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Prayer for the Dead

Written by James Oswald

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Prayer for the Dead

A Detective Inspector McLean Mystery

JAMES OSWALD

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For the Ashprington Crew

Peter, Alice, Jo, Lyle and Io

I

He kneels before me like a penitent, face to the stone wall. The bag over his head means he can't see the indentations in the rock face, the last marks made by those ancient masons so long ago. Their chisels built these caves, a million million strikes chipping away at the slow sandstone, revealing the secrets of their innermost thoughts in the patterns that stretch all around us. There is history here for anyone who takes the time to read it, prophecy too.

'This is the dark place, the warm and the wet. We are here unborn. Waiting.' I pitch my voice higher than normal, occupying the character I've created for this little game. He doesn't answer. Can't answer. His mouth is taped shut. I used the same roll on his wrists, tying them together behind his back. And the funny thing is he let me.

'We await our birth here. Bound and gagged by our previous lives.' I push his head forward, firmly but not roughly. He resists for a moment, but soon bends low to the gritty floor. A channel cut in the rock dribbles a stream of water, leached in from the city up above us. The men who built it knew the secrets of the earth, planned this place so that it would never flood. There are channels throughout, all carefully worked to drain into a sump. From there, the water goes straight down to hell.

'Are you ready to be reborn? Are you ready for the mysteries to be revealed?'

The faintest twitch by way of a nod, felt through my hand rather than seen in this almost total darkness. We brought candles, my new friend and I, but they are over on the far side of this carved room. I look briefly back at them. See mine still burning straight and true, his almost out as it devours the last of the wax, burns out the cotton wick. Not much time left.

'Come, stand, and begin your journey of rebirth.'

I help him to his feet, steady him as he sways a little. He's been kneeling a long time on the cold stone, legs weak. The rope around his neck is too thin for a proper hanging, and too short. A symbol like the many others in this ceremony. I take it up, pull him around.

'The way is dark. The way is not easy. Trust is the only way. Trust in your friends. Trust in your brother.'

The words are nonsense, of course, but they are what he wants to hear. This whole ceremony is for him and no one else. I lead him down the narrow carved passageways, taking care to avoid the lowest parts of the ceiling. Most of them, at least. It's important he suffer a bit, here at the last.

There is a narrow path around the pool, so I can stay dry. For him, the experience is less pleasant. One moment he is shuffling forward, slowly gaining in confidence, the next he is up to his armpits in cold water, struggling to stop himself from going under.

'Do not falter here, at the last.' I tug on the rope and he flounders for a moment before getting his footing, surges up and out of the pool like a performing dolphin in expectation of a fish. His mouth is taped, so he cannot shout, but I can hear his breath forcing its way out of his nose in

terrified snorts. He moves his head from side to side as if trying to see where he is. I pull him forward a couple of steps until we are back where we started.

'Come, brother.' The knife is as sharp as I can make it, blade thin and pointed. I slide it out of its sheath and slice the tape holding his wrists together. His hands go immediately to the sack over his head, whipping it off to reveal wide, staring eyes. A glance over to the carved stone table, and I see his candle gutter once, then expire with a little flicker of blue light. It is the sign I have been waiting for.

'Welcome to the brotherhood,' I say as he reaches up and starts to peel the tape from his mouth. In that instant I know that he is ready, his soul shriven and pure. Only corruption awaits, or salvation. Before he can free himself, I run the blade swiftly across his exposed neck, just above the rope. Hard through skin and artery and the crunchy cartilage of throat. Blood wells as he opens his mouth to speak, finds himself unable even to ask why. I can see it in his eyes though, that question writ large. It is not for me to answer him as he sinks slowly to the floor, his life force mingling with the water in the carved stone channel. He goes swiftly to a far better place and all I can do is watch, hope, pray that my time will come again. And when it does that I will be found as worthy as he.

2

'You got a minute, Inspector?'

Detective Inspector McLean slowed his stride more in surprise than from any desire to talk to the person who had appeared, as if by magic, beside him. He'd been hoping to have a chance to clear his head of work-related thoughts before his meeting. Fate would appear to have had other ideas.

'Ms Dalgliesh. Thought you'd be down at the Parliament. Isn't there supposed to be some new angle on the independence vote today?'

'Today and every day. Doesn't sell papers, so my editor's no' interested.' Dalgliesh wore her trademark long leather coat despite the muggy afternoon heat. An unlit cigarette dangled from her mouth, which meant she wanted something from him. Had it been lit, then chances were she was just paying a courtesy call before digging the knife in.

'Heard you'd caught that gang of scallies pickpocketing all them tourists come for the Festival.'

'That more interesting to you than politics?'

'Anything's more interesting to me than politics. Word is they was mostly Eastern Europeans. People love it when you throw in a bit of racial tension. No' just over here stealin' our jobs, but plain stealin' our cash and all.'

'Sorry to disabuse you of your casual racism, but the gang we lifted were all home-grown. There'll be a press

conference tomorrow, maybe Thursday.' McLean quickened his pace, hoping to get to his destination before the rain came on. And before Ms Dalgliesh could pester him any more.

'Truth is, Inspector, that's not really what I'm after. Can't abide all that nonsense myself, but you've gotta do what the editor says or no bylines and no cash.' Dalgliesh sped up, keeping time with him, though every third or fourth step was a skip.

'What do you want then?'

'A favour.'

McLean stopped so suddenly, Dalgliesh was a few paces on before she realised. She wheeled around and trotted back as he stared at her, incredulous.

'A favour? Are you serious? Why would I even think of—?'

'Well, I'd owe you, for one thing.'

McLean studied the reporter, looking for any sign that she was taking the piss. Hard to tell when her perpetual expression was of someone who'd been pulling a face when the wind changed. It was true he despised almost everything she did and stood for, but on the other hand the goodwill of a journalist, particularly an investigative journalist with questionable ethics, was not something to be passed up idly.

'I'm listening,' he said, and was rewarded by a lengthy pause. Whatever it was that Dalgliesh wanted, she was finding it hard to ask, which had to mean it was important.

'Ben Stevenson. You know him?'

McLean nodded. 'Another one of your lot, isn't he?'

'Aye. You don't need to be so sniffy about it. Ben's all right.'

'I'm not sure everyone would agree with you. Seem to recall he's not been all that nice about my boss in the past.'

'Dagwood? There's nothing worth digging up on him. Might be a buffoon, but he's one of the straightest coppers I've met.'

'I was thinking more about Jayne McIntyre, actually. She might've been Assistant Chief Constable if your friend Ben hadn't run that piece about her family life.'

'Aye, well, there is that.' Dalgliesh had the decency to look embarrassed, for all of two seconds. 'Still, she'd've bin wasted up there at the top. Some folk're just meant to be detectives.'

'You're all heart, Ms Dalgliesh. And so's your ghoul of a friend. Goodbye.' McLean turned down East Preston Street, heading towards the remains of his old tenement block and his meeting with the developers trying to renovate the site.

'He's gone missing,' Dalgliesh called out after him. 'Ben. He's disappeared.'

McLean stopped. Hardly surprising that a journalist might go off the radar for a while; it was the nature of their job, after all. That Dalgliesh was concerned enough to come to him made it far more serious.

'What do you mean, disappeared? He gone on holiday and forgotten to tell anyone?'

'Ben's not had more than a couple of days off at a time in five years. He lives the job, can't stand sitting around doing nothing.'

'So he's chasing a story.' McLean knew he was only saying it because he didn't want to get drawn in. He also knew that it was too late for that.

'Chasing a story, aye. But it was here. In the city. Told me it was going to be big, too.'

'He say what it was about?'

Dalgliesh leaned against the wall as she lit her cigarette. Took a deep drag and held on to the smoke for a few seconds before letting it go. 'And let someone like me pinch it? Don't be daft.'

'So how do you know what he was up to?' McLean glanced across the road, where a shiny black car had just double-parked. No doubt his developer arriving for their meeting.

'I'm a journalist, aren't I?' Dalgliesh said. 'Sticking my nose in other people's business is what I do.'

'So you reckon Mr Stevenson's got himself into trouble, then?'

'Well, he's no' bin seen at work for almost a month. He's no' answerin' his phones. He's no' bin home and his ex hasn't heard from him in six weeks.'

'His ex? Why would she care?'

'Coz he's meant to have custody of their wee girls alternate weekends. No' like him to miss that, apparently.'

The car had disgorged two suited businessmen who were even now donning hard hats and being shown in through the front door.

'I'll look into it as soon as I can, OK?' McLean dug out his phone, jabbed at the screen until it brought up the notebook function and tapped out a badly misspelled note to remind himself. 'Right now I need to be somewhere else.'

Dalgliesh smiled, a sight so alarming McLean thought for a moment her head was going to crack open and reveal something rotten inside. 'You're a star, Inspector. I'll send over all the stuff I've got already.'

Visions of his desk, legs already buckling under the weight of unattended paperwork. He really didn't need more piling up.

'I'm not promising anything, mind,' he said. 'And if this friend of yours turns up with a tan and a new girlfriend, you'll owe me double.'

He'd been avoiding the place. Hiding from the emotional turmoil it represented; that's what Matt Hilton would say. Perhaps he'd be right, but mostly it was just that his old flat in Newington was a long way down the ever-growing list of priorities. Of course, that didn't explain why he'd not done anything about the letters from his solicitors or from the developers trying to acquire the site, why he'd been ignoring calls about the matter for weeks now.

It was a simple problem. He owned a share of the site because he'd owned one of the tenement flats that had been destroyed by the fire. A sharp development company had managed to buy out most of the other shares, but they couldn't do anything without his say. They'd offered him money, quite a lot of money, for a quick sale. There really wasn't any reason why he shouldn't have taken up the offer and walked away from the place. But he couldn't bring himself to do that.

The senior partner from his solicitors had come to the station in person, waited for an hour in the reception area with the drunks and the vagrants and the just lonely, until McLean had come back from a crime scene. That more than anything else had finally persuaded him of the serious nature of the matter. It wasn't something that would go away if he just ignored it long enough, and other people

were being inconvenienced by his inaction. His grandmother would have been appalled at his rudeness.

And so he was here, back in Newington for an on-site meeting to discuss the redevelopment. Perhaps the builders thought seeing what they had planned would sway his mind. Certainly seeing the facade still there, shored up with scaffolding, its windows empty eyes on to the sky behind, brought everything into focus. The front door was the same, too. The paint faded a bit, the number gone, but it was even propped open with a half-brick, just like the students downstairs had always done in times past.

'Detective Inspector McLean?' A voice behind him. McLean turned to see a man in a dark suit, black shoes polished until it was almost painful to look at them. He was wearing a hard hat, but otherwise could easily have been mistaken for a banker or accountant.

'That's me. Mr . . . ?'

'McClymont. Joe McClymont.' The dark suit held out a hand to be shaken. McLean took it, surprised at how firm the man's grip was. His skin was rough to the touch, too. Hands that did more work than pushing a pen around.

'Sorry I've been a bit difficult to pin down. Only so many hours in the day.'

'Well, you're here now. Why don't we go in and have a look at the plans.' McClymont didn't try to pretend it was no big deal his project being delayed months, McLean noticed. He just headed into the building, assuming he would be followed.

Apart from the lack of roof, the entrance hall was remarkably similar to how he remembered it, possibly a bit cleaner. Rain had washed the large flagstones, and the extra

ventilation had managed to remove almost all trace of a hundred and fifty years of cat piss. At the back of the hall, the staircase only climbed a dozen or so steps now, the rest of the building having been cleared away beyond the top of the ground floor walls. McClymont stepped through an opening that would have been Mrs McCutcheon's front door, then down a set of new steps where the back wall had been and into the communal garden. A couple of Portakabins had been craned in to form a site office, but McLean took a moment to turn and look up at the back of what had once been his home. All he could see was the inside of the front wall, held aloft by massive steel pillars and braces. Individual flats were marked out by the different coloured walls, and there at the top on the right, the bay window of his front room still with a bit of skirting board hanging on like a drowning man. He'd stripped paint off that board, sanded it until it was smooth, and varnished it. He'd spent hours, days, years in that room, staring out the window or just sitting on the sofa, listening to music, reading a book, sharing pizza and wine with friends, cuddling up with one in particular. The rush of memories made him dizzy.

'We have to keep the original frontage. That's part of the deal with the council. Much easier if we could knock it down and start again, but it wouldn't be the same, aye?'

McLean turned back, seeing another dark-suited man, this one without a hard hat. He was older, grey-haired and thick-set, eyes cracked with lines set deep in leathery skin.

'Joe told me you were here. Come on in the hut and I'll show you what we want to do to the place.'