

THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

STUART MACBRIDE

Birthdays for the Dead

A person wearing a bright orange raincoat is walking away from the viewer on a path that leads up a set of stone steps. The path is flanked by dark, bare trees and branches, creating a dense, shadowy forest. The background is a bright, hazy light, possibly a sunrise or sunset, which illuminates the scene from behind. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and somber.

TWELVE YEARS. TWELVE DEAD GIRLS.
THIRTEEN WILL BE UNLUCKY FOR SOME.

**STUART
MACBRIDE**
Birthdays
for the
Dead

HARPER

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Without Whom

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And saving the best for last – as always – Fiona and Grendel.

[please ...](#)

Flash. It's like an explosion going off in her head, knives in her eyes, broken glass in her brain. The darkness. She rocks back in the seat; the wood creaks under her.

Blink. Blink. A hot blue-and-orange glow painted across the inside of her eyelids. Tears rolling down her dirty cheeks.

Please ...

She drags a shuddering breath through her nose, wet with snot. The smell of dirt and bitter-onion sweat, dust, and something pissy – like when that mouse got trapped behind the cooker. A little furry body hidden in darkness, going rancid with mould, stinking of rotting sausages, roasting every time they turned the oven on.

Please ... Her mouth makes the word behind the gag of sticky tape, but all that comes out is a muffled moan. Her shoulders ache, both arms twisted behind her back, wrists and ankles stinging from the cable-ties that hold her to the hard wooden chair.

She throws her head back and blinks at the ceiling. The room fades back in: bare wooden joists stained almost black; spider webs; a neon strip-light, buzzing like a wasp trapped in a glass. Walls smeared with filth. A huge camera mounted on a tripod.

Then the noise. He's singing 'Happy Birthday to You', the words coming out all broken and hesitant, like he's scared to get them wrong.

This is fucked up. Completely fucking fucked up. It's not even her birthday yet: not for four months ... days ...

Another shuddering breath.

It can't be happening. It's a mistake.

She blinks the tears from her eyes and stares into the corner. He's getting to the big finale, head down as he mumbles out the words. Only it's not her name he sings, it's someone else: Andrea.

Oh thank God.

He'll get it, right? That it's a mistake? She's not supposed to be here: *Andrea's* supposed to be here. *Andrea's* supposed to be the one tied to a chair in a manky little room full of dirt and spiders and the smell of dying mice. He'll understand.

She tries to tell him, but the gag turns everything into grunts and nonsense.

She's not Andrea.

She shouldn't be here.

He stands behind the camera again, clears his throat a couple of times, takes a deep breath, licks his lips. His voice sounds like one of them kids' TV presenters: 'Say "cheese"!' Another flash, filling her eyes with burning white dots.

It's a mistake. He has to *see* that – he's got the wrong girl, he has to let her go.

She blinks. Please. This isn't *fair*.

He comes out from behind the camera and rubs a hand across his eyes. Stares at his shoes for a moment. Another deep breath. 'Presents for the Birthday Girl!' He thumps a battered old toolkit down onto the creaky wooden table next to her chair. The table's spattered with brown stains. Like someone spilled their Ribena years ago.

It's not Ribena.

Her mouth tightens behind the gag, tears make the room blur. Air catches in her throat turning everything into short, jagged, trembling sobs.

She's not Andrea. It's all a mistake.

'I got ...' A pause while he shuffles his feet. 'I've got something *special* ... just for you, Andrea.' He opens the toolkit and takes out a pair of pliers. Their rusty metal teeth shine in the gloom.

He doesn't look at her, hunches his shoulders, puffs out his cheeks like he's going to puke, scrubs hand across his mouth. Tries for that barely there smile again. 'You ready?'

sometimes it's better not to know

Monday 14th November

Oldcastle FM droned out of the radio on the kitchen work surface.

'... wasn't that groooooooovy? It's eight twenty-five and you're listening to Sensational Steve Breakfast Drive-Time Bonanza!' A grating honk, like an old-fashioned car horn.

I counted out thirty-five quid in tens and fives onto the reminder notice from the Post Office, then dug in my pocket and made up the balance in change. Forty pounds eighty-five pence. Enough to keep Rebecca's mail being redirected into my PO Box for another year.

This week's haul was a Next catalogue, three charity begging letters, and the Royal Bank trying to flog her a credit card. I dumped the lot in the bin. Everything except for the birthday card.

A plain white envelope with a second-class stamp and a stick-on address label:

Rebecca Henderson
19 Rowan Drive,
Blackwall Hill,
Oldcastle.
OC15 3BZ

It'd been done on a typewriter, not a laser printer, the words hammered into the paper, the letter 'c' a little out of line with everything else. Just like all the others.

The kettle rattled to a boil, filling the air with steam.

I took a tea towel to the window, making a gap in the condensation, sending droplets running down the glass to pool on the mould-blackened wooden frame.

Outside, the back garden was a tangle of jagged silhouettes – the sun a smear of fire on the horizon painting Kingsmeath with gold and shadows. Grey-harled council houses, pantiles jaundiced with lichen; the glistening slate roofs of the tenements; a primary school surrounded by chain-link fencing – squat and dour, its windows glowing.

'Haha! Right, it's Straitjacket Sweepstakes time and Christine Murphy thinks the answer is "Acute Polymorphic Psychotic Disorder".' An electronic quack. 'Looks like the voices in your head got it wrong, Christine: better luck next time.'

The cigar box was rough beneath my fingertips. A little bit bigger than an old-fashioned VHS case, decorated by someone only just old enough to be trusted with round-nosed scissors and glue. Most of the sequins had fallen off years ago, and the glitter looked more like grit than anything else, but it was the thought that counted. The perfect size for storing homemade birthday cards.

I opened the lid. The woody smell of old cigars fought against the kitchen's mildew fug and whatever the hell was wrong with the drains.

Last year's card sat on top of the little pile: 'HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!!' scrawled above a Polaroid photograph – a square picture set into a white plastic rectangle. The thing was virtually an antique. Polaroid didn't even make the film-stock any more. The number '4' was scratched into the top-left corner.

I picked up the latest envelope, eased a kitchen knife under the flap, and tore straight along the fold, then pulled out the contents. A flurry of dark flakes fell onto the work surface – that was new. The

smelled of rust. Some hit the edge of the tea towel, making tiny red blooms as they soaked into the damp fabric.

Oh God ...

This year's photo was mounted on plain white card. My little girl. Rebecca. Tied to a chair in the basement somewhere. She was ... He'd taken her clothes.

I closed my eyes for a moment, knuckles aching, teeth clamped hard enough to make my ears ring. Bastard. Fucking, bloody *bastard*.

'Stick with us folks 'cos we've got another heeee-larious wind-up call after the news, but first it's the golden oldie: Tammy Wynette and her crash-helmet hairdo, with "Stand by Your Man". Good advice there, ladies.' Another comedy horn noise.

Rebecca's pale skin was smeared with blood, slashed and burned and bruised, eyes wide, screaming behind a duct-tape gag. '5' scratched into the corner of the picture.

Five years since she disappeared. Five years since the bastard tortured her to death and took photos to prove it. Five birthday cards, each one worse than the last.

The toast popped up, filling the kitchen with the smell of burnt bread.

Deep breaths. Deep breaths.

I lowered card number five into the box, on top of all the others. Closed the lid.

Bastard ...

She would've been eighteen today.

I scraped the blackened toast over the sink as Tammy got into her stride. The butter turned yellow-grey as I spread it with the same knife. Two slices of plastic cheese from the fridge, washed down with milky tea and a couple of anti-inflammatories. Chewing. Trying to avoid the two loose teeth on the top left, the skin tight across my cheek – swollen and bruised. Scowling out through the window's new clean patch.

Light flashed off the Kings River as the sun finally made it up over the hills, turning Oldcastle into a patchwork of blues and orange. In the middle distance, Castle Hill loomed over the city – a thick blade of granite with a sheer cliff on one side, steep winding cobbled streets on the other. Victorian sandstone buildings stained the colour of dried blood. The castle's crumbling fortifications looked like broken teeth, perched right at the top.

That was the thing about living here – you could get up every morning and look out across the crumbling concrete boxes of your crappy council estate, at all the pretty parts of Oldcastle. Have ground in your face every day: that no matter how long you spent staring out at the nice bits, you were still stuck in bloody Kingsmeath.

She would've been eighteen.

I spread the tea towel out on the work surface, then pulled the plastic ice-cube tray out from the fridge's freezer compartment. Gritted my teeth, and twisted. The ice cracked and groaned, a better soundtrack to my aching fingers than Tammy Bloody Wynette.

Ice cubes tumbled into the middle of the tea towel. I folded it up into a cosh, then battered it off the worktop a few times. Fished a used teabag out of the sink and made a fresh cup in a clean mug – laced it with four sugars and a splash of milk – tucked the cigar box under my arm, then took everything through to the living room.

The figure on the couch was huddled beneath an unzipped sleeping bag. I hauled the curtains open.

'Come on you lazy wee shite: up.'

Parker groaned. His face was a mess: eyes swollen and purple; a nose that would never be straight again; split lips; a huge bruise on his cheek. He'd bled during the night, staining the sleeping bag.

'Mmmmmnnnffff ...'

One eye opened. What should have been white was vivid red, the pupil dilated. 'Mmmmmnnnffff?' His mouth barely moved.

I held out the tea towel. 'How's the head?'

'Fmmmmmmnnndffff ...'

'Serves you right.' I stuck the icepack against Parker's cheek until he took hold of it himself. 'What did I tell you about Big Johnny Simpson's sister? You never bloody—' My mobile rang – a harsh edged rendition of an old-fashioned telephone. 'God's sake ...'

I put the mug on the floor by Parker's head, pulled a blister pack of pills from my pocket and handed them over. 'Tramadol. And I want you gone by the time I get back: Susanne's coming round.'

'Nnnng ... fnnn brrkn ...'

'And would it kill you to tidy up now and then? Place is a shitehole.' I grabbed my car keys and leather jacket. Dug the phone from my pocket. The name, 'Michelle', sat in the middle of the screen.

Great.

Because today wasn't screwed up enough.

I hit the green button. 'Michelle.'

Her Highlands-and-Islands accent was clipped and pointed. '*Put that down!*'

'You phoned me!'

'*What? No, not you: Katie.*' A muffled pause. '*I don't care, put it down. You'll be late!*' Then back to me. '*Ash, will you please tell your daughter to stop acting like a spoiled little brat?*'

'*Hi, Daddy.*' Katie: putting on her butter-wouldn't-melt little-girl voice.

I blinked. Shifted my grip on the cigar box. Tried to force a smile.

'Be nice to your mother. It's not her fault she's a bitch in the mornings. And *don't* tell her I said that!'

'*Bye, Daddy.*'

And Michelle was back. '*Now get in that car, or I swear to God ...*' The sound of the door clunking shut. '*It's Katie's birthday next week.*'

'It's Rebecca's birthday today.'

'No.'

'Michelle, she's—'

'*I'm not talking about this, Ash. You promised to sort out the venue and—*'

'Five years.'

'*She didn't even leave a note! What kind of ungrateful little ...*' A pause, the sound of breath hissing between gritted teeth. '*Why do we have to do this every single year? Rebecca doesn't care, Ash: five years and not so much as a phone call. Now, have you got a venue for Katie's party or haven't you?*'

'It's in hand, OK? All booked and paid for.' Well, almost ...

'*Monday, Ash: her birthday's on Monday. A week today.*'

'I said it's *booked*.' I checked my watch. 'You're going to be late.'

'*Monday.*' She hung up without saying goodbye.

I slipped the phone back in my pocket.

Would it really be so bad to just *talk* about Rebecca? Remember what she was like before ... Before the birthday cards started.

Upstairs, I slipped the cigar box back in its hiding place – under a loose floorboard in the bedroom – then clumped down to the lounge and nudged the useless lump of gristle lying on the couch. 'Two Tramadol every four hours, *maximum*. I come home and find your overdosed corpse mouldering on m

sofa, I'll bloody kill you.'

'... sources close to the investigation confirm that Oldcastle Police have uncovered the body of second young woman. Local news now, and Tayside Police are refusing to comment on claims the parents of missing teenager Helen McMillan have received a card from a serial killer known as "The Birthday Boy" ...'

'What? No, you'll have to speak up.' I pinned the phone between my ear and shoulder, and coaxed the ancient Renault around the roundabout. Dundee was a mass of grey, scowling beneath a clay-coloured sky. Rain spattered the windscreen, rising in twin streams of spray from the Audi in front. 'Hello?'

'Hello?' DCI Weber was barely audible over the engine, squealing windscreen wipers, and crackling radio. *'I said, how long?'*

'... where Assistant Chief Constable Eric Montgomery issued the following statement.'

Dundee's ACC sounded as if he had both thumbs wedged in his nostrils. *'We want anyone who remembers seeing Helen, when she went missing in November last year, to get in touch with the nearest police station ...'*

I turned the radio down to a dull buzz. 'How should I know?' The dual carriageway was a ribbon of red taillights, stretching all the way to the Kingsway junction. An illuminated sign flashed 'ROADWORKS ~ EXPECT DELAYS'. No shit. I hit the brakes. Drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. 'Could take weeks.'

'Oh for ... What am I going to tell the Chief?'

'The usual: we're pursuing several lines of enquiry, and—'

'Do I look like I floated up the Kings River on a mealie pudding? We need a suspect, we need a result, and we need it now. I've got half of Scotland's media camped out in reception wanting comment, and the other half laying siege to McDermid Avenue—'

Traffic was barely moving, crawling along, then stopping, then crawling again. Why could that bastard drive any more?

'—are you even listening to me?'

'What?' I blinked. 'Yeah ... not a lot we can do about it, though, is there?' A hole opened up in the other lane, and I put my foot down, but the rusty old Renault barely noticed. Should have held out for one of the pool cars. 'Come on you little sod ...'

A Tesco eighteen-wheeler thundered past into the gap, dirty spray turning the Renault's windscreen opaque until the wipers scraped it into twin khaki-coloured rainbows. 'Bastard!'

'Where are you?'

'Just coming into Dundee – by the Toyota garage. Traffic's awful.'

'Right, let's try this again: remember I told you to play nice with Sergeant Smith? Well, it's not a request any more, it's an order. Turns out the slimy tosser was PSD in Grampian before we got him.'

Professional Standards? Sodding hell ...

Actually, that made sense – DS Smith looked the type who'd clype on his colleagues, then get hard-on while he stitched them up.

The traffic lurched forwards another couple of car-lengths. 'Why have we got him then?'

'Exactly.'

'Might be an idea if everyone kept their heads down for a while.'

'You think?' Silence on the other end. And then Weber was back. *'Professional Standards. From Aberdeen.'*

'I know.'

~~'Means they don't trust us to police ourselves. Which – to be honest – is fair enough, but still there's the principle of the thing. We need a result, sharpish.'~~ A clunk and Weber was gone.

Yeah, we'd get a result sharpish, because that's how it worked. Didn't matter that the official task force had been after the bastard for eight years: Weber needed a result to keep Grampian and Tayside from finding out that all the rumours about Oldcastle CID were true, so one would *miraculous* appear.

I turned the radio back up, and some sort of boy-band crap droned out of the speakers.

*'Ooh, baby, swear you love me,
don't say maybe.'*

Ooh-oooh – say we – can make it right ...'

The phone went again, its old-fashioned ringing noise a lot more tuneful than the garbage on the radio. I stabbed the button and wedged the mobile back between my ear and shoulder. 'Forgotten something?'

A small pause, then an Irish accent, female: *'I think it's yerself that's forgotten somethin', don't ye?'*

Oh God ... I swallowed. Wrapped my hands tighter around the steering wheel. Mrs Kerrigan. So why did I answer the bloody phone? *Always check the display before picking up.*

*'Baby, let's not fight tonight,
let's do it, do it, do it right ...'*

I cleared my throat. 'I was ... going to call you.'

'Aye, I'll bet ye were. Yez are late. Mr Inglis is very disappointed.'

'Let's do it right, tonight!' Instrumental break.

'I need a little time to—'

'Do ye not think five years is enough? 'Cos I'm startin' to think ye're takin' the piss here. I'm wantin' three thousand bills by Tuesday lunch, OK? Or I'll have yer feckin' hole in flitters.'

Three grand by tomorrow lunchtime? Where was I supposed to get *three grand* by tomorrow lunchtime? It wasn't possible. They were going to break my legs ...

'No problem. Three thousand. Tomorrow.'

'That'd be bleedin' deadly, ta.' And she hung up.

I folded forwards, resting my forehead against the steering wheel. The plastic surface was rough, if someone had been chewing at it.

Should just keep on going. Drive right through Dundee and sod off down south. Birmingham maybe, or Newcastle: stay with Brett and his boyfriend. After all, what were brothers for? As long as they didn't make me help plan the wedding. Which they would. Bloody seating arrangements, floral centrepieces, and vol-au-vents ...

Bugger that.

*'Let's do it right, baby,
let's do it tonight!'* Big finish.

A horn blared out somewhere behind me. I looked up and saw the gap in front of the Renault bonnet, goosed the accelerator and coasted in behind the Audi again.

'You're listening to Tay FM, and that was Mr Bones, with "Tonight Baby". We've got the Great Overgate Giveaway coming up, but first Nicole Gifford wants to wish her fiancé Dave good luck in his new job. Here's Celine Dion singing "Just Walk Away" ...'

Or better yet: run like buggery. I switched off the radio.

Three grand by tomorrow. Never mind the other sixteen ...

~~There was always extortion: go back to Oldcastle and lean on a few people. Pay Willie McNaughton a visit – see if he was still flogging GHB to school kids. That should be worth at least a couple hundred. Karen Turner had that brothel on Shepard Lane. And Fat Jimmy Campbell was probably still growing weed in his loft ... Throw in another dozen ‘house calls’ and I could pull in a grand and half, maybe two tops.~~

Over a thousand pounds short, and nothing left to sell.

Maybe Mrs Kerrigan would go easy on me and they’d only break *one* of my legs. And next week the compound interest would set in, along with the compound fractures.

The car park was nearly empty, just a handful of silver rep-mobiles and hire cars clustered around the hotel entrance. I pulled into a space, killed the engine, then sat there, staring off into the middle distance as the rain drummed on the car roof.

Maybe Newcastle wasn’t such a bad idea after—

Clunk, clunk, clunk.

I turned in my seat. A chubby face was peering in through the passenger window: narrow mouth, stubble-covered jowls, bald head dripping and shiny, dark bags under the eyes, blueish grey skin. Broad round shoulders hunched up around his ears. The accent was pure Liverpool: ‘You coming in, or what?’

I closed my eyes, counted to five, then climbed out into the rain.

Those teeny little lips turned down at the edges. ‘Jesus, look at the state of you. Be frightenin’ our ladies, face like that.’ He had a brown paper bag clutched in one hand, the Burger King logo smeared with something red.

‘Thought the Met would’ve beaten the Scouse out of you by now.’

‘You kidding? Like a stick of Blackpool rock me: cut us in half and it’s “Sabir loves Merseyside all the way down.’ He pointed a chunky finger at my face. ‘What’s the other bloke look like?’

‘Almost as ugly as you.’

A smile. ‘Well your mam never complains when I’m givin’ *her* one.’

‘To be fair, she’s got a lot less fussy since she died.’ I locked the car, rain pattering on the shoulder of my leather jacket. ‘The McMillans here?’

‘Nah: home. We’re keepin’ our end low key, didn’t think they’d want a Crown Office task force camped out on their doorstep, like.’ Sabir turned and lumbered towards the hotel entrance, wide hips rolling from side to side, feet out at ten-to-two, like a duck. ‘The father’s just about holdin’ together, but the mother’s in pieces. How ’bout your lot?’

I followed him through the automatic doors into a bland lobby. The receptionist was slumped over her phone, doodling on a day planner. ‘I know ... Yeah ... Well, it’s only ’cos she’s jealous ...’

Sabir led the way to the lifts and mashed the button with his thumb. ‘We’re on the fifth floor. Great view: Tesco car park on one side, dual carriageway on the other. Like Venice in spring, that.’ The numbers counted their way down from nine. ‘So: you here on a social, or you after a favour?’

I handed him a photograph. The doors slid open, but Sabir didn’t move. He stared at the picture, mouth hanging open.

A snort from the reception desk. ‘No ... I swear I never ... No ... Told you: she’s *jealous*.’

The doors slid shut again.

Sabir breathed out. ‘Holy crap ...’

The bitter smell of percolating coffee filled the fifth-floor conference room. One wall was solid glass – patio doors at the far end opening out onto a balcony – the others festooned with scribble-covered flip charts and whiteboards.

Sabir unfurled the top of his Burger King bag and pulled out a handful of fries as he lumbered across the beige carpet. I followed him.

Two men and two women were clustered at the far end of the room, perching on the edge of tables gathered around a stocky man with salt-and-ginger hair and a face gouged deep with creases and wrinkles. Detective Chief Superintendent Dickie. He hooked a thumb at the nearest whiteboard. ‘Ay, and make sure you pull *all* the CCTV footage they’ve got, this time, Maggie. Don’t let the buggers fool you off; should all still be on file.’

One of the women nodded – no-nonsense pageboy haircut bobbing around her long, thin face. ‘Yes, Chief.’ She scribbled something down in a notebook.

DCS Dickie settled back in his seat and smiled at a lump of muscle with no chin. ‘Byron?’

‘Yes, right ...’ The huge sergeant straightened his wire-rimmed glasses. ‘When Helen went missing last year, Tayside Police talked to all of her friends, classmates, and everyone at the hairdressers she worked in on Saturdays. No one saw anything. Stable enough home life, wanted to go to university to study law. No boyfriend. Liked gerbils, Lady Gaga, and reading.’ He turned and pointed at a corkboard covered in about thirty head-and-shoulder shots of young girls, all reported missing within the last twelve months: just before their thirteenth birthday.

Rebecca’s photograph used to be up there ...

One of the pictures had a red border around it – ribbon held in place with brass thumbtacks. That would be Helen McMillan: hair like polished copper, grinning, wearing a white shirt and what looked like a school tie.

A frown crossed Byron’s face. ‘According to Bremner, she was only a twenty-five percent match with the victim profile.’

Sitting on the other side of the group, DS Gillis ran a hand down his chest-length Viking beard, long blond curls tied in a ponytail at the back of his head. When he spoke, it was in a Morningside-sixty-Benson-&-Hedges-a-day growl. ‘Far as we know, Helen’s never kept a diary, so we’ve no idea if she was planning to meet anyone the day she was abducted. Told her mother she was going window shopping after the hairdressers shut on Saturday – wanted a new phone for her birthday. Last sighting we have is her leaving the Vodaphone shop in the Overgate Centre at five thirty-seven. After that, nothing.’

Dickie made a note on the whiteboard. ‘Our boy seems to have a thing for shopping centres. What about social networking?’

Sabir cleared his throat. ‘Goin’ through everything again: got this new pattern-recognition software that spiders her friends too. So far it’s all about who’s got a crush on who, and aren’t Five Star Spies *dreeeemy*.’ He clapped a hand down on my shoulder. It smelled of chips. ‘In other news.’

Everyone looked, and nodded – well, except for that hairy tosser, DS Gillis – a couple even waved.

A smile deepened the wrinkles around the chief superintendent’s mouth. ‘Detective Constable As Henderson, as I live and wheeze. To what do we owe ...’ Then quickly faded. ‘Something’s happened

hasn't it?'

'At two thirty yesterday afternoon, a team of council workers were repairing a sewage main in Castleview.' I pulled out the photograph I'd shown Sabir and handed it to Dickie. It was an eight-by-ten big glossy blow-up of a trench. The earth was dark, almost black, in sharp contrast to the bright yellow council digger in the background. A tattered fringe of black plastic surrounded a scattered mess of pale bone, ribs and femurs and tibia all scraped into a jumble by the digger's back hoe. The skull lay on its side, the right temple crushed and gouged. 'We got a match on the dental records last night. It's Hannah Kelly.'

'Holy crap ...' DS Gillis tugged at his Viking beard, grinning. 'We got one! We *finally* got one.'

'Bloody brilliant.' Dickie stood and grabbed my hand, pumping it up and down. '*Finally* some forensic evidence. Real, proper, physical evidence. Not half-remembered interviews, or grainy security camera footage showing sod all: actual evidence.' He let go of my hand and for a moment looked as if he was moving in for a hug.

I backed up a step. 'We found another body at three this morning. Same area.'

Sabir flipped a laptop open with one hand, the other clutching a half-eaten burger. 'Where?' The fingers of his left hand danced across the keyboard and a ceiling-mounted projector whirred into life, turning the wall by the door into one big screen: Google Earth booting up.

I settled on the edge of a desk. 'McDermid Avenue.'

'McDermid Avenue ...' A rattle of keys and the map swooped in on the north-east of Scotland, the Oldcastle: the glittering curl of the Kings River cutting it in half. Then closer, until Castle Hill covered the whole wall – the twisted cobbled streets surrounding the castle, the green expanse of King's Park, the rectangular Sixties bulk of the hospital. Closer – streets lined with trees, terraced sandstone houses with slate roofs and long back gardens. McDermid Avenue appeared dead centre, growing until it was big enough to make out individual cars. The houses backed onto a rectangle of scrub, bushes, and trees – an overgrown park criss-crossed with paths.

DCS Dickie walked over, until he was close enough to throw a shadow across the projected street. 'Where's the burial site?' He shifted from foot to foot, rubbing his fingertips together.

Probably thought this was it: all we needed to do was ID the house where the bodies were buried, find out who lived there nine years ago, arrest them, and everyone could go home. Poor sod.

I nudged Sabir to the side, brushed sesame seeds off the laptop's keyboard, then swirled the mouse pointer over the parkland behind the houses. Double clicked about an inch away from the ruins of a bandstand, deep inside a patch of brambles. The screen lurched in again, but this time the satellite photo resolution wasn't high enough, so everything turned into large fuzzy pixels.

Dickie's shoulders slumped a little. 'Oh ...'

Not quite so easy.

I zoomed out, until McDermid Avenue was joined on the screen by another cluster of streets: Jordan Place, Hill Terrace, and Gordon Street, all of them backing onto the park.

The woman with the bowl haircut whistled. 'Got be, what, sixty ... eighty houses there?'

I shook my head. 'A lot of these places got subdivided up into flats in the seventies, you're looking at about three hundred households with access to the park.'

'Shite.'

A small pause, then Byron jerked his chin up. 'Yes, but we've got somewhere to start now, don't we? We've got three hundred possible leads instead of none at all. This is still a result.'

I rolled the lump of Blu-Tack in my palms until it was sticky, then tore it into four bits and stuck the sheet of paper on the wall, completing the set. Eight homemade birthday cards, blown up to A3 on the hotel photocopier. I'd laid them out in two rows of four, the oldest top left, the latest one bottom right. All the Polaroids had a number scratched into the top-left corner of the picture: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8. One every year, for eight years.

The first card showed Hannah Kelly strapped to a chair in a filthy room, eyes wide, tears shining on her cheeks, a rectangle of silver duct tape covering her mouth. She was fully dressed in this one, wearing the same clothes she'd had on the day she'd gone missing: tan-leather cropped jacket, strappy pink top with some sort of logo on it, a pink tartan miniskirt, black tights, and biker boots. Cable-ties were just visible against the dark leather around her ankles, both hands behind her back.

She still had all her hair – long, midnight black, poker straight.

She'd been missing for twelve months and four days by the time the card arrived in the post.

Hannah wasn't naked until number five. Not fully anyway. And by then she was a mass of cuts and bruises, little circular burns angry-red on her pale skin.

That familiar cold weight settled in my chest.

Eight cards. This was what the future was going to look like: Rebecca's photo, year after year getting worse. Making sure I knew what he'd done to her. Making sure I saw every—

'Ash, are you OK?' Dickie was staring at me.

I cleared my throat. 'Yeah, just ... long night last night, waiting for those dental results.' I went and helped myself to the stewed coffee in the conference-room percolator, leaving everyone else to stare at the time-lapse torture session. Then one by one they drifted away, until there was no one left but DCS Dickie and the only member of the team I didn't recognize. The other woman – the one who'd sat quietly, taking notes while everyone else had celebrated the discovery of Hannah Kelly's body. The only one who didn't look like a police officer.

She was peering up at the cards through a pair of heavy-framed glasses, one hand fidgeting with a long strand of curly brown hair. Her other arm was wrapped around herself, as if she was trying to hold something in. Stripy grey top, blue jeans, and red Converse Hi-tops, a tan leather satchel slung over one shoulder. Standing next to Dickie, she made it look like bring-your-daughter-to-work-day.

Maybe granddaughter – she couldn't have been a day over twenty-two.

I joined them. Heat leached out of the coffee mug and into my fingers, soothing grating joints. 'Hannah's parents don't know yet.'

Dickie stared at the last photograph in the set, the one that arrived two months ago on Hannah's birthday. She was slumped in the chair, her long black hair shaved off, her scalp a mess of cuts and bruises, the word 'Bitch' carved into her forehead, eyes screwed shut, tears making glistening trails through the blood on her cheeks. Dickie sniffed. 'Do you want me to tell them?'

I sighed. Shook my head. 'I'll do it when I get back to Oldcastle. They know me.'

'Hmm ...' A pause. 'Speaking of which ...' Dickie nodded at the young woman in the stripy top. 'You two met?'

'Hi.' She stopped playing with her hair. 'Dr McDonald. Well, Alice really. I mean you can call me Alice if you like, or Dr McDonald, I suppose, or sometimes people call me "Doc", but I don't really like that very much, Alice is OK though ...'

'Ash.' I held my hand out for shaking. She just looked at it.

'Right, great, thanks for the offer, but I don't really do physical contact with people I barely know. I mean there's all sorts of bacterial and hygiene issues involved – are you the sort of person who washes his hands when he goes to the toilet, do you pick your nose, are you one of those men who scratch at

sniff – not to mention the whole personal space thing.’

Complete. And utter. Freakshow.

She cleared her throat. ‘Sorry. I get a little flustered with unfamiliar social interactions, but I’m working on it, I mean I’m fine with Detective Chief Superintendent Dickie, aren’t I, Chief Superintendent, I don’t gabble with you at all, do I, tell him I don’t gabble.’

Dickie smiled. ‘As of yesterday, Dr McDonald’s our new forensic psychologist.’

‘Ah.’ Set a freak to catch a freak ... ‘What happened to the last one?’

She wrapped her arm tighter around herself. ‘I really think we need to visit the burial site. The Birthday Boy didn’t pick this spot at random, he must have known it was going to be safe, that they wouldn’t be discovered for years, and if it was me killing girls and burying them I’d want to keep them close so I knew they were safe. Wouldn’t you? I mean it’s all about power and possession, isn’t it?’ Dr McDonald stared at the white toes of her red Converse Hi-tops.

I glanced over her head at Dickie. ‘And she doesn’t talk like this when it’s just the two of you?’

‘Hardly ever.’ He raised his hand, as if he was about to pat her on the shoulder.

She flinched. Backed up a step.

Dickie sighed. ‘I’ll ... em ... leave you to it then.’ He put his hand in his pocket, out of harm’s way. ‘Ash? You hurrying back to Oldcastle, or have you got a minute?’

Hurrying back? Still hadn’t decided if I was pointing the Rustmobile towards Newcastle and putting my foot down. ‘Long as you need.’

‘So,’ I slid the glass door shut, and leaned on the safety rail, ‘does she provide her own straitjacket, or does that come out of your budget?’

The view from the balcony outside the meeting room was every bit as dismal as Sabir had promised: overlooking the dual carriageway and the Kingsway Retail Park. Huge glass and metal sheds bordering a lopsided triangle of parking spaces. Up above, the sky was solid grey, the light coming and thin through the pouring rain. At least it was relatively dry here – the balcony for the room above kept the worst of the weather off.

Cigarette butts made soggy drifts in the corners, little orange cylinders swelling on the damp tiles. DS Gillis was down the other end, puffing away – the smoke clinging to his beard as if it was smouldering – grumbling into a mobile phone, pacing back and forth.

DCS Dickie sparked up a cigarette, took a long, deep drag, then rested his elbows on the safety rail, one hand rubbing at the bags under his eyes. ‘How’s the arthritis?’

I flexed my hands, the joints ached. ‘Been worse. How’s the ulcer?’

‘You know, when I took on this bloody investigation, I was untouchable. Top of my game, going places ... Remember the Pearson murders?’ Another puff. ‘Now look at me.’

‘So what *did* happen to your last profiler?’

Dickie made a gun of his thumb and forefingers, stuck it to his temple, and pulled the trigger. ‘Aren’t you over a hotel bedroom in Bristol, three weeks ago.’ He glanced over his shoulder, towards the meeting room. ‘Dr McDonald might be a nut-job, but at least we won’t be sponging her brains off the wall anytime soon. Well ... touch wood.’

I turned, looking back through the glass doors. She was still standing in front of the blown-up birthday cards, fiddling with her hair. Staring up at Hannah Kelly’s bleeding body. I forced a smile into my voice, laid it on thick. ‘Not really your fault though, is it? The Birthday Boy was always going to be a bastard to catch.’

‘By the time we know he’s got them, it’s a year too late. The trail’s cold. No witnesses, or the

can't remember, or they make shit up because they watch too much telly and think it's what we want to hear.' Dickie flicked the ash from the end of his cigarette, then stared at the glowing tip. 'I'm up for retirement in four months. Eight years working the same bloody case and not one single sodding clue ... Until now.' His eyes narrowed, wreathed in smoke. 'Two bodies, probably more on the way. We'll get DNA, fibres, and we'll catch the bastard. And I'll take my gold watch and march off home to Lossiemouth with my head held high, while the Birthday Boy rots in a shite-smear'd cell for the rest of his unnatural little life.'

'You coming to help with the door-to-doors?'

A pause. 'Any chance you could take Dr McDonald back to Oldcastle with you? Show her the book recovery site, let her get a feel for the place?'

Yeah, because babysitting a mentally unstable psychologist was right up there on my list of life goals. 'You're not coming?'

Dickie pulled a face, curling the corners of his mouth down. 'Do you know why I'm still here, Ash? Why they didn't boot me off the case and get someone else in?'

'No other bugger wants the job?'

A nod. 'Career suicide. Speaking of which ... I need another favour.' He stood up straight, one hand rubbing at the small of his back. 'Our last psychologist, Bremner, didn't just top himself, he took his notes with him. Burned the lot in the hotel bin: disabled the smoke detector, set fire to everything, then bang.'

I tucked my hands in my pockets. It was getting colder. 'Always thought he was a bit of a prick.'

'Managed to screw something up on the servers too. Every psychological document we had – photocopies up in smoke. Sabir tried recovering the data, but Bremner cocked up so long ago all the backups we had shagged too.' Dickie took one last draw on his cigarette, then sent its glowing corpse sailing out into the rain. 'Not wanting to speak ill of the dead, or anything, but still ...'

'What's the favour?'

'Well, you're still friends with Henry, aren't you?'

'Henry who?' Frown. 'What, *Forrester*? The occasional Christmas card maybe, but I've not seen him for years.'

'Thing is, Dr McDonald has to start again from scratch; be a big help if she could discuss the case with him. Maybe see if he's got any of his original files?'

'So give him a call. Get him to courier everything over.'

Down the other end of the balcony, Gillis snapped his phone shut, then ground his cigarette out against the wall and let it fall to the tiles at his feet.

Dickie stared out across the retail park. 'She says she needs to see him. Face to face.'

Gillis lumbered over. 'You tell him yet?'

'"Tell him" what?'

A smile cracked the space between the cigarette-stained moustache and bristling beard. 'Shetland? You're taking the Doc up to see your old mate, Forrester.'

I pulled my shoulders back, chin up. 'Take her yourself. You're the one who looks like a bloody Viking.'

'The old git doesn't want anything to do with the case. We need his help. You're his friend. Go up there and talk him round.'

Dickie sighed. 'Come on, Ash, you *know* what Henry's like: once he digs his heels in ...'

I scowled at them. 'Shetland?'

Gillis squinted back. 'You don't want to help us catch the bastard? *Really*? What kind of cop are you?'

‘It’s only a couple of days, Ash: three or four tops. I’ll square it with your boss.’

~~Dr McDonald wasn’t the only mental one. ‘I’m not going to Shetland! We just turned up two bodies and—’~~

‘It’s going to be nothing but hanging around waiting for lab reports in Oldcastle now anyway. The and processing three hundred door-to-doors.’ Dickie nodded towards the meeting room, where Dr McDonald was gazing up at the birthday cards. ‘When we catch the Birthday Boy we’ll need her up speed for the interviews. I want a full confession, in stone, not something he can wriggle out of court six months later thanks to some slimy defence lawyer.’

‘I’m not your bloody childminder! Get someone else to—’

‘Ash, *please*.’

I stared out into the rain ... Four days about as far away from Oldcastle as it was possible to get and still be in the UK. Four days where Mrs Kerrigan’s thugs couldn’t find me. And maybe, once Henry had seen how much of a disaster Dickie’s new criminal psychologist was, he’d drag his wrinkly arse out of retirement and help me catch the bastard who’d murdered Rebecca. Four days to convince the old sod that four *years* in Shetland was penance enough for what happened to Philip Skinner. It was time to get back to work.

I nodded. ‘OK. Flying from Aberdeen or Edinburgh?’

Gillis’s smile grew wider. ‘Funny you should ask that ...’

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