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**Opening Extract from...**

# Close to the Bone

Written by Stuart MacBride

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# STUART MACBRIDE

# Close to the Bone



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Like it or not, you're still alive.

# Saturday

# 1

She holds up the book of matches. Licks her lips. She's practised the words a dozen times till they're perfect. 'Do you have anything to say before I carry out sentence?'

The man kneeling on the floor of the warehouse stares up at her. He's trembling, moaning behind the mask hiding his face. 'Oh God, oh Jesus, oh God, oh Jesus. . .' The chains around his wrists and ankles rattle against the metal stake. A waft of accelerant curls through the air from the tyre wedged over his head and shoulders. Black rubber and paraffin.

'Too late for that.' She smiles. 'Thomas Leis, you—'

'Please, you don't have to do this!'

The smile slips. He's spoiling it. 'Thomas Leis, you have been found *guilty* of witchcraft—'

'I'm not a witch, it's a mistake!'

'—condemned to burn at the stake until you be dead.'

'I didn't do *anything*!'

'Coward.' The lights are hot on her back as she strikes the first match, then sets fire to the rest. They hiss and flare, bright and shining. Pure. Glorious.

'PLEASE!'

'Burn. Like you'll burn in hell.' She drags the smile back on. 'It'll be good practice for you.' She drops the blazing

matchbook onto the tyre and the accelerant catches. Whoosh – blue and yellow flames race around the rubber.

Thomas Leis *screams*.

He jerks against his chains. Thick black smoke wreaths his face, hiding the mask from view as the fire takes hold. He pleads and screams and begs. . .

She throws her head back and laughs at the heavens. Spreads her arms wide. Eyes glittering like diamonds.

The voice of God crackles through the air, making the very world vibrate: '*And . . .* cut. *Well done, everyone – break for lunch and we'll go for scene two thirty-six at half one.*'

A round of applause.

Then a man in a fluorescent-yellow waistcoat rushes into shot with a fire extinguisher. FWOOOSH – the flames disappear in a puff of carbon dioxide as the cameraman backs away, shielding his lens.

The runner peels off the bright green mask with the yellow crosses on it from the stuntman doubling for Thomas Leis. The stuntman's grinning, even though he knows they're going to digitally replace his face in post. Even though he *barged* over her line.

God save us from stuntmen who think they're actors.

She puts her head on one side and frowns. 'I don't know. . . It felt a bit over the top at the end there. Really hammy. Wouldn't she be more . . . you know, suppressed? Maybe even a bit sexual? Can I do it again?'

# 2

'I'm on my way. Tell everyone to—' Something under his foot went *crunch*. Logan froze on the doorstep, mobile phone clamped to his ear. He slid his shoe to one side and curled his top lip. 'Not *again*.'

Three little bones lay on the concrete slab, tied together with a tatty piece of red ribbon.

A hissing whisper came from the other end of the phone. '*Seriously, Guv, Pukey Pete's having ferrets up here, it's*—'

'I *said* I'm on my way.'

Logan stuck the phone against his chest and scowled out at the caravan park in the growing gloom. Bulky static caravans, the size of shipping containers, all painted a uniform institution green. A patrol car idled on the square of tarmac that acted as a turning circle, its blue-and-whites strobing in the warm late-evening air. The driver hunched forward in his seat, peering out through the windscreen at Logan, working his hands back and forth along the steering wheel – as if he was trying to feel it up.

No sign of the little buggers.

Logan kicked the broken bones off the step into the straggly ivy growing up the side of his home. Then took a deep breath

and bellowed it out: 'I KNOW WHERE YOU LIVE, YOU WEE SHITES!'

Back to the phone.

'*I mean, he's gone off on one before, but no' like this. He's—*'

'If he's screwing up the scene, arrest him. If not, just hold his bloody hand till I get there.' Logan stomped over to the patrol car and threw himself into the passenger seat. Hauled on the belt. 'Drive.'

The PC put his foot down.

The sun was a scarlet smear across the horizon, filling the patch of rough ground with blood and shadow. Trees loomed around the periphery, their branches filled with clacks and caws as the rooks settled in for the night.

Grey and black hulks dotted the clearing: burned-out cars, their paint stripped away, seats a sagging framework of rusty wire, the tyres turned into gritty vitrified puddles.

A cordon of blue-and-white 'Police' tape was strung between the vehicles, making a twenty-foot no-man's-land around the Scenes Examination Branch's inner cordon of 'Crime Scene' yellow-and-black. Three SEB technicians knelt in the dirt, poking at something, their white Tyvek oversuits glowing pink in the twilight.

Logan wrinkled his nose. The rancid stench of vomit fought against the greasy scent of burned meat and rendered fat. Like a barbecue with food poisoning. 'Where's the pathologist?'

One of the techs – a shortarse with fogged-up safety goggles – finished scraping something dark and sticky into an evidence bag, then pointed her gloved finger at the other side of the 'Crime Scene' tape. There was another figure in the full Smurf outfit, hunched over a bucket, making retching noises, his back convulsing with every stomach-wrenching heave.

The short tech peeled her facemask off, exposing a circle of shiny pink skin and a thin-lipped mouth. 'Poor wee bugger.

Can't blame him, really. Nearly lost a white-pudding supper myself.' She puffed out a breath, hauled at the elasticated hood of her suit. 'Christ it's *hot* in here. . .'

'You call for backup?'

A nod. 'The Ice Queen's en route as we speak.' The tech pinged her facemask back into place. 'You want to take a sneak peek? We've got as much as we're going to before they move the body.'

'How bad is it?'

She peeled off her gloves and snapped on a fresh pair. 'What, and spoil the thrill of finding out for yourself?' Then she set off across an elevated walkway – metallic stepping stones, like upturned tea trays on tiny legs, keeping their blue plastic booties from contaminating the scene. It led away between a couple of burned-out hatchbacks, disappearing behind the blackened skeletal remains of a Renault Clio. A dark curl of smoke twisted up into the sky on the other side.

Logan adjusted his safety goggles, zipped up his oversuit, and zwip-zwopped after her. The walkway clanged beneath his feet. The rancid barbecue smell got worse. And then they were there.

Christ. . .

His stomach lurched two steps to the right, then crashed back again. He swallowed, hard. Blinked. Cleared his throat. 'What do we know?'

'Not much: victim's male, we think.' Another shrug. 'He's been chained to what looks like a section of that modular metal shelving stuff – the kind you get in your garage? Been hammered into the ground like a stake.'

The victim was kneeling on the hard-packed earth, his legs tucked under his bum. His bright-orange overalls were stained around the legs and waist, blackened across his chest and flecked with little glittering tears of vitrified rubber. Someone had forced his head and right arm through the middle of a tyre – so it sat across his body like a sash – then set fire to

it. It was still burning: a small tongue of greasy flame licked up the side of the rubber.

The SEB tech groaned. 'Bloody hell. . .' She hauled a fire extinguisher from a blue plastic crate, pointed the nozzle, and squeezed the handle. A whoosh of white hid the poor bastard's face from view for a moment, but when the $CO_2$ cleared he appeared again in all his tortured glory.

His skin was swollen and blistered, scorched crimson; the eyes cooked to an opaque white; teeth bared, yellowed and cracked. Hair gone. Patches of skull and cheekbone poking through charred flesh. . .

Don't be sick. Don't be sick.

Logan cleared his throat. Looked out over the graveyard of burned-out cars. Deep breaths. The long corrugated metal roof of Thainstone Mart was just visible between the trees in the distance, what sounded like Tom Jones belting out 'It's not Unusual' at a disco or corporate bash, dancing and boozing it up into the wee small hours. And when they were gone some poor sod would be up all night, clearing up all the spent party poppers and empty bottles before the next livestock auction.

The SEB tech thumped the fire extinguisher back into the crate. 'It's the rubber in the tyre – once it gets up to temperature it's almost impossible to stop the damn thing from catching again.'

'Get it off him.'

'The tyre?' She gave a wee spluttering laugh. 'Before the Ice Queen gets here?'

'Doctor Forsyth—'

'Pukey Pete won't even look at the poor sod.' She sagged a bit. 'Shame. It was nice having a pathologist you could actually *talk* to. . .'

Now the tyre wasn't burning any more, other smells elbowed their way through Logan's facemask: excrement, urine. He took a step back.

The tech nodded. 'Stinks, doesn't he? Mind you, if it was

me – if someone did *that* to me? I'd shit myself too. Must've been terrified.'

A voice cut through the still evening air: one of those sing-song Highlands-and-Islands accents. 'Inspector McRae? Hello?'

Logan turned.

A woman stood behind the outer cordon of blue-and-white 'POLICE' tape, her grey linen suit creased like an elephant's scrotum. 'Inspector?' She was waving at him, as if he was headed off somewhere nice on a train, not standing on a little metal walkway beside a man who'd burned to death.

Logan picked his way along the clanking tea trays until he was in the blue-and-white area again. Peeled back his hood, took off his safety goggles, then crumpled up his facemask and stuck it in a pocket.

The woman squinted at him, pulled a pair of glasses from a big leather handbag and slipped them on, tucking a nest of brown curls behind her ears. 'Inspector McRae?'

'I'm sorry, miss, we're not giving interviews to the press right now, so—'

'I was First Attending Officer.' She stuck her hand out for shaking. 'Detective Sergeant Lorna Chalmers.' A smile. 'Just transferred down from Northern? I'm investigating that off-licence ram-raid in Inverurie yesterday, looking for the Range Rover they nicked to do the job?'

Nope, no idea. But it explained the accent. Logan snapped off his purple nitrile gloves. 'You get the cordon set up?'

'And the duty doctor, the SEB – or whatever it is they're called this week – and the pathologist too: original *and* replacement.'

Cocky.

Logan struggled out of the top half of his oversuit, then leaned back against the remains of a VW Polo. The bonnet wasn't just warm beneath his bum, it was hot.

DS Chalmers pulled out a police-issue notebook and flipped it open. 'Call came in at eight twenty, anonymous – well,

mobile phone, but it's a pay-as-you-go disposable. Unidentified male said there was a "bloke on fire with a tyre round his neck and that" out by Thainstone Mart.'

Frown. 'Why didn't the local station take it?'

She grinned, showing off sharp little teeth. 'You snooze, you lose.'

Cocky and ambitious with it. Well, if that's the way she wanted to play it: he swept an arm out at the collection of burned-out vehicles. 'I need you to get every car here identified. I want names, addresses, and criminal records of the owners on my desk first thing tomorrow morning.'

She gave him a stiff-lipped smile and a nod. I am determined, nothing will stop me. 'I'm on it, Guv.'

'Good.' Logan pushed himself off the VW Polo. 'And you can start with this one. Or didn't you notice it was still warm?'

The smile slipped. 'It is? Ah, it's—'

'Was it burning when you got here?'

'I don't—'

'Details, Sergeant, they're important.'

'Only I was. . . I thought the dead man. . . I was getting everything sorted and. . .' A blush pricked across her cheeks. 'Sorry, sir.'

'Get the SEB to give it a once-over before they go. Probably won't find anything, but it's worth a try.' He struggled out of the oversuit's lower half, then swore as a tinny rendition of the 'Imperial March' from *Star Wars* blared out of his phone. Didn't even need to check the caller ID to know who it was.

Logan hit the button. 'What *now*?'

A pause, then Detective Chief Inspector Steel's smoky voice rumbled in his ear. '*Have you still got me ringing up as Darth Sodding Vader, 'cos that's no' funny!*'

Logan pressed mute. 'Sergeant, I thought I asked you to get those vehicle IDs.'

She kept her eyes on her shoes. 'Yes, sir.'

He smiled. Well, it wouldn't kill him to throw her a bone. 'You made a good FAO: keep it up.' He pressed the mute button again. 'Now bugger off.'

Spluttering burst from the phone. '*Don't you dare tell me to bugger off! I'm head of sodding CID, no' some—*'

'Not you – DS Chalmers.' He shooed her away, then shifted his mobile to the other side, pinning it in place with his shoulder while he unzipped the rest of his oversuit. 'What do you want?'

'*Oh. . .*' A cough. '*Right. Where's that bloody paperwork?*'

'Your in-tray. Did you even bother checking? Or did you just—'

'*No' the overtime report, you divot, the budget analysis.*'

'Oh, I thought you meant where was *my* paperwork. You know, the paperwork *I'm* actually supposed to do, as opposed to *your* paperwork.'

'*Bad enough I've got all this shite to sort out without you throwing a strop every time you're asked to do a simple wee task—*'

'Look, I'm at a murder scene, so can we skip through all the bollocks to the actual reason you called? Was it just to give me a hard time? Because if it was, you can—'

'*And what about those bloody missing teenage lovebirds? When are you planning on finding them, eh? Or are you too busy swanning about with—*'

'Which part of "I'm at a murder scene" do you not get?'

'*—poor parents worried to death!*'

'For God's sake, they're both eighteen – they're not teenagers they're *adults*.' He shuffled his way out of the blue plastic booties. 'They'll be shacked up together in an Edinburgh squat by now. Bet you any money they're at it like rabbits on a manky futon.'

'*That's no excuse for dragging your heels – bloody woman's mother's been on the phone* again. *Do I look like I've no' got anything better to do than run around after your scarred backside all day?*' A loud sniff rattled down the phone. '*Pull your sodding socks*

*up: you've done bugger all on that jewellery heist last night, there's a stack of outstanding hate crimes. . . And while we're on the subject: your sodding mother!'*

'Ah, right: here we go. The *real* reason.' Logan scrunched the protective gear up into a ball and dumped it in the bin-bag taped to the remains of an Audi. 'I'm not her keeper, OK?'

'*You tell that bloody woman to—*'

'I said don't invite her to Jasmine's dance recital, but would you listen to me? Noooooo.'

'*—sodding paisley patterned Attila the Hun! And another thing—*'

A huge mud-spattered Porsche Cayenne four-by-four growled to a halt on the rutted track, behind the SEB Transit van. *Clunk* and the headlights went off, leaving the driver illuminated in the glow of the dashboard. Mouth a thin grim line, nostrils flared, eyes screwed into slits. Brilliant, it was going to be one of *those* evenings.

'*—in the ear with a stick!*'

Logan held up a hand and waved at the Porsche. 'Got to go, Pathologist number two's up.'

'*Laz, I'm warning you, either—*'

He hung up.

Dr Isobel MacAllister stuck both hands against the base of her spine and puffed. Her SOC suit swelled in front, as if she was shoplifting a floor cushion. She hauled back the elasticated hood, showing off a puffy, rose-coloured face framed by a droopy bobbed haircut that looked a lot more functional than glamorous. 'Did you *really* just ask for a time of death?'

DS Chalmers nodded, biro hovering over a blank page in her notebook.

Isobel turned to Logan. 'She's new, isn't she?'

'Just transferred down from Northern.'

'Lord preserve us from the Tartan Bunnet Brigade.' Isobel unzipped the front of her suit. 'The body appears to have

been necklaced – rubber tyre placed over the head and one arm, making it impossible for the victim to remove, then the outer surface is doused with paraffin and set alight. Death is usually caused by heat and smoke inhalation, leading to shock and heart failure. That can take up to twenty minutes.' She wiped a hand across her shiny forehead. 'It's a popular method of summary execution in some African states.'

DS Chalmers scribbled something in her pad. Then looked up. 'And Colombia too. I saw this documentary where the cartels would chain the guy up on an overpass, fill the tyre with petrol and light it. Everyone driving home would see them hanging there, burning, so they knew what would happen if they screwed with. . .' She cleared her throat. 'Why are you all staring at me?'

Isobel shook her head. 'Anyway, I've—'

A car horn blared across the clearing.

She stared at the sky for a moment. Gritted her teeth. Tried again: 'As I was saying, I've—'

*Breeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep!*

'Oh, for God's sake, I can't get five minutes to myself, can I? Not even five minutes.' She jabbed a finger in the direction of her Porsche four-by-four, took a deep trembling breath, and let rip. 'SEAN JOSHUA MILLER-MACALLISTER, YOU STOP THAT THIS INSTANT!'

Silence.

A wee face peered over the dashboard, big eyes and dirty blond hair. Then a flashing grin.

*Breeeeep! Breep! Breeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep!*

Isobel hauled off her gloves and hurled them onto the ground. 'You see what happens? Do you? And will Ulrika get deported for it? Of course not: we'll be lucky if she even gets a slap on the wrist.' Isobel stomped off towards the car. 'YOU'RE IN BIG TROUBLE, MISTER!' Shedding the layers of SOC gear as she went.

DS Chalmers shuffled her feet. 'Well, that was. . .?'

‘They caught the au pair nicking things.’ Logan pulled out his phone. ‘And consider yourself lucky – the last person who asked for a time of death? She made them help her take the victim’s temperature. And the thermometer doesn’t go in the front end.’

# 3

Midges bobbed and weaved in the glow of a SEB spotlight, shining like tiny blood-thirsty diamonds. In the middle distance, Tom Jones had given way to ABBA's 'Dancing Queen'. Logan stuck a finger in his ear and shifted a couple of paces further away from the grumbling diesel generators. 'What? I can't hear you.'

On the other end of the phone, DCI Steel got a notch louder. '*I said, what makes you think it's drugs?*'

'Might not be, but it looks like an execution. We'll know more when we get an ID on the body: my money's on a scheemie drug runner from Manchester or Birmingham.'

'*Sodding hell, that's all I need: some flash bastard knocking off rival dealers like it's a performance art.*' Silence. Then a plastic sooking sound. '*No way I'm carrying the bucket on this one.*'

'Thought that was the point of being in charge of CID?'

'*Sometimes shite flows uphill, Laz, and this one's got "Assistant Chief Constable's Oversight" written all over it in black magic marker. Let him deal with the members of the press.*'

The SEB tech who'd taken him to see the body shuffled into view, holding one corner of what looked like a crate wrapped in miles of thick blue plastic. It was big enough to

take a kneeling man chained to a metal stake. She grimaced at him. 'Budge over a bit, eh? This is bloody heavy. . .'

*'And by "members" I mean—'*

'Got to go, the Procurator Fiscal wants a word.' Which was a lie – she'd left nearly half an hour ago.

*'Oh no you don't: you're no' going nowhere till you tell me where we are with that bloody jewellery heist. You think you get to dump all your other cases just because you've got a juicy wee gangland execution on the cards?'*

'Investigations are on-going, and—'

*'You've done sod all, haven't you?'*

'I've been at a bloody murder scene!'

The SEB hauled their blue plastic parcel through the graveyard of burned-out cars, swearing and grunting all the way, feet kicking up a cloud of pale dust from the parched earth.

*'Well, whose fault is that? You're a DI now: act like it! Park your arse behind your desk and organize things – send some other bugger off to play at the scene.'*

Rotten, stinky, wrinkled, bastarding. . . '*You're* the one who told me to come out here! I wasn't even on duty, I was having my tea.' He pulled the mobile from his ear and glared at it. Concentrate hard enough and her head would explode like an overripe pluke on the other end of the phone. BANG! Brains and wee bits of skull all over the walls.

'Er. . . Guv?' DS Chalmers tapped him on the shoulder, a frown pulling one side of her face down. 'Are you OK? Only you've gone kinda purple. . .'

Logan gritted his teeth, put the phone back to his ear. 'You and I are going to have words about this tomorrow.'

*'Sodding right we will. I'm no'—'*

He hung up. Glowered at his phone for a beat, then jabbed the 'OFF' button. Leave it on and she'd just call back, again and again, until he finally snapped and murdered someone. Logan took a deep breath and hissed it out through his nose. 'I swear to God. . .'

Chalmers held up her notebook, like a small shield. 'We got chassis numbers off all the cars, and guess what: I found my Range Rover.' Pause. 'The Range Rover on the CCTV? The one that ram-raided the off-licence?'

'What about the Golf?'

'Reported stolen at half ten this morning. According to Control: the registered keeper says he drove down the Kintore chippy for his tea Friday evening, came back and parked outside his mum's house, and when he woke up it was gone.' She checked her notes. 'The car, not his mum's house.'

'Go see him. Tell him sod all, just rattle his cage and see what flies out.'

'Yes, sir.' Chalmers wrote something in her notebook, then stashed it away in her jacket. 'I was right about the Colombian drug cartel thing, by the way. Had a boyfriend who downloaded videos of them hanging there, on fire like they were these. . . *horrible* Christmas decorations. He always got really horny after watching them too.' She wiped her hands down the front of her jacket, then rubbed the fingertips together, as if they were dirty. 'I broke it off: *way* too creepy.'

Logan just stared at her.

'Ah. . . Too much information from the new girl. Right.' Chalmers backed away a couple of steps. 'I'll go chase up that . . . yes.' And she was gone.

'I know, I know, I'm sorry.' Logan shifted the mobile from one side to the other, pinning it between his ear and his shoulder as he took the battered Fiat Punto around the Clinterty roundabout, heading back along the dual carriageway towards Aberdeen. 'You know what she's like.'

Samantha sighed. '*Logan McRae, you're not supposed to let her walk all over you any more. You* know *that. We talked about this.*'

He changed gear and put his foot down. The Punto's diesel engine coughed and rattled, struggling to haul the car up the hill. 'I'm going to be a little late.'

'*Pfff. . . I'll forgive you this time.*'

'Good. I'll even—'

'*On one condition: you wash the dishes.*'

'Why's it *always* my turn to wash the dishes?'

'*Because you're too cheap to buy a dishwasher.*' There was a pause. '*Or a decent car.*'

A Toyota iQ wheeched past in the outside lane. One-litre engine, and it was *still* faster than the bloody Punto.

'I'm not cheap, I'm just—'

'*"Prudent" is another way of saying "cheap". Why I put up with you, I have no idea.*' But it sounded as if she was smiling as she said it. '*Don't be too late. And stand up for yourself next time!*'

'Promise.' Logan hung up and fumbled with the buttons until the words 'DS RENNIE' appeared on the screen.

Ringing. . . Ringing. . . Ringing. . . Then, '*Mmmph, nnnng. . .*' A yawn. A groan. '*Time is it?*'

Logan checked. 'Just gone ten.'

'*Urgh. . .*' Scuffing noises. '*I'm not on till midnight.*'

'Yeah, well I was supposed to be off at five, so I think I'm winning the "Who Gets To Whinge About Their Day" game, don't you? Jewellery heist.'

'*Hold on. . .*' A clunk, followed by what sounded like someone pouring a bottle of lemonade into a half-filled bath. '*Unnnng. . .*'

For God's sake.

Logan grimaced. 'You better not be in the toilet!'

A long, suspicious-sounding pause. '*I'm not in the toilet, I'm . . . in the kitchen . . . making a cup of tea.*'

Disgusting little sod.

'I want a list of suspects for that jewellery heist before you clock off, understand? Go round the pawnshops, the resetters, and every other scumbag we've ever done for accepting stolen goods.'

'*But it's the middle of the—*'

'I don't care if you have to drag them out of their beds: you get me that list. Or better yet, an arrest!'

'*But I'm—*'

'And while we're at it, what's happening with those hate crimes?'

'*It's not. . . I. . .*' His voice broke into a full-on whine. '*What am I supposed to do? I'm on night shift!*'

'Rennie, you're. . .' Logan closed his mouth. Sagged a little in his seat as the Punto finally made it over the crest of the hill. It wasn't really fair, was it: passing on the bollocking, just because Steel had had a go at him? 'Sorry. I know. Just . . . tell me where we are with it.'

'*No one's talking. All the victims say they fell down the stairs and stuff. Even the guy with two broken ankles won't blab.*'

'Still all Chinese?'

'*Latest one's Korean. Makes it four Oriental males in the last month and a half.*'

'Well . . . do what you can.'

'*You heading back to the ranch?*'

'Going to see a man about a drugs war.'

'*Yeah.*' Another yawn. Then a whoosing gurgle. '*Oops. I just. . . Emma must've . . . em . . . flushed the washing machine?*'

The young woman in the nurse's uniform scowled up at him, one hand on the door knob. 'I don't like this. It's late. You shouldn't be here.' Her eyebrows met in the middle, drawing a thick dark line through her curdled-porridge face, as if trying to emphasize the razor-straight fringe of her bottle-blonde hair. Small, but wide with it, arms like Popeye on steroids. Hard. Shoulders brushing the tastefully striped wallpaper of the hallway.

Logan shrugged. 'He said it was OK, didn't he?'

'I don't like it.' She swung the door open, then stood to the side, face puckered around two big green eyes. Her finger waved an inch from Logan's nose. 'I'm warning you: if you upset Mr Mowat. . .'

A thin, shaky voice came from inside: a mix of public school

and Aberdonian brogue, rough as gravel. 'Chloe, is that Logan?'

The waggling finger poked Logan in the chest, her voice a low growl. 'Just watch it.' Then she turned on a smile. It would have been nice to say it transformed her face, but it didn't. 'He's just arrived, Mr Mowat.'

'Well, don't just stand there, show him in.'

The room must have been at least thirty foot long. A wall of glass looked out on a garden lurking in the darkness, the occasional bush and tree picked out by coloured spotlights. Wee Hamish Mowat nudged the joystick on the arm of his wheelchair and rolled across the huge Indian rug. His pale skin was mottled with liver spots and looked half a size too big for his skeletal frame, the hair on his head so fine that every inch of scalp was visible through the grey wisps. An IV drip was hooked onto the chair, the plastic tube disappearing into the back of his wrist. It wobbled as he reached out a trembling hand.

Logan took it and shook. It was hot, as if something burned deep beneath the skin. 'Hamish, how have you been?'

'Like a buggered dog. You?'

'Getting there.'

A nod, setting the flaps of skin hanging under his chin rippling. Then he dug a handkerchief from the pocket of his grey cardigan and dabbed at the corner of his mouth. 'Are you on duty, or will you take a wee dram?' He pointed at a big glass display case, full of bottles. 'Chloe, be a dear and fetch the Dalmore. . . No, the other one: the Astrum. Yes, that's it.'

She thumped it down on the coffee table and gave Logan another glare. 'It's late, and you need your sleep, Mr Mowat.'

Wee Hamish smiled at her. 'Now you run along, and I'll call if I need you.'

'But, Mr Mowat, I—'

'Chloe.' A glint of the old steel sharpened his voice. 'I *said*, run along.'

She nodded. Sniffed at Logan. Then turned and lumbered from the room, thumping the door behind her.

Wee Hamish shook his head. 'My cousin Tam's little girl. Well, I say "little". . . Her heart's in the right place.'

Logan took two crystal tumblers from the display case. 'Not Tam "The Man" Slessor?'

'I promised I'd look after her when he was done for that container of counterfeit cigarettes.' Wee Hamish fumbled with the top of the whisky bottle. 'If you want water, there's a bottle in the fridge.'

'So how *is* Tam the Man doing these days?'

'Not too good: we buried him a month ago.' A sigh. 'Look, can you get the top off this? My fingers. . .'

Logan did. 'Do you know anything about the body we found out by Thainstone today?' He poured out one generous measure and another small enough to drive after. Passed the huge one to Wee Hamish.

'Thank you.' He raised the glass, the dark-amber liquid shivering in time with his hand. 'Here's tae us.'

Logan clinked his tumbler against Wee Hamish's. 'Fa's like us?'

A sigh. 'Gie few . . . and they're a' deid.' He took a sip. 'Unidentified male, chained to a stake and, I believe the term is: "necklaced".'

'We think it might be drug-related.'

'Hmm. . . What do you make of the whisky? Forty years old, nearly a grand and a half a bottle.' A little smile pulled at the corner of his pale lips. 'Can't take it with you.'

Logan took a sip. Rolled it around his mouth until his gums went numb and everything tasted of cloves and nutmeg and burned toffee. 'Is there another turf war kicking off?'

'I've been thinking about it a lot. Well, one does, doesn't one: when time's running out? What's going to be my legacy? What am I going to leave behind when I go?'

'We need this to stop before it gets even worse.'

'Don't get me wrong: I'm not ashamed of the things I've done, the things I've had other people do, but . . . I want . . . something. Got my lawyers to set up bursaries at Aberdeen University and RGU, helped people become doctors and nurses, sponsored vaccination programmes in the Third World, paid for wells to be drilled, mosquito nets for orphans. . . But I don't *feel* any different.'

He sipped at his drink. Then frowned up at the ceiling. 'Perhaps I should try a big public works project? Like Ian Wood and his Union Terrace Gardens thing, or the boy Trump and his golf course? Leave the city something to remember me by. . .' A grin. 'Other than the horror stories your colleagues tell.'

'Do you know who did it? Can you find out? Because as soon as the media get hold of this it's going to be all over the news and papers.'

Wee Hamish stared out into the dark expanse of garden. Or perhaps he was staring at his own reflection in the glass. Difficult to tell. 'To be honest, Logan, I've rather let my attention waver on that side of the business. Once upon a time I knew the operation inside out, but . . . well, I get a lot more tired than I used to.' A shrug, bony shoulders moving beneath the cardigan. 'Reuben's been looking after our pharmaceutical arm. Like he's looking after many things. . .'

Silence.

'Logan, you know I love Reuben like a son – bless his violent little cotton socks – but he's a foot soldier, a lieutenant. He's not a leader.' Another trembling sip. 'If I leave him in charge it'll end in war.'

'I'm not taking over.' Logan put his glass down on the coffee table.

'I know, I know. But if I can't trust Reuben to run things, what can I do? You don't want it, he can't handle it; do I sell up to Malcolm McLennan instead?'

'Malk the Knife's dangerous enough *without* handing him

Aberdeen on a plate too. He's already got everything south of Dundee.'

The wheelchair bleeped, then whined back a few feet, before spinning around to face Logan. Wee Hamish wasn't smiling any more, instead a frown made hills and valleys in the pale skin of his forehead. 'I shall endeavour to find out who is responsible for your burning victim. And don't worry, if whoever did it is on my team, they'll be getting a . . . disciplinary hearing. This isn't the kind of legacy I want to leave behind.'

Outside, Logan's fifth-hand Punto was bathed in the glow of a security light. A huge man leaned back against the bonnet, tree-trunk arms folded over a great barrel of a chest. His three-piece suit looked brand new – the waistcoat straining over that vast belly. Shiny black brogues. Face a patchwork of scar tissue and fat, knitted together with a greying beard. A nose that was barely there any more.

Logan nodded. 'Reuben.'

No response.

OK. . . Logan took his keys out. 'Thought you were more of an overalls and steel toecaps kind of guy.'

Reuben just stared at him. Then slowly hauled himself off the bonnet.

The Punto's suspension rose about three inches.

Logan drew his shoulders back, brought up his chin. 'Go on then, out with it.'

But Reuben just turned and lumbered off into the darkness, brogues scrunching on the gravel. Didn't say a word.

Logan stood there until the huge man disappeared, then slid in behind the wheel. The world was full of bloody weirdoes.

The windows of the caravan next door glowed pale yellow in the darkness and Logan climbed out of the Punto, engine

ticking and pinging in the silence. On the other side of the River Don, the lights of the big Tesco glittered through the trees.

A noise, behind him. . .

Logan spun around, hands balling into fists.

Nothing.

Grove Cemetery was a mass of silhouettes, reaching up the hill to the railway line and the dual carriageway at the top. The first three rows of headstones were just visible in the orange streetlight. Beyond their reach everything was black and silent. Just the faint rumble of late-night traffic working its way through the Haudagain roundabout.

'Hello?'

Stand very still, don't breathe, *listen*. . .

Nope, he was on his own. Which was just as well – no one about to see him acting like something out of a cheap horror movie.

Twit.

Logan found his house key and— Stopped. Another knot of bones hung from the door handle. More bloody chicken bones, wrapped up in a ribbon that was stained a greeny-grey by the sodium glow.

'Very funny.' He unhooked the bundle and chucked it into the bushes that separated the tiny caravan park from the riverbank. 'Little bastards.'

Just because the Grampian Country Chickens factory used to be across the road, didn't mean people had to be a dick about it.