

THEIR OWN GAME
by
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CHAPTER ONE - THE FIRST TO FALL

Major Bill Clayton, dressed in civvies, leant against the bookstall in the main concourse of Belfast's International airport, going through the motions of selecting something to read. From where he stood, he had a good view of Martin McFosters, surrounded by journalists in front of the check-in desk, briefing them before he left. One of Clayton's men was among the press corps, tape recorder in hand, listening intently.

Clayton, and his opposite numbers in Special Branch, liked to keep an eye on McFosters, but didn't usually bother to see him off on his travels. They knew that this trip was to be something rather different, though. Not that McFosters had any idea. Clayton looked across to his police colleague, sipping coffee from a polystyrene cup. The coffee was awful: it usually was, but he, too, had a good view of McFosters. No one seemed to notice that there were more than usual armed police milling around.

McFosters was off to do more talking. Off to America, which remained **the main source of cash for the Republicans as it had been since**

before the troubles began. A large part of America, and not just the Irish-Americans, shared the Nationalist view that the British should quit Northern Ireland and their oppressive rule, and that the two halves of the island should be united once again into a single community.

From time to time, influential voices in the States had sought to bring pressure on Westminster, and on Dublin, in an effort to bring this about. It has to be said, too, that influential voices in the States were not averse to putting pressure on McFosters from time to time, either, and this visit was likely to be one of those occasions. His briefing finally finished, Martin McFosters turned to pass through the check-in desk. Clayton and his colleagues glanced briefly at one another in acknowledgement that their role at the airport was over, and made their separate ways towards the car park and their offices. There were calls to be made, but on secure phones, not mobiles. They were too easy to intercept.

McFosters passed through immigration, suffered the indignities of baggage and personal security searches, and made his way to the first class lounge. He was alone this time. It had been made clear to him previously, in the nicest possible way, of course, that Stateside fund-raising efforts were not designed to allow him and half a dozen of his top people to swan around the world in luxury. So this time he went alone. But he insisted on travelling first class, just the same. He was, after all, President of Sinn Fein, and an elected member of both the European and the British Parliaments. And he had previously been invited across, not just to attend and speak at fund-raising dinners, but also to meet senior senators from both houses, and even, once, to meet the President of the United States himself. So first class it was - both his own financial people and the generous American donors had at least agreed that.

But he still didn't like the Boeing 747 - not even the new, stretched version. Comfortable perhaps, especially in the upper cabin, but the food was predictable, the movies generally boring, and the whole journey just that bit too long, what with the lengthy check-in procedures and all. And there was a limit to how much free champagne even he could sensibly consume.

He didn't really like flying at all, to be honest. He wished he could persuade his people that he should travel via London for a change, but he knew it wasn't even worth thinking about, even though their coffers were swollen with more cash than they would ever need, short of all-out war. They wouldn't even let him save time going by Concorde when that was in service. But he couldn't afford not to go when invited, although he had to admit that the excitement of visiting America after so many years of isolation had gone. This was the third time in as many months that he'd made the dreary journey to update sympathetic senators on the latest twists and turns of the British Government. They were keen to know what progress was being made, and found it hard to believe that, after all the apparently positive, if slow, movement there had been through the peace process, things now appeared to be stalled again.

For years, the President of Sinn Fein and his immediate lieutenants had been isolated from mainstream politics, not least because of their

association with, and in some cases, parallel membership of, the IRA. Martin McFosters was not alone in this. The leadership of the political wings of the Protestant paramilitaries were in the same boat. Those who supported terrorism were never likely to be taken seriously by the political parties who existed because of the ballot box, rather than because of the bullet and the bomb.

Slowly, though, that had changed. Now, with power sharing in Northern Ireland, McFosters and others had a voice. Their power-base was reinforced by the ballot box as well. To some extent, they had been able to quell the violence through a series of cease-fires, which had been more or less maintained. They had undertaken to use their influence over the IRA, which they had always claimed was not born of a direct link, to work towards 'decommissioning' stockpiles of weapons, through an independent body which was actually powerless to do anything except talk. Protestants and Catholics alike had dragged their feet over this, and other issues, and both sides of the political divide also had to deal with militant members who still believed that violence, rather than talking, was more likely to bring progress.

But talking there still was, and plenty of it. And there was violence, too, in spite of the many concessions that had been made in the continuing effort to bring peace to the troubled Province. Rather too much violence, in fact. McFosters had to admit that it was making his life more difficult than he would have wished.

This visit was about money. He must make sure he kept up the pressure for the continued flow of funds, and make sure, too, that those whose political support might be wavering, understood that nothing could be achieved, in peace or war, without very substantial amounts of cash. Certainly more than could be raised through the normal methods on the Irish side of the Atlantic. Protection rackets, drugs, prostitution, crime and so on had their value, but the US dollar was available in much greater quantities than they could ever raise, through the huge and influential Irish American population.

It had certainly always been readily available in seemingly endless sums in the past, although there had been one incident, very recently, when urgently needed cash had not been transferred with the usual speed. At one time, a clerk in the branch of the Manhattan State Bank, where several million dollars was held anonymously, had even claimed that the account had been closed. Of course, it hadn't, but several attempts had to be made at other US banks before the required sum was eventually put together and moved to one of their many accounts in Ireland. A cock-up somewhere that would eventually be sorted out, but if anything, it had proved that McFosters' oft proposed and always rejected idea that some of their huge wealth should be invested, had been ill advised. Cash in a bank was like notes under the mattress - quickly and easily available.

The States had always been the main source of cash for the republican movement, ostensibly to keep Sinn Fein's political efforts alive, although only the most naive would pretend that the steady flow of dollars had not also gone towards buying arms and keeping the IRA going as well. And they were still there, and still needed cash support. Weapons that, in theory at least, had been put beyond use by

the decommissioning process, had to be replaced, and those remaining, stored and maintained. NORAIID understood this, although for some inexplicable reason, parts of the US administration appeared not to. They believed that their support of Sinn Fein was bolstering the republican's political efforts, and that was what this visit was all about - American support for the republican dream of unification. But he would find it difficult to explain to his Senate supporters that there was, in reality, no longer a peace process at all. His friends in the Real IRA had seen to that. The shock of the first devastating bomb in London's Docklands was followed quickly by the assassination of a Cabinet Minister and then bloodshed at Twickenham during the England v. Wales six nations game. Political dialogue over many months and years had not taken things forward as fast as some had hoped and others had wanted, so the militant hot-heads had decided to put a little pressure on things to help the talks along. It had put the nationalist cause back on the front pages of the world's press, all right, but somehow it wasn't quite having the effect they had all hoped for, any more than it had in the past. Impact, yes. Results - well, perhaps it was a bit early for the changes in attitude to materialise. More time, and more incidents, then we'll see. McFosters was not himself convinced, and he knew that friendly senators weren't either, so this could be one of his more difficult visits. Perhaps it was as well he was on his own, although he could see that a bit of support in the few days ahead might very well be welcome.

Somehow, Martin McFosters survived the journey. The menu was the same as last week, and he wouldn't mind a quid for every time he'd seen 'The Hunt for Red October.' Sean Connery as a Russian submarine captain with a Scottish accent was the only faintly entertaining thing about the whole film. But he'd never heard of any of the others, so he'd half watched it again, and pretended to doze, between glasses, to prevent neighbours from getting too chatty.

Now he ambled with the crowds towards the immigration desk at Washington's sprawling Dulles International airport, with his mind almost in neutral. Not because of the free drink, of course. It had already been a long and tiring day, and in any case, he knew automatically where to go and what to do. There was no novelty in it for him any more.

Eventually he got to the head of the queue - inevitably, the others had moved quicker than the one he'd chosen to join. He shoved his passport towards the immigration officer, as he had done so often before. The man smiled, took it, glanced at it, looked up, and turned to his hidden computer screen. His fingers moved deftly across the keyboard, although, an Irish-American himself, Clint thought he recognised the passport's owner. The computer confirmed McFosters identity, and flashed up special instructions, in red. This often happened with VIPs or semi-VIPs.

"You're expected," said Clint, looking up. "There's a guy waiting for you outside."

"There always is", said McFosters, wondering who it would be this time.

Clint squinted again at the passport. This was one they'd been waiting for all right, and although he'd been told to hang on to it, it looked OK to him.

"I need to get this checked out," he said, waving the passport towards McFosters. "You go through, and this will catch up with you later. I guess we know where you're staying."

They should do, thought McFosters - they made the booking. Probably the Sheraton again. He hoped so, anyway. Very comfortable that was. But he was uneasy. He never liked being parted from his passport, even if he was being treated like a VIP.

"I'll hang on to it, if you don't mind," he said, holding out his hand to take it back.

"Sorry," said Clint, "orders." And he waived vaguely towards the computer monitor in his cubicle, as if that explained everything. "Why can't you check it out now, while I wait?" demanded McFosters. "Because I can't, that's why," said Clint, getting annoyed. "Just relax. We know who you are and where you're staying, and we'll get it back to you as soon as we can. OK?"

McFosters thought it probably was OK after all, nodded, and went through. If the worse came to the worse, he had another passport at home - and an Irish one, too, just in case of emergencies. But they were both forgeries. Good ones mind, but forgeries none the less. He always preferred to use the real thing when on legitimate business, even if it was a British one. Anyway, he was tired, and was looking forward to a hot shower and a decent meal. The man smiled again, as he headed for baggage reclaim and customs.

"You needn't bother with that this time, Mr McFosters," said a voice. It belonged to a tall, crew-cut man in a loose fitting raincoat.

McFosters had never been met 'air-side' before - always after customs. The man did not introduce himself, but they shook hands.

"Sorry about the passport," said the man. "Don't worry about it - just red tape, or another survey or some damned thing. I'll see you get it back. Anyway, we can skip customs. We'll find your bag and have it taken to your hotel, along with the passport. I've got a car for you right outside. You're booked in to the Sheraton - they say you like it there."

"Yes I do." said McFosters.

This was different. McFosters grinned his thanks. Perhaps, after all, people were beginning to take him and his cause seriously again, on this side of the Atlantic, if not the other.

"Personally," said the man, "personally, I prefer motels. They're clean, cheap, and don't ask too many questions about who you're with. Know what I mean?" he said with a wink.

McFosters followed his escort, down long, dimly lit corridors, through the customs admin. offices - almost empty at this time of night - and out on to one of the myriad of small internal roads that carved the airport into a small town. They got into the waiting limo, and drove off in silence.

Clint had had a lousy day. Let's face it, a Jumbo full of Colombians is always trouble. More for customs than for immigration, he had to admit, but trouble enough. They always got them first. There were always long lists of 'prohibiteds' and 'wanteds', and it was up to him

and his buddies on the other desks to spot them before they got through to customs. But he didn't envy their job, either. The thought of having to body search some of the drifters he'd seen come through the airport made his flesh creep.

He was tired. This was always the worse shift, anyway. Every damned aircraft from every damned country in the world trying to get in before the night restrictions.

And too many new names and faces to look out for were added to the lists and the mug shots every shift. Mostly drug runners, he guessed, but Irish, too. And Arabs. Muslims all looked alike to him, same as the Chinese.

It might not be the best job in the States, but Clint did his best not to let anyone slip through.

He'd spotted McFosters, hadn't he? So he reckoned he'd earned his beer. That's what he'd planned for tonight, and he was looking forward to it. A quiet beer or three on the way home, and then watching the ball game on video, if the damned thing had worked, which sometimes it didn't. He must get it fixed.

Clint headed for the staff parking lot, down long, dimly lit corridors, past the customs admin. offices, which were mostly empty at this time of night.

Somehow, he didn't hear the car, or see it, until it was too late.

There was no one else about as he had stepped into the narrow road, just about where McFosters had gotten into the limo.

Apart from the car, three things struck him as his head smashed into the tarmac. The damned car had no lights on, it was going too fast, and he should have looked, anyway.

He was dead on arrival at the hospital.

Bill Minton was in the Oval Office, going through the motions of working late, when the Chief of Staff, Colin Carlucci strode in, without knocking. This was why Minton was really there - waiting news. The President's Executive Secretary disappeared fast, without being asked. Laura Billings knew the signs, and knew something was afoot. Minton sat, grim faced, his stomach churning, and looked up. This was it. It had started. Probably the biggest gamble of his political life. This would be bigger than Watergate, the Gulf war, Bosnia - anything. The ball was rolling, and there was no stopping it now. He could tell from the look on Carlucci's face.

"McFosters." said Carlucci. "He's gone. Had it. Finished - kaput - disappeared off the face of the earth."

"As planned?" asked Minton.

"Exactly as planned."

There would be no trace of him. There was no record of him arriving in Washington. Not a living soul saw him. Nothing.

In his Downing Street office, alone except for the Cabinet Secretary, Prime Minister Tony Weaver was getting a similar briefing.

Verbally, and in hushed tones, of course. Nothing was to be put in writing anywhere about any of this, by anyone, ever. No paper, no leaks.

"McFosters checked in at Belfast airport, all right," reported Sir

Robin Algar. "No doubt about that. The media were there to see him off."

But he seemed not to have arrived.

"According to Washington," continued Sir Robin, "no one has seen him at the other end."

"Exactly as planned?" asked the PM.

"Precisely so."

"And no one in Washington saw McFosters at all?"

"No one living." Sir Robin allowed himself the suggestion of a grin.

"Certainly not the gentleman sent to meet him in the arrivals hall, outside customs. He is still there. And McFosters' bag is still going round on the carousel in the baggage hall. An extraordinary thing altogether!"

"Well I'll be damned!" exclaimed Weaver. "You know, I really did wonder if the Americans had the guts to go ahead with all of this. But the game's on now, all right. Well I'll be damned!"

"Shall I ask Jane to come in?" asked Algar.

"Yes, do. And tell her to bring the whisky!"

McFosters was the first.

CHAPTER TWO - IN THE BEGINNING

It's odd how things happen sometimes. Tony Weaver was in reflective mood as he sat in his office at No.10, not quite believing what was happening or how it had all started. Almost by accident, really. It's not so unusual for small, simple and often quite insignificant things to happen by chance. They do, all the time. More often than not, people don't even notice. Little coincidences, of no importance or relevance to anything much at all, are part of life. But this was different. All this was pure chance, too, really. A casual remark. Almost an aside. But it had set in train a cycle of events that was changing the course of history and the destiny of nations. And changing them fast in a world where already, after the war on terrorism had been declared, things would never be the same again anyway. The Prime Minister simply had to take time to reflect, just to keep up.

The day had started like most others, he recalled, except that there had been no emergency calls overnight, so he was rested and refreshed when he got to the office, just after eight. It had made a change to have breakfast with the family on a weekday, too - he had enjoyed that. Sir Robin Algar, the Cabinet Secretary, was already in, of course. So were half a dozen other key officials, getting papers ready for the planned events set out in his diary. No travelling today, not even across the road for PM's questions in the House. A few meetings with colleagues, going over the most important agenda items for tomorrow's Cabinet meeting, the usual mountain of paper work, and the regular call, now back on a more leisurely weekly basis after the frenzy of events a few months ago, to Bill Minton, the American President. Sir Robin would give him a written briefing for that, and they would go through it together later, with the Permanent Secretary from the Foreign Office. It was now, once again, a routine enough

event for the Foreign Secretary not to be involved directly, although he would have read and agreed to brief and the lines to take.

As Tony Weaver reached his office, Jane Parsons, his Senior Personal Secretary, handed him a sheaf of papers, and almost immediately followed him to his desk with his first cup of coffee of the day.

"Good morning, Prime Minister,"

"Morning, Jane. Anything special in this lot?" he asked, waving to the now full in-tray.

"No more special than usual, Prime Minister," she replied, collecting his over-night red boxes. "Sir Robin would like to see you when you're ready, and Andrew is waiting to go through the press cuttings with you."

"OK. Give Andrew a coffee, and tell Sir Robin to bring his in with him. I'll see him now."

He moved across to an armchair next to the coffee table in the bay window overlooking the rose garden, taking his cup with him, and heard the disappearing Jane say, as she did every morning at about this time, 'The Prime Minister will see you now, Sir Robin.' He brought his coffee with him, without being told. He always did.

A tall, slim and elegant man, in his mid-fifties, Sir Robin Algar was one of Tony Weaver's favourite people. A career civil servant with an excellent classics degree, he had risen rapidly to the very top, serving en route as a diplomat in Washington, and Permanent Secretary in both the Treasury and the Foreign Office, before heading up the civil service from his present post as Cabinet Secretary. Those who criticised him at all, usually did so through jealousy, but pointed to his sheltered life and lack of experience in the 'real' world outside the confines of Whitehall, either in industry, commerce or the military. Up to a point, they had a point, but ignored the very real demonstration of his versatility and razor-sharp intellect when he spent three years seconded to a lame duck industry, which he managed to turn to profitability. Others did remember, though, and it was said that he was frequently headhunted for much more lucrative positions outside the civil service. Such was his loyalty, though, that he had so far not been tempted. He undoubtedly enjoyed his work - his enthusiasm rubbed off on others - and was very much on top of the job. He appeared unflappable, knew everyone worth knowing, and seemed to know what was going on in every nook and cranny of Whitehall. What he didn't know, he very soon found out.

Tony Weaver motioned him to another armchair.

"Jane's got the red boxes, and I have signed everything except that letter to the CBI. You'll see that I've scribbled on it a bit. Let me know if you agree with what I've suggested."

"Yes, of course, Prime Minister. I may have trouble with Trade and Industry over that, as I know they were wedded to what they thought was a carefully crafted letter on a difficult subject, but if we can square away the Secretary of State, we should be alright."

"I'll speak to him myself if you have any trouble." Weaver didn't expect for a moment that Sir Robin would have the least bit of trouble.

"Thank you, Prime Minister."

"Now, what about today, Robin? For a change, it looks straightforward

enough and pretty routine, judging by the diary at least."

"As you say, straightforward enough, I think, although fairly busy. So far as I can see, you have all the papers and briefings you need to see you through. Unusually, there are no lunches and no speeches today, although there is a draft of one for you to give in your constituency on Friday. That's been prepared by your people at party HQ, of course, although I have taken the liberty of having a quick look at it myself, and nothing in it seems to conflict with any stated Government policy. Later on we have a slot in the diary to talk about tomorrow's Cabinet, and this afternoon you have your regular telephone conversation with the President of the United States. If I may, I'll sit in on that as usual. I shall be here or in the Cabinet Office most of today, although I do have a few meetings of my own to attend to as well as a couple with you, but I can be contacted if you need me for anything urgent while I'm out."

"That sounds fine - thank you, Robin. Anything special for the President this afternoon?"

"Nothing I'm aware of that isn't already covered in your briefing notes, unless there's something in the papers this morning. Shall I ask Andrew to join us now?"

Andrew Groves joined them, nursing what must by now be a cold mug of coffee. He had his own mug, which he reckoned held more than most cups, although it badly needed a good wash. Andrew and the mug were somehow right for one another. He was a bit on the scruffy side of smart. His suit could have done with a press, his hair was a bit ruffled and untidy, and his shoes - well, they used to be Hush Puppies, but most of the nap had long since worn off. He shuffled in briskly, a fist full of papers in the other hand and cuttings under one arm, a stooping figure, no doubt the result of long hours hunched over a typewriter trying to beat it to death with two fingers.

" 'Morning, Prime Minister." He slumped into a vacant armchair, and dumped an untidy pile of paper on the floor beside him. "Not much in the media this morning to worry about," he said, thrusting onto the two laps facing him a neatly produced and concise summary of the main items of interest over the last 24 hours from the TV, radio and papers. "I told them yesterday there was nothing important in your diary today - if you see what I mean - so they managed to get their main story from Brussels. Some clown apparently wants us all to grow straight cucumbers. Why do they do that?"

"Why don't you go and find out?" asked the Prime Minister, annoyed.

"That sort of headline is most unhelpful, and even damaging to us at the moment, given the state of the debate in this country about our future in the EU. And it can't help other potential member nations, either. There ought to be the same sort of consultation and co-ordination between member states that we enjoy here between Government Departments, to make sure there are no surprises."

"Well, I certainly could shoot over for a day. I haven't met Pierre van-Leengoed officially since the G8 meeting earlier this year, and we didn't have much chance for a bi-lateral chat then. Too much else going on, if you recall. But I've known him for a long time now, and we occasionally have a weekend together, as I'm sure you know, so it would be good to have an excuse to see him again. I might take James

Wellington or one of his chaps from the Foreign Office, too, just to avoid upsetting anyone. I'm sure between us we could sort something out."

"By all means consult with James first," said the Prime Minister, "but I'd rather you went on your own, if you wouldn't mind. There's something else I'd like you to check out while you're there, if you would. Let me know when you have a date, and I'll brief you then, but make it soon if you can."

Andrew and Robin exchanged glances. What was all this about, then? No doubt they'd soon find out, so neither chose to ask.

They finished going through the days' news summary. Plenty of coverage about the latest twists and turns in the Middle East, including yet another suicide bomber who, for once, had managed to blow himself up without hurting anyone else. But that hadn't stopped the Israeli administration from using their helicopter gun-ships against yet another series of Palestinian targets, including a police station on the West Bank. The new outbreak of BSE in Devon, although very limited, continued to get plenty of coverage, especially from those who thought the Government was directly responsible for it and could have prevented it. Not least, some European 'allies', who could see the chance of more exports for their own livestock, were busy jumping on the bandwagon again. There was quite good coverage of the latest Government initiatives announced the previous day, especially the deliberate leak of a rumoured consultation document about the possibility of re-introducing tax relief on contributions by pensioners to private medical insurance. But there was virtually no mention of the anti-terrorist war, no doubt because the initial storm had passed, and there was not much sign of activity against new targets.

There was no need to change the briefing for the Washington call. Another piece of paper was thrust forward.

"Today's announcements by other Ministers - nothing unexpected. Overseas Aid is top for questions in the House, but again no major initiatives are planned, and no embarrassing questions have been tabled. But I shall be there just in case. Someone's bound to ask if we're doing enough for Afghanistan or Pakistan - they always do."

Both men were always impressed by how on top of events he always seemed. There was no doubting that he was in charge of co-ordinating Government communications, or that he was one of the hardest working people in Whitehall. Weaver had no idea what time he got to the office each morning, to get all this read and summarised and prepared for such an early briefing, but he knew he did it all himself. He almost felt guilty about it. Groves lived in Surrey and drove to work - liked to miss the rush hour and the congestion charge at both ends of the day, he always said. He certainly did in the evenings. He had seen him leave around eight on a good day, and he knew he often stayed on if there was an important debate in the House. Robin drove to work, too, but only from Battersea. All Weaver had to do was walk down stairs, and even that was an effort some mornings. He almost felt guilty about it.

"I've got a copy of the briefing for your call to the States," Groves continued, almost without pause for breath, "and I'll brief the media

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