

## CHAPTER 9

DERRY, IRELAND - JULY, 1920

Fergus Croft returned from service in the British Army's 36<sup>th</sup> Ulster Division at the end of the European war in 1918. He survived three years of trench warfare rising to sergeant. Seeing action at the Battle of the Somme in 1916 and the Battle of the Lys in 1918, he was among the lucky. Wounded by artillery shrapnel during the German Spring Offensive in early 1918, he never returned to the front. Weeks in a hospital but alive. No long-term effects except for a set of ugly scars.

Yet returning to his home in Derry provided little peace. He rejoined the Ulster Volunteers as the issue of Irish Home Rule again came to the forefront with the end of the war in Europe.

The Ulster Volunteer Force formed as a militia when the prospect of a semi-autonomous Ireland almost passed Parliament in 1912. Home rule was popular in all of Ireland except the north-east Ulster six counties. Home Rule was London's way of resolving the Irish problem. To Ulster Protestants that meant they could rely less on British Crown forces to protect them from the restive Catholics.

By 1914 when the bill passed in parliament, UVF membership had reputedly grown to 100,000. A good percentage of all Protestant adult males in Ulster. That year 25,000 rifles and 3,000,000 rounds of ammunition were smuggled into Ulster. A

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serious rebellion loomed in the north. Yet the British government found itself thwarted in asserting control. When the British military commander for Ireland was ordered to move troops into Ulster, 57 of his 70 officers at headquarters chose to resign rather than enforce Home Rule by confronting the loyalist Ulster Volunteers.

With war declared against Germany in 1914, the British suspended implementation of home rule. Resources must be directed to the Continent and most Irish put aside their differences for the duration of the Great War. Unresolved, the latent sectarian animosities in Ulster reemerged in 1919.

Revisiting the Irish problem, the Fourth Home Rule Bill of 1920 divided Ireland into two separately governed entities. Six counties of the province of Ulster would become Northern Ireland. The remaining twenty-six counties would become Southern Ireland.

The northern counties of Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Tyrone, and Londonderry had a Protestant majority. Overwhelmingly they favored continued union with Great Britain. Therefore partition grudgingly allowed them to accept home rule. They could at least control their own provincial parliament while remaining part of the United Kingdom. In contrast, the nationalist Catholic dominated South overwhelmingly rejected home rule. Only full independence would satisfy Irish Catholic republican aspirations.

Further aggravating hostilities, the sectarian demographic distribution of the northern six counties was uneven. In County Londonderry, Catholics held a narrow majority. In the City of Derry, even more so. That constituency favored Irish independence. For a virulent Unionist like Fergus Croft, circumstances at home appeared more threatening than before he went off to war in France.

Although Croft secured a supervisory position at the Derry's Foyle Port, his entire being centered on UVF activities. No conflict with his work duties since a senior UVF official controlled the port.

In April, 1920, rioting erupted in Derry. As elsewhere across Ireland, the IRA pressed their attack against British rule. In Derry they faced the Royal Irish Constabulary backed by British Army regulars of the Dorset Regiment. In June the Ulster Unionist Council officially revived the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force.

Recruitment to the postwar UVF however met with only limited success. Their numbers never approached the numbers of their founding in 1912 before the Great War. That failure further emboldened the IRA. But those that did heed the call to the resurrected UVF were among the most extreme. Many were ex-British Army veterans of the Great War. Not only ultra-Unionists, the UVF represented Protestant anti-Catholic racist militancy. Animosity to such an extent that some UVF units amounted to nothing more than armed killers acting as ethnic vigilantes. Fergus Croft commanded one such notorious group.

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Two men from Croft's unit loitered about the Carlisle Bridge on this summer night. With a cool breeze coming down the River Foyle it was a good place to take a smoke after a night of drinking. Hanging about on the eastern side of the bridge they saw a couple walking arm in arm across the bridge from the west side. The city quiet at close to midnight. Street lamps on the bridge revealed no one else about.

As the couple came closer they stopped on the bridge. After kissing and embracing they stood looking out over the water. The man held her close with his arm around her waist.

"Look at that will ya?" one man said in a whisper. "Doin' his best to get in her drawers."

"Maybe already has," the other said. "Great knockers. Can see that even from here."

The two concealed themselves behind one of the stone columns anchoring the end of the bridge.

The romantic couple eventually resumed their walk. As they walked past the concealed men, one man whispered, "Well I'll be dipped in shit. That's Abigail Ahearn."

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"And who might that be?"

"You stupid shite, don't you know? She's the one that Croft's sweet on."

"Huh. Well it looks like she's not. That bloke's got his hands all over her. Know him?"

"Fuck no."

"But we need to tell Croft."

"Yeah? That his sweetheart is being buggered by someone else? Not me, you arsehole."

"Just the same, Croft will want to know. Right away I should say."

"Well it's your neck. He might still be at Duffy's."

Duffy's was a nearby Waterside Protestant pub they left a short time ago after drinking with Fergus Croft. The two took off at a jog covering the three blocks quickly.

Both were winded from the run as they entered Duffy's. Fergus Croft was still seated at a table with two other men. All were slightly drunk.

"Why the fuck are you pissers out of breath? Somethin' scare you?" Croft said. The other seated men laughed.

"It's that woman, Abigail Ahearn. The one you like, Fergus. Just saw her."

"Saw her? What the fuck's that mean? Where?"

"On the bridge. Walking. From the Bogside. She wasn't alone."

"Who was with her?"

"We didn't recognize him. Maybe because he was one of them."

"One of what?"

"Catholic maybe. They were coming from the Bogside, Fergus."

With that Croft fished out money and slammed it down on the table as he stood. "Show me what the fuck you're talkin' about."

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Abigail Ahearn turned pale. Five men dressed in working clothes came out from an alley. They said nothing but clearly appeared threatening. Even from several feet away the smell of liquor obvious.

Dillon O'Farrell realized he and Abigail had been foolishly careless. Derry with its troubles was not the place for romantic strolls. Especially with the sectarian heresy they were practicing. Abigail was Protestant. As a Catholic, much less IRA, he was clearly in the wrong neighborhood.

Fergus Croft pushed aside two of his men and stepped close to Ahearn.

"What's this, Abby? Kind of late to be walkin' about isn't it?"

Terror caused a wave of nausea. She knew Fergus Croft. Not bad looking but she knew his violent reputation within the UVF. Knew also his attempts at romancing her. The very thought of him touching her made her skin crawl. While always polite the few times he had approached her, she never gave the slightest encouragement to his advances. Caught now with Dillon O'Farrell under these circumstances could only turn out badly.

Croft continued. "Who's your boyfriend, Abby? Haven't seen him before."

She didn't know what to answer fearing to make the situation worse.

"Name's O'Farrell," Dillon said. "We mean no trouble. I'm just escorting Miss Ahearn home."

"From where?"

"Miss Ahearn was visiting my mother. She's been sick. She's a friend of Miss Ahearn's mother."

Croft just stared menacingly saying nothing for several moments.

"Well now, we both know that's a crock of shit don't we? Tell you what I think. I think you're a bloodsucking Catholic. Live in that shithole the Bogside. The pretty Miss Ahearn doesn't find her own kind to her liking it seems. I think she's been out all night spreading her legs for the likes of you."

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"You sonofabitch!" O'Farrell said and foolishly stepped toward Croft.

Croft landed a debilitating fist into O'Farrell's midsection sending him to his knees.

Ahearn attempted to go to O'Farrell but Croft grabbed her arm. Two of his men grabbed both of O'Farrell's arms dragging him to his feet.

"O'Farrell you say? Related to a Fenian scum named Eoin O'Farrell? Perhaps brother to an IRA fucker named Terrance O'Farrell?"

O'Farrell made no reply. Croft landed another vicious blow to O'Farrell's lower abdomen.

O'Farrell sagged vomiting while still held by Croft's two henchmen.

Stepping back to avoid being dirtied, Croft said to his men, "Young Mr. O'Farrell here is undoubtedly IRA himself. The whole family stinks of popery and sedition."

To O'Farrell he said, "But you are an audacious fucker. Or just blinded by Miss Ahearn. She is a looker isn't she? That could make you do the most stupid of things. You'd never make it in my outfit, O'Farrell. Dumbass Catholic IRA walking a Protestant girl back to her neighborhood in the middle of the fuckin' night."

Croft shook his head. "It's a war we're havin' while you two are out rutting like dogs in heat. Now you both have to pay for such stupidity. Take 'em both, lads."

"Make a move you IRA prick and I'll put a bullet in ya," one huge man said from behind O'Farrell. Two others held him by the arms.

Croft took charge of Ahearn grabbing her upper arm roughly.

"Fergus, don't harm him. Please," Ahearn said.

"Shut up, Abby. It's yourself you need to be worrying about. Not only a whore but maybe an IRA spy? Serious matters that need to be dealt with."

After a short walk they came to a shabby automotive garage. Automobiles in various states of dereliction ran along an alley to the side of the building.

One of Croft's men opened the office door with a key.

"No lights," Croft said. "Don't want any peelers to come nosing around. Get everyone into the back. Stay here, John and keep a lookout. This shan't take long."

The garage interior was cramped. Enough room to work on just one vehicle at a time. A service van imprinted with a logo occupied the workspace.

"Tie O'Farrell to that chair, boys," Croft said. "His legs too."

Once O'Farrell was immobilized with some chains, Croft grabbed a greasy rag from a workbench. "So you don't make a fuss." He tied the rag over O'Farrell's mouth as a gag.

Walking up to Abigail Ahearn he stood within inches of her face. He was a tall muscular man. Reaching both hands to each side of her blouse he ripped it open to the waist.

She attempted to fight back but he slapped her several times hard enough to cause her to slump back against the bench. Without hesitating, Croft grabbed her undergarment tearing it away. She slumped forward covering her exposed breasts with her forearms.

"Rooney, got that razor you always carry?" Croft said.

"Yeah," the big man said hesitantly. He knew Croft's vicious nature. Not someone to fuck with. Provoked like this no telling what he might do.

"Then get over here."

"See here, Fergus. I ain't goin' to cut no woman."

"Nothing like that. Just want you to give her a haircut."

Abigail Ahearn's eye widened. She prized her long auburn hair. Worse, the shame of being branded a traitor.

"Make it a short style, Rooney. No need to be too fussy though. Sit on this crate, Abby."

When she hesitated, Croft said, "Do it, Abby or I'll make it much worse."

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Sobbing uncontrollably she sat down on a crate pulled in front of O'Farrell. Croft undid her hair letting it fall to her shoulders.

"Now Mr. O'Farrell, since you're in store for much worse, I'll give you a treat. The wish of a condemned man so to speak. Abby, sit up straight. Put your hands in your lap. Let your boyfriend feast his eyes on those glorious tits for the last time."

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Once Abigail Ahearn's humiliation was complete things turned sadistic.

"Need to send a message O'Farrell. Can't be havin' lowbred Catholics defiling Protestant women. Doesn't look so pretty now does she?"

Croft stepped over to Ahern and lifted her head with his hand under her chin. "You need to watch this, Abby. This is your doing."

Putting on a pair of leather work gloves, Croft began a relentless pounding to Dillon O'Farrell's face. Blood splattered about. After twenty minutes, O'Farrell was unrecognizable.

"Don't you be passing out on me you fucker. I'm not finished yet," Croft said breathing hard from the exertion. Nodding to one of his men, "Not yet through with your boyfriend. Now pay attention, Abby."

The man pulled a revolver. Croft pointed to O'Farrell's knee. The round blew away a good deal of the knee joint. A crippling wound causing unbelievable pain.

O'Farrell twisted in agony, grunting through the gag.

Abigail Ahern shrieked and nearly fainted.

"Half a cripple? That won't do," Croft said and nodded again to the shooter.

A second shot to the other knee caused O'Farrell to pass out. Ahern turned away from the horrible sight now hysterical.

Minutes later both she and O'Farrell were bundled into the empty delivery van. O'Farrell was still bound and gagged. Ahearn wept quietly with her head down covering herself dur-



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ing the short ride through the deserted night. The van jerked to a stop in front of Ahern's parents' home.

"You'll not be letting on who did this, Abby. If I get any trouble over this it'll go badly for you. At least your hair will eventually grow back. A razor to your face would be permanent. So you mind your tongue, bitch."

Without time to say anything to O'Farrell she was pushed out of the van by Croft.

As the van began moving away she got up holding her shredded clothing, "Dillon? What are you going to do to him?"

Croft closed the rear doors of the van without answering.

To her horror, the van driver repeatedly sounded the horn. Lights came on along the street.