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Broken Skin

Written by Stuart MacBride

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STUART MACBRIDE

BROKEN SKIN

HARPER

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SEX

1

Up ahead the woman stops. She stands on one leg under the streetlight, rubbing her ankle, as if she's not used to wearing high heels. Number seven: a wee Torry quine on her way home after a night out on the pish, staggering along in her fuck-me heels and miniskirt, even though it's February in Aberdeen and freezing cold. She's a looker. Curly brown hair. Upturned little nose. Nice legs, long and sexy. The kind he likes to feel struggling beneath him as he makes the bitch take it. Shows her who's boss.

She straightens up and teeters off again, mumbling away to herself in a little alcoholic haze. He likes them drunk: not so drunk they don't know what's happening, but drunk enough that they can't do anything about it. Can't get a good look at him.

Dirty bitches.

She lurches past the NorFish building – spotlit for a moment in the sweeping headlights of an

articulated lorry – across the roundabout and onto the cobbles of Victoria Bridge, crossing the dark, silent River Dee into Torry. He hangs back a bit, pretending to tie his shoelace until she's nearly all the way over. This part of town isn't his usual hunting ground, so he has to play it carefully. Make sure no one's watching. He smiles: the dark, grey street is deserted – just him and lucky Number Seven.

A quick jog and he's right behind her again. He's fit, doesn't even break a sweat in his Aberdeen Football Club tracksuit, complete with hood and black Nike trainers. Who's going to look twice at a man out for a jog?

Torry's bleak in the late February night – granite buildings stained almost black with grime, washed with piss-yellow streetlight. The woman fits right in: cheap clothes, cheap black leather jacket, cheap shoes, cheap perfume. A dirty girl. He smiles and feels the knife in his pocket. Time for the dirty girl to get her 'treat'.

She turns left, heading off the long, sweeping curve of Victoria Road onto one of the side streets, where the fish processing factories are. Probably taking a shortcut back to her horrible little bedsit, or the house she shares with mummy and daddy. He grins, hoping it's mummy and daddy – she should have someone to share her pain with when this is all over. Because there's going to be a *lot* of pain to share.

The street's deserted, just the back end of an

empty eighteen-wheeler parked opposite the oriental cash and carry. It's all industrial units here, silent and dark and closed for the night. No one to see them and call for help.

The woman – Number Seven – passes a skip full of twisted metal, and he speeds up, closing the gap. Her heels go click-clack on the cold concrete pavement, but his Nikes are silent. Past a couple of those big plastic bins overflowing with discarded fish heads and bones, grimy wooden pallets slapped on top to keep the seagulls out. Closer.

Out with the knife, one hand rubbing the front of his tracksuit, stroking his erection for luck. Every detail stands out bright and clear, like blood splashed on pale, white skin.

She turns at the last minute, eyes going wide as she sees him, then sees the knife, too shocked to scream. This is going to be special. Number Seven will get to do things she's never dreamed of, not in her darkest nightmares. She—

Her arm flashes out, knocking the knife away as she grabs his tracksuit and buries her knee in his groin hard enough to lift him off the ground.

He lets out a little squeal and she closes his mouth with a fist. Black concentric circles chase a hot yellow roar and his knees give way. The pavement is cold and hard as he collapses, curls up around his battered testicles, and cries.

* * *

'Jesus . . .' DC Rennie peered at the man snivelling away on the cracked pavement among the fishy stains. 'I think you broke his goolies. I heard them pop.'

'He'll live.' PC Jackie Watson forced the man over onto his face, cuffing his hands behind his back. He groaned and whimpered. Jackie smiled. 'Serves you right, you dirty little bastard . . .' She glanced up at Rennie. 'Anyone looking?' He said no, so she kicked the guy in the ribs. 'That's for Christine, Laura, Gail, Sarah, Jennifer, Joanne, and Sandra.'

'Jesus, Jackie!' Rennie grabbed her before she could do it again. 'What if someone sees?'

'You said no one was looking.'

'Yeah, but—'

'So what's the problem?' She stood, glowering down at the crying man in the AFC tracksuit. 'Right, Sunshine, on your feet.'

He didn't move. 'Oh for god's sake . . .' She grabbed his ear and hauled him upright. 'Rennie, you want to . . . ?' But DC Rennie was busy on the radio, telling Control that Operation Sweetmeat had been a success – they'd caught the bastard.

2

Aberdeen Royal Infirmary was spreading like a concrete tumour. For years it'd been in remission, but lately it had started to grow again, infecting the surrounding area with new wings of concrete and steel. And every time he saw it, Detective Sergeant Logan McRae's heart sank.

Stifling a yawn he crumpled up the thin plastic cup his vending-machine coffee had come in and dropped it in the bin before pushing through the brown double doors into the heady bouquet of disinfectant, formalin and death.

The hospital morgue was a lot bigger than the one down at Grampian Police Force Headquarters and a lot more cheerful. A small stereo in one corner of the large, brown room pumped out Dr Hook's greatest hits, the music almost drowning out the sound of running water as it gurgled down a drain on one of the dissecting tables. A woman in a green plastic apron, surgical scrubs and white Wellington boots was packing an old lady's organs

back where they'd come from, to the tune of *When You're in Love with a Beautiful Woman*.

Logan's unidentified male was lying on his back on a hospital gurney, eyes taped shut, skin as pale as wax paper. They'd left all the surgical tubes and lines attached for the inevitable post mortem: it made the body look abandoned. Mid-twenties, short blond hair, thin, but well muscled, as if he'd been addicted to the gym. His lower limbs and abdomen were smeared red, a long row of hurried stitches marking where they'd sewn him back together again after the surgeon finally admitted defeat. Death: one, NHS Grampian: zero.

The woman stuffing the old lady looked up and saw Logan peering down at the man's naked body. 'Police?' He nodded and she pulled off her mask, frizzy red hair escaping from underneath her surgical cap. 'Thought so. We've not bagged him up yet.' Stating the obvious. Not that there was much chance of getting any useful forensic evidence off the body now. Not after it'd been contaminated in the A&E lobby, examination room, and operating theatre.

'Don't worry about it, I can wait.'

'OK.' She picked the old lady's ribcage up off a stainless steel trolley and fiddled it back into place, then started to close up.

He watched her for a moment before asking: 'Any chance you could take a quick look at our John Doe here?'

'No bloody chance! You got any idea what the Hormonal Bitch Queen would do to me if she found out some lowly APT played with the corpse before she got her icy little fingers on it?'

'I'm not asking you to do a full post mortem, but you could, you know,' shrug, 'take a look?' He tried on his best smile. 'Otherwise we're going to have to wait till tomorrow afternoon. Sooner we know, the sooner we can catch whoever did this. Come on, just a quick external examination – no one will ever know.'

She pursed her lips, frowned, sighed, then said, 'OK. But you tell anyone I did this and you're going in one of those bloody freezers, understand?'

Logan grinned. 'My lips are sealed.'

'Right, give me a minute to finish up here and we'll see what we can do . . .' Ten minutes later the old lady was sewn closed and back in a refrigerated drawer. The APT pulled on a fresh pair of gloves. 'What do we know?'

'Shoved out of a car at A&E, wrapped in a blanket.' Logan hoisted up the plastic bag full of bloodstained fabric they'd given him upstairs. 'We'll do a full forensic on the clothes, but could be a hit and run. Driver flattens some poor sod, panics, bundles them into the back of the car and abandons them at the hospital.' He watched as the anatomical pathology technician started prodding the cold flesh, muttering 'hit and run' under her breath in time to the music.

'Don't think so.' She shook her head, sending

a stray Irn-Bru-coloured curl bouncing. 'Look—' she hooked a finger into the side of the man's mouth, pulling it back to expose the teeth, still wrapped around the ventilation tube, 'incisors, canines and premolars are broken, but there's no damage to the nose or chin. An impact would leave scarring on the lips. He's bitten down on something . . .' She stroked the side of the dead man's face. 'Looks like some sort of gag, you can just see the marks in the skin.' Logan's blood ran cold.

'You sure?'

'Yup. And he's covered with tiny burns. See?' Little circles and splotches of angry red skin, some with yellowing blisters in the middle. Oh God.

'What else?'

'Dermal abrasions, bruising . . . I'd say he's been roughed up a bit . . . More marks on the wrists, like he's been strapped to something. It's too thick to be rope. A belt? Something like that?'

That was all Logan needed: another body who'd been tied up and tortured. He was about to ask her if there were any fingers missing when she handed him a pair of gloves and told him to give her a hand turning the body over. It was a mess of dark, clotted blood, reaching from the small of the back all the way down to the ankles.

The APT slowly scanned the skin, pointing out more burns and contusions as she went, then prised the corpse's buttocks apart with a sticky screltching sound. 'Bloody hell.' She stepped back, blinked, then peered at the man's backside again.

Dr Hook started in on *If I Said You Had A Beautiful Body (Would You Hold It Against Me?)*. 'The only way this was a car accident is if someone tried to park a Transit van up his backside.' She straightened up, peeling off her latex gloves. 'And if you want anything more, you're going to have to ask a pathologist, 'cos I'm not opening him up to find out.'

Grampian Police Force Headquarters wasn't the prettiest building in Aberdeen: a seven-storey block of dark grey concrete and glass stripes – like an ugly Liquorice Allsort – jaundiced with pale yellow streetlight.

There was a lot of indignant shouting coming from the front lobby, so Logan gave it a miss. One look through the part-glazed door was enough for him: a large woman with grey hair and a walking stick was giving Big Gary on the front desk an earful about police harassment, prejudice and stupidity. Bellowing, 'YOU SHOULD ALL BE ASHAMED OF YOURSELVES!' at the top of her lungs. He took the stairs instead.

The canteen was in the post-midnight lull: just the sound of pots and pans clattering in the sink and a late-night radio station turned down low to keep Logan company as he sat slurping his cream of tomato soup, trying not to think about the dead man's ruptured rear end.

He was finishing up when a familiar figure grumbled her way up to the service counter and

asked for three coffees, one with spit in it. PC Jackie Watson – she'd changed out of the rape-bait outfit she'd worn to work that evening and back into the standard all-black uniform, her hair returned to its regulation bun. She didn't look very happy. Logan sneaked up behind her while she was waiting, grabbed her round the middle and went, 'Boo!'.

She didn't even flinch. 'I could see you reflected in the sneeze guard.'

'Oh . . . How's it going?'

Jackie peered over the counter at the little old man fumbling about with the coffee machine. 'How long does it take to make three bloody cups of coffee?'

'That good, eh?'

She shrugged. 'Honestly, I'd be quicker swimming to Brazil and picking the bloody beans myself!'

When the three cups finally materialized, Logan walked her back down to interview room number four. 'Here,' she said, handing him two of the paper containers, 'hold these.' She peeled the plastic lid off the third, howched, and spat into the frothy brown liquid, before putting the lid back on and giving it a shake.

'Jackie! You can't—'

'Watch me.' She took the other coffees back and pushed through into the interview room. In the brief moment the door was open, Logan could see the huge, angry shape of DI Insch leaning back

against the wall, arms crossed, face furious, and then Jackie banged the door shut with her hip.

Intrigued, Logan wandered down the corridor to the observation room. It was tiny and drab – just a couple of plastic chairs, a battered desk and a set of video monitors. Someone was already in there – ferreting about in his ear with the chewed end of an old biro: DC Simon Rennie. He pulled the pen out, examined the tip, then stuck it back in his ear and wiggled it about some more.

'If you're looking for a brain, you're digging in the wrong end,' said Logan, sinking into the other seat.

Rennie grinned at him. 'How's your John Doe then?'

'Dead. How's your rapist?'

Rennie tapped the monitor in front of him with the ear-end of his biro. 'Recognize anyone?'

Logan leaned forward and stared at the flickering picture: interview room number four, the back of Jackie's head, a scarred Formica table, and the accused. 'Bloody hell, isn't that—'

'Yup. Rob Macintyre. AKA Goalden Boy.' Rennie sat back in his seat with a sigh. 'Course, you know what this means?'

'Aberdeen doesn't stand a chance on Saturday?'

'Aye, and it's bloody Falkirk. How embarrassing is that going to be?' He buried his head in his hands. 'Falkirk!'

Robert Macintyre – the best striker Aberdeen Football Club had seen for years. 'What happened

to his face?' The man's top lip was swollen and split.

'Jackie. She did a Playtex on his balls too: lift and separate . . .' They sat in silence for a minute watching the man on the screen shifting uncomfortably, taking the occasional sip from Jackie's spit-flavoured coffee. He wasn't much to look at – twenty-one years old, sticky-out ears, weak chin, dark spiky hair, a single black eyebrow stretched across his skinny face – but the little bugger could run like the wind and score from halfway down the pitch.

'He come clean? Confess all his sins?'

Rennie snorted. 'No. And his one phone call? Made us ring his mum. She was down here like a bloody shot, shouting the odds. Woman's like a Rottweiler on steroids. Aye, you can take the quine out of Torry, but you can't take Torry out the quine.'

Logan cranked the volume up, but there was nothing to hear. DI Insch was probably trying one of his patented silences again: leaving a long, empty pause for the accused to jump in and fill, knowing that most people were incapable of keeping their gobs shut in stressful situations. But not Macintyre. He didn't seem bothered at all. Except by his crushed gonads.

DI Insch's voice boomed from off camera, crackling through the speakers. *'Going to give you one more chance, Rob: tell us about the rapes, or we'll nail you to the wall. Your choice. Talk to us and it'll look good in front of the jury: shows remorse, maybe gets you*

a shorter sentence. Don't and they'll think you're just a nasty wee shite who preys on young women and deserves to go down for the rest of his life.' Another trademark pause.

'Look,' said Macintyre at last, sitting forward, wincing, then settling back in his chair again, one hand under the table. He'd not been in the limelight long enough to lose his Aberdeen accent yet, all the vowels low and stretched. *'I'll say it again, slowly so you'll understand, like. I was out for a wee jog. Keepin' fit fer the match Saturday. I didn't rape anyone.'*

Jackie got as far as, *'You had a knife—'* before Insch told her to shut up. His bulk loomed into the frame, leaning on the tabletop with both fists, his bald head glinting in the overhead lights, obscuring Macintyre from the camera.

'Yes you did, Rob – you followed them, you jumped them, you battered them, you raped them, you carved up their faces—'

'It wasnae me!'

'You took trophies, you daft sod: necklaces, earrings, even a pair of knickers! We'll find them when we search your house.'

'I never did nothin', OK? Get that intae your fat, thick heid. I NEVER RAPED NOBODY!'

'You really think you're going to walk away from this? We don't need your confession, we've got enough on you—'

'Know what? I've had enough of cooperatin' with the police. I want tae see ma lawyer.'

'We've been through *all this: you get to see a lawyer when I say so, not before!'*

'Aye? Well you might as well send out for more coffee then, 'cos it's gonnae be a long night. And I'm no sayin' anythin' else.'

And he didn't.