





Madeline Ryan

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**Madeline Ryan
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01: In for a penny.

The silence in the small room was oppressive, the overhead fluorescent light was flickering slightly and, through the small window, I could hear the noise of traffic – the sound of ordinary people going about their ordinary lives.

‘I just want to tell you that you are very brave, Mr McMullen.’

Although he meant to be reassuring, Inspector Mawson’s words achieved the opposite; they certainly did *not* reassure me. I felt instantly ill! Just like the people I heard through the window, going about their normal lives, he was ignorant of my dilemma, unaware of my pain!

Everywhere in the police station, I could see the police officers looking at me with their evasive eyes full of pity and they also knew my days were numbered.

Inspector Mawson gave me a bleak smile and I nodded, trying to quell the nausea in my stomach. I felt awful and could not remember the last time I ate anything substantial.

‘Would you like a cup of tea, Mr McMullen?’ Detective Sommers asked.

She was at least attempting to be kind but when I saw the expressions on their faces, I knew they thought they were looking at a dead man.

Was that what I was – a dead man?

All because I chose to do the '*right thing*'. Or was it the right thing?

My mother had always told me to do the right thing, to live a truthful life and, I suppose, I attempted to follow her values in life and her morality.

And look where that's got me! That's why I was in the mess I was now in. Perhaps I made a big mistake stepping forward to testify against Boris Preteski.

Everything has its consequences; even doing the *right thing*!

I was walking home after a late night shift at the hotel when I had decided to cut through the park. It was there I saw two men having an intense argument under the lamplight.

Slowing down, I wondered if I should skirt around, as I didn't want to get involved. They might turn their anger on me, it's happened before. I am a rather short male and not very strong – easy prey for some louts. In my youth, it had caused much derision amongst my classmates who had all looked like rugby forwards. I am so used to being called '*sissy*' that, sometimes, I react to it better than my own name!

I was still standing there, half hidden behind a tree undecided whether to turn around or not when one of them pulled a gun from his coat pocket, aimed it at the other and the gunshot echoed through the park.

The victim fell back, lifeless like a crash dummy and I saw it all clearly, as if it was in slow motion – even the small red hole in his forehead.

He's dead! He killed him!

Horrified, I stood gaping at the lifeless body. When I looked up, I saw the man, the killer, staring at me. We saw each other at the same time and it felt like I was rooted to the bloody spot!

Then he moved!

I saw him clearly in the lamplight as he raised the gun to shoot me!

Some reflex made me dive headfirst into the bushes as I heard a bang and then something like a swarm of angry bees whiz over my head.

The bugger is shooting at me!

At me!

Furiously, I crawled through the bushes in the dark on my hands and knees, not worrying about what it was doing to my only good suit.

He's trying to kill me!

Keep your bloody head down, Eric!

Trying to control my breathing, I lay in the bushes and hoped the darkness would cover me.

'Come out, come out, where ever you are!'

His voice had a thick accent and I wondered if he could see me. Peeking through the shrubs, I tried to see him, while fighting the urge to throw up.

'There is no point running from me, young lady.' he called and this time, he was closer!

Young Lady? He thinks I am a woman!

I thought it was because of my statue and I was wearing my hair in a ponytail.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to steady the thumping of my heart and wondered, insanely, if he could hear it.

‘I won’t hurt you, little one,’ he said and, this time, thankfully, his voice was moving away from me. ‘Trust me. We will have a little chat, perhaps a cup of tea. Do you like tea? That’s all,’ he said in a soothing voice as he moved through the bushes, ‘we will talk, I will not hurt you, little one.’

I peeked through the bushes and saw him walking down the path, gun still in his hand as he peered into bushes.

Yeah, sure! All he wants to do is chat.

Suddenly, I heard sirens and immediately thought, *thank god!*

He also heard them and quickly slipped the gun into his pocket as he half ran down the path. Abruptly, he stopped and turned around and I shrivelled back into the leaves.

‘I will find you, little one,’ he declared loudly, ‘you cannot hide from Boris!’

I moved back even further as his eyes rested on the bushes where I was hiding, as the sirens grew louder. For a long moment, I wondered if he could see me, if my life was over, but he hastily turned and ran into the darkness.

Police were suddenly everywhere. I hesitantly stepped from the bushes and they pounced on me.

Shivering, with teeth chattering, I felt awful but thankfully, they saw immediately I was in shock, wrapped me in one of those emergency silver blanket thingies and I sat in the back of the ambulance while the ambulance people who checked me over.

A big man in a suit with a waistcoat appeared in front me, showed identification and said, 'I'm Inspector Mawson.'

'Eric McMullen,' I said softly and he looked me up and down.

'Do you have identification?'

I gave him my wallet with a shaking hand and he examined the contents while talking.

'Did you see it?'

I nodded as a woman in trousers and a jacket joined us.

'This is Detective Sommers,' Mawson said without taking his eyes from me.

'Hello,' she said and offered a small smile, 'you look done in.'

'I feel awful,' I murmured, trying to stop my hand from trembling as I pulled the blanket tightly around my shoulders.

'Why were you in the park late at night, Mr McMullen?' Mawson asked, his hard eyes holding mine.

I sensed he was suspicious of something but, for the life of me, couldn't understand of what.

'It's a shortcut,' I said, 'I work at the Regent Hotel as a clerk and this is a short way home...'

‘No other reason?’

I looked at him puzzled.

‘No, no other reason.’

‘How old are you, Mr McMullen, if you don’t mind me asking.’

‘I’m twenty three...’

‘You look younger,’ Mawson said flatly. ‘So, you took a short cut?’

I nodded.

‘What did you see?’ Mawson asked after a moment and, slowly and painfully, I told them everything. Sommers took notes and when I said what the murderer had said, they exchanged glances.

‘He said Boris?’ Mawson demanded.

‘Yes, he said “*You cannot hide from Boris*”.’

‘That doesn’t mean it *was* Boris,’ Sommers said softly to Mawson who nodded. ‘Boris wouldn’t do something this stupid.’

Mawson shrugged.

‘Maybe he made his first mistake. I can hope, can’t I? Can you come in tomorrow and look at some photographs, Mr McMullen?’

‘I suppose so,’ I said wearily and they took down my details.

‘We’ll take you home in a car,’ Sommers said sympathetically when they finished.

The next morning I went to New Scotland Yard dressed in jeans and a jacket. There was no doubt I still

looked done in, as I hadn't slept that well and hoped the entire process would be over quickly.

How wrong I was!

Mawson and Sommers were fired up, almost as if they were on a crusade and placed me in front of a computer screen to look at photographs. They asked that I carefully go through them in the hope I would recognise the murderer.

I saw him after twenty minutes of staring at faces and I gasped, blood draining from my face.

'That's him,' I squeaked, pointing at the cruel face.

Mawson and Sommers exchanged small, quick grins.

'Are you sure?' Mawson demanded. '*Really* sure?'

'Definitely, I will never forget that face.'

Mawson sat down as Sommers took printed the photograph and then left the room.

'Tell me, Mr McMullen, have you ever heard of Boris Preteski?'

I shook my head.

'No, I don't think so.'

'He is the largest villain in Europe, Mr McMullen, and,' Mawson said seriously, 'perhaps the most successful ever as his empire is estimated at over one billion pounds!'

'Oh.'

'Yes, a *billion* pounds, Mr McMullen, and we can not prove anything illegal with his business dealings, even

though we've been trying for years! He's a very intelligent man and should not be underestimated.'

Stupidly, I tried to consider what *that* sort of wealth meant, what it could buy, but my mind would not cope.

'As I said, we've been after him for years but he's always been too bloody clever for us. Now, if you'll help us, Mr McMullen, we have him!'

Mawson smiled triumphantly.

'I see,' I said softly.

'The man he killed was a business associate of his.'

'Another criminal? They were killing themselves?'

'Not exactly a criminal – he was Preteski's accountant. We could never prove anything.'

'Will...will I be in any danger, if I testify?'

Mawson nodded seriously.

'There may be some danger but we'll protect you, Mr McMullen, you have my word.'

'Well that's a comfort.' I said with a bit of sarcasm.

'We are very good at this Mr McMullen,' Mawson said stiffly.

'I'm sorry, I'm just very nervous.'

'I understand,' Mawson said quickly. 'Do you have any relatives or friends that Preteski could get at to influence you?'

Friends? Me? Not likely.

My mother died when I was sixteen. I shook my head.

'There's no one close.'

Sommers returned with a sheet of paper. ‘I’ve written your statement for you, Mr McMullen, please read it carefully.’

My fingers shook as I picked the piece of paper up and attempted to study it.

As I read it, my mother’s words silently echoed through my head – *you must always do the right thing, luv, sometimes it’s not easy but when it’s right, it’s right and everything else is wrong.*

‘Where do I sign?’

Now, here I am, the consequences of my actions, consequences of signing that statement!

Why oh why did I do such an insane thing?

‘You just have to go into the court room and certify that you signed the deposition and are aware of its contents, Mr McMullen,’ Sommers said gently.

‘Ah...yeah...I know, the solicitor said that.’

‘Don’t look at Preteski,’ Inspector Mawson said, ‘keep your eyes on the judge and ignore Preteski. This is just the first step before the trial actually begins.’

‘When exactly will the trial begin...’

‘That unfortunately depends on lawyers,’ Mawson said with a shrug and I immediately sensed he didn’t have a great deal of respect for the legal profession.

I imagined my lost mother saying softly, ‘You *are* doing the right thing.’

I’m not so bloody sure, I replied silently.

The door opened and the police prosecutor poked his head in.

‘They’re bringing him up; we’re next.’

Nervously, I stood and adjusted my tie. Some men look fine in a suit but I always look awkward – small shoulders and so thin – the bloody thing always looked like it swam on me, no matter the size!

‘Remember,’ Sommers said, at my side as we walked, ‘don’t look at him.’

‘I won’t...’

‘Make sure you don’t.’

‘I won’t, I’m too bloody frightened.’

She smiled.

‘You’ll be fine.’

‘You think so?’

‘Yes. You are very brave...’

‘Everybody keeps telling me that but I’m just trying not to be sick.’

The judge looked at me over his glasses and shuffled the papers.

‘You are Eric Simon McMullen?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘The correct term is *Your Honour* or if you were a member of the legal profession, *M’lud*.’

‘Yes sir, sorry sir...Your Honour.’

Thanks for the bloody etiquette lesson!

‘This is your deposition?’

He held up the piece of paper that I couldn't see but I took a wild guess.

'Yes, Your Honour.'

'You have stated that on the night of the twelfth of March this year, you allegedly witnessed Boris Andre Preteski fire a gun which inflicted a fatal wound to the head of the victim?'

'Yes, Your Honour,' I replied in a low voice, feeling the hairs on the back of my neck shiver.

'The defendant will stand,' the judge ordered and my heart pounded as I heard noises behind me. 'Please look at the defendant, Mr McMullen,' the judge continued in a clear voice, 'and confirm this is the man you saw.'

My heart was pounding so much I was sure the entire courtroom would hear and my fingers were trembling but I managed to turn.

Preteski stood with a calm expression on his round face, his hair was shaven very close – just stubble really – and his pale eyes glittered as I looked at him.

Now I know how a rabbit feels when they see a snake!

'That's him,' I whispered.

'Please speak up, Mr McMullen,' the judge intoned, 'is this the man?'

Preteski smiled at me coldly and, body shaking, I turned back to the bench.

'Yes, Your Honour, this is the man.'

I didn't follow what went on then as I gratefully sat down and allowed the rest of the proceedings drone on about me.

All the while, I felt Preteski's eyes burning into the back of my head.

As usual, I was on the night shift of at the hotel and the supervisor stared grimly at me as I bumbled in.

'Please straighten yourself up, McMullen,' he snapped. 'You *are* representing the hotel!'

'Sorry, Mr Jacobs,' I muttered as I squeezed past Stella to get behind the reception desk.

'Sleep in?' Stella asked from the side of her mouth as she checked the bookings.

Stella and I got on reasonably well. We seemed to have a few things in common and she liked talking to me. She said I was one of the few blokes who knew who to talk to women.

'No, not really, had a few things,' I muttered. 'Anything new?' I added as I watched Jacobs move away.

Stella beamed at me the moment Jacobs vanished into the lifts.

'I got the job!'

'Job?' I asked stupidly. 'What job?'

'The trainee managers' job! I got it! It was tough,' she added, 'I had to go through two interviews.'

My heart sank and I tried to mask my emotions as I had *also* applied for that position.

I thought I had what it took to manage a hotel – *god knows I know how a hotel works!* – but, apparently, no one else thought I did. I didn't even get one interview! Moreover, they didn't even tell me I had failed!

This was the ninth trainee manager's role I had missed and I was about to give up hope.

'Congratulations,' I said woodenly, 'that's fantastic news.'

Stella looked at me, eyes twinkling.

'I'll be your boss now, young man,' she teased, 'so you better smarten yourself up. That long hair will have to go.'

'Oh great,' I muttered, 'not you as well!'

'It's about giving the right impression.'

'I know, I've heard it enough times from Jacobs!'

A guest walked towards the counter and Stella moved down the other end of the counter as I smiled at him.

'Can I help you, sir?'

The evening wore on; Stella went home and left me to handle the late shift.

At least, I thought with weary consolation, I didn't have to work the graveyard shift anymore.

Picking up the telephone, I answered automatically, 'Regent Hotel, Eric McMullen speaking; can I help you?'

'Greetings from Boris.'

My heart leapt to my mouth and my skin prickled.

‘What...’

‘You should have kept your mouth shut, McMullen! You’re a dead man! *If you are a man,*’ the voice said with a throaty chuckle.

‘Who...who is this?’

‘A friend of Boris. Look out the front.’

Nervously, I looked up and through the double glass entry doors to see a long black car. The back window slid down and a man in dark sunglasses waved with one hand, and a mobile phone in the other pressed to his ear.

Slowly, he pointed his index finger at me like a pistol and cocked his thumb.

‘Bang!’ I heard him say down the telephone and, dropping the ‘phone, I moved quickly away from such an exposed position. Crouching from behind the counter, I watched the black car drive away with a squeal of tyres.

‘This is unfortunate,’ Inspector Mawson said.

I was sitting in his office with Sommers behind me, leaning on the door.

‘Unfortunate!’ I squeaked. ‘They could have killed me...’

‘But they didn’t,’ Sommers soothed. ‘They’re just trying to scare you.’

‘Well, it bloody worked! You said you were going to protect me,’ I accused Mawson.

He had the good grace to appear a little uncomfortable.

‘Well...ah...yes, manpower is a little tight...’

‘I see! I’m bloody expendable, is that it?’

‘No, of course not,’ Sommers jumped in, ‘we will do everything we can do...’

‘How long before the trial?’

Sommers and Mawson glanced at each other and Mawson answered.

‘It’ll take at least six months...’

‘Six bloody months!’ I was horrified and didn’t mind showing it.

‘Yes,’ Mawson said rapidly, ‘but Preteski will be in prison for all that time – at least they refused his application for bail. As long as we submit your depositions and evidence, he’ll remain in prison.’

‘Oh my god,’ I groaned. ‘Six months?’

‘Mr McMullen,’ Sommers said seriously, walking around to where I could see her properly, ‘you are the only witness. Not to put a fine point on it, without you, the prosecution doesn’t have a case.’

‘So, if I’m dead, there’s no case, Preteski goes free?’

‘Exactly, but we believe it’s all a bluff,’ Mawson said and I could see that Sommers didn’t agree with him. However, she didn’t say anything.

‘We’ll put a plainclothes man in the hotel to keep an eye on you while you’re working’

‘Eric, there’s something fishy going on with that bloke over there.’ She pointed to a man in plainclothes

reading a newspaper. ‘That bloke has been sitting there ever since you came on,’ Stella said, her eyes narrowed as she looked at the man. ‘He may be up to no good! I think we should tell Mr Jacobs.’

‘No, don’t do that.’ I said quickly.

‘Why?, Eric, do you know that bloke?’

‘Ah...well...it’s complicated.’

‘Complicated?’ Stella turned to look at me. ‘What’s going on, Eric?? What are you up to?’ Stella’s eyes ran over me, lingering on my ponytail. ‘You’re not running something, are you – a business or something?’

Shocked, I stared at her.

‘Whatever do you mean?’ I asked in a low voice, glancing over at the bulky man in the plain brown suit who was reading the sports section of the newspaper.

‘We had a bloke on here once that was running an escort business...’

‘Stella! How could you? Do you think I look like a pimp?’

‘Well...no.’ Stella looked uncomfortable and then rushed, ‘you are a little...well...effeminate and I thought you might be running...’

‘A *gay* escort business?’ I hissed. ‘Thanks a bloody lot! If you must know, that bloke is my bodyguard!’

‘Bodyguard?’ Stella was shocked. ‘Why?’

I took her to the corner of the reception counter so we were out of earshot, explained everything and her face went white, her eyes wide and her jaw dropped.

‘Oh, I’m so sorry, Eric. If I can do anything to help...’

‘I don’t think anyone can really help me,’ I said morosely, watching my bodyguard scratch his ear. ‘Did you really think I was gay?’

Perhaps I am gay? That might explain why I sometimes day dream about what it would be like to wear women’s clothes, to dance in a beautiful gown...

Stella placed her hand on my arm.

‘Well, Eric,’ she said as gently as possible, ‘there’s nothing wrong with being gay. I know lots of people who are gay. They are very nice, and it seems to be an explanation...’

‘For what?’

‘When was the last time you asked a girl out?’

I looked away.

‘A while...’

Like – never!

Stella looked at me as if she knew and just smiled gently.

‘I’ve read that it can take some courage to come out of the closet and you know I would be very supportive. I’m your friend Eric, aren’t I?’

Maybe she’s right. Maybe I am gay, I just didn’t know it. I’ve never really been attracted to any girl – sexually that is., but then again I’ve never had any desires for any male either. Maybe I’m just a freak!?

‘Do you still do ballroom dancing?’ Stella asked, to change the subject.

I shook my head.

Bloody hard to dance without a partner and I wasn't macho enough to attract a partner for the competition! It was a real loss, as I *loved* dancing!

Usually, I finished work at eleven but there had been a sudden flurry of enquires and I stayed to help the new receptionist until midnight. When I looked up, I noticed my bodyguard had left.

So much for protecting me, they mustn't be able to pay overtime.

It was chilly, rather cold in fact, so I walked quickly down the street. Luckily, there were still a lot of people around and I began to relax.

As I moved through a group of people, I suddenly felt hands on me as I was shoved unceremoniously towards the road and sent sprawling on the hard surface, I looked up to see a taxi bearing down at me.

Again, it was all in slow motion – I even saw the horrified look on the taxi drivers' face as he frantically stamped on the brakes – the wheels spun and I tried to get to my feet.

With a screech, the taxi stopped as I threw myself to one side and the driver shook his fist at me.

'Fucking *idjit!*' he screamed through the open window. 'Shite! Bloody hell, mate! I almost fucking killed you!'

I didn't bother to argue, looked around at the group of bystanders and took off like a rabbit.

After another sleepless night with every door and window locked and chairs placed in front of the front door of my flat, I saw Mawson and Sommers again.

'Are you sure someone pushed you?' Inspector Mawson asked soberly.

'You think I make a habit of throwing myself in front of taxis? Of course someone bloody pushed me! And what happened to my bodyguard?'

'Ah, he said he was in the toilet and you just left without him.'

'Not true!'

'Well, it won't happen again. We've replaced the bodyguard.'

'Wow! Thanks!' I said sarcastically. 'That just fine! So you can guarantee that this will stop someone from trying to kill me!'

Mawson sighed and looked at Sommers.

'I think we should tell him. Even if it may not be true and just rumour.'

I looked at each of them.

'What's true?' I asked with a sinking heart, not sure I really wanted to hear the answer.

Mawson cleared his throat and glanced at Sommers who sat next to me.

‘Mr McMullen, there is a rumour that Preteski had placed a bounty on your head...’

‘Bounty!’ I exclaimed. ‘What, a dead or alive thing like westerns?’

‘Close but in this case,’ Sommers said softly, ‘it’s just dead.’

‘Oh my,’ I said softly sinking back into my chair.

We sat in silence for a long moment and I could hear noises from the outer offices. Everything seemed surreal for a moment as if I was in a bad dream.

‘How much?’ I asked finally.

They looked at each other again and then Mawson said softly, ‘one million pounds.’

I stared at them as it sank in.

‘I’m worth a million pounds?’ I tried to smile but failed. ‘Expensive, aren’t I?’

It was a weak joke and they both smiled faintly in sympathy.

‘What am I going to do?’ I murmured.

‘Do?’ Mawson said firmly. ‘We have to hide you and protect you...’

‘Hide me? For six months?’ I asked incredulously.

‘If that’s what it takes, yes,’ Mawson said grimly.

‘But...’

‘We’re not going to let this villain win! We definitely have to hide you for three weeks until the depositions are submitted. If we don’t get those submitted, Preteski will be out on bail.’

‘But...but how will you hide me?’

‘It is difficult,’ Mawson agreed. ‘With a million pounds in the offering, you can’t afford to trust anyone.’

‘So...how?’

‘We are working on it,’ Mawson said soberly, ‘we will have a plan. For the moment we can deploy two bodyguards...’

‘That’s brilliant! So now I’ll have *two* bodyguards reading the newspapers and picking their noses until they wander home and leave me alone!’

I suddenly sounded hysterical and I didn’t like it but panic will do that to you.

‘Excuse me, sir,’ Sommers said formally to Mawson, ‘I have an idea.’

Mawson looked quizzically at her.

‘Let’s hear it?’

Sommers glanced at me.

‘Could we step outside for a moment? It’s a little radical. Excuse us, Mr McMullen.’

I nodded, lost in my misery and they left me alone.