



**NEVER ASK  
THE DEAD**

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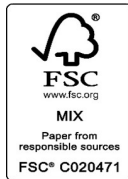
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## PROLOGUE

Strabane, a border town. County Tyrone,  
North-west Northern Ireland. Late December 1979

The rusty glow of a street lamp rippled in puddles outside the fortified police station, and the cold and unforgiving rain fell. He splashed straight through them, his feet already soaked, and approached the armoured hatch where he would be seen and there waited. He didn't need to rap or call for attention. They had already spotted him and would be watching him right now, assessing the solitary, dark figure who stood, soaked to the skin, as 1979 ticked slowly down to detonate a new decade. The Christmas cessation of violence observed by the IRA – annual alms to overworked volunteers, their assorted enemies and the long-suffering people who lived day and night under the cloud of the Long War – still held, but only just. They'd promised two days of peace, and the clock was ticking. At midnight, the war was back on, and the witching hour approached. The peelers and Brits who eyed him through peepholes and on the green, fuzzy output of a concealed

camera probably did so with both trepidation of what he might be, and annoyance that he was bringing them any kind of work at all during this lull. After a time, he heard the unbolting of the hatch and it opened, wide enough to show a pair of eyes and the muzzle of a gun.

‘Yeah?’

‘I need to speak to the Branch,’ he said. Special Branch. The secretive army within the Royal Ulster Constabulary, RUC. The Branch had its origins in the Metropolitan Police’s Special Irish Branch, to give it its original and correct title. They had been tasked to deal with the Fenian dynamite campaign against English targets in the 1880s that was organised by Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa. Almost a hundred years later and another war was on, and there were more bombs exploding than Rossa would have ever dared hope. A pause from the cop who appraised him from behind the hatch. His eyes narrowed.

‘Who are you?’

He glanced away, not wanting his face to be seen. ‘A friend,’ he said.

Which could mean many things. The peeler kept the gun pointed on him, waited for more but got only the hiss of the unrelenting rain. The cop told him to hold on and quickly snapped the armoured hatch shut. As expected, he wanted to call it in. The man who stood in the rain could be anyone. A plain-clothed soldier, coming in from the cold, his cover compromised; a Branch man who needed help and would trust only one of his own in the secret police; or a mad dog Provo that had a gun in his waistband and wanted them to open the gates before he started shooting, happy to go down fighting so long as he took more of the

enemy with him. But he was none of the above. Here, in the cold and rain, nearly eighty miles from his Belfast home, he was undergoing a metamorphosis. There was dark magic at work this devil's hour, and in truth, he did not know what he was in this moment, nor what he would be transformed into. The sound of a bolt snapping, and another hatch opened, above him this time, and then a voice. English, barking as only a Brit soldier knew how.

'Hands on your fucking head. Now!' He didn't bother to look up, he knew that the proboscis of a standard long rifle was trained on him. He did as asked, and the door that was set into the large armoured gates was unbolted and quickly opened. Two RUC officers, flanked by two soldiers, emerged and fanned around him, guns pointed. One of the peelers let go of the semi-automatic rifle he was holding and swung it on his back, then frisked him.

'He's clean!' he shouted.

The two Brits seized him and marched him through the gate. He was half carried, half dragged across a rutted and waterlogged courtyard where armoured Land Rovers were parked. His bruised and battered body screamed out, but he gritted his teeth and did not give voice to his pain. He had screamed enough in the last two days. This night, he would speak his revenge. Through a door and along a corridor, the smell of frying eggs and the sour reek of sweat, talcum powder and the humidity of hot showers. A door opened by one of the peelers, and the Brits who had him by the arms stopped. He braced himself to be thrown into the room head first, but the hands released him and the young men marched away. A big hand pressed between his shoulder blades, firm but not aggressive, and he obeyed

the assertive suggestion that he enter the room. Inside was a table with two chairs. One peeler followed him in, invited him to take a seat which he did, but reluctantly. The cop pulled out a chair and sat opposite. Average height and build, dark hair in a middle parting that fell in curtains on his forehead. Maybe in his late twenties, older than he was. The cop wore a small moustache that suited him and had blue, intelligent eyes. They rested on his face and then creased into a concerned question.

‘Do you need a doctor?’

He shook his head, though it still pained his neck to do so. His eyes were almost swollen closed, and black as the night he’d just emerged from. One of his lips was up like a tractor tyre, and that was what could be seen. His body was a cloudscape of bruises and broken skin. At some point, he would need a doctor and some antibiotics. But the medicine he needed first and foremost was not going to be dispensed at a pharmacy. The peeler asked him if he was sure and he said, quietly, that he was. In fact, it was sitting in the chair that he had a problem with, and part of him understood that perhaps he always would. They’d tied him to one in the isolated barn in South Armagh where they had set to work on him so systematically. It was a dark art to beat a man for three days, inflict the greatest possible hurt and yet manage to keep him breathing, not have him die from shock or blood loss, or rupture a vital organ, to have the temperance and clinical control to keep the blows to the head to a minimum.

‘I want to speak to the Branch,’ which he knew without being told this man was not. He expected him to ask his business.

Instead, he said: 'You any ID?'

'No.' He had a return bus ticket to Belfast and the clothes on his back. He'd left his wallet and anything that could identify him in a locked drawer in his home, and he hoped the state of his face would mean those who'd seen him here, so many miles from his locality, would barely recognise him in the light of an average day. The peeler tensed. He braced himself for the Brits to re-enter and lift him up by his sideburns, and drag him to another cell where two men would push his wrists back, bending them against the joint until his tendons screamed while a third crushed and twisted his already broken bollocks. He had been lifted before. First during internment in 1971 before he had joined, and a couple of times after he had raised his right hand and swore allegiance to the IRA. Promises, promises. He knew the drill. But the peeler didn't make a move.

'There's no Special Branch officer present in Strabane station,' he explained.

He shrugged but said nothing in response. The peeler drummed his fingers on the table. He could feel the cop's eyes on him. Silence ensued. The peeler pushed back his chair and left the room.

As soon as the door closed, he stood up and slowly started to pace, feeling the cold that seemed to have seeped into the bones of his feet, feeling the myriad of hurts, remembering them as they were administered, remembering all of them. When you torture a man, he will say anything, agree to anything, admit anything. First, he will beg for his life and then, he will plead for you to kill him. The men who had worked on his body in shifts with the thick wooden paddle,

the iron ball on a chain, the electrodes rigged up to a car battery, had taught him this. Every man can be broken. It was a long time and he was no longer the person he had been, that the man who had ordered his torment had visited. His Officer Commanding in the Belfast Brigade of the IRA. He'd shook his head, a look of disgust on his face. As though being tied to a chair, looking like he did, and reeking of his own urine with his trousers and thighs smeared with his own faeces had been a choice.

'Someone's here to see you.' His OC had pulled his wife into view and clasped her face in his hands, forced her to stare at him. He'd felt the touch of an iron bar under his chin and he too was forced to see. Her eyes full of glass and fear and abhorrence. She had looked at him in a different way the last time they had met. But then, he had been a different man. She was released and she ran out of the barn in tears.

'There's plenty of tail in Belfast. But that one's out of bounds. Understood?'

'Yes.' It was only then that he realised he might actually survive this.

'Good. Then we're square.' He could not believe his ears. Not a question and delivered like a man paying a restaurant bill. His OC was staring at him, wanted him to reply.

'Thanks,' he'd said.

In Strabane station, he had retreated to a spot on the floor in the corner of the room when the blue-eyed peeler returned an hour later and set a plastic beaker of water on the table. If he was surprised to see him on the ground he didn't show it.



‘I’ve made a call. To Belfast. Someone is on their way,’ he said, and took a blister of aspirin from his shirt pocket. He popped four from the foil and put them on the table beside the water and then turned and made to leave.

‘Thanks,’ he said, not yet ready to move from where he lay.

The peeler nodded and left the room.

Time passed. He drank the water and took the pills. At first, he did not sleep. But he must have nodded off. It was gone six in the morning when the door opened again.

‘So let’s have a look at ye.’ The man who had entered and now closed the door behind him did so on a wave of sparky energy, despite the hour. He was well over six feet tall, and unlike the peeler he wore plain clothes: a brown corduroy sports coat over a shirt and V-neck jumper combo, and a pair of expensive-looking slacks. He had a groomed beard and blonde hair that was almost flaxen and swept off his face. Like a Viking modelling for a clothes catalogue. The newcomer strode over to where he was curled up in the corner and hunkered down, face-to-face. His eyes were a blue-grey and cold, like the inner wall of a shell washed up on a northern shore. He smiled. ‘Don’t tell me, I should have seen the other guy,’ he said and raised himself up. He clicked his fingers and pointed at a seat as he sat down at the table. Belfast accent but not plummy, despite his attire and swagger. He limped over to the table, sat down.

‘Are you a Branch man?’ A warrant card fell with a slap on the table. It said Special Branch.

Name: Samuel Royce Fenton.

‘Read it and weep. That’s legit. Now, to whom do I owe the pleasure of unpacking my cock from the arse of

that wee WPC I left in bed, not to mention the death of a morning's golfing I had planned?'

He doubted whether the weather would permit anything in the way of golf unless things had changed utterly since he arrived here. He hesitated, but only for an instant, and thought, *This is what it is like to stand on the precipice of another world*, and then he spoke, told Fenton his name, where he was from.

'You're IRA,' he replied without hesitation. It wasn't a question, and he didn't confirm or deny, but he was correct. 'I've heard of you. Connected,' said Fenton, slowly pointing a finger at him, that cold smile on his face again. 'And here ye are. Not that your ma would recognise you.' Not an accusation, and no disdain in his voice. If anything, the big man seemed awed. He stopped pointing and thrust his hand over the table. They shook. And that was that. He knew it as soon as he took Sam Fenton's hand that he had crossed a divide and he could never, ever return. And he felt nothing at all. When he'd been dumped on a country road after they released him from the barn, he had just one loyalty left in the entire world and that was to himself.

Fenton stood up abruptly. 'Mon the fuck, this place is a shithole. Let's go for breakfast.'

He navigated them out of Strabane RUC station as though he owned it, and they accelerated west out of the town. The dawn was leaching the night from the sky behind them, weak grey replacing the blues and blacks that they pursued west. They approached the Lifford Bridge that would take them across the River Foyle. The river was the border with the Irish Republic and up ahead was a security checkpoint, manned by police and British

Army. All vehicles were being stopped. He turned in his seat and looked at Fenton, who returned a small wink. A big peeler with a hat on and wearing a thick bulletproof vest raised his hand, and Fenton slowed to a stop and rolled his window down. He passed his warrant card to the cop before a word was exchanged. The peeler took a few seconds to absorb it, his features moving from scrutiny to recognition to looking mildly perturbed. He handed it back quickly and barely glanced at the passenger seat, wishing Fenton a good day.

‘Free State?’ he asked as they left Northern Ireland behind them and entered the Republic, County Donegal.

‘We need a bit of peace. To talk,’ Fenton replied. Which was probably right, but here he had no jurisdiction, and the legally held personal protection weapon he no doubt had secreted was a criminal offence to possess. They drove along winding, high hedged country roads for almost half an hour, deeper into the green recesses of Donegal, the light of the new day awakening colour from the land. Fenton pulled in without indicating and stopped with a skid on a gravel clearing at the front of a whitewashed pub with no name. When they got out, he could smell turf smoke and saw a green An Post van and a white Ford Cortina with Garda emblems and a blue line down the side. Fenton rapped the closed door and gained entry. They sat in the snug, away from the smattering of uniformed Garda officers and postal workers who appeared interested only in minding their own business and drinking, illegally, without hassle.

‘Early morning house,’ he commented.

‘The same,’ confirmed Fenton, who sparked up a Dunhill filter and tossed the maroon box his way. He accepted the

flaming match and took a draw while Fenton ordered them both pints of stout, and bacon and eggs. ‘*Sláinte*,’ Fenton said as they had their first sip, surprising him with his use of the Irish language. ‘Oh aye, I know my Gaelic.’

Food arrived quickly and he surprised himself by eating the lot, though noted that his companion chased his round the plate. Fenton waited until he had finished.

‘Talk to me,’ Fenton said.

He did. Told him the whole thing, left nothing out. And then talked some more, like a man with a dam in his head that had ruptured. This man, he had a way. He made it easy. Charismatic was not a word he would have used at that time in his life, but Samuel Royce Fenton had it to spare. In fact, Fenton appeared, from his fallen perspective, as the unadulterated incarnation of it. When the words dried up, he checked his watch. He’d been talking for more than an hour.

‘So, there it is. Everyone has their reasons. And now you want to come and work for us?’ asked Fenton.

He shrugged. ‘I’m done. My war is over.’ He took a second smoke.

Fenton grunted at this, gave him a wry smile through the fug.

‘Mate, it’s not just your fight that’s over. The IRA and the British have already fought this to a stalemate. Sooner or later the talking will start. Then there’ll be peace, and sharing power, you can take that to the bank. I mean look at France and Germany, tucked up in bed together like the Second World War never happened. Someday it will be the exact same here between the Brits and the ’RA.’

‘A man could get an OBE for that kind of loose talk,’

he observed. One behind the ear. Street slang for a single bullet in the back of the head.

‘Oh, for a lot less,’ said Fenton. ‘But it’s true. You’ve made the right choice today. For the first time in your career you’re on the right side. The winning side,’ Fenton said.

‘I’m not interested in serving the Crown,’ he replied.

Fenton threw his head back, laughed from his ribs.

‘I didn’t say you were,’ he replied, and his face became sombre. He pointed the serrated knife that came with their breakfast at his chest and then across the table at him. ‘This winning side. You and me.’ Fenton jabbed the knife towards the low ceiling. ‘The higher you go, the higher I go,’ he explained.

‘Sounds like I’ll be doing all the work.’

‘There’s fifty large in cash every year for you. Anything you make on the side is your business, I’ll not interfere. But you’re going to need a new name, a codename.’

He thought for a few seconds and then pointed to the steak knife in Fenton’s hand. Fenton shook his head, said that would not work. Then he stubbed out his smoke and clicked his fingers.

‘Topbrass,’ he said.

‘Seriously?’

‘It’s exactly what you will be. Untouchable, my friend, you’ll go all the way to the very top.’

The sun was fully up as they travelled in silence back towards the border. Fenton agreed to drop him off on the outskirts of Strabane and he would take the bus back to Belfast. They agreed on a story that would cover his absence. They crossed the Lifford Bridge as a mushroom of grey-black smoke rose in the distance ahead of them, followed a few

seconds later by the sound of the explosion, like rocks rolling in a steel drum. Strabane had been bombed, yet again, and the IRA Christmas cessation was at an end. He watched the smoke drift in the wind, wondered absently if anyone had been killed and if the buses would be running. When he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the wing mirror, he almost didn't recognise the bruised mask that looked back. And the name that came to mind was not his own, it was Topbrass. Even though he had walked in and freely offered himself, he could not shake the feeling that he had been snared by this dark Messiah, a fisher of men who had called on him to drop his nets and had renamed him in his own image.