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Hurt

Written by Brian McGilloway

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HURT

Brian McGilloway



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PROLOGUE

The one benefit with getting a school picture taken was that it took so long you missed an entire lesson. Especially when all the other girls in the class were taking forever, fixing their hair, nipping out to the toilet to put on make-up they weren't even meant to have in school. Her mother forbid her using it. 'Fourteen is too young for make-up,' she'd said. Not that make-up would have made much difference, Annie thought.

Annie Marsden stood, watching the group in front of her, their conversation soundtracked by the music leaking from her headphones. If they were aware of her standing behind them, none showed it.

A flash to their left. Up on the stage an old guy, white haired, slightly stooped, was standing at the camera while Nuala Dean preened herself, angling a little in front of the canvas image of a library of leather-bound books, their spines mixtures of red and blue and green. Showing her good side. At least she had a good side, Annie thought.

The line in front of her shuffled forward a space and she moved to fill the gap.

She glanced up only to catch the eye of her physics teacher. He was standing, his arms folded, watching her. Without unfolding his arms, he gestured towards his own ear then waggled his finger at her.

She obligingly pulled out her earphones and pocketed them. The group ahead of her had moved onto the steps of the stage now, their conversation reduced to a murmur as each prepared themselves for their shot.

'Move up, will you!' someone behind her said, and Annie shuffled forward again, pulling her cardigan sleeves further down, gripping their cuffs in her hands. The floor was yellow, she noticed. Assembly hall floors always are. Yellow because that's the only colour of light they can't absorb. Or it's the only one they can absorb. She couldn't remember which.

'Give me a beautiful smile,' she heard the old man say. The girl on the stool in front of him obliged.

'Button up your top button, Annie,' someone said. The physics teacher was standing next to her now. 'Look like you have some pride in your uniform.'

Annie blushed slightly, murmured an apology as the girls behind her tittered at the comment. She struggled to bring the collars close enough together to clasp, in the end gave up and tightened the knot of her tie nearer her throat. She'd told her mum she needed a new shirt in September. Four months later and she was still waiting. Either that or she'd put on too much weight.

'Aren't you just lovely?' the old man said, earning the reward of a smile from Sally McLaughlin.

Annie made her way up the steps, stood, next in line, for the shot, her stomach churning. Sally got up, flicked her hair over her shoulder and strode across and down the set of steps on the other end of the stage.

'Sit yourself down, love,' the old man said.

Annie came across to the stool, edged herself onto it, picked

a spot above the photographer's head to look at, waited. He was busying himself with the flash, adjusting the angle.

Hurry up, Annie thought. She was aware that her skirt was pulled up on her thighs a little, revealing the whitened scar of the ladder in her black school tights. She shifted in the seat, pulling at the hem.

'Right, look at the camera, please,' the old man said.

Annie, despite herself, did. She saw a distorted version of herself reflected in the concave of the lens.

'Haven't you the prettiest eyes?' the old man said.

Annie instinctively glanced at the floor, just as the flash brightened the stage.

The wood was yellow.

Sunday 16 December

Chapter One

He'd just got a pint in when the aura started. A quick flickering of iridescence on the periphery of his vision that already made his stomach turn. He shut his eyes in the hope that perhaps it was a trick of the light, overtiredness from the night before. The last thing Harry needed was another late evening, but then he'd promised the missus this for months. A bit of dinner, a few glasses of wine, then down to the pub after for an hour. The tentative re-beginnings of a relationship which had sprung leaks years earlier, but whose gaping holes only became apparent with the departure of their only son to university.

'Empty nest syndrome,' one of the drivers had told him that day as he'd mentioned during break that he had to go out. They'd all been out the night before on a work do; John-Joe Carlin's leaving party. He'd been driving the Belfast-Derry train for thirty-three years, through all kinds of shit. And now, this evening, he was bringing his last train home.

Harry glanced at his watch, could just make out the time beyond the growing intensity of the flickering, his whole field of vision now haloed with shifting ripples of light. John-Joe would be on the final stretch of his final drive, passing Bellarena.

He stumbled back to the table where his wife, Marie, sat, glancing around her, smiling mildly at the other drinkers.

‘I need to go home,’ Harry said. ‘I’ve another bloody migraine starting.’

Marie tried to hide her disappointment, a little. ‘Have you none of those tablets?’

Harry shook his head. ‘They’re in my work uniform. I left them in the station.’

She tutted, turning and picking up her coat, the fizzing soda water untouched on the table where Harry had set it fifteen minutes earlier. ‘Come on, then. I knew it was too good to be true.’

The shimmering had thickened now into a perfect circle of tightly packed strands of light that seemed to encircle his pupil. Harry felt his stomach lurch, swallowed hard to keep down his meal. It really would be a wasted night if he brought that back up.

His phone started vibrating a second before he heard the opening notes of ‘The Gypsy Rover’, his ringtone. He stared at the screen, trying to make out the caller ID.

‘John-Joe,’ he said, answering the phone. ‘You’re done early.’

‘Earlier than I’d planned. Something’s happened. The train’s just died.’

‘Where are you?’

‘Just past Gransha. Coming in on the final stretch.’

That was less than two kilometres from the station. The train would already have been slowing, rounding

the curve at St Columb's Park, then the last few hundred metres in past the Peace Bridge.

'What happened?' Harry asked, shifting the phone to his other ear.

'I don't know. We just lost power. Everything. Can you check it out?'

Harry glanced up at where Marie stood, the keys in her hand, the hoop of the key ring hanging off her wedding finger.

'I'll be right down,' he said.

As he moved onto the tracks, away from the brightness of the station, Harry was grateful for the silence after all he'd listened to in the car. The darkness actually helped ease his building headache a little. The aura had stopped as they'd pulled into the station, though that was perhaps because his attention was diverted into trying to placate Marie. After all, he was well enough, she suggested, to work, but not to take her out for the night. How could he explain that it was John-Joe's final night? That the man needed to get his train home, one last time? She wouldn't understand it. He could see her now, sitting in the car, the heater turned up full, arms folded, tight lipped, her expression pinched.

He could feel the migraine proper begin to build. He tried focusing on the bobbing of the torch he held as he walked the line. He glanced ahead a distance, to his right, at the looming shapes of the trees separating the train line from St Columb's Park.

Power cables ran along the track side, heavy copper, sheathed in plastic. It was to these that Harry turned his attention, for undoubtedly that was the reason for the train stopping. Sure enough, only ten yards ahead, just beneath the Peace Bridge, the lines had been cut.

He dialled through to the train.

'John-Joe? Sorry, man. You're not going to be bringing this one in for a while. The lines have been cut just outside of the station. We'll need to get the passengers bused out. Have you many on board?'

'One. And he's sleeping off a session.'

It wasn't unusual. The Belfast to Derry train was so slow a journey most people took the bus. The line had been promised an upgrade for years. They were still waiting. Maybe, Harry reflected, the cost of replacing the broken lines would be the latest excuse for not doing it.

'Maybe just a taxi, then.'

'How much cable is missing?' John-Joe asked.

'I'm still walking it,' Harry said. 'It's gone until at least St Columb's Park,' he added, shining his torch along the side of the tracks, noting the absence of the thick cabling.

He was moving away from the light thrown off from the street lamps of estates up to his right now, and heading below St Columb's Park itself. The moon hung low over the tops of the thick-limbed sycamores above him. To his left, the lights of the city seemed to wink at their own reflection off the river's surface. Harry could smell the sharpness of the mudflats he knew to be just a

few feet away from him, a sudden drop down from the tracks to the river's edge.

Suddenly, ahead of him, he saw something.

'Shit, I think one of them is still here,' he whispered, lifting the mobile to his mouth again.

'Get out of there. Call the cops,' John-Joe said.

Harry squinted up ahead. His headache had gathered now behind his right eye. He felt a wave of nausea, felt the sweat pop on his forehead. He could make out a figure who seemed to be lying on the ground, as if hiding, perhaps hoping that, in so doing, he wouldn't have noticed them.

'Oi! You!' Harry shouted. He tried training the torch beam on the spot where the figure was lying, but even so, his headache had grown in intensity to the point that he found it hard to make out what exactly he was looking at.

'Get up off the tracks,' he shouted as he stumbled up the tracks, his foot catching on one of the sleepers beneath, his hands taking the main force of the impact on the sharp-edged grey gravel between the tracks as he fell.

Cursing, he stood again, retrieved his torch and stumbled onwards. It was clear now that the figure was lying on the train line. It looked like a girl, for the hair was long, brown, hanging over her face. She was lying face down on the tracks, her throat resting on the side closest to the river, her legs supported by the other side, her body sagging into the space between them.

'Jesus, get up,' he shouted. 'You'll be killed.'

It seemed a pointless thing to say. The train wasn't going anywhere because of the cables. Besides, lying where she was, she was obviously trying to kill herself anyway. Not brave enough to throw herself in front of the train, she was lying on the tracks, waiting for it to come. She'd picked a spot on the curve so the driver wouldn't have time to brake by the time he'd seen her. In fact, he might not even realize he'd hit anyone at all, until the body was found.

'Come on! Get up, love,' Harry shouted, as he covered the last hundred yards. He wondered if she'd be pleased or sad to find out that the train wouldn't have made it as far as her. Maybe God was looking out for the girl when he sent whoever out to steal the cabling. Mysterious ways and all that.

'Are you all right?' he asked, approaching the girl now. He couldn't tell her age, but she was dressed young: flowered leggings and a hoodie. He noticed one of her baseball boots was lying on the gravel off to one side.

He crouched down beside her, placed a hand on her shoulder. 'You need to get up, love.'

No response.

He left the torch on the ground and, using both hands, gripped her shoulders harder, struggled to turn her over. Finally, she fell onto her back, though in doing so, he knocked the torch onto its side, its beam spilling out onto the river.

At first, he couldn't quite comprehend what had happened. Her head lay unnaturally tilted back, though in the weakening gradations of light thrown

from the torch, he couldn't quite see why. It was only when he shifted the torchlight towards her that he saw the gaping wound severing her throat.

Harry struggled to his feet but only managed a few yards before he finally brought his meal back up.

Chapter Two

A flash of lightning bloomed inside the thunderheads far to the east as DS Lucy Black, trailing a step behind her boss, DI Tom Fleming, picked her way along the train tracks towards the arc of light thrown off from the crime scene beyond. A sharp, earthy smell carried off the River Foyle, which was slate grey and choppy in the rising breeze. From the canopy of the trees bordering St Columb's Park, to their right, the crows shifted uneasily on the branches, curious as to the disruption to their night roost.

As they approached the crime scene tape, Fleming flashed his badge at the uniformed sergeant standing at the cordon.

'And Sergeant Lucy Black, also Public Protection Unit,' Fleming added as the man wrote the names on the clipboard he held.

Lucy glanced to her left; the lights of Derry City winked in the shivering water of the river next to the train line as a breeze shuddered down the Foyle valley. The embankment across the water had been pedestrianized and newly refurbished. The increased street lighting meant Lucy could make out the figures gathered across there, watching over at them.

Fleming stood back, holding up the tape for Lucy to duck under it.

‘It’s a mess up there, Sergeant,’ the officer at the tape said.

‘I’ll manage,’ Lucy commented, noting that he had not offered the same advice to Fleming.

As they made their way along the edge of the train tracks, the first thick drops of rain raised dusty plops from the wooden sleepers the tracks dissected. Lucy recognized the figure coming towards them as Tara Gallagher, a DS from CID.

‘Hey you,’ Tara said, smiling warmly when she saw her. ‘I didn’t know you’d been called.’

‘DI Fleming suggested we should ID Karen. Is it her?’

Tara nodded. ‘We think so. She fits the description, anyway. I’ll get the boss down.’

Tara lifted her radio. ‘Inspector Fleming and DS Black from the Public Protection Unit are here, sir,’ she said.

Lucy glanced up to the scene, saw one of the suited figures put away his radio and turn towards them. He lumbered down the tracks. Lucy assumed this to be the new CID Superintendent, Mark Burns, who had been recently appointed as the replacement for the late Chief Superintendent Travers.

Burns had been fast-tracked up through the ranks though and was a very different creature from the late Chief Super, by all accounts. He’d only taken up the post a week or two earlier, following the last round of promotions.

‘What’s he like?’ Lucy asked Tara, nodding towards the approaching figure.

The girl shrugged. 'All right, so far. *Thorough*,' she added, in a manner that meant Lucy couldn't tell if it was intended as a compliment or a pejorative.

'Chief Superintendent Burns,' the man said, approaching them, gloved hand outstretched. 'Tom, I've met before. You must be Lucy Black. I've heard a lot about you.' His eyes twinkled above the paper mouth mask he wore. Lucy wondered just how much he could have heard in a fortnight.

'Lucy can ID the body,' Fleming said. 'She'd been heading up the search for the girl. She knew her a bit.'

'Great,' Burns said. 'Of course. Come with me.'

He held out his hand, gesturing that Lucy should lead the way. 'I'm sorry for the loss. Did you know her well?'

'I'd met her in one of the care homes a few times,' Lucy said. 'Her mother's an alcoholic; Karen would be taken in anytime her mother went on a particularly long bender. She was a nice girl.' Lucy's placement with the Public Protection Unit of the PSNI meant that she primarily worked cases involving vulnerable persons and children. As a result, she spent quite a bit of time in the city's Social Services residential units, in one of which Karen Hughes had been an occasional inhabitant.

'How do you like the PPU?' he asked, as they walked. 'It's a strange posting for a young DS. I'd have thought CID would have been the obvious place for someone like you.'

What did he mean, *someone like me*? Lucy thought. Young? Female? Catholic? All of the above?

‘I’d rather work with the living than the dead,’ Lucy said a little tritely, though she knew it was not entirely true even as she said it. The dead motivated her as much as the quick. More perhaps.

Burns nodded. ‘I’m afraid in this case that will prove a little difficult. There’s no doubting which she is.’

They had reached the body now, which lay across the tracks so that the girl’s neck was supported by one of the metal rails. It could easily have been mistaken for a suicide attempt, had it not been for the knife wound that had severed her windpipe. A handful of SOCO officers continued to work the immediate scene. One documented the area with a hand-held video, while a second used a digital camera to take still shots.

The girl lay on her back. Her clothes were as described in the Missing Person’s alert that Lucy had released just three days earlier. She wore a white hooded top, too long for her, over flower-patterned leggings. The top was soaked in blood now, but the material near the hem still retained the original white.

Lucy couldn’t really see the face too clearly. Part of it was smeared in the girl’s own blood, the rest covered by the loose straggles of her hair. She could make out, on one side, the soft swell of her cheek, still carrying puppy fat. A smattering of freckles was more vivid now, against the pallor of her skin.

Her hair had also become stuck to the blood that was already congealing at the edges of the wound at her throat. Lucy didn’t look too closely at it. No doubt she’d be treated to all manner of post-mortem pictures

over the coming days without having to look at it here, too. She resisted an urge to push Karen's hair back from her face, instead gently touched it with the tips of her gloved fingers. 'Jesus,' she said, softly.

She tried to dissociate the memories of Karen alive from the scene before her as she examined the body. 'She used to wear a cross and chain around her neck,' Lucy said. 'It might have been lost when her throat was cut.'

'Any other identifying features?' Burns asked. 'Or do you want to wait until she's cleaned up?'

Lucy lifted the girl's left hand. She noticed that the tips of each of her fingers were scored with deep gashes.

'Defence wounds,' Burns said, watching her. 'She must have tried to grab the knife as he was slitting her throat.'

'He?'

'Most likely,' Burns said.

Lucy turned the dead girl's arm. She wore a number of leather wristbands and friendship bracelets. Lucy recognized them. She pushed them up the girl's arm, exposing the skin of the wrist, finding what she was looking for: a series of criss-crossing scars in broken lines traversed the girl's lower arm.

'That's Karen Hughes, all right,' Lucy said, tenderly laying the girl's hand back onto the grey gravel.