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opening extract from

The Devil's Breath

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1

The killer, like many assassins, came in the night.

The distant, echoing boom of gunfire and the lazy but deadly arc of machine guns' tracer rounds seeking out their target across the windswept countryside would help hide his presence. And tonight would be one of his easiest assignments. His victim was a fifteen-year-old boy, so he was in no doubt as to the success of his night's work.

He checked his watch. His timing was good. He was in position. First choice: make it look like an accident – a broken neck. Second choice: a shot to the head and dispose of the body. It made no difference to him. The wind had veered from the east to the north – there was a colder bite to it and he thought of the soldiers lying out there on the waterlogged ground. They would not have slept for days and, with almost constant gunfire and the demands of patrolling, exhaustion and the cold would have eaten into them. Not him, though; his zipped roll-neck was mohair and his topcoat a padded Timberland (no external Gore-Tex to make any rustling sound) and his Rockport boots were waterproof. It was good kit that kept his muscles warm and ready to move in that split second when speed and agility were needed. The killer's

random thoughts eased away the remaining few minutes until his target would appear.

The steady chattering of the soldiers' machine guns, a couple of kilometres away, was a comfort to him, the staccato rhythm like music to his ears. The ground-sucking crump of mortar fire and the thud of distant artillery blended in his senses. Some of his happiest days as a soldier had been spent killing, but nowadays he offered a more personal service in his lucrative trade of murder. He was being paid impressive money for this job – so, whoever this kid was, someone badly wanted him dead. He checked his watch again, and then eased a 9-mm semi-automatic pistol from his waistband – better to have it ready.

Out in the darkness, a few minutes away from where the killer waited, fifteen-year-old Max Gordon jogged along the thin strip of tarmac. His dad had been right in sending him to school here; these past three years had built up his strength and agility, and he'd decided to enter for one of the junior triathlon contests: extreme sports were the real test of nerve and skill. Next year there would be a Junior X-treme Competition in the French Pyrenees and Max wanted to compete in the downhill mountain-bike race, snowboarding and wildwater kayaking – every one a big adrenalin rush. He knew it was ambitious, but he had the stamina and physical strength now. These extra late-night training runs were paying off. Although it was nearly pitch black, especially when the North Atlantic weather fronts roared in from the coast, there was always enough ambient light to see the tarmac ribbon guiding him around the dinosaur-like boulders.

His breathing settled as he locked into a perfect pace. Across the landscape firepower criss-crossed the night. Explosions were much further away and parachute flares jigged ineffectively in the sky as the buffeting wind swept them away. But he was safe where he was. The commandos and paratroopers were in a designated training area and were no threat to him here. Another four kilometres on the loop back and he'd turn for home, have a hot shower and then bed.

Then he heard a sound that didn't belong. Instincts focused his senses. A soft metallic click – about twenty metres ahead. There was a curved bowl worn away into the hillside, probably made by animals seeking shelter over the years, and that's where the noise had come from. Max knew there shouldn't be any soldiers about here and caution slowed his pace. The wind had shifted slightly, to dead ahead, and that was why he had heard the noise. Like a car door being pressed gently closed. Or an automatic pistol being cocked. He knew that sound well enough.

In less time than it took to think, he veered off the road and into the gorse, putting on a turn of speed and feeling the needle-sharp foliage scratching his legs. Just as he glanced back, a shadow moved from behind a sheltering boulder and then disappeared again. Whoever was out there knew what he was doing, and there was no doubt in Max's mind that the shadow was after him.

He pounded across the dangerously uneven ground, risking a twisted or broken ankle. A fall would put him at the mercy of whoever was chasing him, but he had no choice – he needed to put distance between himself and his pursuer. Arms

pumping, eyes streaming with tears from the cold, he glanced around and saw the blurred shadow coming at an angle towards him, but it looked as though the man's bulky clothing was slowing him down. Max was heading straight into the military danger zone – the terrifying crackle of gunfire ahead of him was louder than he'd ever heard it before and the lethal stream of bullets scythed across the sky; he ducked instinctively from the ripped air above his head.

Another quick look over his shoulder told him that the shadow had gone, but then Max lost his footing. Stumbling, he fell; his arm scraped granite and flint, and the raw pain made him yelp. He rolled and scrambled to his feet again – but now in almost complete darkness. The machine-gun firing had stopped; the artillery and mortars had fallen silent. He was running into a black void where the low, ground-hugging fug of smoke stung his eyes and the acrid taste of cordite burned the back of his throat. It was like the aftermath of a massive fireworks display – except these fireworks could rip you apart. He realized, too late, that he'd underestimated the shadow pursuing him. He thought he could outrun him but the man had cut behind him, keeping himself out of sight, and Max could still hear the thump of his feet, getting closer now. Desperation powered him on, his feet came free of the gorse and found a scratch of track through the bracken. Sucking in as much air as his lungs could bear, he ran blindly onwards. The whiplash of a bullet cracked past his ear, followed almost immediately by the sound of the gunshot from behind him. No doubt now – his pursuer was out to kill. Max felt his legs give a little, but that was the ground falling away into a dip. And

the man behind him was getting closer, homing right in on his target like a heat-seeking missile.

Max ducked and weaved and then he almost cried out in fright as the night sky exploded. A criss-cross of tracer tore low across the sky, and a part of his brain told him that these were fixed-position machine guns, sweeping arcs of fire. Thousands of rounds a minute were perforating the darkness, less than a metre above his head. He was in what the soldiers called 'dead ground', a belly dip in the earth where bullets couldn't reach him, only now the ground was rising again.

Thoughts raced through his mind. Run? Fall? Crawl? Too late. He had to make a run for it. As he reached the crest he felt a powerful thud into his back as the killer tackled him, and the weight carried him, face down, into the gorse and bog. Max squirmed and fought until he'd twisted his body under the man, who then sat on his chest, pinning Max's arms with his knees. The pain bit into his biceps but he couldn't buck the man off.

The dull glint of the pistol nestled next to his face reflected the crimson gun flashes and explosions around them. The assassin was catching his breath; his eyes stayed firmly on Max's face. Cold, relentless eyes. Max knew in that instant that the man had no feelings, so nothing he could say would stop him. More than anything else, the killer was irritated. He had a job to do and this kid had taken him by surprise. The boy was kicking and bucking, and he was stronger than the man had thought, but he had him pinned. He put the pistol on the ground next to the boy's face so there was no chance of him reaching it. He'd break his neck, that'd save him the bother of disposing of

the body. A bad fall against these rocks would look like an accident.

Max was gagging, losing consciousness as the man's hand palmed his face sideways into the stench of the bogland sludge. Lights were flickering in his head – explosions of pain – but he didn't know whether it was him dying or the army's firepower above him. The killer held Max's head with both hands, ready to twist and snap his neck.

And then suddenly it felt as if a tremendous gust of wind swept the man from Max's chest. It whipped him away, but, as it did, something splattered across Max's face. It wasn't the cold sting of rain, it was warm – the man's blood. Sitting on Max's chest he'd pushed himself above the skyline and exposed himself to the machine-gun fire. One round in three was red tracer, and there was a lot of red tracer tonight. It smashed the killer's body, pulverizing bone and muscle, the rounds burning his clothing.

For a moment Max was numb. This was a surreal glimpse into hell. He got to his knees, felt for his throat and gulped in air, tasting the dull, metallic stench of blood. He had to get out of here. The noise was deafening now. He gazed, mesmerized, across the black void in front of him, like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a car, unable to move, watching as the red fingers of death swung back towards him.

A shape loomed out of the darkness and what felt like a lorry smashing into his chest knocked all the wind out of him as his back thumped into the ground. Barely conscious, he was aware of fleeting images: the feel of the rough material of a soldier's camouflage jacket, the dim sight of his white-

edged eyes in a face streaked with camouflage cream beneath his helmet, and the far-off sound of his voice yelling 'Cease fire! CEASE FIRE!'

Max sank into a black, silent, bottomless pool.

2

Despite its name, Dartmoor High wasn't a normal secondary school. It sat above the snowline on the northern edge of Dartmoor National Park, built into the rock face like a small, medieval fortress. Nestled into the ancient granite of Wolf's Head Tor, it was believed to be the site of an outpost of Rome's XX Legion when they fought for and secured ancient Britain.

The Victorians originally built Dartmoor High as a prison for the criminally insane, believing that society would be better off if the prisoners were locked away in an isolated spot. After a few terrifying nights spent alone with the inmates in such a bleak place, where one's imagination turned the wind's howl into an evil, supernatural moan, even hardened warders refused to serve there. Eventually the inmates were institutionalized in slightly more humane conditions elsewhere.

After a chequered history, it finally became a private school that concentrated on vigorous physical pursuits and no-nonsense education.

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A hundred years later it was still a boys-only school. Some of the former pupils had gone on to become explorers, soldiers, pilots, pioneering doctors, MI6 officers and successful businessmen; there was even a well-known rock-star who had studied there. They all benefited from the self-reliance that Dartmoor High gave them. Pupils came there from all over the world, and it was now regarded as an exclusive school, catering for twelve- to sixteen-year-olds. Although it seemed to have a fearsome reputation that scared a lot of the new entrants, they soon found the staff to be firm and fair, and they discovered the excitement that this kind of adventure-training school offered. The emphasis was on the boys themselves proving that they were cut out for it. If they weren't, they could always go to other schools. Once they'd adapted to their new surroundings, most would rather stay at Dartmoor High, despite the howling wind, the blistering cold winters and its close proximity to one of the military's biggest training areas, than go anywhere else.

But being hunted down and killed was not on the curriculum.

Max's cuts and bruises were treated by Matron. It may have been a boys-only school but the headmaster recognized the need for some kind of female role-model, so there were a couple of women on the staff. Right now, Max wished his mother was around to give him a hug. Tears stung his eyes but he tried to be brave and pretend it was caused by the antiseptic Matron was putting on his arm. Matron murmured a few comforting words about there being no shame in crying, and that no one would know. Max didn't care about anyone

knowing, he had cried for ages when his mum died, four years ago, and he couldn't help some tears now, but once he put it in perspective and took some deep breaths to calm himself down, he felt better. He was alive. Marks – ten out of ten.

Once Max had been checked by the school's on-call doctor and had given his statement to the police, he learned that it was a paratrooper who'd saved his life by hurling him to the ground out of the way of the machine-gun fire that had killed the assassin. The army had been in the training area for two weeks on a live firing exercise, and by chance the eagle-eyed soldier saw Max being chased and, without time to stop the firing, hurled himself at the dazed boy, saving his life.

Everything else was a mystery. 'I've spoken to the police, Max; they don't know who the dead man is. Not yet, anyway,' Mr Jackson, the school principal, told him. Fergus Jackson didn't have the look of a traditional school headmaster. He seemed to live permanently in corduroy trousers, hiking boots and a woollen round-neck sweater. Max sipped the hot chocolate someone had given him as they'd moved through to Jackson's study, a big room with a blazing fire in a massive granite fireplace. Multi-coloured rugs cushioned the slate floor and well-worn, creaky leather chairs and sofas were arranged around the fire.

Mr Peterson, Max's housemaster, was also in the room, looking more worried than usual. His appearance was that of a rather ineffectual bookkeeper. He had floppy hair and wore spectacles, and he always seemed to be deep in abstracted thought. This appearance was deceptive: he'd led a vigorous life, climbing the world's highest mountain peaks in between

teaching boys geography and white-water canoeing.

The attack remained a mystery. There was no obvious reason for anyone to try to kill Max. 'Do you think it could have been a random attack?' Max asked. 'Y'know, some kind of nutter who crawls out from under a stone whenever he feels the urge?'

'From what you've said, it seems he was determined from the start to kill you. Otherwise, once you'd run he could have simply got himself out of there and disappeared into the night,' Jackson answered.

'How did you realize it was an ambush?' Mr Peterson said.

Max recalled when he'd heard the sound of an automatic pistol being cocked, a moment indelibly impressed on his memory.

Every school holiday, the boys could stay on at school and take part in various activities, such as an expedition to climb Ben Nevis, a canoe trip, or even bear watching in Canada; but if they were really desperate they went home to their parents. It was a school rule that families had to be seen at least once a year, otherwise Mr Jackson and the staff would never have a breather. Max chose to see his dad every time. He loved it. He always had. Tom Gordon was a . . . well, Max wasn't a hundred per cent certain what his dad was, to tell the truth, but it was something along the lines of a hydrologist-geologist-archaeologist, who travelled around the world. He found underground wells in the deserts and helped Third World villagers get a clean supply of water; he uncovered hidden cities and identified lost civilizations; he scuba-dived off exotic ocean reefs, searching for lost wrecks. No wonder

his dad urged him to go to Dartmoor High – he wanted his son to be as resilient and capable as he was. Life should be an adventure, he always told Max, but you had to be equipped to go on the journey. It was brains as well as physical fitness that were needed.

It had been eighteen months ago when Max had heard the oily slide and click of metal against metal as his dad's hands cocked a 9-mm Browning pistol. Max had never been that scared before or had ever seen that look in his father's eye. It chilled him. It made him feel that the smiling, warm, loving father he'd always cherished had a cold place in his heart that was as deep as glacier ice.

For the summer holidays that year he'd joined his father on a dhow from Zanzibar, sailing down the east coast of Africa. His dad was taking a break from his work, showing Max a spectacular reef that teemed with sharks. Beneath the calm, gentle swell of the Indian Ocean the sea was thick with them. However, on the eighth day, pirates had roared up alongside them in a rigid raider boat, its high-powered outboard engines enabling it to catch up easily with the lumbering dhow. The modern-day cut-throats had a good intelligence network, gathering the gossip around the harbours as to who was sailing where. They were known to attack yachts and kill their crews. The dhow's crew was terrified by the half dozen men, each brandishing an AK47, that virtually indestructible workhorse of the gun world. Max's dad had ducked down into the cabin and came back a few moments later, just as the first of the pirates clambered aboard, his gold-capped teeth glinting as he laughed at the terrified crew. Max's dad had quickly stepped forward,

grabbed the man's neck with his left hand and squeezed a pressure point. The pirate was immobilized, his gun clattering to the deck; at the same time Tom Gordon fired twice into the pirates' boat's fuel tanks – the shock wave from the tremendous explosion made Max reel. The pirates bailed out and Max's dad pushed the terrified captive pirate over the side. It had all happened in a matter of seconds. Tom Gordon shouted a command in Arabic and the dhow swung away, leaving the screaming pirates clambering on to what was left of their boat.

'Dad! What about the sharks?' Max finally managed to choke out.

'They should have thought of that before they set out to murder innocent people,' his dad replied, still grim-faced but, unlike everyone else, unshaken by the incident. Then he'd smiled, and he was the same old dad Max loved, though now he realized that there was a lot more to his father than he had ever known. 'They'll have a transponder linked to their mates back on shore, but by the time they get here we'll be long gone and out of range. They can cling to the wreckage until then.'

The memory lingered a moment longer, before Max realized that Mr Peterson and Mr Jackson were still waiting for him to answer the question.

'Oh . . . sorry. I heard the man who tried to kill me cock the weapon; it was something I'd seen and heard before when I was with my dad.'

Jackson and Peterson looked uneasily at each other for a moment.

'Max,' said Jackson a little hesitantly, 'we've tried to contact your father, but . . . well, we're not sure where he is.'

'He could be anywhere,' Max said. 'Maybe you should try the organization he works for.'

Jackson paused, trying to decide whether he should tell Max what he knew. It was Peterson who broke the silence. 'We have. It seems . . . he's gone missing.' Max barely noticed Jackson's look of disapproval at his geography teacher's lack of tact. 'Best you should know,' Peterson said.

Gone missing. That had an ominous ring to it. Under any other circumstances Max wouldn't have been too alarmed – his father was often out of radio or mobile phone range. But now? 'It's been more than a week since he made contact with anyone,' Jackson said.

Max nodded, thoughts flooding his mind as he tried to think clearly and picture what might have happened to his dad. 'Where was he?'

'Namibia.'

Diamond country. Namibia's coast ran for thousands of kilometres along the south Atlantic. Vast tracts of land were off-limits because there were diamonds waiting to be picked up. Max's dad had told him about Namibia before. A huge triangle of a country, bigger than France and the UK put together. Away from its mist-shrouded coast was an arid, brain-sizzling desert and scrubland. The Okavango swamps with their crocodiles lay to the east in Botswana, Angola was north, beyond the Kunene River, and South Africa lay to the south. There was a lot of game: lions, elephant . . . but what else? Max's brain couldn't put it all together. His dad must have been injured, or worse. If an assassin had come in the night for Max, whoever wanted him dead must have captured or killed his father first. Why?

Jackson's voice interrupted his thoughts. 'Naturally, if this wasn't a random attack on you, then we have to assume there's a connection.' Max nodded. What would Dad want him to do? 'In the circumstances, Max,' Jackson went on, 'we think we should go to the vault.'

The vault. That was where you heard voices of the dead. Max had known a couple of boys whose parents had died – they'd been taken down to the vault. Every pupil had his own key, kept in Jackson's safe, which unlocked a deposit box in the underground chambers of Dartmoor High. The vault was fireproof, bombproof, everything-proof, because it was cut into the granite hills on which the school was built. When a parent died, it was a legal requirement that a guardian be nominated to look after the boy, and that information was in each boy's deposit box. Sometimes there were personal letters, mementoes, and usually a legal document that gave a lawyer's name for his inheritance – if there was one. It was also a condition of attendance at Dartmoor High that each parent left a digital recording for their child. Jackson believed that if tragedy struck, the comforting voice of a parent was just about all a boy had left to help him cope with the trauma.

Voices from the dead. Going to the vault was so final.

Matron tapped on the door; Jackson nodded for her to come in. 'We thought we'd do that tomorrow, Max,' Jackson said.

Matron was carrying a glass of water and a pill holder. 'The doctor reckoned you should get a proper night's sleep. Help you deal with things.' Matron offered the sleeping pill to Max. 'It's only a mild sedative. OK?' Jackson assured him.

Max nodded, took the pill and a gulp of water and gave a reassuring smile to Jackson, Peterson and Matron.

'Good boy,' Matron said.

'We don't want to cause any alarm, Max, so, as far as anyone else is concerned, you strayed into the Danger Zone and took a tumble. Are you all right with that?'

Max nodded.

The moment he was outside the study, Max spat the tablet out. He'd tucked it under his tongue and pretended to swallow it. It wasn't that he didn't trust anyone; he just wanted to keep a clear head and think this through. That's what his dad would want him to do. That's why he'd sent him to this school in the first place.

Max's room was big enough for a single bed, a small table used as a desk, a chair, a bookcase, a trunk for personal bits and pieces, and a single wardrobe. It may originally have been built as a prison cell, but now it offered enough space to have the essentials – but no luxuries, not even a television, though there was one in each House's common room. There were four Houses at Dartmoor High: Eagle, which Max belonged to; Wolf, Otter and Badger.

Max lay on his bed. He realized he might be facing the starkest moment of his life. If his dad had been killed, he was an orphan. No, he just didn't believe that. His father was too resourceful, but no sooner had this positive thought arrived than another one chipped in. Nobody is immortal and if they, whoever they were, had killed his dad then they must have taken him by surprise. Ambushed him. As they had tried to do with Max.