

20th May 1974

ONE

McCoy was almost at Wilson Street when he started to hear it. People shouting. The clatter of police horses' hooves on the road. Car horns blaring. Then a chant, quiet at first. He couldn't quite make it out to start with but it got louder and louder the closer he got to the court. And then he could hear exactly what the crowd were chanting.

HANG THEM! HANG THEM HANG THEM!

He turned onto Brunswick Street and stopped dead. The entrance to the Sheriff Court was surrounded by at least a couple of hundred people. So many that they'd started spilling off the pavement. The traffic was backed up both ways, taxi drivers half out their cabs to see what was going on, buses overheating, their engines steaming in the wet.

He couldn't see Murray anywhere. The crowd had totally blocked the street. He was going to have to try and make his way through, see if Murray was on the other side.

McCoy decided discretion was the better part of valour, started mouthing *HANG THEM! HANG THEM!* along with everyone else and pushed his way through. The crowd was made up of all sorts. Had to squeeze his way past men, women, even little kids. Some of them were holding home-made signs

on wooden poles, umbrellas or raincoats over their heads, all of them had the same face contorted with fury.

The chanting was building momentum and the crowd surged towards the court entrance. McCoy felt himself being pulled along, wasn't anything that he could do. He was squashed between a man in a denim jacket with a Zapata moustache and a middle-aged woman, the type you normally saw in the front row when you watched the wrestling on the telly, well used to screaming for blood.

The only thing keeping the crowd back from the court entrance was a line of twenty or so uniforms with interlocked arms and two mounted policemen using their horses to block the way. He caught the eye of one of the uniforms who recognised him.

'This way, Mr McCoy!' he shouted. 'Over here!'

McCoy struggled forward, managed to get to the front of the crowd, and ducked under the uniform's arm.

'Thanks, Barr,' he said, patting the man's back. 'Saved my life.'

Barr nodded, grimaced as a sign saying AN EYE FOR AN EYE knocked his cap off.

'Fuck sake,' said McCoy. 'You need more bodies here, do you not?'

'You're telling me,' said Barr. 'They're supposed to be coming down from Central. No sign yet.'

'You seen Murray?' McCoy had to shout, the chanting had having started up again.

'Goldbergs!' Barr managed to get out before the crowd surged against the line again.

McCoy looked down the street, could see Murray, sheepskin car coat and trilby, sheltering in the back entrance of the department store. He was looking directly at McCoy, shaking his head. McCoy couldn't hear him but the chances were Murray was muttering 'bloody clown'.

McCoy hurried down the back of the police line, dodged between the cars stopped on Wilson Street and joined him in the doorway.

‘I thought you should see this,’ said Murray. ‘Get you back in the swing. Didn’t expect you to get caught up in the bloody thing.’

‘Couldn’t think how else to get through. I didn’t realise how mental it was. Thought I was going to get trampled. You need some back-up.’

‘That right? I just got Faulds to call in the cavalry,’ said Murray. ‘But thanks for the advice.’

‘You ever seen anything like this before?’ asked McCoy, watching the crowd working itself up for another go at the police line.

‘Once,’ said Murray, searching his coat pockets for his pipe. ‘Peter Manuel. Back in fifty-eight. I’d only started a week. I was trying to hold the line like those poor buggers are now. A woman spat right in my face. Don’t know what she thought I’d done. I hadn’t murdered anyone.’ Murray found his pipe, shoved it in his mouth, and looked at McCoy. Didn’t seem happy. ‘You look bloody awful.’

‘Should have seen me three weeks ago,’ said McCoy.

‘At last,’ said Murray, pointing over McCoy’s head.

McCoy turned to see a blue police van pulling up at the edge of the crowd. Boos and jeers went up when a dozen uniforms got out and tried to make their way through the crowd towards the entrance. They weren’t having much luck. Crowd was refusing to let them through, waving their signs in front of them. Angry red and black letters painted onto wood.

REMEMBER THE SALON GIRLS. NO MERCY FOR KILLERS!

A line of women were standing on the pavement off to the side, heads bent in prayer, front pages of newspapers stuck on to bits of board.

FOUR DIE IN ARSON FIRE HORROR

A man in a paint-splattered boiler suit climbed up onto a letterbox and started shouting, hands raised in the air like an orchestra conductor.

HANG THEM! HANG THEM!

Kept saying it over and over until the crowd took it up, shouting along with him.

HANG THEM! HANG THEM!

The police back-up finally managed to push their way through the crowd and set up another line behind the first one. A double row of grim-faced police, arms interlocked, half their caps already gone in the struggle. As the chant got louder and louder, a bottle flew through the air, smashed at the policemen's feet. There was a moment of quiet, an intake of breath from the crowd, and then the cheering started. Another bottle sailed through the air, then another. A woman by the police line fell, hands on the back of her head, blood already seeping through her fingers.

'Jesus Christ,' said McCoy. 'This is getting out of control.'

He turned to tell Murray they had to do something and realised he'd moved off, was standing by the open door of a panda parked down the street. He was leaning in, giving instructions to Hughie Faulds sitting in the driver's seat, radio in hand. McCoy saw Faulds nod, start speaking into the radio. He turned back to the crowd and saw the injured woman sitting on the kerb, blood all down her pale blue coat. A girl aged six or seven next to her bawling her eyes out, her sign lying in the gutter.

'For fuck sake,' said Murray, back at his side. 'Have these people got no bloody sense?'

'I don't get it,' said McCoy, watching a man in the crowd lift his wee girl up on his shoulders so she could see better. 'Why did they do it? Why would you want to kill three women and two kids?'

Murray was chewing the stem of his unlit pipe, no hope of firing it up in rain. 'One of them's got previous. Set fire to a garage and his primary school. Pyromaniac.'

'What about the other two?' asked McCoy. 'They like that as well?'

Murray shook his head. 'Just two lads apparently, small-time stuff.'

'So, what?' said McCoy. 'The other two were just along for the ride and killed four people?'

BRING BACK HANGING! BRING BACK HANGING!

Murray pointed to the crowd with his pipe stem, had to raise his voice. 'Don't think it matters much to these clowns. All they want is blood.'

'I heard Tobago Street got a tip-off. That right?'

Murray nodded. 'Case like this one – wee lassies dead, women – even the villains want it solved and quick. Honour amongst thieves goes straight out the window. Anonymous phone call into Tobago Street Station. Told them there were three lads in a flat in Roystonhill. They brought them in, one of them still had the receipt for the petrol in his trouser pocket.' He glanced over at the court. 'Not wasting any time, they're charging them today.'

'If they can get them through the crowd that is,' said McCoy as the uniforms tried to hold back another surge. A line of photographers he recognised from the evening papers were standing under the awning across the road, chewing gum, looking bored, waiting.

'Tobago Street were bloody lucky,' said McCoy. 'Faulds is the only good cop they've got. The rest of them are useless. A tip-off's the only way they were ever going to get something like this.'

Murray put his pipe back in his pocket. 'Aye, well, it might be up to me to change that.'

McCoy looked at him. 'What do you mean?'

‘Pitt Street’s great new idea. They want me to run both stations.’

‘And what did you say to that?’

‘What do you think I said? Tobago Street’s a fucking disgrace, has been for years. It needs someone to . . .’ He stopped. Pointed. ‘Oh, Christ, here we go.’

A navy-blue prison service van had turned in from Ingram Street. For a second or two everything went quiet and then someone shouted, ‘It’s them!’ and that was it. All hell broke loose.

The crowd pushed through the police barriers and swarmed the van. Hammering on the sides with their fists, kicking at it, using the poles of their signs to try to smash the windows. The photographers got as close as they could without being trampled in the mêlée. The van driver kept going, slow and steady, knew if he stopped, they were done for. A man fell to the ground as the wing mirror of the van hit his head. A glass bottle exploded on the windscreen.

GET THEM! GET THEM!

The police separated for a few seconds and the van turned, accelerated down the ramp to the court entrance. The police line quickly joined up again, uniforms pulling people out the way as the iron shutter of the vehicle entrance rolled down and the van disappeared from sight.

And just as fast as it had started, the chaos was over. The chants died down and the crowd dispersed, people picking up broken signs, muttering that the police had been too rough, sitting on the pavement to inspect their cuts and bruises. Photographers took the film out their cameras and gave the spools to the boys who ran back to the papers. A wee kid in a cowboy outfit was crying, wandering round looking for his mum.

McCoy and Murray stood in the rain, watching the scene in front of them.

‘Crowds can be ugly things,’ said Murray. ‘Dangerous. Saw it in my National Service. Palestine. Not something I’d like to see again.’ He stuck his hand out the shelter. Grimaced and pulled it back in. ‘You would think this bloody rain would put the buggers off.’

‘Don’t think anything’s going to put them off,’ said McCoy. ‘It’s a big day out.’

‘Aye, well, they won’t have long to wait. It’s a special sitting – murder charge, no chance of bail. Quick appearance before the sheriff to read the charges and that’s it. They’ll be back out in fifteen minutes.’

A taxi rounded Wilson Street and Murray stuck out his hand. ‘I’m going back to Pitt Street. You going to wait for the van coming out?’

McCoy shook his head. ‘I’ve seen enough. Going to head back to Stewart Street.’

Murray started to walk towards the waiting taxi. Stopped. ‘You sure you’re well enough to be back?’

McCoy nodded. ‘Fit as a fiddle. Olympic standard.’

TWO

McCoy watched Murray's taxi turn in the direction of Pitt Street, leant back into the doorway and managed to light up. Fit as a fiddle was what he would keep saying, even if it was a lie. At least another month of bed rest they had told him when he left the hospital a couple of days ago. No work, no stress, no smoking and no drinking. And here he was back at work, lit fag in hand.

The four weeks in hospital had driven him almost mad with boredom. The thought of another four staring at his bedroom ceiling and eating boiled cod and mashed potatoes was more than he could stand. Bleeding ulcer or no bleeding ulcer, he'd take his chances.

His stomach must have heard him. Started grumbling. McCoy felt in his pocket for his bottle of Pepto-Bismol, then remembered he'd left it on the bathroom shelf in the house. Time to buy yet another bottle. He headed for the chemist in Bell Street. Rain was teeming down now, pavements swimming. Could feel damp in his left sock. He needed new shoes. Needed a lot of things. New shoes, a new suit, a couple of shirts. A haircut as well. Was over his collar at the back, surprised Murray hadn't made a comment. Maybe that's what

he'd do this weekend. Go and buy the stuff he needed, go to Green's in King Street and get a haircut. Changed days indeed. He must be getting old. That's what weekends were for now. Not for going out and getting out your head, for doing chores.

He sheltered under the chemist's awning, looking at the gift sets of talcum and bath cubes while he finished his cigarette. Had to confess he was glad the fire had happened in Tobago Street's patch, no matter how useless they were. He was well enough for day-to-day work, not sure his stomach would put up with the stress of a big case like that. He dropped his cigarette into a puddle and stepped inside.

Two minutes later he came out, bag in hand. He screwed the top off the Pepto-Bismol and took a slug. Felt like some kind of alky drinking out a bottle in a brown paper bag. The chalky fluid slid down his throat and he grimaced. He was starting to really fucking hate the taste of the stuff.

He was screwing the top back on when the chants started up again. Fainter now, but he could still hear them, same old stuff.

HANG THEM! HANG THEM!

The prison van must be leaving the court, had riled the crowd again. Murray was right, the whole thing couldn't have taken more than fifteen minutes. McCoy started along Bell Street, heading for the High Street and the taxi rank.

The chants got louder and louder and he looked back towards the court. He was just in time to see the van turn onto Bell Street, a few stragglers running behind it, battering on the sides. It was heading for the High Street too, quickest way to Barlinnie. As it drove past McCoy noticed a big crack in the windscreen, had a fleeting glimpse of the stony-faced driver. It moved on, stopped at the lights at the end of the road.

The lights changed to green and McCoy watched the van

ease out. It had only gone a couple of yards when a speeding lorry appeared out of nowhere and rammed into the side of it. There was an almighty bang, a mist of shattered glass, and suddenly the van was up in the air. Seemed to sit there for a minute then crashed back down onto the road and skidded along the street, sparks flying up from beneath it, until it hit a lamppost and ground to a halt in a cloud of dust and exhaust fumes. Lay there on its side, wheels turning.

McCoy realised he was holding his breath. Let it go and started running. Up ahead, three men jumped down from the cab of the lorry, ran to the van and scrambled over it. They were dressed in dark boiler suits and balaclavas, two of them with crowbars and one with a bolt cutter. In a couple of seconds they had levered the back door open, pulled it wide and disappeared inside.

McCoy kept on running, needed to find a phonebox or hope that some of the cops from outside the court had heard the bang and were on their way. A black estate car screeched up to the side of the van and the driver got out, ran round the car opening all the doors. Shouted at the men in the van to hurry up. A second later one of the boiler-suited guys emerged from the back, dragging a stunned prisoner, hands still cuffed, then pushing him into the back seat of the car.

McCoy could hear sirens in the distance, didn't know if they were coming here or if there was more trouble back at the court. He was out of breath, struggling to keep running, but he was still fifty yards away. The other two prisoners stumbled from the van, made their way to the estate car and got in.

The driver hit the accelerator hard and the back of the car fishtailed as the tyres tried to get a grip on the wet tarmac. McCoy was close enough now to see the driver's eyes through the holes of his balaclava, caught a glimpse of

a prisoner behind him, red hair and a huge grin on his face as the tyres finally caught, the car powered forward and McCoy jumped out the way just in time. He went over on his ankle, fell onto the road, and sat up just in time to see the car speeding off towards the Saltmarket. His hands were wet and gritty, looked down to see petrol from the van pouring out the ruptured tank, running down the hill. He got to his feet as a pale blue Viva with no number plates pulled up. The men from the lorry got in and the car sped off after the estate car.

McCoy tried to shake the petrol off his hands, shouted at a man standing watching to go and call the police and limped over to the van. The wheels were still spinning, horn going. He helped the driver out through the smashed windscreen, blood everywhere, his arms and face covered in cuts and bits of broken glass.

He sat the man down on the kerb and tried to calm him down. He was moaning, trying to pull bits of glass out his arm. McCoy could see an ambulance and two police cars coming down the High Street towards them. He sat down beside the driver and told him he was going to be okay, to leave the glass alone. Tried not to look at his ruined face.

An ambulance pulled up beside them and the medics got out, started to attend to the van driver. McCoy left them to it and walked towards the police cars. He stopped, turned to the gathering crowd and shouted, 'Any witnesses to what just happened please make yourself known and go to the police cars.'

A couple of people stepped out the crowd, a couple scuttled away, not wanting to get involved.

McCoy put his hand on the roof of the police car and stood for a minute. The pain in his stomach was taking his breath away. Hoped what he thought was about to happen wouldn't. Didn't work. He tried to get behind the wall so no one would

see. Didn't make it. Leant over and threw up half a bottle of pink gunge into the gutter. Stood up and wiped his mouth, realised the uniforms from the cars were staring at him.

'Who's going to take my statement?' he said.