

FURTHERMORE

A Seamus McCree Novella

James M. Jackson



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DEDICATION

For all the readers who wanted to know.

ONE

EMBRACING THE BURN IN MY shoulders, I counted repetitions under my breath. At twenty, I released the pull bar from the universal gym and opened my eyes to discover my ex-wife appraising me, a crooked smile on her face. I pulled off my headphones. Eric Clapton's "Layla" spilled tinnily into the room.

"Sorry to interrupt," Lizzie said. "How did today's rehab go?"

"She's a latter-day Marquis de Sade. Boy howdy, that girl can bring me to tears. She—"

"You don't fool me, Seamus McCree—a.k.a. Mister No-Pain-No-Gain. Besides, you love watching her cute ass sashay around."

"Lizzie, she's younger than Paddy."

"Which is why she still has a cute ass. Speaking of our son, he took Megan to her play date and by now should be rowing on the Charles. He promises to be back in time to take you to your mysterious lunch appointment. I'm heading for my ten-thirty meeting with the mayor. No headphones, Seamus. You need to hear the real estate agent when he arrives."

"He knows to ring the downstairs bell?"

"Should, but just in case, I left the upstairs door open so you can hear." She gestured to the oak door that closed off the top of the grand interior staircase, added during her conversion of the Cambridge, Massachusetts Victorian house into upstairs and downstairs condos.

“He’s scheduled for eleven, but it will depend on how long they take at their earlier stops. He knows you’ll be here. Keep out of their way and it’ll be fine.” She placed her hands on her hips and arranged her face to appear stern. “And don’t overdo it and tear a muscle or something.”

“Yeah . . . yeah . . . yeah,” I said. “You sound just like a wife.”

“Oh lord, save me.” She swatted my shoulder. “Been there. Done that. I’m off.” She waved a toodle-oo over her shoulder and performed an exaggerated sashay to the front door, the tapping of her low heels echoing off the plaster walls of the sparsely furnished room. Lizzie may have been thirty years older than my physical therapist, but she kept herself in good shape. Her ass still looked fine. But truth be told, I’ve always been more a leg than a butt man.

I silenced the mp3 player and towed off the equipment. Lizzie was right about not overdoing it. Less than four weeks earlier, I had destroyed my ankle while capturing someone who had tried to kill me. Lizzie had generously offered to let me stay in the first-floor condo she had recently put on the market: I wouldn’t have to rehab in an overheated nursing home, and Paddy could stay with her upstairs to help take care of me. As a bonus, three-year-old Megan got to tag along with her father and visit her grandparents.

Should I take a quick shower before the potential buyer arrived and chance being caught *au naturel* or wait until after their visit and possibly run out of time before leaving with Paddy for lunch?

The buzz of the condo’s old-fashioned doorbell resolved my dilemma. I grabbed crutches and looked

around to make sure I didn't need to straighten anything before I let in the prospective buyer. The open-concept living/dining room contained a table with four chairs—tucked in, two lounge chairs with lamps—shades straight, and the universal gym Paddy had rented for me. I pictured the bedroom: bed made, pile of books on the nightstand, not the floor. Bathroom clean. Breakfast dishes in the drainer. The remaining rooms were empty.

I sniffed my armpits. Sweaty, but okay. The easiest place to store the towel was around my neck. I crunched to the door and peered through the side windows. Man and woman. The guy looked like he played middle linebacker in college: six-footer and solid. His suit and tie seemed odd for a real estate agent these days. Well, maybe agents who showed seven-figure properties dressed differently. The woman buyer stood partially hidden behind him. I sensed sharp angles hidden by a deep-blue pants suit.

Remembering to put a smile on my face and in my voice, I opened the door and said, “You’re earlier than I expected. I’ll escape to the patio while you check the place out. Okay?”

The guy’s face scrunched in confusion. The woman stepped around him and held out a badge case. “FBI, Mr. McCree. I’m Special Agent Grozniak. We’d like a few minutes of your time. May we come in?” She offered her hand.

My mouth went Sahara Desert dry. My stomach clenched. Beads of perspiration popped onto my forehead. *Oh, shit. What did they find?*

Her handshake was firm and contrasted with the limp one I received from her partner, Special Agent Unger,

who smelled of cheap aftershave lotion. I waved them toward the table and closed the door behind them. *Try not to lie, Seamus. They throw you in jail for that.* With deliberation, I took a seat and balanced the crutches against the fourth chair. The agents gave the impression they had all the time in the world. “How can I help you?” I asked, knowing full well I would try hard to hinder their investigation if they were here for the reasons I thought.

Agent Grozniak took the lead. “Have you kept in touch with John Smith, the self-styled Happy Reaper?”

His name is John Smith? You’ve got to be kidding. Her question seemed to imply the Happy Reaper and I had something of a relationship. Less than a month ago I had caught the professional assassin. He now waited in jail for various states and the federal government to decide who would prosecute him first. The FBI could access visitor logs and phone records to know I’d had no contact with him since his arrest. What subtext was I missing?

“It’s a simple question,” she said.

“I’ve never been in touch with him. Our paths have crossed several times.”

“Then can you explain why he placed you on his visitor’s list?”

“I was unaware of that.” *What the hell was he up to?*

“His list includes a bevy of lawyers and three McCrees: you, your mother, and your son. Curious, don’t you think? We’re starting with you. Why would he do that?”

I had no idea and told her so. The Happy Reaper and I first crossed paths nine years ago. He had been at the top of his profession, earning six-figure payments for his work. “I was heading the financial crimes unit of Criminal

Investigations Group when I first met him. You familiar with them—an international not-for-profit local police can call in to provide free expertise? Anyway, I foiled a mass-murder plot that would have earned him millions. The second time was years later. I was helping my professional bodyguard partner protect a federal witness who the defendants had hired the Happy Reaper to eliminate. We got the guy into federal custody. Before our client testified, the Happy Reaper killed him . . .” The words caught in my throat. “. . . and my partner. I assume you know about last month. I had him in custody. He tried to escape. I shot him.”

“I’ve reviewed the files relating to that day,” Agent Grozniak said. “Something stinks, Mr. McCree, and everyone—local cops, state cops—seem to have Vicks VapoRub stuck up their noses. Why do you think Smith insists he was there because your mother hired him to protect you from someone trying to kill you? You know, the other guy you captured—the one who screwed up your ankle?”

“A crafty ploy. If I didn’t let him go, he said he’d cause our family grief with that accusation. He’s succeeding. You guys are here, right? He’s in jail with no hope of ever getting out and entertaining himself by making mischief.”

“Then why do you think he was there?”

I shrugged—a response that wouldn’t bring me jail time for lying.

She rubbed her eyes, something I did if I wanted time to think. With me it meant pushing up my glasses. If she was myopic, she wore contacts. I risked a quick look in Agent Unger’s direction. He maintained an interested smile and nodded at my glance. Police use silence to

encourage people to talk. I can do silence like a monk. Agent Grozniak broke first.

“Mr. Smith claims that, after you shot him, you lifted the keys to his Airbnb and stole a bunch of stuff.” She checked her notes. “A laptop and the money your mother paid him for a down payment. We confirmed that during Mr. Smith’s stay, his apartment’s Wi-Fi carried traffic, upload and download using an encrypted browser. Unfortunately, we can’t tell what that traffic was. Did you take those items, Mr. McCree?”

“No.” Technically the truth; Paddy had taken them.

“A jailhouse snitch told us Smith used an illicit phone to send text messages. Did he send any to you?”

A tingle of fear ran down my spine. The Happy Reaper had threatened to kill everyone associated with his arrest once he escaped prison. Had he given up on escaping and was texting to arrange for someone else to murder us?

“Why would you even ask?” I responded.

“Because in interviews, the only thing he will talk about is your family. May we have permission to access your phone records?”

The problem with my phone records was not nonexistent texts from the Happy Reaper. Unless Paddy had used his extralegal hacking skills to erase my phone’s location data, the records would prove I had been in the vicinity of the Happy Reaper’s Airbnb. Paddy had used the Happy Reaper’s key and taken the money, the laptop, and other items that incriminated my seventy-nine-year-old mother. She *had* hired the Happy Reaper to do away with the other guy trying to kill me.

I’d need a book to explain the convoluted business but saying anything was only asking to hang myself or my

family. It was time to call their bluff. “I’m not a fan of governments spying on their citizens. If you really think the Happy Reaper and I are in contact, get a warrant. Is there anything else?”

Grozniak gave Agent Unger a wave of her hand, as though turning me over to his clutches, and he spoke for the first time. “Because of the tip, we arranged a lockdown and search of the jail. Guards recovered a burner cellphone in the common area of his unit. It was wiped clean—physically and electronically. We obtained a search warrant for its records and discovered the phone sent a single message.”

Which meant they already knew it hadn’t come to me. They had been on a fishing expedition. There’s something more.

He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket, unfolded and read it, and handed it to me.

You know me by my Celtic Cross and Results Guaranteed.

Offer: \$2.5 million for escape.

I’m patient.

My hands shook while I re-read the message. The Happy Reaper had told me he’d escape and when he did, he would kill my family, leaving me for last. I handed it back. “He has a Celtic cross tattoo on his lower back. The cross and ‘Results Guaranteed’ are also on his business card. But lots of people know that. Could another prisoner be setting him up? Send a text and leave the phone where guards could find it? Either way, he didn’t send this to me. Who did it go to?”

“Another burner phone,” Agent Grozniak said. “Your scenario is possible, but odds are it’s him. Our problem,

Mr. McCree, is we don't know how many phones he's used. Whatever you and your family have going with Smith, you're in way over your head. Best you cooperate with us and put this behind you. What do you say?"

"I'm afraid I have nothing I can tell you." *Or at least nothing I will tell you.*

Knocking at the front door followed by the continuous buzz of the doorbell saved me from their next question. "There's a house showing," I said. "I need you to leave."

"You're making a big mistake, Mr. McCree," Agent Grozniak said. "We can protect you if we work together. Is your son here?"

"Sorry, no." I grabbed my crutches and yelled toward the entrance, "Coming." Speaking over my shoulder to the agents I added, "Shall I have him call you?"

Grozniak caught up to me. "Here's my card. Make sure he calls today. Let me get that for you."

With Agent Unger in tow, she opened the door. "We were just leaving." To me she said, "Consider our offer. We'll be in touch."