

LETTERBOX

BY

PAUL DAVIES

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Cover designed by Paul Davies.

FOR MADDY

THANKS TO:

My family, friends and colleagues who have all given their valuable time and input in one way or another during the writing of this book. I truly do appreciate everybody's thoughts, interest and patience ... Bless you all.

AND WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO:

Mark David Dunn. A true legend and someone I'm proud to call a friend. May I thank him for all his support and contributions throughout the writing of this book and for all his hilarious little ditties that define the man himself, some of which have been included in the book as my personal tribute. (You'll know which they are Dude!) ... Cheers Dunny!

AND FINALLY ... To the dedicated and professional staff of the Greater Manchester Emergency Services and Security officers who acted with great tenacity and selflessness to protect members of the general public. It was through their tireless actions in the face of such adversity, that any loss of life was prevented and I give you all my respect!!

###

Though certain events captured throughout this book are based on documented fact, the main characters portrayed, are of a purely fictional nature and not intended to represent any person or persons, whether living or dead. Likewise, the views expressed by certain characters throughout the novel are, again, written within a fictional context and are not intended to offend or indeed portray the views of the author or any other persons.

PART ONE

At this time it appears that the two governments are intent on changing the basis of the peace process. They claim that 'the obstacle now to a lasting and durable settlement is the continuing terrorist and criminal activity of the IRA'. We reject this. It also belies the fact that a possible agreement last December was squandered by both governments pandering to rejectionist unionism instead of upholding their own commitments and honouring their own obligations.

We are taking all our proposals off the table and it is our intention to closely monitor ongoing developments and to protect to the best of our ability the rights of republicans and our support base.

The two governments are trying to play down the importance of our statement because they are making a mess of the peace process. Do not underestimate the seriousness of the situation!

IRA statement Feb 2005

Chapter 1

11.30hrs Saturday 15th June 1996

The first chilling images of devastation, beamed relentlessly across the airwaves onto millions of television screens throughout the nation. Radio broadcasts became dominated by the incredulous story that no one doubted, would change the face of history ... not only in the United Kingdom, but throughout the entire world.

Many saw the terrorist attack on the City of Manchester, as nothing more than a cold and callous act of violence by a group of evil and cowardly thugs, whilst others, deemed it to be an unprecedented victory against a complacent and oppressive regime that hid behind the walls of Parliament under the guise of the British Government.

For one man, this was the day that had served to exorcise some personal demons yet paradoxically, had also rekindled a conscience that he believed to be long dead. For another, this was the day when the powerful voice of the Irish Republican Army had spoken ... and been listened to.

###

The Commander sat behind his desk gently stroking his thick beard as he watched with interest, the unfolding stories coming through live from Manchester. There would be much celebration this evening he thought, but for now, he needed to remain focused and consider his next move. "Set up a meeting of the council for this afternoon," he instructed, without taking his eyes off the

television. A man stood by his side, nodded silently and began to leave the room. “And Marty,” he added sternly, before the man had reached the door. “Bring Joseph here as soon as he returns!”

Once the man had left the room, the Commander glanced down at the two phones on his desk and wondered which of the two would ring first. Would it be the one that brought a tedious dialogue from the sycophantic lapdogs of the Prime Minister, decrying this outrageous act whilst issuing veiled threats on behalf of John Major and his countrymen? Threats that they had neither the balls nor the power *to* carry out ... ‘*Small cogs in a big wheel!*’ he pondered ... Or would it be the anticipated call to his private and secure line? A call that would be the focal point of their meeting later that day and would undoubtedly result in the extending of the proverbial olive branch. It was a call that would ensure a place for *Sinn Fein* at the negotiating table and take them one step closer to a free Ireland. But whichever one it was, it always amused this particular Leader, how the right hand of the British Government had no idea what the left hand was doing ... or capable of.

He continued to watch the television, quietly musing how today had undoubtedly shown the free world the capabilities and commitment of his comrades, dedicated in the pursuit of their beliefs. It was also the day, he thought with some respect, that Liam Connor had finally become a man.

When one of the phones began to ring, the Commander looked down at it and smiled.

###

Chapter 2

Ten hours earlier

Somewhere in Belfast

The three men sat in silence in the sparsely furnished living room of a high rise flat, a building that did little to promote their importance or standing within the powerful organisation to which they belonged. An underpowered light bulb hung from the ceiling, struggling against the blanket of cigarette smoke that enveloped the room, whilst old wallpaper peeled away from the sodden walls like skin falling from a rotting carcass. In another part of the building, Bob Marley's '*Buffalo Soldier*' pounded the structure, educating the residents with a lesson in Black History, whilst somewhere else, a baby was left to cry as its parents hurled relentless abuse towards each other. A fourth man entered the room carrying a bottle of Bushmills whiskey and four odd tumblers; socialising was not on the agenda. He placed the tumblers on a wooden crate in the middle of the room, filled them with the drink and passed one to each of the other men. He then took his own glass and raised it high in the air. "Gentlemen," he began, glancing at the others. "T'Ireland and Home Rule!"

In unison, the other men stood, raised their glasses and repeated. "T'Ireland and Home Rule!" Each man drank the contents of their tumbler and sat back down.

One of the party, a thick set, tower of a man in his fifties, placed a cigarette in his mouth and inhaled deeply. His weathered but well defined face was temporarily masked by the plumage of thick unfiltered smoke as he exhaled. When he spoke, it was with an air of great presence and

authority that left no man in any doubt that it was time to listen. “Is he ready gentlemen?” he asked, glancing at the three other men in the room.

The man who had distributed the drink, nodded slowly and replied. “Aye, sure enough. He’s ready.”

The thick set man shifted in his chair and leant forward, looking intensely at the man who had answered him. In a half whisper, half growl he said. “But will he do it Pat?”

Before he could reply, a voice from another part of the room interjected. “One things f’ certain, we’ll know either way for sure in about ten hours!”

###

0500 hrs Saturday 15th June 1996

Somewhere in England

The radio alarm sprang into life, causing the man sitting on the edge of the bed to jump slightly. He needn’t have set it, he hadn’t slept all night.

The voice of a female news reader reported on; *‘Britain’s first female Chief Constable being on the Queen’s Birthday honours’ list, job losses announced at ICI and how John Major was to get tough with social scroungers. There were no current problems on the road and it was going to be a clear June day with a high of 18 degrees centigrade.’*

He remained seated and still, hands clasped together and head bowed as if in silent prayer. Only the gentle sound of his breathing distinguished him from a display piece at Madam Tussaud’s Wax Museum.

He had replayed the schedule over and over in his head until it ached. There were to be no mistakes, no second thoughts and no contact until the package had been delivered. The words of his peers from two days previous remained embedded in his mind, playing again and again as if on a continuous loop. *‘Do your Dada proud son. Do yourself proud!’*

He *would* make his Dad proud and there *would* be no mistakes, *no* second thoughts. But for himself, it was retribution he felt, not pride.

He remained motionless for a few minutes longer before turning his head towards the radio, a thin trace of a smile appearing on his face. He reached out and pushed the off button sending *The Fugees* and '*Killing me softly*' into silence.

###

Chapter 3

0900hrs Saturday 15th June 1996

Manchester, England

Putting the keys into his jeans pocket and zipping up his green hooded jacket, the man strode off along the high street, *package* delivered. The passenger he had picked up at Knutsford Services on the M6 motorway, as instructed, had also completed his task and without so much as a nod, had headed off in the opposite direction and was soon lost in the growing crowd.

Finding a phone box, the man rang a number that he knew would be secure. "It's done," was all he said, all he needed to say.

The silent recipient at the other end of the line nodded, smiled and replaced the receiver. He looked at his watch, turned to the only other man in the room and said. "Call them in one hour!"

###

Leaving the kiosk and keeping his head down, the man walked on with a good pace, not hurrying, but methodical and brisk despite his heart beating quickly and his mind telling him to run.

As he threaded his way through small pockets of pedestrians bustling along the street, he consoled himself with the fact that nobody would give him a second thought, too caught up in their own intimate worlds to notice him. In less than 5 minutes he would be home dry, gone forever without a trace.

At first he thought it was his mind playing tricks, a rush of adrenalin perhaps causing his ears to wrongly decode the sounds. But there it was again, louder and clearer. "Liam?" The man faltered a little recognising his own name being called and though he tried to ignore it, his pace slowed to a near stop. "Liam. Liam, wait. It's me!"

'*Shit!*' the man thought as he stopped in his tracks, his heart pounding so hard he thought he would have a seizure right there and then. Turning around he saw the source of the voice. A man no older than himself was heading towards him, smiling with a hand already outstretched to greet. Liam wanted to run but he couldn't, fearful that this would draw attention to him. He had no choice. Face this smiling man, exchange few words as possible and then go, quickly.

"Jesus!" the male exclaimed. "Liam fuckin' Connor. How are you mate? It's me, Sean. Sean Bevan!"

Liam knew who he was from the first time he heard his name called. This was, after all, the person he had shared most of his childhood with, the man with whom he had been best friends and inseparable from. "What about ya Sean?" Liam responded, shaking his hand whilst quickly scanning his surroundings.

"Whoa, nice accent," Sean began. "Proper Irishman eh? How long you been back? Are you back for good or jus' visiting? Where are you...?"

"What's w'all the bloody questions?" Liam snapped, surprised at his own intolerance. '*Calm down,*' he told himself. '*Don't draw attention to yourself.*'

"Sorry mate," Sean replied, slightly bewildered. "I only..."

"No Sean," Liam cut in remorsefully. "It's me that should apologise. I'm just a little ... well, surprised!"

There was a moment of awkward silence between the two men, neither sure whether to turn and walk away or ride out the uneasy pause. It was Sean that eventually broke the deadlock. "Hey, do you remember Louise Duffy?" he asked with an overly chirpy tone.

Liam thought for a moment. “Yeah. Skinny wi’ glasses an’ spots, always tellin’ tales on ya. Got ya inta loads o’ shite too if I remember right!” Sean suddenly looked to the floor and gave a nervous laugh. Liam became confused. “What?” he asked, curious as to Sean’s obvious and sudden embarrassment.

“Well,” Sean replied, “I’m going to meet the *future* Mrs. Bevan in a couple of hours for lunch, just across the road there and...”

“Aw shite all mighty!” Liam interjected, he himself now overcome with sudden embarrassment. “I’m sorry mate, I had no idea ... I ... you and Lou? ... Aw shite!”

Sean Laughed. “Don’t worry mate, you weren’t to know ... and she’s not changed one fuckin’ bit!”

Both men laughed and for Liam, this was an unexpected but welcome release. He found himself remembering why he and Sean had been such close friends, closer than brothers many said. They could, and would, laugh at anything and everything given the opportunity. Even taking the piss out of each other was not only acceptable but expected. The bond they had forged during their childhood and early teen years had seemed destined to keep their friendship alive, for always; it was *their* world. What neither could have predicted, was just how dramatically that world was going to change.

###

Chapter 4

June 1982

The first time the two boys met, Liam Connor was busy watching the effect that the sun's rays, when intensified through a magnifying glass, had on a worm that he'd just dug up from the soil.

"What y' doin'?" asked an eight year old Sean suddenly standing above him.

Liam looked up and saw a chubby, blonde haired boy staring back at him. He had the remains of a sandwich in his hand and Liam could tell, from the spillage on the boys tight fitting white *Umbro* t-shirt, that the sandwich contained jam. "What's it to you?" he replied.

Sean shrugged and pushed the remaining sandwich into his mouth. "You're from the family that's just moved in aren't you?" he said through a mouthful of bread and jam, spitting out bits of masticated food as he spoke.

"Did your mum never tell you not to speak with your mouth full?" Liam said, flicking pieces of bread off his own t-shirt.

Sean shrugged again and continued to stare at Liam whilst he finished the contents in his mouth. "D'ya wanna see a dead bird?" he asked casually.

"Where is it?" Liam asked, now rising to his feet. The hot worm had now lost its appeal to a greater scoop and Liam wanted in.

"Not far," replied Sean. "It's on Joey's Field near the school." Liam looked at him blankly. "Oh yeah, I forgot you're new round here," continued Sean. "C'mon then, I'll show you!" And with that, the two set off.

On that day, the boys learned a lot about each other and their respective families. Liam learnt how, like he, Sean was the second of two children, with an older sister called Karen. He had a mum called Angela, who stayed at home and a dad called Peter who was an engineer in a factory making stuff. Sean learnt that Liam had an older sister called Margaret and that they had all moved over from Ireland because of his Dad's job, although he had no idea what his dad did, only that he was away a lot and brought back ace presents when he came home.

"You don't sound Irish," offered Sean. "Well, not like my Gran. Now she's proper Irish!"

Liam explained that they had first moved from Ireland to London three years ago, stayed there for a year and then moved to a place called Birmingham before coming to Manchester. "Probably why I don't sound Irish anymore," he explained to an open mouthed Sean.

"Wow!" Sean remarked, genuinely impressed, though he frowned a little before continuing. "I've never been further than the Arndale Centre in Manchester with me mum, unless you count Butlins in Wales, but that was just a holiday." He paused a moment and smiled. "Everything's free though," he added excitedly. "Have you ever been?"

Liam shook his head but listened with great awe as Sean told him about the free rides, free food and free swimming pool with a diving board. As the heat of the day turned to a warm evening, the boys began to walk home, the introduction to Joey's Field, dead birds and the best trees to climb, completed. They had covered everything in their lives from favourite food to football teams, from best Action Man toy to why girls can't build a den. They had also discovered that, not only did they live on the same street, but, after the weekend, Liam would be going to Sean's school, St Michael's Primary and that would be 'top'. Despite their differing backgrounds, they had found so much in common and both knew that a friendship had been forged in the last few hours that would surely stand the test of time.

###

As they stopped outside the front gate, Sean looked towards his house and sighed.

“What’s wrong?” Liam asked.

“My dad’s home,” Sean replied.

“So what? Don’t you like your dad?”

“Yeah, course I do! But he’s home early and that means mum’s sick again!”

Liam looked at Sean, confused. “Is she gonna die?” he asked before he could stop himself.

Sean turned quickly towards Liam. “Don’t say that!” he snapped, taking Liam a little by surprise. “She’s just sick ok!”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean...” Liam started, but was cut short as Sean continued to speak.

“She drinks stuff, lots ... and it makes her a bit, y’know, sick?” He shrugged, wondering if Liam understood then looked again towards the house. “But my dad will carry her up to bed,” he said in a near whisper. “And tomorrow she’ll be better again.” Turning again to Liam he added. “She’s not gonna die, ok?”

For the first time, Liam saw sadness in Sean’s eyes and felt a genuine concern. That’s when an idea popped into his head. “Hey, do you like Irish stew?” he asked, hoping to change the mood.

Now it was Sean’s turn to look confused.

“What?” he replied, frowning.

“Irish stew? My mum makes it and she’s making it for tea!”

“So what?” Sean asked, not really understanding what his new friend was talking about.

“Well,” Liam continued. “Why don’t you come and have tea with us? My mum makes loads and she won’t mind you coming!”

Once again, a pensive Sean looked towards his house and after a moment’s silence replied. “I’ll go and ask my dad.”

A few minutes later, the boys were heading up to Liam’s house for tea, a routine that would become commonplace for years to come.

Chapter 5

May 1984

“Sean Bevan. Get out!” Miss Jamison scowled at Sean from the front of the classroom, her reddened face accentuating her bright ginger hair. She was not in the mood for foolishness today and Sean’s disruptive comments, likening cows ‘*teats*’ to girls ‘*tits*’, was above and beyond the excuse she needed to impose her authority and put a stop to the silly laughter now resonating around the classroom.

“But Miss...” began Sean, putting on his most innocent face.

“Save your explanations for Mrs. Gunnel,” Miss Jamison continued. “I’m sure the Headmistress will be only too happy to deal with you in a manner befitting your stupidity ... Now go!!”

Sean walked out of the classroom trying hard not to chuckle as Miss Jamison turned to face the remaining pupils. “And if anybody else would care to join him, please, feel free, as I will not tolerate this kind of behaviour in my lesson. Is that understood?” Silence fell around the classroom. “Is that understood?!” she demanded again. In unison, the pupils acknowledged their understanding. Miss Jamison remained still, glaring at them, mentally urging somebody to fall out of line. It wasn’t to happen. She had been victorious.

At the rear of the classroom, two boys had sat and watched the expulsion of Sean with great delight. Neither was impressed with him or his ‘*teat*’ comment, but found the outcome of his

actions very satisfying. Once the lesson had fully resumed, one of the boys looked up towards Miss Jamison and seeing that she was occupied, gave the other boy a nudge, gesturing with his head towards Liam now sitting on his own.

The second boy looked at Liam and then too at Miss Jamison and seeing his opportunity, turned back to Liam. “Paddy. Hey Paddy!” he said in a loud whisper. Liam glanced round and looked at the boy, knowing that whatever Matthew Walker was about to say, would not be pleasant. “Are you missing your girlfriend?” Walker continued, pointing to the empty seat next to Liam where Sean had been sitting fifteen minutes ago.

Both Walker and his friend began to chuckle, causing Miss Jamison to look up. “Is there something you want to share with us Matthew?” she asked, the tone in her voice still menacing.

“No Miss, sorry Miss. I was just asking Pa ... er ... Liam for a rubber.”

“Then do it quietly please, or you will find yourself joining Sean,” she added before looking down again.

“Yes Miss,” Walker concluded, his face reddening slightly. He turned and saw Liam smiling triumphantly back at him and, in frustration, put two fingers up. Liam shook his head and turned away.

###

Matthew Walker disliked Liam Connor from the first time he had been introduced into their class almost two years ago.

“Liam’s originally from Ireland,” the class teacher had declared. “So let’s make him feel welcome!”

Not that Liam had done anything against him personally, but Matthew bore the influence of his father, an ex military man with a hate of anything Irish. For years, he had listened to his dad rant on about the ‘*Bloody IRA*’ and how the ‘*Murdering Irish bastards had let off yet another bomb*’ and though Matthew didn’t fully understand what was going on in the world, he felt an overwhelming

duty to share his father's views; a desire born out of the mind of a child who is desperate to help and console yet desperate to be loved. Over a period of time, Matthew came to realise that he could neither help nor console his father and love was a virtue reserved only for mothers and songwriters.

Nevertheless, his misguided yet deep seated hatred remained and here, in his own classroom, stood a boy who symbolised the root of that passion. A boy not differing in age, height or colour from himself, nor in the style of clothing worn. But even so, different. Wrong. In short, '*a stupid Paddy*'.

It was later that day, during break, when Matthew saw an opportunity to make his mark and show the Irish boy what was what in St. Michael's. Seeing him standing alone in the school playground, he beckoned to his friend Simon and the two of them walked over to Liam.

"Hi Ian," he said in an overly friendly tone. "I'm Matthew but everyone calls me Matty."

"Hello," Liam replied. "But it's Liam, not Ian."

"What is?" asked Matthew

"My name ... it's Liam but you called me Ian!"

"Oh sorry," Matthew began. "You're not going to blow me up are you *Liam*?" The boy standing with Matthew let out a loud cackle, which sounded more like a dutiful appreciation than a genuine laugh. Liam looked at the boy and then back to Matthew, confused. He opened his mouth to speak but Matthew continued. "'Cause that's what you lot do isn't it Liam? Y'know? Paddies? You blow things up?"

"I..." Liam started, but Matthew ignored him and carried on.

"That's what my Dad says and he should know cause he's a soldier, isn't he Si?"

The boy with Matthew nodded before adding, "Yeah. And he's shot loads of people."

"Y'see?" continued Matthew. "My Dad knows what he's talking about and he says that all Paddies are cowards ... Are you a coward Liam?"

"No," Liam replied, feeling very uneasy about the way this was going.

Matthew grinned and opened his arms. "Ok, prove it then," he said. "Let's have a fight."

"What for?" asked Liam. "I don't want a fight!"

"See. My Dad's right. You're all shitty cowards!" Matthew sneered, taking a step closer to him.

"No!" Liam retorted. "It's just ... we'll get into trouble and ... AAH!" Liam didn't know which was worse, the sting from the sudden hard slap to his face or the shock that it had happened at all. Either way, his eyes welled up almost immediately, sending the sight of a smirking Matthew into a temporary blur. As he desperately tried to wipe away the tears and regain his vision, he didn't see Matthew moving towards him intending to *'finish'* the job. But neither did he see Matthew hit the ground as he was suddenly side swiped and prevented from doing so. "What you doin' Walker, ya mong?!"

Liam's sight returned to see Sean standing over a bewildered Matthew now sprawled on the playground floor. The other boy, Simon, was backing away, quietly.

"What's it to you Bevan?" Matthew asked, attempting to get to his feet. "Are you a Paddy Lover or something?"

Sean moved towards Matthew and pushed him back onto the floor before kneeling full weight onto his stomach. Matthew let out a heavily winded gasp before Sean stood back up and dropped on him once again. Now it was Matthew's turn to have tearful eyes. When Sean stood up for the second time, he pointed at Matthew, shouting. "Don't you ever touch my friend again ok? You wanna fight, then fight me, y' spaz!!"

Matthew didn't reply. He couldn't. He just sobbed, trying to catch his breath as Sean led Liam away. When he was eventually able to get up a few minutes later, he brushed the dirt off his clothes and looked around the playground, hoping nobody had witnessed the embarrassment of his defeat. He then caught sight of Liam and Sean heading back into the school building, laughing. "One day Paddy," he whispered to himself. "And fatty won't be there to help you out!"

Things hadn't gone to plan for Matthew that day and for nearly two years it seemed that wherever Liam was, Fat Boy Bevan was right there with him. '*Thick as Thieves*' he had heard them described as. More like '*Man and Wife*' he had said, much to the amusement of his friend Simon.

But today, it seemed that the Gods had shone down and given Matthew a long awaited chance to exact revenge. Today was the day that '*mouth almighty*' Bevan had said too much and was now on his way to be given lunchtime litter picking duty by Mrs. Gunnel. Today was the day that Sean Bevan's Irish girlfriend, Liam Connor, would be facing lunchtime on his own ... result.

As the lunch bell sounded, Miss Jamison ordered everyone in the room to pack their things away quietly and make their way out of the classroom to lunch. "And walk Liam Connor!" she added in a very military tone, although Liam was already out of the door heading towards Mrs. Gunnel's. As he rounded the corridor that led to the Headmistress's office, he saw Sean sat outside, swinging his legs and staring at the floor.

When Sean looked up and saw Liam approaching, a big smile appeared on his face. "Now *that* was funny," he said once Liam was standing next to him. "Did you see Jamison's face? ... classic!"

"Yeah, quality!" giggled Liam. Then, nodding towards Mrs. Gunnel's office, he added. "Have you seen her yet?"

"Nah!" Sean replied. "Well, she opened her door and stared at me all weird, but then she went back inside!" Sean pulled a face that was his idea of 'weird' and looked at Liam. Both boys began to laugh. At that moment, the office door opened, making the pair jump slightly as a stern looking woman appeared, her gaze immediately fixing on Liam.

Mrs. Margaret Gunnel was an immaculately dressed woman in her early fifties, though her short grey hair and glasses dangling around her neck on a gold chain, gave her the appearance of being much older. The whole school knew that she was not a lady to be crossed. "And you are here for what purpose Mr. Connor?" she asked Liam directly.

“Erm, nothing Miss, I was just...”

“On your way to lunch perhaps?” she cut in, more instructing than questioning.

“Yes Miss,” Liam replied. “Just on my way!”

“Off you go then.” She directed. Liam looked at Sean feeling helpless. “Now Liam!” she added loudly, making Liam jump again, about turn and walk off double time, back along the corridor from where he had first come. Head down, he turned the corner at the end of the corridor and walked straight into a pupil coming the other way. Liam looked up and his heart sank. The lanky frame of Walker stood before him, his squatter, uglier sidekick Boland, just to his left. “Well well. If it isn’t Miss Paddy!” Walker said, grinning. Liam guessed that this wasn’t going to be pleasant.

###

Having watched Liam’s departure until he had turned the corner at the end of the corridor, the Headmistress fixed her gaze on Sean, let out a heavy sigh and began shaking her head. “Why is it always you outside my office Sean?” Sean shrugged his shoulders and looked to the floor. “Right. In you go then!” she instructed, adding another sigh.

Crestfallen, Sean walked into the office, closely followed by Mrs. Gunnel still shaking her head. She knew that a ten minute lecture followed by the punishment of litter picking duty for the remainder of lunch, was going to have little, if any, effect on Sean Bevan. Oh, she would give him the usual speech about *being disruptive* and about *self discipline* and then finish off with the *deeply disappointed and let’s make a new start* routine, but in reality, she could think of no better solution than to thrash this little shit to within an inch of his life then drag him home screaming to his drunk of a mother and do the same to her. ‘*That’s the trouble with Educational Reform,*’ she had voiced many times to her colleagues. ‘*No place for good old fashioned discipline anymore!*’

And here she was again, looking across her desk at a supercilious young boy who just didn’t give a sod and feeling powerless to do anything constructive about it. ‘*Why can’t you be more like*

your friend Liam?’ she thought as she searched for her opening words to Sean. ‘Such a nice boy ... But then he comes from a strong, Church loving family, not a dysfunctional drunken one!’ With one final heavy sigh, she began.

Sean listened to the Headmistress speak, grunting and nodding in all the right places but wishing she would hurry up and finish. He didn’t like sitting here. Not because of the lecture, he had heard that so many times before, but because of the smell. It reminded him of dead people. Not that he knew many dead people, but his Uncle Eddy was an undertaker and he once went to his funeral parlour to drop a letter off from his dad and it smelled funny, like someone had used a bad air freshener to cover the smell of a wet dog. *‘Wonder why they call it a Parlour?’* he thought to himself as the words of Mrs. Gunnel became no more than a monotonic sound. *‘My Gran’s got a parlour, but she doesn’t keep dead people in it, just her best cups.’*

“... and you’re only letting yourself down Sean, can’t you see that?”

“Yes Miss,” right on cue. *‘God, it stinks in ‘ere. Maybe they use this office for dead people ... maybe Mrs. Gunnel is really dead and she’s come back as a zombie ... shit, that makes sense!’*

“... deeply disappointed that you are here again Sean ...”

‘She’s well old and she looks a bit dead!’

“... more self discipline and a little less disruption ...”

‘Bet she lives in a funeral parlour full of other zombies, that’s why it smells in ‘ere!’

“... and this afternoon, we can make a fresh start, are we agreed Sean?”

‘And I bet she doesn’t have a husband ... or he’s mysteriously vanished!’

“Sean! ... are you even listening?”

Sean’s eyes focused on Mrs. Gunnel as he was jolted from his own world. “Yes Miss, I am Miss ... A fresh start, yes Miss!”

Mrs.Gunnel stared at Sean for what seemed like an eternity before adding. “You should take a leaf out of your friend Liam’s book. Such a nice boy. I never see him outside my office. Why

do you think that is?"

'Cause he never gets caught!' Sean wanted to say, but shrugged for the umpteenth time and remained silent.

The Headmistress let out a final sigh, stood up and concluded. "Ok Sean. Go and collect the litter bags from Mr. O'Leary and see me at the end of lunch time!"

"Yes Miss," Sean replied as Mrs.Gunnel opened the office door to signify there was nothing more to say. Sean walked out of the office and stopped in his tracks, open mouthed. "I think there is somebody here to see you Miss!" he said with great surprise.

Mrs.Gunnel peered around the open door into the corridor. "Holy God!" she exclaimed as she saw the two people sitting outside her office. The first of the two was a slightly smirking Matthew Walker. The second, a dishevelled looking and bloody nosed, Liam Connor.

###

Chapter 6

May 1984

Even before the black vehicle had come to a complete standstill outside the modest Manchester semi, Bridie Connor was standing at the open front door waiting to greet the expected guests. Inside, her husband Michael turned off the television, lit a cigarette and sat down waiting for them to enter the room. Never before had he felt so anxious, though never before had a meeting been conducted at his home. He already knew, from the phone call he received two days earlier, that it was of some great importance to the *cause*. But still.

“It’s a matter of some urgency Michael,” his brother Joe had said. “And with most of our usual places being watched, it was thought that a change of *scenery* might be best for all concerned. But the final decision rests with you of course Michael!”

“For God’s sake Joe,” he had protested. “This is my home, the home of my wife and our children. It’s somewhere that should be a world apart from our ‘*cause*’ and the shite it can bring, you know that!”

“I know, I know Michael.” Joe replied softly, but then continued with a slight patronising tone. “But hasn’t your home always been provided for you by fighting for that cause? I’m sure our superiors would never suggest that your living ‘*gratis*’ came with a price, but when it’s about loyalty and commitment, well!”

“Don’t start that shite Joe!” Michael retorted, feeling his anger rise. “And don’t *ever* question

my fuckin' loyalty again ... I have fought and fought hard in the campaign for our Country's freedom and no man, not even our fuckin' *superiors*, can ever doubt my commitment!"

"Ok Ok Michael, calm down. I just meant..."

"Y' meant what Joseph? T' try my patience? Well ye are doing a fuckin' good job of that!"

There followed, what seemed like, an eternal silence between the two brothers, eventually broken by a more humble sounding Joe. "So can I tell them it's on? ... I promise t' wipe the shite off my shoes before I come in!"

Reluctantly, Michael had agreed and now, two days later, he was about to discover just how important this meeting really was.

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Chapter 7

Michael Connor was born 24th May 1946, the second of five children to parents Thomas and Elizabeth Connor. He was raised in an overcrowded house in a poor area of Belfast where everybody seemed to know everyone else's business. It was a community filled with unprecedented support and loyalty for '*their own*', but a community also consumed with a hate for the British regime.

From a very early age, Michael would listen with awe as his father recounted stories of the struggle for freedom against the British, of the battles won, and lost, and of the many 'soldiers' that gave their lives in honour of the cause. With feelings of pride and excitement, he would never tire of hearing about the Easter uprising of 1916 when a group of heroic men came together in the hope of overthrowing the British in one of the greatest battles Dublin had ever witnessed. Michael saw his father's delight with every telling of that story and understood his passion. He didn't understand why every time he told it, his mother would raise her eyes and offer to make a cup of tea.

Over the years, schooled mostly by the elders of the community, Michael learned that a fair and just British Government was a concept thought up by tiresome and overpaid politicians who spent endless days sitting around in Cabinet offices talking of plans for peace.

"*Hoping* for peace," his father had said, "is for fools who sign petitions and trust that an British Government is interested enough even to acknowledge them. *Fighting* for peace, Michael, is for the men 'n' women of this land with enough pride to stand up for what they believe in, with strength to say enough is enough. It's for all the people of our great country with the conviction to fight and lay down their lives for what is their right by birth. That of freedom!"

Michael was to hear that speech on many occasions and at 14 years of age, spurred on by the love for his father and his country, became a fully paid up member of ‘The Belfast Patriots’, an all boys marching band whose founders and patrons were openly sympathetic and supportive to the cause of the *Óglaigh na hÉireann* ... The IRA.

At fifteen, Michael had risen up through the ranks of *The Patriots*, achieved mainly by his role in running ‘errands’ and relaying messages for his peers during the *Border Campaigns*, an IRA initiative to break down the British administration in the occupied areas of Ireland. Although menial tasks in the grand scheme of things, it brought him a certain amount of respect from the community, a great deal of pride from his father and a little jealousy from his older brother Joseph.

“He’s just a glorified lackey,” Joe had said bitterly when he overheard a group of local girls going on about how ‘*wonderful*’ Michael was. “But if it’s a real man you’re after ladies?”

“And you fit that bill do you Joseph Connor?” said one of the girls through the sound of giggling.

“More likely he’ll be passing on somebody’s address to us!” said another, turning the giggling into full laughter and Joe a shade of crimson.

“Fuckin’ gypsies!” he retorted, before walking away ... quickly.

###

Joseph Connor was born 4th June 1943 in the midst of two bloody wars; the world against a Nazi Germany and Irish Republicans against an intrusive Britain. Only the former would conclude a few years later.

When Joseph’s mother announced that she was pregnant, the father sat down next to her, looked her straight in the eyes and sighed heavily. “Are you sure?” he asked. “I mean, could there be a mistake?”

“Of course I’m sure!” Elizabeth replied, a little hurt at his reaction. “And before you ask,” she continued, “yes, it is yours!” Elizabeth took hold of the man’s hand and placed it onto her stomach.

Her excitement diminished with the look of worry on his face. "It'll be alright," she said softly.

"We'll manage."

"How?" he replied, a slight quiver in his voice. "Your man Tommy will kill us both if he ever finds out!"

From that day on, nobody other than Elizabeth and her quick to flee lover, knew that Thomas Connor wasn't Joe's real father, yet she couldn't help thinking that deep down, Tommy knew the truth and was just biding his time before confronting, then disowning, her and the child. But he showed no signs of suspicion or doubt, only love and support towards her and *their* first born. That said, Elizabeth always felt that there was something missing between *father* and *son*, a niggling instinct that a piece of that bond was absent and it was to be a few years later, following the birth of her second child Michael, that it became all too apparent what that was ... Pride.

Joseph hadn't been blessed with handsome features and what he lacked in looks, he more than made up for in weight. With a thick head of jet black hair and small grey blue eyes set above chubby pale cheeks, Tommy had often referred to him as the 'baby cannonball'.

"Jesus, Elizabeth," he'd said, on one of the few occasions he had picked him up. "The lad gets heavier by the day! Ya wouldn't be feedin' him extra portions when I'm not lookin' would ya now?" Elizabeth would just smile and hope that the subject of where Joseph's looks came from didn't ever enter the conversation.

In contrast, his younger brother Michael was a beautiful infant with fair hair and deep green eyes that had the appearance of constantly smiling. From birth, Michael was the one who would receive most of his father's attention and though Tommy never ignored or neglected Joseph, it was clear from the outset where his heart really lay. He would pick Michael up, cradle him in his arms and in a soft whisper, promise him the world. "Y'have your dada's Irish eyes for sure young babby," he'd say smiling. "And the girls'll love y' for that!"

In the years that followed, neither Joseph or Michael ever left Tommy's side, though it would be

Michael who was to be the centre of attention and receive adoring comments from the older women of the community. It would be Michael who always sat on his father's shoulders whilst Joseph walked slightly behind and it would be Michael who, in later life, caught the eyes of the local girls.

At eight years old, Michael ran into his house looking for Joseph, flushed with excitement. He found him in their bedroom lying on the bed playing with a model plane. Joe looked up briefly as Michael entered the room and then turned his attention back to his toy Messerschmitt. "Joe Joe come see what Dada's got me!" Michael said, slightly out of breath.

"Nah," replied Joseph uninterested. "I'm busy."

"Please Joe, please. It's a bike, a real bike. C'mon and see!" Michael begged.

"*Please Joe Please,*" Joseph mocked. "Please come and see what Dada's done for his precious Michael!"

Michael stared at Joseph, confused and slightly hurt. He walked over to the bed and sat next to Joseph who had now turned to face the wall. "What's wrong Joe? Why ya angry wit me?" he said softly.

"Go away Mikey and leave me alone. Go play wit your precious bike," Joseph replied, making Michael feel more confused.

"But I don't understand. I want you t'see it Joe. You're my brother and..."

"Just fuck off won't ya!" Joe cut in angrily. "I don't wanna see the stupid thing!!"

Michael jumped at Joe's angry outburst and, getting off the bed, started to walk back towards the door. Before leaving the bedroom he turned toward Joseph again, his eyes welling slightly.

"I'm sorry for makin' y'angry Joe," he said, his bottom lip quivering as he spoke. "But ... but I still want to share it wit ya ... if y'like?"

For a few moments, Michael stood in silence hoping for a change of heart from his brother. Then, as a tear rolled down his cheek, he turned to go back out of the door.

"Wait!" Joseph called and sat up on the bed. Michael stopped in his tracks and with a faint

feeling of hope, turned back to Joseph. “Ok Mikey,” Joe continued with a sigh, “I’ll come see your bike.”

“Our bike,” Michael said, a smile appearing on his face. “It’s *our* bike now!”

At only 11 years old, Joseph came to realise two things on that day. The first was that Michael’s love for him was, and would continue to be, unconditional and real. The second, was the all too hurtful fact that his father’s wasn’t.

###

When Thomas Connor passed away some years later, Joseph had long since given up trying to win his father’s affection and grieved only for the sake of his mother and siblings. He had already resigned himself to the fact that Michael would supersede Tommy as head of the family; a process reinforced on the day of the funeral when hundreds of attendees made it their business to offer Michael their respects and continued support.

Michael, however, felt that a huge void had entered his world. He had spent his childhood, youth and early adult life in the powerful shadow of his father. He had listened, learned and developed his knowledge of the struggle for a free Ireland, never thinking that one day, *this day*, he would be expected to step into Thomas Connors shoes. It would be a great responsibility, he thought, but also a great honour. Yet, as he stood in the cold and misty church grounds shaking hands with mourners promising their loyalties, he knew that his acceptance of taking on this role rested solely on receiving the full blessing of one man ... his brother Joseph. Without it, Michael thought, the journey ends here.

Six days earlier, Michael had been at his ailing father’s bedside, trying desperately to sound positive and talk of a future when Tommy would be better.

“Michael, Michael,” his father had said in a frail voice. “We both know that I’m not getting out of this bed again, but I need to give you something before it’s too late!”

“Don’t talk like that dada. You’ll be up and about in no time, you’ll see,” Michael had offered,

but hadn't even managed to convince himself.

Tommy patted his son's hand and smiled, appreciating the words but knowing that his time was coming to an end. With a great deal of effort, he removed a chain that held a key from around his neck and passed it to Michael. He then looked and pointed across his bedroom. "Go to my drawers," he instructed quietly. "Move them aside and look under the carpet ... bring me the book!"

Michael went over to the drawers, moved them to one side and pulled back the threadbare carpet but saw nothing else. He looked back at his father, confused. "Try the floorboards," Tommy urged, smiling slightly.

Michael knelt down and saw that two pieces of the floorboards were loose. He pulled them up revealing a black metal box nestled in between the joists. He took the box out, unlocked and pulled back the lid and stared open mouthed at the green book lying inside it; a book that he knew was regarded by many as second only to the Holy Bible itself in terms of importance. A book so secretive, that to reveal its contents to anybody outside the organisation it was meant for, would result in certain death.

Michael removed it from the box and caressed it gently, turning it over and over in his hands. He opened its cover with both excitement and trepidation, knowing that this green book was *the* 'Green Book', a secretly published guide of philosophies, strategies, techniques, objectives and weapons. A book that was *the* training manual of the IRA. Smiling, he looked up from the book to his father's bed. His smile quickly faded when he saw that his beloved dada, at only 56 years old, had just passed away.

On 15th November 1966 and at just twenty years of age, Michael Connor was one of the youngest people in the IRAs history to possess the Green Book and over the years, in the continuing struggle against British rule, it would prove to be his greatest aid and guide ... it would become *his* Bible.

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