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opening extract from

Grass

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'Want a Mint Imperial?' I handed over the bag of my favourite sweets to my mate, Sean.

He pushed it back at me, and pulled a Mars bar from his pocket. 'You know I hate them things, Leo. Gimme chocolate any day.'

We were on the train heading home after the Saturday match. Our team had lost 3–0, but in our minds we had not been defeated. We usually lost by a lot more than that. Nearly all our friends supported Rangers or Celtic. But not me and Sean. We liked to be different. We were Barnhill men, like our dads before us. We supported our local team, Barnhill. Or, 'Barnhill Nil', as some rotten people liked to call them.

We were well pleased that day as we headed home on the coastal railway line past Dumbarton Rock, watching

the river sunset red and the whole town bathed in a pink glow.

'We're really lucky living in the best place in the world, with the best football team.'

Sean laughed. He agreed with me. 'When they were handing out luck, McCabe, God gave us an extra share.'

That's how me and Sean always were. We agreed about everything. We were best mates. Had been since Primary 1. We liked the same things . . . except when it came to Mint Imperials – but then you can't have everything.

We were just drawing into one of the stations when Sean pointed towards a wall surrounding one of the derelict factories. 'Hey, look at that.'

It would have been hard to miss what was written on that wall. Painted in giant whitewashed letters.

SHARKEY IS A GRASS

I hadn't a clue who Sharkey was, but I knew one thing. 'Sharkey's a dead man,' I said. 'They should have added RIP – Rest in Peace.'

'Or rest in pieces.' Sean laughed. ''Cause they'll probably cut him up and drop his body bit by bit into the Clyde.'

Me and Sean are big C.S.I. fans and they'd had a storyline just like that only a couple of weeks ago.

'I wonder who Sharkey grassed on?' I said.

'Could have been Nelis, or Armour, or McCrae.'

Everyone knew the top gang leaders in the town. The drug dealers, the hard men, the bad men. Nelis had an evil reputation for doing the most awful things, and Armour was simply called 'The Man'. As if there was no other. McCrae was vile. His name would always be linked to the Sheridan lassie. She'd come from a decent family but once she'd started running about with McCrae he'd got her on to drugs. Her life had spiralled downhill, and when she'd finally had the courage to leave him she'd been found shot dead not far from McCrae's house. No one leaves McCrae. He had even been charged with her murder but managed to get off when two of his 'friends' had supplied him with an alibi. But no one doubted his guilt. Andy Sheridan, the girl's dad, had sworn all kinds of vengeance on him for that.

McCrae and the others always got off due to lack of evidence – or lack of surviving witnesses. No one ever grassed on them because once you did you'd be a dead man, like Sharkey would be soon.

'He's probably left town already,' Sean said.

But Sharkey, whoever he was, the drug dealers, the crime bosses, everything was forgotten by the time the train stopped at our station. We were going to Sean's house. He had a new PlayStation game and we were dying to try it out.

Sean lived in McCrae territory. Crazy, I know, that they claimed areas of the town as their own, but that was the way it was. Sean and me, we were streetwise enough to know that. But we kept back from any trouble. My dad and Sean's would have gone spare if they'd caught us having dealings with anyone connected to McCrae or any of the others.

And on the way to Sean's house we did what we loved best. We explored.

The area where Sean lived had so many boarded-up houses and derelict properties and shops, and me and Sean were experts at getting inside them. It was exciting and a bit dangerous as well. You never knew what you might find. It was about the only risky thing we did and it didn't hurt anybody. We'd sneak inside, pretend we were SAS commandos searching out terrorists, or crime scene investigators looking for clues. Always the good guys, me and Sean.

There was a new boarded-up shop to explore that

night. Azam had finally had enough. He'd given up after all the hold-ups and break-ins and vandalism to his shop. He had closed up and decided to move to somewhere less dangerous. 'Baghdad, I think,' he had told Sean's dad. 'It's a lot safer there.'

'My dad says it was a blinkin' shame,' Sean said. 'Azam was trying to give the people here a good corner-shop service. They never gave him a chance.'

It sounded like something Sean's dad would say. Like my dad, Sean's was always complaining about how the town was run by those three gang bosses.

'If Azam had paid McCrae protection money, he could have stayed,' I said to Sean. And he agreed. Everyone knew it went on. McCrae would threaten the small shopkeepers with his gang of hard men, who would break up the shop or warn customers to stay away – shop somewhere else. In the end most of the shop-keepers would pay up just for the sake of peace. But after that they would be in McCrae's pocket for ever.

'The Untouchables', my dad called Nelis and Armour and McCrae. Because the law could never seem to touch them. They got off with everything. Verdicts not guilty, or not proven.

So now Azam's once brightly whitewashed shop was

covered in graffiti – on the walls, on the door. Even on the steel panels that boarded up the windows. It was easy getting inside. Me and Sean were experts at finding a way. One of those steel panels was lying askew at the back door, and first me and then Sean squeezed through. First thing that hit us was the smell. Somebody had been using this place as a toilet.

Sean started dancing about like a cat on a sizzling hob unit. 'Hope I don't put my feet on something yucky.'

I was almost tempted to squeeze back through into the street, but my crime-busting instincts took over. I pulled out the pen-torch I carried with me (well, I did say we were always exploring) and flashed it across the ground. Just as well. Another few steps and Sean *would* have stepped on something yucky. The vandals had obviously been here already. It never took long for them to get inside any derelict properties. There was broken glass all over the floor, pipes had been ripped from the walls. There was graffiti on every empty space.

'I hear something,' Sean said.

I could hear it too. A low moan from one of the dark corners. We were always hoping to find evidence of a crime or a robbery in progress, maybe stumble across

the aftermath of mayhem – a dismembered body in black bin bags strewn across the floor. So far the only thing we'd ever come across was a gold watch. We took it to the police. Got a reward too. Didn't I say we were always the good guys, me and Sean?

But here in the dark, listening to that moaning coming from the shadows, it occurred to me that right at this minute I'd rather be at Sean's playing his new Zombie computer game.

Neither of us moved. The moan became a growl. I flashed my torch towards the sound.

I thought at first it was a wild animal. All hair and teeth. It leapt at us. Me and Sean yelled and this time Sean didn't miss the yucky stuff. He sank his foot right in it.

The face became clear. It was an old man, a dosser. He was yelling like a beast.

'Get oota my place! Ya wee . . .' He threw something at us. We didn't wait to find out what it was. We had never moved so fast, squeezing out of the door almost at the same time. It was only as we were running away that we started to laugh. Laugh until we couldn't stop.

'Oh, we would be brilliant crime scene investigators,' I said. 'One old weirdo and we're off faster than a speeding bullet.'

I made a whizzing sound, and it only made us laugh all the more.

My dad picked me up later at Sean's. My dad nearly always picked me up . . . or my mum did.

'I'm not having my boy walking these streets late at night,' they would both say.

I had a great mum and dad. A great family and the best mate in the world. Sean.

That night as my dad was driving me home and I was yattering on about the match – giving him a kick-by-kick description of the game – I was really happy. Life was good.

Nothing was ever going to change that.