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Opening Extract from...

And When I Die

Written by Russell D. McLean

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AND WHEN I DIE



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The Other Side of Town

Glasgow

2011

A suburban street in the Southside. Tenements all around. Middle-income workers, migrant communities. Shops shifting groceries at markdowns and takeaways selling kebabs and chips with gravy.

The man walks out of his one-bedroom flat. He's big, and walks leading with his shoulders, head held high. Posture perfect. Dressed in dark jeans and a red shirt that he wears un-tucked. On his feet, heavy boots that are scuffed from use. Hard to tell what he does for a living, if anything.

Looking the way he does, you figure he has money, but he's not a lawyer or a doctor, not living round here. He's not in sales. Doesn't have the smarm or the cheap polyester suit. He's not a shop worker or a labourer. Doesn't have the right look or the right walk.

What he is, is dangerous.

You know that by looking at him. The walk tells you that this is a man you do not mess with.

He's big. Not fat. Just big. The kind of chest that makes you think of Superman, deflecting bullets. Hands big enough that they could dig a grave. No real expression on his face; not happy, not sad, not angry. Maybe he's waiting to see how he feels today.

On the street, he looks up at the sky, as though expecting rain. But the sun is out. Most people would smile when they realise this. A sunny day in Glasgow – anywhere in Scotland, really – is something to be celebrated. But he merely looks up and then back down again with no change in his mood. He walks to a black Skoda: one of the newer models, not the old rust-buckets. He looks around again, but it's merely habit. The big man has clearly learned to be cautious over the years. A doctor or lawyer or salesman or manual labourer would not be cautious.

But despite all the precautions, he doesn't see the people in the grey Megane further down the street. They've been watching him since he came out of the building. Both of them coked up. One is trying hard not to vomit, while the other barely notices the drugs

in his system. Truth is, the second man needs a regular hit just to keep himself stable. The first is only high under duress.

What he's doing is barely keeping himself together.

This is the last time, he thinks. *After today, it's over.*

They wait. They watch.

The big man gets into the car. Closes the door. Turns the key in the ignition.

There's a moment when he seems to realise that something's wrong. He twists in his seat, reaches for the door.

When the explosion comes, it's bigger than either of the two coked up men expect. It pushes at the cars to the front and rear, and blows out the windows of the nearest building. Twisted scraps of metal arc into the air, trailing flames and sparks.

The two men in the car don't bother to see if the big man's dead.

They just drive off. One of them vomiting violently into his own lap.

One

Pay to the Piper

Two days after the car bomb

John

I take a look in the rear view. Remind myself who I am.

'Your name is John Grogan. You are a police detective. You no longer have to pretend.'

Like slipping off a mask you've been wearing for too long, you're no longer sure what the real you looks like. So, which one of us is me? The undercover cop? The would-be-crooked financial advisor?

The murderer?

Three distinct people, really. That's the problem. At first, it was like playing a part. Now, some days, it comes so natural it's hard to remember who I really am.

If I ever knew.

Maybe I was always a murderer. Or… No. He was a mistake. He was…he wasn't me. He was the coke. He was something outside my control. That's what he was.

The face in the mirror looks back, eyes wide with panic. Pale, red rings under the eyes from lack of sleep. There was an incident two days ago No matter who I think I am, I can't figure a way to deal with the fallout. All I can do is ride this one out. Hope that I come through in one piece.

The face in the mirror hardens. The man looking back at me has been in hiding for over two years now. He's disgusted with some of what he knows, some of what he's seen. And more, he's disgusted that he can't talk about it. That there were things that had to be done in order to maintain my…*our*…cover. Am I losing my grip on sanity? Who could blame me if I was?

Over two years now I've lived with the idea that one day everything I've worked for will come crashing down. Maybe I'll say something out of turn. Maybe I'll forget who I'm supposed to be. Maybe some lag I arrested donkey's years ago when I was doing the uniform beat will put two and two together, realise where he's seen my face.

Here's what I know after two years deep undercover:

Derek Scobie is a psychopath. The kind of psychopath Hannibal Lecter has nightmares about. The good doctor ate people's liver, but at least he was cultured and witty. Derek doesn't even have that going for him. Only person worse than him is his youngest son, Anthony.

Anthony Scobie makes his old man look like a kids' TV presenter – a cuddly, benign uncle.

And let's not even talk about Raymond. Not yet.

Because Raymond's still alive.

Raymond's still alive.

The words are a chant, a mantra, a reassurance.

Raymond's still alive.

Alive is a matter of degrees, and after what happened to him two days ago, alive could be a very loose term indeed.

Whatever, I have to see him. Understand the condition he's in. Try and figure out how I'm going to explain all of this. I'm so far off the reservation, not even Google Maps can find me now.

This is uncharted territory. Nothing in the manuals about what to do when you fake a man's death and then fail to inform the detective in charge.

Not like I don't have my reasons. All I need to do is get Ray to speak. Spill his guts. Metaphorically, of course. Although the state he's in after the explosion, we could be talking literally as well.

If he talks, then I figure I can call in my superiors, admit to my mistakes. Take a slap on the wrist and hope to hell that they don't believe a word Derek and Anthony tell them.

Aye. Right.

I take a look in the rear view again, see those stranger's eyes staring back at me. Cold, unforgiving.

He knows the truth. There's no way out of what I've done. That whatever happens next, I'm the one who has to deal with the consequences. And I can't blame it on my cover. Because here's the thing – when you're undercover, you're still the one in the driving

seat. Your cover isn't independent. He's an extension of you.

Maybe that was my problem all along. Me and my cover, we found the places where we merged, became the same person.

The question is begged: which one was the cover? The cop or the crook?

I open the car door, climb out. The cold air hits hard. Ice shards in my lungs. I look at the A&E building just a few hundred yards away.

Think about running.

Figure I've been doing that most of my life. Maybe now's when I finally face up to what I've done.

Kat

The BBC are talking about Raymond. Of course they are.

'Raymond Scobie's death is believed to be connected to gang violence in the city of Glasgow. His murder is just the latest in a series of escalating…'

I switch channels. *Undercover Boss USA*. Fine.

I don't have to think about Raymond. Just watch some rich, out-of-touch guy with 1980s hair throw his workers a few meaningless platitudes after pretending he's worked as one of them for an hour of telly.

By the end, I'm crying. Can feel the tears on my face. Didn't even realise it was happening. They're not tears of empathy, either.

I swing my legs over the edge of the king-size bed and stand up. Traffic noises outside the window. I go over, look out at the city.

Glasgow.

Six months I've been gone, figuring that's it, I'm done. And now I'm back. Once a Scobie, always a Scobie.

I shower. The water is on full, smacking my skin, pummelling out all the tears and the sadness. The heat cocoons me, and, for a while, it's like I've escaped the world.

Something about hotel showers: they always feel cocooned from reality.

When I come out, there's a curdling in my stomach. Heavier than butterflies. A reminder of reality.

I fire up the laptop. It's old and clunky, takes its time booting. When I finally log onto Gmail, I catch a number of messages from work telling me to take my time before coming back. One from Lesley saying, *Call me if you need to talk*. I smile. A little guilty. It's been a few weeks since we talked. Somehow, I always feel that makes me a bad friend.

Lesley and I came through nursing college together. She stayed on the wards, while I went into admin. She was better able to cope with the horrors of ward work. Maybe that was surprising to some people. They figured I should have been used to blood. It's in the Scobie family, after all.

John

First time I met Raymond, he looked at me the same way you might look at a dog who just took a dump on your rug. Ray wore a cheap suit, no tie, shirt just the right side of ironed. He chewed his lower lip every so often. I took him for an ex-smoker looking for a new bad habit.

I'd later realise he hated wearing suits. His brother and his father insisted, however, so he pulled the same one out time and again for social occasions.

It didn't fit him. Few clothes did. His frame was too large in all the wrong places. He wasn't designed to fit in to the world. He wasn't built to be normal. He would never fade into the background.

He was big. Features hacked out of the side of a mountain. He couldn't crack a smile. Or any expression, really. Just looking at him made something tickle at the base of my neck, made me want

to turn and run. There were all kinds of rumours about Ray. It was my job to sort out what little of the truth there was about him. He was the gangster's bogeyman. The kind of person who kept grown men lying awake at night with their bedside lamps on.

The oldest son of Derek Scobie, Ray had a rep for death. Known colloquially as the Ghost. Hard to imagine, given his size, that he could kill people and simply disappear like so much mist, but however he got the reputation, you believed it the moment you met him. The very sight of him touched something primal.

The SCDEA have a large file of unsolved gangland murders they like Ray for, but they've never been able to place him at the scene or find a single piece of corroborating evidence. Never been a hair left behind, a fingerprint smudged, a flake of skin beneath a fingernail.

If he has a signature, it's that he prefers to kill from a distance. The weapons and the calibres of the bullets vary from case to case. He might have a stash, but no-one knows where it is. Raids on Ray's one bedroom in Govanhill always turned up less than nothing, leading to red faces all round and mumbled, insincere apologies from the local constabulary.

But he's a killer. No doubt. You look at him and you know. One third of what Crawford had refers as the Scobie's own Holy Trinity:

The Father.

The Son.

The Holy Terror.

I forced my hand out, offered it to him like a dentist reaching into a lion's mouth to pull out a rotten molar. His shake was lighter than expected. As though he didn't really want to touch me. But social convention had him cornered.

He was a tough man to work out. Didn't really talk, barely made eye contact with anyone. Carried a glass, but barely took a sip from it. Didn't like social convention. Didn't really like people. Probably what made it so easy for him to kill.

The first words I said to him were, 'How're you?' A quick and easy greeting, not giving too much away. He didn't say anything.

We were in a bar, which was maybe why he felt he had to keep holding onto that glass. Our introduction wasn't going well. I was there as Kat's plus one, had been doing the introductory rounds, feeling like finally this operation was getting ready to pay off. But unlike everyone else in the room, it seemed Ray wasn't willing to take me at face value. And with Kat off to the bathroom, I was on my own trying to make small talk with the most dangerous man in Glasgow, maybe even Scotland as a whole.

Ray looked at me and said, 'Think you could do it? A stretch like White's?' The question surprised me. Not just because it wasn't the kind of question you ask your cousin's boyfriend first time you meet him. But because he was assuming I understood his world.

Dave White had been 'away'. Someone told me, as the newcomer, that he'd been 'touring the world'. They laughed when they said it. I acted innocent, the way I was supposed to, still not feeling the truth behind my cover, still waiting for the moment when they spotted the copper behind my eyes. But I knew what they meant. White had been away a long time. But all he'd seen of the world was what he might have read in books or seen on a communal telly.

I said, 'I'd try not to get caught in the first place.'

Ray just nodded, not saying anything. He'd asked his question. Got his answer.

I tried not to shrink inside my skin.

• • •

The thing in ward 45's isolation room doesn't look like the man I met two years earlier. Barely looks like a man at all.

His skin has been burned, near enough melted. What hair is left appears in wispy patches across his skull. He's hooked up to pipes and feeds, like a medical experiment gone badly wrong. Or Frankenstein's monster. Brought back to life only to suffer.

I did this to him. Coked up, whatever, I don't have any excuses. I lit the blue touch paper and walked away. Figured he was dead.

Criminals always return to the scene of the crime. In the end,

I'm no different.

Soon as I could dump Anthony, I did. Doubled back to see what was happening. Dropped character, became the cop I used to be. Slipping into a way of walking and talking I'd figured I might have forgotten.

Helped that I knew the officer in charge on the scene. Asked him to me a favour. Told him it was in the name of a sting operation. He fudged the paperwork, told me I owed him. That it was his balls on the line.

'It'll be sorted out in the end,' I said.

He trusted me, too.

Never trust an undercover. We'll lie to anyone. It's in our nature.

Thing is, I was still high. Anthony Scobie's condition for me helping plant the device. His way of making sure I could be trusted.

Hitting coke, I always felt like I was standing two or three steps behind my body, watching it as though it was controlled by someone else.

When this all hits the fan, I think I could lose a friend or two.

More than that.

The heart monitor beeps steady. There are footsteps outside the door. Hushed voices echo from elsewhere in the ward.

But we're alone.

Just me and Ray.

The ghost. The man who should be dead.

His chart reads *John Doe*, of course. No-one knows who he really is. I see people walk past the room sometimes, looking in, curious as to why this man is locked away from view.

I wonder how much he remembers. Did he see us that morning? Did he know that we were watching him?

I lean over him.

He forces one eye open. A chaotic mess of broken capillaries. His lips part. The skin cracks. 'Here to finish the job?' His voice is low, each word a struggle.

I shake my head.

His words don't mean he knows anything. Just that he remembers who I am. Of course, if he remembers too much, then I'm as fucked as he is.

I reach inside my jacket and pull out something even I haven't seen in a long time. My identity and badge number. They've been in a storage locker for almost two years now. When I looked at them this morning, I had to convince myself they didn't belong to someone else.

He breaks into a coughing fit.

I sit patiently and let it pass.

Underneath my shirt, I'm drowning in sweat. My arms and legs are shaking. My heart could be playing the best of Miles Davis, the way it syncopates. My ribcage aches.

I take a deep breath. 'They think you betrayed them, Ray. I saw the evidence. Big, regular deposits in your personal account. Came through a number of subsidiaries, but I traced it. Came from that pasty fuck, Buchan.'

'They're family.' He coughs again. Then, a deep breath. Both eyes open now. Staring right at me. Not once breaking contact. 'And….sod…Buchan. Never…paid me nothing. Wouldn't work for…him. Family. Fucking family.'

'Think family really means anything to your lot?'

But it does. It means everything. The Scobies are tight. Derek always talks about family loyalty. Bit of a monomaniac that way. Only way the Scobies could be any closer is by inbreeding. Makes me glad the old goat never had any daughters.

Both Ray's eyes close. His breathing shallows out. Those monitors register slower beats. His whole body relaxes, like he's drifting into sleep. I reach for the panic button, thinking that everything I've done over the past two years has been for nothing.

If he dies, then everything I've done becomes little more than the punchline to a bad joke.

'Tell me,' Ray says, opening his eyes, twisting his lips into what

might be a smile. Suddenly alive. 'They know? About you?'

The bomb should have killed him. Should have done its job. But it didn't. And right at this moment, I wish it had.

'Does…' and I think he smiles, 'Kat…know?'

I stand up. Still unable to believe he's alive, never mind able to talk.

The heart monitor hits overdrive. The cough shakes and rattles Ray's body. The bed joins in, threatens to break apart under the strain of his gigantic frame entering some kind of seizure.

The expression on his face does not change.

I run out into the hall, flag down a nurse. She takes one look at Ray, thrashing around on that bed, calls for help. Tells me to wait somewhere else.

I slip into a waiting room. Spend some time pacing before finally grabbing a chair. Kill time reading leaflets that tell me how cancer will kill a frightening number of people I know, and that the odds are I've got some form of it too. I re-learn how to recognise a stroke. Read advice for family members, for recently diagnosed patients. Begin to think about what hidden dangers lurk in my body. My stomach seizes. For a moment, I imagine it might be a tumour.

After half an hour, the doctor on-call comes in to talk to me. A serious-looking man with thick glasses. Not much more than nineteen or twenty. At his age I probably looked every bit as serious, believed myself king of the world.

In a way, I still do.

'Your Mister Doe,' he says, no pre-amble, 'is a minor miracle.'

Not the way I would describe the cold-blooded bastard. Not the way anyone who's ever met him – especially in a professional sense – would ever describe him. But the young doctor does, with a sense of awe and what I think might be admiration.

'He should be dead,' the doctor says. 'At the very least in a coma. Massive internal injuries, and those burns... If that was me, I'd be screaming for morphine every two seconds. But he just...he just takes it.'

'He can actually handle that amount of pain?' I understand his reaction. There's stoical, then there's impressive.

The doctor sits down in one of the chairs just along from me and adjusts his glasses. I lean forward. Old cop instincts coming back. Treating this like an interview. I'm the man in the mirror now. Slipping back into his skin, using him to get what I need. I need to lose the stance and the attitude when I leave. I've spent two years building a cover, and I'm not going to blow it. Until I know the precise prognosis and how useful Ray's going to be to my case, I can't afford the luxury of relaxation.

Of course, even when this is all over, I don't know that I'll ever be able to relax again.

Kat

Twelve years old. Face in the mud. Grit on my lips, between my teeth. A weight on my back. Fingers in my hair, pulling, twisting.

And the yells:

Scabies Scobie! Scabies Scobie!

What you get for a family name like ours. And having red hair at twelve. Long red hair that your mother tells you is beautiful, but really just makes you a target for bullies like Jenny Hanson.

Scabies Scobie! Scabies Scobie!

Jenny was the one doing all the pushing, the one sitting on the small of my back, pressing down with all her not inconsiderable weight.

She smelled of rank BO, but no-one told her that. She could beat the boys when it came to a fight, and her gang worshipped her as much they were afraid she would turn on them next. She was that kind of bully, that kind of monster.

'All bullies,' Mum told me, would tell me, 'are afraid.'

Never made me feel better, though. When I thought of bullies I

thought of Jenny Hanson. Maybe she was afraid, but it didn't stop her from beating the tar out of any girl (or boy) she took a dislike to.

I had the stupid name. The stupid hair. And teachers liked me. She was on me like a heat-seeking missile. Making me eat mud. Laughing at my name. Pressing down on the small of my back with her knee. Telling me I was going to be a spinal case. Or dead. And no-one would care. Because I was a 'filthy fucking ginge!'

Someone shouted, 'Ginger Minger!' with the enthusiasm of the scared.

Other voices joined in.

I started choking. Couldn't breathe. The grit was in the back of my throat. When I swallowed, it scraped against the soft tissue, made me want to scream.

Was I going to die?

That's what I believed. Truly, honestly.

And then the chanting stopped. Silence struck the playground. The pressure on my back eased momentarily. I forced my head to twist round so I could see what was happening.

Some of the assembled girls were making a break for it. Startled gazelles who just realised there's a predator bearing down on them.

A voice rumbled, 'What d'you think you're doing?'

Jenny Hanson clambered off me. Hurt worse than when she jumped onto my back in the first place. I rolled over, tried to clamber back onto my feet with some degree of dignity. Failed miserably.

Jenny Hanson quaked – wobbled, really – with fear. The man had big shoulders, big hands and a stillness about him that spoke of absolute, terrifying control.

I smiled, even though the taste of grit and the backwash of blood frightened me when I swallowed.

My protector. My saviour. My cousin.

Ray.

Even at the age of twelve, I knew there was something not quite right about my family, the way that some people behaved around them. But I couldn't quite put my finger on the enormity of what it

all meant. It would take me until I was fourteen or fifteen to really figure it out.

Ray had a reputation, I knew that. He was big and strong and sometimes, when you looked at him you thought about monsters and giants from the fairy stories you read as a child.

He was dangerous. And Jenny knew it, too.

She looked at him, eyes wide with fear, maybe even a kind of attraction. I was just beginning to notice boys, and if Ray wasn't my cousin, I might have had a little crush on him, even though I'd never dare to act on it. Because he gave out all the wrong signals. He was dangerous. More dangerous than any boy I'd ever met before or since.

Ray said, 'She's my cousin. Family. Leave her alone'

Jenny didn't say anything. She turned and ran. Maybe she even cried. I certainly hoped so.

Ray came over to me. 'Go home. Wash up. Tell me if that wee cow ever raises her voice to you again.'

I told him I would. Ray walked away.

'We look out for own,' Uncle Derek used to say. For years I saw this as a good thing. Persuaded myself that all the other stuff, all the things I heard were exaggerated or that they had been done for the sake of the family.

The Scobies like to believe in their own myths.

Even when they're a lie.

• • •

I've been thinking about Ray a lot since I got the phone call. Uncle Derek on the other end of the line, telling me his son was dead. His words flat, still in shock.

The local papers have been filled with coverage of the investigation. The TV has broadcast endless footage of Uncle Derek, along with an old photo of Ray that makes him look like the son of Satan. Like he clawed his way up from the pits of Hell.

I know the truth about my family. They've done bad things. I

know that Uncle Derek's legitimate businesses shield him from other aspects of his life. I know that Ray wasn't as unemployed as he looked on paper.

I know all of the dirty laundry.

Sooner or later you need to make a decision: you either walk away or you get involved.

I walked away.

After John. After what they did to my life.

The decision should have been heartbreaking. Instead, it was simple. John did that. By choosing my family over me, by proving that all the Scobies do is corrupt, seduce and ruin everyone who gets involved with them.

That's not me. Never has been. Never will be.

Nothing like the betrayal of a lover to help you make those all-important decisions, to finally shove you down the road you always knew you should take and were too afraid to.

A new life out near Oban. Just the sea, my work, a quiet little apartment, a chance to finally become someone else.

And now I'm back.

I can't help it. It's in the blood. For everything that's happened, I can't not come back for Ray.

Death can bring any family back together.

Around me, people eat their breakfasts, talking in mostly hushed tones. Sometimes, the over-excited voice of a child peaks above the drone, but mostly people keep to themselves, conversation low around their own tables, as though afraid everyone else might be listening in.

I pull out my phone, check Facebook, find messages of support mixed with a few spiteful comments about how he had this coming. I unfriend the haters fast. Wonder about when people mistook rudeness for honesty.

My breakfast arrives. I put down the phone, face up on the table, and dig in. Bacon. Sausages. Beans. Potato scones. All in congealed fat, only lukewarm. I eat anyway.