

The Cejit's Tale



Brian G. Scott

The Eejit's Tale



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An Eejit's guide to Czech pronunciation

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Dedication

In communist Czechoslovakia, dissidents referred to their country as *Absurdistan*. They no longer need the name, and I am appropriating it for the country I think of as home, Northern Ireland. So this is for all of the eejits in Absurdistan who want only to live their lives free from bombs, bullets, gangsters, useless sectarian politicians, ayatollahs and so-called heroes!

And especially, it is for two best mates, Robert Scott-Brand and Kevin Michael Magee, who didn't finish the course, but who deserved to. It was my privilege to know them.

ē'jīt; an Irish colloquialism derived from 'idiot' and referring to someone who acts unintentionally in an often comical and irrational way, but who usually can still chew gum and walk at the same time.

See yer man McDevitt! He's a real eejit!

* * * * *

Foreword

*The Fool who knows he is a fool
Is that much wiser.
The Fool who thinks he is wise
Is a fool indeed.*

Dhammapada – The Sayings of the Buddha

Writing about Northern Ireland can be difficult, especially if you've lived there for most of your life. Living there has often been difficult enough! Getting to know another country, like Czechoslovakia – now divided into the Czech and Slovak Republics – is fun, especially when you find out that there are many similarities to your own, albeit in a different language.

This story is set in Belfast and Prague, two cities that look absolutely nothing like each other but which have, in their rhythms of life and attitudes, much in common. Both have had more than their fair share of sadness. Belfast has suffered from the people who think that murder and destruction are the road to justice and peace. Prague was repressed by a system which preached that justice and peace could be achieved by putting the boot into anyone who disagreed with it. Nevertheless, I know of very few cities in the world where the folk are friendlier or the craic is better.

I have taken a few geographical liberties with both cities. The most glaring for Belfast is the jiggling of the geography of West Belfast and the addition of a taxi rank at the junction of the Lisburn Road and Stockman's Lane. And the Ministry of Privatisation in Prague is a wee bit removed from Zborovská Street.

This tale is set in the not-too-distant past, in the days before the tobacco-nazis killed that old, familiar pub smell of stale beer and departed cigs. But even though there has been an edgy peace in Northern Ireland since 1998 and the Good Friday Agreement, the killing and the bombing still haunt us, albeit at a much lower level.

Anyone who thinks that stories about paramilitary drug dealing are a foul slur on the good names of clean-living freedom fighters or 'defenders of Ulster' need look no further than the back issues of the local papers over the last few years. The major corruption in the privatisation process in the Czech Republic is equally well-documented. As for the £25,000 pound meal, if you look in the Guinness Book of Records...

Brian G. Scott

January 2017

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Acknowledgements

The original idea for this book came in 1999 from my mate Robin Renelt, film producer and seriously good guy. It arose on a night when a time of great drink had come upon us and sort of took on a life of its own from there.

I have been greatly helped in the writing by a number of good friends who read the manuscript in its various stages and whose comments and criticisms and, above all, encouragement, have been invaluable.

Ray Curran and Robert Scott-Brand helped immensely, as did Blanka Brabcová who took on, amongst other things, the thankless tasks of telling me about recent Czech history and correcting my Czech. Roman Stechmiler offered his useful and invariably humorous insights into Czech business practices, past and present. My very good friend and mentor, the late Professor Rado Pleiner over the years provided invaluable Slavic perspective for some of the tales.

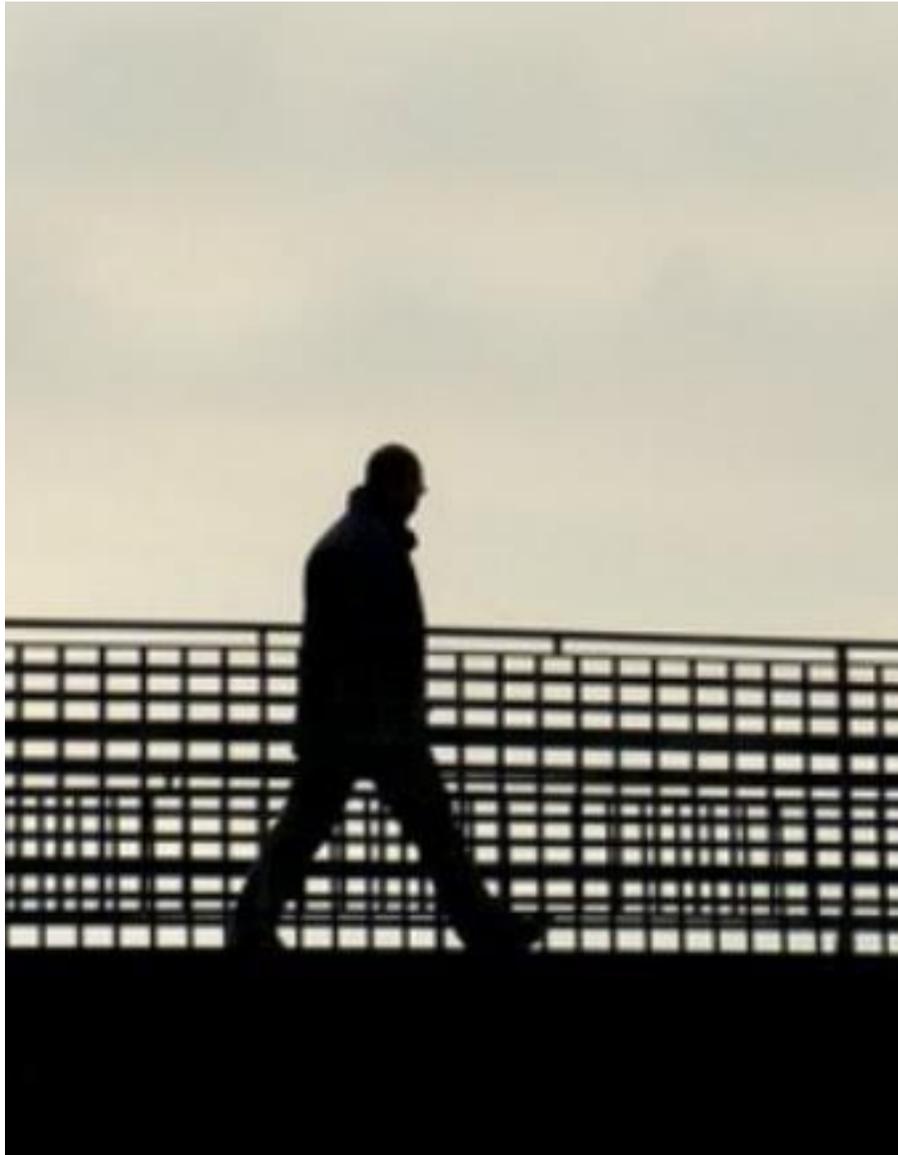
Linda Pettit taught me a little bit about horses and aircraft, while Kelly Doyle looked after my mistreatment of Americanisms and Shani Wright did the same for Strine.

I also received anonymous assistance with aspects of criminality and security for which I am truly grateful.

Last, but not least, I owe a great debt to all of the musos I've gigged with over the years in both countries. While none of them appear in person, as it were, these are the boys and girls who provided the inspiration for not a few of the goings on.

* * * * *

Prologue



Prague – 1st March, 1993

It wasn't really Veronika and Johanna not coming in at their usual time that suggested that now would be a good time to get out of my office at the Ministry. Nor was it that their phones started to ring with nobody to answer them. It was that when I picked one of them up, there was Jana calling from a phone box and yelling at me not to go back to the flat because the police were looking for me. In her delightful Prague-Belfast accented English, she was also telling me 'to get fuck out before peelers come up your orfice'. She's been around me too long, you see.

So I retrieved the briefcase, put on my coat and left. The corridor to the stairs was empty, as was the stairwell, odd for 8.00am on a Monday morning. Usually there was a steady flow of warm bodies, including the occasional important person like me too chicken to use the paternoster to and from the upper floors. When I reached the front door, at least Cerbera the porter was in her kiosk, waiting myopically to rend and tear those not sanctified with the right entry permit. She peered towards me and started to wave a sheaf of message slips. I tossed her a 'Na shledanou', or 'goodbye', over my shoulder, instead of the 'Goodbye you obstructive oul' bitch!' I'd have preferred. It would have been quite wasted, because the obstructive oul' bitch didn't speak English.

Then there I was, striding out briskly along Zborovská Street. And as I roved out on this bright and sunny March morning (as an Irish come-all-ye would have it), I was absorbed with how the hell I was going to find a way out of the Czech Republic – and fast.

Even to a prat like me, it was clear that the copies of the files I'd tried to get to Pavel Slanský had been intercepted by Heger and his lot. And after the shenanigans of the night before (and thank God, Jana had been at her aunt's), I'd evidently become the subject of a heavy-duty arrest warrant. Through what I hoped was a very serious headache, Heger would be very anxious indeed to get his loot back when he returned to his office and found out that it was gone.

There had very obviously been a failure of communication between two or more of the various branches charged with feeling my collar on the way into the building. Well, they weren't expecting me to be coming out, were they? And it was equally obvious that they had cleared my floor of staff in case this Belfast-born desperado should return to the scene of his misdeeds with a couple of Kalashnikovs or a few pounds of Semtex. I mentally gave thanks that Czechs, like my fellow countrymen, are real masters of the cock-up, albeit with much more charm. One thing was certain, though, I wouldn't be flying out of Ruzyně airport from the VIP lounge.

Dressed as I was in my nice blue suit and black coat, with tastefully matching shirt, tie and polished black shoes, I could hardly mingle with the masses for long. I just hoped they were going to try and be discreet, and not plaster my photo all over the front page of *Lidový noviny*. Forlorn thinking, because when the scandal broke, it would be me sitting with my bare bum on the pointy stick. But it shouldn't happen for a couple of days. And at least I had the money. And I was alive. And I had the originals of the files secure.

I covered the short distance to the right stop and hopped on the crowded tram to Holešovice market, infiltrating a scrum of sexy-legged young girls with very nice nipples poking through their sweaters like chapel hat-pegs. It trundled along, cramming on more shopping *babičkas* in heavy winter coats and woolly hats, and the odd harassed entrepreneur trying to look as if his new top-range BMW was unavoidably off the road for today only.

The market itself is a great place – a disorganised sprawl of sheds with waves of small stalls lapping around their edges. Entirely the province of fraternal Vietnamese comrades, they were guest workers in fact who, with the collapse of communism, had seen the opportunity to survive. When summoned home, they had, to a person, told their still-communist government to go take a flying fuck and applied for residence and work permits. Those who got them took to capitalism with relish.

A fascinating thing about the Vietnamese here is that most of them speak Czech far better than I do. Until, that is, it comes to the question of taxes or discount. At this point, their linguistic skill will desert them, and they retreat into those seemingly self-deprecating smiles and that melodic, singsong mixture of nasalised yings and yongs that we westerners love to parody. When translated, it is usually an exhortation to go elsewhere and have sex with a pig as befits your inferior status in life.

Avoiding all the pitfalls, I purchased jeans (“Genuine Levis,” I was assured. “Sewn up in your wee brother’s back yard,” I thought.), several not-too-violent check shirts, a couple of pairs of trainers (“True genuine Adidas,” I was assured. “Cobbled together in your sister’s flat,” I thought.), a pseudo-military anorak and a typically nerdy American backpack. I made a quick trip to the public toilets, for a hurried change, and a transfer of the money to the backpack with my old clothes and new shirts (“Shit! I forgot socks and knickers,” I thought). I jammed the empty briefcase behind one toilet bowl, the coat and shoes behind another, and emerged looking, I hoped, like a late-30s American wally of the type infesting Prague in flocks. With the John Lennon clear-lensed glasses that Jana thinks lend me *gravitas* (they make me feel a total twat), at least now I had the security of looking different. So I went to find a phone.

By a miracle, there was one working in the market precinct and I called Mrázek. And his phone was working again. I was counting on the searchers not bothering to go near him for at least the time it took to work out that I wasn’t anywhere else. I’d have a couple of days to think, to contact Jana and to travel with her in the general direction of ‘away’. Not home, mark you. Not back to Belfast. Just ‘away’. By another miracle, he was in and told me to come straight over. Mrázek, you see, is Jana’s father and is widely believed to hate my guts. This is something we have taken great pains to foster, not least by half beating the shit out of each other – actually him beating nearly all of the shit out of me when he suspected me (wrongly, I hasten to point out) of cheating on his daughter. Anyway, now I had to find a taxi.

A lot has been written by foreigners since the revolution about the predatory nature of the average Prague taxi driver, some grossly unfair, most grossly understated. The knack of dealing with them is having enough Czech to explain that you don’t want to see the meter going like a demented carousel, that you know both the distance you want to travel and the approved rate per

kilometer, and that if he tries to charge you more, he can stick it up his arse. In other words, survival phrases that the likes of Collins and Longman never seem to find space for in the *Teach Yourself Colloquial X* series.

The elderly battered driver and his elderly battered Lada wheezed and farted in unison all the way up to Žižkov. He accepted defeat over the asking fare with rough grace, taking a reasonable compromise that didn't have me buying his car, his house and his eldest daughter's virginity.

Then he scuttled off to search for more succulent foreign meat. As one of the legion of unlicensed drivers prowling the streets, he was unlikely to admit to the peelers that he'd been carrying a fare-paying passenger, let alone this strange Yank (I'd put on a strong American accent and mangled my Czech even worse than normal).

I got him to drop me off a couple of streets from Mrázek's place and meandered around for a while, looking for signs of the law. There were none visible – anyway, I'm not that much of an expert so I decided to take the chance.

For a change, Mrázek's doorbell was working and I didn't have to hang around. He ushered me up the cavernous stairway and into the cave-like clutter that was his home.

"So!" He glared at me. "My daughter confirms me you are of the criminal class. Police come here."

I grabbed his arm. "The police were here already?"

"Of course. You are so stupid. And I told them if you come near me that I absolve the surgical operation on you and hand you to one police and your prick to another."

He shook my hand off roughly. "So again! Say why I shouldn't?"

Suddenly I needed alcohol. It had been a long night. I shrugged my shoulders and said, "For fuck sake Mrázek, give us a drink and I'll tell you. Give us a lot of drink and I'll tell you the lot."

It took nearly a litre of cheap local Pražská vodka, half a dozen lumps of Hungarian salami and a couple of hours to tell all. At the end, I felt as sober as if I'd been drinking water. Mrázek is pickled in the stuff, so it never affects him. He pinched the brow of his narrow nose and blew air out of his mouth in a long slow stream.

"You sit in my flat and say you have three million US dollars in your silly bag, that you shoot someone last night, that now you finally have proof of big corruption in the Ministry, that you know who did it and you are to take blame for everything?" He paused for breath. I was glad I hadn't got round to telling him about the stash of UK sterling (slightly larger, in fact) back in Belfast that was the main reason I'd ended up here.

"And you say me you want to marry my Jana? I should just like to say you are fuck mad."

I'd sort of slipped that in about Jana at the end, so perhaps the drink had had more effect than I felt. I'm not sure why I did. Marriage, I've found out to my cost, hadn't agreed with me all that well to date. To be truthful, my previous two wives would tell you that it doesn't agree with

me at all. Marriage to me agreed with them a lot less. Nevertheless, I managed a silly sort of grin, my endearing, boyish look. It failed. Miserably.

“No fuck chance. You get out of Bohemia to home or any fuck where. Jana will not marry idiot like you. And me! I need the son like you like I need StB back.” Mrázek’s command of English swearing is nothing if idiosyncratic. Now, in his native Czech, he has an almost magic fluidity that allows him to call you the shit-filled bastard son of a stinking bolshevik whore’s bitch (and he has) and make it sound like the most eloquent of Shakespearian soliloquies. As for his Russian, acquired over numerous stretches in the nick courtesy of the secret police (the Statní bezpečnost or StB or esstaybay) on account of his unacceptable and often-demonstrated anti-party attitude, well... I was too tired to argue.

Mrázek suddenly stood up. “I go to my sister and bring my daughter home,” he announced.

Suddenly I was wide-awake. “Aye. And half the Prague police as well. Thanks a lot.”

His eyes twinkled. “Of course. And perhaps they visit to ask more questions from us. So you are stupid to be here, wouldn’t you?”

I looked around the cramped flat. “So what am I supposed to do? Disguise myself as a fuckin’ lamp-stand?”

He gestured for me to follow him and we sidled into the meagre square metres that passed for a kitchen. Bending down, he opened the door of one of the cupboards under the sink. I could see pots and pans, but, so what?

“Look inside,” he ordered with a chuckle.

Getting down on my hunkers I could just see space at the back. I stood up and asked, “You really expect me to get inside there?”

“Try it.” He pushed down on my shoulder. For a fairly old man, he’s quite strong. He knows how to punch as well.

At first I just didn’t appreciate the amount of space. But then as I wormed my way in, I could see that between the back of the cupboard and the wall of the bathroom next door, there was a gap about fifteen inches wide running the whole length.

Somewhere right at the back of my mind I remembered reading that 18th century slave ships allowed thirteen inches for packing males, so I was ahead by a couple of inches. It took a bit of doing first time, but I reckoned that if the front door started to come in, I could be in there in a flash, looking just like a saucepan. Mrázek told me to stay put and came back after a couple of minutes, passing me a pillow and a blanket, then my backpack.

“You stay there while I go for Jana.”

I wasn’t going to argue as, without warning, the vodka started to haul my eyelids firmly shut. I must have been falling asleep before he closed the doors on me.

At some point, I drifted into dream and seemed to hear the clean-mouthed Jackie asking me over and over what the fucking shitting hell I was doing.

Then Jana was asking. Then there was Grogan and Sweeney with his hammer and Rab and the Reservoir Puppies and the blue-rinse war-junkies and Elena bollock-naked, and then... then there was...

* * * * *

Part 1

Belfast



12th to 30th November, 1992

Chapter 1

Here's Seanie!

I suppose I've started this saga arse-about-face, but then I've always been totally disorganised. So before I go on, I'll tell you that my name is Sean Patrick McDevitt. At the time this all began, I was forty years old, six feet three inches tall, reasonably well-built, with bright grey-blue eyes, jet black long hair (with what Mills and Boon would describe as a 'distinguishing touch of silver at the temples'), and a raggle-taggle beard and moustache that are souvenirs of the passing of puberty. And still women tell me I have a nice ass.

To be precise, it all started around noon, on the day I was waiting for my brother Jackie outside the Law Courts in the centre of Belfast. He's a barrister with a very lucrative practice either prosecuting for the Crown those who have decided that the law of the land is not up to their high moral standards ("Sure wasn't he only a fuckin' brit or peeler or taig or orange bastard or whatever.") or defending same ("My client was pressured into keeping these weapons in his house and was in extreme fear for his life and that of his young family."). It's not uncommon over here for prod lawyers to represent or prosecute taig clients/accused and *vice versa*. As Jackie and his colleagues say, they get the same shillings for Mass and Communion.

He's very good at it. Unlike me, he's chosen one profession and mastered it. If he doesn't get a coronary with the weight he's putting on, he's bound to end up a pillar of the judiciary. I sometimes did wee bits of 'research' for him, helping his staff to gather routine background information, checking addresses, and seeing if witnesses were not suffering from the chronic amnesia that regularly affects those who see wrongdoing by paramilitaries. And it also had occasionally involved running like fuck when I asked the wrong person the wrong question in the wrong place at the wrong time.

You see, I never quite settled down to one 'proper' career, as Ma would have said. I was bright as a kid (and, in some ways, I suppose I still am quite a clever sod). I have some talent as a musician and a degree in political science. This should tell you a bit about how my mind works. So while I still played a regular gig, I had dropped out of 'real' work after having been, in succession over fifteen years, a teacher, a soldier, a repo man, a home tutor for the intellectually challenged progeny of the local aspiring middle class, a builder's labourer, a club DJ, a trainee estate agent and, now, an unqualified legal odd-job man.

Teaching was a profession, which led me to meet my first wife to our soon-realised mutual dissatisfaction. I packed both in after a year. Being a repo-man got me to meet my second wife when I went to lift her fridge! This career came to an abrupt end, following a conversation that went along the lines of "Hi missus! The HP on the TV is three months overdue. Sure you'll not miss it – you won't notice the difference between the wallpaper and 'Neighbours'. Yer husband is a what in the UVF? Shot three taigs did he? Gets out next week, does he? Ah well, now in that case..."

I'm a reasonably competent guitar player and singer and songwriter. I suppose I have to be totally honest and say that the reason I never got any further with it is because, I am, at the heels of the hunt, bone bloody idle. So, while other kids practised their Hendrix riffs and crammed the music theory, I just practised the riffs. I have a very good ear, can busk well and am a great mimic both of voice and tune. It also helps me with languages, even though the stricter rules of grammar and syntax largely pass me by. (My French teacher once told me "McDevitt, your accent is nearly perfect Parisian. Such a pity you can't speak French.")

Anyway, while all the rest was going on, I was playing two to four gigs a week in the pubs and clubs. I've never had the bank balance of Eric Clapton, but it's kept me in booze, food and fags, and (usually) kept the landlord off my back. In short, I was an ageing throwback to the hippie generation, but without the wit to get out.

Those of you who know Northern Ireland (or Norn Iron in local dialect, or Ulster or the Occupied Six Counties take your pick – I don't give a shit personally) might well think immediately "Sean Patrick McDevitt. Aha! A fenian! A taig!" For those of you who don't, the Christian names Patrick and, in particular Sean, are far more likely to be given to a catholic (in other words, a fenian, a taig, a popehead etc.) than to a protestant (a prod, billy-boy, orange bastard etc.). McDevitt perhaps leans more to one side than the other but not significantly so. But in tandem with Sean and Pat, you might as well have a day-glo tattoo saying 'Fenian/Taig' across your forehead. Mind you, the names helped me more than once, like when I was getting laid by Mary Lennon on the Lower Falls Road.

That was at a time when the locals were using any prods stupid enough to be on their turf for punch bags or worse.

*

Now, my parents were both protestants and of established prod stock. And indeed, my paternal grandfather was staunch Orange and a pillar of the local Temperance Lodge. This didn't stop him from drinking like a fish. Nor did the Orange oath pledging brotherly and Christian love to all prevent him from advocating the need to exterminate all Catholics and festoon the lampposts with hanging priests. He was really narked when Roosevelt dropped the first atom bomb on Hiroshima instead of Rome.

I never met him at all, but the Da often told me that Grandad and Adolf would have got on a storm, swapping ideas on genocide. His attitude really pissed off Da, who'd seen the ultimate worst side of human nature when, as an infantry corporal, he'd been at the liberation of Belsen concentration camp. Bigotry worried him before the war. By the time he got back home, he hated it and started to hate Grandad for it.

My parents met after Da was demobbed and had spent some years working on rebuilding in the centre of Belfast, clearing away the damage left by the Blitz. Ma was working as an assistant in a shop he was helping to fix up, and as she told me, it was Da's eyes that really caught her. ("It's the best thing you inherited from either of us!" she'd smile at me). Having conceived me out of wedlock soon after (I'm two years older than my brother who, in both senses, is definitely not a bastard like me) – then a cardinal sin in any part of holy Ireland – they agreed that they'd just been anticipating the wedding a little bit too enthusiastically and decided to get hitched straight off.

Usually a hurried wedding is a recipe for disaster (like with me), but they never had any doubts before, or regrets after. I never did meet my Ma's side either. They were middle-class Church of Ireland and this was to the Da's fundamentalist Presbyterian lot, half way to Rome and direst popery. But at least they didn't land me and Jackie with illuminated biblical tracts for Christmas ('A message from Jesus for a Good Boy!'), so they can't have been all that bad. But the wedding was registry office as neither family could stomach the idea of 'spoiled goods' (i.e. the Ma) sullyng the inside of a church. Anyway, my parents weren't practising by that stage in their lives, and anyway they were unconventional by contemporary standards.

The employment situation at the start of the 1950s in Northern Ireland was not the best, after the worst of Hermann Göring's work had been tidied up, and my folks decided to strike out for elsewhere. Australia was in need of new blood and the Da, being a proper time-served chippie (and a good one at that), was welcome for the building industry there.

In fact, their immigration papers came through so quickly that their departure was only delayed until I made my appearance and had a few days to be paraded around. You see, both of them had still enough attachment, Ma especially, to want their families to see me before leaving.

Now, they do say that of the whole of your life, from conception to death, the most tranquil time you will ever spend is the nine months in the womb. So I was totally unaware of the blazing, vitriolic, running row focussed throughout the pregnancy on my foetal self over the names I was to be given. What I ended up with was typical of Ma and Da.

It was a dead cert that I would be a boy. A girl wouldn't have caused problems. But for his first grandson, Grandad McDevitt was heart-set on William (after William III of Orange, three hundred years dead, and of 'pious, glorious and immortal memory'), Winston (after the man who allowed Belfast to have the living daylight's pounded out of it because of a lack of air defences against the Luftwaffe) and George (after his glorious majesty George VI). The Ma and Da liked names like Alexander and James and Brian and Robert, but had no really fixed views.

However, the Grandad's insistence on labelling me as a bigoted dickhead like himself finally got their goat to the point that they decided to make a clean break and put the boot in at the same time. Da really did make one last effort at reconciliation and compromise with him in the local the night before I was born. Normally a social drinker only, he'd had a wee bit more than his usual.

And normally an even-tempered man who seldom swore (and then without obscenities), he ended up telling Grandad to 'shove his fucking sash right up his bigoted fucking arsehole'. Grandad (neither a moderate drinker nor close to even-tempered) replied by fetching him a smack in the mouth. Between them, they wrecked half the pub before the other punters pulled them apart. And they never spoke to each other again.

Ma always swore blind that it was the sight of Da's battered face that sent her into labour. He always replied that, as usual, I was late and that nature was just taking its course. After a rush in a taxi, I was duly born in the Royal Victoria Hospital. Despite Ma's difficult labour, two days later, by special arrangement, there was I in the local Church of Ireland first thing in the morning with Ma's folks standing as Godparents. I got the water-treatment and

roared complaint fit to burst, although Ma assured me that at least I didn't piss in the font or puke on the Minister.

The Reverend Andrews did ask my parents if they were they 'really sure' about the names. When emphatically assured that they were, he somewhat reluctantly baptised me 'Sean Patrick', while hoping that the Godparents would renounce the devil and all his works and see that I did too.

They might have, but I went on to find some of the man's ideas entertaining, particularly the sins of lust and gluttony and, of course, the blues. Anyway, like Billy Joel said, it's better to laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints! And I've always had the quare craic with the sinners !

The Da, a thoughtful man not given to great outbursts of emotion or dramatic gestures, told me that as soon as my head was dry, they were in a taxi to the docks and onto the Liverpool boat on the first leg of our journey round half the world. But the taxi made one stop at a post-office from where a telegram was duly sent off to Grandad and Grandma McDevitt. Da had a copy among his things when he died. (It read 'Congratts. You are Grandparents to Sean Patrick. Off to Australia today. Your Son Charles.' Nothing more.)

The old man never forgave him, even though other members of the family sort of kept in touch for a while. I suppose that I can be grateful they didn't fall out over music – I might have ended up going through life as Elvis Ludwig McDevitt.

So I spent the first nine years of my life – Jackie his first seven – down under in Oz and can still G'day a Bruce with the best of them. My parents settled into Campbelltown, a suburb of Sydney, in a little house near the local station. One of my earliest memories is of drifting off to sleep to the clickety-clackety rhythms of trains going past the bottom of the street.

Perhaps that's where the music started. But I digress.

* * * * *

Chapter 2

12th November, Lunchtime to Early Evening

It was a foul Belfast November Thursday and there were spiteful little splashes of rain blowing right up the steps of the courthouse. All of that ‘season of mists and mellow fruitfulness’ bit they handed us in school is so much balls, I reckon. Of course, you couldn’t smoke in the marble halls of justice and so I was huddled outside, cupping my fag in my hands. Why in the name of sweet Jesus, I wondered, couldn’t Jackie have decided to become a publican or a hotel owner or anything that allowed him to work in warm and dry premises where you were allowed to smoke? Anyway, I didn’t see them at first, but their movement up the steps caught the corner of my eye.

“Oh Fuck with a capital ‘F’!” I thought.

Malachy Grogan was a forty-something upper middle-ranker in the Provos (*aka* the Provisional Irish Republican Army, the ‘Ra). As his defence counsel, Jackie got him a remarkably light sentence for arms possession a couple of years back. He was also the first person on whose account I had to do a runner. Some of his mates got the idea that I was RUC Special Branch and not just some buck-eejit without the wit to realise that the time and place for questions were wrong.

But the funny side of my predicament (for him at least – I never did see the joke of being chased by heavies with guns) and the fact that Jackie got him only three years instead of the expected seven (out in sixteen months), disposed him kindly towards us. I saw him from time to time when he came to gigs – he said he enjoyed my playing. And at least he had the saving grace of liking B.B. King. I suppose he had a certain charm, but it palled totally for me when I thought of the number of people his ideology and methods had damaged. So I was polite, but...

He was strolling up the steps with Marga his wife, a scraggy, hatchet-faced bitch with a whiny, whingy voice that could peel grapes at fifty yards. There were also a few of his heavier protective brethren as befitting his ‘status’ and a few camp-followers. I thought that they hadn’t seen me, but my luck was out.

“How ya doin’ Seanie boy?” Herself just maintained the perpetual scowl in response to my nod.

“Not bad Mal. And yourself?” Personally, I couldn’t have given a toss, were it not for the fact that Grogan’s main function in the organisation was to police the dope supply in Catholic west Belfast and the provo end of the city centre. So I thought I should at least inquire, as the odd ‘J’ does do wonders for my self-esteem, if really sod-all for my coordination and playing.

He leaned in towards me. “I’m told there’ll be some good stuff around tomorrow. Where are ye playing?”

“*The Venue*,” I told him, naming a bar in the docks where you could get good drink without hassle, listen to good music ditto, and occasionally, despite the best efforts of the proprietors to conform with the provisions of the Dangerous Drugs Act (NI), score some reasonable stuff.

“Ach well, I’m sure there’ll be someone around.” He winked like the boys do when they want to show themselves for the cute hours they think they are.

“What brings you here?” I asked, despite myself.

He stared at me. “What? Is your head cut or something? Smicker’s up for sentencing today. Wouldn’t miss it for the world. Mind you, we’re a wee bit late because of the traffic. But I hope your Jackie’s done a real good job on the wee fucker.”

Of course! I’d momentarily forgotten. The reason I was standing in the cold waiting for Jackie was that he was still in court, prosecuting counsel in *Regina v John Smith*. John Smith, *aka* Smicker, was a cold-hearted, murderous bastard who was firmly convinced that the only good taig was a dead one. He’d spent most of his adult life trying to improve the spiritual lot of his Catholic neighbours by translating them to glory. Such a pity because at sixteen, he’d been a shit-hot bass player and we’d gigged around a lot together in the same band for eighteen months or so.

But Smicker had forsaken rock-and-roll in favour of topping taigs and moving on up the hierarchy of the Ulster Volunteer Force. He’d become Grogan’s prod counterpart on the Belfast drugs scene when his boss failed to win an argument with a dozen or more bullets from a republican Armalite. And while both sides usually worked together with carving up the city into territories, Grogan and Smicker had clashed heads (or, rather, other people’s) on more than one occasion.

Hold on, I hear you say. Prod and taig paramilitaries co-operating?

What most foreigners generally, and Yanks in particular, don’t understand is, that all these ‘freedom fighters’ are as deep inn the rackets as Don Corleone and with much less style. After all, you need income to finance a ‘war’ somehow. Income from protection rackets, counterfeit tax-exemption certificates, smuggling, VAT scams, illegal drinking clubs (where the stock all manages to fall off the back of lorries without spilling a drop), dole fiddles, porno videos (most usually depressingly home-made) and so on and so forth.

All this provided the pennies to buy the bullets and explosives which widowed and orphaned and maimed, maintaining sufficient levels of fear to allow the principals on both sides to maintain a happy (for them) status quo. It also allowed said principals to live a lifestyle they would never have known otherwise.

A new and interesting development in the mid-70s came when both sides, anxious to show how they were striving for the good of their communities, decided to outlaw drugs. Pushers were warned off or kneecapped and, if still unco-operative, kneecapped in the head. The effect was that while you could still get dope and acid and the odd drop of speed if you looked closely enough (and I did), the heavy stuff – heroin and cocaine – was largely unknown.

So the RUC drug squad only had to look for the obvious dopers skinning-up, or trying to fly up to join the pretty angels in the rafters. You didn’t need to be other than not-totally-stoned to play spot-the-DS, the shorthaired guys and gals lurking with half-pints of shandy and dressed to a person in cavalry-twill denims and shit-kickers.

But other police activities were putting the squeeze on fund-raising and it dawned on both sides that instead of trying to stop people buying drugs, they should control them. Republicans favoured the hands-off line of ‘licensing’ the dealers (Grogan’s role was enforcement and ensuring that the dues were paid), while the loyalists opted for direct

control. That was how Smicker, the kingpin on the Shankill, felt the long, hairy arm of the law round his neck.

A Special Branch inspector whom Jackie knew had told me that although they knew he should be up for at least eleven murders of Catholics (including a cousin of Grogan's), and probably had had a hand in many more, they couldn't prove it in court. Witnesses were non-existent on the sound principle that having an animal like him on the streets was preferable to rotting in a grave while he did a 'lifer' working out at fifteen years but out in seven less remand. Instead, he'd been busted with a weight of good Lebanese Gold and around five thousand E's.

Jackie was arguing for a deterrent sentence on the grounds that drugs were abhorrent to decent Northern Ireland society (while omitting in his closing address that this excluded his sibling). Somehow I'd also overlooked the same policeman telling me that they suspected (but again couldn't prove) that it was one of Grogan's boys who'd sold Smicker the gear. "Aye! Right!" I remember thinking to myself.

There was bustle and commotion inside, and through the glass of the doors, I could see a scrum of people spilling into the central hall.

"Seems you're a wee bit late. I think he's been done already," I told Grogan.

*

He and his group pushed past me and marched inside, while I mashed out my butt on the white Portland stone step and tagged along to watch the fun. Outside the doors of Number 3 Court was a group of shouting, swearing and generally being disrespectful-towards-the-majesty-of-the-law type folks. Led by Smicker's common-law wife Janey Simpson, baby in arms and his older brother Rab, they were effing and blinding the peelers, the judge, Jackie, fenians in general and, surprise, surprise, Grogan in particular.

They started to boil forwards when they spotted us. (I say 'us' because although I was now rapidly sidling away, off-stage was still quite a few more yards to go.) Some peelers emerged from various points and I could imagine that a fair few of the heavier types were being summoned urgently to come and cope with the looming confrontation.

Now Janey I knew from the days when Smicker and Rab and I gigged together, and she was a half-sensible lassie when they first started going out together. But Rab was the archetypical drummer, in other words mad as a shithouse mouse. I've never played with a sane drummer in my life, so believe me, I'm an authority. Brother Rab, to put none too fine a point on it, was several trolleys short of a supermarket.

While you could always see Smicker thinking it out first, Rab would be stuck in there like shit to a blanket as soon as a row started. Fair do's, he usually came out better than most. Violence scares me daft and I am a devout and practising coward (although when totally cornered I can look after myself), but his initiatives had on several occasions bought me the time to get the Les Paul back into its case and me and it out of harm's way.

Somewhere I've got a band photo of us all together – me trying to look weighty as B.B., Smicker just young, short-haired and open-faced and smiling self-consciously, and Rab with his triple-axe-murderer maniac grin. It's funny how much Rab and I looked alike when you close your eyes and sort of squint a bit at it. Keyboard Alex is there too, longhaired and

gangly and bearded, and out of his tree. Pity about him – in the wrong place at the wrong time. Good player he was too.

A group of seven or eight of the older, less active type of constable who normally pulled the soft duty of policing the corridors of justice, formed a sort of forlorn cordon between the two groups. Grogan and the wife and heavies just stood there smirking. Smicker's lot ranted and generally raved at them, while the peelers tried to push them back.

I needed to get to Jackie's rooms, but the way lay through the edges of the ruck. I played rugby at school and know that the rules for getting offside are a penalty to the opposition and, if you try to go over the top, a surreptitious studs-up boot in the crotch at the next loose scrum you are silly enough to get involved in. So I waited.

I suppose I should have headed off to the pub and let them get on with it, but I was curious to see the action. Anyway, Jackie owed me money for the latest work and I didn't want to miss him, because I hadn't the price of more than one pint on me.

The confrontation finally erupted, but it wasn't Rab who led the charge as I had expected. Instead, Janey ripped the nappy off her sprog and then dumped the kid, bare-arsed, on Rab. Then she nipped in between two of the police, ran at Grogan and welted him – I swear it's true – right square across the face with the shit-steeped cloth, turning his normally ruddy complexion a sickly yellow and totally ruining his tie.

"There ye are ye fucking cunt! See how ye like being dropped in the shite. That'll teach ye to tout," she screamed at him.

The following two or three seconds of total silence was broken not by the sound of the gunk dripping from Grogan's discoloured features to the marble floor, but by the crack of Marga Grogan's hand across Janey's cheek. After that, as the song goes, civil war did then ensue, woman to woman and man to man. The police, who had by now had their batons out and were laying round them left, right and centre, provided shillelagh law in a forlorn effort to build a cordon sanitaire around themselves.

While the row and the ruction rumbled on, I was slowly edging my way along the wall, when up pops Rab and dumps the baby on me. "Don't drop him McDevitt or I'll fuckin' kill ye," he yells before diving into the fray like Bruce Willis on acid.

Smicker Junior promptly started to howl, repaying my protection by pissing down the front of my coat. Holding him clear of me in one arm in case he dropped another load, I dabbed the piss off with a tissue. I pressed against the wall and decided to make a dash to wherever seemed clearer should the row spill over any further in my direction. At least two of the peelers were already down, horses-di-combat, having made the mistake of trying to stop the various louts beating the crap out of each other.

Janey and Marga were on the floor tearing lumps out of each other's hair-dos, alongside Rab who appeared to have his teeth well into the ear of one of Grogan's heavies while being booted by another. Grogan himself was down too, clasping his genital region and looking none too happy with his day. Then, as if to break the spell, sirens wailed, tyres screeched and around about twenty members of the RUC heavy mob (or Mobile Support Unit to give them their proper title) from Musgrave Street Station, just round the corner, burst on the scene in full riot gear.

With the air of those who regularly sort out better handbag-scuffles before breakfast, in no time they had all of the combatants subdued, the handcuffs on and the first arses toed

into the backs of waiting Landrovers. By virtue of the fact that I was literally holding the baby, I'd escaped a kicking followed by arrest myself, unlike a couple of other previously quite innocent bystanders. I'd never seen them in live, close-up action before.

I watched in quite horrified fascination as they demonstrated that their doctrine followed that of Amalric, the 14th-century Bishop of Cîteaux – in other words, boot and baton the living buggery out of everything that moves and God will take care of his own. Mind you in their job, when you have a rent-a-mob of evil sods trying to incinerate you with petrol bombs or smash your face in with bricks (or both, or worse), there must be more than just a wee bit of attraction to getting your retaliation in first. Equalising before the other team scores as good ol' Danny Blanchflower would have put it.

Anyway, I was much relieved when Smicker's mother emerged to reclaim her grandchild. I hadn't seen her in the years since his life changed course. She looked older and more tired. But I had happy memories of cuppas and cigs and fried-egg sodas in her back kitchen on gig nights, while waiting for Smicker to pack up his old Fender Jazz and Rab to assemble his scrapyard of drum stands.

Although her husband had been one of the first prods to be sent down for sectarian murder at the start of the Troubles, it never seemed to bother her that her 'wee lads' (as she called them) were playing with someone called Sean Patrick. Jimmy, her husband, was a fenian-hating lifer, one of the original hard men, and had supposedly scrapped with the legendary Silver McKee.

But Jean Smith was always kindness herself towards me. She thanked me with a wan smile and hurried off.

*

Those of us who'd survived the mayhem shuffled about our business looking pretty sheepish. Jackie, my second-best mate, had wisely ducked back inside the court and then nipped off to his rooms. When I caught up with him, he was not unhappy with the outcome.

"Nine years less the seven months he was on remand. His Honour plumped for maximum. All the usual 'menace to society' bit," he announced gleefully. "That should stop him killing for a while."

"Didn't stop his relatives trying," I said. "Did you see Grogan there?"

"Saw him with poo all over. Wonderful." He stopped and sniffed. "By the way, do you smell wee-wee in here?"

Another difference between Jackie and myself is our use of language. He will do anything to avoid profanity and scatology, believing like Ma that 'bad' language signifies an inadequate vocabulary. On the other hand, I believe that labelling 'shit' as 'poo' or 'number two's' is the mark of the anal-retentive who just can't let the feelings rip properly. But we do have a lot in common and bear a remarkable resemblance to each other, almost like twins, apart from the long hair and beard that is. Anyway, I love the guy. I explained the source.

"For heaven's sake Sean, get that old rag dry-cleaned if you think it's not going to dissolve. Even better, buy another. You look and you smell like a wine-victim."

"Can't until you pay up," I told him.

“Ah. Slight problem there. I didn’t get to the bank and now I have a meeting over lunch. I might be finished before they close, but I just don’t know. And I haven’t time to get home and raid the piggy-bank.”

“You bollocks,” I said, but without any real rancour. “You knew I was coming down. I didn’t risk life, limb and streams of piss just for you to tell me you couldn’t square me.” Worse, although I didn’t say it, my dole had been stopped the week before.

When you’re doing the double – claiming unemployment benefit and working at the same time – you’ve got to be careful. So I would turn up every second Thursday at the Social Security Office like a dutiful citizen, swearing blind I had no other income and begging for the chance of gainful employment to make me feel a useful member of society again. But I’d finally run out of patience with all of those deadhead, dead-end interviews for deadhead, dead-end jobs.

So the week before, I told my grandly titled Jobs Advisor to stick the system anywhere the sun don’t shine. (Given the size of her, she had the choice of an area about half the size of South America. Maybe I shouldn’t have added that into my summing up. But what the fuck! If a thing’s worth doing, it’s worth doing to excess!) She, in turn, robustly invited me to leave. And there was no gig until tomorrow night.

Jackie reached into his elegant suit pocket and pulled out the expensive leather wallet that I’d shoplifted for his Christmas present two years ago on account of being broke. I’d had a few laughs since then, thinking about him in the High Court with seventy quid’s worth of stolen goods in his pocket. He handed me two twenties and two fivers.

“Have to do till tomorrow, I’m afraid. Should do if you stay sober.” Jackie, unlike me, inherited the Da’s taste for moderate consumption – in his case, white wine.

“And the horse you came on,” I said with a smile and the finger gestures that were a running joke between us.

“OK. Now get out of here before you get arrested for impersonating a human being.” So, on good terms as usual, I left.

* * * * *

Chapter 3

12th November, Afternoon

It was way past opening time and I scuttled against the rain, round to the Kitchen Bar, just a hundred yards or so away. I wanted a pie and a pint as a substitute for breakfast. Today was not marked down for abstinence and I was hungry and I was thirsty. I really didn't want to cook another bloody tin of Heinz bloody baked beans in my poky bloody little flat. I went in and meandered up to my namesake at the bar.

"Jesus Christ, McDevitt!" Sean B., a man of indeterminate age and eyes that have seen it all, made a great play of wrinkling his nose at me. "You pogue like a Turkish shite-house."

"Fat lot you'd know about it. Never been further than Dublin in your life. Give us a pint and one of Sweeney Todd's pies, and hold on the fingernails."

"But what have ye been up to?" I told him.

He started to pull my pint in that slow, methodical style that guarantees a good wet throat, even if you have to wait fifteen minutes for it. He looked at me over the pump-handle.

"Fuck away off and sit in the corner by the fire so's ye don't scare off decent, God-fearing folk," he said kindly.

I sat and smoked, drifting in no particular thoughts while I waited. There was a Ry Cooder riff lurking at the back of my mind and I just couldn't get a handle on it. Sean B. brought over the plate and glass.

"So your brother got Smicker sent away," he remarked. "Terrible pity about that wee lad. He had a gift, like."

News of any form and accuracy spreads faster and wider in Belfast than cholera. I just nodded. Sean B. is true to his name, in other words a taig. He'd served bar in a club where I'd done a residency with Smicker and Rab (now that I come to think of it, where that photograph was taken). With the typical schizophrenic generosity of the people of this country, he'd liked Smicker for his talent. Even after his own brother had fallen victim to one of the sectarian gangs that preyed on unarmed innocents as a substitute for the risk of taking each other on. He left me to my pie and my pint and my thoughts.

I was there a fair while, not noticing as the place filled up with lunchtime shop and office staff and then emptied again. Perhaps the whiff of infant urine had put off anyone looking for a seat beside me, but whatever the reason, I'd been left alone. It's not that I'm antisocial, but there are times when people in general get on my tits and I like to sit on my own, undisturbed by idle chatter.

We had a loony Latin master at school whose favourite tag was *Odi profanum vulgus et arceo*, which loosely translates as 'I hate common punters and tell them to fuck off'. If I ever get my own coat of arms, that will be the motto. I decided on another pint, then another and then several more to keep them company.

While lunchtime faded to late afternoon, I had several hours of peace and turf fire to myself. I was quite annoyed when the chair opposite me scraped back and a bulky male body flopped down onto it.

My new companion was one of the heavies I'd last seen trying to kick Rab Smith's testicles and kidneys into next week. I took inner amusement from the fact that he would have a terrific black eye tomorrow.

"Mr. Grogan wants you," he pronounced in the tones of one who expects no argument.

"So what?" I snapped. Annoyance at having my reverie disturbed, aided by the quantities of J. Arthur Guinness' draught happiness, overrode my natural caution.

He just looked at me as if this question was too much for his intellect.

"How d'ye find me?"

"Just looked. We know where you and the brother drink lunch."

"How did you get out so quick?" I asked.

"Mr. Grogan got us bail. Up tomorrow. Breach of the peace. Wee buns." The sentences were straight out of the *Jack and Jill Get Done for Grievous Bodily Harm* Reader (age 8 and under).

"When does he want me?" I asked as a titter of wit kicked in through the alcohol.

"Now."

"I'm busy. Tell him to come to *The Venue* tomorrow night."

"He wants you now."

"Later. I want another pint."

"Now."

The dialogue would have had Samuel Beckett eating his quill pen in impotent jealousy if it had continued much longer. It didn't, because Heavy just stood up and motioned for me to finish my pint.

He didn't do anything melodramatic like letting his coat fall open to show a gun. But the message was clear enough and I didn't feel like measuring the resistance of a kneecap to a copper-jacketed 9mm bullet or a cement block.

So I drank up, paid up, said "See you!" to Sean B. and followed my leader outside to a black taxi. He looked puzzled for a moment as the taxi took off. Then he grinned at me.

"You piss yerself?"

I just shook my head.

*

The rain had gone from sort of getting its own back on people, to really showing its dislike of humanity in general and Belfast in particular. It was coming down in stair-rods as we drove towards Ardoyne. Since I left the army I hadn't – for obvious reasons – been to nationalist areas to visit any of my Catholic muso friends or those from my university days. So I was unfamiliar with the new geography of peace lines and streets blocked-off.

When I'd known Smicker first, he'd lived in Conway Street, which linked the prod Shankill Road to the taig Falls Road. In those days, you could tell where one lot ended and the other began, just by looking to see exactly where the red-white-and-blue, prod-painted kerbs ended. Now, there were no interconnections and the taxi wound its way on the taig side of the border, among the new, council-built houses that had replaced the old terraces of poky wee Victorian red-brick houses. I was totally lost.

Finally we fetched up at an anonymous yellow-brick box with neat walls and a tiny garden. Heavy propelled me towards the front door with a surprising gentleness. I noticed,

however, that I didn't merit an umbrella. He rapped on the knocker and after a couple of moments, Grogan opened the door looking as fresh as if he'd never in his life been slapped in the face with wet shit or kicked in the balls, far less only a few hours ago.

"Come on on in Seanie," he gestured. To the heavy he said "Away into the kitchen Paul and get a cuppa."

He reached for my coat and I saw his nostrils twitching.

"Just don't ask, Mal. Don't fucking ask." I made a helpless gesture with my hands. I told him anyway.

"You OK?" he quizzed.

"Yeah, I suppose so. Just not too happy about being hauled out of the pub by lover-boy there. Apart from that, fine."

"Hauled out? Away on out of that. Paul just invited you round for a jar. You mean you won't be wanting a wee Powers?" he teased as he ushered me into the back parlour that was strategically joined to the kitchen.

"Catch yerself on. I wouldn't go that far." Keep a stiff upper lip, I thought. Difficult to do, because when I reached for a fag, he muttered something about Marga not liking tobacco smoke. Grogan poured two brain-death shots and handed me one.

"Slán!" he offered.

"Up yours!" the ghosts of Guinness past dared me to say.

As I sipped the whiskey, a little of the tension ebbed away, to be replaced by a light glow. But I still wanted to know what had led to this cosy little get-together.

"So, Mal," I asked, "What's it to be? Guitar lessons for Marga or me getting my face well landscaped?" I tried to quip but it fell flat.

"No way. Nothing like that." He fiddled with his glass, wiping his finger round the rim until it produced a clear, bell-like ring. Grogan, I suddenly realised, was (a) worried and (b) not very good at being reassuring. Suddenly he sat forward in his chair.

"You see, Seanie, we've got a problem – you and me."

I tossed off most of the whiskey, nearly choking in the process and started to stand up.

"Thanks for the drink Mal. But the only thing we've got in common..."

I never got the chance to finish the sentence because his hand flew out and pushed me hard back into the chair. The glass flew out of my hand and smashed on the mock stone fireplace. Good golden Powers splashed on the hearth and a few drops caused gas-blue spurts of flame in the smokeless fuel fire. Immediately, Paul-the-Heavy was back in the room, but Grogan waved him away. He got up and poured me another.

"That was Tyrone crystal," he murmured, almost to himself. "Fuckin' expensive. Don't break this one." He handed it to me and then used the hearth-tidy to brush up the sherds.

"Let me tell ye something, son."

I hate it when people start off like that, because it usually ends up with something like "I'm going to tear your leg off and hit you with the wet end."

"We know you was in the UDR for a while. A couple of the boys clocked ye on duty in the City centre and then saw ye in one of the clubs. I was sent down to look you over, but you were playing so well that I said you weren't a problem. Anyway, I was told later ye were

such a fuck-up that ye were probably more use to us than the Brits. That's why you're here and not in Roselawn." Roselawn cemetery that is.

And since all that business with your Jackie, I've been sort of looking out for ye, like."

Offhand, I couldn't think of a thing to say. I just smiled, weakly and took it out on the new whiskey.

I should explain that the UDR, the Ulster Defence Regiment, was a part of the British Army set up in the early 1970s to replace a discredited auxiliary police force known, and reviled (with more than a fair degree of justification by taigs) as the 'B-Specials'. An entirely prod force, the Bs played a highly dubious role in the late 60s when the troubles started and was decreed to be 'unsuited' to a peace-keeping role.

Being infinitely wise, ho ho ho, the British Government replaced it with a part-time infantry. I volunteered to take the Queen's shilling just to get away from the 'shoot all the taigs and it'll all be over' mentality of the likes of Smicker. I thought that neutrals like me who didn't give a toss where the government of Ireland lay – Dublin or Belfast or London or Disneyland or wherever – might just be able to make a difference. But it didn't work like that, even though there were a lot of well-intentioned men and women who felt the same.

Now, I must admit that Grogan was right and I was probably the worst thing to hit the global military establishment since the Good Soldier Švejk. I suffered the indignity of carrying a pistol 24 hours a day against being ambushed at home, checked for wee packages under my car every time I got into it, worked during the day and patrolled the streets at night. But we were never more than a native militia in a third-world banana republic in the eyes of the regulars of the 'real' British Army. So, after a particularly frank and comradely exchange of dialectic with a particularly snot-nosed and obtuse example of Sandhurst training, I jacked it in (but complete with good conduct medal!).

Nevertheless, in this happy land of saints and scholars and very, very long memories, the likes of Grogan could have had me topped just for being the regimental mascot, let alone an active 'part of the British war machine'. Jesus!

He'd stopped talking and all of a sudden the whiskey and the sheer oddity of the whole situation caught up with me. I was angry. No. I was fucking livid. I didn't get up, but I leaned forward until my face was close to Grogan's and I was getting his second-hand Powers and he was getting, in addition, my second-hand Guinness and steak pie.

"Listen Grogan. What the fuck are you telling me this for? You know bloody well what I think about the lot of you. You, Smicker, the whole rotten heap. I should be grateful I'm alive? Screw that. Don't play games. Don't fucking insult me!"

I suppose I expected a smack in the mouth, but it didn't come. Instead, he leaned back and closed his eyes for a moment, cradling his glass on his lap. Then he sat up and hunched over towards me.

"Look Sean. You know why I was down there today?"

"Sure. You wanted to see Smicker get shafted good and proper. Right?" I snapped back. He ignored my tone.

"Right. I hope the wee cunt rots in jail for what he did to my cousin Pat. Did ye know the forensic had to pick up most of Pat's teeth, one of his bollocks and half his hair off the floor round his body? Do you know what they did to him before they shot him? I had to ID

him and then lie to his wife about it. I've been trying to whack that fuckin' bastard for the last four years, but I never got near him. The only way I could get him was to drop him to the peelers with the dope."

"So it was you?" I asked, calmer now.

"Who the fuck else?" he chuckled. "And the beauty of it was he'd paid up and my man got away with the loot before the peelers crashed in. I really enjoyed that, and I'm enjoying it that he knows he was took and took hard and by me. But that's personal. You're here because of business."

I felt the hairs rising on the nape of my neck at the cheap cinema-speak.

"Most of the time we use our own contacts," he went on. "Sometimes one's short and buys from the other. That's how I shafted Smicker. My problem is that there's a really big one going down soon as a sort of joint venture with the UVF. Half-and-half, we've got the investors – they've got the supplier. A wee bit of a trade." He paused as I started forward.

"Let me get this straight," I rasped. Fuck him and his scrawny wife I thought as I pulled out a fag and lit it.

"You set up Smicker to get back at him, and at the same time you and the Billy-boys want to go on cutting deals together? You're sick Mal. Jesus Z. Christ on a crutch. You're fuckin' demented." Panic and alcohol can lead to hysteria, and I was teetering on the edge.

Roused by my voice, Paul the Heavy slid open the door and looked for guidance to Grogan. Grogan waved him away.

"It's really dead simple Seanie." His tone hardened. "I was dealing with Billy Sweeney and setting Smicker up at the same time. Billy was a reasonable fella and would've understood the difference. It really fucked things up when he got done and Smicker took over. But things have changed."

(Billy 'Ten Taig' Sweeney, Smicker's late predecessor, was so-called on account of the number of sectarian murders attributed to him.)

"Fuck me pink!" I thought. "God help me if Grogan's definition of 'reasonable' was that unlike Smicker, Sweeney had not gone in for mutilating his victims before he shot them.")

Grogan pressed on.

"After Billy got his day spoilt for him, we thought his brother Gordon would take over, but we got Smicker instead. Now he's off the scene, we've got Gordon like we thought originally and we thought he'd be sweet to deal with. But he's turning out another stupid fucker. I'll tell ye how stupid he is. He says he's got to have Rab 'cos the contacts are Smicker's and his." Grogan closed his eyes for a moment as if petitioning God.

"Rab isn't going to talk to me or my people. So we need a go-between that both sides know and can trust. And I when I saw you today..."

I fought hard and managed to keep my rising panic at bay. Gripping the glass with both hands jammed down on my knees was one way of stopping them from shaking. I took a deep breath and tried to keep my tone calm and reasonable.

"Let's get this straight Mal. Just let me just talk this out so we're both sure I've got everything right."

He nodded.

"You and the prods want to bring in a load of gear, right?"

He nodded again.

“You provide the cash, Rab and this Sweeney provide the gear, the cash gets paid and everyone gets wrecked happily ever after?”

“Nearly right. It’s not just as simple as that. There’s a few other wee details, but that’ll do for now.”

“And you want me to go to Gordon Sweeney and mend fences between you and him and Rab so the deal can go ahead without Rab trying to chain-saw yer dick off in the middle of it and blowing the heap?”

I yelped as the fag, which had burnt down to the filter without my having taken more than one drag, started to burn my fingers. Grogan looked amused.

“Should give them up Sean. They’ll kill ye. Ye know that, don’t ye?”

I pulled out the packet, lit another fag and blew smoke to the ceiling to sort of try and cool down. But I just couldn’t help myself.

“Oh fuck off, Mal!” I snapped. “It’ll take the fags a hell of a sight longer than it will Rab if I try and explain this one to him. I honestly don’t know which of you is worse. Ah shit! You’re both head-the-balls. You’re mad. Fucking mad.”

I could have waxed really eloquent along these lines for quite a while. However, Grogan didn’t give me the chance. He leaned forward again, his fingers working on the cut patterns of his tumbler. He was definitely not at ease.

“Listen Seanie. Here’s a wee idea to play with. Don’t you think Smicker would want to set Rab on you and your Jackie after what Jackie did to him in court over this last two weeks? Maybe Jackie’s wife and wee’uns? Wouldn’t you think Rab wants your balls in a basket too? Forget about gigging together. So what’s to stop them? Auld lang syne? Fuck away off out of that.”

Now this did give me pause for thought.

“So what’s to stop them?” I echoed.

Grogan looked at me, almost slyly. He said nothing for a moment and then said just one word in a very low voice I had to really strain to hear him.

“Family,” he said.

At first, I thought I hadn’t heard him right. When you spend lots of time in cramped spaces standing in front of your own 100 watt Marshall stack plus various other bits of loud amplification, your middle ear tends to take a bit of a beating.

“What?” I asked.

“Family,” he repeated. “Yours.”

“Grogan, what the fuck are you on about?”

“Rab Smith is your Da’s cousin Cissie’s boy. So you and Smicker and Rab are like second cousins. Did ye honestly not know?”

* * * * *

Chapter 4

12th November, Late Evening

I lost it. Totally and utterly lost the bap. Flipped. I was out of that chair with my hands round his throat before I knew what I was doing. Equally, before I knew what he was doing, Paul the Heavy hurtled out of the kitchen and had me face down on the ‘Souvenir from Torremolinos’ furry fireplace rug, my nose bleeding onto it. Then I was trying to get at the pair of them, but I might as well have tried to fight a cement mixer. And my face hurt. But it didn’t stop me yelling through the synthetic sheep carpet pile.

“You’re a fuckin’ lying fuckin’ goat-shagging motherfucker, Grogan. You bastard. They’ve got nothing to do with me. Rab’s not my family. I’ll kill you. I’ll fucking kill you, I swear.” I went on and on, my arms up past my shoulderblades at the back, until I was spent. For the first time since I was about five, I had a genuine temper-tantrum, the toes of my boots banging up and down on the carpet.

Paul the Heavy just leaned on me like a half-disinterested bystander until my rage began to subside. Then, as he sensed that the pain from my nose and pinioned arms were beginning to exert precedence over my emotions, he eased off a little.

“Let him up now and get back to the teapot,” I heard Grogan say. The pressure eased off. He lifted me to my feet with the ease with which he used to hump sacks of anthracite (or the antichrist as it’s known commonly in Belfast) for Cawood’s Coal in the days before he found ‘the cause’ – or it found him – and eased me back into my chair.

Paul the Heavy brought a length of Marga’s pretty quilted kitchen roll for my nose and another for the rug. Grogan looked at me, almost in a fatherly sort of way, despite the fact that he was only a few years older than me and refilled my glass. The bottle was taking an even worse beating than me.

“It’s the God’s truth then? Ye really didn’t know, did ye?” He was dabbing my blood up.

“Mal! For fuck sake tell me what’s going on. Please” I leaned my head back and pressed the paper towel over my nose. There was blood in my mouth. I hate the taste of blood, especially my own.

“Ye know we keep tabs on everyone we can,” he began. “Well, it so happens that a few years ago, one of our people worked in the Government Record Office, ye know, down Chichester Street near the courts.”

I grunted.

“Who walks in one day but Jean Smith, with Smicker, looking a full birth-certificate for Rab. He was applying for some job or other. So this lassie goes through the usual routine and comes up with an adoption flag, gets the records out and finds that Rab was adopted as a baby. Name of mother ‘Cecilia McDevitt’, father’s name ‘A.J. Smith’. Now the wee girl used to go to your gigs, and knew Rab and Smicker from yer band. And she fancied you too. Maybe you shagged her, I don’t know.

Anyway, the lassie’s clever too – Queen’s University history degree – and she likes doing family trees as a hobby. So she clocks the surnames and decides to do a wee family

tree on the two of you. Just for fun, like. Lo and behold, Cissie McDevitt turns out to be the daughter of Andrew McDevitt of Aghalee who is the brother of Arthur McDevitt of Belfast who is the father of Charles McDevitt who is the father of Sean Patrick and James Michael McDevitt.”

My head was spinning and my nose was hurting.

“How the fuck did she get all that?”

He laughed. “Ach it’s dead easy, she said. T’isnt only Inspector Morse can do that. Just a matter of knowing where to look.”

At least my nose had stopped leaking and I gingerly tried sitting up straight.

“But how did you find out? I mean Rab and Smicker weren’t involved in anything then.”

“Rab was,” he said. “But the lassie didn’t say anything about it until Smicker popped up in the UVF. Then she told one of the right people and he told me. Made me wonder for a while if I was right about you not getting done, but no one ever saw you with any of the other boys, so we figured the only connection was music and left you alone.”

“I didn’t know Rab was into anything then. Honest to God I didn’t.”

“Ach well, he’d only started, and even the boys over there thought he was a bit too flaky at first. But when a few of the real bad bastards got put away or got done, they needed nutters like him. And he brought Smicker in after him, except he turned out much better at it.”

Better? Jesus God!

“So I’m supposed to waltz up the Shankill and say ‘Hey, long-lost cousin Rab! Give us five! D’ye know you’re a bastard like me? Oh and by the way, forget about Jackie sticking it to Smicker because you and me’s going to do a dope deal. So don’t kill me because Grogan says it’ll fuck up business’. Oh Shit! Mal, tell me this isn’t real. Please. Tell me you’re pulling my piss.”

Grogan got up and paced the floor.

“Look Sean. None of this would have happened if Billy Sweeney was alive. he’d more wit than to involve Smicker and Rab while we were doing business – not the other. But I can’t help what the woodentops did. Gordon Sweeney seems to be too thick to see the problems and I’ve got people breathing down my neck because of this deal. I can hardly send the local parish priest down to mediate, can I? So you’re the dildo that answers the nun’s prayer. And you just remember.”

He came and leaned over me, putting his face close to mine and taking my head in his hands.

“You owe me,” he said. He stared straight into my face for a long few seconds and then backed off. He splashed me a refill of Powers that left the bottle as empty as I felt.

We to’ d and fro’ d and damaged another bottle until I agreed that I’d call Smicker’s mother and see if she could get Rab to meet me so that I could pass on the message. I also told him flat that I wanted no other part in the operation.

“Ah well now.” he said. “There might be one or two other bits and bobs.”

“No which way, Mal!”

“Listen Sean. Suppose the word went out that Seanie McDevitt was on the shit list and any gig that booked him was in for a wee bit of bother? Suppose it got around that being in the same band as you wasn’t good for the legs? Or the fingers? Where’d that leave ye?”

I gave in. The drink was really grinding me down now and I needed to get back to the real world. I needed to talk to Jackie. Most of all, if truth be told, I wanted my Ma and Da. I needed Ma to kiss my nose better and Da to tell me to wise up and lift me on his shoulders so I could reach up and touch the clouds in the sky just once more.

But that wasn’t going to happen, so instead I got Grogan to get me a taxi over to Jackie’s place. He said there was no charge, just tell the man where to go. I asked him for a contact number. He shook his head.

“Don’t worry Seanie Boy. I’ll get you. When I need to that is.”

That worried me a great deal.

As I went out the front door, I turned and looked at him straight and said, “If I ever owed you anything at all Mal, this wipes it. Whatever happens. After this goes down, I don’t know you. You’re just another punter. You leave me alone. OK?”

He looked at me, half-sideways. “You mean you’ll still do ‘Sweet Little Angel’ for me?”

I left without looking back.

I gave the taxi driver directions over to Jackie’s place in the Knock area, on the other side of the city, and closed my eyes as he worked his way through the rain.

Dozing off, I thought of Oz. I had a happy childhood, and right from the earliest, me and Jackie got on better than most brothers. Da was working full-time, and we used to love getting home from Primary School to smell Ma’s cooking, and playing hankie-ball cricket in the garden, and then running to the gate when Da got home, smelling sweet of wood and all over sawdusty. He’d swing us up in his arms and carry us inside and then, in the same daily ritual, Ma would come and put her arms around us and we’d just stand there for a minute or so. Jesus, I miss them so fucking much.

“Here ye are mucker.” The taxi driver broke across the dream and I was outside Jackie’s Shandon Park detached house and leaning on the doorbell and telling Michelle his wife that I needed to talk to Jackie and throwing my arms round his neck and crying buckets and telling him I really loved him. They took me upstairs and undressed me and put me to bed in the spare room. Jackie sat with me, listening silently to my disjointed maunderings until I drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

Chapter 5

13th November, Morning

I woke up with the smell of a fry in my nostrils, a fuzzy head and suede teeth and the whoops and giggles of my nephew and niece in my ears. There were footsteps on the stairs and then a tap on the door announcing a procession of three out of four of my nearest and dearest. My sister-in-law entered with a tray, followed by my absolute number-one best girlfriend, five-year old Josie (carrying a glass of water) and my absolute number-one best mate Artie, aged seven (with a box of Seltzer).

“How are you feeling today Seanie?” Michelle smiled indulgently at me. She’s been here before and is inordinately tolerant of my falls from grace.

“Were you pissed again Uncle Seanie?” pipes up our Josie.

“Josephine!” her mother turned to her.

“But that’s what you and Daddy said last night. We heard you. Pissed as a en eee wubbleyeew tee you said,” Artie joined in.

“And your nose looks funny,” chirped Josie. I just smiled weakly and said I’d fallen over.

Michelle came to my rescue before I had to explain the red hooter in any more detail.

“Never you mind what we said. And never mind Uncle Seanie’s nose. And don’t you use that word again. It’s naughty,” she retorted in mock exasperation. “Give Uncle Seanie his tablets and then go and get ready for school.” She set the tray down on the bedside table while a lovin’ spoonful of the fizzy stuff was administered. The kids went a’hootin’ and a’hollerin’ off to the OK Corral at the bottom of the stairs.

Michelle handed me my breakfast. Typical Ulster Fry with sausage, bacon, egg, soda and potato bread and a couple of slices of black pudding, to be washed down with lashings of strong, scalding tea. This is actually the best cure of all for even the worst hangover. Overdoses of tannin and cholesterol seem to sop up excess alcohol from the system like nobody’s business. Mind you, Northern Ireland also has the highest incidence of coronary disease in Western Europe. But who cares when it eases the pain?

She sat down beside me on the bed.

“What is it Seanie? What’s wrong?” she asked softly as if the kids might hear. “I’ve never seen you like that before. Not even when... you know...”

She was referring to the totally pissed-as-a-fart days and nights in the aftermath of my break-up with Elaine, my second wife. I looked up with a mouthful of fry, tapped my lips with the fork and made ‘mmmm-mmmm’ type noises. She chuckled indulgently and waited, joking about Friday the 13th.

Michelle is a lovely lady and exactly the sort of person that Jackie deserves. She comes from that middle-class Ulster which regards as the epitome of cool Volvos, Delia Smith’s chicken biryani and calling their daughters by pseudo-chic foreign names like Michelle and Chardonnay, sons after pop stars like Elton and Eric. But it didn’t spoil her. She is tall, brunette, dark-brown eyes, seriously well-assembled and very, very intelligent. If she weren’t Jackie’s wife, I’d fall for her like a hundredweight of Comber spuds.

With the excuse of a full mouth for not having to talk, I had time to try and pull together the fragments of yesterday that were ricocheting around my skull like shrapnel. I nodded while she told me what the kids had been doing, made suitably appreciative noises, and thought hard. I didn't get anywhere. So I swallowed and cleared my throat.

"I got some totally seriously weird news yesterday, love. I just couldn't handle it," I said at last.

She said nothing but waited for me to go on.

"So, as usual, I got totally stupid-wasted. I'm sorry. But I really, really, really need to talk to you and Jackie. And I don't know exactly what to tell you – or how."

"It's all right," she said simply. "Jackie doesn't have to go in 'til after lunch. When I've dropped the kids off, you should be up and we can have a chat." She got up and left. After a while, I heard the four of them in the drive and peeped out through the lace curtains. It nearly started me bawling again to see Jackie with the two kids in his arms and Michelle with hers round all three, re-enacting the love he and I'd shown to each other and to Ma and Da.

I decided I'd better make a move and pockled off to the bathroom and generally made myself as presentable as my condition allowed. Jackie was downstairs in the living room, reading glasses on and a sheaf of papers in his lap. He looked up.

"We couldn't get War on Want to take that coat of yours, so we gave it to the dog," he announced.

"What d'ye mean War on Want wouldn't take it? That's where I got it from," I retorted. I thought he was joking until I heard Dougal the family Labrador woofing and snuffling and gurr-gurring outside. Looking through the window, I saw him having a great time shredding my only protection from the elements.

"Jesus! Jackie!" I started towards the bay window door, but he just laughed.

"Listen, there's one of mine that Mish doesn't like. You've taken hand-me-downs before, and it'll stop you giving the family a bad name."

We laughed. I didn't bother trying to tell him about what was going on because I knew he'd simply say to wait until Michelle got back. It's not that he needs her as a crutch, or as a shield against problems, or anything like that. She once told me that one of the reasons she loves him so much is that, unlike the average Irish male, he treats her as an equal, not as a chattel. And he's got that straight from Da, something Da hadn't really managed to pass on to me. We made small talk and bantered each other until we heard the car come back.

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While Michelle got her coat off and nipped upstairs for a quick powder of the nose, Jackie made coffee for them and tea for me. About the only serious criticism I have of my brother is that he insists on the powdered pap that suggests how rancid washing-up water must taste. I like to chew coffee and feel the caffeine booting me up the ass. In his house, I stick to the good old S.D. Bell's finest Belfast tea leaves that they keep just for me.

We sat down, them on the sofa, me in the armchair opposite, and I launched forth, telling them the heap, leaving nothing out. After about five minutes, my hands began to shake and Michelle silently brought me an ashtray. Normally I never smoke in their house because,

like them, I don't want the kids to get accustomed to the smell and maybe think smoking is normal. It's the one and only time when I can genuinely abstain for hours and not want to kill myself. But this time I broke my own rule. They listened in silence. Once, Michelle reached over and squeezed my hand when it looked and felt as if the tears would start again. Finally I finished and we sat in silence.

It was Jackie who started.

"Goodness! We can really pick them, can't we? Related to John and Rab Smith. Good Lord! You'll be telling us next we've got Vlad the Impaler in the family tree somewhere. If I'd known this two weeks ago, I'd have done my best to put the family skeleton back in his cupboard for a twenty."

Good old Jackie, I love the 'we' and the way he takes the shit without throwing it back at me.

I just nodded dumbly, still not really trusting myself to speak.

"We've got to divide this thing up," he went on. "Speaking as your little brother, I'd say we have to accept the situation and do what Grogan wants, so's you get out in one piece. Speaking from the legal standpoint, I have to tell you you're bound to go to the police with everything."

"Jesus Christ! you've got to be having me on!" I exploded.

He held his hands up.

"Look." He started ticking off on his fingers. "You are aware that a crime is being planned and about to take place. You know the nature of the crime. You know the principals involved. You are taking part. OK," he added hastily over my protest, "only a small part, I know. Nevertheless you're already involved in a criminal conspiracy.

And if things go to hell in a handcart, you'll be charged with aiding and abetting at the very least, not to mention all of the other charges any half-decent Crown Prosecution junior could throw together in around twenty seconds. If I was looking at this, that's what I'd go for. In other words, we're looking at a minimum of five to seven years here. And don't forget! Now that I know, I'm guilty as well – just as guilty as you, in fact, if I don't lift the phone straight away."

"Oh fuck! What've I gone and done?" I put my head in my hands and stared at my knees.

Michelle came and knelt down beside my chair, one arm round my shoulders while she gently stroked my hair.

"Supposing you left the country for a while, Sean? Wouldn't they have to find someone else?" she asked quietly.

"Nah!" I could see where this was leading but I couldn't think of any way to let her down gently.

"Grogan would put the word out, so I'd have nothing to come back to except him and dear cousin Rab waiting to shake me warmly by the throat – and only the throat if I was lucky."

"Would he really?" she asked.

I raised my head and looked at her.

"Look love. Grogan is sane compared to most of them. And he's the ultimate model of sanity compared to Rab. But he's not that sane. He's obviously under pressure if he wants

to use me at all. If I bollocks him about, and the only way he can get back is to wipe me out on the circuit here, he'll do it. I can't ask other musos to gig with me on the off-chance that he won't really give them to the leg-breakers or the sickos who get their buzz out of taking off folk's fingers with bolt-cutters."

Her eyes widened in shock and revulsion. Such things just don't get talked about in the quiet, tree-lined avenues of Cherryvalley. I went on.

"It's simple. If he can't have me dead for real, he'll kill me anyway else he can. And he'll make sure the promoters know that it won't be a Guinness job either."

"A what?" she asked.

"Listen. A couple of years ago, the 'Ra tried to torch a place with incendiaries. They went off like they were supposed to. But the dickheads who planted them shoved them under the seats, right up at the plastic beer pipes to the bar. So when the fire started, the pipes melted and the Guinness put it out. Sort of a sprinkler system, like."

I could feel her shake as the funny side of that struck her. She has a light tinkle of a laugh and it's as infectious as hell. So when she burst out, she got Jackie going and then me. Soon the three of us were howling and holding our sides as the tension drained a little.

When we calmed down, the gravity of the situation stole up again.

"Look mate," I turned to Jackie. "I can't see any way out of this. Maybe Gordon Sweeney and Rab won't go for it. At least I can tell Grogan I tried."

Michelle looked at Jackie as well.

"And you won't have to say anything either, will you? After all, he's not just your brother. He can be your client as well." Jackie smiled at her.

"No love. Doesn't work like that. Even if he was my client, foreknowledge of a crime isn't privileged information. If Sean has committed a crime and tells me about it, that's one thing. But I'm duty bound to tell all if a crime can be prevented."

"So what would happen if you didn't and they found out?"

"Conspiracy? Illegal drugs? Terrorism?" he shrugged. "Chances are I'd be disbarred."

Now I'm normally an utterly selfish sod. But when I watched the pair of them there, genuinely worried about me instead of themselves, I just couldn't stand the thought of screwing up their lives.

"Jackie! We forget this," I said. "It was just Sean-the-bollocks, stupid-drunk again, slabbering on and on about nothing as usual, wallowing in self-pity. I never said a word, OK? Whatever happens, it's just me. Nothing to do with you. Right?"

"Wrong!" said Michelle. She went back to Jackie and took his hands in hers. "We've got to help. Haven't we?"

Jackie gave her exactly the same sort of look that I remember Da giving Ma when they had to think about something difficult. I felt the tears pricking again. I didn't have anyone to look like that at.

"Too right Bruce!" He'd never quite mastered recall of the Strine, and it came out in Da's broad Belfast.

"Look Sean. You string Grogan along as far as possible. Talk to Rab's mother. Leave it as long as possible. I'll have a quiet word with George Devenney." He was referring to the Special Branch contact that'd laid the score about Smicker on me. "I'll just ask him about Smicker and Grogan and what's the cross-community exchange situation. I don't have to tell

him anything. And I'll use yesterday's little scene as an excuse to scrounge a wee bit of info. A bit of sounding out. Am I under any threat and so on? Nothing more."

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I finished my tea and helped Michelle wash up the breakfast things. Jackie told me to wait until he was going in to work and he'd give me a lift back to my flat in the Holy Land, a collection of wee terraces in the University area all called Jerusalem Street, Jericho Street and the like. The City Council never got round to Sodom Street or Gomorrah Drive, otherwise I'd have ended up in one or other of them.

But a bit of a walk and the couple of bus rides would get me some fresh air and the chance to get my head a bit more together. I particularly wanted to get out the Les Paul and finger a few chords to get me in the mood for the gig. So I tried on Jackie's beige raincoat, the one that Michelle didn't like. It fitted perfectly and looked suitably out of place with my jeans, tatty jumper and cowboy boots. I kissed Michelle and told her to give the kids my love, punched Jackie playfully on the arm and set off into the mizzly morning. I waved back as I walked down the drive.

I'd hardly got onto the avenue when I heard the car rev up. And it wasn't that noise of a housewife-being-a-bit-heavy-hoofed-on-her-road-to-the-shops type of revving. This was the full-throated manic scream that only Sylvester Stallone achieves as he sets off on a five-hundred-mile-an-hour chase through the mean, dirty streets of LA. Totally out of place in middle-class suburban Belfast.

I looked round and saw a white car picking up speed towards me, two wheels on the pavement, tearing lumps out of the hedge and spewing a wake of leaves. I decided that shitting myself could wait and legged it along the tarmac for next-door's driveway.

I just reached it and lurched through the mercifully open gates. I'd have been complete strawberry jam if they'd been closed. The car caught up with me, the wing mirror hitting me a serious-enough skelp on the arse to set me whirling like a badly spun top. As I ran towards the comparative sanctuary of the back of the house, there was the screech of tyres as they stopped, and the whine of the car being reversed way above the manufacturer's recommended speed. I had just got myself halfway round the corner when there was the unmistakable, hateful rip of an automatic weapon.

Something tugged at the tail of my new coat and there were splinters flying wildly off the pebbledash. Wood-chips exploded off the garage door beside me. On up the garden, half the panes in a small greenhouse disintegrated in a jangling, clashing shower. There was another burst, more revving and tortured tyres, then all was silence. I was huddling in the back yard when a woman screamed in the distance and she just kept on screaming. Screaming my name. "Oh Jesus! No! Please no! Not Michelle! Oh not Jackie!" I panicked. "Oh Please."

I looked round in panic and then crashed through the hedge of prissy little Castlwellan Golds between this garden and my brother's.

Careering round the side of the house, I bounced off the wall, never noticing the pain in my leg or my hands. Through the front door, I saw that Jackie had hauled Michelle back inside the house, slammed the door and now was lying protectively on top of her. I hammered on the frame, just as the first sirens sounded in the distance. Jackie got up and threw it open

and grabbed me. Michelle scrambled to her feet and we stood and hugged and shook together like a shrubbery in a Force 9 gale.

I had my hands on Michelle's cheeks when my leg gave way, sprawling me in a heap on the parquet. As I tried to get up I could see blood on her face and it wasn't hers. All of a sudden my hands went on fire, and when I looked at the bloody flesh, I realised I'd left about a square foot of skin on the rough, pebbledashed walls. And the whole of my right buttock and thigh felt like one of Grogan's goons had done a real job on it.

Suddenly there were peelers everywhere and Jackie and Michelle were disjointedly telling what happened and an ambulance was being radio'd for. One of the peelers helped Michelle wipe the worst of the pebbles out of my lower epidermis. At least the fingertips and pads of both hands were undamaged.

Fair do's to the forces of law and order, they were there like lightning – albeit they only had to cover three hundred yards from headquarters at Knock. There were no spirits in the house and I declined the paint-stripper Cyprus sherry. The next best remedy was a really strong, sweet cuppa that I balanced between my finger tips to avoid further aggravation of my lacerated palms.

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The ambulance arrived a few minutes later, having had to come a little further from Dundonald hospital. By this time I'd told the cops everything I knew, which was the square root of fuck-all. The car was white. No, I didn't get the registration number. No, I didn't see any faces. No, I had no idea who was driving – a pointy-eared Klingon out of Star Trek for all I knew. No, I didn't know what make... and so on and so forth.

They didn't ask me if I had any idea who it was. They were taking it for granted it was prods, that it was Jackie they were after and that they'd made a complete balls-up, in time-honoured fashion, and tried it with the wrong guy. I didn't want to go to hospital. But anyway, I was carried off by the ambulance, under protest, escorted by two peelers.

The nurses got my jeans and knickers down in Casualty. I could see over my shoulder that one God-almighty bruise was creeping remorselessly from the top of my arse down towards the inside of my right cheek and on round in the direction of my scrotum. In the centre, right on the point of the buttock, was a leaking, but fortunately shallow gash. Then they took me to X-ray.

As we waited for the plates to come back, a nice young blond intern overrode my whimpers about not liking needles and gave me a painkiller jab. She bandaged my hands in swathes of crepe after a liberal application of antiseptic. It stung worse than our old headmaster ever managed with his strap when we couldn't remember what five times seventeen was, or how to spell 'artichoke'.

Without actually telling me to be a brave boy, but threatening to by her posture, she once again punctured my uninjured left buttock, this time with an anti-tetanus jab. Repairs were completed by a large plaster stuck over the damaged areas and she stepped back to admire her wrapping and wallpapering.

The plates came back showing no bones broken, so she agreed I could go and gave me a line for the police doctor. As the peelers helped me up and I got my dignity buckled and

zipped again, the wee lassie shocked the hell out of all three of us by announcing as she trotted out the door “You’re dead lucky, you know. Never seen anyone try out a wing mirror butt-plug before. Could set a whole new style in fetishism.”

Dead lucky? I was dead lucky the peelers managed not to drop me, the unsympathetic buggers were laughing that hard.

* * * * *

Chapter 6

13th November, Afternoon and Evening

Still chortling, the two cops got me back to Jackie and Michelle who got me into a vaguely comfortable position on the sofa. While I'd been away, Jackie'd been on the phone. As a result, there slouched in an armchair and slurping a cup of my S.D. Bell's, was the thin, thirtysomething with fried-egg eyes and sparse, dirty-yellow hair that was Detective Inspector George Devenney, RUC Special Branch. He'd obviously been in the middle of something that had thankfully brought a bit of a smile back to their faces.

When I'd been tea'd up and pampered a bit, he said, "Seanie, you're going to enjoy at least a bit of this."

"Tell me how I can get my hands round Rab Smith's neck without dying and you'll make me really happy."

He chuckled. "Why Rab?" he asked.

For a moment I panicked, remembering the last evening and Grogan. Then I flashed on the scene at the High Court.

"Because of yesterday, of course," I replied.

His normally lugubrious features split wide open to reveal good teeth.

"Listen," he said, "the boul' Rab has a totally watertight alibi. Since right around lunchtime yesterday he's been safely under observation in the secure wing of Musgrave Park hospital."

"What happened? Did he accidentally boot himself down a flight of stairs in custody did he? Hit somebody's truncheon a severe blow with his head?"

"Even better. You'll love this." Devenney started to laugh and ended up in a choking, coughing fit.

"When they get Rab and the others round to the station, even though they're all cuffed behind, he starts trying to head-butt one of the constables. Some of his mates join in, so the dog-handlers help to break it up. They said it was like something out of Monty Python, them hopping around like that. Anyway, in the middle of it – and its true, I swear to God – Rab falls over and while he's on the deck, he bites a police dog in the leg. The dog doesn't take too kindly to that, and bites him back in the same part of the anatomy you got hurt in."

He was beginning to laugh again. "The dog won't obey his handler and let go, so they have to use a truncheon to prise his jaws open. Rab's rolling around screaming that the dog's mad. The handler says of course the dog isn't mad he's just bloody furious and he's taking him straight round to the vet to get him the jabs in case he catches rabies."

I don't know what sort of painkiller blondie at the hospital had given me, but the effect was kicking in for real and it was magic. I cracked up, and for the next few minutes could only gurgle and splutter and giggle over and over "The dog's furious! he's going to catch rabies from Rab!"

When I finally subsided, Devenney was more serious.

"The Super says you're all to have 24/7 protection until we can get a handle on this. You too, Sean."

I looked blank.

“You can’t go back to your flat in that state,” he told me. “The kids are going to your Michelle’s aunt in Bangor for a while. They’ve been picked up from school already and the Bangor boys will take good care of them. You’re staying put here. There’s a police doctor sending you something round tonight and he’ll call in the morning to check you over.”

I started to protest, feebly, but both Michelle and Jackie told me to shut up, firmly. What the hell, I thought and started to relax. Then I remembered I was supposed to be doing a gig and made the big mistake of turning round and trying to sit upright.

I didn’t actually leave teeth marks in the anaglypta’d ceiling, but it was a near thing. I groaned out the problem. Michelle took my gig diary to call Zed the bass player and tell him I’d been in a car accident and wasn’t fit to play for a couple of days. I told her to give him the numbers out of my address list of a couple of other guitar players who knew our stuff and could dep for me until my hands mended a bit. She went off to the phone in the hall.

Devenney’s radio went and he walked over to the window to answer it. He was back to looking lugubrious.

“They’ve found a car burning in Clarawood,” he told us. Clarawood is a prod estate not half-a-mile away.

“It could have been some of the locals, but it could be that they were from further away and just had wheels waiting there. Anyway, forensic are going to get bugger all, and we’ve no chance of witnesses.”

Michelle came back and instead of speaking directly to me, went to Devenney and said something in low tones. He, in turn, got up and went out into the hall. I looked questioningly at Michelle. She came over, knelt down and stroked my cheek with her hand.

“Your friend Zed said he called round to your flat this morning on his way into work. He found the landlord putting plywood on your door where it had been broken in. When he went inside, the place was wrecked and,” she paused, obviously trying to get the worst over in the gentlest possible way and failing, “he found all your equipment smashed and your guitar snapped in two.”

I was just stunned. I’d had that guitar for over fifteen years and it was like my child, my lover, my true friend. It could make me so happy to slide my hand up and down the silky, sensuous rosewood of the frets and caress the scratch plate with my pinkie as I picked. Oh not Les! Not my Les Paul! Jesus, I’d rather have lost a wife than the Les Paul.

In fact, I already had when Elaine told me that if I didn’t pack in playing and get a proper job, she’d leave me. Which she straight away did when I told her to get stuffed and went back to work on a particularly knotty Stevie Ray Vaughan lick. I never heard her bang the front door shut on her way out. It wasn’t until I found her things gone, right down to the lacy suspender belt that really turned me on, that I realised I’d been and gone and done it again.

Jackie tried to say something about insurance, but I waved him away. You don’t pick up a guitar like that off the peg. Just like the patina on old furniture has to build up over the years, so the feel and weight and the balance and the relationship and trust (no, it’s not a just dumb lump of wood and wire and plastic!) have to build up. Every time you adjust the bridge just-so, every time you fit a new set of strings, every time you clean and polish it, every time you... Oh Jesus Christ on a fucking bicycle. I wanted to cry but I couldn’t. I was really numb.

And it wasn't insured. None of it was, and I still owed a couple of hundred quid on my effects pedal-board.

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Devenney came back to say he'd phoned the local cops who'd already followed up a 999 call from a neighbour about breaking noises. By the time they got there, the damage had been done and the buggers were away. As usual, nobody saw a thing, and it was being treated as a routine burglary and was I insured? I just shrugged and studied the pattern on the carpet like I'd never seen it before. He stayed a while longer to check that the protection was in place.

We sat and looked at each other for a while and then Michelle went to phone the kids. Jackie went to talk to them and came back to help me to the phone. Josie and Artie took it in turns to burble away happily, as unconcerned about happenings as only wee'uns can be. They each told me about the police car and the nice lady policeman and the one who looked like Mr. Bean and that they loved me and blew kisses down the phone. I hobbled back into the living room, leaning on Jackie, as Michelle issued all the usual instructions about being good and teeth cleaning.

When she came back, she sat down beside me and broke the next bit of news.

"I didn't want to say anything while that policeman was here. You know, in case it had anything to do with last night. What we talked about. But your friend told me to tell you that your gig was cancelled anyway. He got a call from *The Venue* to say that they'd been told if you were seen there ever again, a lot of people were going to get hurt. He said to tell you he's sorry and that he's collected all the bits and pieces and is going to keep them for you. You're to call him back when you can."

This was the last fucking frozen straw. Not only had I got Rab Smith's crew wanting to kill my brother, but also Grogan had set me up without giving me a chance. I was trying to put this into words when the phone rang. Michelle answered it and called, "It's for you, Sean." I heard her ask the other person to wait a minute as Jackie helped me down the hall. It was Grogan.

"How are you Seanie?" he began. I was too high on painkiller and too mad to hear the concern in his voice.

"You motherfucking lump of shite!" I screamed at him. "You just couldn't wait, could you. Fuck you Grogan. Fuck you straight down to hell!" I slammed the phone down. Before Jackie had got me to the living room, it rang again. Michelle answered and nodded and yes'd and yes'd and no-not-really'd and I-suppose-so'd. She put her hand over the mouthpiece and called me back. But before she handed me the receiver, she said, "It's that man Grogan again. I think you should listen to him."

Absolutely anyone else – except Jackie – I'd have told to go fuck a roll of barbed wire. So I stood there, trembling with anger.

"Yes?" I snapped.

"Listen Seanie. It was nothing to do with us. Believe me."

"Oh yeah?" Sneering isn't really my forte, but I really got all of my pent-up contempt for every self-righteous paramilitary that ever was into those two words.

“Paul – ye remember Paul from last night – and a couple of the boys had a chat a wee while ago with Ernie Johnston, one of Rab’s crew.”

“Oh aye. Right. Where’s the poor bastard now? Leaking brains behind the bins in some alley?”

“Nah, nothing like that. He’s home with his missus and wee’uns with only a shiner and couple of loose teeth. The point is that what happened today...”

“How do you know what happened today?” I broke in.

“For fuck sake Sean, we monitor the police frequencies like everyone else. Now shut it and just listen.” So I shut it and just listened.

“According to our Ernie, Gordon wasn’t terrible unhappy about Smicker. And when he heard about Rab and the police dog he was fit to laugh his tits off. Just like me when Paul told me. The point is, it was a couple of loose screws from Rab’s crew who thought it up, and Gordon’s mad with them for stirring things.”

“So who put the frighteners on *The Venue* then? Who smashed my place up, eh?”

“Same wooden-tops. But I’ll sort *The Venue* and so will Gordon when he knows the score. Anyway, Gordon’s already put the word out to lay off you and Jackie, and the woodentops are in for a right good digging.”

He paused and then asked, “Did they do much damage? didn’t think there’d be much to wreck in that shit-heap you live in.”

“They smashed my guitar.” I could hardly get the words out. There was silence at the other end, and then I heard Grogan hiss “Bastards.”

“I’m real sorry. Ye got good sounds on that,” he went on. “There’ll be some way we can make it up to you.”

I was about to tell him there wasn’t, when he continued.

“They tell me Rab’s going to be in hospital for a week or so while they sew his arse back together, so now’s as good a time as any.”

“Grogan. It’s not just Rab’s arse that’s in a sling, literally.” I told him about my traumas and aches. At least he had the good grace not to laugh. Not so’s I could hear.

“Aye but ye can walk, can’t ye? Ye can lift the phone?”

“Yes, but...”

“No buts Seanie. Things is moving and I need to get sorted with Gordon and sorted fast. Ye’ve got to Monday to heal. Then get on with it. I mean it.”

The line went dead.

I stood there, looking stupidly at the silent receiver. There was a knock on the front door and one of the police guards came in with a plastic chemist’s bottle with pills to help me sleep. The police doctor would see me tomorrow, he said. I thanked him numbly and hobbled back to the living room where I lay down gingerly and opened the bottle. There were a whole two tablets. Not even enough for a mouse to OD on.

I told them what Grogan had said. There wasn’t much to discuss after that, and we watched the local teatime news which deadpan reported an assassination attempt in East Belfast. Without mentioning Jackie’s name or mine, they showed the usual footage of peelers and Brits and landrovers and anonymous garden gates. There was no mention at all of the callous and brutal murder of an innocent bystander called Les Paul.

I took the tablets with a final cup of tea. With just a little help, I climbed the Everest that the dozen or so stairs to the bedroom had become, and let Jackie put me to bed.

* * * * *

Chapter 7

14th November, Morning and Afternoon

From time to time, you could get little red capsules of secobarb in the clubs. A couple of those and a few pints made for a good stone, but you were woolly the next day. I've never been especially partial to downers, but when the pain in my bum brought me back to the land of the sort-of-living, the fuzziness reminded me of the good old mornings after the long nights before. Except there wasn't hide-nor-hair of a naked woman in the bed. Ach well!

The tap at the door announced not breakfast but a doctor of the police variety. For a man with hands like shovels, his thorough examination was remarkably gentle. He gave me a couple of painkillers 'just in case', wrote a prescription for some more sleepers and gave me a note for my own GP, telling me to see him on Monday. "You'll live," he said on his way out. I drifted back to sleep for a while.

When I finally made the effort to get up, my hip joint had stiffened up and I felt like calling for a Zimmer. But I made it to the bathroom on my own. You never really think of how routine it is just to sit down on the bog, crap, get up again and go on your way – until, that is, something goes wrong with your legs. And when you have to balance on one cheek and both hands are bandaged and... I'll spare you the details. I managed, eventually.

I made it downstairs to discover it was mid-day. Michelle came and fussed over me and offered me breakfast. Another reason why I don't like downers is that they mess up my digestion and put me off my food. So I settled for a cuppa. Jackie was on the phone as I hobbled into the living room and he waved at me half over his shoulder. I still really couldn't sit normally, so I sprawled on the sofa. My hands were beginning to ache. Jackie came back in and sat down.

"I've got Mrs. Smith's address and number for you," he announced.

"How'd you manage that?" I asked. I'd expected to have to comb the phone book for the right John Smith.

"I phoned Devenney and asked how the investigation was going. Of course, nothing doing. Then I threw in a bit about did Smicker's mother still live in Conway Street. Oh no, says Devenney, the whole family's in Moscow Street now. And there's only one Smith in Moscow Street."

"Jesus Jackie! I hope you didn't call!"

"Away on. I'm not that daft. Anyway, my accent's too posh." Ever since we got back from Oz, Ma and Da had tried to get us to speak proper, like. They'd given Jackie a good start before Da died and Ma carried on with us over the years. He sounds refined. Me? Well, what do you think?

I hummed and hawed for a while, thought of reasons not to and couldn't find any. Michelle put a chair for me in the hall, and I perched on my uninjured buttock and dialled. After a few rings, a woman answered.

"Is that Mrs. Smith?" hoping it was the wrong number.

"Yes. Who's that?" Not a wrong number. I recognised her voice.

"It's me, Mrs. Smith. Seanie. Seanie McDevitt."

“Oh,” she sounded a mite reserved. “Hello there. What can I do for you?”

“How’s Rab doing?” I enquired with what I hoped was the right amount of sympathy in my voice.

“Ach well, he’s feeling a touch sorry for himself. But like I said to him, it’s his own fault for always getting into rows.”

“I can see that,” I said, thinking of Rab’s addiction to mayhem.

“It’s a wee bit delicate Mrs. Smith. Is there any chance I could come over and have a chat sometime? Like this afternoon?”

There was a pause at the other end, so long in fact that I thought we’d been cut off. Then she said

“I don’t think that would be too clever, Sean love. Feelings is a bit high round here at the moment. You and the brother aren’t flavour of the month, like.”

“So would you ever be doing a bit of shopping in town?” I asked. “We could meet for a cup of coffee and a sticky bun.”

“Well, I’ve got to go down to Marks and Spencers in Royal Avenue. In fact I was just away out the door when ye called.”

“There’s a place in Fountain Lane. The ‘Stepaside’. Do you know it?”

She told me she did and we arranged to meet at 4.00 o’clock. A good reason for choosing this place was that it’s just around the corner from Queen Street police station! Jackie dropped me off in the city centre about three-thirty.

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Walking was as awkward as in the morning, and it took me ten painful minutes to cover the distance an unfit granny could have covered in two. The ‘Stepaside’ is one of those trendy coffee shops where they at least have the good grace to serve quality espresso in quantities more than a skim in the bottom of a thimble. As luck would have it, there was a table near the window with a good view up and down Fountain Lane. I would have warning of approaching trouble. What the fuck I could do if it materialised was quite another question.

I was just starting my second cup and my third fag when I saw Mrs. Smith. She’s a quite well preserved mid-60s, with a nose that verges on the hatchety and big green eyes. Although she now wears her greying hair scragged back in a bun, she must have been a fair looker in her day. She saw me and came over. To my surprise, before she sat down, she looked at my bandaged hands and then gave me a peck on the cheek.

“How are you Seanie?” she asked.

“Ach! I’m not as young as in the old days. But I can’t complain.”

“Don’t mess around.” She didn’t quite snap, but she showed a bit of the sharp tongue that she’d sometimes laid on her sons.

“I only just heard about yesterday. I’m powerful sorry. Are ye OK?”

“Just a bit sore, honest. It’ll be gone after I get a few pints down my neck.”

She looked at me sort of sideways. I called the waitress over and she ordered a pot of tea and a currant bap. We sat and drank in a companionable way.

“Bit like old times, isn’t it?” I decided to break the silence.

She said nothing at first. Putting down her cup and using her hankie to dab some non-existent crumbs from the corner of her mouth, she gave me an almost guilty look.

“It’s about Rab and John, isn’t it?” She was probably the only person in Belfast who didn’t call her son ‘Smicker’.

“Aye. And it’s a wee bit complicated. It’s mainly to do with Rab.”

“How did ye find out?” She was twisting and untwisting the hankie in her hands.

“The peelers told me...”

She almost jumped out of her seat. I’d never seen anyone go white before like they tell it in books.

I reached across, intending to take her hands in a comforting gesture which, of course, I couldn’t do with the bandages. I just laid what must have felt like a paw over one of them.

“Today, love. They told me about Rab being in hospital today.” I was puzzled and let a frown run across my face.

“No.” She cradled my swaddled fingers between her hands with real gentleness. “I don’t mean that. The other. You know. You do know, don’t you?”

“If you mean about me and Rab and Smicker being cousins, aye. But only sort of, if you know what I mean. I haven’t a clue about the details.”

She looked almost past me and I could see tears misting her eyes. She said nothing for a while and then squeezed my hand gently, not causing any discomfort, as if she knew my limits. She took her hands back and set them on the table in front of her.

“It was really funny, you know, the first time John brought you home. ‘Here’s Sean McDevitt, Mum.’ he says. ‘Great guitar player and I’m going to play in his band.’ Do you mind the time?”

“I do indeed.”

“Rab was in the kitchen and heard the name ‘Sean’...”

“Aye. Is that why he came running out and dragged Smicker off? And then he came back in and started being really polite to me. I never did work that one out.” I began to chuckle. Mrs. Smith joined in.

“Took him out in the kitchen and gave him what-for for bringing a fenian into the house. John said ‘No. He’s a prod.’ Rab says, ‘He’s a fenian.’ And John had to threaten to do him if he didn’t shut up.”

“Smicker threatened to do Rab?” Now this was something new.

Her face went wistful again. “I know what they say about John and what he’s supposed to have done. And I know my Rab loses the bap terrible easy. But, you see, there’s something not quite right about John.” (I thought, “Tortures and mutilates and kills people and he’s ‘not quite right?’”)

She ploughed on. “Rab was always terrified of John, right from the time when John was about ten. I never knew why. Like if there was any chance of a scrap, Rab always backed down. Rab never thinks about the trouble he’s causing. But John does. He has it all worked out. And you know the worst of it is that I really don’t think he thinks about it after. Like it never happened.” She paused and returned to the hankie mangling.

“Anyway, d’ye mind me saying that you and Rab looked alike?”

“Yes indeed. And I suppose that nearly gave Rab the staggers?” She smiled again, just a little.

“He always knew he was adopted, but he knew nothing about his real parents. He told me later that even the thought of having a fenian in the family made him feel sick. And he

was still convinced you were a fenian. And I said he looked like you. It was the only time I ever thought he'd hit me, afterwards like, after you'd gone. John had to calm him down and explain how he knew you and how he'd got the audition and how he knew you were a prod."

I remembered the audition well. We'd had a bass player who got a better offer, fucked off with no notice and left us in the shit. Me and Alex the keyboard player and the drummer, another nutcase whose name I can't remember, spent hours on the phone. A guy in one of the music shops told us about this wee lad who was supposed to be good. So Alex went up to the house and told him to come down to the gig with a couple of numbers prepared.

If I'm not wrong, we gave him Jethro Tull's 'Bourré' (Alex was a good man with the flute) and Whitesnake's version of the old Jimmy Withers 'Ain't No Love in the Heart of the City'. Whatever they were, he breezed them and when we went into a 12-bar jam and suddenly stopped to let him solo, he blew us away. We all had a few jars after, and I could recall the way he had asked simple questions about where we lived and worked and the like. The sort of questions that when you think about them, are Norn Iron code for 'What are ye – fenian or prod?' (Or, if you're Jewish, then 'Are ye a prod Jew or a fenian Jew?')

"Anyway, that night, after John went to bed, Rab sat and talked to me about things. Me and Jimmy told him he was adopted from as soon as he could understand and he always said it made him feel a bit special. Like two lots of people wanted him. Later on, I sat there thinking about how funny it was that your name was McDevitt like hers and you looked like Rab. So I went and talked to her oul' uncle. Arthur McDevitt, that was. Wouldn't say much like, but what he told me was enough. I just couldn't believe the coincidence."

"Just a minute love." I interrupted. "He was my grandfather. Did that oul' bastard tell you who Rab's father was?"

"Ach sure I knew that already. It was my Jimmy." She said it so calmly that I thought I'd misheard. Like Frankie Howerd might have put it, my gob was truly smacked!

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The hankie was by now looking like the nerve-ends in my hands. On the one hand, I didn't like seeing this nice wee body doing her head in. On the other, I couldn't stop her because I had to know. Jesus God! I just had to. She went on in a low, sad voice.

"You see Sean, me and Jimmy tried and tried for childer. Ye know his reputation – he was a real hard man. A man's man. Soft as a kitten with me like, but God help the fella that looked cross-eyed at him. Or me, for that matter. After a couple of years and me not with a bun in the oven, he started to get moody, but I didn't ask. He was working the building sites then.

Anyway, he gets this job with a builder putting up barns for a farmer out at Aghalee. The guy calls at six o'clock in the morning to pick Jimmy up. I'm off to the Ropeworks at the Hollywood Arches at seven. Sometimes he didn't get back until nine or ten at night. Sometimes he didn't come back for two days at a time. Said they were working all hours God sent. But the money was good, so I said nothing. It only lasted a couple of months anyway."

She stopped and put her hand to her mouth. A couple of traitor tears leaked from her eyes. I reached out to stop her. She put her hand down to mine, and dabbed her eyes with the other.

"No," she said. Simply. Just like that. "Ye've got to hear the rest."

“It was late one Saturday night about six months later. He’d gone down the Berlin Arms for a few jars. See the mates. Just the usual. Normally, he’d never be later than about eleven and I was sitting with his supper ready. It was nearer one in the morning and I was feared something had happened to him. The next thing I hear is roaring and shouting outside. So I goes to the door and it’s my Jimmy, totally plastered. No shirt on him. Blood all over. And he’s shouting at God and the devil and the Pope and anyone who’ll listen that he’ll smash their bakes in, calling the neighbours out to face him and he’ll fucking kill them and their families and burn their houses down and...”

She paused.

“Jesus it was fearful. I’d never ever seen him mad drunk like that. Even on a quiet night he could put away a bottle of Black Bush and be sober as a judge and quiet as a wee mouse. I rushed out, and I swear to God he dropped on his knees in front of me and grabbed me. And he howled. It was like a dog that needed shooting. He just howled and howled. Honest, I’d never heard nothing like it in my life. And there was me down on my knees with him, holding him. Rocking him like a wee’un. The tears was tripping him.”

I felt a pain in my hands. I realised I was gripping them tight together as she told her story.

“Anyway, I got him inside, away from those nosy neighbours. Half the street was up watching and sniggering. I washed the blood off and I could see he’d taken a few digs, nothing serious like. Most of it was someone else’s. But all the time he was crying and saying things that I couldn’t make out. And the worst was when he stopped crying and started whimpering like a beaten puppy, shaking and shivering and curled up in ball in my lap. Christ, I was demented. Finally, he goes to sleep, just curled up on the settee. So I got a blanket and put it over him. The whole night he was crying in his sleep never woke up, mind – whimpering and crying. I just sat there with him.”

I could see the pain in her eyes as she looked past me to the past. I didn’t need to remind her that twenty odd years ago, this wee beaten puppy blew a lot of big holes in three people simply because they were Catholics.

She went on to tell how the next morning, before Jimmy was awake, a peeler came to the door – one Basher Barton from Brown Square RUC station and apparently a right hard case too. From Strabane originally. He and Jimmy were sort of mates, both in the same Orange lodge. And if Basher saw Jimmy with a few jars in him, he’d threaten to arrest him and Jimmy’d tell him where to go and they’d take a couple of swings at each other and laugh and go on their way. But Basher was looking really serious.

“Is Jimmy there, love,” he asked.

“He’s asleep.”

“Look love, I really need to talk with him. Jimmy went right over the top last night. There’s three boys in hospital and one of them mightn’t pull through.”

“God,” she said. “I near fainted.”

“Is there anywhere he can go until we get this sorted out a bit?” It was a serious question.

“I didn’t really know what to say,” Jean Smith told me. She was shocked when Barton said

“Look I don’t want to see Jimmy inside for manslaughter, ’cos that’s what it’ll be. He might even be better taking himself off down the Free State for a couple of months.”

She sort of chuckled. “I remember I started to laugh. Jimmy in the Free State? Among all them fenians? he’d rather hang himself. I told Basher that.”

“Look love,” sez Basher “Ye want to see the Berlin Arms. It’s like Bomber Harris was there last night. Your Jimmy did that. They won’t be open properly for two days at the very least. Did he say nothing to ye?”

There was a sort of pause as she gathered herself together for the next stage.

“I didn’t hear him get up, but then Jimmy was there with his arm round me and bringing Basher into the parlour and telling me to wet the tea. I don’t know what they said, exactly, but Basher was looking real unhappy and saying that Jimmy was just thran. Jimmy was being real quiet and saying he knew but there was nothing to do. So Basher just left and Jimmy drank his tea and said nothing. I didn’t ask, like.”

The waitress came over and lifted the cups. I ordered another round.

“Then he gets up and starts pacing up and down. Up and down, up and down, like he was walking on the twelfth. I sez what’s wrong love and he just keeps on going. Then he stops. Stands like one of them shop window dummies and I can see the tears running down his face. Big fat tears they were, like summer rain. He tells me these fellas comes into the Berlin and sez ‘Where’s Jimmy Smith?’ Country they were. So Jimmy sez it’s him and one comes over and tells him he’s going to kill him.

Jimmy just laughs like, ‘cos he’s heard it all before and sez ‘Why? D’ye want to die young? What’s the name so’s I can piss it on your gravestone?’ And he tells him it’s McDevitt and... and he started crying again and he couldn’t stop, like his heart was breaking. I remember well that he came and laid his head on my shoulder and cried his heart out.”

The waitress came back and Mrs. Smith took the time to dab her eyes again and pour herself a cuppa, putting the milk in first like they do here and then the tea and then the sugar. I lit another fag, shoving it against the bandages between my fingers.

She went on with the story.

“So when he stops, he tells me – in bits and pieces like – that this farmer they were working for had a daughter and she’d bring them tea out to the site, and they sort of... Well! I went buck bloody mad and ate the face off him. I just started smacking him anywhere I could get at him. He never put a hand up to stop me. I started screaming at him and hitting him harder and harder and screaming and hitting and... In the end, he grabbed my wrists. I was still screaming at him – ye cunt ye, ye sleekit fucking cunt and the like. He had both my wrists in one hand and he slapped me one with the other. Just a wee tap on the cheek like. Didn’t use his fist, just his open hand. I swear to you Seanie, it was the first time he ever raised his hand to me and it was the last. Then he tells me that this girl, Cissie McDevitt, is up the spout and its his and the fellas in the Berlin were her da and brothers.

I couldn’t take it in. Ye see I wasn’t all that keen on – well ye know what – but I wanted childer. And I hadn’t any. Here was Jimmy telling me he’d got some other woman pregnant. I was demented. I just looked at him and ran out of the house to my Ma’s and bawled my head off.

Ma and Da just thought it was the usual sort of husband/wife thing, although me and Jimmy never rowed normally the odd spat but nothing real. I didn’t tell them anything

anyway. So after a couple of hours, Jimmy comes down and sez –real gentle like – ‘Come on on home, love. I need to talk to you.’ I wasn’t too sure but my Ma just pushed me out the door and told me to do what my man said. So I went. Jimmy made us tea and we sat there. He said he knew it was wrong and he was wrong and he was sorry. ‘Don’t leave me Jean,’ he sez ‘I love you. I truly do.’ It was the way he said it. I could have forgave him anything. So I stayed.

We had a few bob put by, so Jimmy went to see Tommy, the guy who owned the Berlin, and gave him what we had to help pay for the damage. And he got a few mates and they helped put as much of the pieces back together as they could. The boy in the hospital pulled through and when it came to court, Jimmy said it was self-defence.

Anyway, the JP was on the square and Orange and the word was in. So he got a fine and bound over. That was all cleared up. Then a few days later he tells me that Cissie McDevitt’s in Belfast and he wants to bring her to the house.

I sez ‘You’re a quare geg! Are ye daft or something?’

He sez ‘No love, she needs help.’

‘What with?’, sez I.’ Getting her drawers down again?’ I wasn’t best pleased I can tell you.

‘No love,’ sez Jimmy. ‘The family threw her out and she’s no money and...’ Anyway we went back and forwards until I agreed. So he went and got her. She paused again to blow her nose.

I leaned forward. “What was Cissie like? You probably don’t know, but I never knew any of her side at all.” And I told her the story about my names. She gave a little laugh.

“Aye that sounds like her lot. Anyway, she was a quiet mouse, like a wee delf doll. Only eighteen. Not bad looking and I could see why Jimmy had fancied her. Nice sweet face. I had a hard time talking to her at first and she stayed in our back bedroom most of the day when Jimmy was out. Then one day I come back from doing a wee bit of shopping and she has the ironing board out and all the washing ironed and as neat as I ever saw. That sort of broke the ice.

Her Ma was dead and the rest of her folks were even worse than Paisley’s lot. Ye know, everything’s sin and punishment and everything’s in the Bible. She’s eighteen, she’s no real friends outside bible class, never been out with a fella let alone kissed one, never smoked, never drank. Just doin’ and cooking for her Da and brothers.

My Jimmy was a great talker and made her laugh. She said no one laughed much in their house, so Jimmy was a real breath of fresh air. She was so innocent she didn’t even know she was pregnant. Went to the doctor thinking she’d caught some bug or other when she kept on being sick in the mornings.

When the family finally caught on, her Da took his belt to her. She showed me her arse and the scars and ye’d have wondered how anyone could do that to a defenceless wee slip like her. He tied her to the bed and just beat her and beat her till she fainted. Then him and the brothers went looking for my Jimmy.

She said she when she woke up, it took her a couple of hours to get free. She couldn’t sit down and she just walked round the house. Her da and one of the brothers came back in the afternoon looking battered. Cissie told me that what was worse than the pain was they

way they looked at her and never said a word. She said that for a week or so they just looked at her, never said a word.

Then her Da drove her into the centre of Belfast, gave her two pound notes and told her that all a whore like her was good for was walking the streets. So she went looking for the builder Jimmy had worked for and he found Jimmy for her. He was a good soul, never told no one.

I really got to like her. It was like we was sisters. Jimmy told everyone she was his second cousin and her man had been killed in an accident. Some might have guessed but no one was going to say anything to Jimmy's face. But she was a wee slip and the doctor said she might have trouble. God love her, she had more than that."

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Jean Smith rummaged in her handbag for another hankie and had a really good cry. The waitress came over to clear things but I waved her away. After a minute or so, she calmed down and dried her eyes.

"She was took in one afternoon." Her face was misty. "A Wednesday it was. Me and Jimmy got her to the Royal. Jimmy said she was his wife and I was the sister-in-law. We didn't think it out really. She was in labour for hours and hours and we was sitting and waiting and waiting. Waited all night. The next morning, this doctor comes up and says to Jimmy 'Sorry, Mr. Smith. Your wife's dead.' Just like that.

We buried her up in the City Cemetery and up to Jimmy got put away, we went every Sunday to put flowers on. I don't suppose I'd be able to find the grave now. I haven't been able to go since the troubles started. And Rab and John couldn't go. We told her family, but none of them ever bothered to turn up."

"Would you know the plot number?" I asked her.

You see, for the twenty years or so after the troubles started, prods by and large didn't venture up to the City Cemetery because it lies right at the top of the Catholic Falls Road. Rab and Smicker might as well have signed their own death warrants as try. But maybe I could at least go up and do a bit of tidying up if the vandals hadn't wrecked the headstone. She said she'd see if she could find the papers. She looked at her watch.

"I need to finish up and get away on home. My lift's meeting me here in a minute. Anyway, we had a row with the doctor over the birth certificate because, of course, there was no way we could lie round that one. They kept Rab in the baby ward and we had to go home without him. Jimmy went to see Basher for advice and Basher got this solicitor he knew and the solicitor organised for us to adopt him formally.

So you see, when Rab was cut up about John playing with a fenian and me saying that you looked like him, I told him the lot. Made him swear that he'd never say a word to you about it."

"He never did. True as God, he never did."

"I don't know if he ever told John. But I told Jimmy about it when I went out to the Kesh and he said to let it lie."

I suppose this explained why, after the nut-case drummer left and Smicker said Rab was interested in joining and we took him on, he sort of looked after me. I'd sometimes

wondered why he was so keen to get into a row on my behalf and just put it down to a love of a good fight. “Maybe he isn’t as mad as all that,” I thought. “Bollocks! Of course he is,” came the reply.

“After that,” she said, “we had wee Rab and things settled down between us. And while I never really took to the sex thing, Jimmy was so good and gentle. Never looked at another woman again. And then all of a sudden, there was me pregnant, after nearly ten years of trying. And that was our John.”

Mrs. Smith looked over my shoulder and said, “That’s my lift now.” and started to get to her feet.

Ma always taught me that when a lady gets up to go, the man should stand also. It’s one of the habits she drummed into me that has stuck (like always letting a lady go through a door first – that way the bucket of shit drops on her and not on you)!

As I groaned to my feet, a stocky, muscled guy about five foot eight, crew-cutted to the point of nearly being skinhead, came over.

He had the blackest eyes I’ve ever seen on a man or a woman. She smiled at him and turned to me.

“This is Rab’s mate Gordon Sweeney,” she said.

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Chapter 8

14th November, Afternoon and Evening

My leg gave way under me and I crashed back in the chair. Sweeney held his hand out. I sort of scraped it with my bandages.

“You’re Sean McDevitt, aren’t ye?”

“Yeah.” It was the only thing I could think to say.

“Aye. I remember you from the Liverpool Club. Need a lift? I can drop you off after I’ve taken Jean here home.” I started to protest, no it’s OK, I’m meeting friends at five. He looked at his watch and said it was nearly half-past and come on away on. It’s no problem he said.

He came round to help me out of my chair. As he got behind me he murmured quietly “Don’t mess me around, McDevitt. Do as yer told.”

So I paid for the coffees and the tea and the currant bap and went with him and Jean Smith out into the murk of early evening Queen Street. A silver Vauxhall Astra was waiting with a Paul-the-Heavy clone at the wheel. They put me in the front in deference to my leg and while we drove up to the Shankill, Jean and Sweeney chatted away and she asked me what I was doing now and all the rest.

We dropped her off with my promise that I’d keep in touch. The car ripped off up the Shankill and then swung into Ballygomartin. The clone didn’t bother with subtleties like traffic lights and just sped down the road until he reached the clutter of terraces and semis and high rises that is the prod Cairnmartin estate. But then he took a turn up a sort of lane that wound through trees to a battered and seemingly derelict old pile of the ‘Victorian gentleman’s country residence’ type. The car pulled up in what might have been a stable yard where another car stood. The two of them got out and helped me over to a tatty-looking door that had probably been the tradesman’s entrance.

Clone pushed it open and Sweeney nudged me gently through it. We went at my pace up rickety stairs until we reached a door with a crack of light coming through it. Again, the clone opened up and I followed with Sweeney behind.

Oh Fuck!

It was a big, old room with a high ceiling that some of the plaster had come away from, leaving the old lath supports showing like flayed ribs. The walls were peeling, and the hanging wings of paint threw weird shadows in the light of the two gas lamps burning on a single wooden table. But what caught my attention was the hooded figures, naked to the waist and tied with electric flex by their wrists and ankles to two chairs. The torsos were covered in blood and they were slumped with their heads hanging down. A couple more boys stood around, smoking and lounging and pulling their jackets round them against the cold. Christ, it was freezing. One of the hooded figures coughed a little and then moaned. At least he was alive.

“D’ye see this pair,” said Sweeney from behind, making me jump. I sort of half-turned and nodded. I couldn’t get a word out, my mouth was that dry. He kept his voice loud as he spoke.

“This is the pair of dumb cunts that tried to do you yesterday. No ‘by-your-leave’. No ‘ye-think-we-should?’ You are so lucky they are dumb cunts. So are they ’cos if they’d been good at it, you’d be dead by now. So would they. Couldn’t even tell the difference between you and the brother. That’s what a pair of fuck-ups they are.” He strolled over and casually kicked the moaner on the ankle. Then he grabbed each by the hair through their hoods and pulled their heads up.

“Now boys,” he said. “Do ye know who I’ve got here? Do yez?” To emphasise the point, he pulled their heads back until their masked faces were pointing up at the ceiling.

“I’ve got Seanie McDevitt here lads. Come on on over Seanie and take a look at these turds.” I managed to shuffle forward a bit. Sweeney pulled the hoods off and let their heads go.

“Take a good long look at him. ’cos it’s his pay-back time.”

The pair had obviously taken a fair battering and my stomach started to twitter with butterflies. I told you how I feel about violence, even if it’s not directed at me. One of them started to say something and, in addition to the blackened eyes, I could see he’d got a badly broken nose and lost a couple of teeth. Sweeney hit him a vicious backhander across the ear that knocked the chair over. A couple of the boys came over and set it upright again. He held out his hand to one of the heavies who reached into his jacket, pulled out a 9mm Browning pistol and handed it over.

Sweeney stood behind the chairs and made a great play of offing the safety and pulling the slide back all the way. He held it against the spring and, when he had his hands between the two heads, let it crash back, ramming a round into the breech. There was silence broken only by a low moaning from one of the two – I couldn’t tell which. Sweeney looked up at me and said, “Come here.”

At first, my feet just wouldn’t move. I was frozen there. Then I felt a hand in my back and I slowly stumbled forwards.

“See that? D’yez see the way he’s walking?” Sweeney asked. “Yez damn near crippled him with your fucking wee games. So now he’s going to do the same for you.”

I looked at him in horror. He came round in front of me and pushed the pistol against the right knee of the nearest. The sound of the hammer being cocked was like thunder.

“You know how to use one of these, don’t ye? Just give him one through the kneecap. Then you can do the other asshole.”

I shook my head. He grabbed my arm and then looked at my hands. “Can’t really hold one of these with your hands bandaged like that, right?” I shook my head again.

“Ach well, I’ll just have to do it for you.” He took aim and the two men started sobbing and begging in earnest.

I managed to croak “Don’t do it. Jesus God. Sweeney. No. Not for me.”

He turned and looked at me, those black eyes piercing holes. “Too fuckin’ soft are ye?”

“No.” I felt old and cold and sore and tired. “It’s your way, not mine. I don’t... I mean... Please...” the words dried up.

“Ye’ve got to have discipline like,” he said. “No discipline and everything gets fucked up. Fuckers like this think they can do what they like. Nah, has to be.” He swung round and fired and a spurt of blood and bone splinters flew out. The chair shot backwards and bounced off the wall. The pistol shot drowned the first of the screams, but as the echoes died away, the screaming went on and on.

“Now that one’s the one who was driving. This asshole,” he gestured to the other, “was the shooter. And he’s the one who wrecked your place,” he nodded to the others. “Get him over to the table.”

My stomach was heaving. One of the heavies was tying a makeshift bandage around the shattered knee that was pouring blood. The others untied the second victim and dragged him, weeping and pleading incoherently, to the table. They forced his hand onto it, palm down. Sweeney calmly picked up an ordinary claw hammer from the floor and raised it. I screamed out loud as the hammer came down on his fingers. Sweeney raised the hammer and swung again.

I lurched to the door and was sick as a pig. I threw up everything I’d eaten in the last year, until my stomach was empty and my guts were sore from retching. Over my own noises I could hear the whimpering and mewling of the two maimed men. Sweeney told the others to take them and dump them at the Mater Infirmorum, the nearest hospital, but one that serves a mainly Catholic area.

“It’ll serve them right being surrounded by fenians.” He and the heavies laughed like it was the best of jokes. Then the victims were hauled out like broken sacks of coal, blood trailing after them.

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I was crouched in a ball with a pile of puke at my feet. He put his arm under mine and hauled me upright. With the other hand he pulled a half bottle of vodka from his pocket, unscrewed it and took a slug. He pushed it towards me. I shook my head, but he forced against my lips. I choked and gagged, but at least the spirit took the taste of vomit out of my mouth. A flood of tears was streaming down my face and my nose was leaking large amounts of snot. He found a hankie in one of my pockets and thrust it at me.

“Fer fuck sake stop snivelling and clean yerself up,” he ordered.

I was shaking uncontrollably as they took me back down to the car. Sweeney put me in the back seat and the clone ran the motor to heat us up. Sweeney leaned over the seat and said, “You OK?” I just nodded.

“Look,” he went on, “I don’t like hurting our lads, but it had to be done. I don’t care what you think. It’s the way it is.”

I said, “Give us a drink.” He passed the bottle and I took a long swallow.

“You don’t want to know what I think.” I managed to say, finally. The drink on a very empty stomach fired straight through into the bloodstream.

“To be honest, I don’t give a fuck,” he replied.

“Did you set this up just for my benefit?” I asked, prompted by a sort of morbid fascination.

“Nah. Didn’t know you’d be around until Jean told me she was having tea with you. Just an accident like. I don’t get on too well with Rab, but his ma’s always been a decent body. I was passing and called to see if she needed anything. This was going to happen anyway. Thought you might like to see.” He must have seen the look of horror in my eyes, even in the gloom. He shrugged.

“Aye, so I was wrong. Sorry about that.” Just like that. He offered me a fag that I accepted gratefully. I sucked the smoke right down into my lungs and tried to compose myself.

“I’ve got a message for you,” I blurted out.

“Nah. Don’t bother insulting me. I might get annoyed.”

“No, it’s not like that. Mal Grogan wants to talk to you.” That got him and he sat bolt upright and fixed his eyes on mine. He told the clone to take a walk for ten minutes.

Sweeney said nothing for a while. He looked at me, almost pityingly.

“Funny old world, ain’t it.” He mimicked Michael Caine’s Cockney very badly indeed.

“This whole business with Smicker and Rab has really fucked things up. I can’t guarantee what Rab might do. But I can’t bring in any outsiders. If I could I would. Grogan’s got to see that. I need Rab and I need Rab’s crew.” He fell silent, and I decided to say nothing.

“If Grogan had had a hand in Billy’s death, I’d feel about him like Rab does about Smicker getting put away. But this is just business.” The second time in as many days I’d heard *The Godfather* quoted.

“Can you not just tell Rab what to do?” I asked.

“Nah. It doesn’t work as simple as that. Like I’m in command, but Rab has his own clout. He’ll maybe be a wee bit pissed off about today. But he knows it had to happen. He’d probably have done worse. See, part of the problem is that there are people in the command who don’t want any dealings with taigs. Don’t like drugs. Can’t see that we need the cash just as much as the fenians do. And our fuckin’ politicians are total shite compared with the ’Ra. He paused for a moment.

“That fucker Gerry Adams is waltzing all round America getting lots of dollars shoved up his hole everywhere he goes, while our lot couldn’t raise a quid from a fuckin’ church collection. Rab might be a problem, but he knows what’s needed. And the contacts are Smicker’s and Rab’s. And that’s why I need him.”

“So I can just tell Grogan it’s Rab or nothing?” I asked hopefully. He gave me another fag and we sat and smoked while he thought this over.

“Sort of,” he said finally. “But we can do something about it.”

I didn’t like the ‘we’ bit.

“Tomorrow ye can go and see Rab and sort of add your weight to the argument. Make him see the light.”

“Oh shit no!” I protested. “Anyway, he’s supposed not to have visitors.” I could have bitten my tongue off.

“How d’ye know that?” he demanded sharply.

So I told him about what Devenney had told me. He nodded and said, “Aye, but his ma is another thing. And when she tells them he’s your cousin, they’ll let you in.”

“And does she know about all this?” I just couldn’t believe it.

“Nah. And she’s not going to either. Jimmy doesn’t know nothing either. He thinks Smicker did the dope off his own bat and he was mad. I hear he threatened to tear Smicker apart when he sees him inside. But he’s an old man now. Hates drugs, but he’s like the other old farts. Doesn’t know what the situation really is after so long inside.”

“So what do you want?”

“Call Jean Smith tomorrow morning. I’ll talk to her tonight. You’ll go with her and chat to Rab. Get him on his own. Persuade him.”

“What if I can’t?”

“Then you and me and Grogan are all in trouble.” Why, I thought again, do I get caught up in this ‘we’ bit?

“So how do I contact you?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll contact you.”

I’d heard that one too.

Sweeney dropped me off at the City Hall and I got a taxi back to Jackie’s. But on the way I got the driver to stop at an off-licence where I bought two half bottles of Powers and concealed them about my person.

I couldn’t bring myself to tell the pair of them what I’d seen and there was no way I was going to get to sleep without nightmares – not sober.

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