

## PROLOGUE: MAY 1921

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### NORTH EARL STREET, DUBLIN.

**P**eter was nervous as he queued at the checkpoint. As a thirteen year-old schoolboy he was unlikely to be roughed up by the soldiers who had suddenly cordoned off the street, but the Black and Tans who manned roadblocks and checkpoints were notoriously lawless and unpredictable, and he felt his heart starting to beat faster.

The War of Independence had been raging for two and a half years between the British Government and the Irish Republican Army, and the Tans were mercenary troops who had been drafted into Ireland to boost the British Army. Peter and his school friends had heard whispered, hair-raising stories about the Tans' treatment of prisoners, and drunken Tans had been known to kill people who had simply annoyed them.

Peter looked towards the head of the checkpoint now and tried to weigh things up. It was mid-afternoon, so the chances were that the Tans wouldn't be drunk this early. The other good thing was

that they were under the command of a regular British officer. Peter knew that the British Army behaved far more properly than units like the Black and Tans, who had been recruited – so rumour had it – from jails all over England.

But even the regular army could behave badly, and feelings were running high right now. Two days previously the British had ambushed a rebel unit in Mayo, shooting dead six volunteers, and Peter had just heard a newsboy calling out the latest headline – that in retaliation a party of Royal Marines had been killed today in County Clare.

Was that why the man directly ahead of Peter in the queue was so nervous? There were lots of rebel gunmen walking the streets of Dublin. Could this man be one of them? He was in his twenties and reasonably well dressed, but he was heavily built and looked quite tough – just how Peter imagined a gunman should look. More tellingly, Peter had seen a fleeting look of fear on the man's face when the soldiers had set up the checkpoint. The man had immediately glanced behind him as though to change direction, but the Tans had cordoned off the street to the rear, to prevent any such action.

Peter watched the man carefully. Although he was moving in line with everyone else towards the checkpoint, Peter could see his eyes darting about, still seeking an escape route. From the junction with Marlborough Street to Nelson's Pillar, all of North Earl Street was lined with shops, but if the man hoped to take shelter in one of them he was too late. Peter watched as a line of soldiers fanned out along both sides of the street, to ensure that nobody left the checkpoint queue to enter a shop.

The man looked ahead again, as though gauging how long he

had before reaching the checkpoint, where people were being frisked and having their bags searched. It was a mild day, but the man wore a heavy jacket, and Peter saw him unbutton it now. Was he too warm, or could he be hoping to get rid of a weapon? Peter looked more closely at him. Tiny beads of sweat had formed on his forehead and his jaws seemed to be clenched tightly. But the thing that made Peter's pulses race was the way he had slipped his hand inside his jacket. Surely, even if he had a gun, he couldn't hope to shoot his way past all of the armed soldiers at the checkpoint? He'd be dead before he got a few yards, Peter reckoned, and innocent civilians could get shot too.

The queue moved nearer the waiting Tans, and suddenly Peter felt a movement at his kitbag. At the same time, the man turned round towards Peter, staring him straight in the eye. It was an aggressive, threatening look, and Peter swallowed hard.

'Don't look down,' said the man. He spoke quietly, but with menace.

Peter felt further movement at his kit bag, and realised that the man was slipping something – presumably his weapon – into it. All the while the man stared Peter in the eye, as though daring him to object. Peter felt intimidated, and before he could decide what to do, he felt another movement as the top of his kitbag was closed.

The man spoke again.

'Don't make a fuss, son. Don't even think about it. Right?'

Peter felt mesmerised by the man's frightening stare and somehow he couldn't make himself look away.

'Right?' repeated the man.

'Y ... yes ...'

'You'll sail through; they won't bother a young lad.'

Peter felt really scared, but he didn't know what this man might do if he disobeyed him. He wished that he had never gone near North Earl Street. He had been coming home from an away rugby match with his school, Belvedere, and had stopped off to buy sweets before getting the tram home to Glasnevin. Now, though, he had landed himself in real trouble. He thought of what the man had said about the soldiers not bothering a young lad. But the previous November, eighteen-year-old rebel Kevin Barry – a former pupil at Peter's school – had been hanged for his part in the War of Independence.

Before he could think any more about it, the queue moved forward. He moved with it, conscious that he was taking a major risk, but not knowing what else to do. Although there was a lot going on to distract people, it was still possible that someone in the queue could have spotted that he had accepted the weapon. Supposing that person turned them in to the Tans? It didn't bear thinking about. But most Dubliners hated the Black and Tans and their brutal behaviour, and Peter tried to convince himself that even if they had been seen, nobody would say anything.

The queue moved forward again, and now Peter felt beads of sweat on his own forehead. He wiped them with his sleeve; it would be important to appear relaxed when dealing with the soldiers. The queue continued to snake forward, and Peter could hear the harsh tones of the Tans as they questioned and searched people. Those in the queue were being dealt with at a reasonable speed, however, and Peter realised that the soldiers were questioning and frisking all the men, but examining the bags of only about half of the women. *He would have to behave as though there was clearly no need to search the kitbag of a schoolboy.* But even as he thought it,

he could feel his heart pounding.

Suddenly, the gunman reached the head of the queue and the soldiers began to question him. Peter noticed that the man kept his replies neutral, not seeking to please, as some people did, but not deliberately provoking the Tans with sharp answers either. Peter was so preoccupied that he didn't reply at first when a nearby voice asked, 'Victory or defeat?'

The voice was cultured, and the accent English, and Peter realised that he had been addressed by the British officer in command. Presumably the man had returned to the checkpoint after deploying the troops who were preventing people from leaving the queue. Peter turned to face his questioner. The Englishman was younger than Peter had first thought, and the officer had kindly blue eyes and a slightly wispy moustache.

'Sorry?' said Peter.

'Belvedere Rugby Club,' said the man, indicating the kitbag. 'Win your match?'

'Yes, 12-9,' answered Peter, and he smiled, despite his nervousness.

'Good show,' said the officer. 'Let me guess,' he added, looking at Peter appraisingly. 'Playing at centre?'

'Yes, actually.'

It wasn't entirely true – he played the occasional game as centre but more often played as out-half, but Peter sensed that this wasn't the time for corrections.

'Score today?'

'No. But I stopped a certain try for them.'

The officer smiled again. 'That's the stuff.'

The man seemed so genuinely pleasant that Peter found it hard

to think of him as the enemy. *But that would all change if they opened the kitbag.*

Just then, Peter saw the gunman being dismissed by the soldier who had been questioning him. Now he was next in line. He found himself facing a tall Black and Tan who wore a sergeant's stripes and who stared coldly at him. The man had a scar running from his left eye to his cheekbone, and Peter felt his stomach tighten with anxiety as the man beckoned him forward.

'Coming from?' asked the soldier, in what Peter recognised as a north of England accent.

'St Michael's college.'

'Where's that?' queried the Tan impatiently.

'Ballsbridge.'

'Going to?'

'Glasnevin. My home – Botanic Lodge,' Peter added nervously, in case Glasnevin might not be detailed enough for the scary-looking soldier.

'Arms out,' ordered the man.

Peter lowered his kitbag and stepped forward to be frisked, his mind racing with the thought that if the sullen Black and Tan was thorough enough to frisk a schoolboy, he might well insist on searching the kitbag.

'It's all right, sergeant. I think he's been man-handled enough for one day on the rugger pitch,' said the officer with a smile.

'Very good, sir,' answered the Tan with a hint of disapproval.

Peter smiled back at the young Englishman. He was hugely relieved that the officer was taking his part, but he realised that he mustn't appear *too* relieved, and that he ought to keep things casual-sounding.

‘Thanks. I got enough tackles from their flanker.’

‘I’ll bet.’

‘Just the kitbag then,’ said the sergeant, indicating the table on which people had been placing their bags for examination.

Peter felt his stomach tighten. Any sort of a decent search would locate the weapon – and he couldn’t count on the scar-faced sergeant shying away from rummaging through his soiled rugby gear. Peter hesitated. If he appealed to the officer it might look like he had something to hide. But if he said nothing, hoping for the officer to intervene again, and the man didn’t, what then?

‘Let’s be having you,’ said the Tan, his impatience obvious.

Peter had no choice but to hoist the bag onto the table. He wished fervently that he’d never found himself behind the gunman, wished that he hadn’t bothered with buying sweets and instead had gone straight home to the safety of his family.

‘Open it,’ instructed the soldier.

Peter decided to look appealingly at the officer. He caught the eye of the young Englishman, who held his gaze. It only lasted a second or two, but it seemed an eternity to Peter, as he waited for some kind of response. The officer finally raised an eyebrow in a sort of ironic gesture, as if to say *What can you do with someone like the sergeant?*, then he turned to the other man.

‘I think you can spare yourself the muddy rugby gear, sergeant,’ he said.

‘If you say so, sir,’ answered the man, his disapproval more obvious this time.

‘I do.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said the man, more respectfully, then he pushed the bag back to Peter.

*Don't show how relieved you are!* Peter told himself, even though his whole body was flooded with relief.

'Thank you,' he said politely, but casually, to the officer.

'You're welcome. Keep giving the flankers the slip.'

'I'll try,' said Peter, with a smile. Then he picked up his kitbag, nodded to the young Englishman and walked off.

At the corner of Marlborough Street he saw the gunman pretending to be window-shopping. As Peter approached, the man indicated with a nod of his head to turn the corner. Peter followed him, turning left again as the man led the way towards a small laneway that smelt of rotten fruit. Now that the first surge of relief had subsided a little, Peter was more aware of the risk he had taken. But even though it was terrifying to think of what could have happened, it was exciting too, now that he had gotten away with it. *Wait till he told his friends, Tommy and Susie, they would hardly believe him!* Though of course he would have to swear them to secrecy – his parents would go mad if they knew what he had just done.

His thoughts were interrupted by the gunman, who had stepped into the shelter of a doorway that Peter reckoned must be a rear entry to one of the shops on North Earl Street.

'Get in out of view,' said the man, and Peter stepped into the doorway and out of sight of those passing by on Marlborough Street.

'Let's have it,' said the man, indicating the kitbag.

'Right ...,' said Peter, then he opened the bag and handed a wrapped parcel to the man. Peter was certain that it was a pistol, but the gunman quickly pocketed it. Before Peter could ask any questions, the man looked him in the eye.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Peter Scanlon.’

‘You did well, Peter.’

‘Thanks.’

‘But what just happened, never happened, if you know what’s good for you. Got me?’

‘Eh ... yeah.’

‘Forget me, forget my face, forget any of this ever took place. All right?’

‘Right.’

‘Good lad. Up the Republic.’

The gunman gave Peter a farewell nod, then turned away and strode briskly up the lane.

Peter stayed unmoving in the doorway. *Forget any of this had happened?* Not in a million years. It had been terrifying, no question, and he still felt a little shaky. But it was thrilling to realise that he had outsmarted the dreaded Black and Tans, and to know that he had played a part, however small, in the War of Independence. Excited by the thought, he stepped out of the doorway, swung his kitbag over his shoulder and started on the journey home.