

...

THE TRUST

...

PREFACE



*I*n the sixteenth century, the British Crown, mindful of the burgeoning thirst for independence on the predominantly Catholic island of Ireland, instituted a landgrab policy referred to as the Plantation of Ulster. Catholic farmlands in the northeast sector of Ireland were confiscated and handed over to thousands of Protestant settlers from England and Scotland who were willing to pledge loyalty to the Crown. As a condition of ownership, the new landowners were prohibited from employing Catholic workers. Hence, the native Catholic population in the six northern counties was institutionally deprived of its lands, its income and its political status. Centuries of conflict ensued but failed to diminish the hold of the Protestant ascendancy.

In 1920, the English Parliament passed the Government of Ireland Act, partitioning the island into two entities: Southern Ireland and Northern Ireland. The twenty-six counties of Southern Ireland would become the Irish Free State in 1922. The six northeast counties of Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry and Tyrone would become the country of Northern Ireland, and remain a part of the United Kingdom.

By 1969, Catholics numbered a third of Northern Ireland's population, but had not a single Catholic cabinet member. Judges were uniformly Protestant and civil servants were required to swear allegiance to the British crown. Public works and housing, administered by the Protestant-controlled government, directed economic benefits to Protestant neighborhoods. Living conditions for Catholics in the larger cities of Belfast, Derry, Portadown and Antrim were bleak and oppressive. Health care was poor and male unemployment exceeded 70 percent.

Catholics began to organize protests and stage civil rights marches often ending in violence. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) and its political arm, Sinn Fein, advanced the Catholic cause, often by violent means. The Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF), with their political arm the Ulster Union Party (UUP) took up arms in opposition. Civil order in the six counties disintegrated and led to a bloody civil war that would last for thirty years. That war was known as the Troubles.

ONE

• • •

Life's direction is ephemeral. Something as common as the ring of a telephone can knock it off its course. Simple as that, but I didn't see it coming this time. I had just arrived at my office, set my coffee on my desk and was starting to unfold the morning *Tribune* when my phone rang. Since I make my living as a private investigator and my assignments typically begin with a phone call, the ring was not unwelcome. But this turned out to be a call I didn't expect and I certainly didn't want.

It's not that my life was so predictably calm, but lately I'd settled into a comfortable routine. I had a new baby, a happy marriage and a solid investigation practice. Then the phone rang, and like the switchman in a railroad yard, it redirected my life. First I'm going north, now I'm going east.

I lifted the receiver. "Liam Taggart, Investigations."

"Liam? It's Janie."

The call I didn't expect. I sat there staring at the phone.

"It's Janie. Your cousin, Janie. The cute one. Holy Mother of God, Liam, have you lost your senses? Do you not remember your own family?"

I winced. Janie was one of a dozen cousins I had back in Northern Ireland, a clan I hadn't seen since the late nineties. She was seventeen then, a lively little dark-haired colleen. Deep expressive eyes. Little turned-up Irish nose. Full of spunk. Her voice brought back old memories. Memories I had locked away sixteen years ago.

“I’m sorry, Janie, it’s just that your call took me by surprise. How’s everyone back in the North?”

“Uncle Fergus died last night.”

My heart sank and I swallowed hard. I feared this day would come and I knew I’d better make amends before it did. But I hadn’t. Damn the call I didn’t want. Fergus and I, we should have never left it like this. We had unfinished sentences, incomplete paragraphs. I could have gone to see him. We could’ve raised a pint, cleared the air, restored our relationship. Hell, it might have been as easy as a damn telephone call. We’d shared too much to let it end like this. Now he’s gone and it’s too late.

No longer locked away, memories flipped through my mind like pages of a photo album. A smiling Fergus Taggart, my father’s brother and a giant of a man. Me, riding on his massive shoulders. Us, fishing in a wooden boat on the Lough Neagh. Me, sound asleep in a booth at McFlaherty’s Public House, my head upon his lap. Him, slipping a fifty-pound note into my jacket pocket the day I left for America. And the pure joy of Aunt Deirdre’s Sunday night dinners.

Who was it that said hours pass slowly but years fly by? It was just sixteen years ago that Fergus said the last words he’d ever speak to me.

“I don’t think you and I have anything more to say to each other, Liam. You best be off now.”

They were never supposed to be the last words. They were just words to end the day. Maybe the week. There would always be time to make amends. To find other words. Did Uncle Fergus believe those would be the last words or was he, like me, waiting for the inevitable reconciliation? I guess I’ll never know.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Janie, truly I am. That’s such sad news. How long had he been ill?”

“The funeral’s Thursday. We’ll talk about it when you get here. Please come.”

I took a deep breath. Three days. “Oh, I don’t know, Janie, I’m scheduled to—”

“Mass is at St. Michael’s in Antrim, Thursday morning at eleven. The family needs you. Uncle Fergus needs you.”

I furrowed my forehead at the odd remark. There would surely be

no loving summons from my estranged Irish family. And Fergus wouldn't know one way or the other. I nodded to the phone. "I'll see what I can do. I'll have to get back to you."

Catherine met me at the front door with her finger on her lips. "Shh, the baby's sleeping." She gave me a kiss. "What are you doing home so early? Are you feeling okay?"

I nodded, hung my coat on the rack and went straight to the kitchen for a cup of coffee. "I got a call from a cousin in Northern Ireland," I said over my shoulder. "My uncle Fergus died. They want me to come to Antrim for the funeral."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Catherine said. "Was he sick?"

"I don't know. I asked Janie and she gave me a cryptic answer—we'd talk about it when I got there. I mean, if he died of a heart attack, wouldn't she tell me?"

"I would think so. That's a strange answer. You and your uncle were very close at one time, weren't you?"

Close? At a critical time in my life Fergus was the most important person in the world. When my mother became ill, I was sent to live with him. He and my aunt Deirdre took a scared little four-year-old boy in short pants into their home and raised and nurtured me for six years. Close? I loved him with all my heart. Still do. I needed him and depended on him and he was there for me. I blinked a few tears and nodded my head.

Catherine put her arm around my shoulders. "I'm so sorry, honey. When's the funeral?"

"In three days. It doesn't matter, I can't go. I have appointments scheduled later this week."

"Can't you reschedule them?"

"Maybe I could, but that's not entirely it. I think if I were there it would be uncomfortable. Not just for me, but for everyone. I didn't leave under the best of circumstances and I haven't talked to any of them in sixteen years. I had a falling-out with my uncle, returned to America and shut them all out of my life like they didn't exist. I'm sure the family harbors bitter feelings and who could blame them? They

deserved better from me. I should have taken the initiative, stayed in touch, but I just didn't know how to start the conversation. Now it's been too many years."

"You left because you had a falling-out with your uncle? Seems to me that it takes two to have an argument."

"No, Cat, this one was all my fault. I was living a lie and I got caught. I never should have put myself in a position where I had to lie to my family. It was foolish of me to accept a posting in Northern Ireland that was bound to end in a betrayal. I don't know why I did it."

"Maybe because it was the right thing to do? And you were young, Liam. Cut yourself a break."

"At the time, I thought it was the right thing to do. It was 1994 and I was a young recruit with the CIA. I'd only been with the Agency for a year when a position opened up in Northern Ireland and I jumped on it. For one thing I hadn't seen my Irish family since I was a young child and for another, Northern Ireland was the decade's political hotspot and I wanted in on the action.

"The Troubles was always front-page news for me. I followed it every day. In January 1994, President Clinton decided to get involved in the peace process. He invited Gerry Adams, the IRA's top politician and the UK's public enemy number one, to visit D.C. He arrived to rousing crowds and shook hands at the White House. It wasn't exactly what Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern had in mind, but Clinton was an effective peacemaker.

"As expected, Clinton directed the Agency to assist on the ground in Northern Ireland. Because I had family in County Antrim and could move about in the nationalist community, the Agency granted my request and posted me there. So in the summer of 1994, I returned to a grand reunion. My uncle Fergus was so happy to see me, it was like I'd never left. He gave me a bear hug so strong I thought he'd break my bones. As far as he and I were concerned, not a single minute had ticked off the clock since I was ten years old. There was my aunt Deirdre, with tears in her eyes and her arms wide open, the woman who warmly and unselfishly took me in and gave me a mother's love when I was four years old. There was my uncle Robert, always a broad smile on his rosy face. There was my aunt Nora and my wise old Uncle Eamon. They couldn't wait to welcome me back. And me, I was the undercover

spy who was going to help bring an end to the war. What I didn't realize was that I had chosen a path destined to alienate me from the family I loved.

"The job directed me to use my family to spy on the Catholic community. At first, all the Agency asked me to do was to hang out in the various clubs and organizations and pass along information if I thought it was important. What's the buzz in the nationalist circles? What rumors have you heard from the republicans? Is there anything going down that we should know about?" "My uncles were prominent in republican circles and because of them, I could freely come and go in those organizations and I learned quite a bit. Some of my information saved lives, Cat. Make no mistake, I did some real good while I was there.

"Right up until the end, I was enjoying strong bonds with my family. I loved them all dearly and they loved me. Aunt Deirdre would cook these marvelous Sunday dinners and the whole family would come and gather around her long kitchen table. More often than not, there'd be an extra chair for a single girl that my aunt Nora 'just happened to know' and 'wasn't she a darling?'"

Catherine raised her eyebrows. "I'm not sure I want to hear about the darling single girls."

Catherine was right about that. Most of the girls were just passing encounters, but not Annie. Just thinking about Annie and the year we had together brought all those feelings back to the surface—feelings that needed to stay locked away where I put them sixteen years ago. What would my life have been like had I not had that falling-out, had I not returned to America in 1999, had I stayed with Annie? What would my life have been like had I not been blindsided? Had the rug not been pulled out from under my feet? I had no desire to revisit those memories now, nor did I wish to discuss them with Catherine.

"Nothing came of the darling girls," I lied. "But everything ended in 1999 when my uncles learned who I really was and what I had done behind their backs. I was the great deceiver. I was a fraud. I had betrayed them."

"Seriously, Liam, aren't you going a little overboard? What did your family think you were doing in Northern Ireland? Didn't they have an inkling that you weren't a liquor salesman?"

I shook my head. “Absolutely not. I certainly couldn’t divulge that I was working for the CIA. I was sent there to secretly gather information. For five years I pretended to be working for a whiskey exporter. I even negotiated contracts for delivery of Uncle Fergus’s crops to an Agency front.

“You sold your uncle’s wheat to a phony CIA distillery?”

“Barley. It was barley. Single malt stuff. We brokered it to Jameson.”

“And they never figured out you were CIA?”

“Not until the end. Oh, one time Uncle Fergus caught me talking to my station chief, Jim Westerfield. It was right before one of the Drumcree marches and I thought my uncle was suspicious. He questioned me about Westerfield, but Westerfield had credentials as a whiskey distributor and my uncle was satisfied. He trusted me. And of course, there we have the crux of the matter. My uncles trusted me.”

Catherine nodded. She understood—it was all about trust, or lack thereof.

“Cat, my family took me in and loved me without qualification and I conned them. I played them for information. And when they learned the truth in 1999, it ended very badly. We haven’t spoken since I left. I should have called. But every time I thought about it, I didn’t know how to start the conversation, and every day that passed made it more difficult. Now I think it would be too awkward to go to the funeral. There are bound to be a lot of bad feelings.”

“Well, staying in touch is a two-way street. He could have called you as well.”

I shook my head. “Not the way it ended. I had to be the one to make the first move. And I didn’t.”

“What really happened in ’ninety-nine? What was so earth-shaking that it destroyed your relationships?”

I took a sip of coffee and a deep breath. “It all started with a guy named Seamus McManus. He was a technician, an IRA bomb maker. He designed and set off a petrol bomb in the Belfast Arms Hotel in 1975, killing twelve people including three children. Two years later he was arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to life in prison by a judge who called him a monster. He sat in Crumlin Road Prison for twenty-two years.”

“Don’t tell me they released him.”

I nodded. “In 1998 the Troubles officially ended with the signing of the Good Friday Peace Agreement. I say officially because there were still plenty who wanted to keep fighting. The GFA called for the release of four hundred prisoners, and McManus was one of them. He was paroled in 1999.

“One night, barely a month after his release, with his bones full of hate and his belly full of Guinness, he clubbed a Protestant aid worker to death with an iron pipe. He was rearrested and thrown into the Antrim jail. Westerfield got word that McManus was part of a plot to set off a bomb at the Orange Parade. He wanted to plant someone in the cell with McManus to pump him for information. I volunteered. They gave me the identity of Danny Foy and threw me into the cell with McManus. My cover story was that I was arrested for plotting to shoot up a Protestant lodge. I spent two days with McManus and I got it all. Everything. The where, the when, and the names of all the conspirators that McManus was plotting with. As a result, eight men were rounded up and their guns and bombs were confiscated. The planned attack never went off. The eight terrorists got life sentences. I did my job and I was damn proud of it.”

“So what was the problem?”

“Later in the week, after one of Aunt Deirdre’s Sunday dinners, we were sitting on the front porch—Uncle Fergus, Uncle Eamon and me—when suddenly, out of the blue, Uncle Fergus turns to me and says, ‘Kevin Donnelly told me that he saw you coming out of the Antrim jail last Tuesday with Mr. Westerfield. What the hell were you two doing there, Liam? Selling whiskey?’

“I hesitated. I couldn’t tell him the real reason. I tried to bluff my way through it, but I must have had guilty written all over my face. ‘Nothing,’ I said quietly.

“‘Nothing?’ he said. ‘Nothing at a jail? You weren’t sitting in there talking to Seamus, were you now?’

“I don’t know how he knew. My uncle had deep contacts everywhere, so he must have found out. ‘I can’t tell you about it,’ I said. ‘I’m sorry.’

“Uncle Fergus stared at me. He looked right inside of me. He bowed his head and slowly shook it back and forth. ‘How long, Liam?’

“My charade was over. My disguise was gone and I stood naked

before my uncles. And even then, at that moment, I couldn't own up to it. I was too afraid to answer, too afraid of losing their respect, their love. Too afraid of being cast out, as indeed I would be.

“‘How long for what?’ I stammered.

“‘C'mon, son. The U.S. intelligence service. How long have you been snooping for 'em?’

“I let out a deep breath. There was nowhere to hide. ‘Since I got here,’ I said. ‘Since 1994. Seamus McManus was a killer. He told me an attack was coming down in Portadown. He knew everything—the time, the location, the names of all the raiders and where the arms were stashed. I was planted to get the information and I got it. And I'm not sorry. I saved a lot of lives, Uncle Fergus. People would have died. I interceded and that's what I've been doing here in Northern Ireland.’

“‘No liquor distribution?’

“‘No, sir. I lied to you.’

“My uncle closed his eyes. ‘All this time you've been gathering information, your so-called *intelligence*, from me and Eamon and Robert?’

“I nodded.

“‘And using it to arrest republicans?’

“‘The bad ones.’

“‘For all these years, Liam, you've been dishonest with us?’

“I nodded again. What could I say?

“My uncle pursed his lips, looked at Eamon and stood to dismiss me. There were tears in his eyes. ‘Of all the people I know . . . I never thought it would be you, son. I don't think you and I have anything more to say to each other, Liam. You best be off now.’ I walked off the porch, turned around, looked back and saw him hanging his head. That was the last thing he ever said to me.”

Catherine took a seat at the end of the couch, tucked her legs and patted the cushion for me to come sit beside her. Her blond hair lay gently on her white cable-knit. Her smile was warm and kind. I looked into her blue eyes and drew comfort from them. I've been enamored of this woman since we were in high school and I considered the fact that she was now my wife and the mother of my son to be an ongoing daily miracle. “Come sit,” she said.

“‘You best be off now,’ my uncle said, and I lost the best friend I

ever had. The only father figure I can really remember. He was the only link to my early childhood, back when we all lived within a few blocks of each other in Belfast's Lower Falls."

"Before you moved out to the farm?"

I nodded. "I left the Falls when I was four and I don't have many memories of those days. I can barely remember my house and the room I shared with my sister. We all lived in terrace houses—narrow town houses all linked together with common walls on each side. They were called 'two up, two down' because they had two rooms on the first floor and two bedrooms on the second.

"The Lower Falls was a battlefield, but I was too young to know what was going on. I remember hearing gunshots, seeing British soldiers running down the street with their rifles and watching as they busted down our door and screamed at my mother. I didn't know why. I just knew it scared the hell out of me. In 1975, my dad died, my mom was hospitalized and I was sent to live with Uncle Fergus on his farm outside of Antrim."

"You said you had a sister. What happened to her?"

I shook my head and sighed. Memories buried away were now bubbling up. Catherine was opening too many floodgates. I got up from the couch, put down the coffee, grabbed a beer from the fridge and stood at the windows watching the neighbor water her parkway.

"I did have a sister," I said after a few minutes. "Her name was Molly. She was a couple years older and she died the same year as my father. I don't know the circumstances and my mother never wanted to talk about it. It was a subject I was never permitted to raise with my mother. I don't have many memories of Molly, but I do recall she was a happy child. She danced around the house and giggled a lot. She had long, curly red hair. She died before I moved out to Antrim."

Catherine's eyes glistened and she blinked away a tear. *Simpatico*. Cat and I share the same wavelength and it didn't take much imagination for her to surmise what had probably happened to my sister.

I tried to shrug it away. "It was Belfast, Cat. Life was cheap and fragile. That's why we all ended up in Antrim. But the grass wasn't much greener and relations between Catholics and Protestants weren't any more cordial. My mom finally gave up and packed us off to Chicago."

“But you didn’t come to Chicago right away. You said you lived with your uncle,” Catherine said.

“That’s right. For six years. My mother was sick and didn’t come out to the farm for several years. When she did, it was just to get us ready to move to America. We moved in 1981. She had cousins in Chicago, in the Bridgeport neighborhood. She closed the door on Ireland and never looked back. She didn’t take any furniture, any pictures or memorabilia. Nothing. She put it all behind her like a bad dream. She cut off all communications.”

“How did he die, your dad?”

“I don’t really know the details. I was only four. They said he died in an accident. He was visiting someone and was killed in a car accident.”

“And your Uncle Fergus was his brother?”

I nodded. “There were five Taggart siblings. Eamon was the oldest. Dad was second. Then Fergus. Aunt Nora was four years younger than Dad and died in 1999. Robert was the baby. I remember being scared, lost and alone when I was sent to Antrim but they took me in and loved me like a son, Cat, all of them.

“When I came back to Antrim in 1994, we reconnected like we’d never been apart. The love was still there, strong as ever. But five years later, my duplicity destroyed it all and I left under bitter circumstances. As the years went by, I should have made amends. At least I should have tried.”

“Liam, don’t beat yourself up. You made a courageous choice to accept a post in Northern Ireland and you did it for the right reasons.”

“I don’t know if it was courageous or foolish or ambitious. Are any of those acceptable reasons for lying? I betrayed my family.”

“You did what you were sent to do. You were a spy. By definition, spies deceive people. Surely, you knew what you were getting into. The fact that it ended as it did, as we lawyers would say, was an assumption of the risk. Your motives were good, but you had to accept the possibility that members of your family were active in the Troubles. I mean, isn’t that why you got the job?”

The Agency sent me to gather information, which made me professionally dishonest. Had I told my uncles the truth, they would have kept me out of the loop. I had no business taking the assignment. Nothing justifies lying to your family. Was I filled with some mixture

of arrogance, conceit and self-importance? I had just come out of the marines, spent a year at Langley, and put in for the transfer, certain that I could help make a difference in my native land. Didn't I consider the possibility that I would be lying to my family? I shrugged at Catherine. "I didn't give it as much thought as I should have."

She reached over and gave me the medicine that only she could dispense. She hugged me tightly. "I understand," she said softly. "And it's okay. I still believe you did the right thing."

"I loved my uncle Fergus, Cat, and I don't think he ever forgave me. We never spoke again."

Catherine squeezed my hand. "I know you feel guilty, but *they* called *you* today, Liam. They want you to come to the funeral. Maybe they realize, like you do, that it's time. You're letting sixteen-year-old by-gones get in the way. You should go. Go see your family. Go say good-bye to your uncle Fergus. Go see your aunt Deirdre. Make your amends. I know wherever Fergus is, he'll be listening to you. You'll be sorry if you don't go."

She was right.

"Want to go with me?" I said. "I could use the moral support."

She gave me an *I'm sorry* smile and shook her head. "There are too many arrangements I'd have to make. It's too sudden for the baby and me."

"It's too sudden for me too."

She gave me a kiss to end the conversation. "You should go."