

SHORT-LISTED FOR THE CWA DEBUT DAGGER

THE BOOK OF SOULS

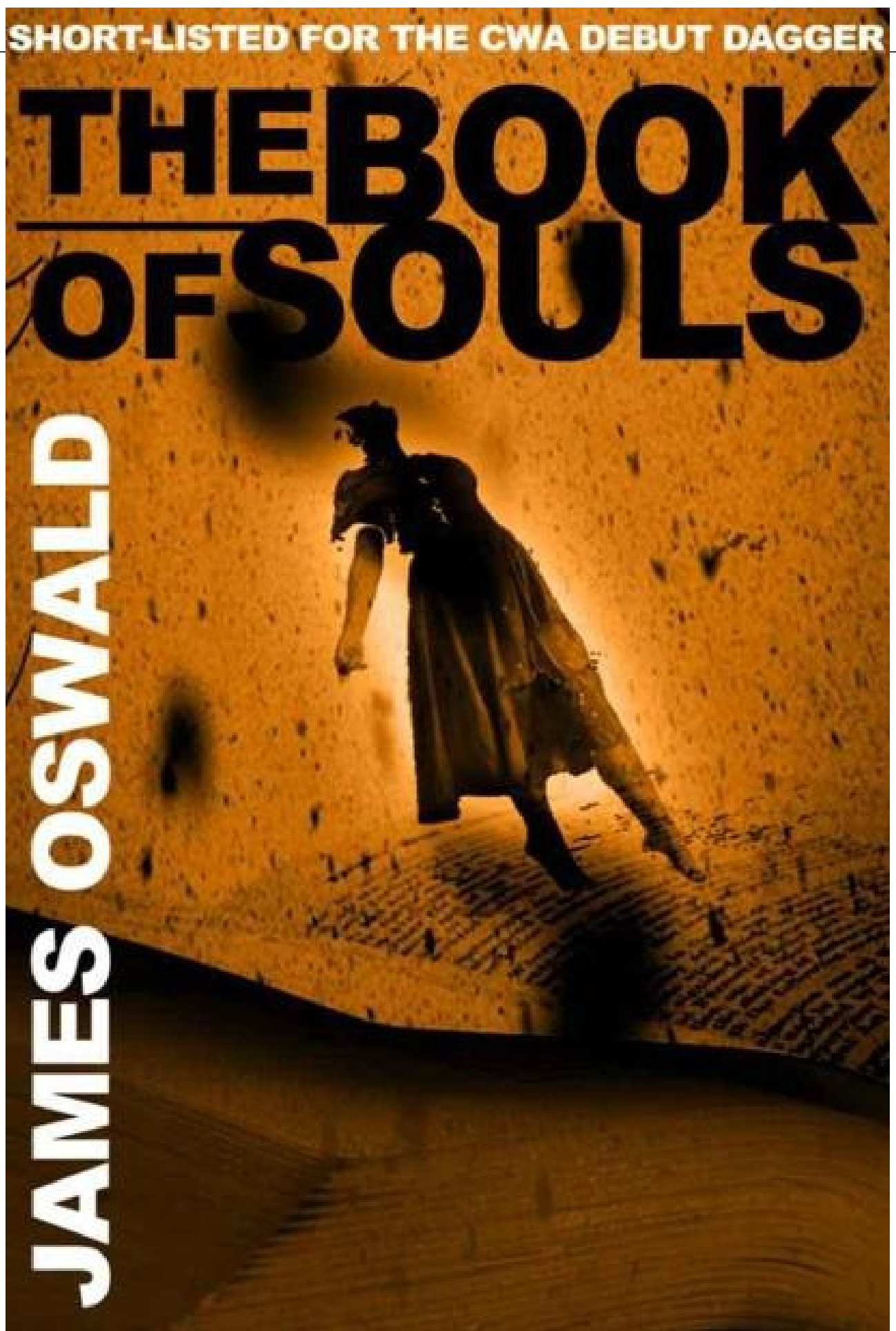
JAMES OSWALD



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James Oswald

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# 1

The streets are empty. An unnatural quiet spreads over the north end of the city as if all the sound had been sucked out of it by the festivities on Princes Street. Only the occasional taxi breaks the calm. He follows his feet who knows where. Away from the crowds, away from the excitement, away from the joy.

He has been wandering for hours now, searching though in his heart he knows he is too late. Has he been here before? There is a terrible familiarity about it all: the clock tower arms reaching toward midnight and the opening of a new millennium; the cobbled streets glistening with slippery rain; the orange glow against warm sandstone painting everything with a demonic light. His feet take him downwards, through the nine circles, despair growing with each muffled footfall.

What is it that stops him on the bridge? An impossible sound, perhaps. The echo of a scream uttered years ago. Or maybe it's the sudden hush of the city holding its breath, counting down the last seconds to a new dawn. He can't share their enthusiasm, can't find it in himself to care. If he could stop time, turn it backwards, he would do things so differently. But this is just a moment, and it will be followed by another. Another after that. Onwards to infinity.

He leans on the cold stone parapet, looks down on the dark rushing water below. Something has brought him here, away from the world of celebrations and festive cheer.

A loud explosion marks the end of the old and the start of the new. Fireworks come in quick succession, rising over the tall buildings and lighting the sky. A million new stars fill the heavens, chasing away the shadows, reflecting in the black water, revealing its dread secret.

Flash, and the water sparkles with strange shapes, fading away like afterglow on the back of the eye.

Flash, and startled fish dart from the floating fingers they have been nibbling away.

Flash, and long black hair tugs glossily in the flow, like seaweed on the tide.

Flash, and the pent up force of a week's rain pushes past the latest obstacle, moving it slowly down towards the sea, rolling it over and over as it goes.

Flash, and a pale white face stares up at him with pleading, dead eyes.

Flash...

~~~~~

'Argh! Jesus! Is that a rat?'

'Keep it down constable.'

'But sarge, it crawled over my foot. Must've been the size of a bloody badger.'

'I don't care if it was as big as my shiny arse. Keep it quiet until we get the signal.'

A grumbling silence fell over the dark street as the small group of police officers crouched among uncollected rubbish sacks outside a lifeless tenement. The constant quiet roar of the city around them underlined the stillness, the insufficient glow of the one functional streetlight casting everything in twilight shadow. Early morning and you could rely on the natives of this part of town to be asleep, or stoned out of sensibility.

Two clicks on an airwave set, then a tinny voice through an earpiece. 'All clear round the back. You're good to go.'

The bodies shuffled around, hemmed in by the rubbish on either side. 'OK people. On my mark. Three... Two... One...'

A crash of splintering wood split the air, followed closely by a scream.

'Argh! Bastard wasn't even locked.' Then. 'Jesus Christ! There's shit all over the floor.'

Detective Inspector Anthony McLean sighed and switched on his torch. In front of him he could just make out the black-clad figure of PC Jones struggling to extricate himself from a pile of rubbish sacks inside the tenement hallway.

'Did they not teach you in Tulliallan to check that first?'

He pushed past the struggling constable and into the dank building, sniffing the air and trying not to gag. Rotting garbage mixed with stale piss and mould, the favoured aroma of the Edinburgh slum. It wasn't usually this ripe though, and that didn't bode well for why he was here.

'Bob, you take the ground floor. Jones, help him.' McLean turned to the final member of the party, a baby-faced young detective constable who'd been unlucky enough to be in the canteen at the station an hour earlier looking like he had nothing better to do. That's what you got for being kept. 'Come on then MacBride. Let's see if there's anything here worth breaking down an unlocked door for.'

*

There were three storeys to the tenement, two tiny flats on each floor. None of the doors were locked and the graffiti liberally scrawled over every available surface was at least two generations of squatters out of date. McLean stepped carefully from room to room, the beam of his torchlight playing over broken furniture, ripped out electrical fittings and the occasional dead rat. DC MacBride never left his side, hovering like an obedient Labrador, almost too close for comfort. Or maybe it was just that he didn't want to brush up against anything. Couldn't blame him, really. The smell of the place would take weeks to wash out.

'Looks like yet another complete bloody waste of time,' McLean said as they left the last flat and stood on the landing at the top of the stairs. All the glass had long since gone from the window looking out over the gardens behind. At least that meant a cold wind could blow away the worst of the smell.

'Umm. Why did we come here, sir?' The question choked in MacBride's throat, as if he had tried

to stop himself asking it at the last minute.

—'That's a very good question, constable.' McLean shone his torch down into the empty stairwell then up at the ceiling with its high-angled roofline and reinforced glass light well. That was out of reach of the vandals, and tough enough to withstand thrown missiles, but even so a couple of panes were crazed and sagging. 'An informant. A snitch. What is it they like to call them these days? Covert Human Intelligence Source?' He made little bunny ear inverted commas with his fingers, bouncing the light from his torch up and down as he did. 'Bugger that. Mine's a stoner called Izzy and he's a useless tosser. Spun me a load of old crap just to get me out of his hair, I've no doubt. Told me this place was used as a distribution hub. My own fault for believing him, I guess.'

More lights flickering in the darkness downstairs were Detective Sergeant Bob Laird and Police Constable Taffy Jones stumbling through the rubbish sacks in the entrance hall. If they'd found anything they'd have shouted, so it looked like the whole episode was a complete waste of time. Just like every other bloody raid. Wonderful. Dagwood was going to be so pleased.

'Come on then. It's probably best if we don't make Grumpy Bob climb all the way up here. Let's get back to the nice warm canteen.' McLean set off down the stairs, only realising he wasn't being followed when he was halfway to the next floor. He looked back and saw MacBride's torch pointed at a space above the fanlight over one of the flat doors. A small hatch gave entry to the building's loft space. It looked almost completely unremarkable, except for the shiny new padlock hasp screwed into it.

'D'you think there might be something up there, sir?' MacBride asked as McLean rejoined him on the landing.

'Only one way to find out. Give us a leg-up.'

McLean shoved his torch in his mouth, then trod gently in the cup made by the constable's interlocked fingers. There was nothing to hold onto except a small lip below the hatch, and he had to stretch his other leg out to the wobbly banister before he could reach up with one hand and unclip the hasp. It gleamed where until recently a padlock had swung.

'Hold steady.' McLean pushed against the hatch. It resisted slightly, then swung in on well-used hinges. Beyond was a different darkness, and a sweet musk quite at odds with the rank odour wafting up from below. He swung his head around until his torch pointed in through the hatchway, seeing aluminium foil over the rafters, low wooden benches, fluorescent lighting.

'I can't hold on much longer, sir.' MacBride's voice shook with the effort of holding twelve stories of detective inspector. Well, maybe thirteen. McLean transferred as much of his weight as he dared to the banister, then swung around and dropped back down to the stone landing. The constable looked at him with a worried expression, as if expecting to be shouted at for his weakness. McLean just smiled.

'Get on your airwave set,' he said. 'I think we're going to need a SOC team here as soon as possible.'

*

Removing the rubbish bags had helped clear the air, but the flagstone floor they had covered was sticky and slippery with fluids best not thought about too deeply. McLean watched the stream of white-suited SOC officers as they trooped from their van, along the corridor, and up the stairs lugging battered aluminium cases of expensive equipment.

'Pity the poor bastard who's going to have to go through all that.' Grumpy Bob nodded at the pile of rubbish bags each now sporting a 'Police Evidence' tag and waiting in the middle of the road for

truck to come and take them away.

~~'That would be me, as it happens. Who's the officer in charge here?'~~ A white-suited figure stopped mid-corridor, pulling off a hood to reveal an unruly mop of spiky black hair. Emma Baird either was or wasn't going out with McLean, depending on which station gossip you spoke to. He'd not seen her in a couple of weeks; something about a training course up north. As she scowled in the hallway light, he wished their reunion could have been in better circumstances. He looked at Grumpy Bob, who shrugged back at him an eloquent refusal to take any responsibility.

'Hi Em.' McLean stepped out of the shadows so he could be seen. 'I thought you were still up in Aberdeen.'

'I'm beginning to wish I'd stayed there.' She looked at the growing pile of rubbish. 'You know that attic's not been disturbed in months, right?'

'Shite.' Another dead end. And it had all been looking so promising.

'Exactly, shite. Twenty-three stinking black bin bags of it, to be precise. And I'm going to have to go through every last one of them knowing there's going to be bugger all in there of any use to your investigation. Unless you decide it's unnecessary...' She trailed off, looked at the two of them, eyes flicking between them as if unsure who she should be addressing.

'If I could, I would, Em.' McLean tried a smile, knowing it would just look like a grimace. 'But you know Dagwood.'

'Oh crap. He's no' in charge is he?' Emma scrunched her hood in her gloved hands, shoved it in her pocket of her overalls, turned and shouted to the assembled SOC crowd. 'Come on you lot. Quicker we get started, quicker we can hit the shower.' And she stalked off without another word.

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An icy rain whips around the cemetery, turning the winter snow into salt-grey slush. The sky is leaden, clouds settling down over the small party like a drowning wave. He stands at the edge of the grave, staring down into blackness as nearby a minister mutters meaningless platitudes.

Movement now, and strong men grasp the sash cords slipped under the coffin. She is inside, lying still and cold in his mother's favourite dress. Her favourite dress. No good to anyone now. He wants to break open the lid and look on her face just one more time. He wants to cradle her in his arms and will the past to melt away. For the bad things to have never happened. What would he give to go back just a couple of months? His soul? Of course. Bring on the contract and the blood-tipped quill. He has no need of a soul now that she's gone.

But he doesn't move. Can't move. He should be helping the strong men lower her into the earth, but he can't. It's all he can do to stay standing.

A hand on his arm. He turns to see a woman dressed all in black. Tears run down her white-painted face, but her eyes are full of an angry hatred. They stare at him full of accusation. It's his fault that all this has happened. His fault that her baby girl, her only joy, is slowly being covered with shovels of earth. Food for the worms. Dead.

He can't deny those eyes. They're right. He is to blame. Better she push him in the grave now. He won't stop her. He'd be happy to lie on that coffin while they threw the dirt on top of him. Anything would be better than trying to live without her.

But he knows that's what he will do.

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Noon had scarcely passed and the late autumn sun was already heading for bed. McLean stared up at the clouds hanging in mackerel strips high above Salisbury Crags and shivered at the thought of an impending winter. The concrete hulk of the station would swallow him into a world of artificial light and tinted windows soon enough. For now he just wanted to feel the wind on his face. Be anywhere but inside.

'You going to stand out here all day, sir? Only there's a cup of tea with my name on it in there.' Grumpy Bob slammed shut the door of the pool car and set across the car park towards the back door of the station. He'd not gone more than a half dozen paces when a blaring of horns made him jump back in alarm. Brakes squealed and a shiny new Jaguar estate ground to a halt on the ramp that led down to the secure storage under the station. A tall figure pushed open the driver's door before struggling out and limping around the front of the car.

'Sorry about that, Bob. Didn't see you in the sunlight.'

'Jesus, Needy. You nearly had me there.' Grumpy Bob put a theatrical hand over his chest, the other patting the car's bonnet. 'Nice motor, mind. I must have missed the news about sergeant's pay.'

'Now, now, Bob. Just because you spend all your money on beer and loose women.' McLean looked over at Needy, Sergeant John Needham to those who didn't know him well. King of the subterranean depths of the station, the evidence locker and labyrinthine warren of archives and stores. Normally he could be relied on to bring a touch of humour to any situation. Now though, he looked strained, grey-faced and tired.

'Afternoon, sir.' Needy moved stiffly to address McLean, his damaged leg obviously giving him more gyp than usual. McLean remembered the athletic detective sergeant who'd taken him under his wing all those years ago. If not for an unfortunate encounter with a drunken, bottle-wielding thug, he would have more likely been Needy running the investigation and McLean calling him sir.

'Afternoon, Needy.' McLean nodded at Grumpy Bob. 'He's right though. It's a nice motor. You decided to treat yourself to a retirement present? Can't be long now.'

'February.' Needy didn't look altogether happy about the prospect. 'Just need to get Christmas and Hogmanay behind us, then it's goodbye to all this.' He held up his hands as if praying to the courtyard and looming walls. Or taking applause from the silent windows. 'There were Needham working out of the old station before they even built this place. Reckon about a hundred years of service, all told. And I'm the last.'

'How is the old man, by the way?' McLean asked. Tom Needham, beat copper for forty years, man and boy. It'd been a while since he'd last visited the station, wandering around as if he owned the place and poking his knobbly walking stick into everyone's business. No matter that he was long retired and didn't have clearance; there wasn't a senior officer in the district would dare tell him to go home.

A shadow passed over Needy's face and he began the laborious process of lowering himself back into his car.

'He's in the hospital again. I was on my way over to see him.'

'Well give him my best,' McLean said. 'And don't let us keep you.'

'Aye, I'll not at that,' Needy said. 'I want to be as far away from here as possible when Dagwood'

hears about your raid this morning.'

~~'How could you possibly know anything about that?' McLean asked, but Needy just smile~~
pulled the door closed and drove off.

*

The tension grew as you climbed the stairs from the back foyer towards the dark heart of the station. McLean could feel it as a stillness in the air, a heavy weight on his shoulders, a pressure in his sinuses. And then there was the smell of fear that pervaded the corridors. Either that or some of the junior constables were in need of a wash.

The largest incident room in the building took up a good proportion of the front of the first storey, its long windows overlooking the busy commuter route funnelling traffic from the Borders into the city centre. McLean hovered in the double doorway, surveying a study in busyness. Uniformed constables and sergeants scurried back and forth between a bank of computer screens, a whiteboard the length of the room and a map of the city that took up one whole end wall. Two dozen different voices chattered into headpieces as yet more manpower disappeared into the ever-swelling overtime budget. And all for what? A crappy tip-off that had led them to a long-abandoned site that probably had nothing whatsoever to do with their current investigation.

'Well, well, well. Look what the cat dragged in. I was beginning to wonder what had happened to you.'

McLean faced his accuser, grateful at least that he'd be able to break the news to someone who might not chew him up and spit him out. Detective Inspector Langley was all right really, as far as the Drug Squad detectives went. Technically speaking, this whole investigation was meant to be under his command, with McLean giving logistical support, whatever that meant. But they had both been forced into a different role by the constant interference of a certain detective chief inspector who, thankfully for McLean, didn't appear to be around right now.

'So how'd it go then?' Langley asked, with a look on his face that almost convinced you he didn't already know.

McLean shrugged. 'Too early to tell. Forensics might come up with something. We certainly let them enough to work through.'

'Aye, I heard.' Langley scratched at his nose and then peered at the tip of his finger as if pondering whether or not to stick it in his mouth. Deciding eventually to rub it on the side of his jacket instead. 'So's the boss.' And he flicked his gaze past McLean's shoulder towards the open door behind him at the same time as McLean felt the temperature drop and the hubbub fall to silence.

'Where the bloody hell have you been McLean? I've been looking for you all day.'

McLean turned to see the tall figure of his least favourite colleague stride through the doorway. Detective Chief Inspector Charles Duguid, or Dagwood to anyone not within earshot. It must have been a brown suit week, and the faded polyester mix of this particular number had frayed at the cuffs and gone shiny at the elbows. He looked more like a schoolteacher than a detective, the kind of schoolteacher who takes great pleasure in picking on the slow kids, and whose whole demeanour just encourages his pupils to be insubordinate. From his thinning, ginger-grey scraggle of hair, to his blotchy white face that could turn red with anger at the slightest hint of an excuse, to his gangly frame and overlarge hands with their long fingers and bulbous bony knuckles, he put McLean in mind of an Orangutan in a suit, only less friendly.

Try to be reasonable. At least at first. 'If you remember sir, I told you I was going to follow up

potential lead from one of my informants. You know how hard it's been to pin this lot down. I thought I'd hit the place fast, get there before they scarpered.'

'So the investigation's winding down now? We've got the felons stewing in the cells as I speak and the city is once more free of the menace that is farmed cannabis.' Duguid sneered. 'Weren't you just a sergeant last month?'

'I hardly see what that's got to do with...'

'Some of us have just a little more experience running an investigation than you, McLean. Even Langley here's put a few dealers away in his time. And you know what the single most important factor of any investigative team is, eh? You remember that from your training, eh?' With each 'eh?' Duguid came closer and closer, looming over McLean, making full use of his extra height.

'It's that little word, McLean.' And now Duguid jabbed him with a bony finger, the nail cracked and yellowing from a lifetime's proximity to cigarettes. 'Team. T. E. A. M. You don't go swanning off on some dawn raid without co-ordinating it with everyone else first. What did you do? Grab the first uniforms you could lay your hands on and go in all guns blazing?'

McLean was going to protest, even got as far as opening his mouth just a fraction, but shut it again when he recognised the irritating nugget of truth in the chief inspector's words. He had completely forgotten the team structure - DI Langley had been in on the short briefing he'd arranged at six that morning. Nice of the man to come to his aid now, instead of sloping off towards the bank of computers lined up in the centre of the room, pretending to be very interested in the latest useful actions they were churning out.

'Well, what have you got to show for yourself?' Duguid asked, shoving impatient hands into his jacket pockets, guddling about a bit and coming up with a slightly yellowing mint imperial. He rubbed a few crumbs of what McLean hoped was rolling tobacco off it before popping it into his mouth.

'We found high power lights and hydroponics gear in the loft of the tenement my informant named,' he said, then went on to fill in the chief inspector about the morning's activities. For once Duguid didn't interrupt, possibly because he was too busy enjoying his nicotine-infused mint.

'So now SOC are going through two dozen rotten bin bags full of shit for us, and you say the place looked like it hadn't been used in a while?'

McLean grimaced. 'At least we know they were there.'

'We know where they've been, McLean. We've got a half dozen sites across the city where they've been.' Duguid wafted an overlarge hand towards the banks of computers and the hard-working constables poking at keyboards, peering myopically at screens. 'We've no end of work finding out about where they've been. I need to know where they are now.'

'I know sir. But...'

'I don't want to hear it. I really don't. It's bad enough having to listen to bloody Langley bleating all day like some constipated sheep. I brought you in on this investigation because Chief Superintendent McIntyre thought it was a good idea.' Duguid grimaced as he mentioned his superior as if the thought of her was enough to put him in a foul mood. 'She was obviously fooled by your winning smile, but it doesn't work on me.'

'If you don't want my help, sir, I've plenty other things to be getting on with. We still don't know who's been setting fire to those old buildings, for one.' McLean could hear the petulant schoolchild in his voice, but it was too late to take the words back. Duguid bristled, his face reddening like a startled octopus.

'Get out, McLean.' His voice was rising in pitch and volume. 'Go chase your little arsonists. Leave the real police work to those of us who know what we're doing.'

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'Christ almighty. This is some gaff!'

He stands in the enormous hallway of a palatial mansion and looks up at the wide staircase climbing around three walls towards a vast skylight high overhead. Coming down the drive, he assumed that the house was split into apartments, but now it seems the whole thing belongs to just one man.

'Takes a bit of getting used to, doesn't it lad.' Detective Inspector Malcolm 'Mac' Duff shrugging off his coat. Detective Sergeant Needham has already thrown his down onto an old chair sitting by the door.

'Welcome to my not so humble home,' Needham says. 'Or should I say my father's home.'

'I didn't think they paid duty sergeants that much.'

Needham laughs. 'Don't go getting any ideas, constable. They don't. This place has been in the family for generations. Here, let me give you the two cents tour.'

It reminds him of his Grandmother's house, up in Braid Hills, though in truth it makes that place look small by comparison. Still there's that air of a home waiting to be filled. Most of the rooms are cold, damp, unused. Only the kitchen with its vast range oven and long wooden table has any real warmth to it. The tour ends there with the inevitable mugs of tea.

'You'll be wondering why we've all come out here, lad.' Mac Duff has taken the head of the table, even though it's not his house. 'Needy's got the space, and no wife or children to go upsetting. You know how the station can get; so busy you can't hardly hear yourself think sometimes. So we use this place as a sort of unofficial incident room.'

'For what?' He asks the question even though he suspects he knows the answer.

'The Christmas Killer's what, lad.' Needham stares at him with an unusual intensity. 'Eight years we've been trying to catch the bastard. You impressed everyone with the way you solved the Probe case. Now's your chance to have a crack at something really difficult.'

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The sound of laughter echoed out of the propped-open door to the CIB room. McLean paused outside, his ears still ringing from the bollocking he'd got from Duguid. It was always worse when you knew you'd fucked up and deserved the rant. Hard to ever accept that the DCI was right. Jovial comparison wasn't what he needed right now, but neither was the prospect of folding himself into his tiny office and getting to work on the overtime rosters or whatever else the duty sergeant had chosen to heap on him, the most junior DI in the station. He glanced at his watch, too early to call it a day? Probably, even though it had started long before dawn. Well, there were plenty of other cases demanding his attention, that at least had been the truth. And what better place to start than down in the archives, far away from anyone who might remind him of his failings?

The station was an architectural monstrosity, designed by a committee and thrown up in the Seventies when the fashion for unadorned concrete was all the rage. Like much of Edinburgh, it had been built on top of something else, in this case an earlier, Victorian police station, and the basement levels were a different place altogether. Descending the old stone steps, worn in the middle by the countless criminal feet, was like passing into another world. The walls were brick, painted with countless layers of thick white and laid in perfect vaulted arches by master craftsmen who had obviously taken pride in their work. The rooms down here were small, windowless. Cells from an earlier age. No longer deemed safe for housing prisoners, they had been co-opted into storage space for evidence and old files. One had been converted into an office, and it was from here that Sergeant John Needham ruled his underground realm.

McLean approached the doorway quietly, not out of any desire for stealth so much as because the place demanded silence, a bit like a cathedral, or a crypt. As he came closer, he saw that the office door was open, the light on, and from inside came the unmistakable noise of a man trying very hard not to cry. McLean peered around the doorway to see the sergeant hunched over his desk, back to the door, shaking gently.

'Needy?'

The sobbing stopped as if a switch had been flipped. Sergeant Needham looked up, rubbing his cheeks as he tried to focus through raw-red eyes.

'Who...? Oh... Inspector McLean, sir.'

McLean recalled the conversation earlier, asking about old man Needham. They'd been close, father and son, in that curious, reserved way of a family robbed of female influence. There was one really one thing that could account for this.

'Your Dad?'

Needy nodded. 'Aye. About two hours ago.' He sniffed, produced a tangled white handkerchief from his trouser pocket and blew his nose, then used a corner to dab at his eyes. 'Poor bugger. They were going to operate on his cancer today, but when the doctor opened him up... Well there wasn't much point.'

'I'm sorry, Needy. I really am. He was a good copper.'

'Aye, he was that. Right crabbit bastard at times too.' Needy gave a grimacing smile and glanced past McLean, who followed his gaze to a clock on the far wall. Half past five, Edinburgh time. 'So what brings you down here this evening?' He asked.

McLean looked at Needham and remembered the detective sergeant who had in turns bossed him around and shown him the ropes, all those years ago when he'd first joined CID. Needy had been a good detective, solid and thorough. Some might have even called him obsessive, but not McLean. They had been friends after a fashion, though never close. So what was it friends were meant to do at a time like this?

'It wasn't important. Just some background stuff, but it can wait. Why don't we get out of here. Go get a pint? I reckon we've both earned one, eh?'

*

'Funny. I had you as more a real ale man.'

Needy sat on the cheap vinyl bench in an alcove that looked like an escapee from a bad gangster movie, his hands folded together on the cheap fake-wood Formica table. McLean put down the two pints of ice cold fizzy-keg beer that were the closest the place came to something drinkable, and squeezed his way onto the opposite bench.

'Not much choice, really.' He pushed one of the glasses across the table, noticing as he did that neither of them were what would pass for clean. The pub was close to the station, and that was about all it had going for it.

Needy took his pint, studiously ignoring the grimy ring around its middle, and raised it into the air.

'To Esther McLean.'

'Aye, and Tom Needham,' McLean added, raising his own glass. They both drank, then fell silent for an awkward, long moment. It was Needy who broke first.

'How long was it, mind? That your Gran was... You know? Before she...'

'Eighteen months, give or take a day or two.'

'Jesus. That long? How'd you cope with that?'

'I don't know. You just have to, I guess. Nothing else you can do.'

'Yeah, I think I know what you mean.' Needy took another long drink. 'Doesn't mean it's easy though. Watching someone die in front of you, bit by bit.'

The silence was even longer this time. McLean tried to hurry it along, but his pint was too gasp to gulp.

'You thought about what you're going to do?' Stupid question. Of course not. Old man Needham's not cold yet. His Gran had been dead half a year now, and he'd still not begun to sort out her affairs.

'Christ no. One day at a time, I guess.'

McLean raised his glass again. 'I'll drink to that.'

Needy took a sip, then slumped back against the wall. 'You know, this is almost like old times. The two of us in a god-awful pub somewhere, moaning about the bitterness of life. We just need Bob Laird and Mac Duff, and we'd have the whole team.'

'I can give Grumpy Bob a call, if you want.' McLean fished his mobile phone out of his pocket. 'Duff, though...'

'I heard he was in a home somewhere in the Borders. Alzheimer's.'

That killed off the conversation for another long pause. Needy studied his pint, nervous fingers caressing the sides of the glass. He didn't look up when he finally spoke again.

'I've always wondered, Tony. How'd you do it? How did you find him?'

And this is why the old team never got back together. McLean didn't need to ask Needy who he was talking about. Donald Anderson, the Christmas Killer, was never far from his thoughts. Least of all when the nights were long and dark and cold.

'I got lucky.' McLean laughed like a man who's been knifed in the gut. 'Hah, lucky. Don't know why I went into his shop. Can't remember much from back then. But he kept mementoes. You know as well as I do. And he had that piece of her dress.'

Needy looked up then and McLean saw the grief in his eyes, realised the deep bond that had formed between the sergeant and his father. How many years was it now since his own parents had died? Too many to count, and he'd been too young to really understand.

'I still don't know how you did it, though. After what he'd done to you. Christ knows, I'd have beaten him to death if it was me'd found him.' Needy flexed his hands, claw-like and liver-spotted. 'I have throttled him there and then.'

McLean reached for his beer, knocked back as much as he dared without disturbing the crusty bits milling around the bottom of the glass. He glanced at his watch.

'I thought about it. I still do. Look, I've got to go. I'm supposed to be preparing Dagwood's briefing at six and it'd be nice to get home and have a shower.'

'Aye, you're right.' Needy picked up his glass, swirled around the beer left in it. 'Think I might have another one of these though. Maybe something to help with the taste.'

'You'll be all right getting home?'

'Don't you worry about me, inspector. We Needhams survive. Always have, always will.'

*

Oily puddles shimmered on the pavement when McLean stepped out of the time-warp pub and back into the real world. The rain had stopped, but a lazy wind blew in off the sea; too idle to go round, cut through everything in its path, stealing any spare heat it could find. He hunched his shoulder against it, pulled up the collar of his overcoat and started out on the long walk home. In this weather he could see the sense in owning a car. Or perhaps he should say owning a proper car. Not that impractical classic Alfa Romeo his Gran had left him. It would be nice to be warm, dry. But then again, the traffic was crawling more slowly than he could walk, and if he owned a car there'd be nowhere to park at the other end, and a massive annual charge from the council for the privilege. A taxi was the answer, of course, but there weren't any to be seen. Not here, not now.

The phone buzzed against his hand, thrust deep into his coat pocket. McLean pulled both out, peering at the screen to see who was calling him. It was the station, no doubt Dagwood wanting to make his life a misery again.

'Tony? You at home?' Not Dagwood.

'Oh, Chief Superintendent, Ma'am? Umm... No. I'm out walking. It's...' He didn't really know what to say. He'd got the impression from Needy that few people knew, and the sergeant would prefer it to stay that way as long as possible. On the other hand, there wasn't much got past Jayne McIntyre. She'd taken Needy to the pub.'

The silence at the other end of the line was the chief superintendent working out what that meant. To her credit, it didn't take long.

'Damn. That's going to be hard for him.'

'He'll be OK, Ma'am. Those Needhams are tough old bastards.'

'Aye, you're right there. But still.' The line went silent again.

'I take it that's not why you called me though.' McLean assumed that word of his morning cock up had made it to the top of the pile, no doubt suitably embellished by Duguid to make him look even more stupid than he felt. He'd be expected in first thing for a professional bollocking.

'No. Something else.' McIntyre paused once more, as if she was trying to find the right words. Christ, he hadn't screwed up that badly had he?

'I thought you needed to hear this from me first. Before you got it second hand. It's about Anderson.'

McLean felt a chill in his gut that had nothing to do with the wind. 'Oh, aye? They letting him out for good behaviour are they?'

'Not exactly, Tony. I've just had a message from Peterhead. Seems someone took a knife to him in the kitchens. He's dead.'

~~~~~

'In the midst of life we are in death; of whom may we seek for succour, but of thee, O Lord, who for our sins art justly displeased?'

McLean stared out over the ranks of headstones towards a small knot of people clustered around a grave in the spattering rain. A sharp November wind blew off the North Sea, tugging at the thin grey hair of the priest, his head down in his prayer book. A brace of uniformed police officers shifted uncomfortably, like they would rather be anywhere else. A slim, red-haired woman struggled with her useless umbrella, rain darkening the grey of her tailored trouser suit. Two scowling men dressed in the dirty green overalls of Aberdeen City Parks Department waited impatiently to one side. No family, of course. Not much of a turn-out for the deceased at all.

'Yet, O Lord God most holy, O Lord most mighty, O holy and most merciful Saviour, deliver us not into the bitter pains of eternal death.'

McLean dug his hands deep into the pockets of his heavy overcoat and huddled against the cold that seeped into his bones. Low clouds scudded across the sky, blanking out what little weak afternoon sun could hope to reach this far north. Dreich was the word. It matched his mood.

'Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts; shut not thy merciful ears to our prayer.'

He tuned out the words, looking around the cemetery. Flowers dotted here and there, even the odd photograph. The headstones glistened wetly, granite grey like the city that spawned them. Just the occasional angel to break the monotony. What the hell was he doing here?

'Suffer us not, at our last hour, through any pains of death, to fall from thee.'

The council workers hoisted the heavy coffin up on thick canvas straps, kicking aside the scaffold planks it had been resting on before dropping it clumsily into the hole. No elegant sashes and six young men to lower the bastard to his last resting place. He deserved nothing more than he was getting.

'In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our brother...' The priest paused, then scrabbled around in his prayer book coming up with a small scrap of paper. He peered at it myopically before the wind whipped it from his arthritic fingers and away over the graveyard. '...Our brother Donald Anderson and we commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.'

McLean couldn't suppress the smile that slid across his face at the priest's mistake, but it was short-lived. He felt no satisfaction, no closure. Turning away from the scene, he walked to his car. It was a long drive back to Edinburgh; might as well get started. Not like there was going to be a wake or anything.

'Might I ask what your interest in Anderson is?'

McLean turned at the voice, seeing the woman with the useless umbrella standing a couple of paces away. She was slightly shorter than him, her face pale and freckled, its elfin shape exaggerated by the way the rain had plastered her short red hair across her scalp.

'Might I ask yours?'

'Detective Sergeant Ritchie, Grampian Police.' She fumbled in the large canvas bag slung over one shoulder and pulled out her warrant card. McLean didn't even bother looking at it. He probably should have told Aberdeen Headquarters he was coming, but then they'd have escorted him

everywhere, dragged him down the pub to celebrate Anderson's death.

'McLean,' he said. 'Lothian and Borders.'

'You're a fair bit off your patch, inspector.' So she knew of him, even if she hadn't recognised his face.

'I put Anderson away. Just wanted to make sure he was gone for good.'

'Aye, well. I can understand that.'

The two uniformed officers trudged past, the collars of their black fleeces turned up, yellow fluorescent jackets pulled tight against the wind. Behind them, the priest looked as if he was going to hang around and say something, then thought better of it. McLean stared back towards the grave where a mini digger was dumping heavy earth onto the coffin. 'How does a piece of shit like Anderson end up being buried in a place like this?'

'Plot was bought and paid for, apparently. Some solicitor from Edinburgh sorted it all out. Seems Anderson had money. Plots here aren't cheap.'

'What about the man who killed him?'

Ritchie didn't answer straight away. McLean didn't know her, couldn't read the expression on her face. She looked young for a DS, boyish even with her short-cropped hair and businesslike suit, but she held his gaze as if to say his seniority didn't intimidate her.

'Harry Rugg. Anderson's cell-mate in Peterhead. They were both on kitchen duty. Rugg took a carving knife and stabbed Anderson in the heart.'

'So I heard. Any chance of having a word with him?'

Ritchie wiped wet hair out of her eyes. 'I could talk to DCI Reid for you. He's in charge. But I doubt he'd let another force anywhere near. What do you want to ask him anyway?'

'Ask? Nothing. I just wanted to say thanks.'

\*

The phone rang as he was crossing the Forth Road Bridge, and he fumbled with the buttons as he coasted to a slow stop. Sudden rain squalls made angry red stars of the brake lights ahead of him, commuter traffic welcoming him home. He cradled the receiver to his ear, hoping there weren't any traffic cops around. It would be embarrassing to be pulled over on his day off.

'McLean.'

'You back from Aberdeen yet?' Detective Chief Inspector Duguid didn't bother with any conversational niceties.

'On the bridge, sir. But...'

'Well get yourself over to Sciennes. There's another fire.'

McLean was about to complain that he was off duty, but Duguid cut the call. There was no point arguing, anyway. It never did any good.

The traffic grew steadily worse as he approached the scene; exhausted office workers fighting to get home down unfamiliar roads. At least the uniforms had cordoned off the whole street, which meant he could abandon his car and walk the last couple of hundred yards. Smoke drifted down between the tenements in choking swirls, ash falling like black snow. Everything smelled of childhood bonfires, and high overhead the dark sky reflected rippling orange.

The fire was in an old factory, built well over a hundred years ago, its stone façade dark and grimy. The redevelopment signs had appeared several months back; just before the credit crunch had set in. Nothing much seemed to have changed since then. Until now. Six fire engines clustered around

the site, two of them hosing down the adjoining tenement blocks to try and stop them catching. The factory itself was past saving. Flame roared from shattered windows, and as McLean watched, the roof began to buckle and collapse. Firemen sprinted away; uniforms pushed the security cordon further back; onlookers gasped with excitement.

'Enjoy the funeral did you, sir?' Grumpy Bob strolled up, cradling a mug of tea in his large hands. Oblivious to the chaos unfolding around him.

'Where the hell did you...?' McLean pointed at the steaming cuppa. 'No, don't bother. Just bring me up to speed, Bob.'

'It looks like another one of ours. But we won't really know until it's out and the fire investigation team have had a crack.'

'Christ, that's just what we need.'

'Aye. Place is boarded up like Fort Knox. There's plate steel over the downstairs windows and all the doors. Took the first fire crew twenty minutes to cut their way in. Too late by then.'

McLean stared up at the roaring fire, feeling the heat radiating from the old stones. It seeped into his body, making him drowsy despite the noise and hubbub around.

'Inspector McLean.' A light tap on his shoulders. He turned, then cursed. Short and scruffy in a grubby old leather coat, Joanne Dalgliesh might have been mistaken for someone's mum, but she had a nose for a good story, and the newspaper she wrote for wasn't known for pulling its punches, especially where Lothian and Borders Police were concerned.

'This is the ninth fire at a redevelopment site in the city in two months. Are you any closer to catching the arsonist?'

'Who the hell let you in here?' McLean looked around for the nearest uniformed officer. 'Constable!'

'Come on Inspector.' Dalgliesh glanced over her shoulder as the constable hurried towards them. 'Just a word. Anything. Surely this isn't coincidence, all these buildings burning down?'

'You know I can't comment until the fire investigation team has been inside, Ms Dalgliesh.'

'But you're treating all the fires as connected.'

'We're not ruling out anything at this stage.'

'Which means you haven't got a clue.'

McLean ignored her. 'Constable, escort Ms Dalgliesh back behind the security cordon. And make sure no-one else gets through. We don't want anyone getting hurt.'

'We can help you, Inspector. If you let us,' the reporter protested as she was led away.

'Aye, right,' McLean muttered under his breath.

'She's got a point,' Grumpy Bob said.

'Yes, well, thanks for the support sergeant. That's really helpful. So what's the situation here? You doing any actual policing, or just drinking tea?'

Grumpy Bob downed the last dregs, then looked for somewhere to put the empty mug. 'I've had Constable MacBride working the crowd. You never know, we could get lucky. There's good CCTV coverage. We'll pull the tapes, see if anyone's lurking.'

Long hours of staring at grainy television images, trying to see if the same faces turned up at more than one fire. Wonderful.

'Inspector? Sir?' McLean looked up to see the new boy himself, Constable Stuart MacBride winding his way through the abandoned cars and dodging the milling fire crews. He had an airwave speaker in one hand, his notebook in the other, a look of excitement flushing his face. Either that or he'd been too close to the fire.

'What is it, constable?'

~~'Call just came in... they've found a body.'~~

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McLean rubbed his face, trying to get the tired dryness out of his eyes. The firemen had moved back towards the burning building now, but as far as he could tell no-one had gone inside.

'What, in the fire? How?'

MacBride looked momentarily confused. Then held up his radio.

'No sir. South of the city. Looks like a murder.'

'I'm supposed to be off duty. Can't they give it to anyone else?'

'Dagwood's gone to some important society dinner.' Grumpy Bob bent his knee, miming the rolling up of his trouser leg. 'Langley and his crowd won't want to be first in if there's no obvious drugs connection.'

'What about Randall?'

'Off with the flu.'

'Oh Christ.' McLean shook his head to try and scare away the fatigue of a long day about to go even longer. 'Give us the details then.'

MacBride consulted his notebook. 'It's out near Gladhouse. Young woman, naked in the water. Sergeant Thoms said something about her throat being cut.'

Despite the heat from the fire, McLean's insides were as cold as the wind in an Aberdeenshire graveyard. Beside him, Grumpy Bob went suddenly very still.

'The Christmas Killer?'

McLean shook his head. 'It can't be, Bob. He's dead. I watched them bury him just this morning. But in his mind, he wasn't so sure.'

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A circle of bright white light hovered over the crime scene like some strange alien spaceship. Or maybe the Star of Bethlehem, given the time of year. That made McLean either a shepherd or a wise man, but he couldn't decide which. Whatever he was, it was tired. He stifled a yawn as he clambered out of the car, then remembered he was supposed to get it back to the hire company by seven. Even driving like a maniac he'd miss that by an hour. Well, it wouldn't be the first time his one day hire had turned into two.

A line of squad cars and a couple of battered old white transit vans meant he had to walk a short distance to the fluttering crime scene tape. Closer in, the arc lights set up by the SOC team washed over an area of rough ground below the road. Fat wet drops of rainwater glistened on the spiky tips of the thick gorse bushes and splashed down from the bare, black, twisted branches of scraggy birch trees. Through it all ran a deep-culverted stream, gurgling loudly with recent rain. It was a while since he'd been out this way. But if memory served, it was part of the reservoir system that fed the city. Just the sort of place you wanted to find a body.

'I'm sorry sir, this is a crime scene. You can't...'

McLean cut off the young uniformed constable who had tried to block his way, wearily pulling out his warrant card for inspection. It wasn't surprising the lad didn't recognise him; this was Penicuik's patch, after all.

'Who's the officer in charge?' McLean asked once the constable had finished apologising.

'Sergeant Price, sir. He's down there with the pathologist.'

'Already? That was quick.' McLean looked up the line of cars, and sure enough, parked at the far end, Angus Cadwallader's British Racing Green and mud-coloured Bentley poked one salt-encrusted headlight out from behind a SOC van.

'Dunno about that, sir. I've been here over two hours already. Call came in about four o'clock.'

Long before Dagwood had set out for his Masonic knees-up. Bloody marvellous.

Knee-high grass and gorse bushes soaked his trousers and shoes long before he made it to the edge of the culvert. A group of people clustered around an improbably Heath-Robinson arrangement of scaffolding poles, light stands and other paraphernalia. Steam rose off the hot lights, adding to the already surreal, hellish feel of the place.

'Sergeant Price?' McLean waited while an overlarge, white-haired, uniformed officer turned slowly around, trying not to slip on the wet concrete edge to the culvert. The drop to the water was about ten feet, spate-swelled waters running noisily below, so McLean couldn't really blame him for his caution.

'About bloody time someone senior showed up,' was all the greeting the old sergeant gave. The nod and a cursory nod. McLean tried not to rise to the bait.

'It's my day off, OK? I spent the morning in Aberdeen burying Donald fucking Anderson. So cut the small talk and tell me the story.'

If Sergeant Price was impressed by McLean's sacrifice, he didn't show it.

'Couple of lads out on their mountain bikes saw her first,' he said. 'What they were doing down here is anyone's guess.'

'They still about?'

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