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Opening Extract from...

The Last Witness

Written by Denzil Meyrick

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THE LAST WITNESS

A D.C.I. Daley Thriller

Denzil Meyrick

Polygon

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my wife Fiona's parents, Norman and Illeene MacLeod, both of whom, sadly, died before its completion.

‘And if you gaze for long into an abyss,
the abyss gazes also into you . . .’

Friedrich Nietzsche

Prologue

He lay back on the trolley as though it was a poolside lounger, cushioned from the motion of the ambulance as it rattled and bumped its way through the Glasgow traffic.

He was aware of the young prison officer, manacled to him by a sturdy pair of handcuffs, stealing furtive looks in his direction. The older officer sitting near the door of the vehicle was chatting to a pretty nurse, his bluff demeanour at odds with her worried face. The woman's nervous laugh at the lame jokes she was forced to listen to bore witness to the fact that she was well outside her comfort zone.

As the journey continued, his young guard offered him a stick of chewing gum, which he refused with an expressionless shake of the head. The older officer stopped what he was saying as the nurse searched in her bag for something – no doubt in order to save herself from further exposure to his coarse humour.

Outside the blackened windows of the vehicle a horn sounded – then another. There was a screeching of brakes, the sounds of a collision. He was flung against his keeper as the ambulance swerved and came to a sudden stop.

There was a scream, and he heard shots being fired. At his feet, the nurse was trying to pick herself off the floor, blood

gushing from her nose. The older prison officer was talking hurriedly into a radio as his colleague called out to him in panic, tugging at the rigid handcuffs that bound him tight to his captive.

There was a bang – a deep thud almost too low to hear – as the rear doors of the ambulance splintered inwards in a metallic clash of plastic and steel. He saw a shard of metal imbed itself in the face of the nurse. She looked bewildered, her whole body shaking, as she lifted a trembling hand to her cheek.

Then they appeared: two men squeezing through the ragged hole created by the explosion. Both in black, their faces were masked with balaclavas, and automatic weapons were slung over their shoulders with black webbing straps.

He smiled.

The older prison officer was forcing himself into a corner of the vehicle as though willing himself through its sides and out into the street. One of the gunmen stood over him and released a rapid burst of fire at point-blank range.

He stared at the sliver of grey-haired scalp that now slipped down the darkened window of the ambulance.

The nurse retched at the feet of the other gunman, who kicked her mercilessly in the head. The woman gasped and choked, spitting blood and teeth onto the ambulance floor.

The young officer, still manacled to him, face smeared with his colleague's blood and gore, stared down at her. The first gunman pushed his gun into his stomach and pulled the trigger.

For a split second he thought his arm was going to be pulled from its socket as the handcuffs were jerked by the death throes of his captor.

'Get me out of here!' He could barely hear his own voice; whether his hearing had been affected by panic or his proximity to the gunshots in the confined space, he didn't know.

The first gunman stood over him, then with one hand pulled the balaclava up to reveal most of his face. His smile was strangely familiar, yet entirely foreign.

A terrible fear gripped his heart a split second before his head was blown apart.

1

Five years later, Melbourne, Australia

Wet days in Melbourne were not unusual, but this one, he thought, was particularly miserable.

He looked out over his lush garden as heavy drops of rain splattered onto the jacaranda trees. His grandchildren's toys were scattered on the neat lawn; a riot of dolls' prams, small bicycles and balls of varying size and shape. A climbing frame stood sentinel by a mammoth trampoline, which was in turn faced by a set of swings.

For a moment he recalled his own childhood. The playground in Paisley's Gallowhill was the haunt of bored teenagers drinking tonic wine, drug dealers and the occasional prostitute. The ground was habitually littered with used syringes, broken glass and dog faeces. He shuddered.

Soon the rain would be gone and the warm sun would bring the children of Ringwood East back out to play. That's how the weather went in this country, though the dark clouds looked threatening at the moment. The suburb was really a small distinct town to the east of the city, a magnet for those with ambition and aspiration. With its good schools, safe surroundings and green open spaces, children

could be children and adults could seek refuge from an uncertain, dangerous world in their generously proportioned air-conditioned homes, pools and basement gymnasia.

He supposed that at forty-four he was young to have three grandchildren, but he didn't regret it. His daughter – like himself – had been an early starter in the race to parenthood, becoming a proud mother of two before she was out of her teens. His wife had managed to persuade her to join them in Australia when her arsehole of a boyfriend, Andy Lafferty, himself a foot soldier in the Machie clan, had taken up with another poor, impressionable soul, leaving her literally high and dry in a dingy Glasgow multi-storey. It had been a conversation that should not have taken place; however, it had, and the end result pleased him.

In the two years since her arrival, she had fallen in love, got married and had another kid. Her husband was a young civil engineer, neat, sober and kind; a man with prospects, who didn't mind taking the place of a father who lived thousands of miles away. This, of course, assuming he was still alive. Those involved in the seedy side of life in Scotland's largest city often had short, meaningless existences – their bodies ruined by drink, drugs, or both – at the mercy of the deprivation and violence that stalked those on the margins of society.

No great loss.

That could have been his life. He had been sucked into the world of crime when he was still at school. It started with a bit of shoplifting in Woolies and the wee sweetie shop down the road, and was followed by opportunist theft from cars, pockets or broken windows. Dealing and extortion followed, by which time he was part of a sophisticated, organised crime family, built along the lines of a terrorist cell structure to

protect those at the top from the police, as well as from those at the bottom. He'd often found himself wondering if the guy in the expensive suit driving the German sports car was the fabled Mr Big to whom they all owed their allegiance, or just another wanker working for a bank. But he hadn't really cared; he had plenty of cash, more than most of the poor sods he had been at school with, even the clever ones. He had that imperceptible quality too, something that couldn't be bought and that brought him fear and respect. He could walk down the street confident in the knowledge that everybody knew his name and what he was capable of. As he rose through the ranks, the names and faces that populated the Faustian inner sanctum became clearer. Soon, he became one of them.

And now? Well, now he was sure that, apart from his family, none of the ten thousand or so citizens of Ringwood East had the slightest idea who he was. That was the way he liked it. A change of identity had helped, but, hey, that was surely the least a grateful nation could have done. The information he had given to the police had seen the conviction of over fifty hardened criminals; some of them the most dangerous men in Europe.

Now he had all of this – the beautiful garden, the pool, the gym, a small business to keep the dosh rolling in – everything he could want. Happy families: apart from, of course, the one left behind in the decaying hinterland of Glasgow.

He awoke on his recliner with a dry mouth and thick head just after four p.m. He must have dozed off. His wife would be home soon, anxious to wash the office off with a dip in the pool and a gin and tonic – a residue of the UK she hadn't managed to shed.

Marna – he could only think of her by that name – dealt with the business. When necessary, he would intervene in any difficult negotiations, or should one of the many delivery drivers they employed become restive. After a contretemps with a rough Queenslander, most of the workers soon learned that their Scottish boss was not to be messed with; visits to their former colleague as he languished in hospital had served as a blunt reminder. As with everything though, there would always be some Jack the Lad ready to try his luck. It was the way of the world, he supposed.

He ambled over to the drinks cabinet, removing the gin for Marna and the Ardbeg for himself. Leaving her bottle on the side, he held his glass under the integrated ice dispenser and, yawning as the cubes clunked into the squat tumbler, popped the cork of the whisky bottle and poured himself a gentleman's measure. He held the single malt to his nose, breathing in the spirit's distinctive iodine aroma.

Here's tae ye, Bonnie Scotland. Stick it up yer arse.

He raised his glass and smiled at the toast that had become a daily mantra. Outside, the clouds were growing darker; it looked like Marna would have to forego her swim and find solace solely in the gin, or perhaps a workout in the basement gym. He sighed and gulped down another mouthful of the whisky at the same moment as the doorbell rang.

'Mair shit fae Amazon,' he muttered, looking at the outline of the tall figure behind the glass-panelled front door. He had to fiddle with the chain and double locks before he was able to turn the large brass handle and swing the door open.

'Good tae see yer keepin' yer door locked, Gerald.'

The whisky glass dropped from his hand and onto the thick carpet as he tried to close the door. His visitor, though, was faster, and shouldered his way into the hall, knocking him against the wall.

The pain of the first strike of the machete on his unprotected skull sent flashes through his eyes, his left arm into convulsions, and weakened his knees. The second strike was less painful, his senses dulling as he slid down the wall of his hallway. After the third, he neither thought nor felt any more.

Calmly, his attacker dropped the murder weapon and, leaving the front door open and the dead man in full view of any passing neighbour, bounded down the front steps and along the path to his parked 4x4.

He opened the boot. Inside, Marna lay on her side, trussed in a kneeling position with her wrists tied to her ankles behind her back. The thick duct tape plastered over her mouth prevented her from crying out, allowing only the quietest whimper. Tears flowed from her wide, terrified eyes, mascara running into the mucus from her nose. Roughly, he pulled on the ropes that bound her, letting her fall from the car onto the road. Her scream of pain sounded only faintly behind the plastic tape. The woman's head throbbed and her vision blurred. She could feel the rain on her skin; for some reason her mind scrolled back to a trip to miserably wet Largs when she had been a child – she could clearly see her mother's face.

He bent forward and pulled the sobbing woman up onto her knees, then grabbed her roughly by her long peroxide-blonde hair to make sure she was looking along the pathway and up the three front steps to her home. She breathed

heavily through her nose, partly through fear and partly necessity, as mucus was beginning to block her nasal passages.

'There ye are darlin'.' His voice was calm, and strangely unfamiliar now that she had become accustomed to the Aussie twang. 'Just thought I'd gie ye a wee look at yer man. No' at his best the now, eh?' He tugged at her hair again as silent sobs racked her body.

He pulled up his jacket and removed a handgun from the waistband of his trousers.

She thought of her mother again: her hand wiping the rain from her face on the Largs seafront, holding her close to keep her dry.

'Cheerio, ye fuckin' pair o' rats.'

The one shot from the pistol sent its report echoing down the quiet suburban street and a bullet into her temple.

He walked slowly back to the car, pausing to look up and grin at something unseen before jumping into the driver's seat and speeding away, tyres squealing on the wet tarmac.

The dead woman's eyes stared blankly at the ground on which she knelt, face down, all memories gone.

2

30 November, Kinloch, Scotland

His heart thudded against his chest in an alarming way, causing nearly as much discomfort as the tight boots on his feet.

'We're nearly there, darling.' Her voice was clear; she was not in the least out of breath. 'Another ten minutes and we'll get a seat and open the flask.'

'I . . .' His breathing was laboured. 'I . . .'

'Don't try to speak until we stop, love, or you might not get there at all,' she giggled. 'It'll be worth it in the end – you'll see.' She bounded ahead as he stopped yet again to gulp down lungfuls of cold air.

Half an hour later he was beginning to feel just about normal. They were sitting atop a grassy mound at the summit of Ben Saarnie, a modest hill that overlooked Kinloch. The town lay before them in miniature: traffic, buildings and busy-looking people, almost like toys at this remove. He realised what a local he was becoming as he found himself able to recognise some of the cars and vans, picturing their occupants. Never let it be said that Jim Daley is not observant, he thought.

'This was the site of an Iron Age fort, you know.' She was taking photographs with an expensive digital camera. 'Strange to think that hundreds of years ago people stood right here, breathing this air, just being alive. Don't you think, darling?'

At that exact moment, all of his concentration was focused upon removing a Penguin chocolate biscuit from its packaging, his reward for the struggle up the hill. So he employed his habitual reply when he had not quite heard what had been said: something between a grunt and a word, ambiguous enough to be taken as the answer of someone who was actually paying attention.

'I think I'll get my tits out; it's a really liberating feeling at this height.' She smiled as she watched his continued attempt to get at the confectionery.

At last! He had broken into the wrapper and thought he better reply before he set about the contents. 'Absolutely, Liz, aye.' He then devoured half of the biscuit with one bite.

'You've not been listening again,' she said, with an I-told-you-so intonation.

'Eh? Wha' you say?' He spat out a few crumbs as he looked up at her, his mouth full of chocolate.

'Nothing, Jim,' she laughed, putting the viewfinder back to her eye. 'Just you enjoy some more empty calories.'

Suddenly the biscuit tasted sour in his mouth. This little hike was part of the fitness campaign that his wife had so generously devised for him. She reckoned that with regular exercise and an excruciatingly austere dietary regime, he could lose at least four stones before the spring. This was week three, and despite enormous blisters on his feet and a gnawing hunger that never abated, he had managed to shed only a paltry two pounds.

Undeterred, his spouse had shrugged her shoulders at the most recent weigh-in on their newly acquired bathroom scales and declared: 'The first few pounds are always the toughest. After that it's plain sailing.'

He wondered how she was so sure of this. In the many years he had known her she hadn't put on an ounce of weight and had never, *ever*, been on a diet. However, to please her, and to bask in the joy of virtuousness, he continued to suffer the sore feet and rumbling stomach. Yuletide beckoned though, with its temptations of calorific indulgence and general sloth, never mind the immersion in various types of alcohol. He tried not to think about it.

The air was cold and exhilarating as they trudged down the hill. Daley's knees throbbed in time to the rumble of his poorly nourished belly. There seemed to be a kind of blueness in the air, framing everything in a light that could only be that of a Scottish early winter. The still water of the sea loch below appeared more viscous than it should as it reflected the winter landscape; the scene was calm and glorious. Daley hadn't noticed all of this on the way up, concentrating as he had been on reaching the summit without expiring, but he had to admit that his surroundings – and even, to some extent, the experience of hill walking – were stimulating. Was he beginning to fall into step with his wife's pursuits at last?

Well, one step at a time.

Daley's car was parked on a patch of waste ground near the farm gate that led to the hill. The new Toyota RAV4 had come with his new title of Chief Inspector, Sub-Divisional CID, as well as Sub-Divisional Commander (Acting), Kinloch, Y Div.

He had just found the car keys in the depths of his new ski jacket – XXL, very expensive and a present from Liz – when he heard the tinkle of his new iPhone, another trapping of his elevated job status. Strapping himself into the driver's seat with one hand, he took the device from his pocket with the other, squinting at the screen to see that he had an email from his distant superior, Superintendent John Donald.

'Hang on, please, Liz. I better take a swatch at this.' As his wife sighed, he remembered how to retrieve emails and started to read.

From: Supt. J. Donald.
To: Chief Insp. J. Daley
Subject: Killing, Australia
Message: Thoughts – ASAP

Daley clicked on the attachment and the banner of the *Melbourne Star* newspaper burst into view. He slid his finger down the screen until the bold headline was revealed: COUPLE BUTCHERED IN CITY SUBURB. Then the byline: *Husband and wife business team executed in broad daylight*.

Daley scrolled further down, wondering what this distant murder had to do with him. But when two fuzzy, passport-style photographs slid into view, all confusion was immediately banished. His audible gasp attracted a questioning look from his wife, now fidgeting in the passenger seat.

'Fucking hell', was all he could say. 'Fucking hell.'