

The first shards of light splintered their way through the bedroom curtain as the greyness of the morning light started to fill the room and slowly Thoroughgood began to waken from a fractured sleep.

Turning over onto his left side he reached out across the bed searching for her presence but the sheets were smooth and the bed was empty. Slowly the stupor of his drowsy awakening gave way to the cruel reality that was his waking hours. She was gone ... gone forever.

His eyes flashed as the feeling of blind panic that had marked the start of his every day since Celine had been taken from him, gripped his mind and body anew. He sighed out loud and stared uncomprehending at the space in the bed where she should be lying, where she had been lying what seemed like a moment ago, so alive, so real, so sensuous, so Celine. But now she was no more, forever consigned to his past, yet during his sleeping hours so much a part of his present.

He had taken the offer to come to Castlebrae, the Scottish Police Convalescence home, thinking that a break in the Perthshire countryside might help him escape the torment that seemed to taint everything in Glasgow.

Glasgow. Where everything seemed to remind him of Celine and the man who had ended her life and his hopes of happiness ... Declan Meechan.

He ran his right hand through strands of jet black hair that was increasingly grey-streaked. Sat up in the bed staring at the curtain ahead and then the Hurting came and it was too much. Gus Thoroughgood buried his head in his knees and wept until his body was wracked with a pain he knew would never go away, and all the time her face remained the focus of his mind's eye. Then the voice in his head spoke up.

“C'mon Gus get it together, a month up here and you still haven't got it under control, face facts; she's gone and she ain't coming back, you've got to start again.”

The problem was where did he make that start, when nothing seemed to work? It had been almost five months since he had found Celine at Meechan's place, shot dead by a hired killer, so still, so peaceful: never more beautiful and yet so dead.

Grief had given way to anger. Alcohol had provided a false balm for the pain that seemed to sear his very being. He had tried to throw himself into his work and find a way to occupy every moment of the day. Failed.

Eventually it had been too much and Superintendent Tomachek had summoned him to his smoke-filled room. There, with his partner Kenny Hardie adding some moral support, they had suggested he take a month's leave at Castlebrae.

“A change of scene might help you put some distance between what has happened down here and maybe get some perspective on it all. Help you decide how to start again.” Tomachek had said, trying to find some advice that might kickstart the healing process by offering him a way forward.

Anger surged anew through his veins as he thought back to that day and his reaction to the best advice the old boy could come up with

“Just what the fuck is there to start again?” He had leaned across Tomachek’s desk and the old man had recoiled from the fury that had spread across his features.

“That bastard Meechan has murdered the only woman I’ve ever loved and gone scot free, so please enlighten me, just what do you think I can start again?” He had ripped his warrant card out from his jacket pocket and tossed it onto the table, “I’ve sacrificed everything for this fuckin’ job and with it has gone everything that meant anything to me. You can stick yer fuckin’ job up your arse. I can’t give it any more.”

With that he had charged out the office, almost taking the door off its hinges in the process and leaving the disbelieving Tomachek and Hardie stunned in a combination of silence and pity at his meltdown.

Now, Thoroughgood got to his feet, pulled the curtains open and stared out at the gently rolling hillside painted in pleasing pastel shades.

He looked at his watch and saw that it was Saturday and he had a visitor today. Hardie was

coming to pick him up and take him back to the place he had called home - Glasgow.

But as the moisture filled his eyes afresh and he felt droplets trace down his cheeks and salt slide into his mouth the voice in his head asked. “How can you call it home when there’s nothing there for you anymore?”

KENNY HARDIE eased through the gears of the CID Focus as he picked up speed, zig-zagging through the lanes of the M8, manoeuvring into the outside lane and flattening the accelerator. The rain lashed off the windscreen this bleak grey Saturday lunchtime, as the weather tried to make up its mind whether it was autumn or spring.

As well as the dampness that hung habitually in the air, wrapping around his body like some soggy old blanket, there was also a chill that made the DC shiver. As the Focus started to heat up his mind began to thaw out and he focused on the meeting that had been dominating his thoughts.

His destination was the Perthshire village of Auchterarder and the subject of his visit was DS Gus Thoroughgood or the shell of the man who had been Gus Thoroughgood; his governor and his mate.

As Hardie's mind replayed the previous months which had left the DS gutted and broken, living a life devoid of meaning, his hair-trigger temper broke its banks and he rapped his left hand on the dashboard.

“Why the fuck did you have to go after her again Gus?” Hardie shouted out loud and found his mind focusing on the image of his partner cradling the lifeless body of the woman he had put everything on the line for - Celine Lynnot.

A love triangle that had imposed a grip on Thoroughgood's life; which had tormented and tantalised him in almost equal measure for the best part of a decade. Ended with Celine's pre-ordered slaying by her fiancé, Declan Meechan; Glasgow's foremost crimelord and Thoroughgood's mortal nemesis.

But as Hardie continued to turn over the aftermath of Celine's brutal demise he knew that all that mattered was how to get Gus Thoroughgood back into the here and now. That was the reason behind this trip to Perthshire. Achieving just that, Hardie knew, was going to be far from easy.

He reached for one of the Silk Cut cigarettes poised half out of the almost empty pack, pushed in the cigarette lighter on the dash and a minute later was filling the interior of the car with smoke.

“Fuck 'em all,” said Hardie in defiance as his mind briefly strayed to the string of complaints he knew would head his way from the next users of the pool car when he finally returned it to Stewart Street, City Centre office, later that day.

The diversion from the events at hand was momentary and as he filled his lungs with a deep inhalation of nicotine, Hardie tried to train his mind on exactly what he needed to achieve from the visit.

No matter what happened he had to get Thoroughgood back to Glasgow. The month's compassionate leave granted by Detective Superintendent Tomachek was up and it was time to somehow start getting his DS back into the routine and structure of bog-standard coppering.

The fact that Thoroughgood had tendered his resignation by virtually slapping the old man with his warrant card was neither here nor there. Tomachek valued the services of a DS he had taken under his wing as something of a protégé far too highly to let a moment of grief-fuelled angst put the full stop on Thoroughgood's career.

Apart from anything else, by putting his life on the line and ultimately losing the woman he loved, Thoroughgood had also brought down the seemingly untouchable Meechan and smashed a multi-million pound drug operation filtering into the city from the Western Isles. Thoroughgood's warrant card had remained in Tomachek's desk drawer until the Detective Superintendent had handed it over to Hardie prior to his departure that morning, with a warning.

"For God's sake Hardie don't hand it back until you are sure the time is right."

But that, as Hardie knew, was only one side of the equation. It was all very well Strathclyde Police wanting to welcome the returning hero back into their ranks with open arms but did the prodigal son want to return? Only time would tell how things would pan out and Hardie had resolved that whatever decision Gus Thoroughgood ultimately

came to, he would be there for him. He flicked the automatic window switch and as the glass panel lowered, lobbed the Silk Cut out.

"Fuck it! As if that isn't enough, I'm gonnae miss the Rangers game as bleedin' well. I hope you're grateful Gus," Hardie said out loud and tuned into Radio Scotland's coverage of the afternoon's football.

It was almost 2.30pm when Hardie arrived in the grounds of Castlebrae. The imposing sandstone building immediately recalling memories of his own two visits he had made as he recovered from back and shoulder injuries sustained during separate incidents which had both ended with him hospitalised.

He parked the Focus and eased out of the car, tried to fight back the sense of dread enveloping him at just what kind of state he would find his mate and colleague in.

His attention was diverted by ducks waddling past his feet and heading to the small pond situated in front of the imposing Victorian building. He had not forgotten about them and delved into his overcoat pocket to produce a paper bag he had had the 'missus' fill with bread crumbs. Then Kenny Hardie got on the end of the line and followed his feathered friends down to the pond.

After he had waited for a moment to let the birds immerse themselves in the icy water, the grizzled detective began to throw assorted crumbs and chunks of his breakfast toast into the pond. "There you go my beauties, fire into that why don't you?"

A smile that would have warmed the coldest winter night covered Hardie's face as he enjoyed a moment of rare satisfaction.

Submerged in his moment of animal magic Hardie failed to hear the footfall on the gravel behind him.

"Hello old friend, come to save me from myself?" Hardie recognised the voice immediately

He turned round slowly and tried to keep his smile welcoming as he took in the appearance of his partner.

"Aye, you and your birds, some things never change," said Thoroughgood as he gestured to the bench overlooking the pond, "Fancy a seat?"

Hardie nodded and took the half dozen steps towards the bench overlooking the family of water fowl with the silence between him and his partner deafening.

The first thing he had noticed about Thoroughgood were the hollows his eyes appeared to have sunk into, while his cheek bones stood out like the edges of a ski slope. The weight loss was blatantly obvious and the jersey he wore – a yellow number Hardie used to taunt his mate about as being primrose – hung from him like an empty sack.

Perhaps most stark of all was the grey, in places white, materialising in the DS' previously jet black hair. But there was something else, something about Thoroughgood and the way he moved that Hardie had noticed immediately but been unable to diagnose. It was as though Thoroughgood had

become weighed down, aged by the pain of a loss that had drained the very sap of life from his being.

They sat side by side on the bench and watched the ducks. This time Hardie did not smile for he had no idea where to begin. Surprisingly it was Thoroughgood who broke the silence.

"Ah fuck it, any crumbs left in the bag faither?"

The mention of his nickname brought the smile back to Hardie's face. "Sure, help yourself."

Thoroughgood took the bag and filleted it for some morsels before lobbing the last few into the pond, much to the delight of the attending drake and his little family. Still Hardie did not know where to begin and his attempt when it came was hardly adroit.

"Tomachek and the rest of CID back at Stewart Street send their best and the old man is ..." but before he could complete the sentence Thoroughgood did it for him.

"Wondering when I am coming back?"

Hardie shrugged his shoulders and nodded uneasily as the gorging ducks soaked his scuffed brown suede shoes in spray.

"It's okay mate. I know my time at Castlebrae is up this weekend and you've come to take me back to Glasgow. No disrespect, but I just don't know if I want to go back with you."

The DC had feared as much. The arts of gentle persuasion and skilful diplomacy were unfathomable to Hardie. He knew then there was no point in pursuing his objective in a manner that would have left him open to ridicule. Thoroughgood

may have had his heart broken but his mind was evidently in full working order.

The DS leant forward and stared at the ducks. It was hardly an act of encouragement and Hardie sighed out loud before reaching inside his anorak and seeking to stiffen his resolve with another Silk Cut. One click of his Zippo and a deep inhalation and he launched himself into the matter in hand.

“Fuck’s sake Gus, what the hell else are you gonna do man? I know you loved her, Christ I do, but she’s gone and it doesn’t matter where you are, the hurting is still gonna be there with you. Sitting around moping, wherever you are intending running off to, isn’t going to bring her back is it? What you need is to get back to what you do best, back among the boys, and get stuck in. In my opinion the last thing you need right now is more time to torture yourself with what if’s and if only’s.”

Hardie stopped for another suck on his Silk Cut but was just too late to stop ash falling on his treasured brogues.

“Ah, piss off ya diddy!” He chastised himself before flicking his right foot in the direction of the ducks who were this time on the end of an unwanted shower of fag ash, a volley of quacks soon let Hardie know what they thought of his not so fancy footwork.

Hardie’s words of wisdom did however have the desired effect of gaining a reaction from his partner. Thoroughgood sat upright and turned his body towards Hardie before levelling those hollow, almost translucent green spheres on the veteran DC.

Hardie felt uneasy under the surveillance of his mate’s disconcerting gaze.

“Straight to the point as always Kenny, eh? Maybe you’re right but I just feel tired of it all, I don’t know where my life is going anymore. One minute everything is there for me and we are making all these plans and now it’s back to square one, start again, like some sick game of snakes and ladders. But what is the point? You tell me.

“Get stuck back into the job? What for? Where is that going to take me?” Thoroughgood saw Hardie remove his fag and held his hand up to stay any interruption from his partner.

“Before you say ‘One day I’ll meet someone else’, well maybe, but she won’t be Celine. Anyway the old man took my warrant card so the problem is no longer yours or Strathclyde Polis’ is it now?”

Hardie cleared his throat and drew an enquiring look from Thoroughgood who was well aware this usually meant an uncomfortable admission was imminent.

“Well, not quite, Gus.” Hardie rummaged in the other pocket from the one housing his beloved fags and slowly produced Thoroughgood’s warrant card.

“The old man may have accepted it but your warrant card has spent the last few weeks gathering dust in his office drawer. We both think it’s time you took it back and returned to Glasgow.”

Silence.

Thoroughgood got up and moved closer to the water’s edge, gazing across the pond and into the

Perthshire hills ringing the horizon with their pleasing undulations.

“You’re naw gonnae jump mate?” shouted Hardie from behind him and they both erupted in laughter simultaneously. An outpouring of relief as much as anything else.

“OK, old mate, I’ll come back to Glasgow with you but you can keep the warrant card for now. Strathclyde Polis has had the best part of fifteen years of my life and right now I’m not ready to commit any more.”

Hardie allowed himself a smile and patted his mate’s right shoulder.

“Good man. What do you say to a curry in Mr India’s once we get back to the West End?”

“Good to see that at least *you* haven’t changed Kenny, still always thinking about your belly eh? Well I haven’t exactly got plans for my Saturday night have I? But listen, there’s one condition for me returning with you; there is no way I’m gonna put up with you kicking every ball of the Rangers game on the drive back. No radio ok?”

“Fuck’s sake Gus, at least let me get the half-times! What’s the problem, have you finally given up on Thistle?”

The raising of the middle digit of Thoroughgood’s right hand was indeed eloquent proof that he had not.

“Just get me to the West End in one piece faither, will you?”

THE Focus surged down the A90, a study in still life. Hardie had not had the guts to ignore his partner’s wish, that, as far as the football was concerned Radio Silence was the only station he wished to be tuned into.

Conversation was non-existent and Hardie shot Thoroughgood a sideways glance that revealed his gaze was vacantly focused out of the passenger window. For once in his life Hardie decided that the continued quiet of the vehicle was preferable to the vacuous chatter of conversation for the sake of itself.

As he pulled out to overtake a blue Audi estate Hardie realised that the drumming of his left hand fingers on the dashboard was now becoming so incessant it was even beginning to get on *his* nerves. He stopped.

Then Thoroughgood’s baritone broke their soporific self-imposed silence.

“Fuck me, it’s Felix Baker and two mates. Well, well. What do you suppose they are up to, 40 miles from Glasgow, in the middle of the Perthshire countryside?”

The surprise, not just down to Thoroughgood's shock discovery of his voice but the content of his comments, forced Hardie to grip the steering wheel to compensate for the tremor of shock which had almost caused him to swerve into the Audi.

Hardie could not help himself leaning slightly farther forward in his driver's seat to catch a glimpse of Baker, a prolific housebreaker whose speed on the prowl had earned him the eloquent nickname of Felix.

Baker had terrorised the private housing schemes of Bishopbriggs, an affluent suburb in the north of Glasgow, through his use of the "Creper" housebreaking MO that saw houses targeted in the dead of night when their occupants were deep in their slumbers. Then of course there was Felix's penchant for violence that saw any waking householders invariably beaten with a frightening severity that had left one OAP on life support in the city's Royal Infirmary.

But that had been long ago and Baker was known to have graduated to the theft of fine art items on a steal-to-order basis from the stately homes of Scotland's old aristocracy.

"Look faither, just keep going will you? Any money they will spot a CID motor and the last thing we need them to pick up on is that it's being driven by two of their oldest polis pals," barked Thoroughgood and the urgency in his gaffer's voice injected the first faint feelings of positivity into his

being that Kenny Hardie had experienced that damp dreich day.

"All right Gus, but they aren't on a day trip just for the sake of the scenery. How do you propose we play this one? Now we've gone past them we're hardly in a position to give them a tug." said Hardie.

Thoroughgood turned his full attention on his partner. "Just get into the nearside lane and crawl along like you usually do and they can take that decision out of our hands."

But Baker and his two mates didn't play ball and remained stubbornly 100 yards adrift of the Focus.

Clocking the Audi almost constantly in his rear view, Hardie provided a breathless commentary on its incumbents.

"Baker is driving all right but I don't recognise the other boy in the front and I can't get a read on the punter in the back. You reckon they'll be tooled up?"

"A bad boy like Felix is always going to be looking for that little bit extra insurance. If it's not shooters then he is bound to have a blade or two in the motor. They aren't sitting back there because they are nervous of motorway driving. They know it's a CID motor. What they've got to be waiting for is to see if our arrival is mere coincidence or if we're on to them. Either by chance or design, it makes no odds. So it's up to us to keep them guessing."

Thoroughgood took a look in his passenger mirror and tried to sneak a glance at the front

passenger in the Audi but the combination of spray and distance rendered his efforts pointless.

“We're maybe a mile or so from the roundabout just up from Bridge of Allan. That will give them four options. Either they go straight through and keep heading for Glasgow and see if we do likewise, take a left into Bridge of Allan, go past the Glasgow turn off and take the Denny road, or double back for Perth.

“Any of the last three means they have clocked exactly who we are and have something on board they don't want us having a butchers at. If they head for Glasgow, well, I still wouldn't bet on them being clean, just that they haven't recognised us and reckon we are local Central Scotland CID.”

“Fair enough,” responded Hardie in agreement.

“Right, I can see the roundabout signs ahead Kenny, slowly pull on the anchors and we'll see if we can force the issue.”

With 200 yards to go to the roundabout the Audi darted into the outside lane and proceeded to close the gap on the Focus. Baker and his cronies had no option, as Hardie had dropped down to second gear.

As the Audi pulled parallel with their car, Baker and his two minions kept their eyes resolutely to the front; locked on the roundabout. Then the Audi signalled to pull in front of the Focus and continued to indicate left for Bridge of Allan.

With Thoroughgood and Hardie now behind them, Baker and his gang headed down the road that would take them into the old Victorian spa town.

Hardie was first to articulate his thoughts.

“He's clocked us all right Gus, might be time to get on the mobile to Central Scotland plod?”

The Focus followed the Audi at a distance and there could be little doubt that Baker and his confederates had realised the Focus was a police vehicle, judging by the furtive and repeated glances into their rear view mirror.

About 600 yards from the entry into the main street the road became a mini dual carriage way just as it crested the bridge over the river Allan. It was then that Baker decided it was time to test the resolve of his pursuers.

As the mini roundabout that preceded the dual carriageway loomed, the Audi suddenly shot across the traffic island diagonally, narrowly missing a bottle green people carrier, heading straight into the oncoming northerly lanes of the road.

“Fuckin' idiot! What the hell does he think he's doing?” roared Hardie, flattening the accelerator of the Focus but remaining in the correct lane. But Baker's change of lane wasn't the only surprise the criminal and his mates had in store for the detectives.

With the speedo showing Hardie was hitting 60mph, the Focus had almost pulled level with the Audi on the opposite carriageway; it was then that the rear passenger window rolled down and a sawn-off shotgun appeared.

Thoroughgood had been keeping constant surveillance on the Audi and spotted the shooter first. “Hit the anchors! Sawn-off stickin' out rear window.”

Automatically Hardie did as he was told as a hail of lead unloaded into the bonnet of the Focus. The Audi was back in front and this time it crossed the next mini roundabout and sped back onto the south carriageway.

“Jesus H Christ!” just about summed up Hardie’s thoughts on the matter as Thoroughgood said

“We’ve got three hundred yards to the village and there’s a pedestrian crossing just outside the Allan Water Cafe that’s always teamin’ with kids, grannies, mum and dad, the whole bleedin’ lot. If he goes in there at 60mph it will be carnage. Say your prayers faither.”

But Baker had other ideas and with the village main street and the cafe looming, he tried an ambitious and almost 90 degree turn down a side road running parallel with the banks of the river they had just crossed.

“Fuckin’ maniac, he’s never gonnae make that!” exclaimed Hardie, and he was right. It was like watching a slow motion replay as time seemed to stretch its perimeters. No sooner had the Audi begun its attempt at an abrupt left turn than the back of the vehicle started writhing violently as the movement asked of it defied the laws of physics.

With tyres screeching the vehicle began to tip and the two wheels on the passenger side lost their grip on the road before daylight clearly showed under the vehicle as it began its flight into oblivion.