

AUTHOR OF PAIN

Book one: Minor Mayhem

BY
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Prologue

It's a curious thing, researching your own death.

Which, once the inevitable disorientation of his post-mortem rebirth had passed, was the first thing Randall did once he had returned from oblivion to the land of the (almost) living.

He even had a copy of the crime scene photographs, very grisly, not the kind of keepsake one would normally hang onto but they still held a macabre fascination for him, even after all these years they never failed to illicit a shiver down the spine.

He had been prompted to do all this by the dream of the final moments of his mortal life.

The before, to this after.

It always began the same, the caress of a gentle breeze on his face as he drifted off to sleep and with it the smell of freshly rain soaked streets.

Then came the shouts, and that God awful burning in his chest. Fractured images reassembled in some sort of vaguely coherent order would play out in his mind's eye, over and over like a damn movie loop but one edited by a madman with a hatchet. Yeah, he remembered just about everything about that night. Which considering what happened wasn't that surprising. After all, if you can't remember your own murder, then just what the hell are you going to remember?

He was running now, down a long dark New York cobbled street, the burning in his chest was his lungs screaming for air. The shouts were coming from the four shadows chasing him with murderous intent. A volley of gunshots rang out followed by that sound like angry bees buzzing past his head, one so close he could feel the concussion as it zipped by his ear. Randall could still, even now, feel that first bullet hit as it slammed into the back of his right shoulder and with it, just like always, everything became crystal clear.

He remembered struggling to keep his feet as his mutinous legs threatened to buckle as he ran. He remembered stumbling on and firing blindly behind him and that much needed hit of adrenalin as one of his pursuers screamed and tumbled to the ground. Lucky shot, but then again Randall had always been lucky. Lucky until he ran blindly into that alleyway.

Once he was beyond the reach of the streetlights the alley soon became pitch black, but still he ran on. The footsteps at his back were closer now and more gunshots rang out, their bark echoing off the walls around him and with each shot came a muzzle flash which cut through the darkness giving Randall fleeting glimpses of this surroundings; walls closing in around him.

He remembered the blood, icy cold running down his arm, he couldn't be sure, but he thought that must have been why the gun slipped through his fingers and clattered to the ground behind him. Betrayed by his own blood.

Randall's head was spinning wildly, his usually clear thoughts muddled by blood loss and an overdose of adrenaline, but he stumbled on, concentrating on just putting one damn foot in front of the other. Another gunshot briefly illuminated the alley ahead and the brick wall that was right in front of him forcing him to skid to a halt. A dead end, very apt.

He remembered not being afraid, of turning to face his executioners with a smile, or maybe that was just his pride and memory playing tricks on him. But either way it felt good not to be running anymore. That was when his legs finally gave out and he slid down the wall and onto his backside. He remembered laughing as he looked up at the three silhouettes standing over him, each breathing hard from the pursuit. One of them was speaking, but to this day, of all the things Randall remembered so vividly about that night, he couldn't remember a damn word the Man said, strange that.

Then, after that forgotten epitaph they finally opened fire. He got fleeting glimpses of their faces, they were all grinning like loons, one of them, did his face look familiar? Was openly laughing as he emptied his gun. Randall could still feel every single bullet hit, nine of

them, he guessed at least one of the bastards must have been a lousy shot.

So Randall remembered almost everything about that night, which stands to reason when you think about it. After all it's not every day you are shot to death in an alley, is it? Yes, he could recall with an almost absolute clarity, the sights the sounds, even the damn smell of the place. But curiously that was it.

There was nothing from that feeling of slipping into darkness to the moment he walked back out of that same alley looking exactly the same as when he had entered it, even wearing the same damn suit, (less the blood and bullet hits).

This he soon realised was the first thing he had to remedy when he discovered he'd been away for some fifty odd years. Nineteen seventies New York was the first of many shocks that day. Half a century gone by in a heartbeat and he remembered nothing of it.

He was just, different somehow.

Worse still, he had no recollection of the deal, of the selling of his soul and signing up for this new life he found himself slap bang in the middle of. For surely there must have been one, some little seduction scene play out in the void between life and death where he had readily given up his eternal soul for his lost life back, and not forgetting the power he now possessed.

There was no end of the mischief Randall could perform, he could manipulate those around him, not to mention the numerous creatures he could conjure up, just by will alone and with the help of a little spit, blood, smoke and shadows. Sure, that would explain where all the years had gone, you can't learn all that shit overnight, but he couldn't remember learning any of it, not even a training montage like in the movies.

And what of that moment, of signing his soul away? Nothing, and surely that has got to be even more important to a guy than simply dying. Any idiot could do that, people did it in their thousands, every damn day.

There was nothing from the moment he died to when he walked out, dazed and disorientated, into a world that had quite literally left him way behind.

Hence the research into his own death, it was his way of confirming all this wasn't just some hallucination brought on by blood loss and the odd bullet to the head. No, he was dead and it hadn't been big news either, if he was honest, Randall thought it would have been bigger, but there no screaming newspaper headlines for him, just a few paragraphs found almost by accident in an old copy of the New York Times in the city library. No one knew who had killed him or why, and Randall couldn't imagine they had made much of an effort to track down his murderers. He wasn't missed, just another dead hood in the carnage that was the gang wars of the roaring twenties. Gone and defiantly forgotten.

But now he was back.

Randall had been wandering around in a daze for almost a week with all this power but no clue what it was for or why he was back. That was when that annoying little bastard Ishrel finally found him, and that was when things had gotten really surreal.

One

Larry McCulloch was a survivor, no doubt about it. Say what you like about him, (oh and they did) but the one thing you could never do was deny his ability to worm his way out of trouble. In his sixty-seven years, Larry had been shot, (twice) stabbed, (thrice) and beaten to a pulp, (too numerous to mention) but had always come out the other side smelling of roses, no matter what the bastards had thrown at him.

He'd led a charmed life that was for sure, so how he'd come to find himself in this present company eluded him. Larry looked around at the three plain clothed officers he was sharing the car with as they drove through the rain and turned onto yet another dimly lit street.

They were kids really, not one of them was over forty, and although he had only known them a matter of hours, he hated the lot of them already and certainly didn't relish the fact that these three were his last line of defence against those who, most of whom he had once called friends, now wanted him very dead.

Lewis, who Larry had already taken a particular dislike to, was in the front passenger seat fumbling with a hand drawn map. The man was thirty five at most, and looked like a dishevelled accountant in his crumpled cheap suit and badly combed dirty blond hair.

Lewis frowned at the makeshift map and absently ruffled his already messy mop of hair. "Ok Jeff, you want to take your next left," he instructed Jeff, the driver who was barely into his twenties, but looked even younger, the kid nodded and obediently took the next turning.

Larry peered out of his side window at the urban decay as it passed by. "Hmm," he said. "Dark deserted streets, that's a good idea."

Lewis craned his neck around. "Relax Larry, you're with the professionals now. No more uniforms, we're the real deal."

"Huh!" Larry grunted in way of response: MI5? Bollocks, he thought, this was all far short of the five star treatment he had been promised by the pencil pushers in Whitehall. Oh, he had been assured this was only temporary of course, just until things died down a little and they could guarantee his safety. Then they would begin the negotiations in earnest. Larry had already made up his mind to make them pay a little extra, to make them beg a little more, for the gold mine of information he had ferreted away through the years. It still brought a smile to his face when he recalled how Chief Inspector Willis had almost had a thrombosis upon seeing just a glimpse of the evidence he had gathered over his fifty odd years of criminal activity.

There was dirt on most of the underworlds biggest movers and shakers. Larry knew, sometimes literally, where the bodies were buried. But it was the other stuff that had Willis practically panting, the names of all the bent judges, coppers and the odd politician (past and present) that Larry had encountered, all backed up with cast iron proof. That had been the real gold, it was that mother lode more than anything that would save Larry McCulloch's life.

It had started as a hobby of sorts, little pieces of information filed away here and there, just in case. But the evidence had mounted up over the years and Larry soon began to realise what if things went badly for him, then this was his winning lotto ticket, his get out of jail free card. And he sure as hell intended to play it now that things were looking bleak.

Queen's evidence. Two of the sweetest words in the English language.

He must have been smirking to himself because Pieroni who was sitting next to him, an Italian Woman in her early thirties, who Larry had first thought attractive until he realised she never smiled and who had the dubious honour of being the leader of this happy little troupe, gave him a sideways glance.

"Having fun?" She said with a strong accent. Larry assumed Lewis and the kid Jeff must be MI5 so that made Pieroni Interpol, which made sense considering Larry's

mischief over the years had often taken him over to fleece our European friends.

Quite a collaboration he thought, maybe he would see if he could get these three fuckwits fired as part of his deal, or shipped off to Outer Mongolia. "Yes," he finally replied meeting her brown eyed gaze. "Yes I am having fun."

"That's it," Lewis piped up. "Last house on the left."

Jeff nodded. "Yep got it, number twenty." And pulled the car over to the side of the road.

Larry looked up at the house they were parked in front of in dismay. Now they were just taking the piss. "Oh come on," he said. Even under the flattering mask of night the place looked dilapidated.

Lewis folded away the map and glanced back at Pieroni. "Don't think he approves of your choice of safe house, Ania." To which Pieroni just raised an eyebrow in way of response. "Careful Larry, you'll hurt her feelings." Lewis added.

The old crook glared at Lewis who clutched his heart in mock pain. "Ugh! If looks could kill we'd be a man down," Lewis said. And Larry wished he had a gun.

Pieroni opened her door and moved to get out. "Come on Larry, let's get you inside before the bad men see you, eh?" And with that she got out.

"Huh," Larry snorted. "No self-respecting hit man would be seen dead in a place like this," he added more to himself than anyone.

"Exactly Larry, exactly." Lewis said as he got out.

"Here," said Jeff before Lewis closed the door. "I tell you what, he catches on quick though, doesn't he?"

Larry exhaled and buttoned up his coat. 'Just relax,' he told himself, 'don't bite and in a few days you'll be away from all this bollocks.' The thought warmed him as he stepped out in to the cold night air and followed his protectors over to the safe house. Rundown as it was, this

was to be his home for the next couple of days or so. Then he promised himself, it would be nothing but five stars for the rest of his, hopefully very long, life.

Once Jeff had finished fumbling with the front door keys they finally got inside, it was just as Larry had feared. The place was as rundown inside as the outside had suggested. The interior décor reminded him of a time, back in the eighties, when he had briefly gotten into renting fire traps to students. Everything was second hand and mismatched, the whole place smelt of damp. Hardly the Ritz.

Lewis pushed passed Larry rubbing his hands together. "I'll get the heating on," he said and then disappeared into the kitchen.

"I suppose room service is out of the question?" Larry deadpanned.

Ignoring the remark Pieroni went through into what looked like the living room jabbering in Italian on her mobile phone, leaving Larry in the hallway with Jeff. The kid locked the door and turned to Larry grinning. "You're a real card, Larry," he said. "A real card."

"Yeah," came Lewis' voice from the kitchen. "Ought to be dealt with!"

Pieroni reappeared snapping her mobile shut, she could see Larry wasn't happy. "It's just temporary, until things die down," she told him. "I'll order some food, you'll feel much better after you have had a shower and something to eat. Besides, it doesn't look too bad to me." She eased past Larry and started up the stairs.

"I can't believe I agreed to all this," Larry said.

Without stopping Pieroni called over her shoulder; "Don't recall you having much choice McCulloch, do you?"

Lewis came back through from the kitchen. "Heating's on, it'll be toasty warm in no time. He unzipped his jacket. "Tell you what," he continued. "You can have the big bedroom if you like?"

"Oh, well that makes all the fucking difference then doesn't it?" Larry said testily. He rubbed his tired eyes with the balls of his hands. Yep, it was going to be a long few days, he thought, a long few days.

TWO

Larry stepped into the shower and stuck his head under the tepid water, it robbed him of his breath for a moment, but he was so desperate to wash away the grime of the last few hours that he gladly risked hypothermia. Now that he was out of sight of those clowns downstairs, Larry allowed himself a brief moment of self-pity, the urge to sob uncontrollably almost over took him but he just about managed to suppress it, even though he knew it would help ease the knot that had been tightening deep in his stomach ever since he had woken a week ago and finally realised he was shit out of luck, which left only one option.

And so he had reluctantly surrendered himself into the hands of those he had always thought of as the enemy. He stopped himself because he knew that once he started he wasn't sure he would ever be able to stop.

He rested his forehead against the cold tiles and tried to tell himself that he had been in worse scrapes than this before and still come through the other side. After all wasn't that what he was famous for? By rights Larry McCulloch should have been found dead in a ditch somewhere on any number of occasions before this, but someone had always come through for him at the last minute.

Larry's philosophy, which had kept him alive this long, was quite simple: If you are going to pull a fast one and fuck somebody over on a deal, just make sure it benefits not only you, but also somebody who's bigger or stronger than the fella you've just fucked. That way they have to grin and bear it or risk an even bigger shafting from your new partner. Sure it was risky, but in the end Larry knew that was all part of the charm, he had a thinly disguised self-destructive streak, always had, sometimes he even shocked himself. He remembered what a hit man had once said to him while they were waiting for their victim to emerge from a late nightclub one night, years ago. 'Deep down every killer wants to get caught eventually.'

That had always rung true with Larry and in moments of vulnerability, like now, more than ever. Still as no one he had ever known had the balls to pull some of the stunts he had over the years, Larry had attained a kind of mythic status amongst the underworld, not just here but in Europe

too, which he had always enjoyed, probably too much in fact, because it had worked well enough as long as his friends had outnumbered his enemies. But somewhere along the way his list of friends had grown shorter and his enemies alarmingly longer, until he'd had no choice but to play his last card and get the fuck out of Dodge.

His famous black book, (which was in fact, rather less glamorously, half a dozen tatty folders crammed full to bursting and a cheap flash drive) that was his ticket out of here. It was a stroke of genius and safely tucked away ready for its big entrance. The thought of the chaos it would cause never failed to lift his spirits. And when the shit hit the fan he would melt quietly way somewhere hot. Somewhere a million miles away from here so all this would be just a distant memory, if he would be able to recall it at all.

And then he knew the legend of 'Lucky' Larry McCulloch would be set in stone. He imagined there would be books, maybe even a biopic, yeah he would like that. And so with images of media immortality buzzing around his head, Larry got out of the shower and dried himself off.

Once he had changed into some clean clothes, Larry felt a million times better and even felt up to another round of moronic conversation with his so-called protectors, that coupled with the smell of freshly delivered pizza tempted Larry down stairs.

As he got to the hallway he could see Pieroni through the living room door, mobile in one hand and a slice of Pepperoni in the other. She was pacing the floor speaking Italian again in between nibbling on the pizza, although he couldn't speak much Italian he knew whomever was unfortunate enough to find themselves on the other end of the phone was getting a tongue lashing, hopefully about this shit-hole they were staying in.

Hearing voices from the kitchen Larry wandered through to see Lewis sitting at a cheap plastic topped table munching on some garlic bread while Jeff was in a corner studying two monitors which occasionally flicked between different parts of what Larry assumed must be outside the house. At least they had some sort of security system in place.

Lewis jumped up theatrically from his seat seeing Larry enter. "Don McCulloch, take a seat. What can I get you, Sir? We've got Pepperoni, Ham and pineapple and for our veggie friends Margarita."

Larry ignored him and eyed the pizza boxes on the table, he opened one and took a slice of Margarita. "Anything to drink?" He asked, taking a bite.

"Tea, coffee, it's freshly brewed, and I think there's some bottled water in the fridge." Offered Lewis.

"Anything stronger?" Larry said in between chewing.

Jeff looked up from the monitors. "I've got some shandy. I know I shouldn't while on duty but what the heck." This won a smile from Lewis but just more contempt from Larry.

"Coffee," Larry grunted and took a seat on one of the mismatched chairs opposite where Lewis was sitting. Lewis poured Larry a mug of coffee and sitting back down slid it across the table to him, up close it smelt burned.

"How was your shower?" Jeff asked.

"The water's freezing," Larry said, he sipped the coffee and winced at the sour taste. He gestured around him. "Is this really the best you people can come up with?"

"Government cut backs," Lewis said shrugging apologetically. "You know how it is?" He then picked up another piece of garlic bread and proceeded to feed his face.

"Yeah," Jeff said, leaned back in his chair and stretched. "Here, Larry, there's been something I've been meaning to ask you. Seeing as all the trouble you're now in, didn't anybody ever tell you, crime doesn't pay? At school maybe?"

"Be fair," Lewis said. "That was a long time ago."

Larry was about to answer when Pieroni poked her head around the door. "Arh, good you're eating, Larry. How was your shower?"

"Cold, like his heart," Lewis said glancing mischievously at Larry.

The Italian ignored the comment. "I'm off then, keep in touch, I should be back tomorrow sometime."

Lewis nodded. "Will do chief, see you later."

"Any problems Larry, see Lewis until I return. Bye for now." She disappeared again.

This pleased Lewis no end. "I think he's got a list." He said.

"Be nice!" Pieroni called back before the front door slammed shut. Jeff checked one of the monitors and followed her as she walked down the garden path and in to the car and once she had pulled away, repositioned the camera so it was covering the front door once more.

"She'd be attractive if she removed that rod from up her arse." Larry said and finished his slice of pizza.

"Don't knock the boss, Larry. She's a gem" Jeff said playing with a camera control. "She will keep your sorry backside alive if you let her."

This won a snort of derision from Larry.

"Sooo, Larry," Lewis said pointing a half-eaten piece of garlic bread at him. "How did a high roller like you end up in a place like this?"

He gave Lewis a bored look, but thought, what the hell, a bit of banter might make the time go quicker. "You goody-goodies tell me crime doesn't pay?"

"Just an observation, Larry taking into account your current situation." Jeff said, turning to face them both.

"Alright smart guy," Larry continued. "Tell me this. Where will you two dickheads be this time next year, eh? Shall I tell you?"

"Go on," Lewis said.

"Nowhere, that's where." Lewis and Jeff exchanged a mock quizzical look. Lewis made to speak but Larry continued. "You'll be risking your lives, stuck in a dump like this, guarding some other wanker who doesn't care if you live or die. And you know where I'll be?"

"No," Jeff said. "But I'm sure you're going to tell us."

Pausing for dramatic effect, Larry took another sip of bitter coffee before he spoke. "In the sun mate, in the fucking sun, living it up in Rio for the rest of my pampered life. Now tell me crime doesn't pay."

Lewis leaned back in his chair he raised his eyebrows and gave Larry a look something akin to pity, which riled him instantly. "Larry," he finally said. "Just because you've agreed to testify against all your so-called gangster mates, doesn't mean you're going to be able to walk away from all you've done. It doesn't work like that anymore I'm afraid. You're fast out of friends," he gestured to Jeff. "We're all you've got left. Now how sad is that?"

Larry gave Lewis his best smug look. "Queen's evidence is a wonderful thing by friend. Once I give your bosses the shit they want, the ones who I haven't got dirt on that is. I walk, scot fucking free."

"He's got you there, Lewis." Jeff interjected.

Unruffled, Lewis got to his feet and walked over to the sink, where he began washing out his mug. "Arh," he said. "The famous book. You really do live in your own little world, don't you?"

"He's a legend in his own lunch time," Jeff spun on his chair and glanced at the monitors. Then happy all was well he spun back.

"Huh, yeah," Lewis continued. "He's just going to walk away from all he's done," he clicked his fingers. "Just like that. The infamous Lucky Larry McCulloch, huh?"

Larry drained his cup, which made him wince at the taste. "You know, why anybody would want to be a bodyguard in this day and age is beyond me."

Lewis turned around, suddenly serious which took Larry aback slightly. After all this was just harmless banter, wasn't it? "You don't know anything about us, Larry."

The kid Jeff however was still in fine form. "But they give us guns Larry, guns!!" He pulled his jacket aside to reveal a shoulder holster.

Larry glanced at it then back to Lewis who was staring at him intently, frowning slightly. So, Larry thought, a chink in the armour, Lewis hated him, that much he already knew. But he hated having to risk his life for him even more. Thanks for the ammo, kid.

As if feeling the tension, Jeff said; "Guns!" again. To which Lewis nodded and patted his own gun under his jacket.

"Huh," snorted Larry. "You lot have to fill in a million forms just to shoot one of those things. God forbid you should actually hit anything."

"Not like when you were a lad, eh Larry?" Jeff said with a sarcastic wink Larry happily ignored, but nodded all the same.

"In my day," he said. "If I wanted some twat shot, all I had to do was pick up the phone." He made his hand into a gun and 'fired' it at Lewis. "Bang!" Then he hit the table for dramatic effect.

This raised a slight smile from Lewis. "And just think, now someone is going to do the same for you," he said, then softly added; "Bang?"

Larry held his gaze, refusing to be intimidated. "Don't worry about me," he said.

The smile on Lewis' face broadened. "Oddly enough, we don't." He replied.

'Got ya!' thought Larry. "Hmm," he mused. "Yet you might have to take a bullet to save me and by precious book." Lewis' smile faltered ever so slightly, but Larry saw it only too well, so added; "How do you spell imbecile?"

Lewis was openly frowning now, he sighed. "You know, you really aren't a very nice person, are you Larry?" Larry

looked at him, amused. Lewis studied him for a moment, then added. "Ever heard the expression: 'What you sow you shall reap?'"

"Very Biblical," Larry replied nonchalantly.

"Or live by the sword, die by the sword?" Jeff added gleefully.

Larry shook his head, the clock on the wall said 22:30 and he decided after the day he'd had and the way things were going down here that it was well passed his bed time. He stood up. "You know if asshole could fly, this place would be an airport!"

This made Jeff laughed out loud at this and it even raised a smile from Lewis. Jeff clapped. "Good one liner, Larry," he said.

Lewis shrugged. "Well it was more two than one, but good never the less."

That was it, Larry threw his hands up and left them to it. "Enough of this bollocks," he said on the way out. "I'm off to bed."

He got as far as the bottom of the stairs when Jeff shouted; "'Ere Larry, you should go into showbiz with a repartee like that."

He couldn't help himself and shouted back; "A fuckin' airport!" He was about to ascend the stairs but he could still hear the two of them twittering on and stopped on the first step to listen despite himself.

"Arh," It was Jeff. "Everyone a classic, everyone a pearl."

"Yeah, watch out Bob Monkhouse, eh?" Lewis replied.

"Bob Monkhouse is dead," explained Jeff.

"Don't be daft, no he isn't." Countered Lewis

"He is!" Insisted Jeff.

"Nar."

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