hurting and stealing and fucking up the good guys, or the OK-ish guys, or even the not so bad guys, and that's good, that's great, and it doesn't work perfectly but it's good. What you're doing, it's nothing. It's black. Isn't it, Black Fergus? Ask him? Isn't it? Oh fuck.

FRANK exits.

ISOBEL I don't want to hurt you, Fergus. I've put in a request to see him. He might not agree anyway. Fergus, Chalmers was put away because of eighties forensic evidence that was creaky back then on the fourth victim. Nothing on the three other girls. He never cracked once. I'm not saying he didn't do it, he probably did, but . . .

FERGUS gets up with difficulty and in some pain.

FERGUS The hunch of a police officer has become a playful element of fictional crime-solving. But all this paper piled up neatly, filed and stored, hasn't the weight of a copper's hunch. And I tell you, Isobel, the ugliness of that man, the deep, deep ugliness, was the nearest to pestilence I ever encountered. I know he did it, did all of them. You don't need a wedding ring to know you're loved, Isobel. Don't dirty yourself. Don't bring those girls up again. It won't clear it up. Sorry. Don't do it. Sorry.

FERGUS exits. ISOBEL walks to the door and calls through.

ISOBEL Drew?

DREW Ma'am?

ISOBEL Come here a minute.

DREW enters, a bit worse for wear.

ISOBEL Drew, can you do me a favour?

DREW Anything, ma'am, especially today.

ISOBEL Thank you. I'd like you to arrange to get all the files on a closed case sent over.

DREW OK.

ISOBEL *(Writing)* Details here.

DREW Was that Black Fergus just here?

ISOBEL Yes, that was him.

DREW Man's a legend.

ISOBEL Yes, he is. Here.

She hands him the piece of paper. He looks at it and looks at her. She nods.

ISOBEL Make sure you get everything. The cassettes.
Everything.

DREW Cassettes? Oh yeah. Any reason?

Beat. DREW starts to go.

ISOBEL Drew, I'd appreciate it if you kept this to
yourself. Saves any silly questions. You know,
like the one you just asked.

DREW Gotcha, ma'am.

ISOBEL And Drew, I'm very glad you won Tail on the
Donkey.

DREW Me too. It was a good moment for me.

ISOBEL More to come, I'm sure.

DREW I hope so.

DREW exits. ISOBEL phones on her mobile.

ISOBEL Hello. *(Beat)* It's Chief Superintendent Isobel McArthur here. Yes, I e-mailed you about Alfred Chalmers. Have you had any response from him? *(Beat)* Yes, I'm sure he was surprised. *(Beat)* No, it's not an official request and really I'm . . . well, it's not that I definitely want to see him. I wanted to be clear on his position. *(Beat)* He's considering it. Right. Right. *(Beat)* No, there's no developments, just . . . let me know. Thanks. *(Beat)* Thank you. Goodbye.

A screech of someone from the party next door.