

THE  
COLD COLD  
GROUND



A DETECTIVE SEAN DUFFY NOVEL

THE  
COLD COLD  
GROUND

BOOK ONE

THE TROUBLES TRILOGY

ADRIAN MCKINTY



59 John Glenn Drive  
Amherst, New York 14228-2119

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Inquiries should be addressed to

Seventh Street Books

59 John Glenn Drive

Amherst, New York 14228-2119

VOICE: 716-691-0133

FAX: 716-691-0137

WWW.PROMETHEUSBOOKS.COM

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It is rumoured that after concluding his song about  
the war in Ilium, Homer sang next of the war  
between the frogs and rats.

—Jorge Luis Borges, “The Immortal,” 1949



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## 1: THE THIN BLUE LINE

The riot had taken on a beauty of its own now. Arcs of gasoline fire under the crescent moon. Crimson tracer in mystical parabolas. Phosphorescence from the barrels of plastic bullet guns. A distant yelling like that of men below decks in a torpedoed prison ship. The scarlet whoosh of Molotovs intersecting with exacting surfaces. Helicopters everywhere: their spotlights finding one another like lovers in the Afterlife.

And all this through a lens of oleaginous Belfast rain.

I watched with the others by the Land Rover on Knockagh Mountain. No one spoke. Words were inadequate. You needed a Picasso for this scene, not a poet.

The police and the rioters were arranged in two ragged fronts that ran across a dozen streets, the opposing sides illuminated by the flash of newsmen's cameras and the burning, petrol-filled milk bottles sent tumbling across the no man's land like votive offerings to the god of curves.

Sometimes one side charged and the two lines touched for a time before decoupling and returning to their original positions.

The smell was the stench of civilization: gunpowder, cordite, slow match, kerosene.

It was perfect.

It was *Giselle*.

It was *Swan Lake*.

And yet . . .

And yet we had the feeling that we had seen better.

In fact we had seen better only last week when, in the hospital wing of The Maze Prison, IRA commander Bobby Sands had finally popped his clogs.

Bobby was a local lad from Newtownabbey and a poster boy for the movement, having never killed anyone and coming from a mixed Protestant-Catholic background. And bearded, he was a good Jesus, which didn't hurt either.

Bobby Sands was the *maitreya*, the world teacher, the martyr who would redeem mankind through his suffering.

When Bobby finally died on the sixty-sixth day of his hunger strike the Catholic portions of the city had erupted with spontaneous anger and frustration.

But that was a week ago and Frankie Hughes, the second hunger striker to die, had none of Bobby's advantages. No one thought Frankie was Jesus. Frankie enjoyed killing and was very good at it. Frankie shed no tears over dead children. Not even for the cameras.

And the riots for his death felt somewhat . . . *orchestrated*.

Perhaps on the ground it seemed like the same chaos and maybe that's what they would print tomorrow in newspapers from Boston to Beijing . . . But up here on the Knockagh it was obvious that the peelers had the upper hand. The rioters had been cornered into a small western portion of the city between the hills and the Protestant estates. They faced a thousand full-time peelers, plus two or three hundred police reserve, another two hundred UDR and a battalion-strength unit of British Army regulars in close support. The Brits on this occasion were the Black Watch who, notoriously, were full of Glaswegian roughnecks looking for any chance of a rumble. There were hundreds of rioters—not the thousands that had been predicted: this hardly represented a general uprising of even the Catholic population and as for the promised "revolution" . . . well, not tonight.

"It looks bad," young Constable Price offered as a conversational opener.

"Ach, it's half-hearted at best for this lad," Detective Constable McCrabban replied in his harsh, sibilant, Ballymena-farmer accent.

"It's no fun being the second hunger striker to croak it. Everybody remembers the first one, number two is no good at all. They won't be writing folk songs for him," Sergeant McCallister agreed.

“What do you think, Duffy?” Constable Price asked me.

I shrugged. “Crabbie’s right. It’s never gonna be as big for number two. And the rain didn’t help him.”

“The rain?” McCallister said skeptically. “Forget the rain! It’s the Pope. It was bad luck for Frankie to kick the bucket just a few hours before somebody tried to kill the Pope.”

I’d done an analysis of Belfast riots from 1870–1970 which showed an inverse proportion between rain and rioting. The heavier the down-pour the less likely there was to be trouble, but I kept my trap shut about that—nobody else up here had gone to University and there was no gain to be had from rubbing in my book-learning. And big Sergeant McCallister did have a point about John Paul II. It wasn’t every news cycle that someone shot the Holy Father.

“He was a scumbag was Frankie Hughes. A rare ’un. It was his ASU that killed Will Gordon and his wee girl,” Sergeant McCallister added.

“I thought it was the wee boy who was killed,” McCrabban said.

“Nah. The wee boy lived. The bomb was in the car. The wee lad was severely injured. Will and his young daughter were blown to bits,” McCallister explained.

There was a silence after that punctuated by a far-off discharge of baton rounds.

“Fenian bastards,” Price said.

Sergeant McCallister cleared his throat. Price wondered what that meant for a beat or two and then he remembered me.

“Oh, no offense, Duffy,” he muttered, his thin lips and pinched face even thinner and pinchier.

“No offense, *Detective Sergeant Duffy*,” Sergeant McCallister said to put the new constable in his place.

“No offense, Sergeant Duffy,” Price repeated petulantly.

“None taken, son. I’d love to see things from your point of view but I can’t get my head that far up my arse.”

Everybody laughed and I used this as my exit line and went inside the Land Rover to read the *Belfast Telegraph*.

It was all about the Pope. His potential assassin was a man called

Mehmed Ali Agca, a Turk, who had shot him in St. Peter's Square. The *Telegraph* didn't have much more information at this stage but they padded out the story with the shocked opinions of local people and politicians and a few right-wing Protestant nuts, like Councilor George Seawright who felt that this was an "important blow against the Anti-Christ."

Sergeant McCallister poked his big puffy face and classic alky nose round the back of the Land Rover.

"You're not taking the huff at Price, are you, Sean?" he asked in a kindly manner.

"Jesus no. I was just getting out of the rain," I replied.

Sergeant McCallister grinned with relief. One of those infectious grins that I had not been blessed with myself. "That's good. Well, look, I was thinking, do you want to call it a day? No one is going to be needing us. They're more than covered down there in the riot. They've got redundancy in spades. Shall we bog off?"

"You're the senior sergeant. It's your call."

"I'll log us in to midnight, but we'll skip, what say you?"

"Alan, I think that's the most sensible thing I've heard since we bloody came up here."

On the way back down the mountain McCallister put a cassette in the player and we listened to his personal mix tape of Crystal Gayle, Tammy Wynette and Dolly Parton. They dropped me first on Coronation Road, Carrickfergus. "Is this your new manor?" McCrabban asked, looking at the fresh paint job on number 113.

"Aye, I just moved in couple of weeks ago, no time yet for a house-warming party or anything," I said quickly.

"You own it?" Sergeant McCallister asked.

I nodded. Most people still rented in Victoria Estate, but a few people were buying their council houses from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive under Mrs. Thatcher's privatization plans. I had bought the place vacant for only £10,000. (The family that had lived here had owed two year's rent and one night just upped and vanished. To America, some said, but nobody really knew.)

“You painted it pink?” Price asked with a grin.

“That’s lavender, you color-blind eejit,” I said.

McCallister saw that Price clearly hadn’t got the message yet. “Hey lads, you know why Price nearly failed the police entrance exam? He thought a polygon was a dead parrot.”

The lads chuckled dutifully and somebody punched Price on the shoulder.

McCallister winked at me. “We have to head, mate,” he announced and with that they closed the back doors of the Rover.

“See you!” I shouted after them as they drove off, but it was unlikely they heard me through the bulletproofing and armor plate.

I stood there looking ridiculous with my full riot gear, helmet and Sterling sub-machine gun.

A wee lad was gawping at me. “Is that a real gun, mister?” he asked.

“I certainly hope so,” I said, opened my gate and walked down the garden path. It wasn’t a bad house: a neat job in the middle of the terrace, built in the 1950s, like the rest of Victoria Estate, Carrickfergus for the Protestant working poor. Of course these days hardly anybody was working. The ICI textile plant had closed last year, in the autumn of 1980, and they had employed one in every four men in Carrick. Now the town had an unemployment rate of twenty per cent and it would have been worse but for emigration to England and Australia and the brand new DeLorean factory that had just opened in Dunmurray. If people bought DeLoreans in anything like the numbers predicted then Carrickfergus and Northern Ireland had a chance. Otherwise . . .

“Busy night?” Mrs. Campbell asked from next door.

Mrs. Campbell . . . I smiled and said nothing. Best not to. She was trouble. Thirty-two. Red hair. Looker. Husband away on the North Sea oil rigs. Two weans under ten. There was no way.

“You know, what with the riots and everything?” she insisted while I hunted for my keys.

“Aye,” I said.

“I suppose you heard about the Pope?”

“Yes.”

“You could find about a dozen suspects on this street,” she said with a cackle.

“I’m sure you could,” I agreed.

“Personally, mind, I find it shocking, really shocking,” she said.

I blinked a couple of times and looked straight ahead. This statement worried me. It meant that she was trying to show empathy, which led me to the inescapable conclusion that she probably fancied me and that she (and everybody else on the street) knew that I was a Catholic.

I hadn’t been here three weeks, barely spoken to anyone. What had I done in this time to give myself away? Was it the way I pronounced the letter “H” or was it just that I was marginally less sour than Coronation Road’s dour Protestant population?

I put the key in the lock, shook my head and went inside. I hung up my coat, took off my bulletproof vest and unbuckled the handgun. In case we’d been needed for riot duty I’d also been issued with a CS gas canister, a billy club and that scary World War Two machine gun—presumably to deal with an IRA ambush en route. I carefully put all these weapons on the hall table.

I hung my helmet on the hook and went upstairs.

There were three bedrooms. I used two for storage and had taken the front one for myself as it was the biggest and came with a fireplace and a nice view across Coronation Road to the Antrim Hills beyond.

Victoria Estate lay at the edge of Carrickfergus and hence at the edge of the Greater Belfast Urban Area. Carrick was gradually being swallowed up by Belfast but for the moment it still possessed some individual character: a medieval town of 13,000 people with a small working harbor and a couple of now empty textile factories.

North of Coronation Road you were in the Irish countryside, south and east you were in the city. I liked that. I had a foot in both camps too. I’d been born in 1950 in Cushendun when that part of rural Northern Ireland was like another planet. No phones, no electricity, people still using horses to get around, peat for cooking and heating, and on Sundays some of the crazier Protestants rowing or sailing across the North Channel in little doreys to attend the kirk in Scotland.

Aye, I'd been whelped a country boy but in 1969, right as the Troubles were kicking off, I'd gone to Queen's University Belfast on a full scholarship to study psychology. I'd loved the city: its bars, its alleys, its character and, at least for a while, the university area was immune to the worst of the violence.

It was the era of Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, Ciaran Carson, and QUB was a little candle of light held up against the gathering dark.

And I'd done well there if I say so myself. Nobody was doing psychology in those days and I'd shone. Not much competition, I suppose, but still. I'd gained a first-class degree, fell in and out of love a couple of times, published a little paper on the unreliability of eyewitness testimony in the *Irish Journal of Criminology* and perhaps I would have stayed an academic or gotten a job across the water but for the incident.

*The incident.*

*Why I was here now. Why I'd joined the peelers in the first place.*

I stripped off the last of my police uniform and hung it in the cupboard. Under all that webbing I had sweated like a Proddy at a High Mass, so I had a quick shower to rinse out the peeler stink. I dried myself and looked at my naked body in the mirror.

5' 10". 11 stone. Rangy, not muscled. Thirty years old but I looked thirty unlike my colleagues on sixty cigs a day. Dark complexion, dark curly hair, dark blue eyes. My nose was an un-Celtic aquiline and when I worked up a tan a few people initially took me as some kind of French or Spanish tourist (not that there were many of those rare birds in these times). As far as I could tell there wasn't a drop of French or Spanish blood in my background but there were always those dubious sounding local stories in Cushendun about survivors from the wreck of the Spanish Armada . . .

I counted the grey hairs.

Fourteen now.

I thought about the Serpico moustache. Again dismissed it.

I raised an eyebrow at myself. "Mrs. Campbell, it must be awful lonely with your husband away on the North Sea . . ." I said, for some reason doing a Julio Iglesias impersonation.

“Oh, it’s very lonely and my house is so cold . . .” Mrs. Campbell replied.

I laughed and perhaps as a tribute to this mythical Iberian inheritance I sought out my Che Guevara T-shirt, which Jim Fitzpatrick had personally screenprinted for me. I found an old pair of jeans and my Adidas trainers. I lit the upstairs paraffin heater and went back downstairs.

I turned on the lights, went into the kitchen, took a pint glass from the freezer and filled it half full with lime juice. I added a few ice cubes and carried it to the front room: the good room, the living room, the lounge. For some arcane Proddy reason no one in Coronation Road used this room. It was where they kept the piano and the family Bible and the stiff chairs only to be brought out for important visitors like cops and ministers.

I had no toleration for any of that nonsense. I’d set up the TV and stereo in here and although I still had some decorating to do, I was pleased with what I’d achieved. I’d painted the walls a very un-Coronation Road Mediterranean blue and put up some original—mostly abstract—art that I’d got from the Polytech Design School. There was a bookcase filled with novels and art books and a chic looking lamp from Sweden. I had a whole scheme in mind. Not my scheme admittedly, but a scheme none the less. Two years back I’d stayed with Gresha, a friend from Cushendun, who had fled war-torn Ulster in the early ’70s for New York City. She’d apparently become quite the professional little blagger and hanger-on, name-dropping Warhol, Ginsberg, Sontag. None of that had turned my head but I’d done a bit of experimenting and I’d gone apeshit for her pad on St. Mark’s Place; I imagine I had consciously tried to capture some of its aesthetic here. There were limits to what one could do in a terraced house in a Jaffa sink estate in far-flung Northern Ireland, however, but if you closed the curtains and turned up the music . . .

I topped off the pint glass with 80 proof Smirnoff vodka, stirred the drink and grabbed a book at random from the bookcase.

It was Jim Jones’s *The Thin Red Line* which I’d read on my World

War Two jag along with *Catch 22*, *The Naked and the Dead*, *Gravity's Rainbow* and so on. Every cop usually had a book going on for the waiting between trouble. I didn't have one at the moment and that was making me nervous. I skimmed through the dog-eared best bits until I found the section where First Sergeant Welsh of C for Charlie Company just decides to stare at all the men on the troop ship for two full minutes, ignoring their questions and not caring if they thought he was crazy because he was the goddamned First Sergeant and he could do anything he bloody well wanted. Nice. Very nice.

That scene read, I turned on the box, checked that the Pope was still alive and switched to BBC2, which was showing some minor snooker tournament I hadn't previously heard of. I was just getting a little booze buzz going and quite enjoying the loose match between Alex Higgins and Cliff Thorburn (both them boys on their fifth pint of beer) when the phone rang.

I counted the rings. Seven, eight, nine. When it reached ten I went into the hall and waited for a couple more.

When it reached fifteen, I finally picked up the receiver.

"Aye?" I said suspiciously.

"There's good news and bad news," Chief Inspector Brennan said.

"What's the good news, sir?" I asked.

"It's nearby. You can walk from there."

"What's the bad news?"

"It's nasty."

I sighed. "Jesus. Not kids?"

"Not that kind of nasty."

"What kind of nasty, then?"

"They chopped one of his hands off."

"Lovely. Whereabouts?"

"The Barn Field near Taylor's Avenue. You know it?"

"Aye. Are you over there now?"

"I'm calling from a wee lady's house on Fairymount."

"A wee fairy lady?"

"Just get over here, ya eejit."

“I’ll see you there in ten minutes, sir.”

I hung up the phone. This is where the Serpico moustache would have come in handy. You could look at yourself in the hall mirror, stroke the Serpico moustache and have a ponder.

Instead I rubbed my stubbly chin while I extemporized. Pretty nice timing for a murder, what with the riot in Belfast and the death of a hunger striker and the poor old Pope halfway between Heaven and Earth. It showed . . . What? Intelligence? Luck?

I grabbed my raincoat and opened the front door. Mrs. Campbell was still standing there, nattering away to Mrs. Bridewell, the neighbor on the other side.

“Are you away out again?” she asked. “Ach, there’s no rest for the wicked, is there, eh?”

“Aye,” I said with gravity.

She looked at me with her green eyes and flicked away the fag ash in her left hand. Something stirred down below.

“There’s, uh, been a suspected murder on Taylor’s Avenue, I’m away to take a gander,” I said.

Both women looked suitably shocked which told me that for once in my police career I was actually ahead of the word on the street.

I left the women and walked down Coronation Road. The rain had become a drizzle and the night was calm—the acoustics so perfect that you could hear the plastic bullet guns all the way from the center of Belfast.

I walked south past a bunch of sleekit wee muckers playing football with a patched volleyball. I felt sorry for them with all their fathers out of work. I said, hey, and kept going past the identical rows of terraces and the odd house which had been sold to its tenants and subsequently blossomed into window treatments, extensions and conservatories.

I turned right on Barn Road and cut through Victoria Primary School.

The new graffiti on the bike shed walls was jubilant about the Pope: “Turkey 1, Vatican City 0” and “Who Shot JP?”—a none too subtle *Dallas* reference.

I slipped over the rear fence and across the Barn Field.

The black tongue of Belfast Lough was ahead of me now and I could see three army choppers skimming the water, ferrying troops from Bangor to the Ardoyne.

I crossed a stretch of waste ground and a field with one demented looking sheep. I heard the generator powering the spotlights and then I saw Brennan with a couple of constables I didn't yet know and Matty McBride, the forensics officer. Matty was dressed in jeans and jumper rather than the new white boiler suits that all FOs had been issued and instructed to wear. I'd have to give the lazy bastard a dressing down for that, but not in front of Brennan or the constables.

I waved to the lads and they waved back.

Chief Inspector Tom Brennan was my boss, the man in charge of the entire police station in Carrickfergus. The bigger stations were run by a Superintendent but Carrick was not even a divisional HQ. I, a buck sergeant with two months' seniority, was in fact the fourth most senior officer in the place. But it was a safe posting and in my fortnight here I'd been impressed by the collegiate atmosphere, if not always with the professionalism of my colleagues.

I walked across the muddy field and shook Brennan's hand.

He was a big man with an oval face, light brown, almost blondish hair and intelligent slate-blue eyes. He didn't look Irish, nor English, there was probably Viking blood somewhere in that gene pool.

He was one of those characters who felt that a weak handshake could somehow damage his authority, which meant that every handshake had to bloody hurt.

I disengaged with a wince and looked about me for a beat or two. Brennan and the constables had done a hell of a job contaminating the crime scene with their big boots and ungloved hands. I gave a little inward sigh.

"Good to see you, Sean," Brennan said.

"Bit surprised to see you, sir. We must be a wee bit short-staffed if you're the responding officer."

"You said it, mate. Everybody's away manning checkpoints. You know who's minding the store?"

“Who?”

“Carol.”

“Carol? Jesus Christ. This would be a fine time for that IRA missile attack we’ve all been promised,” I muttered.

Brennan raised an eyebrow. “You can joke, pal, but I’ve seen the intel. The IRA got crates of them from Libya.”

“If you say so, sir.”

“Do you know Quinn and Davey?” Brennan asked.

I shook the hands of the two reserve constables who, in the nature of things, I might not see again for another month.

“Where’s your gun?” Brennan asked in his scary, flat East Antrim monotone.

I picked up on the quasi-official timbre to his voice.

“I’m sorry, sir, I left my revolver at home,” I replied.

“And what if my call to you had been made under duress and this had been an ambush?” Brennan asked.

“I suppose I’d be dead,” I said stupidly.

“Aye. You would be, wouldn’t ya? Consider this a reprimand.”

“An official reprimand?”

“Of course not. But I don’t take it lightly: they would just love to top you, wouldn’t they, my lad? They’d love it.”

“I suppose they would, sir,” I admitted. Everybody knew the IRA had a bounty on Catholic coppers.

Brennan reached out with his big, gloved, meat-axe fingers and grabbed my cheek. “And we’re not going to let that happen, are we, sunshine?”

“No, sir.”

Brennan give me a squeeze that really hurt and then he let go.

“All right, good, now what do you make of all this?” Brennan said.

Matty was taking photographs of a body propped up in the front seat of a burnt-out car. The car was surrounded by rubbish and in the lee of the massive wall of the old Ambler’s Mill. The vehicle was a Ford Cortina that been had jacked and destroyed years, possibly decades, before. Now it was a rusted sculpture, lacking a windscreen, doors, wheels.

A shock of mid-length yellow hair was visible from here.

I walked closer.

The cliché of every cops and robbers show—the dead blonde in the garbage tip. Course the blonde was always a bird, not what we had before us: some chubby guy with yellow tips in a denim AC/DC jacket.

He was sitting in the driver's seat, his head tilted to one side, the back of his skull gone, his face partially caved in. He was youngish, perhaps thirty, wearing jeans, that jacket, a black T-shirt and Doc Marten boots. His blond locks were caked with filth and matted blood. There was a bruise just to the right of his nose. His eyes were closed and his cheeks were paler than typing paper.

The car was on a rise above the high grass and wild blackberry bushes and only a few yards from a popular short cut across the Barn Field itself which I myself had used on occasion.

I pinched the skin on the corpse's neck.

The flesh was cold and the skin stiff.

Rigor was on the gallop. This boy was killed some time ago. Most likely the wee hours of the morning or even late last night.

They had either marched him here and shot him or shot him and dragged him here from their vehicle on Taylor's Avenue. Good place for it. There would be no one here late to witness a killing or a body dumping, yet someone would find the corpse soon enough in the daylight hours. Ten more minutes up the road would have brought you into the countryside but you couldn't be too careful with the Army throwing checkpoints up all over the place.

I looked again for footprints. Dozens. Matty, Tom and the two reserve constables had come over for a look-see at the body. They didn't know any better, God love them, but I made a mental note to hold a little seminar on "contaminating the crime scene" perhaps in a week or two when everyone knew who I was.

I circled away from the car and walked up to the high mill wall, which, with the broad limbs of an oak tree, formed a little protected area. It was obviously some kind of former druggie or teenage hang-out. There was a mattress on the ground. A sofa. An old reclining chair.

Garbage. Freezer bags by the score. Hypodermics. Condoms. I picked up one of the freezer bags, opened it with difficulty and sniffed. Glue. Nothing was fresh. Everything looked a couple of months old. The teenagers had obviously found an abandoned house in which to get high and create a new generation.

I checked the sight lines.

You could see the car from the road and from the Barley Field short cut.

They—whoever *they* were—wanted the body to be found.

I walked back to the vehicle and took a second look at the corpse.

Those pale cheeks, a pierced ear, no earring.

The victim's left hand was by his side, but his right was detached from the body and lying at his feet on the accelerator pedal. He'd been shot in the chest first and then in the back of the head. There wasn't much blood around the hand which probably meant that it had been cut off after the victim's heart had stopped pumping. Severing a limb while he still lived implied at least two men. One to hold him down, one wielding the bone saw. But shooting him and then cutting off his hand was easy enough to do on your own.

I looked for the customary plastic bag containing thirty sixpences or fifty-pence pieces but I didn't find it. They didn't always leave thirty pieces of silver when they shot informers but often they did.

*Here's the hand that took the dirty money and here's the Judas's bargain.*

The right hand looked small and pathetic lying there on the accelerator. The left had scars over the knuckles from many a bout of fisticuffs.

There was something about the other hand that I didn't like, but I couldn't see what it was just at the moment.

I took a breath, nodded to myself, and stood up.

"Well?" Brennan asked.

"It's my belief, sir, that this was no ordinary car accident," I said.

Brennan laughed and shook his head. "Why is it that every eejit in the CID thinks they're a bloody comedian?"

"Probably to cover up some deep insecurity, sir."

“All right what have you got, Sean? First impressions.”

“I’d say our victim was a low-ranking paramilitary informer. They found out he was snitching for us or the Brits and they killed him. In typical melodramatic fashion they cut off his right hand after they topped him and then they left the body in a place where he could easily be found so the message would go out quickly. I’d say the time of death was sometime around midnight last night.”

“Why low-ranking?”

“Well, neither you nor Matty nor I recognized him so he’ll just be some crappy low-level hood from the Estates; also this place, bit out of the way, so the killer will be somebody local too. Somebody Carrick at least. I’ll bet Sergeant McCallister can ID our stiff, and I’ll bet you we find out who ordered the killing through the usual channels. Who called it in?”

“Anonymous tip.”

“The killer?”

“Nah, some old lady out walking her dog. Unless you think the terrorists are using old lady hit men?”

“What time was the call?”

“Six fifteen this evening.”

I nodded. “That’s a bit later than our killers wanted but he was seen in the end. I’m sure we’ll have the prints by tomorrow. I’d be very surprised indeed if this boy doesn’t have a record.”

Brennan slapped me hard on the back. “So, you’re happy enough to take this as lead?”

“What about the Ulster Bank fraud?”

“White-collar crime is going to have to wait until we’re back from the edge of the abyss.”

“Nice way of putting it.”

“It’s going to get worse before it gets better, don’t you think?”

I nodded. “Aye, I do.”

“Have you handled a murder before, Sean?”

“Three.”

“A triple murder or three separate murder investigations?”

“Three separate.”

“What, may I ask, were the results of those murder inquiries?”

I winced. “Well, I found out who did it on all three of them.”

“Prosecutions?”

“Zero. We had good eyewitness testimony on two but no one would testify.”

Brennan took a step backwards and regarded me for a second. He opened my raincoat. “Is that bloody Che Guevara?”

“It is, sir.”

“You’re a big pochle, aren’t ya? You turn up at a crime scene with no gun, wearing trainers and a Che Guevara T-shirt? I mean, what’s the world coming to?”

“A sticky end more than likely, sir.”

He grinned and then shook his head. “I don’t get you, Duffy. Why did a smart aleck like you join the peelers?”

“The snazzy uniforms? The thrilling prospect of being murdered on the way to work every morning?”

Brennan sighed. “Well, I suppose I should leave you to it.” He tapped his watch. “I might be able to get a wee Scotch and soda at the golf club.”

“Before you go, sir, I’ve one question. Who will I get to work this one with me?”

“You can have the entire resources of the CID.”

“What, all three of us?” I asked with a trace of sarcasm.

“All three of you,” he said stiffly, not liking my tone at all.

“Can I put in a secondment request for a couple of constables f—”

“No, you cannot! We’re tighter than a choir boy’s arse around here. You’ve got your team and that’s your lot. In case you hadn’t noticed, mate, civil war is a bloody heartbeat away, *après nous* the friggin flood, we are the little Dutch boys with our fingers in the dyke, we are the . . . the, uh . . .”

“Thin blue line, sir?”

“The thin blue line! Exactly!”

He poked me in the middle of Che’s face. “And until the hunger

strikes are over, matey-boy, you'll get no help from Belfast either. But you can handle it, can't you, Detective Sergeant Duffy?"

"Yes sir, I can handle it."

"Aye, you better or I'll bloody get somebody who can."

He yawned, tired out by his own bluster. "Well, I'll leave this in your capable hands, then. I have a feeling this one is not going to cover us in glory, but we have to file them all."

"That we do, sir."

"All right then."

Brennan waved and walked back to his Ford Granada parked behind the police Land Rover. When the Granada had gone, I called Matty over.

"What do you make of it?" I asked him.

Matty McBride was a twenty-three-year-old second-gen cop from East Belfast. He was a funny-looking character with his curly brown hair, pencil thin body, flappy ears. He was little was Matty, maybe five five. Wee and cute. He was wearing latex gloves and his nose was red, giving him a slight evil-clown quality. He'd joined the peelers right out of high school and was obviously smart enough to have gotten himself into CID but still, I had grave doubts about his focus and attention to detail. He had a dreamy side. He wasn't fussy or obsessed, which was a severe handicap in an FO. And when I had politely suggested that he look into the part-time degrees in Forensic Science at the Open University, Matty had scoffed at the very notion. He was young, though, perhaps he could be molded yet.

"Informer? Loyalist feud? Something like that?" Matty suggested.

"Aye, my take too. Do you think they shot him here?"

"Looks like it."

"March him out here and then chop his paw off with him screaming for all and sundry?"

Matty shrugged. "Ok, so they killed him somewhere else."

"But if they did that, why do you think they carried the body all the way over here from the road?"

"I don't know," Matty said wearily.

“It was to display him, Matty. They wanted him found quickly.”

Matty grunted, unwilling to buy into the pedagogical nature of our relationship.

“Have you done the hair samples, prints?” I asked.

“Nah, I’ll do all that once I’m done with the photos.”

“Who’s our patho?”

“Dr. Cathcart.”

“Is he good?”

“She. Cathcart’s a she.”

I raised my eyebrows. I hadn’t heard of a female patho before.

“She’s not bad,” Matty added.

We stood there looking into the burnt-out car listening to the rain pitter-patter on the rusted roof.

“I suppose I better get back to it,” Matty said.

“Aye,” I agreed.

“Is the cavalry coming down from Belfast at all?” Matty asked as he took more pictures.

I shook my head. “Nah, just you and me, mate. Cosier that way.”

“Jesus, I have to do this all by myself?” Matty protested.

“Get plod and sod over there to help you,” I said.

Matty seemed skeptical. “Them boys aren’t too brilliant at the best of times. Question for ya: skipper says to go easy on the old snaps. Do you need close-ups? If not I’ll skip them.”

“Go easy on the snaps? Why?”

“The expense, like, you know? Two pound for every roll we process. And it’s just a topped informer, isn’t it?”

I was annoyed by this. It was typical of the RUC to waste millions on pointless new equipment that would rot in warehouses but pinch pennies in a homicide investigation.

“Take as many rolls of film as you like. I’ll bloody pay for it. A man has been murdered here!” I said.

“All right, all right! No need to shout,” Matty protested.

“And get that evidence lifted before the rain washes it all away. Get those empty suits to help you.”

I buttoned my coat and turned up the collar. The rain was heavier now and it was getting cold.

"You could stay and help if you want, I'll give you some latex gloves," Matty said.

I tapped the side of my head. "I'd love to help, mate, but I'm an ideas man, I'd be no use to you."

Matty bit his tongue and said nothing.

"You're in charge of the scene now, Constable McBride," I said in a loud, official voice.

"Ok."

"No shortcuts," I added in a lower tone and turned and walked back to Taylor's Avenue where the police Land Rover was parked with its back doors open. There was a driver inside: another reserve constable that I didn't know, sitting on his fat arse reading a newspaper. I rapped the glass and the startled constable looked up. "Oi, you, Night of the Living Dead! Close them rear doors, and look alive, pal, you're a sitting duck here for an ambush."

"Yes, sergeant," the unknown constable said.

An idea occurred to me. "Shine your headlights onto the field, will ya?"

He put the headlights on full beam giving Matty even more light. I looked for a blood trail from the road to the corpse and sure enough I found a few drops.

"There's a blood trail!" I yelled to Matty and he nodded with a lot less excitement than I would have liked. I shrugged, did up my last coat button and went back along Coronation Road. It was well after midnight now and everyone was abed. The rain had turned to sleet and the smell of peat smoke was heady. No people, no cars, not even a stray cat. Dozens of identical, beige Proddy curtains neatly shut.

So all these Jaffa bastards know I'm a Catholic? I thought unhappily. That was the kind of quality information the IRA would pay good money for, if anybody around here was imaginative enough to sell it to them.

I walked up the garden path, went inside, pulled my vermillion

curtains, turned on the electric fire, stripped off my clothes in the living room and found an old bath robe. I made myself another pint of vodka and lime. The TV was finished now and it was test cards on all three channels. I put *Double Fantasy* on the record player. I flipped the lever for repeat, lay down on the leather sofa and closed my eyes.

Darkest Ulster in the Year of our Lord 1981: rain on the gable, helicopters flying along the lough, a riot reduced to the occasional rumble . . .

The problem with *Double Fantasy* was the arrangement whereby they alternated John Lennon tracks with Yoko Ono tracks. You couldn't escape Yoko for more than four minutes at a time. I lowered the volume to two, snuggled under the red sofa comforter and, taking the occasional sip from my vodka gimlet, fell into the kind of deep sleep only experienced by men whose lives, like those of C for Charlie company, are lived on the edge of the line.