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Written in Bones

Written by James Oswald

Published by Michael Joseph

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Written in Bones

JAMES OSWALD



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This one's for Janie, who gave
me the gift of reading

I

He is weightless, lost. He floats on the air like the lightest of feathers. Wind tugs at him, ruffles his hair like an affectionate aunt. Dimly he is aware of motion, of falling, but that is something from another time, another life.

Warm air caresses his skin like a lover's embrace. Like a womb surrounding him, keeping him safe from the pain and suffering outside. Only the slow tumbling upsets his calm, his fugue. He should be worried, he knows. Something happened, but for the life of him he can't remember what. The life of him. His life.

The wind is fiercer now, tugging tears from the corners of his eyes. He had not realized they were open, but now he begins to see things. Shapes of darkness, pinpricks of light, rolling and flashing and whizzing past him like fireflies, like angry wasps.

He wakes more quickly now, understands that he has been drugged. Sluggish thoughts try to make sense of his surroundings, but it is too dark, the wind too strong. He remembers the leather tourniquet and bulging vein, the prick of the needle in his skin, the flush of ecstasy as the heroin surged through him. But that was a lifetime ago. He found help, cleaned up, quit. How could he have fallen back into those old ways?

Fallen.

Falling.

He is falling.

The realization wakes him like a bucket of ice-cold water. Forgotten arms snap out from his body in a futile reflex. There is nothing to catch but air. And now he knows the pinprick lights are not fireflies but streetlamps, lit windows, the headlights of endless cars. The city.

Instinctively, he tenses, raises his arms to his face to protect it, even as he understands there is no protection from what is to come. Another lazy tumble brings him closer still to the ground, and now the lights are a thousand thousand fragile glass bulbs outlining the trees directly beneath him. Festooned through winter branches, they reach up to embrace him with fingers of brittle, stabbing wood.

He hits with an explosion of noise. A violence that drives the air from his lungs and the sight from his eyes. He is pierced, rent, ripped apart. The shock should have killed him, but the drugs dull the pain, make everything feel once removed. The final lurch brings him to a halt, forces his eyes open, even as he feels something hard slide deep into his guts. He is still high off the ground, staring down at a path scattered with broken branches and shattered lights. Wires fizz and pop close by as his mouth fills with warm liquid, an iron tang to it like electricity. The warmth leaches out of him quickly as he struggles to breathe, chokes and coughs out chunky dark blood. It falls to the ground in lazy slow motion, his vision tunnelling down to the point of impact. And as the darkness welcomes him, a flash of panic arcs across his dying mind.

He cannot remember his name.

2

'Jesus wept. It's brass monkeys out here.'

Detective Inspector Tony McLean stamped his feet and breathed steam into cupped hands, desperately trying to get some heat back into the tips of his fingers. February could be brutal in the city, and lately someone seemed to have rewritten the weather rules. Deep snow clung to the Pentland Hills, chilling the air as it fell down into the city and pooled in the Meadows. He'd remembered to grab his overcoat on the way out of the house, but in the rush to get here he'd forgotten his hat and gloves. He was regretting that now.

Standing beside him, Detective Sergeant Grumpy Bob Laird had managed to dress better for the weather, wrapped in a fluorescent green jacket that looked like it would double as a sleeping bag for an Arctic expedition. His balding head was enveloped in a garish woolly hat that he had to be wearing for a bet. Even so, the end of his nose glowed red from the cold.

'Least it's not raining.'

McLean followed Grumpy Bob's gaze up to the sky, palest blue in the early morning. The call had come through before dawn, waking him on what was his first day back after three months of suspension, psych evaluation and meandering interviews with Professional Standards. He'd hoped for a gentle reintroduction and a light workload, but that was wishful thinking. Instead, a control operative

who sounded as tired as McLean felt had told him there was a dead body on the Meadows and he was the only senior detective available. McLean had considered telling him to check his rosters again, but he knew it wasn't Control's fault. Every team was understaffed and overworked, even Specialist Crime Division, and at least the scene was reasonably close to home. He'd been surprised to find Grumpy Bob already there when he arrived, but then the old sergeant lived even closer.

'What have we got then, Bob? Apart from chilblains, that is.' The two of them stood on the frosty grass of the Meadows, far enough away from the bustle of the forensics team to avoid being scowled at. The centre of attention seemed to be one of the ancient trees that lined the path from the site of the old Royal Infirmary. Jawbone Walk, if memory served. The whale jawbone arch that had given the path its name had been removed some years earlier for restoration, and McLean couldn't remember whether it had ever been put back again. He thought about going to have a look, but then remembered why he was here.

'Nasty one, sir. And odd. Best if you have a look for yourself.' Grumpy Bob nodded his head in the direction of the trees that lined the main road. A cherry picker was being reversed on to the grass, directed by a white-suited technician. The high-pitched electronic shriek of its warning buzzer sang counterpoint to the dull, omnipresent roar of the city, and only then did McLean notice the lack of traffic noise nearby.

'They closed the road?' He looked off towards the Lochrin end, then turned to Newington and Sciennes. 'That's going to be popular.'

'Didn't have much choice. Not going to get him down otherwise.' Grumpy Bob pointed up into the bare canopy of the tallest tree, and McLean saw what he meant. A wych elm like many of the older trees on the Meadows, it stretched upward thirty metres or more, branches piercing the morning sky like broken, arthritic fingers. Only these fingers had caught something bloodied and grisly.

His first thought was of childhood holidays in the Highlands, clumping, bored, behind his grandmother as she hiked over rough moorland, fishing rod in hand, to some remote loch or river. The land was given over to heather and sheep as far as the eye could see, only the occasional square of dark green conifers to break up the scenery. Burns ran through the gullies, chattering peat water over rocks and churning it into bubbles that looked like the glasses of Coca-Cola he was only very seldom allowed. Every so often they would come across the carcass of some unfortunate animal, drowned and swept away in a spate, left tangled in roots high above the stream, as if the trees had reached out and snatched it from the rushing water.

It wasn't the roots that had dragged this man into their deathly embrace, but the twisted, bare branches. He sprawled high up in the leafless canopy, twisted into a grotesque parody of a body so that it was hard to make out what was arm and what was leg. There was no mistaking his head, though, even at this distance. It hung down from a semi-naked torso skewered by the sharp point of a broken branch, features battered so as to be unidentifiable. Blood dribbled from what must have been his mouth and nose, slicking the trunk and spattering the ground.

'Good God. How on earth did it get up there?'

McLean looked around, recognizing the voice. Angus Cadwallader, the city pathologist, looked like a man who had been roused from too little sleep. Grey skin bagged around his eyes and his smile was tired.

'Morning, Angus. Been burning the midnight oil, have you?'

Cadwallader grimaced. 'Don't start. I'm getting too old for these early starts. And I really don't like heights.'

'You want to go up and see him? Can't just let the experts bring him down for you?'

'And miss a vital clue that cracks the case for you?' The pathologist slapped his friend gently on the shoulder. 'Don't worry. You can go up and have a look after if you want.' He turned away before McLean could respond. The cherry picker was in place now, a forensic technician already on board the lifting platform. A short pause as the pathologist scrambled in to join him, and then they were being lofted up into the tree.

McLean scanned the crime scene, pleased to see that, as well as closing the road, a wide cordon had been strung around the whole area. Uniformed officers were keeping the early morning gawkers away, although, to be fair, the frozen weather was helping. Not many people out and about, which at least made their job easier for now. Grumpy Bob had disappeared, no doubt in search of a cuppa. Heading to the road edge, McLean found a cluster of squad cars, forensics vans and a fire engine all parked in a line. Uniformed constables huddled around one large van bearing the Police Scotland logo. Chatting amongst themselves like schoolchildren in the playground, they didn't notice his approach until he was upon them.

'Who's in charge here?'

The nearest constable startled, slopping hot tea from a mug she had been warming her hands around. 'What the fu–?' She turned swiftly, angry face rapidly changing to fear as she realized who had spoken. 'Oh. Sorry, sir. Didn't know Specialist Crime were here already.'

'Aye, well, some of us wish we weren't. Any more of that tea going?' McLean nodded at the mug, trying to remember the constable's name.

'Here. Have this one.' She held out the mug. 'I'll get another and fetch Sergeant Stephen over.'

McLean took the mug more in surprise than greed, although he had to admit the warmth was welcome. Less so the four or five teaspoons of sugar that made the tea all but undrinkable. He slurped some down anyway as he waited for the constable to return. The others eyed him nervously, as if he were some kind of irascible headmaster, ready to hand out detentions on a whim. Was it his imagination, or were all police officers looking younger these days?

'Anyone know who reported the body?'

'Heard it was a dog walker, sir. Something about a kid, too. The sergeant knows all the details.' One of the young constables nodded at a point behind him, and McLean turned to see the female PC return, a sergeant at her side. He had met Sergeant Kenneth Stephen before, most notably in the case of a spate of hangings in the city a couple of years back. He was a good officer, as could be seen by the efficient way the crime scene was being managed.

'Morning, Kenny. See you're working the early shift again.'

'Aye, sucker for punishment, that's me.' The sergeant

smiled, then frowned as he noticed the group of constables with their mugs. 'Tea break's over, you lot. I need you all working the cordon. Keep the public back till we've got the body down.'

McLean took another swig of over-sweet tea to hide his amusement as the constables muttered and grumbled away. The female PC whose tea he was drinking made to join them, but Sergeant Stephen stopped her.

'Not you, Harrison. You can help the inspector here. Make a good impression and you might even get that transfer to Plain Clothes you've been after. Can't see why you'd want it, mind.'

McLean looked at the young woman. Her name didn't ring any bells, but then it had been a while since he'd had much direct contact with uniforms. That's what happened when you were out of the loop for three months, he guessed. There had been a lot of new faces at the station each time he'd been back for briefings, interviews and those dreaded counselling sessions. Some notable missing faces, too, as more than a handful of promising young detectives took the offer of severance pay intended for the older staff and quit to find less stressful jobs. Most of the new constables eyed him nervously or scuttled away whenever they saw him. Quite what scurrilous rumours the junior officers spread while he was away he had no idea, but he was used to being the station pariah. PC Harrison didn't seem to be as scared of him as most, holding his gaze, her expression one that would win her many a game of poker. He broke first, turning back to speak to the sergeant.

'What's the story then, Kenny? Who's our man up in the tree, and who found him?'

'As to who, I've no idea. We've not been able to get a good look at him yet and he's pretty badly smashed up by the branches. Young lad found him. Out walking his dog before school. Apparently, he heard something crash into the trees, thought he was being attacked.' Sergeant Stephen pointed at the spot directly beneath the man, where a nest of broken branches scattered around the frosty tarmac.

'And he called us, this boy?'

'Christ, no. Poor wee thing ran home, terrified. His mum called us. After she'd come out here and had a look for herself.'

'Where are they now?'

'Back home. They live in one of the tenements up Marchmont Crescent.' Sergeant Stephen pointed across the road to the rows of buildings that lined the south side of the park. 'Family Liaison's with them at the moment. We'll get a proper statement as soon as we've got this place sorted.'

McLean looked up at the tree. The cherry picker had lifted Cadwallader and one of the fire crew up into the bare canopy and was now edging towards the point where the man's body shifted in the breeze. Someone had been thoughtful enough to roll out an inflatable safety bag directly beneath them, and the whole operation looked like it really didn't need him getting in the way right now.

'Constable Harrison, is it?' he asked of the young PC. She stiffened slightly at her name.

'Sir.'

'Have you done any Family Liaison work?' Even as he asked it, McLean realized how crass the question was. Just

because she was a woman didn't necessarily mean she'd have FLO training.

'Not much, sir. Just what I've picked up on the beat. Domestics, that sort of stuff.'

'Probably more experience than I've had in the last few years.' McLean turned back to Sergeant Stephen. 'Mind if I borrow your constable for a while, Kenny?'

'Be my guest. She's more trouble than she's worth, anyway.' The sergeant smiled at his own joke. 'You going to see that kid, then?'

'Aye. Might as well get it done. This lot'll be here for hours yet.' McLean pointed up at the tree, where the cherry picker was now lodged firmly into the canopy, Cadwallader leaning out across the void as he inspected the body in situ. 'Unless he comes down by himself, that is.'

3

'He should be in school and I should be at work. You any idea what a nightmare this is? What it's costing me?'

McLean understood the hostility in Ellen Johnston's voice, but it annoyed him all the same. She had a pinched face, as if she had spent too much of her life sucking lemons, and a haggard expression that suggested mornings weren't her natural habitat. She had dressed, that much was apparent, but her choice of clothing wasn't much better than pyjamas. Her sweat pants looked like they'd been washed a thousand times, shapeless and grey; a pity the same couldn't be said for the hoodie, which sported an interesting collection of stains across its faded green front. It was somewhat at odds with the expensive tenement flat where she lived, and her assertion that she should be working.

'I'm very sorry, Miss Johnston. We'll try to be as quick as possible, but this is a very serious situation. The more information we can gather, the better. Especially this close to the event.'

'It's Mrs, actually.' Johnston shrugged. 'You'd better come in, then.' She stood to one side, letting McLean and Harrison into a hall cluttered with furniture just a little too large for it. No offer of tea; she simply led them over to another door, opening it to reveal a good-sized living room. A young boy sat on a sofa, huddled in close to one

of the arms, his eyes darting nervously to the door as they entered. Beside him, a uniform constable first looked up, then stood swiftly.

'Inspector. Constable.' She straightened her uniform as she spoke, a look of hope in her eyes that she was about to be relieved of her family liaison duties. McLean so hated to disappoint people.

'John, there's more polis wanting to talk to you.' Mrs Johnston addressed her son brusquely, her irritation at the way her day had started clearly not aimed just at the police. The boy who looked up at him was younger than McLean had been expecting. Too young, surely, to be out walking the dog on his own before it was light. He had some of his mother's features about his thin face, but mostly looked worried. He flinched at the word 'polis' in a manner McLean would have found more understandable in a council flat in Restalrig or Sighthill than in this expensive part of town. There was something about Mrs Johnston's accent, too, that suggested wealth was something she had come to only recently. Looking around the living room, McLean could see no obvious evidence of a Mr Johnston. There were photographs of Mrs Johnston and her son on the mantelpiece, but no father anywhere.

'Is there a Mr Johnston still around?' He had tried to make the question sound innocent, but the scowl that was Mrs Johnston's response told him he'd missed that particular mark.

'Tommy's been dead these ten years now. Not that youse lot ever did anything to catch the bastards responsible.'

'Tommy?' McLean had to say the name out loud before

the penny dropped. 'Tommy Johnston? The nightclub owner? He's John's father?' He looked at the boy with more sympathetic eyes. Not just because he'd lost his father but because the boy must never really have known him at all. The family liaison officer obviously understood the situation, too. She stood up, put a gentle hand on John's shoulder. He looked from her to McLean and then to his mother, eyes wide with fear.

'Hi there, John. I'm Tony.' McLean crouched down so that he was at eye level, suppressing the urge to wince at the pain that shot through his hip. The cold weather didn't do much for his old bones, particularly not the ones that had been broken.

'You gonnae arrest me? I dint do nothing.'

'I don't know what they've been telling you about the police, John, but we don't arrest people for no reason. And you're right. You've not done anything wrong. But you did see the man in the tree, and I'd very much like to find out how he got there. So anything you can tell me about it would be helpful.'

The boy stared at him, silent. McLean could see his thoughts playing across his face, the frown deepening as he struggled to decide whether the polis could be trusted or not. Given what had happened to his father, John's reticence was perhaps understandable.

'What's he called, your dog?' McLean asked.

'She. And she's Tilly. Short for Tillicoultrie. Where she came from. Granny and Grampa live out there. I like going to visit them.'

'Where's she now? In your room?'

'Aye. She's happy there.' John's gaze flicked momentarily

from McLean's face to where his mother was standing by the door.

'Perhaps I could meet her. But first, tell me about this morning. You were taking her for a walk in the Meadows, is that right?'

'I take her every morning, 'fore school. She likes to chase the squirrels. Only this time she stayed close. She was whining and shivering like she was scared or something. Then I heard it flying. Sounded like a bird only much bigger, see? It was up high. Too dark, so I couldn't see it proper like, but I could hear its wings. Tilly did, too. She pulled so hard I dropped her lead. I dint know what to do. Thought it was gonnae swoop down and catch her. She's only wee, wouldn't a stood a chance. Only I couldn't call for her, or it'd have heard and come after me. Seen on the telly how they do that. Swoop down and *bam*! So I hid under that tree right up against the trunk, like. And then there was a scream and the tree shook and all these branches came down on top of me. I ran home without her. Only when I got here she'd run home herself. She was up against the door, shivering. Couldnae get in quick enough.'

'He watches too much rubbish on the telly, so he does.' Mrs Johnston spoke as if her son wasn't in the room with them all. McLean ignored her. He'd have much preferred it if he could have talked to the boy without her there, but that would have been inappropriate at best.

'What was flying, John? What did you see? Did it have lights on it?'

The boy paused, as if reliving the events had terrified him into silence. How old was he? McLean wasn't that good at gauging these things, but he couldn't be more than ten.

'Couldn't see well enough, could I? Only heard its wings. Reckon it must have been big, though.'

'You heard wings, you say? Not a plane? A helicopter?'

John looked up at him again, and McLean could see the fear in his eyes. Not fear of the police but something much deeper. 'You're gonnae think I'm stupid. Just a wee boy making up stories. But I think it was a dragon.'

'Tommy Johnston. There's a name I'd not thought to hear again.' McLean clumped down the stairs, PC Harrison beside him. The family liaison officer had left while McLean was busy being introduced to Tilly, an elderly little Jack Russell terrier who seemed to be just about the only friend in the world poor John Johnston had.

'Should I know who he is, sir?' Harrison asked.

McLean stopped mid step and turned to face the PC. She was young, perhaps early twenties. Slim, maybe an inch or two shorter than him, and her round face had a rosy-cheeked tint to it that suggested she was someone who spent much of her time outdoors. Beyond that she was a PC, he knew absolutely nothing about her, least of all how long she had been in uniform. It was perfectly possible there was a generation of officers out there who had never heard of Tommy Johnston, unlikely though that seemed.

'Thomas John Johnston was one of Edinburgh's more colourful characters. He ran a string of lap-dancing clubs across the city. A few in Perth, Dundee and Aberdeen, too. Always just the wrong side of the law, but he never did anything so obvious we could put him away for it. And he was better than the alternative, which I guess means we tolerated him.'

'So what happened to him? He's dead, right?'

'Oh, very. Being shot in the head will do that.' McLean resumed his trudge down the stairs. 'Seems while Lothian and Borders tolerated him, others were less forgiving. It was a very professional hit. We found him in his car in a back lane at the south end of the Pentlands. Never did find out who killed him.'

'And the clubs?'

'His whole empire was built on tick. Creditors came and took the lot. We ended up with some fairly unsavoury Glaswegians running things for a while. People trafficking, drugs. With Tommy it had been pretty much just prostitution, and he looked after his girls, unlike most of the pimps we have to deal with now.'

'And that makes it OK, then? He's nice to the sex workers so he gets a free pass?'

McLean stopped just by the front door, pulled up short by the vehemence in PC Harrison's tone. 'I'm not sure a bullet between the eyes is that much of a free pass, Constable.'

'Aye, but that wasn't us, was it?' She held his gaze perhaps a second too long, then dropped her head. 'I'm sorry, sir. Not my place to say.'

'No. You're right. And don't be scared to speak your mind. Not to me, at least. There's other officers in CID may not like it, but that's their problem. Come on.' McLean pushed open the door to a blast of ice-cold air from outside. PC Harrison stood in the hallway, mouth hanging slightly open, the door almost catching her off guard as it swung closed on a heavy spring. She leapt forward with surprising grace and agility, ending up perhaps closer to

McLean than was comfortable or appropriate. He stepped back reflexively, foot slipping on the ice-slick flagstone, and only saved himself from sprawling on his arse by grabbing the nearby railing. When he pulled his hand away again it was covered in something dark green and sticky.

'You OK, sir?' PC Harrison asked as McLean sniffed whatever it was that was coating the railings, wrinkling his nose at the meaty stench. A smear of something greenish-brown carried on up the outside wall of the building, too, some of it splattered on the door. He'd noticed it on the way in and thought it a well-aimed seagull dropping, but the sheer quantity and the smell of it suggested mischief rather than misadventure, canine rather than avian. He scraped what he could off his palm, then pulled out a clean handkerchief and wiped away the rest.

'Bloody kids throwing shit at the door. Reckon there's a story in that, but not ours to investigate.' He considered putting the handkerchief back in his pocket, then settled for just bunching it up in his soiled fist. There'd be a bin somewhere he could chuck it in, and one of the forensics vans would have antiseptic wipes. 'Come on, let's go and see if they've finished fetching our man down out of that tree.'

It wasn't far to walk back to the scene, and PC Harrison said nothing the whole way. McLean could see long before they arrived that the operation to safely extract the body was still underway. The cherry picker reached into the leafless canopy and a couple of men in hard hats and climbing harnesses were halfway up the tree itself. At least the pathologist had finished his inspection. McLean found

him sitting on the passenger seat of his muddy green Jaguar, door open as he pulled off his white paper overalls. Far from his normal cheerful self, Cadwallader looked even paler than he had before, but he brightened a little when he saw them approach.

'Tony, I was wondering where you'd disappeared to. And who's this new friend you've made?'

'PC Harrison's been helping me interview the boy who found the body. Here, you haven't got any wipes in there, have you, Angus?' McLean held up his grubby hand. 'Touched something I don't really want to think too hard about.'

Cadwallader leaned into the car, came back with a pack of supermarket own-brand baby wipes. 'There you go. Got through a fair few myself. Poor chap didn't just bleed out up there. Branches have ruptured his guts, and more besides. Not going to be much fun doing the PM, I can tell you.'

McLean took one of the wipes and set about his hand with it, unsure whether the pungent synthetic lavender smell was any better than the dog-mess odour. He scrunched the whole lot up into a ball along with his soiled handkerchief, then looked around for somewhere to put it all.

'Here.' Cadwallader held up a small plastic bin and McLean dropped the lot in.

'So, what's the deal with our dead man, then?' he asked.

'He's dead. That much I can confirm. Superficial injuries are consistent with him being dropped into the tree canopy from a considerable height above. It's only bad luck that he didn't carry on straight through and end up on the path there.' Cadwallader nodded in the direction of the inflatable safety bag rolled out across the tarmac track.

'Any idea if it was the fall that killed him? Or was he already dead?'

'I'll have a better idea once I've had a chance to examine him somewhere I'm not in danger of imminent death myself. But given the amount of blood on the branches directly beneath him, I'd have to say it was the impact that killed him. That and being gutted by a broken stick.'

'Any idea who he is?'

'Not a clue. His face is pretty badly beaten up. They sent the crime-scene photographer up in that contraption of theirs after I'd finished, so I've no doubt someone'll put a name to the face soon. That's your department, though, Tony. Not mine.'

'Well, at least I won't ask you for a time of death. Not yet, anyway. If it was the fall that killed him, we've got a fairly good time for that already.'

'The boy?'

'If he's reliable, aye. Says he heard something crash into the trees when he was out walking his dog. Mind you, he also says he thought it was a dragon come to get him.'

'A dragon, you say?' Cadwallader raised a sceptical eyebrow. 'I'll be sure to keep that in mind when I'm examining him.'

'Think that's them bringing him down now, sir.'

McLean turned away from the pathologist, looking in the same direction as PC Harrison, up at the tree. Sure enough, the cherry picker had manoeuvred itself in under the body, a stretcher strapped to the box. The two climbers were in place, too, perched on branches McLean thought couldn't possibly support their weight. He had scrambled higher up trees without any ropes or heed for

his safety when he'd been a boy, but watching them now gave him an uncomfortable sensation in the pit of his stomach.

When it came, the noise was like a rifle shot, echoing out across the Meadows. For a moment McLean thought that was what it was, and then the realization dawned. He saw a brief scramble as the operator in the cherry picker lunged for the stretcher. The two climbers sprang back, their training kicking in instinctively as the branch that had been holding up the body snapped.

It fell like a dead weight, rapid and ungainly, hit head-first into the inflated safety bag with a sound like a box of eggs dropped on a supermarket floor. For long moments there was only silence, underscored by the chuntering noise of the pump as it struggled to reinflate the bag. Then, with an audible creaking of joints, Cadwallader hauled himself to his feet and began pulling his soiled white over-alls on again.

'Well, that's one way of doing it,' he said.