THE BLOOD OF CROWS

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BLACKTHORN

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To Alan

Four wee craws, sitting on a wa'.
One wee craw was greetin' fer its maw,
The second wee craw fell and broke its jaw,
The third wee craw couldn't flee awa'
The fourth wee craw wisnae there at a'.

Prologue
31 January 1993

Pauline McGregor walked quickly towards the lift; the smell of petrol and exhaust fumes was making her feel nauseous. She was getting too old for this subterfuge. Not only too old, she was too pregnant – eight months now. It was nine weeks since she had been able to button her coat, and exactly seven weeks and three days since she had last worn her stilettos. Was she going to be a bad mother? Probably. But at least she would be a stylish one.

She hated the red pumps she had on; they made her ankles look fat and she could feel the cold of the concrete beneath her feet nibble through the soles. She pulled her scarf up round her neck. The forecast said it was going down to minus five tonight but the chill in the wind that funnelled through the first level of the multi-storey car park promised an even colder night was on its way.

She stopped at the lift doors and pressed the mangled button with a gloved finger, swaying from side to side as she waited, rocking the baby. The lift doors opened with a reluctant whine and she stepped forward, then back again, cupping her hand to her mouth as the stink of stale urine swept out to meet her. A discarded beanie hat lay in the corner, a syringe lying neatly on top of it. The mess that splattered the wall looked like a half-digested kebab.

One advantage of her flat shoes was that she could take the stairs. But at the door to the stairwell she heard

voices higher up – hard, violent words answered by the sing-song anger of the drunk. She thought better of it and decided to walk up the narrow pavement that edged the spiralling exit at the centre of the car park. She shivered, and placed a protective hand over her stomach. It was dark and cold, and the sooner she was in her car and out of here the better.

She knew she was parked on the second storey, on the side that faced down on to Mitchell Lane. Sound travelled far on the cold evening air, and she could hear bursts of chit-chat from the pub on the street below, which echoed strangely off the bare walls, slightly disorientating her. Her gloves patted the way along the wall, the cashmere wool catching occasionally on the roughness of the concrete, and her breath billowed in front of her as she walked round a hairpin bend up to Level 2, her back and legs aching. She could hear fighting in the stairwell, then the slam of a door. A figure shot past the glass panel in the stairwell door, followed by another. Another slam and a nearby car alarm started to shriek, then fell silent. For the first time she hesitated, feeling a vague prickle of apprehension that she was being watched. All noise had ceased now, the silence in here somehow separate from the sounds of life going on down in the street. It was quiet. Too quiet.

She quickened her step, pulling the bone-handled knife from her handbag. She always carried it – it was part of her, a gift from her father. Then she heard a car door open on an upper floor, and she moved to the inside of the pavement, in case the car came past her. She wasn't so nimble on her feet these days.

She could see her own Merc waiting for her in the far corner. Looking carefully left and right, she stepped off the pavement to make her way towards it. All the spaces between her and her car were full.

She sensed him rather than heard him, and her grip on the knife tightened. He came out of the darkness between two cars. There was a few seconds' slow dance between them. Then his blade went low and into her ribs, like a hot knife through snow. Hers went high, into his face. Neither made a sound.

He raised his hand to stem the blood – a thick curtain of red, pouring down his cheek into his scarf – and walked off, making his unhurried way to the level above, leaving her to stagger against the bonnet of the car. She felt her knife slip from her fingers, felt the baby kick, then she sank to her knees on the ice-cold concrete. She punched the car on her left hard, and kicked the one to her right, relieved at the cacophony of alarms.

She curled up between the cars, her hand pressed to the wound. She watched the flow of her own blood spreading on the concrete. She raged silently at the betrayal. The baby kicked again, and she spread her fingers on her belly. *Be calm, be calm*. She was hidden from view, she realized; if anyone came past, they wouldn't be able to see her. Her fingers scrabbled against the wheel arch and she pushed her body a few inches, so her feet in their red shoes would be visible to anyone driving past. But would they see the red shoes, in the blood? She tried again, another few inches, then fell exhausted, out of breath.

But nothing was happening. There was no air coming into her lungs. She felt her chest collapsing to nothing.

The baby kicked, then kicked again, demanding oxygen.

She heard the shriek of a cold engine being gunned, the screech of tyres. A black car swung round the spiral, steering wide, then jerked left, aiming straight for her. She never felt the tyres go over her legs, crushing her ankles, ripping her shoes off. She only saw the raw ends of her own bones, so beautiful and pink.

A billow of exhaust hung in the air as one blood-red shoe bounced and rolled, and came to rest in a puddle of oil.

Sunday
27 June 2010

11.30 p.m.

It was late on a hot summer night, Partick Central Station was sweltering, and DI Colin Anderson was bored – not tired, just bored. There was a pile of paperwork waiting for his attention but he couldn't concentrate on it. He really wanted a case he could get his teeth into – but all he had was the suspicious death of one William Stuart Biggart in a fire in the very early hours of the 21st of June, and that case had visited every other desk in Partick Central before landing on his. The forensic fire investigation unit were due to deliver a report first thing in the morning, after which he might have something of evidential value, but he knew his heart wasn't in it. The top brass would be better off putting their money towards LOCUST, the new organized crime initiative, rather than looking into the death of pond life such as Biggart, whose only evolution had been from a dealer in dodgy DVDs to a dealer in dodgy heroin.

He knew it was frustration. He should be a DCI by now – he had completed his required Competency Portfolio for promotion twice over; by right the next DCI post that

came free would be his. But the current DCI Niven MacKellar was making it difficult for him to shine. The Biggart case was not going to be a career maker. He glanced over the room, noting the quiet chit-chat of phone calls, the odd conscientious cop typing at a computer, everyone catching up while they had a minute's peace, going through the door-to-door statements from the night of the fire. It was known to everyone that Biggart was dealing – and dealers, by definition, had connections. But nobody wanted to talk. Anderson couldn't blame them.

DS David Lambie was sweating just as much as Anderson, red hair clamped to his skull, his fair skin pink and angry along the hairline and the collar as if he'd caught the sun. He had been on the phone to every takeaway within 300 yards of Anniesland train station, which put them in close proximity to the scene of the fire at the Apollo flats. Lambie's voice showed he had little hope of getting any kind of lead at Suzy's Palace and was making notes in a suitably relaxed manner. Anderson looked closer; his sergeant was doodling. Then Lambie hung up the phone and gazed deep into the middle distance, rattling his biro noisily back and forth between his teeth.

Anderson coughed loudly to bring his sergeant back to earth, knowing that Lambie was thinking about his wedding to the lovely Jennifer again.

A phone rang. He looked round the office; none of the Partick boys seemed inclined to pick it up so he did, grateful for the diversion.

'A *what*?' he said, once the voice at the other end had paused for breath.

It was such a bad line that, even at eleven thirty on a Sunday night, when the room was quiet, he could hardly hear.

'Can you repeat that?' He caught Lambie's eye, made a dip of the head towards the door. 'Yes, we're about two minutes from it, we might get there first. No, we don't mind . . . yes, we're on our way.'

DS Lambie had already grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair. 'Where are we heading off to?' he asked as they rattled down the stairs.

'Down to the river. There's an incident just this side of Anderson Quay. Seems some drunken reveller aboard the *Waverley*'s reported somebody in the water.'

'If it's somebody in the river, shouldn't the marine police unit deal with it?' puffed Lambie, following Anderson out and across the car park. The air was still hot and heavy, the darkness of the summer night unconvincing.

'Disbanded, pretty much. It's just an anti-terrorism strategy now, a response to 9/11. If you fall in and are drowning, you only get an old guy in a rowing boat. But this guy is holding on to a ladder.'

'Why doesn't he climb up it, then?'

'Knackered? Pissed? Drugged? Anyway, those ladders are all covered in slime and weed. Bloody slippy . . . no matter what, it's a breach of the peace and a chance to get out the station.'

Four minutes later, Lambie pulled up on the Harbour Terrace. They both hopped out of the Focus, eyes scanning the river for any signs of activity. There were no lights, no patrol cars, nothing.

Anderson took his mobile from his pocket as he legged it over the outer barrier, and phoned Control.

'Are we in the right place?' he demanded. 'You said a squad car was on its way. But there's nothing here.'

With one ear he heard Lambie say, 'I'll get the torch, boss.' With the other, he listened to Control confirming the location.

'You should still be able to see the boat,' a woman said. 'Someone on board caught the image on their phone and called 999.'

Sure enough, several hundred yards away the old *Waverley* was slowly making her way up river.

Still on the phone, barking out landmarks to Control, Anderson climbed over the inner barrier and peered down into the water lapping at the concrete about twelve feet below. He heard Lambie slam the boot shut. He made his way cautiously along the edge, but there was nothing to see, just a concrete stanchion and the impatient slap of the river. Far in the distance, he could hear sirens.

He heard Lambie behind him at the barrier and reached for the torch, turning the powerful beam downwards, sweeping it back and forth along the slimy wall. He peered down at the iron ladder bolted to the concrete, and the crushed beer cans bobbing in the murky water. Then he stopped dead in his tracks. He had almost missed it, running the beam past it before his brain could register what he'd seen. In the dark swirl of the water, tucked right in against the wall, he could see what looked like a clump of seaweed, splaying out and flattening again with every wave.

Hair, his brain registered at last. Human hair.

'There's someone there. I'm going down,' he told Control, before thrusting the torch and phone at Lambie, and

pulling his jacket off. 'For God's sake, keep the light steady.'

Ignoring the unspeakable stinking slime on the iron rungs, Anderson made his way down hand over hand, until his foot came level with the head. Down he went, his feet feeling for each rung, until he was in the water up to his shoulders. He hooked an elbow under the chin to lift the face clear.

'It's OK, I've got you, I've got you.' He could just hear a small mewling noise in response. 'She's alive,' he called up to Lambie. Then, 'Oh Christ, she's just a kid. And she's naked.' His voice was barely a whisper.

Above him the iron ladder shuddered and creaked. He heard Lambie call, 'I'm coming down, boss.' Lambie stopped as his feet reached the level of the girl's head. 'Can we get her up?' he asked.

Anderson tried to get a grip under the girl's arms, but couldn't. They seemed to be clasped tightly behind her. Then he realized she was not clinging on; she was tied on. 'I can't get her arms free. There's something tethering her.' He reached further down the ladder, swearing profusely as stinking water broke over his face every few seconds.

'Stay where you are, boss,' Lambie said, and launched himself off the ladder over Anderson's head. He surfaced a few seconds later. 'Shit!' he spat.

'Very probably,' Anderson grunted.

Lambie grasped the iron upright on the other side of the girl. He was still holding the waterproof torch. 'Can you see what's holding her?'

'No. Where the fuck is that squad car?' Anderson

looked up towards the wall. 'Is that wash from the boat, or is the tide on its way in?'

Lambie looked behind him, shaking the water from his face. 'It's coming in. We need to get her out. Now.' He took a deep breath and disappeared under the waves, pulling himself down by the rungs of the ladder. All Anderson could see was the light of the torch wavering up through the filthy water.

Anderson had noticed that, even in that short time, the level had risen and the river was now lapping at the girl's chin. 'You'll be fine. I've got you,' Anderson kept repeating, like a mantra. 'You'll be OK.' He hitched the girl's head as high as he could to keep her mouth out of the water, and tightened his hold on the ladder, preparing himself to take the full weight of her body if Lambie managed to untie her. The one thing they did not want was to drop her. He could feel Lambie's hands groping round his legs, trying to free the girl from whatever held her. He seemed to be having trouble.

'Come on, David,' Anderson muttered. 'We haven't got long.'

The girl was gasping now, in and out, whimpering fragments of words he couldn't understand. The beam of the torch ghosted from beneath the water, a rippling light shadowed on her face, and Anderson saw her face for the first time. He recognized with a shudder just how young she was. She had a little snub nose, and a gap in her front teeth. Her unfocused eyes, the largest hazel eyes he had ever seen, looked past him, her shock too deep for her even to realize he was there.

'Don't you give up on me now,' he told her fiercely.

He readjusted his arms, his fingers slipping on the slime coating the ladder. He threaded one arm across her chest, trying to lift her, giving her a little space, a little time.

Then her face rolled back, and she seemed to look at him. She whispered, '*Mamochka*.' Her eyes lost focus; a wave washed over her cheek but she didn't react.

Lambie's head appeared suddenly. 'Chains,' he spluttered, gasping for air. 'Some bugger's chained her. Hands and feet.'

'No!'

'Honest, Colin.' Lambie shook his head again, backhanding the surplus water from his face.

Suddenly a powerful torch beam illuminated the water, roving around until it settled on the ladder. 'You OK down there?'

'No, we bloody aren't!' Anderson shouted back. 'Bolt cutters! We need bolt cutters!'

'Er . . .' The head vanished for a moment, then reappeared. 'We haven't got any.'

'A snorkel? Plastic tubing? Anything like that?'

'We can send down some ropes.'

'No bloody good! She's chained on to the ladder!'

The head disappeared again. A few moments later, Anderson heard the crackle of police radios somewhere beyond the barriers.

'You OK, Lambie?'

'Fine, boss,' Lambie grunted. 'You?'

'Fine. We're all going to be fine. Everything's going to be fine,' Anderson said. He didn't know who he was trying to reassure – Lambie, the girl or himself. Close to his

ear, the feeble whimpering had ceased, and the girl's weight felt inert in his arms. He twisted his head slightly to look at her again. Her eyes were still open. Another wave slopped across her face, but she didn't blink. Her gaze was vacant; she was staring out over the Clyde and way beyond.

Then the voice shouted again. 'We've radioed it in. Fire rescue's on its way.'

'Don't bother,' Anderson said bleakly. 'We won't be needing it.'