

## Prologue 1

### *A Murder – Belfast, Sunday, February 11th, 1973*

It was cold. Middle of the night February cold. Really fucking cold. He could see his breath softening the street light as he watched the priest kneel beside the body of a petite blonde woman, his head bowed in prayer, her hair slightly ruffled by the lightest of breezes. The priest had said his name was McNally, hadn't vouchsafed any other information before going over the road.

“Sooner the fucker's done with the fenian mumbo-jumbo, sooner we can clear up.” The grizzled RUC sergeant, whose demeanour indicated that he'd been around since pussy was a cat, sucked morosely on his cigarette and shifted his weight from foot to foot. He was bored, as were the British squaddies manning the moonlit roadblock around the scene. There were too many like this for them to be interested in the detail any more. There had been four hundred and ninety-seven violent deaths in the Province in the previous year. Bombs in pubs and shops and clubs and city streets, bullets in back alleys and country lanes and pubs and... Too many to care too much about each tiny tragedy. So they stood guard on yet another and didn't bother to care, except for the fact that it wasn't one of them.

He knew there were eyes watching from behind curtains. But there was none of the usual aggravation. No groups of youths turfing bottles and bricks at the Brits and black bastards. Silence. And that was worrying. This wasn't normal. And this was no crime scene. The woman had been shot elsewhere and dumped here, out in the open. Just like the anonymous call to Tennent Street RUC station with a recognised Republican code word, it was a message. But to whom and saying what... There had been one drunk leaning against a wall a bit further down the road, but he stumbled off as soon as the group of vehicles arrived.

Detective Constable George Devenney didn't want to be there. In Catholic Andersonstown in west Belfast. Anywhere with a body with a hole in its head. But he'd been caught as the emergency duty officer, because his colleague had called in sick. He watched as the priest gently made the sign of the cross over the fallen figure. Compassion in a time of...

He still felt slightly nauseous from the first close-up sight of the corpse. The open staring eyes – light grey as far as he could judge – the hands by her sides and one leg crossed over the other. She could have just fallen a moment or two ago. No coat or anorak, just a sweater, jeans and trainers. But...

They'd warned him in the Enniskillen training depot that you can't look at violent death unmoved for too long, and he knew that the instructors had been right. He'd seen several close up when he was in uniform. And he'd seen a fair number at this distance since he passed his exams and became a detective. But he knew it was always too soon after your last

one to have to look at another body. But to the old sergeant, she was just like a rubbish bag, waiting to go into the bin. So he stood and watched as...

"Finally!" the sergeant growled. "Don't know why the fuckers bother. She's in hell along with all the rest of the popeheads." He dropped the glowing butt of his cigarette and mashed it under his boot. "Let's get it over with then." He gestured to the ambulance men and the doctor. They came out of their tobacco huddle and set about their task.

Devenney went over to the priest who had risen from his knees and now stood erect beside the corpse. He was staring past Devenney, to a horizon of his own. It was the eyes that Devenney remembered. Red-rimmed as if from lack of sleep, but without a shred of emotion inside. Looking to a country somewhere else.

"Can you tell me Father what it was that you saw and heard?"

The priest was standing stock still, frozen almost, looking down the road. He turned his head briefly to watch the doctor pronounce death officially, and the paramedics fold the corpse into a body bag.

"Nothing much to tell, really." His had the softness of an accent from somewhere around County Londonderry, cultured too. Near from where Devenney came from in Limavady. The priest smiled faintly. "I was visiting my young brother down the road there. Someone called the house. They must have known I was there. My sister-in-law took the call and said that a man told her a priest was needed in the road. And when I went out I saw you people coming."

"You didn't hear any shots?" An unlikely question, he knew.

"No, but we were all asleep when the phone went." The priest shrugged apologetically. "I'm afraid that when I get over, I'm out like a light for all of the hours that the Lord allows me. You can ask the brother and his wife, but I doubt if they heard anything either."

And right enough, next morning the brother and his wife, a couple in the mid-twenties, were like the wise monkeys, not seeing or hearing or saying. But that was always the way of it. As his boss said, you could walk in and shoot half a dozen in any crowded bar in Belfast, and if you were one of the boys, every single last sinner in the place would claim to have been in the toilet having a piss, just at the time it happened. So he'd expected nothing, and he got nothing.

"If there's nothing further..." The priest was a big man, a good six footer at least and with broad shoulders. So the hand gesture, almost delicate, seemed out of place.

"No, Father. You've done all you can here. But we'll need a contact address and number."

"I'm only going to be here until tomorrow. But you can get me at the parochial house. It's in the other jurisdiction, I'm afraid, in Donegal. Just outside Carrigans, over the border from Derry." He handed over a slip of card. Father Jerome McNally S.J., Parochial House, it read, and there was a County Donegal phone number.

Devenney just didn't need the complication. "Thanks Father. I doubt if you'll be needed, but if you are, we can get the Derry boys to get in touch with your local Garda station to ask you for a formal statement. But there's not really much to say, is there?"

The priest nodded. Devenney shook his hand before the big man walked slowly down to where the light was shining through the one open door on the street. The ambulance had gone and the squaddies were climbing back into their Humber Pigs. He joined the sergeant and the two uniformed constables in the back of the Land Rover for the trip back to base.

There wasn't really any blood on the ground. Just a couple of vague stains on the ground that might have come from the ketchup off a discarded burger wrapper. Nothing for anyone really to notice in the morning. Nothing except for the whispers.

They never did find out her name back then. Or why she ended up half on the pavement, half in the gutter. No-one ever claimed her and so she went into an anonymous grave. Soon forgotten on the street, sooner forgotten by those who'd been the guardians of her last journey.

Devenney was transferred two days later, down the country for a spell. Two years investigating burglaries in Ballymena. Not wildly exciting, but at least the body count there was lower than a lot of places at that time.

After the statutory wait as is the law on dealing with unknown corpses, she was buried in an unmarked grave. When he got back to Belfast, Devenney paid for a simple flower holder and, when he could, had flowers placed on it. The years passed and she was forgotten. Forgotten in Belfast by all but a peeler for whom she'd been his only anonymous corpse.

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## Prologue 2 – Seanie McDevitt remembers...

*Belfast – Wednesday 14th February 1973*

So how did I manage to get tangled up in this story and get to be the scribe who recorded it? Well, if you know my background, you'll know that George Devenney and I have a long history (see *The Eejit's Tale* and *Trouble with a Capital 'T'*). Oh he's now an Assistant Chief Constable, retiring shortly, but when I first came across him he was an Inspector in RUC Special Branch, and our paths have sort of been intertwined ever since.

The killing of the lassie in Andersonstown made the early morning and lunchtime news bulletins briefly, a wee bit more at teatime and on the late-night news, none the next day. It was submerged under the latest tide of events where you might be able to put a face or a name to one or more of the victims of the day's tragedies. She was soon forgotten, and if I'd actually taken any notice of the news I'd have forgotten too. But it became stuck in my mind because of a slightly drunken conversation after a gig in the west of the city.

I'd recently joined a band that played nice blues and rock, and was starting to pay my dues as a guitar player, while being the student at Queen's University. The venue was a wee hole-in-the-wall club in West Belfast, fuelled by bootleg booze and fags, paying its whack to the boys, and so protected by them. We'd done a good journeyman gig – good enough at least to ensure we got paid! With the gear packed away, it was time to settle down for a couple of pints while we waited for our loot. Then one of the locals sat down with us.

Gussie McBride did turn out to be one of those sad types who fancied the idea of being close to the big boys, so that he could impress people with what he 'knew'. In other words, he was treated by the serious players as a sort of useful big toe-rag who could run the odd errand, smack the odd head, but on no account could be trusted to keep his yap shut or do anything more complicated than fart and walk at the same time. He was about as bright as a broken light bulb, and so he drifted around the fringes, occasionally doing wee bits of this and that, sometimes bouncer at one or other of the clubs in the neighbourhood. He'd had a few pints, and started to lay it out about how this and that was going down.

"I'll tell yez one thing lads," he began, in that conspiratorial tone of voice the likes of him use to show what a cute hoor he is. "There was something not right about that lassie getting done the other night."

You have to remember that this was one of the worst years of the Troubles. And one of the problems in a situation like that was that you were never totally sure whether you were dealing with someone 'in-the-know', a player who might take grievous bodily offence at being disrespected, or just some mouthy bollockbrain. So we all smiled vaguely. Alex the keyboard player drew the short straw and had to ask who was the lassie he was referring to.

"The one who got done the other night up in Andersonstown. I was up there." He actually tapped the side of his nose with his finger, then looked at us, expecting a response.

I'll say one thing for Alex – he knew how to be diplomatic. “So what was so odd then?” he enquired in tones that suggested he might even be interested.

“What was so odd? I'll tell yez.” He leaned back in his chair, happy that he had an audience, stringing us along – keeping us in suspense as he thought.

“What was really fuckin' weird was that O'Sullivan didn't know! He was fuckin' ripping, so he was. Here last night and ye could see he was lookin' to find out who the fuck did it and pull the bollocks off them.”

Back in those days, Gerard 'Ger' O'Sullivan was a local middle-ranker in the Provisional IRA, a face on the street. Someone you should tip your hat to and then get the fuck off-side from before he decided that he didn't like your face, or your jeans or the way you looked at him or... He'd a growing reputation as a hard man, as well as a bit of a one for the ladies – one bit in particular! In other words, he was someone to politely avoid! Unhappily as I was beginning to find out, boys like this quite often turned up at gigs – sometimes to make sure their cut of the action was being looked after, sometimes actually to listen to the music.

Gussie went on. “I mean like a priest who just happened to be at his brother's? That was what they was sayin' next day. Except like the guy who lives two doors down on the other side is a mate of mine and says them'uns don't have a dirty beast in the family, so they don't.”

There wasn't a lot we could say, especially as none of those details, except for the phone call with the code word, had been in the news, according to Alex later on. So we sort of smiled and said things like ‘Aye, yer right. That's really strange.’ and ‘There's some strange shit happening.’

Gussie leaned across the table, looked around for a moment – as we thought at the time, for effect – and said in a low voice “Y'see I reckon she was dumped out of an unmarked car, so I do. I was walking up to the mate's house and I saw a car take off. Like it had no plates on the back. Then the peelers and the Brits turned up, so I got into the mate's place and crashed.”

He leaned back again in his chair, a boozy sort of satisfied grin moulding his face. We all looked at each other and came to an unspoken consensus that it was time to get the fuck away home out of that. This sort of shit we did not want to hear. Except that as we hoisted ourselves onto our feet the consensus was broken by our drummer who, like all good drummers, was a couple of sandwiches short of a picnic.

“So what did yer man O'Sullivan make of that, eh?” he enquired.

Gussie looked at him as if this wasn't the question he wanted to be asked. A sort of sulky look appeared. “He just told me I'd been pissed, couldn't see straight. But I know.” He sort of squinted over my shoulder, and all of a sudden the sulk was replaced by apprehension.

“Ach, he was probably right. Nothing in it really.” Now there was a hint of panic in his voice.

I felt a tap on my shoulder, and turned round to find myself looking into the face of Ger O'Sullivan. I'd only seen him once before, but once seen not forgotten. Dapper, neatly dressed with short, sandy hair. Unobtrusive, inoffensive even. Lose him in a crowd of four. Unless, of course, you knew.

“Evenin’ lads.” He leaned past me and handed an envelope to Charlie, the lead singer. “That was a nice bit of playin’.”

O’Sullivan was smiling. That sort of smile where the lips move but the eyes aren’t involved. He looked across at Gussie, and the smile faded.

“Our Gussie been talkin’ shite again?” The tone was on the unfriendly side of neutral. Gussie was looking seriously unhappy.

“Just talkin’ music, Mr. O’Sullivan. Just...”

O’Sullivan cut him short with a wave of the hand. “Not important, son. Are ye not going to count it?” This last to Charlie, who still had the envelope in his hand. He looked embarrassed.

“No need. I’m sure it’s all ok.”

“But ye’ll count it anyway.” The tone hardened. “Don’t want a repeat of a wee while ago when some lads claimed they’d been short-changed. Don’t want that unpleasantness, like.”

As Charlie took the money from the envelope, Gussie tried to ingratiate himself, saying “We sure sorted them cunts out, didn’t we, Mr. O’Sullivan?” O’Sullivan looked at him for a moment, then started slowly to move round the table.

He sort of looked over his shoulder and in our general direction said “Our Gussie’s got a serious problem, boys. Doesn’t know when to shut his bake.”

We’d all seen fights in bars before – handbags-at-ten-paces sort of events. But what happened next was as truly shocking as it was scary.

O’Sullivan was quite a short man, muscled, but not overly so. He was about half the size of Gussie, but when he walked round the table he seemed to get bigger. He pushed Charlie out of the road and stood facing Gussie, who’d stumbled to his feet and now looked as if he was shitting himself. Without warning, O’Sullivan scooped up a pint glass from the table and smashed it across Gussie’s face. As the big man reeled back, O’Sullivan punched him again and again, finally forcing him back onto a table. Then he kept hitting and hitting until Gussie stopped moving. Stepping back he let him slide to the floor where he lay still.

None of us had ever seen anything like that sudden violent fury. Nowadays you’d think Joe Peschi in *Casino* or *Goodfellas*, but then... None of the bar staff or the last of the punters drinking up made a move to help Gussie, whose face was a mask of blood.

O’Sullivan strolled back towards us as if nothing had happened. He had a handkerchief out and was wiping blood off his hand. “Is the money right?” The tone was back to almost friendly conversational. Needless to say Charlie couldn’t wait to tell him that it was just as agreed. All grand. Thanks all round.

“In that case I’ll love yez and leave yez” The cold smile, a casual glance over at his victim, and he strode off out the door. It was a couple of minutes before anyone went over to Gussie, and by that time Charlie had divvied up the money and we were heading out the door and in the general direction of ‘away’

I never played that venue again although later, when I had my own band, I did play a few places where O’Sullivan had an interest. By this time he’d moved away from the hands-on nastiness and was into the politics, getting himself a seat on Belfast City Council. He seemed to like my playing, so never hassled me, and on the odd occasion when he made any sort of conversation, the incident with Gussie was never mentioned.

I did my damn'dest to forget it, and nearly succeeded until it surfaced years later on account of my brother Jackie. But that's for later.

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Part 1

*George Devenney's Tale*



## Chapter 1

### *Reminiscences*

The George Devenney I've known could always be a right scary sod if he wanted. In terms of the average peeler, he was a right hard case, smart as a whip and with the drive and nerve to more than hold his own. But under a fairly thick skin there has always been a bog-basic, decent man. And unlike so many, there's a solid core of desire – no, of need – to see things right! I'll not say that he was averse to clouting the odd suspect, or boosting the evidence a wee bit from time to time, or blackmailing the fuck out of the likes of me. But in a perverse sort of way he was always 'fair', if you see what I mean. And he introduced me a good while back to Mickey Morrison who's become a really good mate.

The first part of the story George told me a number of years ago, when the kids were young. It was out on Shark Island, the Caribbean retreat, over a year after the affair in Prague and Afghanistan. We'd had a quiet day, nothing special, just two friends sitting and relaxing while the wives were down in the garden sunning their buns and the wee'uns were in bed. Talking about the old days in Belfast. Having a quiet jar or two. We'd been discussing how lucky I was to have got out of Belfast when I did, and how what had happened in Norn Iron over all these years could have happened.

"I used to think it was possible to control evil," he said, quietly. "I was brought up to believe in good and evil. And you do see it. But all you can really do is keep the lid on the box shut for a wee while. Then it opens again."

I can't now remember what started this particular train of thought, but it came round to the first time he'd had to conduct a murder enquiry on his own. George took a long pull at his glass, looking into the distance of years ago. "I'll always remember that girl. She looked so tranquil in the morgue. And she looked almost peaceful lying there in the street. I can still see her, even now."

"The girl who was tied in to Jackie's first Crown case?"

He nodded, his eyes fixed somewhere in the distance. "I learned how to shut that sort of thing out over the years. You see the bodies and the bits and pieces. There are the wives and the kids and the bystanders and all of the shit-story folk. So you grow a shell, otherwise you'd go buck mad. But her... Maybe it was because she was the first case I investigated where it was an anonymous corpse that it hit me so hard."

I'd been reminded because of my brother Jackie and the first prosecution case that he'd been involved in as a newly qualified barrister. The girl in Andersonstown had been sort of on the edge of that. But we'll get to that later.

"But did you ever find out who she was? What she doing when...?" I asked.

"Not then, not for a fair few years." Devenney leaned back in his chair. The soft Caribbean evening was beginning to wash over and enfold us.

He was looking into the distance. Not in miles, but in years. "There was nothing to give us a clue at that time. Her clothes were off-the-peg Marks and Sparks types that you'd get anywhere. No tattoos, no makeup, nails neat but not manicured. Hair neat, no more. Of course there was nothing in her pockets. She'd been sanitised as it were, although forensic

picked up some stray hairs from her sweater. And in those days we didn't have the computers to trace fingerprints. Certainly none of the DNA technology that we have now. We put her picture and prints out to Interpol, but nobody responded, so she went into the dead cases archive. Just another body amongst all the others. And then years later I had a visitor. I tell you Seanie, it was a bombshell and..."

Just then Jana came out with our daughter, Ellen Michaela, roaring fit to burst with her eighteen-month-old lungs. Teething again was the general verdict. So things got kind of shunted sideways as we all acted the maggot to get the wee'un settled and quiet.

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Later that evening, when herself had drifted off to sleep, we had a few glasses of Marie's special rum punch.

"So what about this visitor, then?" I asked.

"Well," he paused, "this was, let me see, yes 1983 and I'd been sort of promoted sideways into a branch that didn't really exist if you see what I mean. I had operational duties and just answered to my boss, a superintendent. No, don't ask." He held his hand up to stop the inevitable question. "Just suffice it to say that in my particular section of E4 we had a number of young lads who'd been SAS trained and went out on the streets undercover – surveillance and intelligence gathering mostly, but sometimes getting a bit more involved, but you didn't hear that."

I just nodded.

"Anyway, we were based in a wee block inside the compound at North Queen Street, really it was a wooden shack while we waited for the money for bricks and mortar. There were a lot of the funnies about, hidden away in offices at the rear of the compound. Military intelligence. That gave us a right few laughs I can tell you when we saw some of the fuck-ups they made at the start. Occasionally bumped into one or two in the canteen but that was about the limit."

"But there was one army intelligence chap from an offshoot of a wee group called 'The Det', 14 Intelligence Company," he went on, "who was a total pain in the hole. A captain by the name of Spencer Mathers. Refined Glasgow Gorbals – lace curtains, fake Oxbridge accent and a cutthroat razor down the sock. Him I did see a lot of. Always 'just popping round for a quick chat', and usually dropping some shit or other on my desk. His brother," he grimaced, "was the Right Honourable also-pain-in-the-hole Winston Mathers MP."

That name rang a bell. "You mean that twat who..."

George nodded. "The very same junior minister, part of the team sent over by Ted Heath in 1972 to run Ulster, after they junked Stormont." He was referring to the British government proroguing the old Northern Ireland parliament because of its inability to stop the conflict between our two communities.

"You remember the scandal?" I nodded. "Mathers was a gospel hall man, but not with Paisley's lot as I found out later. But the difference between him and the brother was something too. You remember the Glesga ehkksent ye cud cut wi' a hatchet?"

George's imitation was spot on, and I laughed as I remembered the jokes about how even Mathers' wife probably needed an interpreter to find out whether he wanted a shag or his dinner.

“He was one right wee turd, I can tell you. Hated us provincials, as if Scotland wasn’t another wee outpost of England. And the brother Spencer was one of those Anglo-Scots who sounded straight out of Oxbridge and Sandhurst. Made Ted Heath sound Cockney. Typical hee-haw Brit upper class, except he was a working class Scots toe-rag who’d worked hard to live down his background. Arse creeper, though, just like his slimy brother. And he was dangerous. He was a part of the Military Reaction Force in ’72 and ’73, right up to when they disbanded them.”

He leaned forward and there was suddenly a real intensity in his face. “The good Captain Mathers called to see me one evening. June it was, one of those sunny days when Belfast actually looks attractive. Just a friendly heads-up about a potentially awkward diplomatic situation. The basic message was that his lords-and-masters as he called them didn’t want one of the local natives causing a stir. So when I asked what the fuck he was talking about, he told me I was going to have a visitor from the other side – would you believe that he actually fucking called it that?”

“Er...was he calling a séance?” I couldn’t get the reference.

George grimaced. “He was talking about the other side of the Iron Curtain! So I asked why the hell a Russian would be coming to see me.”

“So he says, ‘Not a Russian, dear boy.’ I could have shoved my fist down his throat every time he called me that! ‘It’s a blond, Baltic bombshell from Riga in the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic. Lovely arse. Good rack too. I wish she was going to be here longer because that’s a filly that’s hot to trot. Anyway, the big boys who guarantee your continuing employment want you tell her a big, fat nothing. Zero, zilch, nada. Understand?’ I was dumbfucked I can tell you.”

“And this was when we weren’t exactly friends with the Soviets?” I asked.

George nodded. “Yes, Reagan had just made the speech about Marxism and Leninism belonging on the ash heap of history, and all the Brit Tories had their tongues hanging out, and of course Thatcher...” he shrugged.

I just sat and waited. George had slipped into that half world of reminiscence where you have such intense memory that it seems as if you are being dragged back in.

He went on. “I said nothing. Just looked at him. Mathers was looking at me, wanting me to ask the inevitable questions, and I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction.”

“Aye, I remember you doing it to me when you were quizzing me. Aggressive listening I think it’s called” He smiled back at me.

“You told me a lot too, didn’t you? More or less sod all as I seem to remember. Anyhow,” he smiled, looking back over the years to the time when I had been in his sights for... But that’s another story.

George closed his eyes and leaned back for a moment. “Anyhow, I just sat there and finally Mathers came across. This Baltic bombshell was a member of the Latvian security services who was enquiring about the disappearance of a Latvian citizen, female, 31 years of age, who was believed to have been in Ireland in February 1973 at a Socialist conference held in Belfast and organised by the Communist Party of Ireland. The conference and all of the other delegates were believed to have gone home to their various socialist paradises. And none of the local comrades claimed to have seen her after the thing broke up. And I had had a corpse who might fit the bill.”

The comrades, of whom there seemed to be only around twenty in Belfast – most of them drank in the Club Bar by the University when I was a student – were largely united in their hatred of the local Trotskyites of whom there were about five, and of each other. So watching one of their corner-table meetings could make for quite entertaining people-watching as the beer and dialectic flowed. And for a brief while, I gigged with one of them – a drummer no less. Apparently George’s particular corner of Special Branch didn’t take most of them particularly seriously either, although there was a hard core with their Soviet Bloc contacts who did cause concern.

He went on. “So I asked Mathers if my corpse was Latvian and was told that as far as he knew she wasn’t. So why were his lot involved? He told me that was way above my pay grade. I smelled a very large rat at that one. So just for badness I asked why it wasn’t the Third Secretary from the Latvian embassy or some similar functionary? Mathers wasn’t having any of this. All of a sudden it wasn’t ‘Old Boy’ or ‘My dear old chap’ or any of that crap. It was all ‘Now you listen to me!’”, and I think you know how I react to that sort of crap!”

I laughed out loud at that! The thought of anyone trying to intimidate George Devenney was just plain amusing.

George pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes for a moment. “Anyhow, I just sat there and waited. Finally he blinked first.”

Apparently the request for information had come via the Foreign Office to the Northern Ireland Office and, since it seemed entirely non-political, it had been passed on to the RUC, one copy eventually ending up with a records clerk in Tennent Street station. Not knowing any better, she replied with details including Devenney’s name as the reporting officer. It was when the priest McNally’s name came up that some sort of red flag was raised.

“Mathers told me that there was no need for me to know why or when a flag was raised. ‘You don’t have the clearance so don’t bother asking!’ was what he told me.”

The long and short of it was that George was to meet the lady and deny all knowledge of any Latvian citizen or any other foreign national going walkabout in dear old Norn Iron in whatever time frame his visitor enquired about.

“I’ve got to tell you Seanie. It was a bombshell! After being a peeler since before the Troubles started, it took a lot to surprise me, but this really blew me away. Mathers must have sensed it and he just smiled at me. Made some stupid comment about how time erases memory and that he was sure I’d convince the good Major...a Major in a foreign – fer fuck sake a Sovbloc – security service, that us local yokels knew nothing about whatever it was she was looking for. It was surreal. Just like those books by yer man Kafka that you tried to get me to read.”

Mathers dropped a file in front of George, told him that this was the official list of unidentified bodies that the RUC had compiled for the period in question. When George flicked through the slim folder, he found his report from 1973 alright, but with a very different photograph of the girl from Andersonstown.

“I really blew my top. I told him that if he wanted to do some sort of dirty cover up he could do it himself. Told him I’d never liked politics and particularly the sort of shite he was trying to pull. But what came next near broke me.”

Mathers looked at him and asked him if he valued his job? George told him to go fuck himself, that he was going to go to the top and report. Mathers told him that this came for the top. He, Mathers, was merely facilitating co-operation between his unit and George's at the behest of a Deputy Chief Constable no less and Army Command at Lisburn. George told him he'd damn well check up on that, and Mathers simply told him 'Be my guest!'

It could have really turned nasty when George intimated that there were local journalists, particularly of a nationalist persuasion for whom this would be meat and drink. But it didn't, even though it should have!

"I was on my feet. Looked the bastard straight in the eye. 'Brit spook seeks to pervert the course of justice! Aye that'd make a great headline wouldn't it, asshole?' And do you know Seanie, he just sat there, smiling at me. He should have been threatening to get me the sack, or deported, or hung, drawn and quartered, whatever, at the front of the City Hall. But he just smiled."

Mathers flummoxed George when he changed the course of the conversation by asking George how many of his squad were currently out undercover. "I asked him what the fuck he meant by that. And he just went on smiling, told me he hoped I knew what the risks my men were taking. That was when I knew I was fighting a battle I wasn't going to win."

As George explained it, he knew which of his folk were out undercover, but he didn't know who or what Mathers had out there.

"And the bastard still smiled at me and told me he knew I'd see sense and that of course we were both on the same side. So I arranged to see my 'visitor' first thing next morning and lie through my teeth to her. Get rid of her as soon as possible. It was one of the very few times that I wanted to shove my warrant card up a headquarters asshole and retire somewhere. And after he'd gone, my boss called me in for a 'wee chat' and pulled my head off. Don't mess with The Man was the order of the day. No ifs or buts. Just don't rock the boat."

Knowing George, I was pretty sure that this bollocking was so much water off a duck's back, so I asked him what had come next.

"I'll tell you Seanie. Nothing that I was prepared for. Absolutely and totally nothing!"

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First thing – and first thing was 6am – next morning, George was pacing up and down in his office. The phone went. It was Mathers telling him that he'd 'pop over in a jiffy and could he put the kettle on please.' So George got out three cups and the usual brew accessories, stuck the plug in. And he waited.

And waited. The kettle boiled, and then it sat cooling. About an hour at least George reckoned, while he scrutinised Mather's file and tried to see if he could find any other discrepancies, but his report seemed as he remembered it, apart from the facial photographs of the girl. The two other cases that spanned the time period in question seemed straightforward too. He hadn't slept too much the previous night. Pictures of 1973 had played against his eyelids every time he closed his eyes, and he still could see nothing that made sense. So in one respect, it was a bit of a relief when he heard footsteps in the hall.

Mathers, wearing civvies, opened the door, and was followed by one of his squaddies. Behind him came a petite female figure in a steel grey outfit of jacket and knee-length plaited skirt. The squaddie left, leaving the three of them together. And...

George looked at me. His eyes had a look that I'd never seen before. "I swear to you Seanie, it was the girl from Andersonstown. Just as if she'd suddenly sat up and got off the coroner's gurney. The blonde hair, the eyes, the mouth. I thought I was hallucinating, I thought... Fuck! I don't know what I thought. But there she was. Standing there in front of me. Like they say, large as life."

There was no answer to that!

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 2

### *A blast from the past*

Before George could do or say anything, Mathers introduced him to Major Anija Vītols of the Latvian State Police. George just managed to shake her hand and tell her how pleased he was to meet her, hoping she hadn't noticed the shock that he felt was written all over his face.

Ushering her to one of the two seats in front of George's desk, Mathers shot out "Is the kettle boiled? The Major flew into RAF Aldergrove yesterday afternoon, had to doss down up there before coming down here this morning, so I'm sure that she is gasping for a good cuppa. Aren't you my dear?"

To George's absolute and utter delight, and snapping him out of his shock, Major Vītols turned slowly to Mathers, half smiling and said in a light voice and near flawless English, "Is it normal in your army for an officer of lower rank to address a superior as 'my dear'? We should call that – how do you say, ah yes – insubordination."

While Mathers spluttered and told her that of course he had not intended any offence, George busied himself with the kettle to hide a smile like a basket of chips. By the time he set the tray down in front of them, both he and Mathers had regained their composure. They made inconsequential chitchat as George poured the tea, having manfully resisted the urge to ask Mathers if he'd be mother.

After a few inconsequential remarks from all concerned, Vītols turned to George. "I understand that you have made enquiries concerning our missing citizen," she began. "We have made enquiries also in the Republic of Ireland, but without success."

George pulled out the file he had been lumbered with and passed it over to her.

"These are the only three unidentified bodies that turned up during the time-frame of the conference and two weeks on either side." He put as much sincerity as he could into his voice because he now suspected more than just a routine missing persons enquiry.

"Do you have a picture of..." Mathers cut across rather hastily George thought, saying that the Major had indeed provided a full description including a photo, but that there was no match on the files.

If, at this point, I could see that this was seriously fishy, I could understand that George's antennae must have been twanging like harp strings.

He leaned forward and pointed to the end tab of the folder. "You'll see that I investigated one of the bodies, an unidentified female who was murdered and dumped in west Belfast. She is the only one that matches your criteria – estimated age and height, but not weight or colouring or features, I'm afraid. The other two unidentified females were elderly, both probably homeless, who died of a combination of hypothermia and alcohol that February. It was bitterly cold I do remember."

He let Vītols study the file, saying nothing. She scanned each page, occasionally pausing. When she came to Andersonstown victim, her reading became more intense, and she frowned, but said nothing.

“I almost forgot to ask you,” said George, as if an afterthought. “What was your citizen’s name?”

For a moment Vītols said nothing, her eyes still fixed on the fake photograph in the file. Then she looked directly at George and said, “Vītols, Kristina Vītols.”

George said nothing. Mathers had the grim expression of one who has heard the other question asked that he didn’t want asked.

After a long pause, Vītols sat up straight in her chair, folder in her lap and said simply, “She was my mother.”

George told me that this one of those times when he was truly lost for words. He’d suspected something of this nature, but to have this seemingly nice lady lay it out as baldly as that, he had nothing to say.

It was clear, however, that Mathers had much to say, and was about to say it. But just then, there was a muffled thud from somewhere outside, followed a few seconds later by a huge explosion.

And, as George said quite simply, the lights went out!

\*

In 1451, the Turkish Sultan Mohammed II was besieging Constantinople and his guns, which fired bloody great stone balls, were not doing the best against the Venetian fleet that was harrying his army and giving them mucho aggro. Supposedly he hit on the idea of a new type of gun that fired the same bloody big lumps of rock, but at a really high elevation. Some Hungarian gunfounder cast a gun that could fire a 1500lb ball and used it to smash at least one ship to smithereens. And so, according to historians, the mortar was born. Just to show you that there’s nothing new under the sun!

Anyhow, what had pretty much flattened George’s office, partly burying him, Mathers and Vītols in the debris – not to mention killing four peelers and two Brits, and injuring a right lot of other folk, security forces and civvies – was the IRA’s version of the Sultan’s weapon. A big tube that fired a gas cylinder packed with explosives had been mounted on the back of a flat-bed lorry parked about a hundred yards away. Dead simple principle based on the old mortars. Put a load of home-made gunpowder in the bottom of the tube with a detonator and timer, put the gas cylinder in on top with its fuse in, park the lorry and fuck away off at a high rate of knots before the thing goes off. George and the other survivors were lucky too, because of the eight mortars on the back of the flatbed, only one went off. The other 1500lb or so of homemade explosive just sat there and subsequently was made safe by the cool-arsed madmen of the bomb-disposal squad.

George woke up pretty quickly underneath his desk and a bit of the wooden roof. The rest had been blown clean off. Vītols was a bit further away, on her back but moving slowly. As his vision cleared and he reckoned he was in one piece with just a few scratches and ringing eardrums, George saw Mathers, face down and with a lot of blood about him. There was confused shouting and screaming outside, sirens blaring, just general chaos.

The blonde Latvian Major rolled over onto her hands and knees and crawled over to George, helping to push the woodwork off him. And a right strong lassie she was, said George. Helped him shove the remains of his desk to one side and then hauled him to his feet.

They stood there for a moment, surveying the scene of carnage around them. Then they went to help Mathers. He was out of it, a gash across his forehead where he'd been clobbered by some flying debris.

George reckoned this was one of the coolest ladies he had ever come across. And this was in the days before he met Margaret, his wife. There was a fountain of water gushing from one of the many burst pipes, and having torn a strip from her ruined jacket, she got down beside Mathers, rolled him into the recovery position and proceeded to clean his wound as best she could. She pulled off her jacket and laid it over him, and George could see blood on the neck of her white blouse. Coming from a cut at the base of her skull from which a wee bit of glass was sticking.

It stopped him totally dead. And he flashed on to Vītols' mother in an Andersonstown gutter, with a bullet hole in almost the exact same position. It froze him for a few before he shook himself out of an awful sense of *déjà vu*.

He went over and stood behind her, taking off his jacket and draped it round her shoulders. "Just hold still a moment, Major." He gently eased the small scrap of glass out of her skin and then, as blood started to ooze out more quickly, searched frantically through his pockets for a clean handkerchief. He didn't have one, but since his shirt was destroyed anyhow, he tore off part of the sleeve and used it as a compress, holding it gently to her neck while she held her compress to Mather's head.

They stayed in that position until the medics arrived and started to deal with the victims. Mathers was still unconscious when they loaded him into an ambulance. The medics decided that Vītols didn't need stitches and just put a bandage on her cut. After, she stood there, George's jacket draped round her shoulders. For a moment, she looked entirely vulnerable.

Two of George's boys had been on site, fortunately both uninjured. But their radios had been in their car and it had been parked in the area where the mortar bomb exploded. So no radios, and of course this was in the days before mobile phones. The main phones were out of action too, but one of them spotted one of Mather's spooks and managed to persuade him to take them to one of their secure phones in a part of the main building that hadn't been trashed.

George spoke to his boss who was just waking up to the news. Immediate instructions were to make their fall back the Castlereagh interrogation centre at Ladas Drive in the east of the City and to ensure that all of his lads used this until further notice. He was to take Vītols with them and organise getting her on her way back to Riga. George's private car was also a total write-off, so he commandeered one of the Landrovers that had arrived with reinforcements, along with a uniformed driver, and made the short trip across the city.

They travelled in a companionable silence, a group of people who knew that for each of them, the Gods had rolled the dice and hadn't come up Snake Eyes.

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Ladas Drive complex is a red-brick sprawl sprouting with all sorts of communications antennae. It gained a degree of notoriety as the interrogation centre to which terrorist suspects of all hues and persuasions were taken to discuss their wickedness with a confessor from the long and sympathetic arm of the law. Next door was what was the then ramshackle HQ of D Company, 7th Battalion of the Ulster Defence Regiment, where I'd been stationed in my days as a member of Her Majesty's armed forces (and probably one of the least competent!).

Anyhow, as soon as they got inside the centre, George sought out the duty officer and got him and his group into a room with secure communications. A female constable about the same size as Vītols took her to get a shower and a change of clothes. A lot of staff kept a change of clothes here just in case of emergencies, and in any case as well as being the right thing to do, it avoided having to have a foreign peeler from a hostile regime watching how they deployed undercover bodies here.

George left his two boys to deal with the somewhat delicate task of letting their mates know to come in to the fallback. Not exactly the sort of signal that you could send out with the evening news. Then he got to his locker for his spare kit and went to shower, and while the hot water washed away the dust and dirt, stood under the spray and let it wash away the dust from his brain. By the time he'd got himself towelled off and dressed, he'd come to precisely no conclusion as to what the fuck this was all about.

While he'd been showering, the duty officer had contacted RAF Aldergrove, the military side of the main civilian airport in Northern Ireland, and they had arranged for Vītols to get on a routine flight that evening to RAF Northolt, just to the north-west of London, from where she'd be driven to the Latvian embassy in London, close to Madam Tussaud's on the Marylebone Road, as Vītols told him.

He found the blonde Major kicking her heels in the canteen, looking in her borrowed clothes as if she'd just walked out the door on her way to work after a good night's sleep.

"This'll make a good story when you get home."

Vītols smiled. Like the stars coming out on a clear night, George remembered, faint but gentle.

"My chief will be amused. We do not have problems with terrorists since the last of our fascists were hunted down thirty years ago. So I did not expect to be blown up. My ears still ring."

George decided to take the bull by the bollocks and ask what seemed the obvious question.

"I can understand your wish to find out what happened to your mother, but why the need for you to come in person? Couldn't your embassy have pursued the information on your behalf?"

She smiled at him again. "And our embassy would have been told that sadly, no such person had been found here would they not? And so it would not have been necessary for you

to offer me this false document.” Her smile faded, replaced by a look of deep sadness. “Oh Inspector. Do I really seem so stupid?”

This really had George stumped. He felt himself floundering in the realisation that probably anything that he said at this point would be the wrong thing. But he tried anyway.

“I’m not really sure how to ask this question as I wasn’t involved in the process of...” He stopped when Vītols raised her hand.

“I understand your dilemma,” she said. “You did not expect this visit I know. And I am sure that you did not expect your superiors to order you to lie.”

Afterwards, George found himself extremely grateful that she hadn’t laughed out loud when his chin hit the floor.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 3

### *Truth, Guinness and an Ulster fry*

George and I do share a belief that there are certain times in one's life when alcoholic beverage is called for as a matter of urgency, and right then he decided that this was one of them. It was coming up to opening time, and so he ordered an unmarked car and a driver from the car pool, and whisked Vītols off to one of his favourite watering holes, the Elk Inn at Dundonald in the east of the City. He told the Major that as a good Ulsterman, he couldn't possibly let her leave with such a bad impression of the place, and so he was hoping to redress the balance by introducing her to the pleasures of stout and an Ulster Fry. She didn't protest. In any case, he figured, he could call another car after lunch and escort her to the airport.

On the way, he fished for any information that she was prepared to divulge. She was thirty. She'd been born in the Baltic port city of Liepāja. She'd been a member of the Latvian Young Communist League and had joined the State police straight from school. When George remarked that she was very young for such a senior rank, she shrugged and said simply that in her country if you had talent it was recognised. But, she added with pride, she had passed all of her exams at the first attempt.

As she sipped her half of Guinness, approvingly, George had a pint and a Powers. He ordered an Ulster fry with all the works, and a side of wheaten bread. As he told me, he suddenly was ravenous, feeling as if he hadn't eaten for a week. Vītols reckoned that they both had used up all of their reserves in the activity of the morning.

While they waited, they made small talk, but as the alcohol on an empty stomach gave him a boost, he popped the question that had been at the front of his brain.

"What makes you think that we are lying to you?" There was no better way to ask.

She sipped her drink, then setting the glass down, said, "You and I are both police. We both know when someone lies because they make a lot of noise and deny, or evade the question or one of a hundred ways to try and make you believe. But sometimes it is just with silence. And they look you in the eyes and say nothing. Just like you."

George went back into his listening mode. "Please go on."

"From the moment that I meet your Captain Mathers, it is clear that he is a liar, and not a very good one. Also he is one of those men who cannot take women as intelligent. He thinks that we are playthings, so I have had to remove his hand twice from my bottom."

George started at this, but she held up her hand. "It does not matter that he has no manners. And because of this, he does not bother to make a clever lie. So I learn that he is lying to me. But you..." She broke off as the waitress brought the food.

She surprised George by ordering a full pint, saying that this was 'most good beer', and complimenting him on the wheaten bread. He was also surprised by the speed at which she demolished a substantial fry. But then he didn't exactly let the grease congeal on his plate either.

Over an Irish coffee he tried the less subtle approach.

“So do you think I am a liar?” He said it with a smile to disarm, but Vītols evidently didn’t miss the underlying question of ‘Why the fuck am I having to lie?’.

“Actually, I am not sure until you asked me that question. Now I am. You are lying about my mother, are you not?”

She was looking him straight in the eye, no smile now.

George said that at that moment, if he’d been given the choice between his career or trying to perpetuate the lie, he’d have sought out Mathers, shoved the false dossier up his arse, then dropped his letter of resignation on his boss’ desk!

“Yes, Major.” He returned her stare. “Yes we are lying to you. I do not know why, but Mathers or his bosses doctored that report, and I’d bet my bottom dollar that the lady who was murdered was your mother. You could be her twin, not her daughter. It was obvious as soon as you walked through the door.”

Her light-grey eyes filled with tears, which she swiped away with an angry gesture. “You are sure?”

“I am sure, but just in case, do you have a photograph?”

She reached into her handbag and pulled out a slim wallet with a picture window. In it was a black and white photograph. He didn’t need more than a glance.

He nodded. “I am so sorry Major. I truly am. If I did not know any better, I would say that you took that picture from my original report. That’s the woman who was murdered in Belfast in 1973. That’s the photograph that should be in my file. I don’t...” His voice dried up.

Vītols leaned across the table and put her hand over his. “Please, I understand. But I shall say nothing bad of you to my boss.” She paused, then looked George in the eye and went on. “I simply tell him that I know that Captain Mathers lied. What he will do I do not know, but I shall tell him that I believe that you did not know about the lies. You could not remember the case.”

It took all of George’s remaining reserves not to break down and cry. Then he started to get angry. Angry at being used as a patsy for whatever it was that had gone on, was going on.

\*

It only took a few moments to regain his composure. “So why has it taken ten years before your government made enquiries?”

She took her hand away from his. “I am not sure exactly. My chief told me that they asked your government in 1973 and were told there was nothing known. He knew only that her return ticket from London had not been used. So he had nothing. But last year we were told from a source that in the Interpol headquarters in Lyon in France there was on file a report of an unknown female person murdered in Belfast at the right time for when my mother disappeared. When he got a copy of one page with her photo, he knows that it was her.”

She paused, obviously weighing her words. “But when he made the request formally to Interpol, the report that they sent had this different photograph, and it did not have the last page with the details of who prepared it. So he asked the Foreign Ministry to try to ask again

the British Government. This time, they send the full report with the fake picture and with the last page with your name on it. Then..." she shrugged.

George thought for a moment. "I still don't understand, though, why your mother's disappearance was of interest to your security police. Isn't this a civil matter?"

She shrugged. "I do not know. My boss only told me that his orders for me came from headquarters in Riga. It could be because my grandparents were partisans, heroes of the Great Patriotic War against the fascists, and my mother was the daughter of a hero who was murdered by them in Liepāja in 1941." Her eyes suddenly filled with tears. "The date you had on your report was the anniversary of when my grandfather was shot by them. We never knew his grave except it was at a place on the beach just outside called Šķēde. They killed many people there."

"How do you know the date?"

"My grandfather was arrested that morning. My grandmother was with another group who escaped. She was pregnant so was in hiding. But all who were taken, partisans, Jews, gypsies, they were shot that afternoon." She said it so simply, George told me, that it really hardened his resolve to kick over the traces on this one. He excused himself and went to the pay phone, and called his lads at Ladas Drive. Once assured that the units were safe and accounted for, he told the pair of them to requisition a car, draw protection from the armoury and come pick him up pronto.

He went back to the table. "Listen, I'm going to do something a bit off the record." He was also thinking 'I'm fucking mad to be doing this.', but then daft was something that had never stopped George Devenney when he knew he was doing the right thing.

"Can I trust you at all?" he asked.

"How do you mean?" She smiled at him. "Do you want to tell me state secrets?"

George couldn't but laugh. "No, Major. But would you like to visit your mother's grave?"

"Of course I would. You know where it is?"

He nodded.

"But what has this to do with trust?" she asked.

"Because, Major, if any of my bosses finds out, I am likely to be in most serious trouble."

"You have my word on it." She leaned forward, her eyes fixed on his. Beautiful eyes, George remembered years later.

"But how is it possible?"

"When we couldn't identify your mother, she was buried by the City Council. She was found in a Catholic part of the city..." He paused when he saw her eyebrows raise and the puzzled expression on her face.

"There are areas of Belfast where everyone is Roman Catholic, others where they're all Protestant. Your mother was found in a Catholic area, and so she was buried in a Catholic cemetery. There is no headstone, I'm afraid, but there is a marker and a holder for flowers."

Her face lit up. "Please we must go." Then, just as suddenly her face fell. "But I have no money for flowers. How can..."

"Don't worry about that, Major. We can stop on the way, and you can always pay me back if I ever get to visit Latvia."

The smile came back. She was about to say something, when one of George's lads came through the door, saw them and came over. George picked up the tab, and the three of them headed down to the pub car park, where a rather shabby and battered 1970s Ford Cortina waited with its driver.

As they headed down the Newtownards Road towards the city centre, past the imposing entrance to the Stormont Parliament building, George laid down the rules. "We're going to be going into a dangerous area, so if we find any trouble, any trouble at all, we leave as fast as we can. And at the cemetery, we can only stay a couple of minutes. If I or one of the lads say run, you get in the car immediately, no argument, and we leave rapidly."

She nodded. "I understand. I am grateful to you for this." A simple hand gesture that covered the three of them.

A quick stop at a city centre florist and they headed by what their driver, Sergeant Richard Head, figured to be the least hazardous of routes to the Upper Falls Road, and Milltown Cemetery.

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Milltown cemetery is a sprawling boneyard that stretches from the Upper Falls Road down to the edge of an area of wasteland known as the Bog Meadows, beyond which is the M1 motorway. It's a forest of Celtic crosses and weeping angels, speaking of a funeral tradition not far removed from that of the City cemetery just a wee bit down the road, closer to town. It also houses a plot devoted to fallen Republican heroes.

Their driver and his partner Constable Jimmy Reeves, drove slowly through the gates and at George's directions, headed for the bottom of the cemetery, where a strip of grass about fifty yards long and three or four wide stood apart from the rest of the graveyard, just at the boundary with the Bog Meadows. They stopped and George and Vītols got out. George took her over to where a solitary black funerary urn stood, one of several dotted along the strip. There were dead flowers in it. Roses that he'd had put there a few months back. He left her and walked back to the car.

The three peelers stood and watched while she knelt down, removed the dead flowers and started to arrange the new ones in the holder. They could see her shoulders heave and it was obvious that she was weeping as she worked.

"Are we going to get a bollocking for this, boss? Being up in Apache territory like this." Reeves looked unconcerned at the prospect. "Just asking, like."

"Only bollocking you're going to get is for referring to our more Republican brethren and sistern as Apaches. At least in public that is."

George paused for a moment. "Seriously though lads. This wee detour gets forgotten about. We decided to take the back road to the airport to show the Major the scenery. Never came near this place at all, got it?"

The other two nodded. George checked his watch. They'd been stopped in the cemetery for over five minutes, which he reckoned was just about time enough. Vītols had stood up, and was standing over the grave with its fresh roses. George went over and gathered up the dead flowers. There was a waste bin just a few yards away and he walked over to it.

A bit further down, a car was parked on the other side of the roadway, and a couple were just moving away from a grave in the last row, finished with their remembering. For a

moment there was eye contact, and a flash of recognition on both sides. George turned away and hurried back towards his companions. There was a shout, then footsteps.

Without ceremony he grabbed Vītols and hustled her back towards the car. Head was already at the wheel, and Reeves had the back doors open for them. It was the woman who was running towards them, her voice shrill as she screamed “Come back ye fuckin’ bastard. Ye scum. Come back here and face us.” It was directed at George. As he bundled Vītols into the car, he could see the man standing in the middle of the roadway. Just looking, forlorn, head bowed.

Head gunned the motor and they took off just before the woman reached the car. Looking back, George could see her standing, face contorted with rage, still screaming out her hate.

“Get us out of here fast as you like, Richard,” George told his driver. Sitting beside him, Reeves had his gun out and sitting on his lap. Out of site of bystanders, but ready for use. The car sped up towards the gates, narrowly missing an elderly couple who responded to the horn just in time.

Out on the Falls Road, Head kept a steady pace for Kennedy Way and the link onto the M1 motorway. Reeves kept a steady sweep of his eyes on the road in front, using the car’s extra rear view mirror to watch the road behind. After a few minutes, without changing his gaze, he asked nonchalantly “Was that what I think it was, Boss?”

George found Vītols looking at him questioningly too. “That was Bernadette Laughlin and her husband Malachy. Their son was abducted at the entrance to the Royal.” He turned to face her. “The Royal Victoria is our biggest hospital. The lad was visiting his aunt who was in a specialist unit for surgery, and because it’s in a Catholic area, he was just picked at random. The killers drove him to a safe area and beat him to a pulp. Then they shot him. I had to tell his mother that there was no chance of getting them into court. She thinks we’re protecting them.”

“Why would she think that. I do not understand.”

“Most Catholics don’t trust the police. God knows they’ve got pretty good reasons in a lot of cases. And most believe that we protect the killers from the Protestant side.”

“And are you protecting the killer of this woman’s son?”

“No Major.” It was Reeves who answered while George was struggling for words. “We know almost for certain who did it. Richard here could drive you past the door of the guy who pulled the trigger. But prove it in court? Not a chance. We arrested him, and he just sat and looked at us until his lawyer arrived, told us to charge him or release him. That’s how it works over here.”

She said nothing. George was grateful for her tact in not saying what she was obviously thinking.

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The rest of the journey to the military side of Aldergrove airport was uneventful. Once they had passed through the various security checks, George was able to escort Vītols to meet the despatcher who had organised her flight. Although he’d expected to have to wait several

hours with her – had hoped, in fact – the RAF officer had been at his most efficient and announced that she was to be put on an earlier flight to Northolt.

As she was about to leave, she turned to him and said simply “Thank you Inspector Devenney for your kindness. I hope one day to be able to return your hospitality in my country. And please tell your colleague that I shall return the clothes she so kindly lent me.”

She put out her hand and George took it. Then, to his surprise, she moved closer and on tiptoe kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you for caring for my mother.”

Then she was gone, and for the first time in a fair while George felt all alone. But every year after, on the anniversary of the murder, he would get a postcard from Riga.

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## Chapter 4

### *A vicar in the woodpile?*

Three days later, and the face of a uniformed Mathers was a mask of pure rage. He stood leaning over George in the temporary office of George's boss at Ladas Drive. The white bandage around his head accentuated the turkey wattle-red of his cheeks. What seemed to be pissing him off as much as anything was the way in which George was sitting, cross-legged in his chair, the picture of relaxation and a total lack of a guilty conscience.

Mathers was shouting at the top of his voice. And had been for more than a minute. "You took her to the fucking cemetery you moron. The cemetery! You know what you've done? Do you, you fucking stupid provincial plod? You've..."

The sound of an open palm slapping down on the desk was as loud as a gunshot. Mathers stopped in mid sentence. George's boss looked him calmly in the eye and said simply "Enough Captain." And when Mathers seemed inclined to go on, his tone hardened. "I said enough! Do I have to repeat myself?"

Mathers looked for a moment as if he was going to argue, then straightened up, hands by sides, fists clenched.

Superintendent McKittrick said "Sit down please Captain. You've had your rant. You prefer to stand? Fair enough, but now let this provincial plod tell you some home truths. Truths about how you made a total mess of what should have been a simple piece of deception." Mathers bridled at this, but McKittrick overrode him.

"First off, you and your people didn't bother your unintelligent military backsides to ask whether the Latvians had ever made any earlier requests, or contacted Interpol or make the sort of bog basic enquiry that any junior provincial plod would make."

"I do not see what purpose that might have served," Mathers retorted.

McKittrick gestured to George who took great delight, behind a sober face, in telling Mathers what had been divulged about the Interpol enquiry. And his pleasure was heightened by seeing a deflating Mathers really start to squirm.

McKittrick ploughed on over Mathers' feeble attempt to intervene. "Mistake number two was to be such a total clod as to make it crystal clear that you thought that Major Vītols was some sort of wee Glesga hairy-mary with fewer brains than yourself. She saw through you immediately. And in displaying your macho male disdain, Mathers, you were so absolutely cretinous as to grope the backside of a visiting foreign official. Oh yes, Major Vītols mentioned it to Inspector Devenney here, and that will be going in my report to your boss in Lisburn."

Mathers was getting redder to the point where George was wondering if he was going to have a stroke. Not that he'd have minded. But as he said, the paperwork would have been a bugger.

McKittrick stood up and rested his fists on his desk. "In short, Captain Mathers, you couldn't even carry off a simple piece of deception that would be no bother for any one of our

new intake of provincial undercover plods. So you tell us, Captain. What have we done? What have we done other than provide further confirmation to add to your inept confirmation of what the Latvians already knew? And what problems, pray, is that going to cause? I'll tell you Captain. None. None at all."

Mathers made a feeble attempt at comeback. "McKittrick, you don't have the clearance to get the full facts. If you knew..."

McKittrick slammed the table. "It's Superintendent McKittrick to you, Captain. And I don't need clearance to know that you screwed up totally. So you can get out of my sight. And rest assured that I will be making a report to your superiors that will include the recommendation that someone with more brain cells than his shoe size take over your unit. This meeting is over! You can go!"

Mathers stood for a moment, then stomped out, slamming the door behind him.

McKittrick, a tall, spare man who was an old school, thirty-year veteran of the RUC, latterly in Special Branch, had a shock of white hair over a face marked out by seriously unruly eyebrows and a walrus moustache. It gave him the appearance of a rather disorganised grandfather, something he rather cultivated to the regret of those who got on the wrong side of his real self. About an hour earlier he'd given George a serious earful about allowing unfortunate truths to emerge and, more to the point, getting caught on. Now he sat down and leaned back in his chair.

"That idiot couldn't organise a nun shoot in a convent. No clearance indeed! So what was all this about, George? Why was that Major here really?"

George had thought about it, in fact truth be told he admitted to me, he'd thought about little else than the blonde Major since she'd left.

"I really don't know, sir. On the face of it, she genuinely was looking for news of her mother. The grief seemed real enough. From what Mathers let slip, the name of that priest who was at the scene, McNally, seems to have set off alarms. But I really can't connect the two."

"You never followed up on him, did you? I saw a card in the file, but nothing more."

"No, I didn't see the need at the time, and I suppose that makes me as big a wanker as Mathers," George admitted. "But now that the dust's settled I'm going to."

McKittrick told him to have his report ready asap and sent him off to get on with it. And George being the peeler I got to know and be scared of, decided that a wee bit of a closer look at Mathers might not be a bad idea either. Especially when he called the number on the card that 'McNally' had given him those years ago, and was informed by the housekeeper of the parochial house in Carrigans that Father Jerome McNally S.J. had died of pneumonia in mid-January 1973, at the age of eighty-nine!

He then decided to follow up on the supposed 'brother' from whose house the priest had emerged. The couple – Patrick and Teresa Thomas – who had been claimed as relatives were dead – abducted, tortured and shot just a week after the murder of Kristina Vītols, supposedly because they were informers. The killers were presumed to be some of those IRA members who would later be formed into the 'Civil Administration Team'. This was the innocent-sounding euphemism for the group tasked with identifying, interrogating and murdering informers, and otherwise known as the 'Nutting Squad'. It had been another detective, a Constable Forsythe, now a DI, who had been assigned to their case, but for some reason he

missed the connection. The question was for whom had they been informing? There was nothing on file. The one certainty that he took from his ferreting around was that it had not been for his area of RUC Special Branch.

George decided that kicking himself could wait for later, when he knew precisely what it was he was kicking himself for.

\*

Sergeant Richard Head, George's driver for the trip to Milltown Cemetery, was a ten-year veteran of the force, and had graduated into the unit two years previously. Fair-haired and built like a brick shithouse, he was solid, dependable and a good man to have watching your back. It also helped that he was of that size and obviously handy with himself that dissuaded casual aggression. Only his closest friends called him by his nickname, which I'm sure you can guess.

George had called him in because he was probably one of the best on the team at unobtrusive surveillance. Along with his partner, Reeves, George set them the task of tailing Mathers who, like the rest of them had been relocated to Ladas Drive. He told him "Just keep an eye on him for the next few days. See where he goes outside the base, and who he meets if possible. If you think you're in danger of being spotted, pull back. Any questions?"

Head thought for a moment. "Is this about that woman who was here the other day? The foreign one?" George nodded.

"We all saw yer man steaming down to his office. Did the Super give him a kicking? We could hear the yelling from the mess room."

George admitted that a kicking had indeed been administered.

"But how did the fucker find out, Boss?" Head asked.

It transpired that the elderly couple who had suffered the near miss in Milltown Cemetery had taken down the number on their licence plate. They were Americans, doing some genealogical research and looking for the grave of a recent forbear. Good Boston Irish, they weren't enamoured of the British occupation of the Six Counties – Ulster, Northern Ireland to you or me – or of the puppet fascist RUC and the Protestant Death Squads that they protected. So when they encountered a highly distressed Bernadette Laughlin and her husband, and found out the reason for her distress, they took it upon themselves to go to the US Consulate in the city centre and create a fuss about how they had nearly become victims of police brutality. A member of consular staff forwarded on a report and when the licence plate turned out to be...

Head, the unlikely son of a Presbyterian minister chuckled. "Be sure thy sins will find thee out. Just as well I didn't run them over." George agreed and sent him on his way.

For the next week or so, Head and Reeves discretely shadowed Mathers when he left the base. Most of the time he spent shuttling to and from North Queen Street, and they had the excuse of following him in on the grounds that they were ensuring that any of their files that had been in the offices at the time of the explosion had been accounted for. The oddities were two late-evening visits by Mathers and two new members of his team, arrived from England the previous day, to a gospel hall just outside the city, on the road to the town of Ballyclare in southern County Antrim. A substantial new building that recently had replaced a gospel tent,

it sat in the middle of a large field, with a single lane running up to a cinder-surfaced car park. And at the head of the lane by the roadside, was a large sign proclaiming:

*The Church of the Wrath to Come*  
*For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?*  
*(Revelations 6:17)*

Underneath was a poster showing a grizzled, bearded and almost patriarchal figure with the legend ‘Guest Preacher Pastor Ezekiel Hopkins from the USA. All welcome to hear the Word of God.’

On the second visit, Head and Reeves sat and waited, watching. There was no congregation, but the lights were on. They used their night glasses and saw Mathers go inside. They could see his car, but not its occupants, which was a pity.

The pair were getting to that stage of surveillance when it becomes a toss-up as to who gets to close the eyes for a while first. Reeves won out and was just settling back when Head grabbed him and said “Don’t argue. Put your arms round me.” He leaned over as if he was indulging in a serious clinch. Reeves only had time to say ‘Waddafuck’ when there was a tap on the window. It was Mathers’ two team members. In the light of a half moon, Head could see the glint of a gun barrel, and whispered to Reeves to get ready to rumble.

Head rolled the window down and looked up at the face of one of Mathers’ men. ‘What the fuck d’ye want?’ seemed a reasonable line to take.

The man stepped back and shone a torch in through the window. He said to his companion “Oh look Bert. A real pair of fruits. I wonder whose cock is getting sucked? Like to suck mine, darling?” The accent was pure Estuary Essex.

Reeves took the lead, pushing Head away he said “C’mon mate. We’re not doing you any harm.”

The second man brought his gun into view. With the torch in their eyes, he was only a silhouette, his voice was larded with contempt. “You’re doing us a lot of harm sonny. We hate fruits. We hate cock-sucking arse-bandits like you.” He pushed his colleague aside and pointed the gun through the car window. “So if you don’t want to suck on this and swallow my discharge, you can fuck away off right now.”

Feigning panic, Reeves put on a camp accent. “We’re going, we’re going. Please don’t hurt us. Richard, take us away please.”  
Head duly obliged and they sped back up the road towards Belfast.