

Darkest Thoughts
Craig McIntyre series, book 1

A Novel

Gordon Brown



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Books by Gordon Brown:

The Craig McIntyre series

Darkest Thoughts – book 1

Furthest Reaches – book 2

Deepest Wounds – book 3

Falling

59 Minutes

Prologue

I'm next to a bloodstained wall. Somewhere in Iraq. Cut off from my unit.

It's dark. I'm scared. Someone is after me. I don't know who. I'm cold.

Noises come from the other side of the wall. I sit still. I want the voices to vanish but they don't. My name is being whispered. Over and over. '*Craig... Craig... Craig.*' The accent is American. That should make me feel better. It doesn't.

'*Craig.*' Close. This side of the wall now. But there's nobody there. '*Craig.*' In my ear. Inches away. I can feel breath. I reach for my gun.

'*Craig.*' The other ear. '*Craig.*' Both ears. I lift the barrel and point it to my left, then to my right. I can't speak or won't speak. A second voice joins in. '*Craig.*' In stereo. Then three voices. Four. More. The hubbub grows. Hot air and words buzz around my head. The air is alive with people whispering my name.

Then one of the voices shouts. '*CRAIG!*' I wrap my finger around the trigger. '*CRAIG!*' – a second shout. Then they all join in.

Still there's no one there. I try to stand up but the voices force me back to the ground.

Something touches my hair. A gentle brush. My head won't move. It's stuck with Super Glue to the wall. Another touch. Touching and shouting. The touches become strikes. Flicks and hits. I put some pressure on the trigger. Not enough to fire but just short of what's needed.

Somebody or something bites me. A vampire to my neck. Not a nip. A full chunk of flesh between teeth. Ripped from my body the flesh falls to the ground. I pull the trigger and spray bullets around my head. Keeping the pressure on until the clip

runs dry.

Blood floods down my body. More bites. Harder. Faster. Tearing my face apart. A tooth touches my eyeball.

★

Light floods my world.

‘Time to get to work, Mr McIntyre.’

The dream is gone and I’m back in the room. Sweat thick on me. A feeling of disconnect clouding my thoughts. The voice from the speakers is the man in the white linen suit. Lendl. *‘Rise and shine.’*

The door opens and Buzz 1 enters. His haircut as sharp as a box-cutter blade.

‘Mr Mather will show you the washroom. I’m sure you would like to freshen up.’

Behind Buzz 1 there are two more suits. They’re taking no chances with me.

The washroom is heavy on showers. Six in a row. I’m guessing all-night stints are not unusual in this place. I strip off and take the full force of the water.

I finish and towel down. A cabinet reveals some deodorant; toothbrushes in sealed bags along with toothpaste. I scrub and spray.

Buzz 1 times his re-entry to perfection.

A new room. An examination bed against one wall. A table and chair against another. A computer in sleep mode squats on the table. Shelves line the third wall. An oversized TV sits on the space next to the door. Light shines through Plexiglas sheets above.

On the wall next to the examination bed there’s a metal panel the length of the bed – about four feet high. It looks like a screen.

The speaker fires up. Lendl’s voice fills the room. ‘On the bed.’

I obey and sit with my legs dangling. Buzz 1 moves to the

room's corner. The door opens. A tall, skeletal man dressed in a white coat enters. He pays me no attention. Sitting at the table he fires up the computer and begins to tap away. A second man comes in pushing a cart loaded with electronic equipment. Monitors, wires, keyboard, small blue boxes – none of which make any sense to me.

‘Wire him up,’ says the skeleton without looking up.

The second man wheels the cart next to me. He's heavy-set, thick around the gut, sweating freely in the cool air. ‘Could you please lie down?’

I wonder what will happen if I say no but even my slight hesitation brings Buzz 1 out of his corner. I lie down.

The sweating man rubs some gel from a tube onto my forehead and opens up my shirt. He smiles as he pulls out a small razor. ‘Sorry I've no shaving foam.’ With practiced ease he shaves four patches of hair from my chest before attaching wires to the newly-bare areas and my head.

‘Is he ready?’ asks the skeleton. He doesn't look my way as he speaks.

‘Just waiting for the signals to come online.’ The sweating man hits a power button and the monitor jumps into life.

‘Straps,’ orders the skeleton.

Straps? Suddenly Buzz 1 is at my shoulder with another suit in tow. They reach under the bed. Too late I realize what they are going to do. I try to sit up but Buzz 1 whips out his gun and pushes it into my leg. ‘A bullet in the thigh won't affect the tests.’

I freeze. Buzz 1 pulls up leather straps and coils them around my wrists and ankles, pulling hard on the buckles to secure them. When they're fastened he puts the gun away before helping the other suit finish the job. Buzz 1 reappears above my head. He holds a head restraint in his hand and slides the top of my skull into it. With a pull, he tightens the fastening. I'm all but immobile.

'Ready?' asks the skeleton. I can no longer turn my head to tell if he's still looking at the computer.

'Good to go,' says Buzz 1.

'OK. You two can leave.'

Buzz 1 and the suit exit.

'Open the screen,' orders the skeleton.

There is a click and the sound of movement.

'OK,' he continues. 'Do the subjects in the next room have any idea what they're here for?'

Lendl's voice rings out from the speakers in reply. *'No. As requested they were picked up from the streets on the promise of drugs and booze.'*

'Have they been given any?'

'Enough to keep them calm.'

'Good.'

'What are you expecting?'

'I don't know. I've a few ideas but we'll see. I have to say I don't hold out much hope. It all seems a little thin.'

'We've seen more from less.'

I'm beginning to lose my grip on the reality of all this. How the hell did I end up strapped to a bed and wired up to the moon? What is it they want?

'Mr McIntyre, please relax,' says Lendl. *'Before we start I want to ask you a few questions.'*

'Before you start what?'

'A few little tests. Nothing to worry about.'

'If I shouldn't be worrying, why am I trussed up like a turkey?'

'For your own safety.'

'Bullshit.'

'Have it your own way. Now think back to Iraq. To the street outside the brothel. Did anything strike you as unusual?'

'Apart from getting mugged?'

‘Have it your way. Start the tests.’

‘What the fuck is going on?’ It’s the only question I want an answer to.

Lendl spits a few words. *‘Shut him up.’*

The sweating man’s dripping face appears above me. He pulls a mouthpiece over the lower half of my face. I’m silenced.

‘First scenario.’ Skeleton talking. ‘Both times the subject claims to have been asleep. On each occasion two people died and on both occasions they killed each other. Would the subject need to know the victims?’

‘He did, but let’s try it without any knowledge,’ says Lendl.

I’m lost. No idea what they’re doing.

‘OK.’ The Skeleton sounds like he’s dictating a memo. ‘The subject is now aware we have two test subjects in the next room. Let’s put him to sleep and see what happens.’

Put me to sleep. How?

The prick in my arm is a giveaway.

Chapter 1

The murder weapon lies a few inches from my feet, hidden beneath a rusting Pepsi can and a blue plastic bag. The broken handle from an axe – thrown from a car three days ago.

The heat forces sweat from my armpits, and my blue shirt – a poor color choice – is stained. A stream flows down my back, soaking my boxers.

The dust is a constant companion. A storm blew through yesterday, leaving a coating on the world. My sunglasses help a little.

Four a.m. Lifeless. Stained cinder-block canyons. This is no place to be caught unawares.

Footsteps. My antennae pops. I size up the approaching man. He's dressed in a traditional Dish-dash-ou. His Shumagg, the white headscarf of the summer months, shadows his face. He shuffles in ill-fitting sandals.

I touch the bulge under my lightweight jacket, feeling the weight of the gun.

The grip is cool but too small. A P99 Rad – a Polish copy of a Walther. At one time it had interchangeable grips. This one came from the back shop of a local merchant apologetic that he didn't have the original packaging and all the optional extras.

The old man pads along the road, head down. I eyeball the handleless, sheet metal door my employer walked through an hour ago. It's sealed tight.

My fingers curl around the top of the gun's slide. I pull it back until the click tells me the weapon is cocked.

I hope it works. I didn't have time to check it over.

The old man stops. Ten yards away. The smell of baking drifts over. Iraqi flat bread – I've grown used to the smell over the last few days.

I take a quarter step sideways to give me a better bead on the target.

He lifts his head and stares at me through cheap Foster Grant sunglasses. I can't see his eyes and he can't see mine. Not good. Alarm bells are ringing in my head. I focus on his hands, which are thrust inside the Dish-dash-ou. He walks towards me and stops a few feet away.

'Masa il Khee,' he says – not the usual formal greeting I have come to expect.

I hesitate while I try to remember the appropriate reply. 'Masa il Noor.'

'Kayf Halak?'

How am I?

I root around again for an answer and come up with 'Qwayysa.'

He tilts his head to one side, as if I've said something wrong, and laughs. 'You mean Qwayyis?' His English is clipped.

'Do I?'

'But of course. *Qwayysa* would be the response were I a woman.'

'Sorry.'

I take a step back. The old man has closed in on me during the exchange. The smell of bread is joined by a sour tang. It's either him or me and I don't recognize the scent.

He coughs. 'You are new to Basra?'

I have a job to do. Any distraction is one too many. 'I'm waiting for someone.'

'What? In this place? My friend, this is not somewhere that you wish to be meeting people.'

He smiles, teeth pure Billy Bob. 'I am only here myself because this is the quickest way to get home. I worked late tonight and am looking forward to some food and half an hour of CNN. Do you like CNN?'

Say nothing. Usually a good way to lay a hint on someone, but it doesn't work on this occasion.

'I like CNN,' he keeps talking. 'My wife does not. She prefers *Extreme Makeover*. That makes me smile. I think she wants the man in the program to come to our house. She likes the houses she sees in MTV's *Cribs*. I like them too but I am not a pop star – although I can sing a little. Would you like to hear?'

I scan the road and the buildings. He takes this as a no. 'That is probably a good thing. You are American are you not?'

'Look...'

'Ahmed. My name is Ahmed.'

'I'm busy. Could we take a rain check?'

'Rain. Ah, we get a lot of rain here in the winter. Very little in the summer. It has not rained in two months but the waterway keeps the crops supplied. Have you seen our waterway? Impressive, isn't it?'

I back away from him. Trying to keep the smell at a manageable distance. He follows. Behind him the metal door opens.

'McIntyre.' My employer appears. A small man. Small-minded with it. I have instructions to guard him but he told me to stay put while he went inside.

'McIntyre, get the car.' He throws a bunch of keys onto the road and vanishes. I walk over to retrieve them from the dirt.

'Mr Taylor is demanding?'

I spin round as the local speaks.

The old man is picking his nose. 'A member of your government is he not?'

I'm standing halfway between the door and the old man, the keys warm and sticky in my hand.

He takes a step forward. 'Is he your employer?'

I pocket the keys, check the alley once more and walk up to him. 'Will you just fuck off?'

His hands whip out from under his clothes. I see the dull

glint of metal as he leaps towards me. I jump to the side but he twists in mid-air.

Metal connects with my skull.