

Welcome to the sample of 'Crossing the White Line' – roughly 10% of the book. I hope you enjoy it – and there's a link at the end if you'd like to buy it.

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Author's Note

Welcome to the second book in the Michael Brady Short Reads series.

Michael Brady first appeared in *Salt in the Wounds*, set in Whitby in 2015.

The Short Reads series – which began with *The Scars Don't Show* – take you back to the start of Brady's career in Greater Manchester Police.

The Scars Don't Show took place in 1999: now it's early 2001 – and Brady's about to come face-to-face with an old adversary...

Each of the Short Reads is around a third the length of a normal book. They're books that you can read in an evening. They're the stories that trace Brady's career. That made him the detective he is today...

As I'm British and my books are set in the UK, I've used British English. The dialogue is realistic for the characters, which means they occasionally swear.

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, organisations, some places, events and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictionally. All the characters in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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January 2001: The Big Man with the Broken Nose

"How many times has he warned you, Charlie boy? How many bloody times? Come on, let's get this over and done with. Five minutes. Then we can drop you off and get back in the warm. The sooner it's done the better."

The big man with the broken nose sighed. Shook his head. “It shouldn’t have come to this, old son. You’ve got to keep your mouth shut. I was a big fan of yours, Charlie. Still am. But... the boss says teach you a lesson so teach you a lesson is what I have to do. Just hold him up for me, Billy. While I get the tools from the back of the car. Good lad...”

“Emergency, do you require police, fire or ambulance?”

“We’ll need an ambulance, love.”

“What is the problem, caller?”

“Just send an ambulance, love. Khan’s newsagent on Mason Road. Two streets back from the casino. You’ll find a man in the shop doorway. He’s lost a lot of blood. Cuts and bruises to his face. Broken ribs. So tell your lads not to waste time. And they’ll need to know his name. They always like a name. Charlie Irvine... Yes, love, that’s right. That Charlie Irvine.”

He pressed the red button to end the call. Dropped the mobile phone onto the concrete. Stamped down hard on it. Reached down and picked up the pieces. Tossed them over the side of the bridge. Heard them splash into the canal 20 feet below.

Climbed back into the Merc. “Turn the heating up, Billy boy. Fucking freezing out there. Let’s get back and tell the boss it’s job done. And there’ll be blood on the back seat. Get the car valeted in the morning, there’s a good lad.”

Chapter 1

Detective Constable Michael Brady pushed the door of the hospital ward open.

Two years since I was in here.

Twenty minutes since I was in Fitz’s office.

‘Mike?’

‘Boss?’

‘I need you to go to the hospital. Take a statement. Or rather don’t take a statement. Seeing as no complaint has been made and – officially at least – no crime’s been committed. Go and talk to someone.’

‘Who am I talking to, boss?’

‘Charlie Irvine. And yes, before you ask, that Charlie Irvine. He was badly beaten up on Saturday night. Then someone phoned 999. Gave very precise directions on where to find him. Precise enough to make the call handler suspicious. A newsagent’s doorway. So go and have a chat. See what you can find out.’

‘Can we not trace the phone, boss?’

‘Pay-as-you-go. Or pay-as-you-went. Wherever that phone is now I doubt it’ll be making any more calls.’

“Good morning.”

Two years on and the nurses’ station looked exactly the same. A half drunk mug of tea. Grey manila files, paperwork spilling out of them. A picture of a gap-toothed girl in a school uniform. The school year when everyone loses their front teeth.

The nurse looked up. “Hi. I’m sorry, it’s not visiting hours.” Then she looked at him more closely. “Well, you haven’t got a stethoscope round your neck so there’s only one other option.”

Brady laughed. “Right. Got it in one.” He reached for his ID. “Michael Brady. Detective Constable. Here to talk to Charlie Irvine if he’s up to it.”

The nurse smiled at him. “Our celebrity? He’s down the hall. The room on the right.”

“The one overlooking the car park? I know it well.”

He was sitting up in bed. The hospital gown had slipped down. The top half of his chest was an equal mix of bruises and tattoos, the hair shaved away in patches to allow the leads to be attached. His head was swathed in bandages, a thick pad over his right ear, his left eye barely open. He looked warily at Brady with his one good eye.

“No comment,” he said, the Glasgow accent only slightly softened by the years in Manchester.

I’ve seen this guy on a football pitch. I’ve seen him score from 30 yards. The people he played with are managers now. TV pundits. On the golf course four days a week. He was better than all of them. But he’s the one in a hospital bed. He’s the one who’s been dumped in a shop doorway...

“Shouldn’t I at least tell you who I am?”

Irvine tried to push himself further up in the bed. Brady saw him wince. *Broken ribs? Two? Three? Maybe more...*

“I know who you are. This early in the morning? You dinnae look sleekit enough for a reporter, son. So you’re the police.”

“Detective Constable Michael Brady. Do you want to see some ID?”

“Detective Constable? Is that all I’m worth?”

You may as well fight fire with fire...

“I could say the same. Is that all *I’m* worth? A beaten up ex-footballer?”

Irvine laughed. Winced again. “Very good. Maybe you *should* have been a journo. But like I said, no comment.”

Brady shrugged. “I can’t make you say anything. Should I ask for your autograph instead?”

Irvine carefully brought his right hand out from under the sheets. It was heavily bandaged, the first two fingers cocooned in a protective sheath. "You'll have to wait," he said.

"Trapped them in a door?"

"Aye. Bright boy."

If he thinks I'm going he's mistaken. I can't take 'no comment' back to the boss.

Brady crossed to the window.

"I was in this room," he said. "Two years ago. Almost to the day. The first case I ever worked on. Concussion. Someone cracked my head into a brick wall. Took me two or three months to really recover."

"Did you catch him?"

Brady hadn't expected a reply.

Don't waste it...

"Yeah, we did. Not the guy who pushed my head into the wall. No witnesses. So he got away with it. But yeah, we caught – "

Shall I say it? Why not? Let him know you're a serious copper. Not some apprentice sent to make small talk.

" – We did. We caught the murderer."

A serious copper...

"He strangled her. One handed."

Irvine shrugged. Even that was clearly painful. "Shit happens," he said.

"Yeah, it does. Looks like a lot happened to you the other night."

"No comment."

"No comment?" Brady said. "Or daren't comment? Former star footballer in hospital is a story. The local paper is going to speak to people that know you. Someone will say something. They can't resist it. Five minutes of fame..."

Irvine coughed. Winced again. Started to reach out for his water. Brady raised his hand. "Don't. I'll get it for you, Charlie."

"No they won't. Not if they've any sense."

Brady shook his head. "Most people can't help it if the paper's on the phone. Maybe even the local news. TV. It's human nature to say something. And whoever did this to you will think the comment came from you. You don't want to be back here. Or worse."

"So the youngest copper they could find is telling me I'm fucked? Cheers."

Brady looked at the bandages, the bruising, the swelling over his left eye. *If you're not fucked already...*

“Not necessarily. Tell me the story.”

Irvine sipped his water. Considered his options.

“What day is it?” he said.

“Monday.”

Irvine nodded. “Right. I was a bit out of it yesterday. But... no comment. I can't remember what happened. Nothing happened.”

Brady sighed. Walked across to the window. Looked out into the car park. *Two years since I stood in that car park. Bare feet and a dressing gown. Felt the rain running down my neck. But knew I'd found the killer...*

He turned back to Irvine. Shrugged. Spread his hands in a ‘what can I do’ gesture. “I can't make you tell me, Charlie. But if you don't do anything... You don't need me to tell you it'll happen again. Ex-midfield star with drugs and gambling problem. It's hardly Manchester's best-kept secret if even ‘the youngest copper they could find’ has heard it.”

“You don't understand, son. People like you can never understand.”

“Try me. What don't I understand?”

Charlie Irvine, two failed marriages, forced to retire with a knee injury before Sky arrived with their millions, living from day to day, surviving on his memories, considered his options a second time.

Made the same decision.

“No comment,” he said.

“OK. Like I said, it's your decision. Here's my card. You change your mind. You know where I am.”

Brady put the business card on the bedside table. *Two years since I gave Sarah Cooke my number. Since I almost ended my career before it had started. Close escape. I'm older now. More experienced. I don't make careless mistakes any more...*

“Thanks,” Irvine said. “Don't expect to hear from me.”

“Like I say, it's your decision.” Brady smiled. “I won't offer to shake hands. Looks like you've got some healing to do. I'll come back for your autograph.”

“You do that, son. There won't be a queue. Not any more.”

Chapter 2

“I met one of my heroes today.”

“That’s music ruled out then,” Grace said. “All your music heroes have died of excess. Who was it?”

“Charlie Irvine.”

“Ah, there you have me, darling. Discovered fingerprints? DNA? Wrote the treatise on interrogation techniques?”

“Played midfield for United.”

“Right. You’re a man. I should have known. But you’re a Middlesbrough supporter.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t appreciate talent. He made everything seem effortless. Charlie Irvine played a different game to everyone else.”

“So where did you meet this demi-god? Hopefully not in an ID parade?”

Brady sighed. “In hospital. In the room I was in. He’d been... I probably shouldn’t say. He’d been beaten up. And he wouldn’t talk about it.”

“Your pasta’s going cold. And if he wouldn’t talk about it there’s probably a reason.”

Brady nodded. “And it’s not hard to guess. Everyone he played with is a manager now. Or they’re on TV. He was the best of them all and he’s skint.”

“Why?” Grace asked.

“Drugs. Gambling as well, I think. There was a guy called Stan Bowles. Played for QPR. They – ”

“I’m sorry?”

“Grace, how long have we been married? I swear you pretend to know nothing about football just to annoy me.”

Michael Brady’s wife smiled innocently. “Would I do that, darling?”

“QPR, Gracie. Queens Park Rangers. They used to say, ‘If Stan could pass a betting shop like he could pass a football, he’d be a millionaire.’ The same for Charlie Irvine. If the stories are true.”

“But what do you do?” Grace said. “How do you replace the high? Footballers, rock stars – it’s all the same. How do you replace the adrenalin? I went to see Billy Connolly – ”

“Did you?”

“Yes, sweetheart. Amazingly I had a life before I met you. Billy Connolly – and there are thousands of people laughing. One man on stage with nothing but a mic. I remember saying to Ellie as we came out – what does he do when he finishes? Mowing the lawn isn’t going to replace it. Footballers must be the same.”

“Except there are even more people.”

“Right. So how *do* you replace the high?”

“With paperwork if you’re in the police...”

Grace stared at him across the table. “Don’t give me that, Mike. Who went into Sarah Cooke’s house without back-up? Who knew full-well there could be a murderer waiting? Who discharged himself from hospital so he could go and confront the killer?”

“That was my job. Sarah Cooke had been murdered.”

Grace shook her head. “Footballers, rock stars and Michael Brady. You know it, Mike. I know it. You’re as addicted as Charlie Irvine. A different drug. But the same disease.”

Brady picked the pasta bowls up and walked into the kitchen. Tried not to think about what his wife had just said.

Chapter 3

“An absolute waste of time, boss. A resolute – and frequently repeated – ‘no comment.’”

“Did you tell him it was going to happen again?”

“Yes, I did. More than once.”

“Made no difference?”

“None at all.” Brady hesitated. “Can I ask, boss... Why are you so interested in this? Alright he’s an ex-footballer. But looking at him in that bed he’s as ex as ex gets. ‘Charlie Irvine gets beaten up behind casino’ can hardly be at the top of your to-do list.”

Fitzpatrick spun in his chair and looked out of the window. Brady had lost count of the number of times he’d seen him do it. The momentary pause to confirm the decision he’d already made.

He turned back to Brady. “Because it’s more than an ex-footballer being beaten up. It’s what might be happening inside the casino, not what’s happening outside. Go and grab yourself a coffee. I want to talk about informers.”

“You watch *The Bill*,” Jim Fitzpatrick said, “And you think the world is awash with informers. Coppers’ narks. Snitch, stoolie, cabbage hat if you want some old rhyiming slang. Real life – a copper spending the day hanging around in a draughty courthouse waiting to be called – doesn’t make great TV. So they sit him down in a pub with an informer.”

Fitzpatrick shook his head. “Let me tell you the basic facts about informers. Number one, they’re usually terrified. And being terrified doesn’t make you rational. Two, they’re unreliable. They’re nearly always failed villains. They’ve got a score to settle. Or they want to use us to put their rivals out of business. Three – and if you only learn one lesson from me, Mike, learn this one – they like a steak pie.”

Steak pie? What’s he talking about?

“I’m sorry, boss. I’m not following you? Steak pie? Is that some more rhyming slang?”

Fitzpatrick laughed. “No. It’s basic police common sense. What happens on TV? Copper meets an informer in a pub. Copper buys informer a drink. Informer spills the beans. What happens in real life? Copper says ‘do you want a drink?’ And while he’s at the bar the informer gets cold feet and pisses off. But – in my humble experience – if the copper has the good sense to say, ‘Do you fancy some pie and chips, Arthur?’ Then Arthur does not piss off because the chances are Arthur hasn’t had a proper meal for a week.”

It was Brady’s turn to laugh. “Right. I’ll remember that. And remember to claim for pie and chips on my expenses.”

“The point I’m making is this,” Fitzpatrick said. “Reliable informers are about as rare as rocking horse droppings. I’ve had half a dozen in more than twenty years. But I might have found another one. And chances are, he’s not going to need a steak pie. He’s an accountant. He’s due to call me back. This week probably.”

“Can I ask a question, boss?”

“What is it?”

“Why are you telling me?”

“What you’re really asking is ‘why am I telling you and not Tessa?’ Two reasons. One, basic training. This is a part of being a copper that you need to learn. Two, if this guy tells us what I think he’s going to tell us I want some... I want someone in the department who can hold their hand up and say, ‘I didn’t know.’ Officially, at least.”

“What’s he going to tell us?”

“You’ll see. And you’ll understand why I wanted you to talk to Charlie Irvine. But I’ve a feeling this might get messy. And like I said, I want to protect Tessa.”

Does that mean he doesn’t want to protect me?

Chapter 4

Brady’s phone rang. He glanced down. A number he didn’t recognise.

So what? It’s part of the job. You’ve got to risk the double-glazing salesmen...

“Michael Brady.”

It was a woman’s voice. Mid-30s Brady guessed. “Hello?” Slightly hesitant...

“Hi, it’s Michael Brady.”

“My name’s Carrie. I’m Charlie Irvine’s girlfriend. He’d like to talk to you.”

“I thought it was a resolute ‘no comment?’”

“Aye, well,” Charlie Irvine said, opening the door wider, careful to use his left hand. “Things change, don’t they?”

“So what’s changed?”

Irvine laughed. Shrugged. Looked resigned. “Fuck knows.”

“Which is even shorter than ‘no comment.’”

“Aye, it would be.”

Brady walked into the lounge and over to the picture window. “Nice flat,” he said, looking out over half of Manchester. “Except the cranes spoil the view.”

“The owner’s a fan,” Irvine said simply. “He used to stand outside the players’ entrance to get my autograph. Suddenly he’s developing half the city. So he lends me a flat. Like I’m a pet. A bird in a cage. But where else am I going to live?”

Brady shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“And it has its upsides,” Irvine said, the Glasgow accent less noticeable now he was more relaxed. “What I don’t own I can’t lose.”

Brady turned round. *Don’t be overawed. He rang you. His girlfriend rang you. So he wants to talk. Be patient...*

“You want tea or anything?”

“No, I’m good, thanks,” Brady said. “The more tea you drink in the police canteen, the less tea you want to drink.”

“Coffee?”

“No, I’m fine. Really.”

Brady looked around him. “I didn’t know what to expect. I thought footballers... Ex-footballers...”

“Lived in places full of trophies and medals? Signed shirts from Cruyff and Maradona? The medals are all gone, pal. And in my day you did nae swap shirts. The kitman washed it. Then you wore it for the next game. Without your name on the back. Anyway, sit yersel’ down.”

Brady did as he was told. Looked at Charlie Irvine. A week since he’d seen him in the hospital. The bruises starting to fade. A smaller dressing on his hand. But two fingers still taped together. Still wincing as the broken ribs slowly healed. The pad still over his ear. Black hair receding, a week’s worth of stubble, the battle to stay at his playing weight long since lost.

“What’s changed?” Brady said again. “A week ago you wouldn’t talk to me. Now you’ve rung me. Your girlfriend’s rung me.”

Irvine nodded. “Carrie. She convinced me. Said I should tell you. Said you looked like a good person. Someone I could talk to.”

Tell me what? Be patient...

“She’s never met me.”

Irvine nodded. “She’s seen you. In the hospital. Must have seen you leaving the room. Put two and two together.”

He pushed himself to his feet. Winced again with the pain and limped to the window. Saw Brady looking at him. “Knees,” he said. “The ribs will heal. My knees? They’re gone. End my days in a wheelchair. Maybe...”

This is going to take time. But you’ve got all afternoon...

“Are you angry about it?”

“What’s the point? God gives, he takes away. Every footballer that ever lived – Pele, Cruyff, Maradona – he’s either right-footed or left-footed. Except me. Both the same. Now clearly there’s some wires crossed in my head ’cos that shouldn’t happen. It did though. But like I say, He gives, He takes away. So there’s other wires crossed. Fucked-up wires.”

“Which is why a fan has to give you a flat...”

“Right. Fucked-up wires. Wires that get bored. Press the self-destruct button...”

“Could you not... I don’t know. TV? The after dinner-circuit?”

Charlie Irvine laughed. Shook his head. “Tried it haven’t I? One ‘fuck’ too many, even for a pissed-up sportsman’s dinner. Besides, who the hell wants to be in Southport on a Tuesday night?”

He turned round from the window. Limped back to his chair. “So I stay in my gilded cage. Carrie takes care of me. Then I go out a wee bit. Sometimes when she’s looking. Sometimes when she’s not looking.” He ran his bandaged hand across the bruises on his face. “Maybe I shouldn’t.”

“Who did it?” Brady said.

Irvine ignored the question. “You see Live Aid? Freddie Mercury. That’s what I was talking about.”

“When?”

“When I said you did nae understand me. Me. Three o’clock on Saturday afternoon. Crossing the white line. Like Freddie. Farrokh Bulsara. Running up those stairs. Going on stage. What’s he do after that? A hundred thousand people. Ten million round the world. One man.”

Suddenly he was animated. Talking more quickly. “Who’s Queen’s drummer? Who cares? Freddie fucking Mercury. Did you see it?”

Brady stared in amazement.

Watched Charlie Irvine push himself painfully back to his feet again. Kick his shoes off. Jog five paces across his lounge, flicking his heels up behind him. Turn to a hundred thousand adoring fans. Raise his left arm. Strut across the stage. Play air guitar. Raise both his arms. Drink in the adoration. Bring his damaged right hand up

again. Bellow at the top of his voice. “Aaaaaaay – O! Aaaaaaay – O! Aaaaaaay fucking O!”

The Glasgow accent is back...

Brought his hand down again. Sighed. Shook his head. Looked wistful. “The best. The absolute best. But you tell me, son, what’s Freddie fucking do after that?”

“Well...”

“Yeah, yeah, I know he died. Five years later? Six years later? But everything after that had to be an anti-climax, didn’t it? Look at me. That goal against Liverpool. Take it on my chest. Over Hughsie’s head with my left. Bang. Top corner with my right. Thirty five yards. Goal of the Month. Goal of the Season. Goal of the fucking Decade.”

Brady nodded. *How many times did I try and copy it in the playground?*

“But you look at it logically, son. There can’t be a God, can there? All knowing, all seeing. ’Cos if there is he looks down. Speaks to me. ‘Spectacular goal, Charlie. Awesome. Sixty thousand people singing your name. Turn round, son, give ’em a wave. ’Cos it’ll never get any better than this. So up you come, old son. Go out on a high.”

Charlie Irvine looked at Brady. “The same as Freddie should have done after Live Aid.”

“Is that what you want to do? Go out on a high?”

“Is that a joke? You made another before didn’t you?” Irvine shook his head, the euphoria suddenly gone. “Fucked if I can remember it. I forget things now.”

“Why did they do it?” Brady said, gesturing at the bruises.

“Why? Because I have a drink. Do a line. Two lines. An’ sometimes I talk.”

“You said there was something you wanted to tell me...”

“Aye, I did. I thought I did. Thought there was something...”

He looked at Brady.

Like he’s willing me to understand...

“That’s my problem. Have a drink. Talk too much. Say what I think. Not like those fuckers I played with. What can they say? ‘I wear a suit and talk shite on the telly.’”

OK. Give him time. Just wait...

“But they get paid for it...”

“Aye. That they – ”

Chapter 5

The door opened. Brady turned round. The woman was in her mid-thirties. A maroon leather jacket over a black polo neck. Brown hair pulled back into a ponytail. A fresh face.

Too innocent to be living with Charlie...

A Tesco carrier bag in each hand.

“You’re Brady then,” she said simply.

Brady stood up. Held his hand out. She smiled. “Consider your hand shaken. I need to put the shopping down.”

She walked across to one of the work tops. Heaved the bags on to it with an audible sigh. Opened the fridge. Found a Coke. Drank straight from the can. Walked over and kissed Irvine. Turned to Brady. “The price I pay for living with a legend. Shopping on my own. Otherwise it’s every bloody aisle. ‘Can I have your autograph, Charlie?’ ‘That goal you scored against Liverpool, Charlie.’ ‘Just stand by the pasta for a photo will you, Charlie?’”

Charlie Irvine laughed. Carrie leaned over and kissed him again. Brady realised the conversation was over. He was focused on her now. Almost a small boy. His mum back from the shops.

He stood up. “I need to go. Get back to the station. But thanks, Charlie.”

Irvine shook his head. “Did I tell you anything useful? Like I said, sometimes I can’t remember.”

Thank you for reading the sample of ‘Crossing the White Line.’ I really hope you enjoyed it. To buy the book simply [click this link](#).