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Gutted

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Extract

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Chapter 1

ON THE HILLS AT NIGHT, you hear screams, you start running. I don't care what your name is – you do it. Instinct, adrenaline, whatever, it kicks in and you tank it. Sensible people run the opposite way. Mentallers like me chase the screams.

My heart was pounding as my legs stretched out beneath me through the gorse, it was Corstorphine Hill, for Chrissake . . . not exactly fairway territory. In my current condition, wedded to a bottle of scoosh and smoking forty, scrub that, sixty a day, I had five more minutes of this before a massive coronary kicked in.

I slipped, landed on my arse. Was wet below, was Scotland, c'mon . . . it's in the contract. 'Fuck me!' I yelled, my palms scratching on the hard, gnarled roots of a tree. Stung like a bastard. As I tried to get up I took another flyer, cracking my head soundly on the tree's bole.

'Oh, Jesus hellfire . . .' I touched my temple. Found blood on my fingers, couldn't figure if it came from my head or my scratched hands. Both formed their own pain brigade, marching through me in time to my fit-to-burst heart.

The screams came up again. Louder now. I was closer. The ground I covered, skitting down the hill on my arse, must have been in the right direction. I didn't know whether to be grateful or

not. The noise seared me. Real pain. Suffering. And, if I wasn't wrong, laughter . . .

Someone's up to no fucking good.

I tried to get a look about but there was little or no light, save the moon, just the thin crescent job, and half covered by cloud at that.

I strode on, tracked the wails. Felt my teeth itch with each new burst of anguish. Someone, or something, was in serious trouble. As if I needed any confirmation of this, the tormentors upped the ante.

As the first shot rang out, I thought: That's it.

Game over.

I waited for a cry, a scream, something to seal the deal.

What I heard was . . . nothing.

I stood stock still. Only the breeze moving all around me in the silence of the wood. I felt the veins in my neck thumping like pistons. I strode forward, branches lashing at my face, caught a log below and it hurled me down a steep slope. As I fell, my pocket-bottle of Grouse escaped and rolled away.

I could hear movement below, voices, more shots, then . . . the screams again.

The ground hit me like a Mack truck. I stopped dead by the edge of a clearing. There was light now. A pimped-up Corrado with the full beam on. I got myself upright, spat out a mouthful of muck, checked my bridgework was still in place and tried to focus.

C'mon, Gus, get a fucking grip!

My eyes smarted. I wiped away the long grass my hair had trapped and waited for my vision to settle. It didn't take long; I wished it hadn't come back at all. *This* I did not want to see. I was ready to kill. There's a phrase, hear it all the time, *I'll swing for you* . . . That's where I was at with these bastards already.

I looked about for a weapon, rock, stick, anything. Found nothing. Was gonna have to be old school. Didn't faze me. I ran in, fists balled.

'Right, y'bastards!' I wailed, like a nuthouse on meds night. Grabbed the first body I could, a young ned, say seventeen tops, and put a sledgehammer jab through his puss. He dropped like a wet sandbag. It took the other three a time to turn around; the howls from the dog they had tied to the tree drowned out everything. They were taking potshots at it with air rifles; when they spotted me their target changed.

'Get that cunt!'

I felt a crack on the side of my head, then a thud at my shoulder. There seemed to be a few seconds before the almighty agony of hot pain burnt at both these points, but when it did, I cuffed it aside, like swatting flies.

I took my own aim, on the one nearest the dog. He was tall, a six-footer, but a string bean – all coat hanger shoulders and skin pebble-dashed with acne. He wore a white hooded top that was an easy grab in the dark. I quickly hoyed his face down onto my boot.

'Taste that, shithead.'

I must have got a good few kicks in before I felt two lightning bolts strike my back, right between the shoulder blades. I dropped the lanky streak of piss and flung up my hands.

I'll give them this: they were hardy. Grabbed my arms and laid into me with fists. I'm guessing they were no strangers to the odd pagger. The fists came quick and sharp, jabs, interspersed with the odd kick. It took me a while to roll over, but I got there, just in time to catch the big one aiming to jump on my head.

I pulled back. He missed, rolled over on his backside.

The other two watched him fall and I took my chance to get upright again. On my feet I cracked some quick rights, pegged one of them out.

The two on the ground scuffled backward on their arses.

I stood in front of the car lights. 'Right, you sick little fuckers, want to meet the daddy of pain?'

I picked up the rifles, smacked them over their heads. There were wails, shrieks. 'Not so fucking hard now, eh?'

'Ah, mister, fuck off.'

'That's me – Mr Fuck-Off . . . How do you fucking do?'

The dog whimpered. I heard it struggle to free itself, blind with panic.

I took the gun barrels, bent them under my Doc Martens and flung them down. As I went over to the dog, I tried to lower my threat level; the animal was in a state of abject fear. The wounds didn't look too serious, but Christ, I was surprised it hadn't died of sheer terror.

I bent down, offered an open palm. 'It's okay . . . it's okay, boy.'

I got to within inches of the dog when I felt a heavy thwack on my spine.

'Think you're hard, eh? Think you can mess with the likes of us?'

The second strike knocked me into the undergrowth. I seemed to roll a bit, five maybe ten yards, then came to rest under a tree. I thought I'd landed in shit – smelled like it. I turned over, put my hands behind me, tried to push myself up, but I was slipping on something that felt wet, slimy.

As I made a last attempt to ease myself up, the string bean appeared before me, holding up a branch like a club, ready to knock seven bells out of me. I felt my hands slip again, fail to find any purchase. I thought that was it, I was a goner.

'Holy fuck,' said the yob, 'holy fucking shit!'

He lowered the branch and then his pals appeared at his back. 'C'mon, let's get out ay here.' They tugged at his white hoodie, grabbed his arms.

'Is he dead?' he said.

'Aye, course he is . . . look!'

They seemed to be looking at me. Problem was, I didn't feel dead. Was this dead? Never. It felt too much like life, which was depressing to contemplate.

I struggled to free myself again. As I did so, I slipped back. Seemed to slide off whatever I'd landed on. I heard the yobs

scampering away through the bushes as I turned over and lifted myself from the ground.

When I looked down things suddenly made more sense.

I'd been rolling about on a corpse. I had the blood of a dead man all over my hands.

Chapter 2

I FELT A STAB IN my guts. A heave, then I bent like a hinge, chucked up all over the corpse. There was more where that came from, but I battened a hand on my mouth, fought the urge.

As I stared down, my instinct was to scrunch eyes, look away.

'Holy shit,' I said, 'holy mothering fuck.' It didn't look good. The face was a bloodied pulp, unidentifiable. Could have been any age, sex . . . I guessed by the size of the body, male. I hunkered, raised a twig and poked away at the loose covering of leaves. This was one shallow grave: whoever dumped him here wasn't giving a rat's hump who found him.

No shit . . . This is Corstorphine Hill, next to the zoo, a bloody tourist trap.

We had buildings going up all over the city; there was never a better time to pour a bit of concrete over some inconvenient stiff.

'This is fucking madness.'

I poked some more with the twig. It was the body of a man, what they call *skelky* in Scotland, or sometimes *eight stone dripping wet*. His hands were cut to ribbons on the palms. Looked like he'd fended off some fierce swipes from a sharp knife. I turned them over. The knuckles were smooth.

'You didn't put up much of a fight, mate.'

He hadn't been here long, I'd say it was a matter of hours more

than days. He had, however, been soundly slit from – as the saying goes – neck to nuts. Deep wounds had shredded his shirt and jacket to nothing; he was to all intents naked save his sleeves and trousers. How he'd got here, and who'd put him here, I'd no desire to find out. But old habits die hard. I lifted up the flap of his jacket with the twig. There was a wallet in the inside pocket; I pulled my shirt-sleeve over my fingertips, fished it out.

Two tenners and a twenty. A flyer for a sauna in Leith. An RBS bank card. A driving licence that read: Thomas Fulton.

The name meant nothing to me, it was too common. But the face in the photograph sparked some dim recollection; of whom, though, I'd no idea. I put the wallet back.

That I'd been rolling around in Tam Fulton's claret was something I could have done without. From my experience plod tends to take a dim view of such occurrences around a murder scene. Something like self-preservation kicked in, told me to play it by the book. A stretch for me, but the only option.

I replaced the branches, pulled out my mobi and dialled 999.

Got 'Emergency. Which service?'

'Police.'

I took a last glance down at the corpse, caught an eyeful of dark viscera and spilled entrails. Felt another heave. Figured this image was staying with me for a while.

As the operator connected me I stamped out my misgivings, my urge to run, told myself I was doing the right thing.

A firm voice: 'Police, emergency.'

'Yes, hello . . . I, eh, seem to have stumbled across a . . .' – it was clearly murder, but I chose my words carefully – 'dead body.'

A gap on the line, then, 'Are you sure the person is dead, sir? Do you require an ambulance?'

'I'm pretty sure he's dead . . . The blood's everywhere and there's a lot of stuff that should be inside him lying about on the ground.'

Another silence.

'Sir, can I take your details?'

I felt my pulse quicken. What was I getting myself into?

Said, 'My name's Gus Dury.' My address and the location on Corstorphine Hill followed.

'There are officers on their way to the locus now, Mr Dury . . . Can you keep an eye out for them?'

Trembling: 'Erm, yes.'

'The officers will take your statement when they arrive.'

'Fine, yes.'

I hung up.

As I clicked the mobi off there was a rustle in the distance. It put the shits up me. I froze. I'd definite company. Sure as shooting, I wouldn't be too charmed to meet our man's acquaintances.

Another rustle. Same spot. I felt sweat form on the back of my neck.

My head buzzed, thoughts going round faster than a mixer. None gave me a get-out.

My jaw clenched, fists followed, both on auto.

Fight or flight?

This scenario: I'd take the latter.

Since the yobs had legged it in the Corrado visibility was blacker than my thoughts. The moon had escaped the cloud, though, and the clearing caught more light now. Could I risk being spotted if I made a dash for it? What would plod have to say about that?

I felt another bucket of adrenaline tipped in my veins. I got ready to mush, then: a whimper. It came from the same spot as the rustle.

'The dog . . . Fuck, the dog.'

I can't say the wee fella was glad to see me. He cowered, back against the tree, and put his big black eyes on me.

'It's okay, boy . . . it's okay.'

He looked like a Staffie. I wasn't sure, but he ticked all the boxes: stocky, deep-chested, your average tinpot hard man's hound. I'd have expected more of a put-up, snarling. Some teeth-baring maybe. Biting. But got none of it.

'That's it, that's it . . . the good guys are here, boy.'

As I untied him from the tree he trembled. He'd been traumatised.

I lifted him and he yelped, as near to the noise a baby makes as I'd reckon a dog could manage.

'Sorry, fella, that hurts, huh?'

I tucked him under my coat and he curled into a ball, laid his chops on my shoulder. I swear he was docile. Me, I'd have been ready to kill the first bastard who came my way after what he'd been through.

'Think we'll have to get you to a vet,' I said.

I made for the clearing.

The sky's edges started to bleed blue. A violet glow began on the horizon. I could hear the sirens of the police cars bombing it up Corstorphine Road already. In no time this place would be swarming with filth.

The hack in me – or was it the bad bastard? – forced out another call: I dialled my sometime employers, hoped there was still money in the budget for a late shift.

The number rang three times.

An eager voice: 'Newsdesk.'

'If I remember what nights are like in there, I'm dragging you away from a crossword.'

'Sudoku, actually.'

Well, it *was* 2009.

'Gotcha. You'd like a tip-off for tomorrow's page-one splash, then.'

I heard the reporter's chair creak as he sat upright. 'Tell me more.'

Chapter 3

I SAT TIGHT. WISHED I could say the same for the dog. He squirmed under my coat and whined and whimpered with every movement.

'Come on now, you're not doing yourself any favours,' I told him.

He looked at me with wide eyes, his fat tongue lolling out the side of his mouth. He did not look a well beast; if I didn't get him some veterinary attention soon, he wasn't long for this world.

I felt my heart blacken at the sight of him. 'Those little fuckers.'

The police cars had stopped and a trail of searchlights made their way up the hill to the clearing.

I had, I guessed, time to make one last call. If this dog was to have any hope I needed to get moving soon.

I dialled Mac. He still owed me after all I'd done for him of late.

'Mac, it's Gus.'

'How goes it? You done with the badgers?'

Oh yeah, that was the job: stake-out on the hill, to catch badger-baiters. These days, I was big time. My late friend Col had left me his pub, but it wasn't doing too well. We had more debts than punters. I'd been picking up what extra work I could, in any line. Going back to hack work was looking like a more tempting offer than ever.

'Fuck the badgers, Mac.'

'Gus, what are you saying? Are you off the job?'

'I don't have time for this . . .'

'Gus, those Badger Protection boyos are paying top whack . . . Are you pissed?'

'Mac, just listen the fuck up!' Where I found the balls to speak to Mac the Knife, with all his form, like that, I'd no idea. 'Give them back their fucking deposit.'

A pause, then, 'I'm listening, Dury.'

'Good. Now get in your car and drive to the foot of Corstorphine Hill . . . Right now.'

'Gus, I've got the pub to look after.'

'Fuck the pub . . . Shut the pub.'

A moment of silence, the radgeness of the idea registered, then: 'Okay. I'm on my way.'

'And bring towels, lots of them. And some water if you can manage it.'

'What the . . . are you delivering a baby?'

'No, I've just had a fucking cow. Now shift your arse, Mac.'

I hit 'end call'. My phone smelled of Regal – made me want to spark up. As I fished in my pocket for my smokes the dog yelped.

'Sorry, boy . . . we'll get you to a vet soon. Mac's on the way.'

I just got my Marlboro lit when a torch was shone in my face.

I raised my hand, said, 'You're blinding me.'

A uniform stomped over. As he approached, the dog let out a bark – bravely, I thought, given his injuries. Had we bonded already?

'What the fuck are you doing here?' said the uniform.

'I called you. I'm the one that found the body.'

He shone the torch on me again, ran the light up and down. For the first time since my fall I copped an eyeful of my new Leatherface get-up.

Uniform's jaw drooped; his eyes didn't blink. 'You're fucking covered in blood.'

'I know . . . I, eh . . .'

'You're dripping in it.'

'I fell and, well . . .'

He turned away, gave a groan, chucked up. I figured he hadn't been on the job long.

More uniforms arrived; I pointed them to the corpse. There was suddenly a lot of movement about the place. Radios buzzing, people running back and forth. I pointed the way, retold my story twice, three times to uniforms. Then the big guns got rolled out.

I'd seen a suit like it before, in the window of Jenners, but I never dared to check the price. Like they say, if you need to ask, you can't afford it. I remembered the make though, Hugo Boss – mob that made the SS uniforms.

Boss Suit strutted past me, shot me the kind of look I guessed he normally kept for *Big Issue* sellers on the Mile. He took some directions from uniform then followed the by now well-trodden path to the corpse. He kept his hands in his pockets, except for when he wanted to wave away his underlings, or point them in a new direction. He was big on himself, no question.

I followed to the edge of the clearing. There was yellow crime-scene tape being rolled around the trees and a white tent being unfurled, but I could see everything clearly in the breaking light.

It seemed all straightforward: Boss Suit was leaving it to the shit-kickers. Then someone handed him a plastic tray with the corpse's wallet. I was close enough to see the change of expression from cocksure to shit-scared when he registered the victim's details.

He wiped his mouth. It was only a few seconds, but telling. Immediately he dropped the wallet back in the tray, ordered the uniform away and strolled to the side of the clearing to make a call.

I tried to get closer. Caught the words 'It's fucking Moosey!' Then he turned, caught me in his gaze. He lowered the phone. 'Who the fuck are you?'

'I found the body.'

'Dury!' It seemed my reputation preceded me. 'Well, well, well . . . the mighty Gus Dury. I don't know whether to shake your hand or bow.'

I tried a smile. Nah, wasn't happening.

He walked over to me, checked me up and down. I got the impression he'd been rehearsing this bit. 'Well indeed . . . I had you down as quite different.'

'You did?'

'Oh, yes . . . I didn't have you down as a total fucking jakey.'

The dog squirmed. I did too.

'Look, I don't think I've had the pleasure.' I held out my hand. It was covered in blood. Dark, almost black blood.

Boss Suit looked down, laughed. 'I don't fucking think so . . . Though, given I wouldn't be standing here now if it wasn't for you, maybe I *should* be shaking your hand, Dury.'

I saw where this was going: my last case had made some waves with Lothian and Borders plod. 'I don't think that's true.'

'No, you're right. I was fucking fast-track; that wee shit storm you caused with the people-smugglers just sped things up. But if the force hadn't shed a dozen-plus of the top brass, who's to say I might not be poking about in the grass with those uniform retards?'

I looked away, tried to appear bored. Truth was, I'd heard it all before. I'd blown the lid on an Eastern European people-smuggling racket that was bringing young girls into the city, forcing them into prostitution. My discovery led to some big boys in the force being shown the door. The papers ran with it for weeks. I was the man pointing the finger but I sure as fuck didn't get anything out of it. This prick, though, seemed to have done all right.

I fronted him: 'Look, this is all very interesting, going over old times and all that, but if you don't mind—'

'What, the case in hand?'

'Well . . .'

He smiled. Teeth dazzled me more than the torches going about the place. 'I'm happy to take your statement . . . In fact, it would be my pleasure.'

He produced a Moleskine notebook, black with an elastic strap. He twanged the band, licked the tip of his pen. 'Go on, Dury . . .

I'm Johnstone by the way, Jonny Johnstone. You might be hearing more of me.'

'Really?'

'Oh, I'd say so . . . But to your statement.'

He had me rattled and knew it; he was enjoying winding me up. I tried to calm it, but my nerves were shot. 'I was just going down the hill after these yobs—'

A hand went up. 'Whoa, whoa, whoa . . . back up. What were you doing here?'

'I was on a case . . . badger-baiting job.'

He burst out laughing, had to wipe his eyes, near toppled over. 'Come again . . . badger what?'

I repeated.

'Fuck me, Dury . . . you're big time, eh.'

I was beginning to lose it. 'Look, d'you want to hear this or what? I could just as easily have fucked off and left you to it.'

He straightened, put a bead on me. 'Ah, but your sense of civic duty wouldn't allow that now, would it?'

I turned away. 'Fuck this.'

'Not so fast, Dury.'

I swung back. 'Look, I have a dog here that's been shot at with air pellets. I need to take it to a vet.'

Another smirk. 'Badgers, dogs . . . You'll be doing Rolf Harris out a job.'

I moved off.

'Stop. You're not going anywhere until I'm well and truly fucking finished with you, Dury . . . and I mean finished.'

I stood still. I had my back to him now. He walked slowly towards me, then around my right side until he faced me. He said, 'We have more in common than you think, Dury.'

I wasn't biting, though he had my full interest. I let it slide. He seemed almost disappointed, went back to the job in hand, said, 'So, these yobs . . . descriptions.'

'I gave your boys the descriptions.'

'And they were in a car, you say?'

'Corrado, a white one.'

'Probably not related.'

'You seem very sure.'

He raised his brow. 'I'm a proper detective, fuckface. Don't even think of questioning my judgement.'

'Are we done here, *Detective*?'

'Oh, I think we're done, don't you?'

I nodded, said, 'Good.'

As I turned he called me: 'Oh, Dury . . . don't be leaving the city any time soon.'

'You what?'

'I think you heard.'

As he walked past me he twanged the elastic on his notebook again, tucked it inside his suit. I clocked the lining: purple silk. 'We may need to talk to you again . . . so make sure we can get hold of you, nice and easy, eh.'