

—trust no one—

(unless you *want* stabbed in the back)

O

I never really wanted to be a police officer.

Thick flakes of white drift down from a low, grey sky, adding their weight to the drooping branches of beech trees. Making the gorse and broom slump in surrender.

A burn gurgles, just out of sight behind knotted clumps of barbed-wire brambles.

A duvet of white smothers the forest clearing, snow robbing the shapes and colour from everything, leaving only the frozen ghosts of what lies buried beneath.

I wanted to be an astronaut, or a football player, or a rock star . . .

Everything is calm and still and crisp, marred only by a line of deep footprints and a smooth-edged scar where something heavy has been dragged through the drifts.

Then there's the noises: the *ping-and-clang* of a pickaxe, chipping away at the frozen ground – a regular, methodical sound, an industrial metronome, marking out the time of death. Every blow accompanied by a grunt of exertion.

My big brother, Dave, he was the one meant to follow the family tradition and join up, but a drunk driver blew straight through the Holburn Street junction, and that was that.

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The person swinging that pickaxe is tall, broad-shouldered, powerful. Hair pulled back from her flushed face. Mid-forties, give or take a year or two.

Her high-vis padded jacket hangs from the branch of a twisted Scots pine, like a flayed skin – one of the sleeves blackened with blood, more smears on the front. A second jacket, dark as coal, and a petrol-blue shirt are draped over another branch.

Steam rises from the shoulders of her burgundy T-shirt. You'd think she'd be wearing something a bit more . . . *death-metal*-like. You know: a skull and crossbones, or a snake with a dagger in its teeth, but her T-shirt features a cartoon black cat in a bow-tie and eye patch, posing with a gun like it's from a James Bond movie.

The hole's already waist-deep, a pile of dark earth slumping beside it. A wooden-handled shovel poking out of the heap, like a skeletal flag.

Dave swapped his police dreams for a wheelchair, and I swapped mine for a warrant card. Cos that's what you do when your dad's a cop, and his dad before him, and his dad before that.

A body lies off to one side, partly covered by a stained sheet, curled against the Scots pine's hungry roots.

The body's high-vis jacket is the twin of the one hanging from the branch, only there's a *lot* more blood. Deep scarlet stains the jacket's fluorescent-yellow back; it's soaked into the grubby-grey suit underneath too. The jacket's owner doesn't look a day over twenty-four, but he does look very, *very* dead. His skin's got that waxy, translucent, mortuary colour to it, where it isn't smeared in dark red. More blood on his shirt, and on the cheeks of his sharp-featured face. Bags under his closed eyes. Short brown hair and a matching Vandyke . . .

Strange the way things turn out, isn't it?

The muscled woman in the cartoon-cat T-shirt stops swinging the pickaxe and stands there for a moment, head back, breath fogging above her as the snow falls. Face pink and shiny.

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THE DEAD OF WINTER

Sorry – where are my manners? The lady doing the digging is one Detective Inspector Victoria Elizabeth Montgomery-Porter, North East Division.

Some people call her ‘Bigtoria’, but never to her face.

She tosses the pickaxe out of the hole and grabs the shovel instead. Muscles bunch and writhe in her thick arms as she digs, the shovel’s blade biting into the loosened soil, before flinging it onto the pile.

She’s not the worst boss I’ve ever had. And yeah, given what’s happened, that’s pretty hard to believe. Sometimes events just get away from you and before you know it: there you are, in the middle of a remote, snowy glen, digging a shallow grave.

The shovel growls as Bigtoria stabs it into the ground, stones and dirt adding their mouldy-bread scent to the peppery ozone tang of falling snow.

I, on the other hand, am Detective Constable Edward Reekie. And I guess you could say I’m having a very bad day.

One last shovelful gets added to the pile before Bigtoria scrambles out of her pit, then stomps over to the body, scoops her hands in under its armpits and drags it back to the hole.

It’s weird. I know I should be angry about it – furious even – you know, being the dead body and everything? But mostly I’m just cold.

Bigtoria tumbles Edward into the pit. Stands there, staring down at him for a moment, head on one side. Shovel held like an executioner’s axe. Then she grunts. Grabs her high-vis from the branch.

You’d think she could manage a few words, wouldn’t you? Express a bit of sorrow and guilt. Maybe beg my forgiveness? A sodding apology wouldn’t hurt.

But Bigtoria doesn’t say a thing. Instead, she pulls a mobile phone and a child’s walkie-talkie from her jacket pockets. The walkie-talkie’s shaped

like a clown's head, complete with jaunty red nose and big beaming smile, and it's dwarfed in her huge hand.

Have to admit, this isn't exactly the funeral I thought I'd end up with. I'd kinda hoped for more mourners, maybe a few tears, some inspiring speeches about what a great guy I was. Distraught wife, two-point-four inconsolable children, and a heartbroken golden retriever.

She chucks her emptied jacket into the shallow grave. It lands on Edward's body, hiding his bloodied, dirty face. Followed by the blood-stained sheet he was wrapped in.

And it's not like I wanted a massive mausoleum – a nice headstone would've done.

A shovelful of dirt and gravel patters down on the jacket. Then another one. And another.

After all, it's not like any of this was my fault.

An electronic twiddling noise bursts into life somewhere nearby. It's a cheap one-note-at-a-time rendition of that olde-worlde circus theme tune: *Yata, yadda yadda, yata yaaaaaa da.*

There's a pause, some swearing, then a bleep as Bigtoria presses the clown's nose. She barks into it, hard and sharp as the pickaxe's blade: 'What?'

A distorted voice crackles out of the walkie-talkie. It's an old man, sounding every bit as cold and sharp as Bigtoria, but where her accent is posh-girl Scottish, his is gravelly Glaswegian. Redolent with tenements, whisky, and putting the boot in. 'Is it done?'

'God's sake. I'd get through this quicker' – she's getting louder with every word – 'if you didn't keep checking up on me' – till she's roaring it out – 'EVERY BLOODY MINUTE!'

Silence falls with the snow, settling into the landscape. Now the only sounds are the babbling burn, the jagged cawing of a distant crow, and Bigtoria's breathing. In and out like angry bellows.

The man's voice sounds again. 'Just get it done.'

THE DEAD OF WINTER

There's a snarl. A sigh. And another shovelful of dirt clatters down on Edward's body.

Bigtoria keeps filling in the shallow grave. *'Should never have agreed to this.'*

Like she's the one lying at the bottom of a shallow grave.

On and on the earth rattles down, till there's nothing left but muffled death.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Probably better if we start at the beginning...

—the beginning—

(AKA: before it all went horribly wrong)

I

‘. . . *so stay tuned for that.*’ The cheery DJ’s voice crackled out of the pool car’s speakers, turned down till it was barely audible. ‘*You’re listening to Carole’s Cavalcade, it’s ten forty-five on a lovely Tuesday morning, and we’ve got some excellent tunes coming up . . .*’

That weird creaking squeak was back – getting louder every time Edward tapped the brakes. Which wasn’t exactly reassuring.

The Vauxhall’s dashboard was as filthy as the rest of it: a grey fur of dust, streaked by the occasional finger. That was the trouble with pool cars: no one ever cleaned the bloody things, did they? Just added to the mess and left it for the next poor sod to deal with. Only the next poor sod never did. And on and on and on it went.

A parade of never-ending grubbiness and passing the buck.

That was a metaphor for your modern Police Scotland right there.

Bigtoria filled the passenger seat like a grumpy bear, squinting out through the windscreen, phone clamped to her ear. ‘Yes, uh-huh . . . No . . . Not a chance.’

Which was nearly as many words as she’d said to him on the journey from Aberdeen. Because why speak to the lowly Detective Constable when you were a lofty DI?

‘*So, let’s get this party back on track with Stereoface and their brand-new single, “Dancemonkey!”*’ Cheerful music burbled out of the car’s stereo. Not bad. Not *great*. But not bad.

Gave him something to hum along to, anyway. Tapping his fingers on the steering wheel as a bland slice of the north-east slid by. With only the chimney sticking out the top of Peterhead Power Station to

break the monotony – trailing a line of bright white steam across the sapphire sky.

A sneaky peek to the left.

Bigtoria was still at it. Squinting and scowling. Radiating brooding menace. Because detective inspectors loved that kind of thing, didn't they: like they'd seen one too many crime dramas on TV and decided that was the look for them. 'I don't care what he says, the man's an idiot . . . Yes . . . As *mince*, that's how thick he is.'

Hadn't even cracked a smile when Edward pointed out they were twinies today: both in machine-washable grey suits with matching white shirts. Yup, no doubt about it: going to be a *long* day.

' . . . Uh-huh . . . Hold on, I'll check.' She transferred her glower from the landscape to Edward. 'We were supposed to be there an *hour* ago.'

He shrugged. 'All due respect, Guv, I wasn't the one who jackknifed an artic lorry full of tatties all over the A90.'

'Still got a *five-hour* drive ahead of us, and if I'm late for rehearsal tonight, it's you I'm blaming. Now' – spelling it out, like he was thick as mince too – 'when – will – we – get – there?'

Edward checked his phone, sitting in its little plastic mount fixed to the air vent, with the satnav app running. 'Five minutes? Give or take. Going as fast as I can.'

She harrumphed at him. Then back to her phone: 'You hear that? . . . Yes . . . OK. I'll let you know if we get anything.'

The outskirts of Peterhead loomed in the middle distance – all warehouses and business parks, with a smattering of beige and brown housing estates in the background.

Edward took a right at the roundabout – a circular hump of weeds, wedged in between a garage, a McDonald's, and the loneliest-looking KFC in the world – then a sharp left, following the signs to Her Majesty's Prison and Young Offender Institution, Grampian '◀ VISITORS'. Into a quiet rural street fringed with trees and acned with potholes.

Bigtoria hung up and turned the brooding scowl up a notch. 'They want us to grill him about the Abercrombie shooting as well.'

'Never heard of it. Who's—'

'So far that's the Mintlaw Post Office raid' – counting them off on her fingers – 'the Fraserburgh bank job, the Huntly arson attacks, the Gerald

Freebairn murder, the disappearance of Emily Lawrie, and now Wayne sodding Abercrombie.'

The trees gave way to a bland housing estate – all service-station-coffee bungalows with brown pantile roofs.

'Yeah.' He slowed past the forbidding pink-granite mass of Burnhaven School. 'No idea who any of those are.'

'Hmph . . . Before your time.' A frown creased her forehead. 'Before *my* time, to be honest. But unlike *some* people, I did my homework.'

Oh come on!

He tried for a smile. 'Lowly DC, remember? We're "not paid to think" till we make sergeant. And even then the jury's out.'

Nothing. Not so much as a smirk. She just sat there, face like a skelped arse as four rows of quaint old-fashioned houses appeared, with glimpses of the North Sea shining between their grey granite ranks.

'OK . . .' Try again. 'And how am I supposed to do homework when no one told me I'd be sidekicking you till ninety minutes ago?' He took a hard right at the 'HMP & YOI GRAMPIAN' signs, down the hill, towards the half-empty car park. The North Sea lurked past the last row of parking spots, glittering in the sunshine and dotted with the jolly coloured blobs of offshore supply vessels.

Most of the original Victorian and no-longer-used-as-a-prison prison was hidden away behind a high granite wall on the left of the road, but there was no hiding the newer bulky lumps that made up HMP Gram-pian. Its boundary wall was probably even taller than the old prison's but the buildings were much, *much* bigger. More like a collection of airport Travelodge hotels than a correctional facility.

Edward followed the arrows on the tarmac towards the ugly Co-op-on-an-industrial-estate-style Family Centre and Help Hub. 'I was *meant* to be having a cushy Tuesday: checking CCTV and drinking tea. Not my fault DC Guthrie got bladdered and fell down the stairs like he was some sort of half-arsed stuntman.' Adding a wee humorous image at the end there, to dial back the petulant whine a bit.

She sniffed. 'As if.'

Well, it wasn't a smile, but it was a start.

'Totally: who'd hire Guthrie to be a stuntman? Guy's got the coordination of a—'

‘I meant it’s “as if”, not “like”.’ Glowering across the car at him. “‘Fell down the stairs *as if* he *were* some sort of stuntman.” Didn’t they teach grammar at your school?’

Why? Why did he bother?

Detective inspectors were all the sodding same.

He pulled in round the back, parking sideways across the long bay marked ‘MOTORBIKES’, and climbed out into the crisp sunshine. Ears nipping in the wind, the razor-sharp chill turning his breath into a thin pale fog.

No sign of his resident grammatical pedant, DI Victoria ‘As If’ Montgomery-Porter. So he opened his door again and peered in at her. ‘Guv?’

She looked back at him, face like concrete. ‘You’re the one who made us late, you’re the one who goes to check.’

He straightened up and clunked the door shut.

Then rolled his eyes and bared his teeth.

Flicked the Vs at the car roof, turned on his heel, and stomped off towards the main entrance. Which, let’s be honest, had all the architectural charm of a shopping centre crossed with an airport departures lounge. But it was a thousand percent nicer than Detective Inspector Victoria Montgomery-Porter.

Edward eventually found him down the far end of the car park, basking in the arctic sunshine, leaning against an old Volvo estate and staring out to sea.

Mr Bishop had to be eighty-something if he was a day, bent under the weight of a curved spine. His suit probably went out of fashion long before Edward was even born – a sort of blue herringbone tweed thing, with a grey tweed waistcoat. White shirt, blue tie. A luxurious camel-hair coat on over the top. Only none of it seemed to fit, like it’d been made for a bigger, younger man, not this little, white-haired OAP with a hunched back and arthritic fingers.

‘Mr Bishop?’

A cigarette dangled from the wrinkled corner of his mouth. Which probably wasn’t that great an idea, given the oxygen mask in his left hand. The mask was connected to a knee-high brown gas cylinder,

strapped into a wheeled trolley thing. One of those old-fashioned suitcases sat beside it – the kind that didn't even have *wheels* – and a cheap, metal NHS walking stick rounded off the outfit.

'Mr Bishop? Mr Mark Bishop?'

The crooked man swung his watery grey eyes away from the sea and the boats. Voice like honeyed gravel. 'Depends who's asking, son.'

'DC Reekie. Edward. Me and DI Montgomery-Porter are here to take you to Glenfarach?'

Back to the boats again. 'Is that so?' A smile spread its slow way across Mr Bishop's face, then he sooked on his cigarette – the fag cupped in his right hand, hidden away, in case someone stole it. '"Edward Reekie"? Let me guess: the other kids at school were cruel, weren't they? Name like that.'

Cheeky bugger.

Edward stuck his chest out. 'You want a lift or not?' He pointed at the tank. 'And you shouldn't be smoking around one of those.'

'Don't listen to them, son. Kids are vicious little bastards. Especially when they smell weakness.'

'Seriously, oxygen and naked flames don't mix.'

Mr Bishop took another drag, then a tote of oxygen. 'Least I'll go out with a bang.' He gazed at his cigarette like it was a kitten, or a puppy. 'Besides, this is the only vice I've got left.' A sigh. A nod. He abandoned the Volvo and leaned on his NHS walking stick instead, the rubber tip *skiff-thunking* against the tarmac, the wheels on his oxygen tank squeaking as he shuffled off, leaving his suitcase behind. He didn't look back. 'Be a good lad and bring that, would you?'

Lazy old git.

But Edward grabbed the suitcase anyway, grunting as the thing barely left the ground. What the hell did he have in here: breeze blocks? Had to use both hands to carry it, leaning sideways to counterbalance the weight as he waddled after Mr Bishop.

Even going at auld-mannie pace, Edward didn't manage to catch up till they reached the manky Vauxhall, where Bigtoria had her bum perched on the bonnet, her back to them. She was hunched over, massaging her temples with one hand and clamping her phone to her ear with the other.

Sounding pained. 'I'm not *saying* that, I'm saying— . . . Of course I'm

not going to abandon the operation. We've come too far for that . . . Uh-huh . . . Yes.'

Edward clattered that horrible, heavy suitcase down by the boot. 'Guv?'

No response. 'Well, I know it's not ideal, but we'll just have to improvise, won't we . . . Uh-huh: make the best of it . . . *Exactly*. That's what I thought.'

He tried a singsong voice instead. 'Gu-uv?'

Still nothing. 'We can salvage this; but it's going to take a bit of—'

A shrill whistle sliced through the air, then Mr Bishop lowered his fingers from his mouth. 'HOY, BIGTORIA! You still into all that am-dram crap?'

She froze for a moment. Then sat up straight. 'I'll phone you back.' Bigtoria hung up, but didn't turn around. Voice flat and cold as a mortuary slab. '*What* did you call me?'

A grin split Mr Bishop's face. 'Well, well, if it isn't Police Constable Victoria Montgomery-Porter, all growed up and in plainclothes.'

She turned, bringing an industrial-strength glare with her.

Didn't seem to bother him, though. He took one last drag on his cigarette and pinged the smouldering butt away into the bushes.

'Littering is an *offence*, Mr Bishop.'

'Aye, what you going to do: arrest me? And you're late.' He scuffed his way to the pool car's rear passenger door, dumped the oxygen tank in the footwell, and creaked himself inside. 'Get a shift on. I don't have all day.'

Bigtoria's face was heading towards an unhealthy shade of puce.

Edward tried a smile. 'Found him.'

'Lucky me.'

Edward popped the boot, hefted that heavy-arsed suitcase . . . and stopped. Some idiot had left a dented metal toolbox in there – chickenpoxed with stickers advertising various shows: *Sweeney Todd*, *Dracula Reborn*, *Les Misérables*, *The Crucible* . . . But the biggest sticker of all had 'V.E.M.P.' printed on it in big black letters.

Ah, OK. Victoria Elizabeth Montgomery-Porter. It was the DI's.

He shoved it to the side and squeezed Mr Bishop's suitcase in beside it.

Quick look left and right, to make sure no one was watching, then Edward had a wee nosy in the toolbox. The different levels cantilevered out as he opened it, exposing row after row of pots and sticks of stage

make-up. Letting free the stodgy, waxy scent of past-their-sell-by-date candles.

Urgh.

He closed the thing again.

Well, she did *say* she had a rehearsal tonight.

By the time he'd clunked the boot shut and climbed in behind the wheel, she was scowling at him from the passenger seat, tapping her watch like somehow this was all his fault.

'When you're ready, *Constable*.'

Mr Bishop sat in the back seat, looking up at the grey prison boundary wall. Eyes misty and damp, like he was seeing through it to something inside.

'Hmph . . .' Bigtoria hauled on her seatbelt. 'Homesick for your cell already?'

His rattling sigh wheezed out into the car. 'It's not the place, it's the *people* you miss. Got friends in there who won't get out till long after I'm dead and buried.' There was a pause. And a nod. 'Makes a man think.'

Edward started the engine, doing his best to sound bright and positive. 'You can always come back and visit, Mr Bishop. Your friends would like that.'

'Sod off, son. I'm never setting foot in that place ever again.'