

Chapter 36

A DANGEROUS JOURNEY

A day later I got a call from Ted. It was brief and to the point: ‘You have to come over. This is very serious.’

I put down the phone and considered my options. I could step away from the whole sorry mess now. I wasn’t in too deep, and more and more the notion of trying to help end Europe’s oldest war seemed far-fetched. I was having major doubts about my abilities to galvanise a movement from America. On the other hand, I didn’t feel I could quit. The IRA had shown faith in me and I needed to live up to it. I had alerted Senator Kennedy, and through him National Security Council Deputy Director Nancy Soderberg who was keeping the President informed, that the deal was afoot in Ireland. I would look like a complete idiot in their eyes. I tossed and turned for a night before sending a message back. I’d be there a few days later. I really felt I had little option, and, besides, a little of that American can-do spirit had returned.

However, on the flight over, the old doubts gripped me in a merciless vice. Who did I think I was, they repeated over and over. I stared out at the black night. What was I getting myself into? The trip never seemed so long. Finally the plane swooped into Dublin Airport. It was raining, of course, the rivulets streaking off the windows as we dropped from the sky. My mood was as dark as the weather outside. I travelled to Belfast by train. It always fascinated me when the train approached the border. There was no demarcation line, no mountain

range or other natural boundary. Instead you went from one man's fields in the South to another man's in the North and you were in a different country.

I was in a state of paranoia. Supposing my telephone conversations were bugged? What if there was someone on this train who was following me? I shifted uncomfortably and looked around. Maybe the man I had seen devouring the cholesterol-raising breakfast of bacon, eggs and sausages? He returned my gaze quizzically. No, I didn't think so. Maybe the young woman with the backpack who looked like a student? She got off before the border, however. There was really no point in speculating.

On arrival, I took a taxi to Dukes hotel, not far from Queen's University, where the rendezvous had been arranged. It was a comfortable but very basic sort of place. The Troubles had meant that when it came to tourism Northern Ireland was far behind. I was sitting in a corner of the lobby, with a copy of *The Irish Times* open in front of me. That was the sign by which the person who was picking me up would recognise me. I stared out at the torrents of rain being whisked along the drains to the gutters. I could still cut and run. I thought about it for a moment. No, I had to stay. Where *was* this guy? Suddenly a young man entered the foyer and looked around. He was of medium height, dressed in a denim jacket and jeans. He was clearly looking for someone. His eyes fell on me and he came over quickly.

'Hello,' he said, reaching for my hand. 'I'm your driver.'

That was it. We went outside to where his car was parked and I sat in the back, rather than beside him, as would be normal. It must have seemed a strange thing to do, but I was unconsciously thinking of taking a cab in New York. He drove off without a word. We headed towards the city centre and then in the direction of West Belfast, the redoubt of the Falls Road where Sinn Féin and the IRA reigned supreme. Cheek by jowl with the Falls is the Shankill Road, headquar-

ters of the most violent Loyalist gangs. The places are so close together that you can only tell by the colour of the graffiti on the kerbstones where you are: red white and blue for Loyalist, green for Republican. Some of the worst murders of the Troubles occurred in these mean streets.

The driver suddenly took a sharp left turn into a hospital, drove up a dead end, reversed out and went back the way we had come. Obviously he was seeking to throw off any pursuer, or worse, completely baffle me. I was petrified now. What if he was a British agent sent to intercept me? What if he was a member of a Loyalist hit squad who knew what my mission was? I had every right to be worried. There had been several cases of collusion between Loyalist killer squads and the local army and police. Supposing I was being set up after my phone calls had been intercepted? Or had someone told others of the plan? I looked down at my hands and realised that the knuckles were white from gripping the briefcase I was carrying. The bright lights of New York never seemed so far away and I wondered briefly if I would ever see them again.

He was really driving now. Quick left and right turns, a double back and then, finally, and to my immense relief, I saw that we were close to the Falls Road. We drove up past serried files of black taxis which are the local mode of transport. We took a left and then several other turns, amid a maze of streets. Through the pounding rain I kept my eyes firmly on the kerbstones and on the graffiti. I was in IRA territory all right. I felt a huge surge of relief. Halfway up the street he stopped and told me to get out and knock on a door opposite. It was a quiet, nondescript street, indistinguishable from hundreds of other working class areas. As he roared off, I was left clutching my briefcase, a slightly ridiculous figure, I'm sure, dressed in a smart suit and tie in a neighbourhood where someone dressed like that would stick out like a sore thumb. I complimented myself on my foresight as I made my way up

the short path and knocked on the door.

There was no answer. I knocked again and suddenly an upstairs window flew open. It was Ted. I don't think I have ever been so pleased to see anyone in my life. He came downstairs and let me in and then escorted me into the nearby living room. I just had time to notice the closed circuit TV system monitoring everything on the street, and the iron gate that blocked access to the upstairs area. There were about six people in the room. I recognised Gerry Adams immediately. I hadn't seen him in some years and incongruously I found myself noticing how tall he was and how large his feet were. The man had presence, of that there was no question. At least two of the others were familiar to me, by reputation only, as senior figures in the IRA. The other two I did not know. It was a sparsely furnished room with some religious and republican icons on the wall. The ever reliable Virgin Mary stared vacantly at me; there was a cross made by inmates from Long Kesh where the hunger strikers had died, and a wedding picture. The couple looked impossibly young.

The men were friendly and motioned me to sit down. It had all the hallmarks of an interrogation: me sitting alone on the settee, clutching a briefcase, the seven spread out in chairs around me. I suddenly wanted to take a leak very badly. Adams opened the meeting by saying how much he appreciated me coming over. He left me in no doubt, however, how serious the situation now was. Another speaker told me that the IRA had moved heaven and earth to get the unannounced ceasefire and now it had blown up in their faces. He stated that Ted had put himself on the line and had suffered as a result. Why had this happened? I had already made a decision to be as straight as I could. There was no point, with people such as these, in being anything else. I explained the entire Ray Flynn scenario to them and what had happened to the delegation. I set out as clearly as possible just how difficult a task it was to set up a group to come over and the prob-

lems I had encountered. I went through each of the people I had recruited and what their strengths and talents were. They listened impassively. I had no idea what they were thinking. I talked for a good hour. Outside, the rain was pounding the pavements and the room had grown semi-dark.

When I had finished there were some very pointed questions, especially from the men from the IRA. Why did I think the White House was interested? What if I failed again? Did I intend to add anyone to the mix next time? I answered as straight as I could. At least two hours had elapsed before a woman came in bearing sandwiches. I suddenly realised I was famished. The conversation turned to small talk, but I still felt very uneasy. Did they believe what I had told them? I sensed they needed time to talk something over, so I made excuses and went to use the bathroom.

When I came back, Adams spoke. He told me they accepted my explanation, and that I had been honest with them about it. He explained again how careful the organisation had to be that they were not being duped or set up in some way. I told him I understood. They asked if it would be possible to reconstitute the group. I said I thought it would and that I would aim for a September date.

That was it. They had been clinical and focused, and had come to the point very quickly. There was even time for some light humour as I recounted my trip with the driver. We parted on good terms and a different driver took me back to the hotel, this time directly, which took only a few minutes. Overhead, I noticed a British Army helicopter poised motionless in the sky over the nationalist area, the sound of its blades drowned out in the traffic. I wondered who they were looking for or listening to. I was happy, but utterly drained. I took the next available train back to Dublin and slept in my sister Triona's home for what seemed like twelve hours.

The following day on the plane back to New York I suddenly felt

weak. I barely made it to the bathroom to douse my face with water for fear I would collapse. This was all taking its toll, but at least the operation was back on.

Meanwhile, back in Belfast, the IRA ad hoc ceasefire went ahead on 4 May; it had been too late for them to call it off. It lasted thirty-six hours before a bomb was thrown at a British Army patrol in Belfast.