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Trial By Blood

John Macken

One

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Detective Inspector Tamasine Ashcroft leaves the office block, her excitement swirling through the double doors after her. This is the once-in-a-career moment of breakthrough, the link that unites several separate pieces of evidence. After two years, she knows that all three children have been killed by the same man. More importantly, she knows exactly who the man is and where he lives.

Tamasine skips off the pavement and across the road, fresh and excited, despite the fact that it is almost two a.m. Tamasine has been working almost without pause for eight days. When it is as important as this, her reserves of energy are almost boundless. And then, as she knows all too well, she will crash, struggling to get out of bed, a cold coming on.

There is the sound of footsteps behind her. She looks back and sees the figure of a man in the half light. He is moving rapidly, a squeak of trainers on damp paving stones. She is suddenly awake and alert. The alleyway is high-sided, a gap between office blocks and shops, and easily two hundred metres long. Joggers don't take short-cuts to taxi ranks, she recognizes.

DI Ashcroft quickens her pace and risks another glance back. This is no runner. Something in the way he is leaning forward, heading towards her, smacks of hunger. Tamasine hesitates. It is probably nothing, but she should be on her guard. She curses that she has no weapon, no stab jacket, no police radio. He is gaining, and quick. She considers how to tackle him if need be. Think like a copper, she tells herself, not like a frightened panicking female. Stay low, aim a kick to the crotch, that ought to do it.

She stops and turns round, pulling out her warrant card. He is twenty metres away, fifteen, ten.

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'I'm a police officer,' DI Ashcroft says, cool and slow, just like she has been taught.

The man stops. Tamasine sees him clearly for the first time, a small light illuminating his features. He is big, wide, bony and unhinged. Dense black hair, thick eyebrows, burning eyes. Teeth bared, a real-life psycho. From his jacket pocket he pulls out a six-inch hunting knife and a clear plastic bag.

'I am a police officer,' she repeats. 'Put the knife down.'

The man stares at her. Tamasine stares back. Her heartbeat is frantic, everything else shut out. Classes on disarming assailants flash through her brain. He smiles at her. Tamasine slides her warrant card away. She knows that if she fails to disarm him, she is utterly alone and at his mercy. The plastic bag scares her. He has done this before. For an instant, she pictures the man she is going to arrest in the morning. Is this just coincidence? she asks herself. And then, an instant decision, an automatic response: she turns and runs.

Halfway down, the alley dog-legs to the left. After that, the main road will be in full view. Tamasine sprints with all her might. Panic is good, she tells herself. Nothing else matters. Forget the child-killing creep. Forget the urgent need for sleep. Just get the hell out of this alley and on to the road. Now.

For as long as she can bear, she doesn't look back. There is a noise behind her, and she glances over her shoulder. He is flat out, twenty metres away, but gaining. There is something in his eyes, and she knows she has to escape. Tamasine puts her head down, the lights of the main road just eighty metres ahead.

Forty metres. She flails, knuckles scraping the bricks. A couple of taxis pass the end of the alley in quick succession. She can hear traffic. He is too far back. When she reaches the main road she will be safe. A night bus pulls up and stops opposite the mouth of the alley. There are people on board, witnesses, her protection. Tamasine risks a final look back in her last few paces. He is ten metres behind, and no longer gaining.

And then she stops dead. The buildings are looming over her. A strange feeling of reverse vertigo dizzies her mind. A flashing whiteness crashes behind her eyes. A bleeding numbness in her mouth. She is unable to move. It takes a second to register. Her brain tries to right itself. She is on the floor.

She tries to get up but can't. Something is weighing her down. The man who was chasing her comes to a halt. He keeps his distance, glancing down at his knife, and then slowly back up again. Tamasine attempts to right herself, but she is wedged firm. The reason floods into her, the last few seconds finally making sense. Something has smashed her clean in the mouth. And that something is now pinning her to the floor.

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She cranes her neck round as far as she can. Another man. He is large and firm, an unshakeable bulk. Tamasine looks back at the psycho with the knife. He is bristling, the blade gripped so hard she can see his knuckles in the half light. His full attention has switched from her to the man holding her down. There is nothing but the sound of the psycho's breathing for a few long seconds. Tamasine watches his face gradually alter beneath his brush of black hair. He is boiling over, on edge, almost quivering with intent. But she can also see that he is conflicted. And what she detects in his eyes as she focuses more intently into them scares her more than anything so far.

He is afraid.

And then, pace by pace, he gradually backs away, swallowed by the shadows, never averting his eyes from the man above her.

Tamasine starts to thrash on the floor. A gloved hand reaches down and clamps itself over her mouth. She smells the rubber, her nose desperately sucking air in and out, the oxygen debt needing to be repaid. Another hand fixes itself across her windpipe. She sees the bus pull away from the stop, passengers oblivious, just metres away. Detective Inspector Tamasine Ashcroft tries to scream but the air is blocked. As she fights and kicks for dear life, two burning questions fill her head.

What did the psycho see? And what was it that scared him?

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