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PROLOGUE



Road Racer

WHEEL-TO-WHEEL RACING. There's nothing like it.

I'm doing 160 miles an hour, inches from Christian Elkin, the British Champion, and John McGuinness, winner of everything. We're that close you can smell each other's cologne. One false move from any of us will take the pack down like dominoes. That's not going to happen. I'm not going to fall. I'm not going to fail. I can't afford not to win this race.

It's 17 May 2008, the North West 200, the most popular sporting event in Northern Ireland and one of the fastest road races in the world. There are more than 30,000 spectators lining the streets of the nine-mile 'Triangle' course, and to them we're a neck-ache-inducing blur. But from where I'm sitting, I see everything.

I see the people. They're everywhere. Along the pavements. Waving out of houses. They're on roundabouts, in shops, sitting on post boxes and walls. At 100 miles an hour or 200 miles an hour, I see them all.

I see the lamp posts. I see the kerbs. I see the flowerpots, the jagged country walls, the signposts, the shops, the hotels, the pubs, the trees. And the hedges. I go so close to them my overalls will be green by the end. It's not advised. It's not sensible. In fact it's bloody dangerous. But it's me. It's how I ride.

I'm nineteen. I've got a lot on my mind. I don't actually remember much about the race until this moment, until this, the start of the very last lap. Everything from here is as clear as if it happened yesterday.

Elkin and McGuinness have both just passed me. More fool them. It's the wakeup call I need.

I'm not having this.

It's like a switch goes on in my head. Elkin, he's hungry for this race, he really wants the North West on his CV. And the wee bugger can ride. McGuinness is McGuinness. Great driver, always there or thereabouts, a legendary figure. He was impressive in qualifying but now it's different. He's not racing the clock any more. He's racing me. And that boy's going to know about it. By the time we start the last lap, I've got my place back from him.

We're going across the start and finish line, three peas in a pod, synchronized swimmers on two wheels. We're bombing along Millbank Avenue, up Primrose Hill. I get past Elkin. But at what cost? The hairpin at York Corner is coming up quicker than I can deal with.

I'm not going to make it. I'm not going to make it. I'm not going to make it ...

I smack the brakes on, I throw that Honda down left and, for a moment, I think she's put me off. I think it's all over.

But I'm not in the mood to quit. I wrestle her back just as Elkin goes past again. It's okay, I've got time. The two of us are at it the whole way round the anti-clockwise course. I'm having a go at him and he's having a go at me. There is no

love given, no love lost. I'm thinking, *He has no choice, I am going past or through him.* I don't mind which.

Then *boom*, it's done.

We're going round the Metropol, I am in the lead and I'm pushing and pushing. It's the last leg. I'm on the edge and I'm drifting. I know the chicane at Juniper Hill is coming. I know it's the last place where a normal racer can pass you. I know that Elkin will be having a go if he gets half a chance. I don't care what it takes.

I have to be first through here.

I'm going flat out, so fast I don't know if I can stop. Somehow the brakes bite, the tyres grip and I find the strength to force her round right, then left.

We're bombing up the hill again now. As we come to the top, I can see people out of the corner of my eye going bananas. The chequered flag is within touching distance. I soar across the line and lift my visor. I have to hear the crowds. They're cheering, they're jumping, they're having a party - all in my name.

I've never heard anything like it. I'm not one who really likes the crowds or the fuss, but this must be what it's like for Mick Jagger or Paul McCartney or one of those boys when they go on stage. Thousands and thousands of people screaming for you, showing their love. It never happens to me. It never happens to any racer. But then, what I've just done has never happened before.

The second the race finishes I'm done. I'm not seeing anything. My visor's open but it's steamed up. My head's full of tears. I'm numb. I'm spent. I pull up before I get to the pits and am vaguely aware of Christian slapping me on one side and John patting me on the other. I'm really not in control of anything. I've won the race but I can't find any happiness in it. There's no celebration to be had today, for one simple reason.

Tomorrow I bury my father.



Death is a familiar foe to road racers. She's always there, just out of the corner of your eye. Watching, waiting. Since the Isle of Man Touring Trophy began in 1907 there have been 252 fatalities on that famous Snaefell Mountain Course, not including the losses to spectators and officials. My uncle, Joey Dunlop, the legendary 'King of the Mountain', died during a race in Estonia. There've been fifteen deaths at the Ulster Grand Prix, five at the Killinchy 150, five at Tandragee, and nineteen here at the North West. My dad, Robert Dunlop, was number fifteen.

Death is responsible for the man I am today - my dad going, my winning that race the day before his funeral, continuing the Dunlop 'dynasty' - those events shaped me in ways I could never have imagined if they hadn't happened. I know that. All my achievements, everything, it started then. I'm the fastest man in history around the TT track. I hold the lap records virtually everywhere I've ever ridden. I've got thirteen TT trophies so far. I've achieved everything there is to achieve in my sport - and I'm only twenty-eight. What burns me is that my dad never saw any of it.

I'd give it all up tomorrow to have him back just for a day. But then this would be a much shorter book. And anyway, that's not the way of things. You don't get to write your own script. Life moves on. Life will wait for nobody. Not me, not the prime minister, not the Queen. Not even my dad.

ROAD RACER

Like it or not, this is my life. This is the script I've been given. This is who I am.

I'm Michael Dunlop: Road Racer.