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Mothers of the Disappeared

Written by Russel D McLean

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MOTHERS OF THE DISAPPEARED

A J. McNee Mystery

Russel D. McLean



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'Five years,' the old bugger says. 'Five years since I offered you the chance to come and work with me.'

'Aye,' I say, 'and I'm here now.' Playing it cool. This is how it is. Neither of us can change anything.

He's not buying it. Why would he? This isn't the usual dance. We're learning new moves here, and he's not convinced about the tempo.

'Things have changed, then? The events of the last few weeks, perhaps?'

'A lot of things changed,' I say. 'But the last two years . . . Maybe I made a few wrong choices.'

He nods. 'I understand. You've lost a lot. Your friends. Your woman. Your reputation. And now . . . you understand . . . don't you? Finally.'

He sees the way his words sting. But he doesn't gloat. We're walking a fine line here. Like close friends tipping over into lovers; one wrong move and everything we've worked towards is irrevocably destroyed.

The simile, of course, is a little on the nose.

'You need to prove to me that you're serious.' He talks slowly. Calmly. His eyes refuse to leave mine. Searching for any sign of deception.

I meet his gaze. 'What do you need?'

'Information. That's all. You can get me some information, can't you? Isn't that what you do for people all the time?'

'I guess so. What kind of information?'

He leans forward. 'Are you an artistic man, Mr McNee? Do you like taking photographs?'

'Can't say it's a passionate hobby.' I always said I'd never stoop to the peeping Tom jobs. But that was another time. Another life. Before everything changed.

He nods. 'Just need you to watch an address for me. A hotel room.'

He waits for a moment. Perhaps thinking I'll ask for more detail. This is all part of the test. He needs to know how many of my principles I'm willing to abandon for him.

After he's sure I'm not going to say anything, he writes down an address for me. Passes the scrap of paper across the desk. I read it, try not to smile.

He knows what he's doing, the wily old shite-bag. He's been waiting for this moment.

Who can blame him?

This is his tipping point. This is the moment when he finally owns me.

He's always talked like I'm the son he never had. Truth is, he just wants power over me. Same as with everyone he meets. David Burns wants you to know that he's the man in charge. That he owns you. Owns everyone you know.

'Well?' he says.

I don't hesitate this time. 'Long as you pay up front.'

Can he see what I'm really feeling?

'Is cash acceptable?'

'Sure,' I say. 'For a job like this.'

I stand and offer my hand. He stands, too, and when we shake, he continues to lock his eyes on to mine.

When I leave the room, I feel different.

Like someone just paid for my soul.

ONE

stared at the letter.

Read it again.

Again.

Dear Mr McNee

In light of recent charges brought against your agency, the Association of British Investigators has been forced to consider your current active status. Until such time as a full investigation can be conducted, your membership will be suspended . . .

I placed the letter back on the desk, stood up, crossed the floor of the office to the window. Looked out across to the DSS building, beyond to the rear of the Overgate Shopping Centre. Sandstone and steel, a far cry from its heyday as a concrete monstrosity inflicted on the city during the sixties, when the council had proceeded to destroy any vestige of character the city may have possessed. It had long been a symbol of the new Dundee; a city looking to the future rather than remembering its past.

I sucked in a heavy breath, let it go. Slow. Like a smoker's last desperate gasp on his final fag-end.

The word *suspended* echoed in my head.

Someone laughed.

Of course, it took a moment before I realized it was me.

I called on Lindsay. At his house.

Bad idea?

Maybe. But things had changed between us since he came out of the coma. We weren't friends. Never would be. But we'd found an uneasy alliance in shared experience.

And shared betrayal.

As always, answering the door, he didn't smile. Didn't say anything. Just stepped back to allow me inside.

Maybe twenty seconds before his opening gambit: 'How long did it take you to put away the crutches?'

'I still have them,' I said. 'Just in case.'

Five years earlier, I'd been involved in a car accident. Wound up with a limp that the doctors said had no real physical cause.

These days, I limped less. And life was good. So go figure if there was a connection.

We went through to the sitting room, Lindsay taking the lead, his gait awkward, cane tap-tapping an off-beat rhythm on the hardwood floors.

The TV was on BBC daytime; middle-class timewasters searching for bargains at a car-boot sale. Lindsay said, 'Better than morphine.'

Sure, and without the entertainment value.

It was strange, not to hear him swear. Like he was the same man, but not quite. Until recently, I'd known next to nothing about who DCI George Lindsay was off the job.

He had a six-year-old son, and didn't want the lad to grow up hearing daddy swear.

Double standards?

We all have them. And if you can't swear when you're overseeing a brutal murder investigation, then God only knows when you can.

Lindsay and I sat across from each other. I took the sofa. He took a faux-leather armchair. Manoeuvred down awkwardly. The plastic leather creaked.

I pretended not to notice. 'Have you heard from her?'

He shook his head. 'Thought she'd contact you. You know. Considering.'

'Nothing since she left.'

Susan and I had a strange relationship, made worse when she lied to protect a teenage girl who murdered a man – a monster – in self-defence. The secret had brought us together before it eventually pushed us further apart than we had ever been.

There was a physics lesson in there, I was sure of that.

Susan decided to go travelling. Told me she wanted to 'find herself'.

I didn't know what it meant then, and over six months later I wasn't any more clued-in. Except that whatever she was doing, she wasn't saying much about it beyond the occasional postcard and awkward email.

Now the only person I had left to talk to was Lindsay.

Aye, well, laugh it up. We were, after all, the best of enemies. Even when we'd been on the force, the antagonism had got the better of our professional instincts more than once.

But then he took a beating while trying to help me uncover the truth behind the death of Susan's father. The attack severe enough to put him in a coma. During those weeks, the ones that turned into months before he finally decided to come back to the world, I found myself in the habit of visiting his bedside and unburdening myself.

A confessional without the religious trappings.

I wonder if he heard me during those weeks. Since he woke up, neither of us have talked about it. But something had definitely changed between us.

Why I found myself in his front room at half nine on a Tuesday morning.

I told him about the letter. About the reason it had been sent.

'You shouldn't be talking to me about that.'

'Why not?'

He didn't say anything. I took his meaning. This was trouble coming home to roost. Maybe for both of us.

Four years earlier, I had killed a man. Shot him in the chest one rainy night in the centre of the Necropolis graveyard out to the west end of the city.

Self-defence.

The man had been a killer himself. Two days earlier he had killed a woman on the run from her gangster husband. And that evening, he'd been looking to take me out.

I always wondered whether Lindsay – the investigating officer on the case – truly believed the story I sold him, or if he had chosen to fudge the details for his own inscrutable reasons, letting me off the hook, justifying my actions on that rain-soaked evening.

Four years later, someone was raising doubts as to the

official account of what happened. Questioning not just my story but the investigation into the events.

It wasn't Lindsay. He'd be throwing away his own reputation if he raised questions about that night. Besides, if he'd wanted to lock me up and throw away the key, he'd have done it there and then. Maybe things would have been better if he had.

We were quiet for a while. Lindsay was the one who broke the silence, asking, 'So what are you going to do?'

'Nothing I can do.'

'Really?'

'Except wait.'

He nodded. 'Welcome to my world.'

He was awaiting the results of a physical. Nearly eleven months of leave, he wanted back on the job, even if he was just driving a desk. But they were making him jump through hoops. Almost literally. Police work requires a certain degree of fitness, and given what happened to him, no one was sure that he would ever return to that level. He hated the tests, and even worse hated the possibility that he might not be allowed back.

I'd joked that he could go private. He'd almost knocked my block off.

We sat together for almost an hour, not saying much. Mostly exchanging half-hearted observations about the re-opening of the investigation and why anyone would start to look into it now. But neither of us had any answers, and the truth was that after four years we just wanted to forget it all, and move on with our lives.

I'd done enough standing still to last a lifetime.

When I got up to leave, he said, 'I stand by the report, you know. Back it all the way.'

I nodded to indicate that I understood.

And then I left.

About as close to friends as we could be.

I was suspended from the ABI, but the law didn't require that I shut down my business. The ABI has been working with the Government for years to legalize the profession, but the

inevitable red tape has held up many attempts to organize our merry band into something approaching a cohesive professional body.

So I could work under the radar if I wanted. Say I was doing favours for friends. That kind of thing.

I had myself a part-time security gig with a bunch of other eyes from Fife, providing protection for a top-level golf tournament in St Andrews. Rich assholes, richer movie stars, tourists looking to get too close, as though the success might rub off on them.

I drove over the road bridge, slipped on sunglasses as the day brightened. It was the arse-end of summer, the weather unpredictable. For the best part of June and July the heat had been on, and even on dark days, you could see the red remnants of the Scottish suntan among the populace who'd taken advantage of the sun. We're pathetic that way. Scottish skin sizzles easy, and yet the first sign of a heatwave, we're out there, topless, not even bothering with the weakest of suncream.

Eejits.

I pulled up outside the Old Course Hotel, right next to Andy McDowell's gleaming BMW. He was leaning on the bonnet, waiting for me. Dressed all in black: a pasty Johnny Cash. Tipped his shades at me as I climbed out.

'We need to talk, McNee.'

'Something wrong?'

'I don't like to do this—'

I knew what he was going to say. Didn't let him finish, just raised a hand.

'Come on, man,' he said. 'Don't be like that.'

I'd worked with Andy on and off since I got into the investigation game. Originally from Glasgow, he formed McDowell Associates after moving to the east coast to indulge his passion for golf. He'd probably have preferred to move to Tennessee to indulge his passion for Americana, but sometimes in life you have to compromise. His connections to the golf world allowed him access to cake-walk security details like The Open. And he liked to work with people he knew.

He wouldn't take a decision like letting someone go without giving it a great deal of consideration. On all sides.

Didn't make me feel any better, though.

'I have policies,' he said. 'Everyone ABI certified and—'

'Do you believe I did it?'

'I don't know what you're supposed to have done,' he said.

'Just that you're off the register. But I'm sure that—'

'So what happens now?'

'There's a severance in the contract,' he said. 'You saw it. It's generous enough.' Aye, generous enough, he didn't mind being an arsehole.

'Doesn't really help.' It wasn't about the money. He knew that, probably understood. And all I was doing now was making this tough on him.

'Maybe you should take some time off while—'

'Would you?'

He didn't say anything.

I walked past him, stared out across the course and at the ocean. The wind was low, but you could still see the foam of breakers forming as the water lapped into the coastline.

'You want to talk about it?' he asked.

'Not really.'

'How about a beer?'

I looked at my watch. 'It's only just gone twelve.'

'Beer and lunch.'

'You've got work.'

'I've got people working.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'I was supposed to be one of them.' I moved back to the car, started to climb in.

Andy placed his hand on top of the open door before I had a chance to close it. 'If you were in trouble, you'd ask for help, right?'

I reached up and pushed his hand away before closing the door. He stayed where he was as I reversed, and then pulled out.

Looking in the rear-view, I saw him watch me. His shades hid what he was thinking.

But I could guess.

TWO

Back at the office, I stewed.

Windows closed. Door locked. In my chair, staring at piles of looming paperwork. Considering just chucking everything out of the window.

Maybe follow it all.

That last thought a joke.

Probably.

Dot buzzed through from the office. ‘Someone to see you.’

‘You know that I’m not currently taking—’

‘Police.’

I stood up, unlocked the door, opened it. Sandy Griggs nodded at me in greeting. He was still tall and rangy, as I remembered. But his fine red hair was wispy, and you could see his scalp beneath strands that looked like they’d been styled by a gale-force wind. His blue suit fitted him a little awkwardly.

But the geek-edge of his appearance belied a quick and fiery anger that had occasionally taken him before Discipline and Complaints during his time with Tayside Police. Guess I could empathize with that. Especially given that the worst of his ire had been directed towards wife-beaters and domestic abusers. Some cops have their own personal agenda. Sandy always wore his on his sleeve. Why it was a surprise when he upped sticks to join the SCDEA, go hunt down the gangsters.

But those days were behind him. In an official capacity, at least.

Now Sandy was SCDEA.

Scottish Crime and Drug Enforcement Agency. Our very own Serious and Organized. Or, if you wanted to get all sound bite about it: the Scottish FBI.

Sandy stepped forward, one hand outstretched. I accepted the gesture, noted that he grasped just a little too long before letting go.

‘Ja—’ He caught himself, let his gaze drop for just a moment. Showing me he was embarrassed. Something told me it was a show. Work in the investigation game long enough, your shite detector gets a good workout. He was trying to show me that he remembered me well enough, that we were friends, even if we hadn’t spoken in a long time. ‘McNee. How you doing?’

‘Good. Didn’t think we’d see you round these parts any more. Thought you’d be too busy living the good life out on the west coast, keeping busy with the Glasgow gangs and all.’

‘Aye, doesn’t mean we’re not watching over you guys here. Mind if we have a chat?’ He didn’t glance at Dot, but he might as well have done. ‘In private?’

‘I can close the door.’

He thought about that for a second. ‘Fancy a coffee?’

Five minutes of sunshine in Dundee meant the pavement cafes were set up outside pubs and coffee houses in what was called, with some small sense of irony, the city’s Cultural Quarter. Sandy took me to one of the busier set-ups, ordered for us.

I sat at the table with my sunglasses on and thought about what he might want to discuss.

Sandy had been a DI back in the day. Young, possibly ambitious, but occasionally scuppered by that anger. Hence his decision to change direction and work with the SCDEA. I’d been in uniform, then. Remembered his departure as abrupt, the change in direction no doubt something to do with the shitstorms he allowed himself to get into following a friendship with another private eye. I’d met the eye – his name was Bryson – only twice, but knew that he was the kind of man who got his friends into trouble whether he meant to do it or not. Bad news followed him around like a sulky Rottweiler.

No wonder Sandy was acting like he knew me. I had more than a few things in common with his old friend.

When Sandy came back, he placed my coffee in front of me and kept a hold of his own mug as he sat down. ‘Sorry to drag you away from your busy day.’

‘Not a problem.’

We both sipped at our drinks. Keeping eye contact. Giving away as little as possible. Daring: call my bluff.

Around us, ordinary people indulged in ordinary conversations about kids, work, last night’s TV.

Sandy didn’t want to talk about any of that. Neither did I.

So he said, no pre-amble, ‘That night, did you have another gun on your person?’

I started to get up. His hand shot out and grabbed my wrist. ‘That’s not why I’m asking.’

‘All due respect, I think it is.’

Sandy let go of me. I sat down. Waited for an explanation. Ready to leave if I didn’t like it.

‘The reason I ask is that I want you to say you did. Even if it’s not true.’

‘You want my business to tank?’

He hesitated. ‘You could say that,’ he said. And told me why.

The man I killed – and I still can’t say whether it was an accident, or in cold blood – worked for London gangster Gordon Egg. Egg was old-school hard-arse, had been waging a war in Dundee against a man named David Burns. The dead man was one of Egg’s best muscle-men.

I shouldn’t have got involved, but a client was mixed up in their turf war, and I’d managed to get noticed by both sides. Burns, claiming to recognize something of himself in me, manipulated me, made sure I wound up doing his dirty work. I didn’t agree to anything, but all the same found myself in the right place at the right time and with the proper motivation.

Since that night, Burns and I had what you might call a complicated relationship. He manipulated me again, forcing me into a hunt for his missing god-daughter, before using the death of an old friend to once more trick me into doing his dirty work. Looking at it from the outside, you might start to think I was enjoying it.

Which was precisely why Sandy Griggs wanted me to cosy up to the old man. To finally give in to everything he

offered me. To quit being manipulated and willingly do exactly what the foosty old fuck wanted.

‘You’re a mental case,’ I said. ‘You know that, aye?’

He smiled. No humour. No warmth.

A couple took the table next to us. Oblivious to what was happening. Wrapped up in each other, laughing and sharing intimate little stories as they leaned in close across the table.

Wonder how me and Griggs would have appeared to them if they noticed us.

‘Seriously. I can’t do it.’

‘Then what are you going to do?’ Griggs asked. ‘You’re fucked, McNee. You know it. From the minute you made the decision to kill that man, you’ve been in freefall. The pavement’s coming up fast. One way or another, it’s going to hurt when you land.’

I massaged my forehead for a moment. Thinking about what he was asking me.

He leaned back, sipped at his coffee.

Sixteen months or so earlier, a good man had died because he lost track of what side of the law he was really on. Ernie Bright had been a good copper, and tried the trick of cosyng up to the bad guys. It was a move that wound up killing him by inches until a shotgun blast to the chest finally put him out of his misery.

I still believed, even if others didn’t, that Ernie hadn’t switched sides. That he’d had some grander purpose. That he hadn’t died uncertain of who he was, of who he stood for.

Sandy was asking me to walk that same line. More than that, he was asking me to betray every principle I had ever claimed to have.

‘I don’t want to do this, man. But I’m down to my last hand. You’re my ace.’

‘Let me think about it. Jesus fuck, just give me a moment to . . .’

‘Sure, a moment.’ Griggs stood up. His coffee wasn’t even half-finished. ‘You know where I am. Just don’t take too long, huh?’

THREE

I spent the afternoon making phone calls. Calling in what few favours I could. Shaking proverbial trees. Trying to get some idea of just how badly I was being fucked.

Nobody wanted to talk to me. Told me just about everything I needed to know.

Three o'clock got me a phone call from Cameron Connelly at the *Dundee Herald*. Playing the concern-for-a-friend card, but just beneath the genuine worry, I could hear his reporter's instincts angling for a story. If he was calling me, it meant his colleagues were already sniffing blood, and he wanted to beat them to the exclusive.

I said, 'How long?'

'They're waiting for official sources to disclose the nature of the charges.'

'How much do you know? Off the record, of course.'

'About what I knew before. Except the spin is different. Someone's trying to make this about your incompetence.'

'That how you'll report it?'

'I'll report the facts. You'll have right of reply. But I don't want to run this if it's simply a vendetta, know what I'm saying?'

'You're all heart.'

'Aye, it's been said.'

In those days, I had been angry. Recovering – slowly – from the accident that had left me ready to lash out at the whole world. When I wound up caught in the middle of Burns's and Egg's little turf war, I focused my anger on two of Egg's thugs. Convinced there was no other option. Ask me today, I think things went the only way they could. Given who they were. Given who I was. Anyone trying to spin me as a have-a-go hero or a mindless thug was grinding their own axe.

The only witness to what happened that evening – the

thug who survived – refused to talk to the police, to confirm or deny my story. Took the whole ‘honour amongst crooks’ bit dead serious. Dead being the operative word when he wound up knifed in prison just a few months later. The work of David Burns. He might as well have left his signature at the scene. But of course, even if everyone knew he had been behind the death, no one could prove it in a court of law.

So that left me. The only one who knew the truth. I had acted in self-defence. The gun was not mine.

So the questions became, *Why now?* Who was re-opening the investigation?

‘Look, this just fell in my lap.’

‘From where?’

‘Talk.’

‘Come on!’

Connelly sucked in a sharp breath on the other end of the line. ‘Just talk, man. Words. Here and there. I know someone who’s been hearing the whispers. What I can gather is that the word came in from an anonymous source. And given your recent relationship with the force, I guess they’d be more than inclined to look for ways to burn you.’

It was a fair point. I’d exposed one of their top cops as a corrupt asshole playing both sides against the middle. I’d made enemies of the personal and political persuasions. And a number of coppers still thought I’d fitted up Kevin Wood. Refused to believe the evidence that their own Discipline and Complaints department had amassed against the deceased former deputy chief constable.

I wasn’t about to get any answers from the force. And seeking answers from the ABI or any of my private contacts was a dead end. Connelly wasn’t about to give me his source, and the way he told it, so far he was the only reporter aware of what was going on. This left my options limited. Giving me no choice but to go ask the questions I’d been too scared to ask earlier that day. Call in favours I’d never really earned.

‘Don’t start thinking we’re going to become bosom buddies,’ Lindsay said. ‘Just because I have a modicum of gratitude for what you did . . .’

I still couldn't get used to it. When he was in the house, he didn't swear. His wife had tried to tell me as much when I met her in the hospital while the grumpy old bastard was in a coma, but I hadn't believed her.

'I need a favour.'

'Not much I can do moping around on the couch all day. Not much I'd want to do for you, anyway.' The barb was sluggish, more force of habit than genuine enthusiasm. You could see by the way he was sitting – back curved, head slumped just a little, arms hanging there – that he had lost something of the *joie de vivre* he once had. And who could blame him? Spend time in a coma, see how you feel when you come out of it. Especially when the people who put you there were people you were supposed to trust. Fellow police officers turned rent-a-thugs desperate to protect a powerful man's secrets.

I remember talking to Lindsay's wife after he came out of the coma. She told me that a little something inside him had died. That he wasn't quite the same man. Not just his quieter demeanour. There was the sense of shell-shock to him, as though his whole world had been turned upside down.

He hadn't been able to defend himself.

I think that was the worst thing for a man like Lindsay. He's always been proud. Used to take great pride in the fact that he was an outsider; granted grudging respect because of his by-the-book mentality, but never really one of the gang because of his refusal to form relationships within the job.

Then again, I'd taken the opposite tack, and look at which of us became the pariah.

'You're bored,' I said. 'I get that. When I took time off after the accident, all I wanted was get out there and do something. It drove me crazy.'

'Aye, turned you into a bigger arsehole than you already were.' Just a growl, a hint of the old bastard I used to know. Brought a smile to my face. Christ, times were bad when I got nostalgic for a man like George Lindsay.

'I'm not asking for much,' I said. 'Just a name. That's all.'

‘And what happens when they ask me why I want to know?’

‘You can work that out.’

‘I just want to congratulate whoever stuck the knife in.’

‘Always knew you had a sneaky side.’

He didn’t say anything.

‘Look, I just need to know,’ I said. ‘Something about the timing of all this seems very convenient.’

‘Convenient, how?’

He couldn’t work it out? I had to wonder if the coma had slowed him a touch more than anyone realized. ‘I’ll tell you if you get me the name.’

Another hesitation. I hoped he was thinking it over.

Persuasion is a delicate art. Like the police interview. You have to know when to push and when to step back. Go too much in either direction, you lose the control of the situation that you crave.

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ he said. ‘But that’s it. Anyone wants to talk, I’ll listen but there’s no fu— no way, I’m putting my own reputation on the line for you. You go down, it’s on your own. Right?’

‘That’s all I’m asking,’ I said. ‘That’s all I’m asking.’

That evening, I stayed up late in the front room, sitting in the padded armchair, watching reruns on the TV. Most of them made little sense. TV scheduling goes out the window when you work my kind of gig, and with more and more TV built around story arcs and viewer loyalty, it meant that I just let the images wash over me.

In the end, I found that it wasn’t enough of a distraction and turned off the set. I needed engagement. Something I could follow, could lose my brain in. I grabbed a book from the shelf – *American Skin*, by an Irish writer Cameron Connelly had recommended to me a couple of months back – and settled in.

I finished by 2 a.m., and the idea of coming back to reality made my stomach do flips. I placed the book on the arm of the chair, and closed my eyes, thinking I wouldn’t sleep.

But I did.

My dreams were a mess of blood and fear.

It was the damn book that did it; a nightmare ride with a cast of psychopaths. Much as I enjoyed it while awake, it came back to haunt my subconscious.

Unlike the book, there was no narrative to the dream. No way I could later describe it other than as a dread feeling when I woke; a half-memory of the dead.

They were all there.

The innocent.

The guilty.

All of them. People whose deaths I was linked to, causally and explicitly.

They were there, in my dreams, watching me, saying nothing. After all, there really was nothing they could say.