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Black Mail

Written by Bill Daly

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BLACK MAIL

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PROLOGUE

September 1980

Billy McAteer, a private in the British army, was on his first tour of active duty in Northern Ireland when the bomb exploded in the crowded pub. Off-duty, perched on a high stool and chatting to his mates when the blast erupted from behind the bar's floor-to-ceiling plate glass mirror, his sixteen stones plucked from the stool and flung like a rag doll across the room, pursued by a million shards of mirror.

His body slammed into the far wall, the fragments of lancing glass ripping away his ear, exploding his left eyeball, slicing the flesh from his cheekbone and ripping his nostrils to shreds.

It took several hours on the operating table to rebuild his features, followed by months of plastic surgery to graft skin from his buttocks to his face.

CHAPTER 1

Wednesday 15 December

A stiff northerly, whipping off the Clyde, was swirling the sleet past the shimmering floodlights and driving it down on Ibrox stadium. A mid-week, early evening kick-off to suit the television schedules, but still the ground was heaving.

The biting wind all but drowned out the lone drunken voice emanating from the back of the North Stand, but Billy McAteer mouthed the words along with him, a wry smile on his lips as he recalled the old days when the Copland Road end would lift the roof off the stadium throughout every match as they went through their anti-Papist repertoire.

Pausing for breath, the singer launched himself into:

It's old but it is beautiful.
And its colours they are fine

McAteer grinned. 'The Sash' was his favourite. When he heard reproachful muttering breaking out behind him he scrambled to his feet and spun round. 'Gaun yersel, pal,' he shouted in the general direction of the unknown singer. 'Gie it fuckin' laldy!' He glared along the row of disapproving faces, all of them avoiding

eye contact. 'Anybody got a problem wi' the man singin'?' he demanded. The muttering quickly died away.

It was worn at Derry, Aughrim,
Eniskillen and the Boyne.

McAteer joined in, shouting out the words, the left side of his face glowing pink with the blood pulsing through his veins, just beneath the surface of the blotched tissue.

My father wore it as a youth,
In bygone days of yore.

Turning back to the game McAteer raised his face to the black heavens, allowing the stinging sleet whipping under the overhang of the stand roof to pour down his scarred forehead and seep into his vacant eye socket.

And on the Twelfth I love to wear
The sash my father wore.

McAteer stamped his feet in time as a long, shrill blast on the referee's whistle signalled the end of the match, the cue for all the Rangers supporters in the packed stadium to rise to their feet, red white and blue scarves stretched taut above their heads, bodies swaying. McAteer mimed playing the flute as he sneered in the general direction of the despondent Celtic fans trudging towards the exits.

Draping his scarf around his shoulders McAteer stiffened his spine and stood tall, his right arm aloft, the Red Hand of Ulster

tattoo on the back of his clenched fist proclaiming its challenge to the world.

'Ten days to go – and would you look at them?' Charlie Anderson rubbed at the grubby storeroom window with the back of his glove, serving only to smear grime around the cracked pane.

'Sir?' Detective Sergeant Tony O'Sullivan glanced up from rummaging in his sports bag.

'I said, would you look at them, Tony? There's nothing in this world worse than frozen toes squelching inside soggy socks.' Twisting his back, Charlie massaged the base of his spine with both hands as he peered down from the fourth-floor window, through a carpet of multi-coloured fairy lights, on the sea of heads bobbing along Argyle Street's pedestrian precinct. 'And these are the lucky ones. I've still got it all to face.'

O'Sullivan stared down on the sodden, weary procession trudging through the early evening gloom; countless numb fingers welded to the stretched handles of over-laden carrier bags. 'It's late-night opening tomorrow,' he offered as he tugged a pair of powerful binoculars from their carrying case and untangled the leather strap.

'You have got to be joking!' Charlie pursed his lips and blew hard into his gloved fists. 'I'm leaving it all till Rainday.' O'Sullivan's pale blue eyes squinted enquiringly in Charlie's direction. 'Family joke, Tony. Last week my grandson's teacher asked his class to come up with words that were more descriptive than those in current use. Jamie suggested changing "Sunday" to "Rainday".'

O'Sullivan's freckled features creased in a smile. 'I like it. Sunday – Rainday! Monday – Sleetday! Tuesday – Snowday! There's a ring to it. It could well catch on.'

Detective Chief Inspector Charlie Anderson pulled a handkerchief from his trouser pocket and used it to wipe the melting sleet from his head. Completely bald, apart from a few white wisps of hair at his temples and some desultory tufts clinging to the nape of his thick neck, he was well over six feet tall, heavily built and round faced – 'ba'-faced' in Glasgow parlance. As he pushed his handkerchief back into his pocket, his prominent stomach strained against his buttoned-up overcoat. 'Have you done your Christmas shopping yet?' Charlie asked.

'No one to buy for, sir.'

Charlie winced. 'Sorry! I forgot that you and Anne had –'

'No problem,' O'Sullivan said. 'I do need to stock up on the booze, though. I was hoping I might get off in time to get to Oddbins tonight,' he added, his raised eyebrows indicating a distinct lack of optimism on that score.

Draping the binoculars around his neck O'Sullivan gripped both handles of the sash window and tugged hard, but it refused to budge. He examined the painted-in frame, then took a long-handled screwdriver from his sports bag and used it to prise the window open, sending a cloud of faded-green paint flakes and splintered wood fluttering down towards the floor. A blast of freezing air invaded the cramped storeroom, along with Noddy Holder's strident voice proclaiming:

So here it is
Merry Christmas
Everybody's having fun

Charlie looked across at the two Salvation Army guitarists on the opposite pavement. A few minutes earlier they had been

attempting to tune up but had given up the unequal struggle and they now stood shivering, flexing their fingers and stamping their feet, waiting impatiently for Slade to run their course. As soon as the closing bars started to fade away they strummed a quick intro and launched themselves into a dirge-like rendition of 'Silent Night'.

O'Sullivan dropped down on one knee and balanced the binoculars on the window ledge to trawl the far pavement. Beyond the musicians, a drenched, kilted piper had given up all hope of keeping his instrument dry and was squatting on the kerb, puffing on a hand-rolled cigarette and swigging from a can of lager. A *Big Issue* seller with a weary, fixed smile was trying to drum up business in the middle of the precinct and, behind him, several small children had their noses pressed hard against Marks & Spencer's brightly lit windows. O'Sullivan continued panning left, stopping abruptly when a familiar profile, huddled in Marks & Spencer's doorway, came into view. 'Looks like the tip-off was kosher, sir,' he said, recognising Gerry Fraser's unshaven features. 'Our ageing hippie is propping up the wall.'

Fraser's blue trench coat was belted tightly round his waist, his long, grey hair pulled back into a ponytail and held in position by an elastic band. Through the powerful lenses O'Sullivan could see the folds of flesh hanging loose from Fraser's scrawny neck and he sharpened his focus on the spiky hairs protruding from the mole at the base of his nostrils.

Charlie stepped back from the window and whacked both arms around his shoulders in an attempt to get his circulation moving. 'What's he up to?' he demanded, his breath puffing out in a series of frosty clouds.

O'Sullivan tinkered constantly with the focus ring as he ran the binoculars up and down Fraser's body. 'He has a collection box of some kind.' He zoomed in close. 'Looks like Save the Children.' Easing down the sash window he took the binoculars from around his neck and wedged them between the window frame and the sill. Having checked the binoculars were still trained on Fraser he rammed his hands deep into the pockets of his leather jacket while continuing to stare through the sleet-splattered lenses.

'You wouldn't think it beyond their capabilities to come up with a heated stakeout,' Charlie grumbled.

'It could've been worse. Renton drew the short straw. He's out on the roof of W.H. Smith's.'

Charlie craned his neck to squint in the direction of the figure huddled behind the low parapet on the flat rooftop, two floors lower down and thirty yards further along the precinct. DC Colin Renton was easy to make out; his tartan flat cap never left his bald head in winter. He was crouched on one knee, scanning Argyle Street with his binoculars, but Charlie could see that the angle of Marks & Spencer's doorway was wrong for him. He wouldn't be able to see Fraser from where he was.

'The joys of a Glasgow winter!' Charlie sighed. 'Have you ever noticed how Glaswegians behave in this kind of weather?'

'I believe you might have mentioned it, sir.' O'Sullivan hid his grin behind the binoculars.

'You'd think umbrellas had never been invented.'

'Perhaps the Sally Bash have cornered the market?' O'Sullivan suggested.

'Silent night, holy night,
All is calm , all is bright

Charlie looked in the direction of the music. There were six uniformed figures on the far side of the precinct, the two guitarists having been joined by a trumpet player and three tambourine-waving vocalists, one male, two female, each with a hand-held microphone – their voices trilling from beneath a Heath Robinson structure of interlocked golf umbrellas. Charlie turned and stared in the direction of the Trongate. He shook his head; no one hurrying, no one even trying to huddle close to the buildings for shelter. Confirmation of the resignation bred into the Glaswegian psyche. The Almighty has ordained that they're on this earth to be pissed on, so that's how it has to be, even tilting their heads forward as if offering up their necks to some unseen celestial guillotine.

Sleep in heav–enly pe–ace,
Sle–ep in heavenly peace.

Charlie turned away from the window and strode up and down the cramped storeroom, his black brogues stomping on the cracked linoleum, his arms flailing like a beached walrus in distress. 'What's happening?' he demanded, stopping in his tracks and staring at the back of O'Sullivan's head.

'Not a lot. I've never seen a less enthusiastic flag seller in all my puff. Several people have gone up to him and they've virtually had to force their money into his can. The stingy wee bugger isn't even handing out stickers.'

Charlie took the walkie-talkie from O'Sullivan's sports bag and switched it on. 'Anderson to all units,' he barked. 'Gerry Fraser's been sighted in Marks & Spencer's doorway. Hold position and await further instructions.' Dropping the walkie-talkie back

into the bag, Charlie resumed his pacing to the opening bars of 'Good King Wenceslas'. 'Still nothing?'

'No, sir.' Charlie repeated the question every couple of minutes, getting the same answer each time. After the third time of asking O'Sullivan gave up responding.

'Still noth –'

'Hold on a minute!'

'What is it?' Charlie froze in mid-flap, arms fully extended.

'I think it's . . . Yes! It's Tosh McCulloch.'

'Bingo!' Charlie slapped his back hard, flinching as an arthritic spasm shot the length of his spine.

O'Sullivan pulled his hands from his pockets and his frozen fingers gripped the binoculars. As McCulloch approached the flag seller O'Sullivan zoomed in hard on Fraser's face and saw his cracked lips move. He panned out to a full body shot as the two men came together and he watched as McCulloch reached into his inside jacket pocket and produced a wad of banknotes which he started to thumb through under Fraser's nose. Counting off several notes, McCulloch's fist hovered over the extended collection box and then words were exchanged as he stuffed the money into the slot. Fraser peeled several Save the Children stickers from his pad and stuck them onto the collar of McCulloch's faded blue anorak before McCulloch scuttled off.

'What the hell's going on?' Charlie demanded.

O'Sullivan wrenched up the window frame to release the binoculars and scrambled to his feet.

'McCulloch stuffed a wad of notes into the collection box, but there was no handover.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'Shit!' Charlie slammed his fist into the palm of his hand. 'What happened then?'

'McCulloch buggered off.'

'In what direction?'

'Towards St Enoch's.'

'Give me those,' Charlie said, snatching the binoculars from O'Sullivan's grasp and lowering himself stiffly into position to train the glasses on Fraser.

'Should we nick them, sir?' O'Sullivan asked.

'On what charge?' Charlie growled. 'Excessive generosity to Save the Children? I doubt if that stingy wee bastard McCulloch has ever donated a penny to a charitable cause in his life. Now, all of a sudden, he's Santa fucking Claus!'

When Charlie stared through the binoculars he saw Fraser raise both arms high above his head. Swivelling the glasses in the direction Fraser was facing he came to a juddering halt when the familiar, liver-spotted features of Johnny Devlin filled the lenses. 'Well, what do you know? If it isn't his drinking pal.' Charlie switched quickly back to Fraser. 'They're using the old tick-tack. Who said spending my youth at Ayr races was a waste of time?' Charlie studied Fraser's flailing arms. 'Four hundred quid on number two, whatever the hell that might mean. He's repeating the same message.' Charlie swung the binoculars back to Devlin who was now tapping on the keypad of his mobile phone.

When a poor man came in sight,
Gathering winter fu–el

'It's a three-way routine.' Charlie had to shout to make himself heard above the screech of the tenor who was attempting the

descant to the detriment of the sopranos who could no longer hold the tune. 'A pound to a pinch of shit a handover's being authorised,' Charlie roared as he watched Devlin gabble into the mouthpiece. 'Tell the team to move in now, Tony! I want all three of them – as well as whoever's on the other end of that phone call.'

O'Sullivan grabbed the walkie-talkie from his sports bag and flicked it on as he raced towards the store room door. Taking the steep stairs two at a time, he barked out instructions.

'It's after half-past!' Jude Ramsay stood on the bottom step and shouted up the stairs to the study where her husband was gazing out of the bay window. 'Did you hear what I said?' she yelled in an attempt to make herself heard above the driving beat of the music.

'I heard you!' Simon continued staring out of the window, intrigued by the sight of a large black crow with its beak buried deep in the snow, tugging hard at some unseen morsel. 'More's the fucking pity,' he muttered under his breath.

'It's time you were getting ready.' Jude peered short-sightedly into the hall mirror to massage the excess blusher into her cheeks. Checking her hair, she fussily twisted a sculpted blonde strand into position against her high cheekbone. 'You know what Helen and Bjorn are like. They'll be here on the dot.'

Simon crossed to the desk to tweak down the volume of the CD player in his computer. 'I'm almost through. I just need to check my email.' He coughed harshly – a hacking smoker's cough that brought up a mouthful of phlegm. Fishing in his trouser pocket for a tissue he wiped it across his mouth as he slumped down on the swivel chair and swung round to face the screen. 'As soon as I've done that I'll get changed.'

'Don't take all day about it. And don't forget – it's DJs.'

'What!'

'Bjorn's hired one specially and Mike's coming in his dress kilt.'

'You can't be serious! There's no way Alison will ever get Norman into a monkey suit.'

'They won't be able to make it. Alison's just phoned. They're snowed in.'

'Why the hell do I have to dress up like a bloody penguin?' His words came wheezing out from between clenched teeth.

'Bjorn and Mike are making the effort for your birthday, for God's sake!' Jude shouted, peering into the mirror again and licking her fingertips to smooth down her plucked eyebrows. 'The least you can do is show willing.'

Simon cursed under his breath as he took an envelope from the top drawer of his desk and spilled the white powder onto a CD case. Using a credit card to divide the cocaine into two parallel lines, he took a ten-pound note from his wallet and rolled it into a tooter which he used to snort a line up each nostril. Inhaling deeply, he wiped the back of his hand back and forth across his nose. He licked his index finger and rolled it in the remaining powder dust to rub it hard into his gums. Reaching for the mouse, he clicked on the 'send and receive' icon. 'I don't see why I should have to spend my fortieth with your bloody sisters,' he muttered to himself, 'to say nothing of their mind-bendingly boring appendages. Can't decide what I'm looking forward to more – Bjorn's incomprehensible ramblings or Mike's hoary jokes. And who ever heard of dressing up in dinner suits for eating at home? Load of fucking nonsense!'

When the words 'Receiving message 1 of 6' appeared on the screen he reached down to the bottom drawer of the desk

and pulled out a fresh carton of Marlboro. Bursting open the cellophane wrapping he removed a packet and tapped out a cigarette as he prised his cigarette lighter from his jeans' pocket. The first five items of mail arrived quickly but the progress bar showed that the sixth message was downloading slowly. 'What pillock's spamming me now?' he muttered, drumming his nicotine-stained fingers on the mouse pad as he stared impatiently at the flickering screen. Getting to his feet he crossed to the window, but the crow had gone.

The snow, which had started falling before lunchtime in flakes the size of golf balls, had now turned to sleet. From the vantage point of Park Terrace he could see through the leafless branches of the trees on the opposite side of the road and across the deserted, white wasteland of Kelvingrove Park as far as the Glasgow Art Galleries where batteries of concealed floodlights had transformed the Victorian building into an enchanted castle with its phalanx of white turrets stretching up towards the lowering skies. His gaze swung left towards the Scottish Exhibition Centre on the north bank of the river, its striking armadillo profile smoothed away by the drifting snow that had almost filled in its ridges.

Glancing at his watch he strode along the corridor towards the master bedroom, unbuttoning his shirt and unbuckling his belt as he went. He flicked on the top light and stripped to his underwear, discarding his clothes in an untidy heap on the bed. His electric razor was lying on the bedside table, already plugged in. Picking it up he flicked it on and made a token gesture of skimming it over his cheeks and his stubbly chin. He ran his fingers along the row of hangers in the wardrobe until he came to his dinner suit and his dress shirt, still wrapped

in the dry-cleaner's polythene bag. He took a long lingering drag on his cigarette, inhaling deeply, before folding the half-smoked cigarette into the ashtray on top of the chest of drawers. Ripping the polythene cover from the hanger he slipped his arms through the shirt sleeves and buttoned the shirt one-handed while rummaging in the dressing table drawer for his clip-on bow tie. When he stepped into his dinner suit trousers he had to suck in his stomach in order to fasten the top button, the cheval mirror at the foot of the bed reflecting the folds of flesh bulging over the taut waistband. 'Flabby before you're even forty!' He sighed and slapped his stomach, then breathed in hard as he yanked up the zip. Selecting a pair of cufflinks from the jewellery tray on the dressing table he fumbled to thread the cufflinks through the awkward double cuffs. He pulled on his dinner jacket and shot the shirt cuffs through the sleeves. Checking his appearance in the mirror, he ran his tongue across his tobacco-stained teeth, then picked up a comb to smooth his thinning hair across the bald patch on the crown. Squinting again in the mirror, he flicked away the spots of dandruff from his shoulders.

'Get a move on, Simon!' Jude's anxious voice came echoing up the staircase. 'Helen and Bjorn will be here any minute.'

'Relax, for God's sake! I'm ready.'

When he returned to his study he saw that all six messages had now been received. He flopped down in front of the screen and scanned them : two copies of the same spam email offering the possibility of a penis enlargement that would change his life for ever; another peddling cut-price Rolex watches; a cancellation of a rendezvous next week from one of his bridge partners; a confirmation from his bank concerning the price of

the shares he'd sold that afternoon and a message from someone he didn't recognise – 'liam.black@hotmail.com'.

His brow creased as he read the text:

> I thought you might appreciate a wee preview, Simon. If you'd like to see the whole video I've got the full, two-hour, unexpurgated version. I'll call you on your mobile at ten o'clock tomorrow morning. I'm sure we'll be able to come to an amicable arrangement.

Narrowing his eyes he slid the mouse across to click on the attachment, then his jaw went slack as a photograph gradually filled the screen. He felt his legs go weak and he grabbed hold of the arms of the chair for support. Globules of sweat broke out on his forehead. Spluttering, he reached for the packet of cigarettes on his desk and, as he fumbled to light up, the Westminster chimes rang out downstairs.