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For Fiona, this decade and for ever

‘To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often.’
—Winston Churchill


PROLOGUE

Glasgow, fourteen years before

Chief Superintendent John Donald stopped his black Audi A8 outside the disused workshop in Glasgow's Townhead. All manner of new buildings were rising from the ground, as cranes, diggers, vans, lorries and battalions of men in hard hats and fluorescent jackets went about their business. Donald barely recognised the place where he'd walked the beat what seemed like a lifetime ago.

Now, it was all so different – apart from his destination, that was. Like the last dog turd in the street, it stood out because of dilapidation and decay. Once white walls had faded to dirty grey, slathered in the exotic scrawl of gang tags and familiar obscenities. Cracked drainpipes led to fractured gutters, from which sprouted incongruous clumps of grass and the odd drooping dandelion. The pavement that ran along the full length of the tumbledown building was cracked, the road almost gone. He regarded this remnant of the old city's decline with distaste. Superintendent John Donald's world was all about the future, his rise and rise. But there were hurdles to be overcome.

Donald left the cocoon of his car and sniffed at the air. It was a fetid mix of diesel fumes, brick dust, damp earth and



a hint of urine. He neatly sidestepped a used condom as he walked towards a steel security roller-shutter, within which was located a much smaller wicket door, lying ajar, a small gap affording a glimpse of dim yellow light within.

He stopped, passed a hand over slicked-back hair and pushed his way into a large empty space. All was dim apart from a pool of yellow light from a single unshaded bulb hanging over a table in the centre of a pitted concrete floor.

Donald could see the silhouette of a man sitting beside the table. Though only his back was visible, the superintendent knew this individual all too well. He cleared his throat by way of an awkward intimation of his presence.

‘You got the cold, big man?’ The voice was deep, rough, from what had been the wrong side of Glasgow’s tracks, the lines of which had long since blurred. This city was now a place where businessmen shared streets with barrow-boys on the make. Judges and felons parked their cars alongside one another. Whores and churchgoers lived cheek by jowl with dignitaries and drug dealers in some of the best properties the city had to offer, while living entirely different lives. Glasgow was becoming the meritocracy of which everyone had once dreamed. But the nature of merit had never been specified. So now, as long as they had plenty of cash, the city no longer segregated its less desirable citizens in crumbling tenements, swaying high-rise flats or dolorous schemes. A healthy bank balance was all you needed to share the same rarefied air as those who considered themselves the cream of society.

Donald ignored his host’s sarcasm and strode towards the light. The only chair at the table was occupied, so he stood before the man who had summoned him like a recalcitrant

schoolboy before a headmaster. Not a sensation he enjoyed. Making people feel small was his job.

The senior police officer could see his host's features properly now. And despite himself, a shiver of fear went down his spine.

'It's been a long time, Johnny, eh?'

Donald cleared his throat again, not this time to announce himself, but from discomfort. 'It has. How have you been?'

'Oh, just dandy, my man, just fine and dandy. Living on the profits of my hard work and ingenuity – taking it easy for a while. Have you missed me?'

'Do you want an honest answer?'

The man laughed. 'An honest answer fae a polis? Aye, there'll be green snow and yellow hailstones the day that happens.'

'What do you want?'

'What do you want?' He mimicked Donald's acquired accent. 'I want my money's worth, that's what I want!' He banged the table with a clenched fist. The sound echoed round the empty space.

'What did you expect me to do? I can't control your men – particularly Frank MacDougall.'

'You could have had him arrested!'

'I thought that's the last thing you'd want.'

'Aye, well, you thought wrong. No' for the first time either, asshole! Too busy with your new friends in Eastern Europe from what I hear.'

'I don't have to listen to this.' Donald turned on his heel, ready to leave, but the click of the safety catch on a weapon stopped him in his tracks.

'Your good lady's one for the self-improvement, eh?'

Donald spun back round to face his interlocutor. 'Sorry?'
'She likes learning – never oot that night school, is she? Every couple should have a family – kids. It's important to pass something down. You know, something of yourself.' He paused, a salacious smile spreading across his face. 'You've no weans, I hear. You no' keeping her happy, big John? In between the sheets, I mean. Needs to amuse herself wae extra-curricular activities.' He laughed.

'Fuck this. You asked me to come here for our *mutual benefit*. I don't see anything beneficial about being abused by you. I've had too much of that in the past!'

'Remember how you managed to climb the greasy pole, Johnny boy.' The man got to his feet and walked over to where Donald stood. 'Never turn your back on me again, you piece of shit.' He ramm'd the barrel of a pistol into John Donald's ribs, making him double over in pain.

'I don't know what you want me to do,' he gasped.

'I want a favour – for services rendered, let's say. Let's call it an apology for letting my auld friends get too full o' themselves when I was busy being somewhere else.' He towered over the bent figure of the police officer. 'Read this.' He dragged Donald towards the light and thrust a piece of paper under his nose.

Donald squinted at the page, scanning its contents. 'I can't do this – it's not my job. I have no influence over this department!'

The man returned to his chair. He held the pistol in one fist, resting it on the table, one knee bouncing up and down with clear irritation. 'You know why I really asked you to come here?'

Donald looked round in the darkness. 'To intimidate me, I imagine.'

‘Aye, that’s true. But I mean *here* specifically – to this place. Man, you seem to have a short memory.’

‘How so?’

‘This used to be a garage, remember? My garage, in fact.’

‘Oh yes, I remember now. So what?’

‘This is where you took your first bribe from me. A Sierra Cosworth, I seem to remember. Nice motor. I can mind how chuffed you were wae it. It’s also a place I had to get off on my toes quick smart, because of you being shite and doing what I asked you.’

‘Yes.’ The policeman lowered his eyes.

The gun was now pointing at Donald’s head. ‘Well, remember what I’m saying right now. Do this thing for me or you’ll be down one wife. Do you understand?’

The superintendent made to speak, but his tormentor put a finger to his lips to quieten him.

‘No excuses, no shit – just get it done. We go about this properly – the way we should have done the first time round. Let’s face it, that little plan backfired big time.’ He yawned. ‘Now, get tae fuck. I’m a busy man.’

‘I do have something else to offer you. I’m sure you’ll like it.’

‘Aye, I’m listening.’

‘Daley and Scott.’

‘What about those pair o’ bastards?’

‘They’ll be taking the low road to somewhere out of the way soon. I’m just waiting for a suitable opportunity.’

Machie narrowed his eyes at the policeman. ‘Daley’s one too many for you, eh?’

‘Nothing of the kind. But not having him looming over everything will be a welcome break. And his little dog, Brian Scott.’



‘That bastard. He was someone else’s little dog once.’
‘Yes, how can I forget. But down there, well, they’re sitting ducks.’

Machie shrugged. ‘They’ll keep for a while. Just make sure my old pals don’t get the chance to turn on me now I’m back, got it?’

‘Yes, I’ve got it.’

‘Good. Now, do one.’ Machie turned away, meeting over.

Donald swayed from foot to foot, desperately wanting to argue, to remind this man that he was no longer a mere sergeant on the beat who could be ordered about by a thug or kept loyal with petty bribes. After all, this was the gang boss whose own lieutenants had turned their backs on him in his absence. He was nothing now, nothing!

But Donald’s courage failed him. Meekly, he trudged away, back through the wicket door and across the pavement to his Audi.

The chief superintendent drove a few streets away to where he’d once trodden the beat. There was barely anything left of Parliamentary Road, he noted. In fact, the whole Townhead he’d once known was almost obliterated; it was as though Glasgow had removed one head and another had been surgically implanted. This was the world he wanted to be part of, not the one he’d left moments ago – the throwback to a time he dearly wanted to forget.

Donald parked his car close to the Northgate building and grabbed the phone from its charger on the dashboard. He dialled a number from memory and waited impatiently for a reply.

‘What can I do you for, Mr Donald?’

‘It’s what I can do for you, Frank.’



‘Oh aye. Well, that makes a change. And how much will this largesse cost me?’

‘I’ll give you this for free.’

Frank MacDougall laughed. ‘You retiring or what?’

‘No, but *you* are. James Machie’s back. It’s time to cut that deal.’ John Donald waited for a reply, but the laughter had stopped. The line was dead. Frank MacDougall had gone.