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## **BREAKERS**

Written by **Doug Johnstone**

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# Breakers

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Tyler stared at his little sister as she watched television, the light from the screen flickering across her face. Some cartoon about a boy who discovers a magic ring and turns into a superhero girl, so there was some cool gender stuff in it. Bean chewed the edge of her lip then smiled, and he saw the space at the front where her baby tooth had come out. He'd scrambled together two quid from the tooth fairy once he found out from her what the going rate was in the playground. He was surprised she still believed in that, given everything else that was going on.

'Right, Bean, time for bed,' he said.

She shook her head, still looking at the television.

He reached for the remote and the screen died, just soft light from the corner lamp remaining.

'It's way past bedtime,' he said. 'And I need to go out soon.'

Bean turned round. 'Where's Mum?'

'In bed.'

'Is she drunk?'

Tyler sighed. 'She's tired.'

'She's drunk.'

Let her think Angela was drunk, the truth was worse.

Bean played with Panda's car. Tyler had lifted the toy from a house in Merchiston on a job years ago. He'd felt bad for a moment, but the kid had a hundred soft toys lined up on her bed, and Bean had nothing. He wondered if the other girl cried when she realised Panda was gone.

'Can we go on the roof?' Bean said.

'No, come on.'

'Please.'

'It's school tomorrow.'

She gave him a look, chin down, eyes up, like a Manga character. 'Pleeeeeease.'

Tyler looked at his watch. What difference did it make in the scheme of things? He looked around the tiny living room, two ragged sofas, scratchy carpet tiles, bar heater in the corner. The only expensive thing was the Sony LCD widescreen he'd taken from a mansion in Cluny Gardens that backed onto Blackford Pond. They wouldn't normally bother with televisions, they were a pain to carry, but he wanted it for Bean.

'Just for a minute,' he said.

She smiled and hugged him.

'I mean it,' he said, 'I have to go out. Barry's coming round.'

Bean frowned and Tyler regretted mentioning their half-brother. He held out his hand and she took it, her hand clammy in his as he led her down the hall.

He lifted the keys from the wooden crate that served as a table at the frontdoor. He picked up the hook-and-stick that he'd improvised from a curtain rail, and a blanket bundled on the floor. Bean was in her jammies and onesie and it would be cool up top, any breath of wind turning into a gale this high up. It swept down from Liberton Brae, over the hospital and the flat expanse behind Craigmillar Castle, and with most of the other tower blocks knocked down, theirs took the brunt of it.

He put the door on the snib and headed along the corridor, away from the lift and the other flat, where Barry and Kelly lived. Barry had intimidated a Syrian family into leaving months ago, and now the Wallaces had the floor to themselves like a downmarket penthouse apartment.

Tyler used the hook to open the hatch in the roof and pull down the aluminium ladder. He climbed up with the blanket over his shoulder and the keys in his hand and undid the padlock on the steel door at the top. This was a service-access door, but he'd jimmied the original lock and replaced it with his own years ago, and the maintenance guys never came up here.

He looked down at Bean. 'Up you come, but use both hands.'

She placed Panda on the floor and climbed the ladder. He helped her at the top then pushed the heavy door open and felt the cold air on his face. He switched on the torch on his phone and they walked across the scabby tarred roof to the western edge where there were two folded garden chairs. He unfolded one and sat, and Bean clambered into his lap as he spread the blanket over them both. He switched the torch off and the darkness swallowed them.

They were fifteen floors up at the top of Greendykes House. Across from them was the identical Wauchope House – they were the only two tower blocks left in the area. They were surrounded by waste ground and a huge building site where Barratt were creating Greenacres, hundreds of apartments and homes. That's what it said on the large sign with the happy, smiling family on it. For now it was just diggers and rubble surrounded by razor wire and patrolled by private security. Presumably in case someone felt like stealing a digger, some cables or piping. Tyler thought about the logistics of lifting something so large, but he was used to smaller items.

He thought about what it would be like, having hundreds of new neighbours once Greenacres was built. Couldn't be any worse than the shithole it was before, burnt-out houses and tumbledown shops, drug dens and gang hangouts. The streets used for racing hot-wired cars and boosted scramblers.

Past the floodlit, fenced-off area was more scrubland, thick grass and broken concrete until you got to the futuristic spread of the hospital at Little France. Grassy tussocks and clumps of hedge spread uphill to Craigmillar Castle, the ragged turrets just poking through the trees at the top of the slope. Both Tyler and Bean's schools were hiding beyond the trees, fenced off and watched by CCTV.

The space between here and there was a big fly-tipping site, a tangle of rubber tubing, soggy mattresses, a couple of car doors, a shattered windscreen, piles of bin bags full of Christ knows what, some broken fencing once used to keep someone out of somewhere. He could see it all in the security spotlight overspill from the building site. He glanced

at Wauchope House, the twin of the tower block they were on. He never understood why they didn't tear down these last two dinosaurs with the rest of the place. Hadn't just carpet bombed the whole of Niddrie, Craigmillar and Greendykes and be done with it. Beyond Wauchope was a spread of new homes, cheap and thrown together, but still better than what they replaced. At the back of Greendykes House was Hunter Park then more developments, all of Edinburgh's brown-belt land being reclaimed for commuting professionals.

'Tell me again,' Bean said, snuggling into him. A strand of her dark ponytail had come loose. He'd given her a bath earlier and she smelled of strawberry shampoo.

'It was a dark and stormy night,' he said, putting on a dramatic voice. Bean giggled as he tickled her ribs.

'A fateful night,' he said, 'when the world's greatest superhero, Bean Girl, was born, a force for good battling the dark, evil powers of Niddrieville.'

'Go on,' Bean said.

'Angela was just a normal woman from a normal family, when she was visited by space aliens who told her she was to have a beautiful baby daughter with special powers, a girl who could fly, smash tall buildings and leap over mountains, who could shoot lasers from her eyeballs.'

Bean stared at the hospital in the distance and widened her eyes, made cute little laser-fire noises, *tchew-tchew, tchew-tchew*.

Tyler kept talking, making up stuff whenever it came to him, giving Bean Girl immense powers, making her triumph over evil. The truth about her birth was less impressive. Angela's waters had broken when she was off her head on heroin and vodka. Barry and Kelly weren't around and weren't answering their phones, so ten-year-old Tyler had to try to sober Angela up before heading to the hospital, so they wouldn't take the baby away when it came. He called an ambulance but they'd had a spate of attacks in the area and refused to come. There was no money for a taxi so they walked across the fields, slow in the dark, and presented themselves at the maternity ward with no paperwork. Two hours later Bethany was born, four and a half pounds and

six weeks early, no doubt from the booze and drugs. Tyler was the first person to hold her, his mum out for the count. Both he and Bean were small for their ages, something they shared, a bond stronger than anything either of them had with Angela.

He felt Bean sagging on his lap, her arms becoming heavy as she tired. He stared at the hospital where she was born, it was like a glowing spaceship in the night.

He heard footsteps on the ladder behind them, then the clatter of the steel door as it swung open.

'Thought I'd find you girls here.'

Barry strode over and was silhouetted against the security lights below on the building site. Tyler couldn't see his face, just the muscle-bound shape of him, the hardman stance, fists clenched. He was a source of darkness, a lack of light.

'She should be in bed,' he said.

'Like you care.'

Barry took a step forward and Tyler felt Bean flinch in his arms.

Barry stared at her for a moment then turned to Tyler.

'Come on, bitch,' he said. 'We've got work to do.'

It took just ten minutes behind the wheel to get from the most deprived scheme in Edinburgh to millionaires' homes. From Niddrie they cruised through Craigmillar on the main road, past Peffermill and the biscuit factory, the smell of burnt oats coming to Tyler in the back of the car. Round Cameron Toll and they were into the affluent Southside. He wondered if people around here even knew that Niddrie and Greendykes existed. Edinburgh was so small that everyone was cheek by jowl, investment bankers round the corner from families like the Wallaces. Most of these people were ignorant of the fact they were being stalked and targeted. This was their hunting ground, from Mayfield through Newington and Marchmont, down to The Grange, Morningside and Merchiston. Every once in a while they would explore a little further, into the New Town and Stockbridge. It kept the heat off if they'd had a close shave. Sometimes it made sense to leave the Southside fields fallow for a while, give homeowners time to relax and lower their guards again.

They turned up Mayfield Road, left into Relugas, then into the smaller streets. They stayed off the main thoroughfares and stuck to residential areas, less passing traffic and more chance of going unnoticed.

Barry was driving, Forth One playing a stream of charmless pop on the radio. Tyler's half-sister Kelly was chopping out coke lines on the car's manual, pulled out of the glove compartment and placed on her knees. They were in Barry's metallic-grey Skoda Octavia, boosted a year ago from outside a place in Sciennes when they found the keys in a bowl next to the front door of the house. It'd been fitted with new plates by Barry's mate Wee Sam at his garage. An Octavia was perfect,

a nothing kind of vehicle, not flashy or tacky, and every second car on the road these days was grey.

Tyler watched Kelly. She was twenty but looked older, tall and broad, peroxide hair. Wide nose, wide hips, wide shoulders, everything about her was wide. Her bright hair wouldn't make any difference for the job, they always had their hoods up in case of CCTV. Like Tyler and Barry, she was wearing a nondescript hoodie and joggers, Primark's finest, no logos or patterns.

They were in Lauder Road now. Some colossal houses here but the road was wide and exposed. Barry slowed the car but not too much, he didn't want to be conspicuous. There were 20 mph limits all over the city now which helped them, allowed them to go slow and check the area without seeming suspicious.

Kelly bumped a large line of coke then passed it to Barry, holding the rolled-up note for him so he didn't have to take his hands off the wheel. He kept his eyes on the road and snorted, shook his head and flexed his jaw.

Kelly reached over and placed her finger under his nose, wiped up some grains there. She held the finger out to Barry, who leaned forward, sucked it and grinned.

Tyler looked out of the window, checking for houses with no alarms and lights off like he'd been taught. Preferably detached in case the neighbours heard something, but it was amazing how seldom that happened. People don't like to get involved in someone else's business, especially if that business could get them hurt.

'Some fucking gaffs, these,' Barry said, jittery now from the buzz. They never offered Tyler any, mostly because they wanted it for themselves, but also because they knew his stance. He'd seen what drugs did to their mum.

Barry turned right into the narrower, winding Dalrymple Crescent. Quite a few candidates here. It wasn't a school holiday, that was their busiest time, when homes were empty for weeks. But rich people had social lives, they'd be out at dinner or a party, the theatre or cinema. It didn't take long, this thing, in and out in minutes.

Tyler hated that he knew all this. He didn't want to be here but he had no choice. Barry and Kelly needed someone small to squeeze into top-hung fanlight windows if the doors were deadbolted. He could fit and he couldn't say no. Barry was already making noises about bringing Bean along instead and Tyler couldn't allow that.

Barry came to the end of the road and turned right into Findhorn Place, then down to the bottom and right again. They went round the block, Kelly doing another line, then Barry too. Back in Dalrymple Crescent. Barry had spotted a place. Tyler had too, he just hadn't mentioned it. When they passed the second time, he took it in more fully. Semi-detached, but no lights on in either house, low horizontal fence at the front. No alarm box, security lighting or cameras, a handful of mature trees in the front providing cover and suggesting a decent shed full of garden tools.

It was perfect.

They went round the block one more time, Tyler feeling a trill in his stomach, a flutter in his chest. He thought of Bean, tucked up in bed back at the flat, snuggling into Panda, bedside light on. He thought of his mum crashed out in her bedroom and hoped Bean didn't wake with a bad dream, like she'd been doing recently.

They drove past 13 Dalrymple Crescent one last time.

'That one,' Barry said, then pulled in thirty yards along the road.

### 3

The trick was confidence. You can get away with anything if you act like you know what you're doing. That's how the elite did it, the politicians, army officers, Oxbridge guys running banks and companies, just act as if you're entitled to the world and people go along with it. Tyler had heard about a scam two guys from school ran on a slice of waste ground between tenements off King Stables Road. They stole hi-vis jackets and charged a fiver a go for parking. Ran it every day for weeks over the summer, right in the centre of Edinburgh, and made thousands. Never got caught.

Barry and Kelly were buzzing up ahead. Tyler rolled his neck and tried to stay loose behind them. Barry went straight up to the front door and rang the doorbell. They were already pretty sure no one was home, but just in case. One time they'd done this, got no answer, then gone round the back. Saw a middle-aged couple hard at it, fucking each other's brains out on the kitchen floor.

Barry didn't look through any of the front windows, too suspicious. Instead he led the way round the side of the house, down the dark passageway, past recycling boxes and into the back garden. Tried the back door, locked. The windows likewise. A quick look under plant pots and bins for a spare key. Nothing.

They turned their attention to the garden, walked towards the shed at the bottom. Barry twitched as he went, Kelly wiping her nose on her sleeve. Tyler looked around. Neat lawn, cherry-blossom and crab-apple trees along the left-hand wall, sheltering them from the neighbours' upstairs windows. Perfect. On the other side were some rose beds in front of a six-foot stone wall with shards of broken glass cemented along the top. What use was that if you could just walk round from the front? People didn't think about security.

The shed had a small padlock on it but the wood was old. Barry lifted his boot and kicked it, and the metal plate peeled away from the plank beneath. One more kick and it was splintered, the door sagging open to meet them.

Barry put on leather gloves and went into the shed, then signalled for Tyler to close the door behind him. Tyler put on his own gloves and saw the light from Barry's torch slip through the cracks between the wooden panels. A minute later Barry came out carrying a pair of secateurs with long telescopic handles. Everyone had these for pruning trees, perfect for jimmying a back door.

Barry pushed past Kelly to the back of the house. Wedged the secateurs' blade between door and jamb at the level of the lock. He heaved it forwards and back, bending and tearing the uPVC around the lock, making a gap. He kept going a few times, the door creaking with each exertion.

Tyler heard something and looked around. He put a hand on Barry's arm. Barry flinched and almost punched him. Tyler tugged at his earlobe and all three of them listened. The sound of a car far away, wind rustling in the cherry blossoms. Then a hiss.

Tyler turned to face the sound. A black cat high on the wall between this garden and next door, staring down at them. It had four white paws like it had stepped in paint, and they glowed in the gloom. Weren't black cats meant to be lucky? Tyler put his hand out and made a beckoning sound between his tongue and teeth, but Kelly took a step towards it and lunged, making it leap down into the other garden.

Barry removed the secateurs and handed them to Tyler, then threw his shoulder against the door. It shook but stayed solid. Again, same result. Barry tutted under his breath and tried again. The door bent in the middle but only a little. A decent deadbolt, most likely with five bolts into the frame up and down the door. Probably hooked too. It wouldn't give. Modern doors like this were becoming more common, but around here you still sometimes got the old plastic ones with a single bolt, or even original wooden doors that you could almost blow open.

Barry turned to the kitchen window. It was one large pane with two smaller hinged fanlights along the top. He took the secateurs from Tyler and thrust them into the point below the window lock. Pushed the handles and it popped first time. No one ever reinforced fanlights, they were always a weak point. Half the time they weren't even locked.

Barry dropped the secateurs as Kelly lifted a black wheelie bin over, careful not to drag it and make a sound. Barry helped Tyler onto the bin then held it steady with both hands. Tyler pushed the small window open as far as it would go then gripped the open ledge and pulled himself through the gap headfirst. He was midway, his weight balanced half inside the kitchen, half outside. Kelly reached out and gave the soles of his trainers a shove and he slid forward, hands out. He was skinny but his hips stuck in the window frame. Kelly gave another shove. He was over the kitchen sink, his hands near the draining board, and he wriggled his jeans against the lip of the open window, squeezing one hip sideways then the other. He slipped the last few inches, braced his hands against the draining board, swivelled his legs sideways through the gap and flopped onto his hands and knees next to the sink.

He paused for a second assessing his body, listening for noise inside the house. He'd done this dozens of times but his heart still throbbed in his ribcage, the pulse like a message in his ears. He scooted onto his bum then jumped down into the kitchen. He was lithe and flexible but he still wished he had a cat's body, the ability to slip gracefully through the world. He looked around. Marble worktops, brushed chrome hob and oven, long oak breakfast bar. They'd spent their money on that rather than security.

He went to the back door. Sometimes they left the key in the door, but not this time. He had a quick look round, found a spare set on a shelf next to some hardback cookbooks, faces he recognised from television.

He put the key in the lock. It was stiff because of the damage Barry had done from outside but it turned with a jiggle.

He opened the door.

'Good work,' Barry said, coming inside, Kelly trailing after.

He raised his eyebrows at Tyler and tilted his head, meaning upstairs.

'The usual,' he said.

Tyler ran upstairs. It was good to be away from the other two. He did a quick tour of the rooms, three bedrooms, a bathroom and an office. No one home. Always best to check, you never knew if someone had gone to bed early, taken something, slept through the doorbell.

The décor was old-fashioned, a retired couple maybe, kids grown up and left home. That was common, not many younger people could afford places like this.

Tyler stood in the hall for a moment, collecting himself. Soaking up the atmosphere, imagining the people, the lives they lived here. What was it like to be them? Worked in a bank or office all their lives, kids at university now, time to enjoy the garden.

In the master bedroom he went into the linen closet, pulled out a couple of pillowcases. There was a dresser with a mirror, a few jewellery boxes and trinkets. He swept it all into a pillowcase. Tried the drawers, more jewellery, mostly costume but some nice silver and gold. You could accumulate a lot of stuff over a lifetime.

He had a quick look through a chest of drawers, in case valuable stuff was hidden underneath pants or socks, but nothing. He checked bedside tables. Scottish crime novels on her side, books about military history on his. A half-empty packet of Viagra in his drawer.

He did the office next. Shelves lined with hardback books, classics mostly. A laptop and an iPad on the solid desk. He scooped them into the pillowcase. Checked through the desk drawers and lifted out power supplies and charging cables, bundled them up. He looked around. A bottle of expensive whisky, two crystal glasses, a water jug. An old record player and some shelves of vinyl, classical and jazz. Nothing portable.

In the bathroom he lifted two bottles from the cupboard, temazepam and morphine. Barry would want them. He looked at the toiletries and thought if they needed anything at home. Threw the Colgate and Radox in the pillowcase.

The other two bedrooms were mostly empty. Tyler had been right, grown-up kids had moved away. In the back bedroom he found an old Nintendo DS and games, pocketed them. Spotted the charger and

took that too. Sometimes you got PlayStations or Xboxes, but not here. In the other bedroom he found an old Polaroid camera with two packets of unused film. He couldn't sell it but he took it anyway. Maybe Bean would like it.

He was done and downstairs in a few minutes.

When he walked into the living room Barry had his cock out and was pissing on a sofa, Kelly watching and smiling.

'Fuck's sake,' Tyler said.

This wasn't the first time, Barry had been pushing things recently.

'Anything good?' Barry said, zipping up.

The smell of piss snagged at Tyler's nostrils. He stared at Barry for a moment before answering. 'Laptop and iPad, some necklaces and rings.'

Barry had a DVD player, another laptop and some other stuff in a tote bag. Kelly waved some money she'd found in a drawer and a pair of expensive headphones.

Tyler looked around. More bookshelves, they were big readers. A couple of original paintings on the wall, abstract things, pastel shapes that didn't make sense. Dark leather sofas, pictures of the kids on the mantelpiece, a phrenology head on display. Classy people living quiet lives. He wondered how they would take this.

'Come on,' Barry said.

They went back through to the kitchen.

Barry stopped at a bowl in the middle of the breakfast bar and rummaged through it. Loose change, golf balls, a calculator, stained corks from wine bottles.

'Fuck, no car key.'

Barry looked around the kitchen and Tyler followed his gaze. A set of flashy knives in a block, copper pans hanging up, a huge fridge-freezer. He thought about what they had to eat at home.

Barry took one of the knives from the block and dropped it in the middle of the floor with a clatter that was shocking. A warning to the owners. He went out the back door. Kelly smiled at Tyler and followed. Tyler took a last look round and left the house.

Barry and Kelly were yammering up front, buzzing from the job. They were talking over each other, Rihanna's new single throbbing away on the radio. Barry was doing well over thirty, his caution of earlier evaporated. Tyler had the adrenaline rush too, but it felt like a betrayal. He was ashamed of what he'd done but the endorphins pulsed through his bloodstream, making him feel as if he'd achieved something, like a caveman escaping the jaws of a sabre-toothed tiger. He learned about it in biology at school, fight or flight, but knowing the physical reason didn't make it easier to accept.

They drove north through Newington then left into Sciennes and Marchmont. Not many pickings here, too many student flats, the uni just over the Meadows. There were also too many people in the streets, students walking home from pubs and clubs in the Old Town. Barry steered them through Whitehouse and skipped round the edge of The Grange into Morningside. It was the famously posh part of the city, where all the old-school money lived, as opposed to the brash New Town hedge funders.

Barry was too high from the first job and the coke to focus on the houses they drove past. Tyler spotted two candidates that Barry missed, but he didn't say anything. It was the owners' lucky night. Kelly couldn't spot a good mark at the best of times. Thick as shit in a bottle, Barry said, even to her face, like it was a compliment. She just smiled and stroked his arm like she was brainwashed. As if on cue, she laughed at something Barry said, flicked her hair off her shoulder, eyes shining from the coke bumps.

They wound into Craiglockhart, then north to Merchiston, then sat at the lights at Holy Corner for ages, Lorde's new single playing on

the radio. Tyler liked her, she had something interesting about her, not like the other crap Forth played. He didn't like the charts generally, preferred electronica and chill out. He found some stuff on Spotify one day, trying playlists for meditation, looking for something to help his mind settle. He wanted to stick his earbuds in now, listen to his own stuff on his phone, but Barry always slapped them off his head if he tried that on a job. Awareness of your surroundings, Barry said, that was key. How that squared with a coked-addled brain and a jaw that never shut up, fuck knows.

The time idling at the crossroads seemed to quieten them down in front. They went across into Churchill, along Chamberlain Road and right into Churchill Gardens. Too open, too busy, even at this time of night. A couple of lefts and they were into Greenhill Place, a terrace along one side, bigger detached houses on the right. They went to the end, turned right, round the block. A funeral directors on one corner. Tyler imagined what they might find there. But businesses were always better protected, alarm systems linked to the police, CCTV, money in a locked safe.

Barry turned right into St Margaret's Road and slowed. Tyler spotted it before he sensed anything from Barry. A standalone Victorian upstairs-downstairs, bay windows, trimmed hedge and narrow gravel driveway. Ivy crawling up the wall around the front door. Dark, no car in the driveway or street, no sign of an alarm. The windows at the front looked old sash and case, probably the same round the back.

Barry went round the block to be sure, making a purring noise under his breath. Kelly got the coke out and sorted a couple more lines on her lap. Barry slowed the car as they came back into St Margaret's Road and eyeballed number four again, then he pulled up between streetlights and under an overhanging chestnut tree. They both did a line in front, Barry making a gargling sound, Kelly sniffing into her throat. They were both fucked when they needed to be sharp.

'Look lively,' Barry said, climbing out of the car.