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Pitch Black

Written by Alex Gray

Published by Sphere

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PITCH BLACK

Alex Gray



SPHERE

First published in Great Britain in 2008 by Sphere
This paperback edition published in 2008 by Sphere

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-7515-3874-8

Typeset in Caslon by M Rules
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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www.fsc.org Cert no. SGS-COC-004081
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Sphere
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette Livre UK Company
www.hachettelivre.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

This novel is dedicated to Donnie, with love.

*We cannot change yesterday.
We can only make the most of today,
and look forward with hope toward tomorrow.*

Inscription at the entrance to St Margaret's Chapel,
HMI Cornton Vale Prison, Stirling

*Inspiring bold John Barleycorn!
What dangers thou canst make us scorn!
Wi' tippenny, we fear nae evil;
Wi' usquebae, we'll face the devil!*

From 'Tam O' Shanter' by Robert Burns

KELVIN FOOTBALL CLUB

PERSONNEL

Kelvin FC Chairman: Patrick (Big Pat) Kennedy

Directors: Barbara Kennedy, Colin Sharpe, Jeffrey

Mellis, Frank Devine

Kelvin FC Manager: Ron Clark

Assistant Manager: Neil Skinner

Coach: Alan (Ally) Stevenson

Club Doctor: Dr Willie Brown

Physiotherapist: Mary McCarty

Groundsman: Albert Little

Kitman: Jim Christie

Administrative Officer: Marie McPhail

Apprentice: Willie Penny

PLAYERS

Goalkeepers: Gordon (Gudgie) Carmichael; Craig Mitchell

Strikers: Leo Giannitrapani; Austin Woods; John McKinnery; Barry (Baz) Thomson

Mid-fielders: John Fleming; Simon Gaffney; Andy Sweeney (Captain); Hugh McGrory; Mark

McCausland; Brian Finnegan; Donnie Douglas;
Wolfgang Friedl; Jason White; Nicko Faulkner
Defenders: Ian Rammage; Rory Lynch; Kenny
McSporran; Joe Henderson; Axel Rientjes; Davie
Clark

(NB: Not all of these appear in the action of the novel.)

PROLOGUE

When the car rounded the corner of the road, she gasped. Up until now the cliffs on either side had masked the skyline so she was shocked by the streak of orange like a gash across the horizon in front of her, bleeding from the blackness. It took all her concentration to keep the vehicle from veering towards the sheer wall of rock on her left. A quick glance showed how near she'd come to clipping the kerb and she shuddered as the wheel turned under her grip. The slimy walls glowed with sudden reflected light; she'd been close enough to see tiny plant fronds uncurling from the cracks that ran up and down the cliff side.

It was better to slow down a little, let the fright of that panicked swerve subside before she dared take another look.

A huge sigh rose from her chest and she felt the tears prick under the sore places of her eyelids, which she'd rubbed constantly during the drive north. The reassuring hum of the engine and the straight road ahead gave her courage to turn her head a fraction.

Now she could make out dim hills, darker shapes against the ink-blue sky with its burgeoning shafts of dawnlight a beacon of hope.

Mornings had never felt like this before.

Here was a new day beginning and with it the excitement of a million possibilities. It was like the first day of creation, newly-minted, given to her as a gift. All the other mornings of her life seemed to have begun with despair.

Her fingers were numb from gripping the steering wheel so tightly and she flexed first one hand then the other, slowing the car down so she could take peeks at the sky and the water. There was no artificial light here, just cat's eyes reflecting the full beam as she tried to keep to her side of the narrow road. Few vehicles had been travelling south on the opposite lane and her car seemed the only one taking this night-time route away from the city, so she gave a start when the lorry's shape appeared in the rear-view mirror. It rumbled behind her and she slowed down to let it pass. There was a swish of tyres and then the flanks of the lorry passed her by like a looming grey shadow. She watched it move away from

her, then it cut back into the left lane after a decent interval. The sudden flash of the lorry's hazard warning lights thanked her for allowing it to overtake. She opened her eyes wide in surprise; when last had she been shown such courtesy? That it should be here in this lonely place and from an unseen stranger was surely a good omen. She must be on the right road.

Now the sky was lightening even more and pale grey clouds merged into the yellow patches above the horizon's rim.

A bird flew past, slowly winging its way inland, making her suddenly aware that there was life outside this cocoon of engine noise and road and gears. Just up ahead there was a black and white pole indicating a parking place, and she drove in and stopped.

She gave a half-turn to the ignition and rolled the window down, letting in a rush of cold air, then breathed deeply, closing her eyes for a moment against the gusts of wind. It was quiet but not silent. The first sound she heard was the lapping of water against the edge of the shore, like a living creature trying to break free from the deep masses that threatened to hold it back. She listened, mesmerised, then heard another sound, a peeping bird somewhere out of sight in the bushes, then an answering call further ahead. Straining her eyes did not help; the birds were invisible in this early light. The cool air chilled her skin and set her sneezing. A

quick rummage in her jacket pocket found only used and still-sodden paper hankies so she sniffled instead, then rolled the window back up. There had been no time to look for her driving gloves before the journey so she tucked her fingers up into her sleeves to warm them, the way she'd done as a child.

A memory of her mother suddenly came back to her. It had been one of the days when she'd been brought home from school. The day had started out badly at home with a sore throat and difficulty eating her porridge, then became worse when no one had taken her seriously and she'd been forced out, to make the cold walk down to the bus stop. The shivers had begun as she'd sat wedged between a man in a big overcoat and a woman with sharp elbows; the only seats left on the bus were the bench seats facing the exit. Each time the doors of the bus had sighed open she'd been exposed to the cold air and had felt trickles of sweat against her flesh.

Later her mother had fetched her home with cuddles that she knew were born of remorse. She'd tucked her hands into Mum's coat pockets then, sitting on her knee as the bus trundled back out of the city.

Now Mum was long gone and her own children were simply memories of what might have been.

On the brightening horizon she could make out the colours on the distant hills, tweedy browns and

greens with darker patches that told of clefts where waterfalls might run. She glanced at the fuel gauge. It was nearly empty. It was not a road she knew well but there must be a filling station at the next village. A signpost not far back had indicated it was only sixteen miles away. *Then what?* a little voice asked. She had no answer, just the knowledge that she had taken the only way she could. A bed and breakfast place, probably, once she had travelled further north. And it would be wise to take out more money from a cash machine if she could find one. After that she'd have to think about the long-term future. But not yet, not just yet.

Turning on the ignition, she released the handbrake and let the car roll back on to the road. The fresh air had woken up something inside her, a feeling that had become lost through all those months and years. How long had she been recoiling from that voice and those hands? Trying to avoid the blows and the weight of fear that had smothered so much of the woman she used to be. Now she felt like a girl again, a young, wild thing, free of any responsibilities with the whole world still to savour.

It was not yet tomorrow so there were still some hours before she needed to make her plans. So far, escape had been sufficient. What was behind her could be dealt with in time. His body would still be lying where she had let it fall. The blood would have

congealed by now, and rigor would have stiffened his limbs. She had left no traces to tell a story, of that she was certain; nor were there any friends or family to come around enquiring about her. Perhaps there would be a call from the club in a few days, or maybe the smell of a decomposing body would alert a passing stranger. And if *she* should be found? If tomorrow brought questions and blame, then what would she do?

There was no easy answer. It was something she would think about later. Once the sun was high in the sky and the road had taken her into the wilderness. She yawned suddenly then felt her chest relax, her hands lighter on the steering wheel as the road disappeared under the twin beams. Shadows all around still shrouded the world.

Everything would be fine. It was not yet tomorrow, after all.

CHAPTER 1

The man trained his binoculars on the bird, his heart soaring with the sea eagle as its white tail feathers came into view, huge wings hardly moving, floating upon unseen currents of air. He watched the eagle fly into the distant haze until it was a mere speck, and then let his glasses fall with a sigh of pleasure. What a sight to see on their last day!

They'd decided to picnic in the Great Glen, making the most of the fine weather that had blessed their three-week holiday in Mull, and Lorimer had been scanning the skies hopefully all afternoon. Now he had that sighting and it was a treasured memory he could take back with him to the city.

'How many pairs are nesting this year? Did that fellow say?' Maggie asked him, her hand resting

lightly on her husband's arm. Her gaze still followed that dot on the clouds, imagining the bird seeking some prey to take to its growing chicks.

'Gordon? He reckoned they had five pairs out at Torloisk this year. But nobody said anything about sea eagles over this way. Golden eagles, yes, but not these boys,' Lorimer replied, looking down at Maggie's earnest expression with a smile. 'Anyway, how about some food? I'm starving.'

Maggie wrenched her gaze away, thoughts of eagles fading as she looked down at their unopened hamper. It had been a good idea bringing it with them on holiday, especially to a self-catering cottage. Mary Grant had left the basics to start them off, but the old lady knew they'd want to stock up with local produce and so had left a list of suppliers from Craignure to Tobermory and beyond. It had been fun buying eggs and fresh vegetables from farms that were off the beaten track, finding other places of interest like the ancient stone broch while they were at it. Secretly Maggie suspected that was exactly what the old lady had in mind when she'd left the names and locations of out-of-the-way farms and crofts. But the main town on the island, Tobermory, had been the real treasure trove for picnics. Now Maggie unwrapped some rolls and handed one to her husband.

Lorimer leaned back against the grassy hillock and

sighed. 'What a day. Imagine seeing that before we go home!'

Maggie, her mouth full of spicy chicken, nodded in agreement. It had been the perfect last day. Even the midges had left them alone for some reason: maybe it was that small wind stirring the bog cotton and bringing a scent of myrtle wafting towards them.

'Happy?'

She swallowed and smiled, nodding again. It had been a wonderful holiday, just the two of them exploring Mull together from their base at the cottage. They'd been content to live without the intrusion of radio, television or even newspapers; a real escape from the world outside. Even the West Coast weather had been kind, with almost no rain save an occasional nightly shower that had sprinkled the grass and kept it green. Tomorrow they'd pack up and catch the ferry from Fishnish then drive the long way round, making the most of their journey home. But for now they could bask in the sweetness of the Mull air, banishing any thoughts of returning to work.

Lorimer lay back against the soft, rabbit-cropped grass and closed his eyes. It had taken the Detective Chief Inspector days to unwind, to forget that last, protracted murder case and now he was perfectly at peace with his world and his wife. In a matter of minutes his head tilted sideways and he began to snore softly.

Looking down at him, Maggie felt a tenderness

that she had almost forgotten. How she loved this man! Yet there was an ache, a longing that sometimes surfaced. She thought again of that sea eagle carrying food to its chicks. That would never be her lot in life, she told herself. As a school teacher, Maggie had plenty of contact with kids and she was glad to leave *some* of them at the three-thirty bell. But there were others she'd have taken home in a minute, satisfying an empty space that she sometimes acknowledged to herself.

Maggie let her gaze wander over the hills and the ribbon of single-track road winding below them. They were so lucky to have had such a time here. What was she doing becoming wistful at what she couldn't have, when she should be grateful for all that life had given to her, she scolded herself. Then she looked back at her sleeping husband. He'd been such fun to be with these last three weeks. It was a shame it was coming to an end, but maybe there wouldn't be too much going on back in the world of Strathclyde Police. Or was that too much to hope for? After all, crime never seemed to take a holiday.

The cottage door closed with its now-familiar creak and Lorimer turned the key in the lock. Putting it carefully behind a lichen-covered stone where Mary Grant would find it, he picked up the final bag and strode towards the car where Maggie was busy sorting

things into the boot. He took a last look at the white-washed cottage and beyond: the gardens ran all the way down to the boat shed then petered out in clumps of reeds and small pools down by the shoreline. He and Maggie had scrambled over thrift-strewn rocks, stopping sometimes to look for seals out in the curving bay or listen to the seabirds' raucous delight as they dived for fish. Once, Maggie had whistled at a lone black head, coaxing it to swim nearer to shore, and it had, curious to find the source of her music. They'd been rewarded with a woofing bark then the seal had turned over lazily and disappeared beneath the dark blue water.

Lorimer took a last look at the Morvern hills basking in the sunshine across the Sound of Mull, a patchwork of yellows and greens that Maggie had tried to capture in watercolours. These three weeks had rejuvenated him, made him forget any evil that stalked the city streets. Under canopies of late night skies he had held Maggie close and gazed in wonder at the myriad stars and planets scattered across the heavens. Was there some hand at work in all of that? he'd wondered. On such nights it was not hard to believe in an almighty creator. They'd basked in the silence of the place, though by day it was full of bird-song, mainly the different species of warblers whose ubiquitous dun colouring made them nigh on impossible to identify without binoculars. And sheep, he

reminded himself with a grin as a lone black face skittered along the cottage road, a panic-stricken *baah* emanating from deep within its throat. He was feeling fitter and leaner; every day they'd walked or climbed, every night he'd slept soundly, no anxious dreams disturbing his rest.

As they rounded the corner away from the bay, Lorimer heard Maggie give a small sigh. Taking her hand in his, he squeezed it gently.

'Maybe we could come back here next year?' he suggested and smiled as she grinned in pleasure at the thought.

A queue of traffic was waiting by the pier when they arrived. The ferry was usually right on schedule, they'd been warned, and space on this small craft was restricted.

'What's up?' Maggie nudged her husband and nodded towards a uniformed officer who was walking slowly down the line of cars, noting something on his clipboard.

'Maybe he's looking for that rainbow trout you guddled from the burn!' Lorimer joked. Maggie had tried catching fish with her bare hands after they had spent one interesting night staring out at the bay as silent poachers laid their illegal splash-nets at the mouth of the burn. They'd watched, entranced, at the pantomime being played out under a full, silvery

moon. Mary Grant had hinted at such goings-on, telling how the local policeman always had a good sea trout for his dinner: a sort of reward for turning a blind eye. The fishing rights to the bay were quietly ignored by many of the locals, she'd told them. 'Better they get them than the seals!' she'd insisted.

Curious in spite of himself, Lorimer opened the car door and walked towards the policeman.

'What's up?' he asked, recognising the man as PC Gordon Urquhart, one of the team from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds' Eagle Watch. They had been privileged to stay in a hide with the man for a whole morning, watching as an adult bird fed its growing chicks.

'Ach, there's been a report of some egg snatchers in the area. We've got their registration details but we have to check all cars coming on and off the island,' he explained. 'Not quite in your league, Chief Inspector,' the man grinned, recognising Lorimer.

Lorimer was about to reply but the familiar sound of Gordon's two-way radio made the policeman step away from him. He watched the other man's expression deepen; this was surely some business that far outweighed egg thieves?

As the island cop turned back in Lorimer's direction he was met with a pair of questioning blue eyes.

'We've got some real trouble on our hands now!'

he groaned. 'Got to pick up a woman coming off the next ferry,' he explained.

'Not an egg stealer, then?'

'No,' Gordon replied then stared at Lorimer as if seeing him properly for the first time. 'More in your line, sir.' He turned away and nodded at the car ferry making its way from Loch Aline.

'Looks like she's killed her husband.'

There was a dull thud as the metal hull of the boat made contact with the pier. Lorimer saw the ferry-men heave in the massive ropes, securing them to bollards on shore, then watched as one by one the cars made their tentative way down the metal ramp and on to the island. Urquhart stepped up to each one and smiled at the driver, his clipboard at the ready. Lorimer scanned every vehicle to see which one belonged to the murder suspect. He didn't have long to wait. A second officer appeared from the crowds and ushered a woman out of a dark green Ford then took her place at the driver's seat while Urquhart led her away.

As they passed him, the DCI caught a glimpse of shoulder-length blonde hair and a pale, haunted face. Perhaps it was his intent stare that drew her gaze but for a second the woman looked up and met his eyes before she disappeared into the waiting police car. But in that single glance he could see such suffering

that he stepped back into the shadows. What was the story behind this face? He'd probably never know.

Lorimer turned to see Maggie waving frantically at him to come back to the car.

'Just in time!' Maggie scolded, as the line of cars moved off towards the ferry. 'What kept you anyway?'

'Oh, nothing,' Lorimer said. His curiosity was still unsatisfied but something stopped him confiding this incident to Maggie. It was unfair to burden his wife with anything that smacked of work, he told himself; if it was a murder case she'd see it in the papers soon enough.

Janis Faulkner sat staring at the floor. The cup of tea they had brought for her had long gone cold. Her stomach growled, reminding her that she hadn't eaten anything for hours, but the very thought of food made her feel sick. All these questions about Nicko! *When had she last seen her husband? What was she doing up here on Mull? Did she have a solicitor?* Only this last question had drawn any response from the woman and that was an open-mouthed 'Oh!' of surprise as if the enormity of her situation had only just dawned upon her. Now she sat slumped over the formica-topped table in Craignure Police Station, her eyes fixed on something that only she could see.

The woman shivered despite the stuffiness of the

room. It had been madness to think she could find a way to escape. Every port in Scotland must have been on the lookout for her car once they'd found Nicko's body, even here on this island where she'd thought to find some kind of sanctuary. What could she say? How could she tell them what had really happened? And, anyway, who was going to believe her?