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Opening Extract from...

When the Devil Drives

Written by Christopher Brookmyre

Published by Little, Brown

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LITTLE, BROWN

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by Little, Brown

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

Hardback ISBN 978-1-4087-0341-0
Trade Paperback ISBN 978-1-4087-0342-7

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Typeset in Adobe Caslon by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Little, Brown
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

Her drawing efforts did not last beyond the gunshot that rang out at the beginning of the production. It gave her quite literally the fright of her life, calling her attention not only to the action on the stage, but the action all around her. Jolted away from the cosy little bubble of her sweets, her drink and the comfort of her mum's legs, she suddenly noticed how the scenery and backdrops looked up close. She became aware of the platforms, ramps and stairways the actors were using to access different areas of the set, as well as the slides, pulleys and counterweights that were making elements zip in and out of place. And if the gunshot had initially summoned her attention, what held it thereafter was the actors themselves.

Prior to this, people she had watched on stage had seemed little different to the people she watched on TV. They inhabited this unreachable otherworld, barely more real or tangible than cartoon characters. That night, she saw not only that they were real people, brushing past in a waft of heat and smells, but she witnessed them each become something altogether different from themselves. They stood in the wings or behind the backdrop in their costumes, faces painted vividly with make-up so thick that close up they were like circus clowns. Some would chatter quietly to one another, some remained alone and withdrawn, but when they stepped on to the stage they instantly became other people. Their accents changed, their posture and manner changed; they even seemed taller or shorter than mere seconds before. Women in tears made their exits and then traded little smiles and jokes once they had cleared the sightlines. An actor stood alone: reflective, shy and even a little sullen, then stepped before the audience and was instantly a cheerfully drunken and voluble braggart.

Having been taken to all those pantomimes and other shows, six-year-old Jasmine was already familiar with spectacle. This, however, was magic. She knew that night that theatre was no longer something she merely wanted to watch. It was something she wanted to be part of.

When she played with her dolls thereafter, it wasn't make-believe. Some of them were the cast, others the audience, and whatever the former were about – whether it be tea parties or hair dressing – it

was all part of a play. She recalled gluing together kitchen-roll tubes and panels cut from cardboard boxes, placing them either side of her doll's house, its front hinged open where it sat on her bedroom floor. It was no longer a doll's house. It was a stage set.

She took part in children's drama clubs, youth theatre groups, school musicals; and with her mum being a drama teacher whose time and duties were divided between two separate secondaries, when Jasmine wasn't acting she was helping sew costumes, paint backdrops and fashion props.

When it came to her vocation, there was no question of Jasmine having a Plan B.

She recalled her mum's pride, delight and no little relief when Jasmine got accepted into the Scottish Academy of Theatre and Dance, even though it would involve her daughter flying the nest and taking up residence through in Glasgow. Any fears Mum might have for Jasmine being on her own away from her vigilant eyes in a different city (and one whose darker side Beth Sharp was warily familiar with) would prove unfounded. She certainly didn't have to worry about her little girl being seduced by the temptations of her student lifestyle. Jasmine had been seduced by a jealous suitor way back at the Lyceum and remained monogamously single-minded to the point of anti-social where it came to the study of her chosen craft. She relaxed and began letting her hair down a bit more during her second year, but admittedly even that had a vocational element to it, as she began to appreciate how important it was to be making contacts and getting her face known in certain circles. Whatever it took, she was going to do it.

Then Mum got sick.

It was around the start of Jasmine's final year that Mum was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and given her unmerciful, unthinkable, *impossible* prognosis. Jasmine dropped out of college and moved back in with her in Corstorphine, to be with her as much as possible during the time they had left. Mum only had months, and Jasmine only had months left to spend with the person who had raised her, alone, the person she was closest to in the world, the person she could not possibly do without. But eventually, inescapably, Jasmine *would* have to do without.

People talk about picking up the pieces, getting back on with your life, but the pieces scattered around Jasmine looked like grains of sand on a beach, and she spent a lot of time in her mum's empty house contemplating them, unable to assemble them into any pattern that made sense. She didn't feel like she had a life to get back on with. She had no job, no career, no studies any more, and barely an echo of her previously consuming aspirations.

Eventually, she decided to move back to Glasgow and the little flat she still rented, as a means of forcing herself to push forward, of making some attempt to re-gather the threads of her ambitions. And they were ambitions now, at best, not dreams. Dreams were what little girls had as they squatted in the wings at their mother's feet.

All she had left were pragmatic necessities, amid the rather unsettling realisation that she had, as the phrase goes, her whole life ahead of her. This sounded to her a daunting and arduous prospect rather than a rallying cry for the passions of youth. Suddenly it didn't seem so visionary to have spent her whole life in pursuit of a profession with an unemployment rate comparable with dinosaur obedience trainers and banking-sector humility advisers. To make matters worse, in a game where visibility was the key to opportunity, she had completely fallen off the grid. Nobody knew who she was, and among her former peers, those who hadn't forgotten about her completely seemed to have assumed that she hadn't merely dropped out of her course, but abandoned acting altogether.

Auditions were a struggle to come by. Sure, there were occasionally parts you could turn up and read for, but there were auditions and there were auditions. There was a difference between being asked to try out for something because the director thought you might be what they were looking for, and simply making up the numbers because protocol dictated that the audition at least *appear* to be open.

The only real nibble she got was a call-back from Fire Curtain, a touring company founded by the prodigiously talented, formidably connected and more than a little capricious Charlotte Queen, who had been a year above Jasmine at the SATD. Charlotte claimed to have found the academy 'a path too well-trodden' in terms of a route

into theatre, and cited 'itchy feet' as a further spur to setting up her own company at the precocious age of twenty-two. (To talented and connected should also be added 'a bit posh', which in Jasmine's eyes made Charlotte's bold move somewhat less of a gamble, as well as that bit easier to fund.)

Jasmine didn't get the part, but was nonetheless tantalised by Charlotte's suggestion that she'd be great as Miranda in a planned production of *The Tempest* she had pencilled in as their Edinburgh Fringe project a year hence. In the meantime, with bills to pay, she reluctantly and very much half-heartedly accepted an offer of work from Uncle Jim, an ex-cop who ran his own private investigation firm. Jim sold it to her on the premise that in a business replete with ex-cops, he could really use someone whom his subjects wouldn't recognise as such from a mile off, and further sugared the pill by claiming that it would require a degree of acting. Jasmine strongly suspected that Jim's true motivation was a sense of familial duty towards his late cousin's daughter, particularly given the patience he showed in the face of her serial incompetence.

Perhaps ironically, it was a reciprocal sense of duty towards Jim that made her stick it out, though admittedly it helped that it paid considerably better than bar work or a job in a call-centre. She didn't feel entirely comfortable taking money for something she was rubbish at, but Jim seemed sincere in both his intentions and his faith that she would come good. Jasmine gradually began to dig in, despite the actor's whispering angst that commitment to another job was a gentle way of letting go your dreams.

She was barely ready for the water wings to come off when she was hurled in at the deep end by Jim going missing, forcing her to play detective for real in attempting to track him down. She did so in the end, but Jim's own end had preceded that, leaving her not only bereft once more, but technically unemployed.

Amazing what can change in a year; or nine months anyway. As she stood by Jim's grave at the end of last summer, she'd never have thought that by the following spring she'd be acting in theatre. Unfortunately the theatre in question was one of seven in the surgical suite at St Mungo's General Hospital, where Jasmine was currently

working as a clinical support worker, and the acting part was largely about concealing from the rest of the staff that, much as was the case in her fledgling PI days, she didn't really know what she was doing.

Her present task was straightforward enough, at least now that she was beginning to get a handle on where various items of equipment were kept. She was wheeling in a stack for a laparoscopy. It looked very much like the kind of set-up they had at her secondary school for whenever the teacher wanted to show them a film or television programme: an aluminium trolley bearing a large monitor atop a short column of electronic equipment with cables spilling untidily out on all sides. The patient wasn't even in the anaesthetic room yet, and once he or she was under it could still be ten or fifteen minutes before the surgeon showed up, so they were a long way off 'knife to skin'.

There were two theatre nurses setting up as Jasmine entered: Sandra was unwrapping the sterile seals from a tray of surgical instruments, while Doreen was filling in some paperwork for an audit. They paid her little heed as she rolled the stack steadily through the double doors, but her arrival invited greater notice from Liam, the operating department assistant, who cast an interested eye over her as he chatted to a young and slightly nervy orderly named David.

Mr Assan was the surgeon performing the procedure, while Dr Hagan would be anaesthetising the patient. The power relationship there was as complex as it was delicate, but beneath that level there was less ambiguity. Among the theatre staff, Liam wanted everyone else to understand that he was the man in charge.

Liam was in his early forties, and had worked in the hospital for more than twenty years. Doreen and her three decades' service could trump him in the 'in with the bricks' stakes, but he had arrogated a seniority in the pecking order that took little cognisance of rank and that he did not wear lightly. Even Geraldine, the theatre manager, seemed wary to the point of deference when she was addressing him.

With Jasmine being the new arrival, he had wasted little time in impressing upon her that he was the theatre suite's alpha male, picking her up on every mis-step in what struck her as a rather transparent

bid to undermine her confidence, albeit it wasn't her position to judge, and she was certainly ensuring he didn't want for opportunities to criticise. However, this didn't represent the full repertoire of his territorial pissing.

'Here, have you seen that new bird they've got doing the weather on *Reporting Scotland*?' he asked David.

Jasmine had caught the tail end of his last remarks, something about an ongoing dispute between two of the surgeons. It had been gossipy and guarded, a little snide but carefully circumspect. This was a sudden change in subject and register, and though she wasn't the one being addressed she knew it was for her benefit.

'Naw, I usually watch the news on Scotia,' David replied uncertainly, clearly regretful that he couldn't give the desired answer. He needn't have worried. Liam wasn't asking with a view to soliciting his thoughts. It was simply a pretext.

'Aw, man, she looks pure filth. You can just tell. Serious, if I got hold of her, I'd leave her fanny like a ripped-oot fireplace. I'd be on her until the neighbours phoned the council aboot the smell.'

Jasmine knew this was for her ears, but though it was Liam who was talking, it was David who looked her way, a fleeting, uncomfortable glance.

Jasmine could feel her cheeks flush but she knew she mustn't respond.

Sandra let out a tut followed by a disapproving sigh, while Doreen simply shook her head.

'Whit?' Liam snapped, looking round sharply at Sandra. It was hard to tell if he was more annoyed by her impertinence or by the fact that it wasn't her response that was being sought. 'Christ's sake, just a wee bit of banter. Figure of speech, like.'

'There's ladies present,' Doreen sallied in support, part complaint, part appeal.

'It's just youse old miseries that are making a fuss.'

Then, inevitably, he looked towards Jasmine, having found a way to return the focus to his original target. 'You're no' bothered, are you, wee yin?'

There was laughter in his voice and a smile on his lips, but steel

in his gaze as he eyed her across the operating table. To disagree was to get her card well and truly marked, while to accede was to betray Doreen and Sandra while inviting further such remarks.

'I'm sorry, I was in a bit of a dwam. I wasn't paying attention,' she lied, offering all parties a way out.

Liam wasn't for taking it.

'I'm just saying you're open-minded. Lassies your age aren't all buttoned-up and prudish about sex, not like the older generations. A healthier attitude. That's why the young lassies these days take an interest in how they look down below. Go into Boots and it's full of wax strips and depilatories and all sorts. See, this pair here won't even know what I'm talking about. Women their age, it must look like Terry Waite's garden inside their kickers.'

He was giggling to himself as though this was just some benign frivolity, but nobody else was laughing. The two nurses were simmering silently while poor David stared at the floor, afraid to meet anyone's eyes, least of all Liam's. Jasmine knew that this was precisely the type of situation he'd been trying to effect. An atmosphere of tension and poison was a result for him: if everyone else was feeling on edge he had nothing to fear from any of them.

He was looking at her again, checking how she was taking it, waiting eagerly for her response now that she couldn't play the same get-out card.

How on earth did I end up here, Jasmine asked herself, putting up with shit like this? Honestly. The things you had to do for money.

'I'm sorry, I don't quite follow,' she told him. 'Was there something in particular you wanted to ask me?'

'Aye. I was trying to tell them you're not bothered by us talking about this kinda stuff, so they shouldnae be stopping us just because they don't like it. That's right, isn't it?'

Jasmine knew she had to eschew a response ostensibly agreeing with him and adding, in this spirit of sexual candour that permitted speculation about colleagues' genitals, how she imagined he probably had a cock like a budgie's tongue. Instead her words had to be measured and carefully chosen.

'I don't think you should be saying anything that makes the people

you're working with uncomfortable, and what you just said was grossly disrespectful to all of us as colleagues and as women. I think you'd have to consider yourself very lucky if neither Doreen nor Sandra put in a complaint.'

Liam looked towards her with a glare that told her they probably weren't going to be BFFs.

'Oh, sorry, were you wanting my actual opinion, or just a wee bit of "banter"?' she asked.

The atmosphere did not improve, but at least everybody was equally uncomfortable and Liam wasn't getting to enjoy himself. What disappointed Jasmine, however, was that Sandra and Doreen thereafter seemed almost as pissed off at her as they were at Liam. Evidently, she shouldn't have poked the tiger.

Once the operation was over, the patient was wheeled into recovery by Dr Hagan and Sandra, while Liam went off on a break, having said very little throughout. Jasmine was helping clear up, though she had learned not to touch anything until directed to do so by one of the nurses.

'You'd better watch yourself now,' Doreen told her quietly. 'You're new, so you weren't to know, but you're better just ignoring him. Get on his bad side and it's more trouble than it's worth.'

'But he clearly thinks that's acceptable, and it isn't. You should put in a complaint.'

Doreen gave a sour laugh.

'You think nobody ever has? Also more trouble than it's worth. Behind his back, his nickname round here is Eliot.'

'I don't get it.'

'As in Ness?'

'Still don't get it,' Jasmine confessed.

'What age are you?'

'Twenty-one.'

'Before your time, right enough. *The Untouchables*.'

'I see.'

'No, you don't know the half. He's a law unto himself, knows the system inside out. He's well in with Brian Anderson, the Unison FoC, and he's got Brian believing that all the complaints are

trumped-up charges because management have it in for him. Well, technically that's true: management would love to get rid of him, but they can never make anything stick.'

'Why not? His behaviour today was in front of several witnesses.'

'Nobody ever feels like talking by the time the grievance proceedings are heard. That's why I'm warning you to watch out. He's very intimidating. Christ, Sharon Murphy's been off five months long-term sick with stress; Julie Philips was off the best part of a year and then put in for a transfer. He's not daft either. There was a porter saw him moving boxes of drugs out the back door, which there's been rumours about for years. Liam knew this porter was in a flute band, so he claimed the guy had made it up to get him sacked because he was a Catholic. Don't think Liam's darkened the door of a chapel in twenty years, but management panicked soon as he'd played that card. It was his word against the porter's, same as it was his word against Sharon's over the sexual harassment. As I say, it's not worth it. Keep your head down. Stay out his way.'

Jasmine knew it was too late for that. She could try not to antagonise him any further, but the damage was done. Even if she kept her head down, as Doreen suggested; even if she did her best to physically avoid him, she suspected Liam would be making a point of seeking her out.

He didn't wait long. It happened the next day.

Jasmine was wheeling a stack of equipment along the corridor following a colonoscopy list when Liam appeared at her side and began pushing the trolley too. His left arm was stretched across her shoulders, not quite touching, but enclosing her between him and the stack nonetheless.

'Many hands make light work,' he said.

'I've got it,' she said. 'I'm fine myself.'

'Don't be daft. Between us we can have this back where it belongs in no time.'

His tone was polite and matter-of-fact, lacking any trace of grudge or aggression. It sounded like an olive branch, or at least as if it was supposed to.

Oh, you're good, she thought. But not as good as you think.

'I said I'm fine. I'd prefer it if you took your hand away. You're crowding me and it makes me feel uncomfortable.'

His hand seemed to grip the steel a little tighter for a moment, probably an indicator of suppressed rage, then he let go, holding both hands up in an exaggerated gesture, giggling a little, as though mocking what an unnecessary fuss she was making.

'Wouldn't want that,' he said. 'Just trying to help out. I'm heading this way anyway. I'm going to orthopaedic theatre. Mr Williams has his usual over-long list this afternoon. Be lucky if we're finished by seven.'

He kept walking alongside her, talking. Talking too much. Explaining himself when he didn't need to. Jasmine felt a dull dread in her stomach. She wasn't liking this.

They passed two nurses dawdling in the other direction, probably pacing themselves so that they'd have time to finish the packet of biscuits they were eating between them before they got back to their ward.

'You know, nobody's going to think you can't manage by yourself just because you've accepted a bit of help,' he said, still polite, still cheerful, still walking way too close alongside.

The room where the stacks were stored was just up ahead.

'I *can* manage by myself and I'd rather you left me alone.'

Liam glanced forward and gave a dismissive shake of the head, a hollow smile remaining on his lips.

'Just trying to help, hen.'

He skipped ahead a couple of paces and pulled open the door to the equipment room.

'At least let me get this for you.'

Jasmine would have preferred he didn't, but she didn't really have a choice. He was already holding it. She looked up and down the corridor, disappointed to see nobody coming.

Liam looked at his watch, partly to mock her hesitation but possibly also to check how long before he was due in theatre.

Jasmine wheeled the stack through the open door and into the narrow storage room, where several similar trolleys were ranged

against the walls. She heard the door close behind her and turned to see that Liam was standing in front of it. He put an arm across her shoulders again and began pushing the stack towards an empty slot.

'Tricky parking these things,' he said, his arm now resting across her neck.

The stack bumped the back wall and Jasmine turned around. Liam had both hands on the stack, either side of her arms, trapping her.

'Let me past,' she said. 'You shouldn't have followed me in here. I find what you're doing extremely intimidating.'

'What? You that can manage by herself? You that doesn't need anybody's help? You're saying you're intimidated now?'

'You're a man twice my age and twice my size and you've got me pinned up close inside an enclosed space where nobody can see us. Yes, I'm intimidated. Let me past.'

Liam lifted his right hand from the stack and held it in front of her, but he didn't move out of the way. Instead he waited until she made to move, then he placed it upon her shoulder. He focused a steely stare into Jasmine's eyes and slowly slid his hand downwards.

Jasmine took a breath and swallowed, both to fight back tears and to steady her voice to speak.

'Your hand is on my breast,' she said, just managing to keep the timbre of her voice above a whisper. It sounded like a cruel parody of words spoken in a lover's clinch. 'That is considered sexual assault.'

'Not if it never happened,' he replied, moving his face closer to hers, the sour smell of cigarettes on his breath. 'Like you said, nobody can see us. Your word against mine, hen.'

'Is that how it was with Sharon Murphy? Your word against hers?'

'If you heard about Sharon, you'll know what I'm trying to say here.'

Jasmine did: loud and clear. This wasn't about sexual harassment: sexual harassment was merely the weapon he used. This was about power.

'I don't take shite from anybody,' he said, almost nose to nose, his right hand lightly squeezing her left breast. 'Not from torn-faced

boots like her and not from snobby wee cows like you. See I clocked your type right away. Student summer job is it? Just passing through so you think you're better than the likes of me. Talking all proper, like you're giving a commentary. "Your hand is on my tit,'" he mimicked. 'Think you'll be buying and selling me one day, don't you. Well I've got news for you, bitch. In here, I'm the one that owns you.'

Jasmine reached to his hand and pulled it away from her.

'I think that's enough,' she said.

'*I'll* decide what's enough,' he growled, throwing off her grip and replacing his hand on her breast.

'Actually, I think you'll find it's a third party who'll decide it's enough. More than enough.'

She had spoken clearly but he didn't hear what she was telling him.

'Third party? You still arenae listening, are you, hen? Your word against mine, remember, and who are they gaunny believe? I'm an ODA, been here twenty-odd years. You're in the door five minutes and you're just a clinical support worker.'

Jasmine allowed herself a smile.

'That's where you're really quite disastrously wrong,' she told him brightly.

She could see the change of tone provoke first surprise, then confusion and then, as she went on, true, exquisite horror.

'I'm not a clinical support worker, I'm a private investigator, and the reason I'm giving a running commentary is for the benefit of your employers who are listening in. Hence you're profoundly mistaken about your own job status too: trust me on this, maggot, you *were* an ODA.'