

Twenty-Seven

Part 1

The dank, depressing November mist was turning to rain that Wednesday evening but Edward Corrigan was feeling pleased with himself. Sitting at a table in the canteen at Stormont, drinking a solitary cup of coffee as he studied some statistics, he reflected on the day's 'success'. His speech in the Assembly that afternoon had incurred the ire of quite a few of his Assembly colleagues but that fazed him not the slightest. Publicity! Good or bad, publicity was the fuel that kept his political ambitions burning. What was it somebody said a while back, something like '... what used to be humiliation is now simply publicity'. He grinned. He liked that and vowed to remember it for use at some notable gathering in the future. Publicity, and self-promotion, too. He had fought his way on to some of the most prestigious committees in Stormont, was his party's spokesman for Education and Learning (always good for a sound-bite or two), and he made a point of appearing on television every chance he got to champion human rights and all forms of equality legislation. He had recently tabled a private members' bill for the legalising of Civil Partnerships. Got up a few noses, that. Bit too modern for the puritanical majority in Northern Ireland but it put him at the fore of the campaign. He knew how the wind was blowing across the water and, latterly, down in the South as well. It wouldn't be long before he would be called again to speak to his bill, and this time, people would listen.

A small voice, almost inaudible now having been dismissed so many times during his active years in politics, reminded him that he was a Catholic and that the causes he was espousing were against Catholic doctrine. His response to the weak voice had become a mantra. Religion has its place and politics has its place. Politics is about fighting hard for the rights of all people. Specific and antediluvian religious mores that have not kept pace with modern psychological thought have no place in the political arena. Irritated, he looked at his watch. The thought had dented his good form. He focused on the watch's face. Six-fifteen. Just time to call into the office to check his appointments for the following day before he headed home. He was only a few miles east of his constituency office and even with the evening rush-hour traffic, the West Link motorway could have him there in less than half an hour. He drained the cup he was holding and left the canteen with a nod to the young lady who had served him. He was wearing a navy top coat, with a white scarf casually draped

around his neck. He knew he looked good, elegant. No doubt the young waitress was pleased he had noticed her.

He drove out of the car park and along the one mile length of the Prince of Wales Avenue that led from the Parliament Buildings out to the Upper Newtownards Road. The rain wasn't heavy yet but he needed the intermittent wipers. He waited at the gate for a space in the traffic and eased out, not noticing that an inconspicuous, dark-coloured saloon which had been parked across the road had now pulled into the line of traffic two cars behind him. Corrigan drove steadily westwards, not hurrying but wasting no time.

The vehicle that was following had little trouble keeping pace with him. Some minutes later, the shadowing car's driver pulled a mobile phone from his pocket and, heedless of the law prohibiting such acts, dialled a number. Corrigan's car-phone rang, a lawful hands-free unit. He pressed a button and said, "Edward Corrigan. How can I help you?"

The caller said, "Detective Inspector Michael Gordon here, sir."

Corrigan didn't recognise the name although the caller's confident tone made it clear that recognition was expected. He said, "Inspector Gordon? Could you tell me how you got this number, please?"

"Excuse me, sir?" The caller sounded mystified.

"This is my private mobile. I was wondering how you got the number."

"You gave it to me yourself, sir, the last time we met." The voice was patient, a simple exhortation to remember. Corrigan had no memory of an Inspector Gordon but he met so many new people in the course of a week and often gave his number to individuals who he considered might at some point be useful to him. It was perfectly feasible that he had done so in this case. "Ah, yes, of course, Inspector. Sorry, I had forgotten for a moment. What can I do for you?"

"I'm just outside your constituency offices, sir," the caller replied. "I was hoping to find you in. I need to speak to you on a matter of some urgency. Are you likely to be at your offices any time this evening?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm on my way there now. Can you let me know what's so urgent?"

The caller hesitated. "It's delicate, sir. The truth is, we have received a threat on your life." Then with a cheerful rush, he added, "No need to worry unduly, sir. We get these things all the time and they rarely amount to anything. But it does no harm

to take precautions, right sir? I just need a word or two about security arrangements. Shouldn't take long."

Corrigan experienced a tremor of panic. "Ah, right, of course, Inspector. Would you wait where you are, please? I should be there in about fifteen minutes."

"Thank you, sir. It'll be good to get this done this evening. I'll be here when you arrive."

Part 2

Grosvenor Road, once known as Grosvenor Street, straddles a large swathe of the western suburbs, leading in a virtually straight line from the Falls Road to the city centre. A long road, it has seen more than its fair share of disruption and violence during 'the troubles'. Plans for new motorway links during those thirty years of mayhem often had to be abandoned because of the riotous and destructive behaviour of the warring factions.

But in the early 2000s a new junction, what the Minister for Roads and Transport described as "... another important milestone in the one hundred and four million pound upgrade of the M1/Westlink", was completed and the result was greatly improved access to the city centre and the Royal Hospitals. Now a long, sedate city road, it is home to numerous thriving businesses, retail outlets, and medical and dental surgeries of various kinds. It also accommodates the constituency offices of some of the MLAs who serve the people of that region. One such office is that of Edward Corrigan, housed in a large building with an old-fashioned, ornate exterior, and which provides work for three members of staff. At close to seven o'clock in the evening, however, the offices are locked and in darkness, and the staff have gone home.

As Corrigan parked his car in front of the office and made to get out, he noticed a smallish, nondescript car just parking across the road from him. A tall, heavily built man got out, raised an arm in greeting, and began to walk across the road.

"Inspector Jordan?"

The visitor extended a gloved hand. "Yes, Mr. Corrigan. Good to meet you again, sir."

Corrigan had no memory of an earlier meeting. Perhaps the policeman had been part of security detail that had formed protection for him on a past occasion. Disarmed, and perhaps a little surprised that the policeman had chosen not to remove his glove, he shook the proffered hand and replied, "Nice to see you again, too,

Inspector.” He looked quizzically at the car that had just parked and turned to the policeman. “Just arrived?”

The inspector smiled, “Oh, when you said you’d be fifteen minutes, sir, I took the opportunity to nip away and buy an evening paper.”

Corrigan produced his keys, opened the door, switched on the entrance light and stood aside to let the policeman in before him. But the inspector smiled and said, “After you, sir.”

Corrigan shrugged, led the visitor down a short hall and into his own private office. He took off his overcoat and threw it over a chair in the corner. Then he turned to face the man standing behind him. His eyes initially went to the plastic coveralls his visitor was wearing under his overcoat and the odd looking latex cap that was covering his head and forehead before he found himself staring into two cold, grey-green eyes. Suddenly unnerved, he said, in a voice that was unsteady and pitched higher than normal, “Uh ... what’s this death threat you were talking about?”

The man’s right hand, fingers rigid and extended, flashed forward like a rush of sudden wind, catching the politician on the side of the throat. The stricken man gagged and fell back, grabbing his throat as he struggled to find breath. His assailant answered his question with a single word. “Me.”