

Excerpt from Chapter 1, The Janus Complex

He drew in a lungful of smoke, coughed a couple of times, and gazed along the deserted roadway. Circular pools of pale phosphorescent light sat beneath the streetlamps and reflected brightly off the snow. He looked up into the sky at the heavy white mass above him. *It will get worse before it gets better*, he thought, *and a knee trembler up a close or in a bus shelter tonight really will have to be a "quicke"*.

A crunching of gears and a squeal of brakes announced the arrival of a Glasgow Corporation bus, a green, white and gold monster, as it slithered round the corner from Renfrew Street. If the snow kept up the buses would probably stop running and that really would put a damper on the night. He watched as the vehicle trundled slowly past him in low gear, its tyres leaving two parallel black lines, like scars, in the virgin snow while its interior lights illuminated the roadside and danced over snow covered litter bins and discarded rubbish.

When it finally disappeared into deepest Cowcaddens a semblance of quiet returned to Cambridge Street with only the sounds of music, rowdy voices and laughter from the pub disturbing the peace. Somewhere in all the noise Jamie thought he heard a cry for help. He peered keenly into the curtain of snow but could see nothing. Cambridge Street itself was totally deserted but he could make out ghostly shapes drifting back and forth beneath the Christmas lights in Sauchiehall Street, about 150 yards away.

The cry came again, louder this time, clearer and more distressed, and there were others cursing and swearing. Some poor bugger was in trouble. He tried to pinpoint the sounds. On the far side of the road there were only derelict buildings but about twenty yards off to his left a dark alley ran between two abandoned tenement blocks. Whatever was going down was taking place in the alley, he realised instantly. He thought about going back into the pub for help but that might take too long. Without a second thought, he started to run towards the alley, slipping and sliding on the slick carpet of snow. He never had been one for thinking too long in situations like this.

The streetlights threw his shadow against the alley wall as he entered it. The shape of it towered over him like some gigantic apparition. He stopped and squinted into the darkness, his eyes finally adjusting and finding the source of the commotion. About twenty yards into the lane, four vague figures swarmed around a solitary form that lay, curled up, on the ground. Like flies round shite, he

thought sourly. They were kicking and stamping on their victim and shouting at the hapless man.

And then they saw him. Two of them broke off from the attack and turned towards him, fists up and snarling. That brought Jamie to an abrupt halt as he assessed the situation. His head was telling him to run like fuck, but his heart wouldn't let him.

'Fuck off!' one of the thugs shouted, as he approached cockily. 'This has got fuck all tae dae wi' you,' he added in a broad, guttural, Glaswegian accent.

Jamie smiled grimly. The guy was right, he mused; it did have fuck all to do with him but he knew that if he left them to it, the poor bastard on the ground was as good as dead. He had this thing about helping underdogs and the guy lying on the ground, an American sailor by the look of him, was certainly in that category. The Yank was sprawled out, defenceless, with his back propped against the alley wall and his head rolling from side to side with each succeeding blow. He appeared to be bleeding heavily and his kicking was continuing relentlessly at the hands of the two remaining hoodlums. Blood spatter circled him in a windmill like pattern and his clothes were dark stained. Mucous and gore streamed from his mouth.

That was enough for Jamie. 'I can't do that,' he fired back at the approaching thug, surprising himself as much as he surprised the goon. His voice sounded cold and measured when, in reality, he really should have been shitting himself. He slipped his hand into his jacket pocket and felt the comforting little strip of folded newspaper he always kept there for emergencies... And this was an emergency. Surreptitiously, he tucked it into his right palm. Slowly, and unseen by the approaching thugs, he took three pennies from his trouser pocket and slotted them snugly between his fingers, their rims nestling against the folded paper.

The villain grinned and gave a careless shrug. 'Fuck you then, ya wanker, you can have some o' whit he's gettin',' he said, baring his teeth in a malicious grin. He swaggered confidently towards Jamie then, his pal in close support. Jamie didn't wait for them to arrive. Rising lightly onto his toes, he launched his attack. The lead guy, about 25 or 26 years old, Jamie reckoned, having expected him to back off or run, was taken completely by surprise. Before he recovered, Jamie was on him, smashing his coin reinforced right fist into the man's throat. The thug recoiled in shock and Jamie followed up quickly, smashing his forehead into the man's nose with a sickening crack that broke bone and cartilage, and all before the second man could react.

There was a scream and a gurgling noise from the injured man before his buddy, recovering from his surprise, caught Jamie with a deflected blow to the side of the head. Jamie turned towards him as another punch landed, this time catching him above the right eye. Blood trickled down into his eye, temporarily blinding him, and forced him back out of range. Shaking his head to clear his vision he saw the man close in on him again. Confident now, the thug charged, and the signet ring on his right hand that had already inflicted damage to Jamie's eye glinted in the half light. Jamie brushed the attack aside and threw out his right fist. The three pennies did their work, tearing viciously into the man's cheek and cracking his jaw bone. The hoodlum came to a shuddering halt, a look of disbelief spreading across his face. Jamie didn't hesitate. He struck again. This time his fist crashed into the man's lower ribs, expelling a mouthful of foul breath from the man's lungs accompanied by an agonised cry. The man backed off, shocked by the ferocity of the attack, and screamed for help.

The two thugs beating the sailor broke off their leisurely assault and quickly turned their attention to Jamie. Intuitively, Jamie knew he didn't have long... seconds, in fact, to finish off his current opponent. Stepping in close, he feinted left then sidestepped and pirouetted past the ned with a movement Scottish Ballet would have been proud of, before smashing his elbow into the man's jaw. There was a satisfying jolt up Jamie's arm followed by a horrible cracking sound, like snapping wood, as the man's jaw fractured. *So far so good*, he thought fleetingly. *I might, just might, get out of this shit in one piece.*

His hopes were quickly dashed. The two remaining gangsters came at him together in a concerted attack. A heavy kick hit him on his right thigh and a fierce punch caught him in the ribs. He lost balance and staggered away but the men followed up quickly. Another punch landed on his ribs while a third sank deep into his abdomen, winding him badly.

He fell backwards, crashing into the wall and coming to a shuddering halt. Unsteadily, he managed to regain his balance and drew himself up. Wary now, he turned to face the men once more. Time was running out, he knew that. They came for him again, attacking simultaneously, one on each side. With his back to the wall, he had no way out. Punches piled in on him from left and right. His head was being pummelled. He lashed out instinctively, catching the man on his right with a fierce punch to the mouth. The pennies did their work again, smashing teeth and splitting the man's gums and lip.

There was a muttered curse, but that was all. This guy was harder than the first two. Much harder. He spat out a tooth, shook his head to clear it, and then launched another attack, his friend in support.

Get out of here, Jamie's brain screamed, but he couldn't leave the sailor. He screamed at the man, urging him to get to his feet, willing him to move. The American, still groggy, clambered unsteadily to his feet. He leant against the wall for support as blood from his wounds dripped onto the snow. His once white shirt was now stained bright crimson and his right eye, badly cut and swollen, was closing rapidly... But at least he was functioning again... just. The two thugs ignored him. They now had more pressing business. They circled Jamie while their predatory eyes, half closed, searched for an opening.

Jamie prepared himself for the coming onslaught. He didn't have long to wait. The two men attacked, one on each side, their move and their timing perfectly orchestrated, and forced Jamie backwards under a flurry of punches. He felt bunched knuckles tear the skin above his left eye while another vicious blow caught him, once again, on the ribs. Pain seared him. Another fist landed on his mouth splitting his lip again and the salty, metallic flavour of his blood filled his throat.

Trapped now, he lashed out at random and felt one connect on an attacker's mouth, the skin on his knuckles tearing on contact with the man's teeth. A kick landed savagely on the back of his left calf and he began to buckle. His ribs ached, his sight blurred, and everything started slipping away from him.

The Yank was up on his feet now but he was still leaning heavily against the wall. The two thugs separated them but, miraculously, the Yank came staggering towards them, yelling incoherently. The momentary distraction provided by that gave Jamie an opportunity to escape from the entrapment of the wall. His spirit lifted for a heartbeat but soon came crashing back to earth. From the deeper gloom of the alley two more men appeared. They were coming fast and, instinctively Jamie knew it wasn't the 7th Cavalry coming to the rescue. *It's Time to go*, his brain screamed. The odds, already stacked against him, had just become impossible.

He reacted quickly. Grabbing the American by the arm, he pulled the man away. 'Run,' he screamed, 'Run like fuck!' He pushed the sailor ahead of him then and they started to run for the bright light and hoped for safety of Cambridge Street.

The American, though groggy and seriously weakened, was still *compos mentis*. He understood the odds and the danger. Automatically, his legs pumped into action and he started to run but he was badly

weakened and was staggering like a drunk. The snow beneath his feet added to his problems. He wasn't going to make it.

Seeing the man's predicament, Jamie turned to face the oncoming men in a brave attempt to give the American time. The four men spread out, trying to cut his and the American's escape. He was now in serious trouble and he knew it. If the men succeeded he was in line for a serious kicking.

One of the new arrivals reinforced that assessment, grinning at him malevolently. 'You should've kept yer fuckin' nose oot o' this, pal, but ye didnae so now ye're gonnae get a right fuckin' doin',' the hoodlum spat out brutally just before they started their attack.

Jamie ran. One man tried to cut him off but Jamie's momentum, and a lucky, wild punch with his makeshift knuckle duster, forced the hoodlum back. Scrabbling for purchase on the snow covered surface he slithered along the alley towards Cambridge Street with the four thugs now in pursuit. It was like an episode of The Keystone Cops, but much more serious. As he emerged into Cambridge Street a wave of euphoria engulfed him but it was short lived. He felt two blows, one immediately after the other, impact on his lower back near his kidneys. Pain seared through his body. An intense, burning pain like nothing he had experienced before. He cried out. His legs were buckling beneath him. He staggered on but his strength was going. He could see the American ahead of him. That brought a brief moment of satisfaction before the Yank crashed face down into the snow outside the Waldorf.

Everything started to turn black then. It was as if the street lights were being switched off... one after another. He lost focus for a moment but was vaguely aware of light flooding from the open door of the pub and of people running. Angry voices were shouting and someone called out his name, but the lights were going out quicker now... and he was falling, down, down, down into a deep black, bottomless pit.

He was finished, he knew it, but one voice reached him through the all-consuming darkness. Jack Connolly's voice, screaming at him from somewhere close, kicked into his psyche. He felt light, as if he were floating, drifting upwards and away into the still falling snow.

Jack lifted him from the cold, wet ground, and cradled him in his arms, tears of frustration filling his eyes. 'Jamie! Aw naw, Jamie, for fuck sake, naaaaw,' were the last words Jamie Raeburn heard before the lights went out completely.