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A Dark So Deadly

Written by Stuart MacBride

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STUART MACBRIDE

A DARK SO DEADLY



HarperCollins*Publishers*



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For Sue.

Without Whom

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And saving the best for last – as always – Fiona and Grendel.

— exhibit A —

1

The wall whispers to him with splintered wooden lips. *'They'll worship you. They'll worship you. They'll worship you…'*

Its words fill the gloom, rolling around and around and through him, pulsing and pulling. *'They'll worship you.'*

Why?

Why can't he just die?

'They'll worship you: you'll be a god.'

Is this what gods feel like? Thirsty. Aching.

Every muscle in his stomach throbs from the repeated heaving. Every breath tastes of bile.

Bile and dark, gritty wood smoke. Filling the low room with its stained wooden walls.

'They'll worship you: you'll be a god.'

He slumps back, making the rusty links of chain rattle and clank against each other. Heavy around his throat. Heavier where it's bolted into the wall. The wall that talks.

'You'll be a god.'

He can't even answer it, his mouth is desert dry, tongue like a breeze-block, blood booming in his ears. Boom. Boom. Boom.

So thirsty… But if he drinks the foul brown water in the jug, he'll be sick again.

'A god.'

He turns his face to the wall. Finds a silent crack in the wood. And stares through into the other room.

'They'll worship you. They'll worship you.'

Through there, it's bright: a mix of light and shadow as someone stands on their tiptoes to slot another pole of fish into the rack. Herrings,

splayed open, tied in pairs at the tail, their flattened sides like hands. Praying.

Help me…

He opens his mouth, but it's too dry to make words. Too burned by the bile.

'They'll worship you.'

Why can't he just die?

Up above, high above the poles of praying fish, eight fingertips brush a blade of sunlight. They run their tips along its sharp edge as the body they belong to sways in the darkness. Caught in the breeze from the open door. Head down – like the fish – arms dangling. Skin darkened to an ancient oak brown.

'You'll be a god.'

Then the person on the other side disappears. Comes back with a wheelbarrow piled up with sawdust and small chunks of wood. Dumps the lot in the middle of the room. Stoops to light it. Stands back as pale tendrils of smoke coil up into the air. Backs away and closes the door.

Now the only light is the faint orange glow of the smouldering wood.

'You'll be a god.'

He slides down against the wall. Too tired and thirsty to cry. Too tired to do anything but wait for the end to come.

'They'll worship you…'

Why can't he just *die*?

— bodies of the lesser god —

Then the little girl with the lizard's tail jumped into the air with a *whoosh!* "I've got it!" she shrieked. "We can make an enormous pie out of all the bits of hair and beard!"

Ichabod scowled at her. "That's a horrid idea," he said, because it was. "No one wants to eat a cake made of hair."

"Ah, but the hair of the Gianticus Moleraticus is *magical* and tastes of everything you like in the whole world! Gumdrops and sausages, baked beans and chocolate biscuits, custard and ham." She scooped up a big handful of hair and shoved it in Ichabod's mouth. "See?"

But to Ichabod it just tasted of hair. The little girl was clearly insane…

R.M. Travis
The Amazing Adventures of Ichabod Smith (1985)

*And if some motherf*cker gonna call the police?*
I'm-a grab my nine-mill and I'm-a make him deceased.

Donny '$ick Dawg' McRoberts
'Don't Mess with the $ick Dawg'
© Bob's Speed Trap Records (2016)

2

'POLICE! COME BACK HERE, YOU WEE SOD!'

Only that wasn't really right, was it? Ainsley Dugdale *wasn't* a wee sod – he was a dirty great big lumping hulk of a sod, hammering his way along Manson Avenue. Ape-long arms and short legs pumping, scarf flittering out behind him, baldy head glinting in the morning sunshine.

Callum gritted his teeth and hammered after him.

Why did no one ever come back when they were told to? Anyone would think people didn't *want* to get arrested.

Squat grey council houses scrolled past on either side of the street, lichen-flecked pantiles and harled walls. Front gardens awash with weeds. More abandoned sofas and washing machines than gnomes and bird tables.

A couple of kids were out on their bikes, making lazy figure eights on the tarmac. The wee boy had sticky-out ears and a flat monkey nose, a roll-up sticking out the corner of his mouth – leaving coiled trails of smoke behind him. The wee girl was all blonde ringlets and pierced ears, swigging from a tin of extra-strong cider as she freewheeled. Both of them dressed in baggy jeans, trainers, and tracksuit tops. Baseball caps on the right way around, for a change.

Rap music blared out of a mobile phone. *'Cops can't take me, cos I'm strong like an oak tree, / Fast like the grand prix, / I'm-a still fly free…*'

The wee girl shifted her tinny to the other hand and raised a middle finger in salute as Callum ran past. 'HOY, PIGGY, I SHAGGED YER MUM, YEAH?'

Her wee friend made baboon hoots. 'HOOH! HOOH! HOOH! PIGGY, PIGGY, PIGGY!'

Neither of them looked a day over seven years old.

The delights of darkest Kingsmeath.

Dugdale skittered around the corner at the end of the road. Almost didn't make it – banged against the side of a rusty Renault, righted himself and kept on going, up the hill.

'RUN, PIGGY, RUN!' Little Miss Cider appeared, standing on the pedals to keep up, grinning as she flanked him. 'COME ON, PIGGY, PUT SOME WELLY IN IT!'

Her baboon friend pedalled up on the other side. 'FAT PIGGY, LAZY PIGGY!'

'Bugger off, you little sods…' Callum wheeched through the turn, into another row of grubby houses. Low garden walls guarded small squares of thistle and dandelions, ancient rusty hatchbacks up on bricks, the twisted metal brackets where satellite dishes used to be.

'COME ON, PIGGY!'

The gap was narrowing. Dugdale might have got off to an impressive sprint start, but his long game wasn't anywhere near as good – puffing and panting as he lumbered up Munro Place. Getting slower with every step.

'HOOH! HOOH! HOOH!'

He crested the hill with Callum barely ten feet behind him.

The street fell away towards a grubby line of trees and a grubbier line of houses, but Dugdale didn't stop to admire the view: he kept his head down, picking up a bit of velocity on the descent.

The wee kids freewheeled alongside him, Little Miss Cider swigging from her can. 'RUN, BALDY – PIGGY'S GONNA GET YOU!'

One last burst. Callum accelerated. 'I'M NOT TELLING YOU AGAIN!'

Dugdale snatched a glance over his shoulder – little eyes surrounded by dark circles, a nose that looked as if it'd been broken at least a dozen times, scar bisecting his bottom lip. He swore. Then put on another burst of speed.

'NO YOU DON'T!'

'HOOH! HOOH! HOOH!'

Closer. Eight foot. Seven. Six.

Here we go…

Callum leapt. Arms out – rugby-tackle style.

His shoulder caught Dugdale just above the waist, arms wrapping around the top of the big sod's legs. Holding on tight as they both crashed onto the pavement, rolling over and over. Grunts. More swearing.

A tangle of arms and legs. Then something the size of a minibus battered into Callum's face.

Now the world tasted of hot batteries.

Another punch. 'GET OFF ME!'

Callum jabbed out an elbow and connected with something solid.

'HOOH! HOOH! HOOH!'

'FIGHT, PIGGY, FIGHT!'

Then the pavement battered off the back of his head and a fist slammed into his stomach. Fire roared through his torso, accompanied by the sound of a thousand alarm clocks all ringing at once.

He swung a punch and Dugdale's nose went from broken to smashed.

'Gahhhh!' Dugdale reared back, blood spilling down over his top lip. He lashed out blind, eyes closed, and that massive fist came close enough to ruffle the hair above Callum's ear.

Distance. Get some distance.

A big black Mercedes slid past, the sweaty-sweet scent of marijuana coiling out from the back windows, a deep *BMMTSHHH*, *BMMTSHHH*, *BMMTSHHH* of hip-hop bass rattling the air. It stopped in the middle of the road, where they could get a good view of the fight. But did anyone get out to help? Of course they sodding didn't.

'KILL HIM, PIGGY, FINISH HIM!'

'HOOH! HOOH! HOOH!'

Callum scrabbled back against a rusty Volkswagen. Yanked out his handcuffs. 'Ainsley Dugdale, I'm detaining you under Section Fourteen of the Criminal Procedure – Scotland – Act 1995—'

'FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT!' The kids pulled up their bikes, blocking the pavement, making an impromptu brawl-pit in the space between the Volkswagen and a garden wall. 'COME ON: KILL HIM!'

'Shut up!' Back to Dugdale. 'Because I suspect you of having committed an offence punishable by imprisonment, namely the—'

'HOOH! HOOH! HOOH!'

'GAAAAH!' Dugdale lunged, but not at Callum. He grabbed the wee girl by the throat and yanked her off her bike.

Her tin of cider hit the deck and bounced, sending out a spurt of frothy urine-coloured liquid. 'Ulk…' Eyes wide, both hands clutching onto Dugdale's forearm, legs pinwheeling and kicking at the air.

Oh sodding hell. And things had been going so well right up till that point.

'No, no, no!' Callum scrambled to his feet. 'That's *enough*. Let the girl go.'

Her wee mate hurled his roll-up. It burst against Dugdale's chest in a little hiss of sparks. 'LET HER GO, YOU DIRTY PAEDO!'

'Come on, Dugdale … Ainsley. You don't want to hurt a kid, right?' Hands out, open, nice and safe. 'You're not that kind of guy, are you?'

'PAEDO! PAEDO! PAEDO!'

Callum hissed the words out the side of his mouth. 'You are *not* helping.'

Dugdale stuck out his other hand. 'Money!'

'Come on, Ainsley, let the girl go and—'

'GIVE US YOUR MONEY!' He gave the girl a shake, sending her legs swinging wildly as her face turned a darker shade of puce. 'NOW!'

'OK, OK. Just let her breathe.' Callum dug out his battered old wallet. The one with the threadbare lining sticking out. He took the last tenner and crumpled fiver from inside. 'Here.' He placed the cash on the floor.

'Is that *it*?' Dugdale glowered at the two sorry notes. 'ALL OF IT, OR I SNAP HER NECK IN HALF!'

Baboon Boy's chant died. 'Paedo…?'

The kicks were getting weaker: those Nike trainers barely moving.

Her wee friend snivelled. Wiped his top lip on the back of his sleeve. 'Please, mister. Don't hurt my sister…'

'That's all the money I've got, OK? Now let the girl go.'

Dugdale growled, then chucked the little girl at Callum.

He ducked for the fifteen quid as Callum dropped the tatty wallet and caught her wee body before it hit the pavement. And that's when everything slowed down.

The tatty wallet bounced off the paving slabs, spinning away, its torn lining waving like a flag.

'Aaaggggh…' She hauled in a huge whoop of air, both hands wrapped around her throat – as if Dugdale hadn't done a good enough job throttling her and she was having a go herself.

But Dugdale didn't snatch up the money, he kept on going, smashing into Callum and the wee girl, sending them slamming back into the Volkswagen. Rocking it on its springs.

A fist connected with Callum's ribs. Arms and legs tangled. Flashes of sky, then concrete, then rusty metal, then sky again.

Then bang – everything was at full speed again.

Callum yanked the pepper spray from his jacket pocket. The little girl wriggled her way out from between them, trainers digging into his thigh as she went. Callum flipped the cap off the spray and thumbed the button, sending a squirt of burning pepper stink out at Dugdale's face.

Missed.

Dugdale didn't. He rammed his hand into Callum's crotch, grabbed hold, and *squeezed*.

Oh *God*…

But when Callum opened his mouth to scream, all that came out was a strangled wheeze – eyes wide as every single ache and pain in his body disappeared, replaced by the thermonuclear explosion going off in his scrotum. It raced out through his stomach, down his legs, up into his chest – a shockwave ripping out from ground zero as Dugdale twisted his handful like a rusty doorknob.

Oh sodding Jesus…

Dugdale let go, but the nuclear war still raged.

No…

Water filled Callum's eyes, making the word go all soft focus, but the pain remained pin-sharp. He lashed out with the pepper spray, swinging it in an arc with the button held down.

Someone bellowed in pain.

Then scuffing feet.

Argh…

The clatter of a very large man tripping over a fallen bicycle.

A dull *thunk*, like a watermelon bouncing off a coffee table.

Oh that *hurt*…

'BLOODY PAEDO!' Some more *thunks*.

'Come on, leave him!'

Thunk, *thunk*, *thunk*. 'BLOODY BALDY PAEDO WANKER!'

Ow…

'Willow, come on! Before he gets up!'

The sound of someone spitting.

'Grab the cash, Benny. No, you spaz, get the wallet too!'

Then trainers on concrete, the rattle of bicycles being dragged upright, and the growl of tyres fading away into the distance.

One last cry of, 'PIGGY, PIGGY, PIGGY!'

The sound of that big black Mercedes pulling away now the floor-show was over.

And silence.

Callum cursed and panted and wobbled his way up to his knees, one hand clutching his tattered groin.

Sodding … for … *ooogh*…

Deep breaths.

Nope. Not helping.

He scrubbed a hand across his watery eyes.

Dugdale lay on his front, one hand behind his back the other limp in the gutter. His face looked as if someone had driven over it with a ride-on lawnmower.

Callum dragged himself over and slapped on the cuffs. 'You're nicked.'

Ow…

'Little monsters…' Never mind saying *thank you* – no, that was too much to hope for these days, he'd only saved her life, not as if it was *that* big a deal – but did they have to take his sodding wallet?

Dugdale twitched and groaned, eyes still closed, the blood crusting on his battered nose. A swathe of red crossed his face, following the pepper spray's less than delicate path, swollen and angry looking. Like the lump on his head. It was going to be impressive when it finished growing – about the size and colour of a small aubergine. Probably have himself a gargantuan headache when he finally woke up. Maybe concussion too.

Good. Served him right.

Callum pulled out his mobile, staying where he was – standing, hunched over almost double, one hand on his knee, holding him upright as he dialled.

Three rings and then a woman's voice came on the line, sounding small and concerned. *'Hello?'*

'Elaine, it's me.'

'Callum? Are you OK? You don't sound OK. Is everything OK?'

He gritted his teeth as an aftershock rippled its way through his groin. 'No. Can you phone the bank? I need you to cancel my debit and credit card. Someone's snatched them.'

A sigh. *'Oh, Callum, not your dad's wallet…'*

'Don't start, please. It'll be bad enough when McAdams gets here, don't need you kicking the party off early.'

Silence.

Yeah, way to go, Callum. Smooth. Nice and understanding.

He took a deep breath. 'Sorry, it's… I'm not having the greatest of days.'

'I'm not your enemy, Callum. I know it's been difficult for you.'

Understatement of the year. 'All I get is snide comments, nasty little digs, and crap. It's been three solid weeks of—'

'It's for the best though, remember? For Peanut's sake?'

Peanut.

He closed his eyes. Tried to make it sound as if he meant it: 'Yeah.'

'We need the money, Callum. We need the maternity pay to—'

'Yeah. Right. I know. It's just…' He wiped a hand over his face. 'Never mind. It'll be fine.'

'And we really *appreciate it, me and Peanut.'* A pause. *'Speaking of Peanut, you know what he'd totally love? Nutella. And some pickled dill cucumbers. Not gherkins: the cucumbers, from the Polish deli on Castle Hill? Oh, and some onion rolls too.'*

'They stole my *wallet*, Elaine. I—'

'I didn't ask *to get pregnant, Callum.'* A strangled noise came down the phone, like a cross between a grunt and a sigh. *'Sorry. I don't… There are times when I need a bit of support coping with all this.'*

Support? *Seriously*?

'How am I not supporting you? I put my hand up, didn't I? I took the blame, even though it was nothing to do with—'

'I know, I know. I'm sorry. It's…' Another sigh. *'Don't worry about the Nutella and stuff, it's only cravings. I'll make do with whatever's knocking about here.'*

He limped over to the garden wall and lowered himself onto it with a wince. Took yet another deep breath. Scrunched a hand over his eyes. 'I'm sorry, Elaine. It's not you, it's… Like I said, I'm having a *terrible* day.'

'It'll get better, I promise. I love you, OK?'

'Yeah, I know it will.' It had to, because it couldn't possibly get any worse.

'Do you love me and Peanut too?'

'Course I do.'

A shiny red Mitsubishi Shogun pulled into the kerb, the huge four-by-four's window buzzing down as Callum levered himself up to his feet. His crumpled suit and crumpled body reflected back at him in the glittering showroom paintwork.

'Got to go.' He hung up and slipped the phone back in his pocket.

'Constable Useless.' A thin, lined face frowned through the open car window, its greying Vandyke framed by disappointed jowls. The chin-warmer was little more than stubble, matching the patchy salt-and-pepper hair on that jellybean of a head. 'Do these old eyes deceive me? Did you *catch* Dugdale?'

Callum wobbled up to his feet, one hand on his ruptured testicles, the other holding onto the Shogun for support. 'Oh: ha, ha.' Another wave of burning glass washed through him, leaving him grimacing.

'He's been unconscious for a couple of minutes. You want to take him straight to the hospital, or risk the Duty Doctor?'

Please say hospital, please say hospital. At least there a nice nurse might have an icepack and a few kind words for his mangled groin.

DS McAdams raised an eyebrow. 'I am shocked, Callum. Didn't he have enough cash? No nice bribe for you?'

'Sod off, Sarge.' He let go of his crotch for a moment, pointing off down the hill. Winced. Then cupped his aching balls again. 'Pair of kids got my wallet. We need to get after them.'

'If I had to guess. The reason you're hunched in pain. You have met *The Claw*!' He held up one hand, the fingers curled into a cruel hook, then squashed an invisible scrotum. 'Dugdale's claw attacks. Crush and squish, the pain is great. Bringing hard men low.'

Callum stared at him. 'They – got – my – wallet!'

The frown became a grin. 'A well-turned haiku. It is a beautiful thing. You ignorant spud.' He actually counted the syllables out on his fingers as he spoke.

'For your information, *Sarge*, I've never taken a bribe in my life. OK? Not a single sodding penny. No perks, no wee gifts, nothing. So you can all go screw yourselves.' He limped over to the back door and swung it open. 'Now are you going to help me get Dugdale in the car or not?'

'That's the trouble with your generation: no poetry in your souls. No education, no class, and no moral fibre.'

'Thanks for nothing.' He bent down. Winced. Clenched his jaw. Then hauled Dugdale's huge and heavy backside across the pavement and up onto the back seat.

'He better not bleed. On my new upholstery. I just had it cleaned.'

'Tough.' Some wrestling, a bit of forcing, a shove, and Dugdale was more or less in the recovery position. Well, except for his hands being cuffed behind his back. But at least now he *probably* wouldn't choke on his own tongue. Or vomit.

Mind you, if he spewed his breakfast all over Detective Sergeant McAdams' shiny new four-by-four, at least that would be something. Assuming McAdams didn't make Callum clean it up. Which he would.

Git.

Callum clunked the door shut, hobbled around to the passenger side and lowered himself into the seat. Crumpled forward until his forehead rested against the dashboard. 'Ow…'

'Seatbelt.' The car slid away from the kerb.

Callum closed his eyes. 'Think they turned right onto Grant Street.

If you hurry we can still catch them: wee boy in jeans and a blue tracksuit top, wee girl in jeans and a red one. About six or seven years old. Both on bikes.'

'You got mugged by toddlers?' A gravelly laugh rattled out in the car. 'That's pathetic even for you.'

'They're getting away!'

'We're not going chasing after little kiddies, Constable. I have *much* more important things to do than clean up your disasters.'

'That's it. Stop the car.' Callum straightened up and bared his teeth. 'Come on: let's go. You and me. I battered the crap out of Dugdale, I can do the same for you.'

'Oh don't be such a baby.'

'I'm not kidding: stop – the – car.'

'Really, DC MacGregor? You don't think you're in enough trouble as it is? How's it going to look if you assault a senior officer who's dying of cancer? Think it through.' The car jolted and bumped, then swung around to the left, heading down towards Montrose Road. 'And any time our workplace badinage gets too much for you, feel free to pop into Mother's office with your resignation. Do us all a favour.' He slowed for the junction. 'Until then, try to behave like an *actual* police officer.'

Callum's hands curled into fists, so tight the knuckles ached. 'I swear to *God*—'

'Now put your seatbelt on and try not to say anything stupid for the next fifteen minutes. I'll not have you spoiling my remarkably good mood.' He poked the radio and insipid pop music dribbled out of the speakers. 'You see, Constable Useless, sometimes life gives you lemons, and sometimes it gives you vodka. *Today* is a vodka day.'

The jingly blandness piffled to a halt and a smoke-gravelled woman's voice came through. *'Hmmm, not sure about that one myself. You're listening to* Midmorning Madness *on Castlewave FM with me, Annette Peterson, and today my extra-special guest is author and broadcaster, Emma Travis-Wilkes.'*

McAdams put a hand over his heart, as if he was about to pledge allegiance. 'Today is a *caviar* day.'

'Glad to be here, Annette.'

'A champagne and strawberries day.'

'Now, a little bird tells me you're writing a book about your dad, Emma. Of course he created Russell the Magic Rabbit*, Ichabod Smith, and* Imelda's Miraculous Dustbin*, but he's probably best known for the children's classic,* Open the Coffins.'

'A chocolate and nipple clamps—'

'All right! I get it: everything's just sodding *great*.' Callum shifted in his seat, setting his testicles aching again. 'One of us got thwacked in the balls, here.'

'That's right. He's given joy to so many people, and now that he's … well, Alzheimer's is a cruel mistress. But it's been a real privilege to swim in the pool of his life again.'

'Pfff…' McAdams curled his top lip. 'Listen to this pretentious twaddle. Just because she's got a famous dad, she gets to plug her book on the radio. What about *my* book? Where's *my* interview?'

'And it's lovely to see these memories light up his face, it's like he's right back there again.'

'Cliché. And, by the way, unless his face is *actually* glowing like a lightbulb, that's physical hyperbole, you hack.'

Callum glowered across the car. 'We should never have chipped in for that creative writing class.'

McAdams grinned back at him. 'My heart: creative. My soul, it soars with the words. Divinity: mine.'

'Wonderful stuff. Now, let's have a bit of decent *music, shall we? Here's one of the acts appearing at Tartantula this weekend: Catnip Jane, and "Once Upon a Time in Dundee".'*

A banjo and cello launched into a sinister waltz, over a weird thumping rhythm as McAdams pulled out of the junction, heading left instead of right.

Silly old sod.

Callum sighed. 'You're going the wrong way.' He pointed across the swollen grey river, past the docks and the industrial units, towards the thick granite blade of Castle Hill. 'Division Headquarters is *that* direction. We need to get Dugdale booked in and seen to.'

'Meh, he'll keep.' That skeletal grin had widened. 'It's a vodka day, remember? We, my useless little friend, have finally got our hands on a murder!'

3

The first drop of rain sparkled against the windscreen, caught in a golden shaft of sunlight as McAdams' huge four-by-four slid past the last few houses on the edge of Kingsmeath. A second drop joined it. Then a third. Then a whole heap of them.

McAdams stuck the wipers on, setting them moaning and groaning their way across the glass, smearing the rain into grubby arcs. He pinned his mobile phone between his shoulder and ear, freeing his hand to change gears. Accelerating up the hill. 'Yeah. … Yeah, Dugdale was there. … No. … Not a word of a lie, Mother: the new boy *actually* caught him. That's right: his anonymous tip-off paid off.' He cast a glance across the car at Callum. 'I know, I know. … Ha! That's what I said.'

Callum folded his arms and pushed back into his seat. Stared out of the window at the dull green fields and their dull-grey sheep. The ache in his groin wasn't a full-on testicular migraine any more, it'd settled to more of a dull throbbing – each pulse marking time with the groaning windscreen wipers. 'Oh you're both *so* hilarious.'

'What did we say about you keeping your mouth shut?' Back to the phone. 'No, not you, Mother: Constable Useless here. … Yeah, yeah. Exactly: an actual murder. How long has it been?'

Probably never see his wallet again.

McAdams put his foot down, overtaking a sputtering Mini. 'You on your way? … Uh-huh. … Yeah, I couldn't believe it either. Since when does the great Detective Chief Inspector Poncy Powel hand over a murder investigation to the likes of us? … Exactly.'

More fields. More sheep.

OK, so it was just a scruffy, tatty lump of leather and the lining was falling apart, but it had sentimental value.

Bloody kids.

'Did he? … No! … No!' Laughter. 'And did you? … Sodding hell. … Yeah, he'll *love* that.'

Bloody Dugdale too.

He was just visible in the rear-view mirror, lying there with his mouth hanging open, face crusted with blood and bogies. Well, if Dugdale died in custody there was no way Callum was taking the rap for it. If anything happened it was McAdams' fault.

Accepting blame for Elaine's cock-up was one thing, but McAdams? He could sod right off.

'Uh-huh. We're about … five minutes away? Maybe less? … Still can't believe it: a real murder! How long's it been? … Right. Yup. OK. See you there.' He poked a button on his phone's screen then slid the thing back in his pocket, big smile plastered across his skeletal face.

'Am I allowed to ask where we're going?'

'No.'

Git.

McAdams took one hand off the wheel and pointed through the windscreen. 'We go where life rots. Where man's discarded dreams die. We go … to *The Tip*.' Fingers twitching with each syllable.

A large white sign loomed at the side of the road: 'Oldcastle Municipal Recycling And Waste Processing Facility'. Someone had scrawled 'Twinned With Cumbernauld!' across the bottom in green graffiti.

The Shogun slowed for the turning, leaving the well-ordered tarmac for a wide gravel road acned with potholes and lined with whin bushes. Their jagged dark-green spears rattled in the rain.

It was getting heavier, bouncing off the rutted track as McAdams navigated his shiny new car between the water-filled craters and up to a cordon of blue-and-white 'Police' tape.

He buzzed down the window and smiled at the lanky drip guarding the line. 'Two cheeseburgers, a Coke, and a chocolate milkshake please.'

A sigh and a sniff. Then Officer Drip wiped her nose on the sleeve of her high-viz jacket, sending water dribbling from the brim of her peaked cap. 'Do you *honestly* think it's the first time I've heard that today?'

'Cheer up, Constable. A little rain won't kill you.' He nodded at the cordon. 'You got our body?'

'Depends. You on the list?' She dug a clipboard from the depths of her jacket and passed it through the window.

McAdams flipped through the top three sheets, making a low whistling noise. 'There's a *lot* of people here. All for one dead little body?'

'Oh you'd be surprised.'

He printed two more names on the last sheet in blue biro, then handed the clipboard back. 'There we are, right at the end. Now be a good girl and get out of the way. It's the opening chapters: I need to draw the readers in, establish myself as the protagonist, and get on with solving the murder.'

Constable Drip frowned at their names, then into the car. Her mouth tightened as she stared at the bloodied and unconscious Dugdale lying across the back seat. 'Looks like you've already *got* a body.'

'Oh, this one's not dead, it's just resting. DC MacGregor decided to try his hand at a little police brutality.'

'MacGregor…?' She peered at the list again, then across the car, top lip curling. 'So it *is* you.'

Callum stared right back. 'Don't: I'm not in the mood.'

She shook her head, stowed her clipboard away, then unhooked a length of the tape barricade and waved them through.

McAdams grinned across the car at Callum. 'My, my, Constable. You just can't stop making friends, can you?'

No.

'That offer of an arse-kicking is still valid, Sarge.'

'Yes, because people don't hate you enough already.'

The Shogun pitched and yawed through the potholes like a boat. God knew how big the rubbish tip was, but from the wide, lumpy road, it stretched all the way to the horizon. A vast sea of black plastic, gulls wheeling and screaming in the air above – flecks of evil white, caught against the heavy grey sky.

And the *smell*…

Even with the car windows wound up it was something special. The rancid stench of rotting meat and vegetables mingled with the sticky-brown reek of used nappies, all underpinned by the dark peppery odour of black plastic left to broil in the sun.

McAdams slipped the four-by-four in behind a line of police vehicles and grubby Transit vans. Had to be, what, eight cars? Twelve if you counted the unmarked ones. About three-quarters of the dayshift, all out here playing on the tip.

The sarcastic half-arsed-poetry-spouting git was right: this was an awful lot of people for one dead body.

McAdams hauled on the handbrake. 'Right, Constable, make yourself

useful for a change and go fetch us a couple of Smurf suits, extra-large. Ainsley and I need to have a little chat.'

A chat?

'He's *unconscious*, Sarge. He needs a doctor. I told you he—'

'Don't be stupid.' McAdams turned in his seat, staring through into the back. 'Give it up, Ainsley, you're not fooling anyone.'

Dugdale didn't move.

'Don't make me come back there, because if I have to…'

One of Dugdale's eyes cracked open. 'I'm dying. Got a brain haemorrhage, or something.'

'You have to have a *brain* to have a brain haemorrhage, Ainsley. What you've got is a lump of solid yuck wrapped in ugly. Now, Constable Naïve here is going to sod off like a good little boy and you're going to tell me *all* about what Big Johnny Simpson's up to now he's walked free.' McAdams made a dismissive little waving gesture in Callum's direction. 'Go on, Constable. Two Smurf suits, at the double. I won't ask again.'

One punch in the face. Just one. Right in the middle of his smug, wrinkly face…

What was the point?

It wouldn't change anything.

So Callum gritted his teeth and stepped out into the stinking mud. Closed the car door. Counted out his own muttered haiku. 'Away boil your head. You patronising arse-bag. I hope you get piles.'

Out here the smell was eye-watering. Like jamming your head in a dead badger.

He turned up his collar and hurried through the slimy mud to the nearest Transit van, sheltering in the lee of its open back doors. From here, Oldcastle lay spread out beneath the heavy grey lid of cloud like a cancer beneath the skin. The vast prow of Castle Rock loomed out from the other side of the valley, wound round with the ancient cobbled streets of Castle Hill; the dark sprawl of Camburn Woods peered out from its shadow; the warehouses, shopping centres, and big glass Victorian train station punctuated Logansferry to the left of that. Spires and minarets stabbed up between the slate roofs on the other side of the river, like some vast beast was trapped under the surface, trying to claw its way out. And on *this* side: the grubby maze of council houses, high-rise blocks of flats, and derelict terraces of Kingsmeath; the rest of the city, hidden by a line of trees at the edge of the tip.

Quite a view for a rancid mass of black plastic bags and mouldering filth.

He reached into the Transit and helped himself to two large blue Tyvek oversuits, two sets of plastic bootees, a pair of facemasks and matching safety goggles. What every well-dressed Scene of Crime officer was wearing this, and every other, season.

One of them appeared from the other side of the van, the hood of her SOC suit thrown back to reveal a sweaty tangle of dark brown hair. Her thin, pale oval face shone with sweat. She took a swig from a leopard-print Thermos, the words coming out on a waft of coffee breath with a faint side-order of Aberdonian. 'Oh, it's *you*.'

'Don't start, Cecelia, OK? I get enough of that from McAdams, don't need the Scene Examination Branch chipping in.' He tucked the suits under his arm. 'We're here for the body.'

She curled her top lip. 'Which one? Started digging at nine this morning and we've already turned up four of the things. Seven if you count those.' She nodded in the vague direction of a red plastic cool box and helped herself to a wad of paper towels. 'Three left feet, severed just above the ankle.'

'Well … maybe their owners aren't dead? Maybe they're limping about somewhere, wondering where their other shoe's gone?'

'Urgh. I'm melting in here.' Cecelia scrubbed the paper towels across her damp face, turning it matt again. 'Bet they don't have this problem in G Division. Bet if you go digging in a Glasgow tip all you turn up is rubbish. Can't open a bin-bag in Oldcastle without finding a sodding corpse.' A sigh. 'Have you got any idea how much work it is to process crime scenes for *seven* different murder enquiries, all at the same time?' She ticked them off on her fingers. 'One stabbing, one shotgun blast to the face, one God-knows-what, and I'm pretty sure the body we found over by the recycling centre is Karen Turner. You know: ran that brothel on Shepard Lane? Beaten to death.'

At least that explained why most of Oldcastle Division was in attendance, picking their way through the landfill landscape.

'Wow.' Callum frowned out at the acres and acres of black-plastic bags. Suppose it wasn't *that* surprising the tip was hoaching with corpses – if you had to dispose of a body, where better than here? Clearly the city's criminal element didn't approve of littering. 'Maybe we should set up a recycling box at the front gate, so people can dump their dead bodies responsibly?'

She puffed out her cheeks. 'We should never have started digging here. Just asking for trouble.'

'So, come on then: which one's ours?'

'Body number three: the God-knows-what. That way.' She pointed her Thermos at the middle distance, off to the right, where a handful of blue-suited figures was wrestling with a white plastic tent. 'And Callum?'

He turned back to her. 'What?'

'I know it wasn't you.'

What wasn't…?

She rolled her eyes. 'There's no point standing there looking glaikit. You didn't cock-up that crime scene, Elaine did.'

Oh.

Heat bloomed in his cheeks. 'No she didn't.'

'Yes she did. Elaine worked for me, so I *know* it wasn't you. One more strike and they'd have fired her.'

He tucked one of the Tyvek suits under his arm. 'I've got no idea what you're talking about.'

Cecelia shook her head, sending a little trickle of sweat running into the elasticated neck of her suit. 'You're a daft sod, Callum MacGregor.'

True.

'Bye, Cecelia.' He turned and marched back to the Shogun.

McAdams was still in the car, mobile clamped to his ear, so Callum struggled into one of the SOC Smurf suits – zipping it up to the chin, hood up. Stood there in the manky mud, rain pattering off his Smurfy shoulders and head.

Come on, you lanky git. Get off the phone.

A rattley green Fiat Panda lumbered its way up the track towards them, bringing a cloud of blue-grey smoke with it. Dents in the bonnet, dents in the passenger side, a long scrape along the driver's door and front wing. Duct tape holding the wing mirror on.

Great, because having to deal with DS Sodding McAdams wasn't bad enough.

The Panda spluttered to a halt behind McAdams' immaculate Castleview Tractor, and its driver peered out through a fogged-up windscreen as the wipers made angry-donkey noises across the glass.

Mother.

She looked right at him and the smile died on her face.

Oh joy.

He gave her a nod. As if that was going to make any difference.

Mother struggled her way out into the rain.

The sleeves of her black fleece were rolled up to the elbows, exposing two large pale forearms – tattoos standing out like faded newsprint

against the doughy flesh. A dolphin. Two swallows holding up a little banner with 'Love Never Dies' on it. A thistle and a rose wrapped around a dagger. What looked like a tribute to the Bay City Rollers – all mullets and tartan scarfs. She glanced about, sending her mass of tight ginger curls bobbing. Sniffed. 'Where's Andy?' Apparently completely unfazed by the rain.

'DS McAdams is in the car, making some calls.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'Have you been upsetting him?'

'Upsetting *him*? He wasn't the one Dugdale tried to neuter! Come on, Mother, how come every—'

'Ah yes, Andy said you'd had a run-in with The Claw.' A tiny smile. 'And how many times do I have to tell you: you haven't earned the right to call me "Mother". As far as you're concerned it's Boss, Guv, or Detective Inspector. Are we crystal?'

'It wasn't a "run-in", Dugdale resisted arrest. Violently. And *for the record*,' Callum pointed at the back seat of the Shogun, where Dugdale was now sitting up, 'I said we should take him to the hospital, but DS McAdams refused.'

The tiny smile grew. 'Nobody likes a clype, Constable.'

A clunk and McAdams emerged from the car. 'Mother…' A frown. 'MacGregor, why are you wearing that SOC suit?'

Callum looked down at his blue Tyvek body. 'You told me to get two Smurf—'

'One for me and one for *Mother*, you idiot. Why the hell would we want you messing up our crime scene?'

He clenched his fists. Stepped forwards. 'You think I won't—'

'All right, that's enough.' Mother held a hand up. 'Andy, we're going to cut the wee boy some slack on account of The Claw. He can come with us.' The hand came down again, till it pointed at Callum. 'Don't make me regret this.'

'Yes, Boss.'

'Now go find someone to keep an eye on Ainsley here,' she nodded at Dugdale in the back seat, 'and fetch me a Smurf suit. We've got a dead body to gawp at.'