

PROLOGUE

There were four of them.

Dark spectres creeping furtively between the cathedral columns of the copse, careful to avoid the dappled pools of silver that penetrated the overhead canopy of leaves from the waning moon.

They were nervous and alert, heads stiffly raised like animals sniffing for the scent of danger carried on the wind.

Through the ghostly green viewer of the nightsight, Captain Robert D'Arcy was able to identify three of them before they reached the perimeter of the stump-scattered clearing.

It wasn't difficult, despite the blackened hands and faces. D'Arcy knew the men well, intimately almost. They made up the local PIRA 'active service unit'. A farmer, a baker and, appropriately enough, a life insurance salesman.

That was O'Neill, their leader, and a particularly unpleasant specimen who had repeatedly evaded conviction. Always insufficient evidence and a cast-iron alibi. He would strut the village streets with the smugness of a cat who knew it still had several of its lives left. Arrogant, proficient, and exceptionally vicious.

Typically, D'Arcy noted, he carried an Armalite AR18. O'Neill favoured the cheap and very nasty 'Widowmaker', and was frequently heard to boast how he had contributed to its chilling reputation.

D'Arcy watched as the man settled down to wait, to be

certain. Patient. Always professional. That was how he had survived so long.

The Provo's head turned slightly, scanning the clearing. Then a jerking motion as his eye caught the movement high up on the road embankment. A torn piece of blue plastic from a fertiliser bag flapped irritatingly from the barbed wire fence.

The 'distractor' had been deliberately placed by the Special Air Service team. Its purpose was to lure the eye away from the cunningly concealed observation-post just a few metres away. The position had been dug in the dead of night two weeks earlier, tunnelled into the embankment overlooking the clearing. When completed, the foxhole had been roofed with a roll of chicken wire, over which the turfs had been expertly relaid.

That damp and cramped space was to be home for as long as it took the Provos to revisit their arms cache. For two weeks the four-man Sabre team – Villiers, Rix, and the 'unholy alliance' of Monk and Pope – had endured the monotony of self-heating canned rations and the indignities of defecating and burying the results in the confined space. Although worse to suffer, each man would swear, was the incessant call of a pair of nearby wood pigeons which drove them to the very edge of insanity.

Always two on stag while two slept, their only link with the outside world was via the Clansman radio.

A welcome break to the monotony would be the daily passing of the postman, whistling as he cycled down the lane beyond the barbed wire. And the dairy van that came to collect milk churns from the surrounding farms. All such comings and goings were religiously timed and entered in the log.

Two months earlier, at the Regiment's characterless brickbuilt Stirling Lines barracks outside the county town of Hereford, D'Arcy had been summoned unexpectedly to the office of Major Johnny Fraser. The quietly spoken Scot was commander of the Counter-Revolutionary Warfare

Wing of the SAS, which specialised in antiterrorist training techniques.

‘Ah, Rob,’ Fraser greeted, ‘I believe you’ve met this old friend of ours, Brigadier General Roquelaure. General – Captain Rob D’Arcy, my 2IC . . .’

D’Arcy’s face broke into an impromptu grin as Roquelaure rose to shake hands. The Frenchman was shorter than he remembered. Or else it was an illusion created by the added inches around the waist which filled the immaculate grey silk suit.

‘Hello, Pierre, what a lovely surprise! *Ça va?*’ The Frenchman’s handshake was as firm and dry as ever, and his pale blue eyes twinkled amid the laughlines in the broad face. But even the ingrained tan, earned during years serving in French colonies around the world, could not disguise a certain gauntness in his features.

‘Je suis fatigué, mon ami, très fatigué—’ Roquelaure turned to Major Fraser. ‘Forgive me, Johnny, how rude you must think us both.’

The CRW chief waved the apology aside with a short laugh. ‘No problem, Pierre, even I could follow that.’

‘You’re still with the *Ministère de la Défense?*’ D’Arcy asked.

Roquelaure nodded. His role, D’Arcy knew, was that of liaison between the Secret Service – the DGSE – and the *Group d’Intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale*. It was the French equivalent of the SAS antiterrorist group and both units regularly exchanged ideas as well as training facilities. ‘*Oui*, for my sins and my grey hair, I am with the *Ministère* still.’

D’Arcy frowned. ‘Then I can guess why you’re here.’

‘The Paris bombings,’ Fraser confirmed grimly.

Roquelaure raised his hands in a very Gallic expression of despair. ‘I have never known the city in such a state of near panic, *mon ami*. Such carnage and human misery. Bombs in the Champs Elysées, and the Préfecture of Police near Notre Dame, and the rue de Rennes. No one

wants to use the Métro or even our cafés any more. The streets are deserted. There has been nothing like it since the Algerian business. For once our politicians are even agreeing that we need help, and have swallowed their pride.'

D'Arcy smiled tersely. Whilst British and French special forces happily co-operated, politicians on both sides of the Channel perpetuated the history that the countries were each other's oldest enemy. As Roquelaure had once told D'Arcy: 'The trouble is our people are too alike in their approach to nationalism. You British think you are the best, while we French *know* we are. *Mon Dieu!*'

'We're exploring areas of co-operation,' Fraser admitted cautiously. 'But I've called you in on a matter of what the general can do for us. Would you like to explain, Pierre?'

The Frenchman nodded, opened a pack of Gitanes and lit one. The pungent, bitter aroma instantly filled the room. 'This campaign in Paris, Rober', we believe it is to gain the release of the Lebanese terrorist Georges Abdallah. He is serving a four-year sentence, and we have just moved him to a new prison to prevent an attempted jail-break. We believe his brothers may be behind these outrages. But this gang, whoever they are, have powerful help from a Lebanese Shi'ite faction calling itself the *Pessarane Behesht*.'

D'Arcy shook his head. 'Don't think I know them.'

Roquelaure grimaced. 'Unfortunately, I think you will in time. Translated it means – er, you say – sons or children of paradise. Or heaven, if you prefer. It doesn't translate exactly, but the meaning is clear. They are religious fanatics associated with the Iranian Party of God – or *Hezbollah*, and run by a leader who calls himself Sabbah.'

'Sabbah,' D'Arcy repeated softly. 'That rings some bells.'

Fraser consulted the computer print-out on his desk. 'The name first began cropping up in the mid-seventies,

Rob, in connection with the Palestine Liberation Organisation. It's an adopted cover name, we gather, derived from some eleventh-century assassin in Persia – which gives a clue to the man's background. A Shi'ite Lebanese with Iranian ancestry. But little is known beyond that. Conflicting descriptions and always confused reports as to his whereabouts. Very mysterious, and very professional.'

'He's no longer with the PLO?' D'Arcy asked.

Fraser shook his head. 'In the late seventies Sabbah became disillusioned with Arafat's softly-softly approach and virtually went freelance – like Abu Nidal some years before. He moved with a group of followers to Libya. There he acted on his own and Gadaffi's behalf for several years. Political assassination, bombings in Europe, and two aircraft hijacks.' Fraser looked up from the print-out. 'But it was during the downfall of the Shah and the Islamic Revolution in '79 that he really moved into the big league. I think the general has greater detail on more recent events.'

Roquelaure stubbed out his cigarette. 'Unfortunately, Rober', I do not need to consult notes. The facts are ingrained in my heart. You see Sabbah was involved with training young Iranians for the '79 uprising in camps in Libya, Lebanon and Syria. By the time Khomeini took over, Sabbah had found his – er, roots – I think you say. A cause and a divine mission. He still maintained his links with Libya, but drew closer to Iran. Indeed it was he who brought the alliance between the two countries closer together in their campaigns of state-sponsored terrorism.

'In March '82 there was a meeting in Teheran of Shi'ite revolutionary movements from all over the Arab and Western worlds. A major campaign was established and one hundred million dollars immediately allocated to support worldwide terrorism in the name of Islam. It was organised by the Iranian Foreign Ministry's Department for the Export of Revolution. And one of its chief exponents was . . .'

D'Arcy saw it coming. 'Sabbah,' he murmured.

A silence fell between the three men; the air in the small room seemed suddenly chill.

'The rest is history,' Roquelaure said wearily, lighting another Gitane. 'Sabbah formed a sort of inner caucus of the *Hezbollah*, although their actions took place under a confusion of names. Even the PLO use the name of *fedayeen* after the original Sabbah's "men of sacrifice". Nevertheless, he had been so successful by '84, that he was given permission to expand his Sons of Heaven, creating suicide squads to attack his Arab enemies – and, I regret, France.'

D'Arcy raised an eyebrow. 'Why France in particular? You once played host to Khomeini.'

A wan smile crossed Roquelaure's tired face. 'And since the Islamic Revolution we have given sanctuary to his enemies. And, thanks to Sabbah and his *Pessarane Behesht*, we have paid the price, believe me. So penetrating his organisation has been one of our prime objectives, as you can imagine.'

D'Arcy leaned against the wall, his arms folded. 'With what success?'

For a moment the general's gloomy expression lifted slightly. 'After many failures we managed to get one of our agents – whom I shall call "Tashakkur" – into a Sabbah cell operating out of Tunisia. It is he who gave us the information that I have just passed on to Major Fraser.'

D'Arcy's eyes moved across to the CRW chief who now had a TOP SECRET file open amid the pile of print-outs. 'This agent, Tashakkur, reports that the *Pessarane Behesht* have developed links with PIRA, along with *Action Directe* in France, and West German terrorists associated with the former Bader-Meinhoff gang. It's the usual story of scratching each other's backs. According to Tashakkur, Sabbah is acting for Libya and Iran to smuggle arms to Eire. Vast quantities, some of it very sophisticated – valued at some sixty million pounds sterling – will be smuggled in

over the next couple of years. PIRA will get a large part of the consignment, while the rest will be distributed to *Pessarane Behesht* and other Iranian terrorist networks throughout Europe.'

D'Arcy let out a low whistle. 'Using Ireland as the usual back door to Europe? Thank God your chap's been able to give us some warning.'

An apprehensive silence followed as Fraser and Roquelaure traded glances.

Fraser said quietly: 'Not quite, Rob. The first shipment has already landed.'

For D'Arcy, the next few days were filled with frantic activity as he established a special unit within the SAS's own 'Kremlin' intelligence department. Ongoing liaison was opened with Roquelaure and the French intelligence community, UK Customs & Excise, the RUC and Irish Special Branch.

At the end of the initial period, all the pointers were that the information from the agent Tashakkur had been correct. Sifting through the usual glut of rumour and speculation from Republican neighbourhoods resulted in no actual evidence or proof. It was clear, however, that something big had happened. A consistent thread running through the gossip in the drinking clubs was that the arms had been concealed in elaborate preprepared bunkers throughout Eire, ready for when they would be needed.

If quantities of weapons had already been distributed to Sabbah's *Pessarane Behesht*, or other Iranian terror networks in Europe, there was no word.

Unfortunately Tashakkur was in deep cover. There was no way to communicate with him, let alone request additional information. Roquelaure would give away no more than that his agent could now be anywhere in Ulster or the Republic of Ireland.

When the break they'd been hoping for finally came, it was from an entirely different source. The information

was received via a dead-letter drop from a long-established and trusted Army Intelligence informer in Armagh.

Once decoded it warned that quantities of weapons were due to be smuggled over the border, some of which were highly sophisticated and would require demonstration and instruction before deployment. For this reason a 'foreign team' would cross the border to link up with O'Neill's active service unit.

There was no mention of Iranians, the *Pessarane Behesht*, or Sabbah. But the implication of the 'foreign team' was obvious.

Immediately D'Arcy pushed the button, and his carefully prepared contingency plan was under way. Within hours the full might of the British security apparatus had homed in on O'Neill's village. Informers were discreetly contacted, sometimes during house searches or under the pretext of arrest. Observation-posts were set up and telephones tapped. Elaborate eavesdropping and remote-controlled surveillance devices were positioned at the known homes and meeting places of O'Neill's gang.

Before the first week was out, a clear picture was emerging. A small quantity of arms had already crossed the border and had been hidden in a cache. The approximate location was identified. There the weapons would be left until O'Neill's unit was sure that the heat was off. Then they would be joined by 'foreign gentlemen', who would demonstrate how to use the weapons.

'Those foreign gentlemen will almost certainly be members of Sabbah's *Pessarane Behesht*,' Roy Bliss told D'Arcy.

Bliss was a scruffy individual in his early thirties. His badly pressed suit and unkempt ginger hair belied the fact that he worked for the Secret Intelligence Service and was responsible for liaison with his French counterparts in the DGSE. Despite his seedy appearance, D'Arcy knew him as an efficient field officer with a sharp, sardonic sense of humour.

Bliss lit his umpteenth cigarette of the meeting, cupping the flame with nicotine-stained fingers. ‘Sabbah’s blokes are bloody dangerous and unpredictable, as you’ve no doubt gathered. So we don’t want any mistakes. Your job, pal, is just to watch and learn. No heroics. If their operation is as big as we think it is, there’s no point in pulling in small fry. Or chopping just one tentacle off an octopus.

‘Besides which, the Foreign Office is adamant that they don’t want any dead Iranians turning up on British turf, terrorist or not. If you hadn’t noticed, the FCO is up to its usual trick of putting Britain last. They’ve had a policy of quietly helping the Khomeini regime ever since it came to power. For convenience they play along with the charade that British hostages in Beirut aren’t held on orders from Iran. We even let the little sods have an arms-purchasing office in London. And, along with half the Western world, we supply them arms, ammo and explosives to keep ’em sweet in Teheran. Apparently we still want influence there when all the trouble dies down.’ Bliss inhaled deeply in disgust on his cigarette. For him it was quite a speech. ‘So no corpses, pal, right? The FCO doesn’t want anything to upset our relationship with the mullahs. Or with our French allies for that matter; they’ve got troubles enough of their own.’

D’Arcy said quietly: ‘I hear what you’re saying, Roy. Rest easy, there’ll be no problem.’

That night for the first time D’Arcy had moved into the covert observation-post to join the four-man Sabre team assigned to watch over the arms cache. As he squeezed into the cramped position his nostrils filled with the all-pervading stench of damp peat which nevertheless failed to hide the smell of unwashed bodies completely.

‘I’m going in to take a closer look,’ D’Arcy announced. ‘Establish exactly what’s involved.’

Villiers, a rangy veteran sergeant of the old school grinned widely, showing the gap where his front teeth had once been. ‘We can do that for you, boss.’

D'Arcy shook his head, understanding the other man's mild sense of resentment. 'Not this one. There's a complicated history. I want to see it for myself.'

Villiers wasn't happy, and neither were the other three. But then D'Arcy wasn't a man to argue with. He was always willing to discuss things, but once he said no that was it.

'Bloody officers are all the same once you scratch the surface,' muttered Rix, a stocky corporal from Yorkshire, as they watched D'Arcy begin his leopard crawl down the slope towards the cache.

'Not the boss,' Villiers disagreed. 'He's all right. Came up through the ranks before he joined the Family.'

Rix wasn't convinced. 'With a name like his?'

'Frog ancestry, he can't help that. He's all right, you'll see when you've been with us a while longer. You won't find a man or officer with a bad word to say about him.'

A retort began to form in Rix's mind, but was stillborn as he realised he'd already lost track of D'Arcy's path of descent. He shifted the image-intensifier, scanning slowly. Nothing. And the only cover was grass no more than eighteen inches long. He was good, was D'Arcy, he had to give him that.

Villiers chuckled, his grin white in the earthy gloom. 'You're looking in the wrong place, mate. The boss is already there.' He pressed the send-button on his PRC 349. 'Okay, boss, still all clear. Safe to proceed. Over.'

Below them a soft shadow detached itself from a gorse bush and slid smoothly towards the lichen-covered treestump that marked the location of the cache.

There was no telltale glint from the heavy black-bladed survival knife as D'Arcy prised away the thick trapdoor of moss.

Up in the OP a thought occurred to Villiers. 'Course, you never know what motive the boss might have for going hi'self.'

Rix's eyes darted sideways at his companion. 'Such as?'

The sergeant shrugged and squinted into the viewer. 'Such as setting up an "own goal",' he suggested cheerfully. It was the sort of approach to terrorism that appealed to him. 'There's been a few recently.'

'I bloody hope not,' Rix replied. 'We could all end up on a bloody civilian murder rap. Besides, it's bloody counterproductive.'

'Who says?'

'The experts, the psych-ops blokes,' Rix retorted in a whisper. 'It's been the official line since Aden.'

'Official line,' Villiers sneered. 'Well, I don't think it's counterproductive. The boss don't think it is either. We only talked about it last week. As he said, it's proven fact that at least ninety-five per cent of Provos who blow themselves up never do it again.' He grinned malevolently.

'He'd never get clearance.'

'Perhaps he ain't bothered. So an explosives cache goes up and some Provo gets blown to teensy-weensy pieces. Who's to say what caused it? Unstable stuff, gelly.'

'The Micks know what they're doing nowadays. Caches don't blow up by themselves.'

Villiers smiled. 'Then there's been a lot of thick Provos storing explosives lately.'

'It's not policy,' Rix insisted.

'If it was, they wouldn't tell the likes of you and me. Just brief the man who had to do it. We've all heard the rumours. Anyway, if that's what the boss is doing, I'm all for it. Orders or not.'

Rix shook his head. 'You're a thug, Pete.'

'Yeah.'

D'Arcy had returned to the OP with a full list of the contents stowed in the black plastic dustbin buried beneath the mossbed of the clearing. But the find was disappointing. The cache had not been booby-trapped, which indicated a low-grade store. The contents confirmed it; it was not what everyone had been expecting, hoping for.

He reported just four Kalashnikov AK47 assault rifles,

several hundred rounds of ammunition, and a greaseproof package which probably contained some type of explosive. There was no sign of the rumoured RPG-7 anti-tank launchers, nor the SAM-7 missiles for use against helicopters.

Perhaps after all Tashakkur had been wrong. Or perhaps it was the local Army Intelligence informer who had misinterpreted what was going to happen. Disappointment and apprehension dampened the spirits of D'Arcy's operational headquarters and the OP team who remained cocooned in their muddy underground tomb. Still watching, still waiting.

Nothing happened for another three days of mind-numbing boredom. Then at dusk two sets of footsteps were picked up by one of the seismic ground-sensors buried on the approaches to the clearing. A pretty local girl and her boyfriend passed through the copse, chatting and laughing intimately. They crossed the clearing but didn't stop.

In all probability innocent, the couple could just as easily have been checking that the cache remained undisturbed. The shutter on the camera with the powerful telephoto lens flickered rapidly in the OP. Routinely the suspects' presence was radioed to D'Arcy for the Royal Ulster Constabulary or Army Intelligence to check them out.

The girl, it transpired, was O'Neill's niece.

Anticipation at the covert OP and at D'Arcy's headquarters rose steeply. Justifiably as it turned out.

The following night the figure of a man, dressed from head to toe in black, slipped out of the copse and approached the cache. He carried a collapsible entrenching tool which he used to dig down to the sunken dustbin. With his back to the OP, it was not possible for the SAS team to see what he was doing.

D'Arcy had already been called from his bed by the time the man was closing up the cache again, apparently

leaving it intact and without removing any of its contents.

Villiers radioed for instructions. Intervene? Negative, D'Arcy replied. Roy Bliss's warnings were still fresh in his mind.

In fact he could scarcely risk mounting a surveillance operation in case the stranger became aware that he was under observation.

To D'Arcy's chagrin the stranger in black had to be allowed to melt away into the darkness. After studying photographs taken through the nightsight, D'Arcy agreed with Villiers that the man was not a known member of O'Neill's local Provo unit.

But, whatever his true identity, it was clear that the man had been checking to establish that the weapons were still in position. That, in turn, suggested that something was imminent. Perhaps, after all, Tashakkur's information had been correct.

That night, D'Arcy decided he would rejoin Villiers and his team at the OP.

D'Arcy was jolted from his recollections by a movement down at the edge of the clearing.

O'Neill had decided it was safe. The movement had been a beckoning hand motion.

A second figure crawled up to his side. The newcomer was slightly built, wearing dark jeans and a military-style anorak. Although a knitted balaclava masked his face, it was obvious he was asking a question. O'Neill shook his head and pointed to the treestump in the clearing.

D'Arcy heard the faint metallic click beside him as Villiers took more photographs through the nightsight.

Shrugging, the newcomer began to crawl across the carpet of moss, alone. Every few yards he would stop, cock his head to one side, and listen. Satisfied that he could hear nothing, he continued. Several times he repeated the process until he reached the treestump.

Villiers' coarse whisper grated in D'Arcy's ear. 'O'Neill's pulling back, boss. Him and his two cronies are pulling back.'

Irritably D'Arcy waved the sergeant to silence.

The SAS captain was aware of his heart pounding as he watched the newcomer lift the trapdoor of moss and extract the black dustbin lid. Then the man reached down and carefully, one at a time, removed the four Kalashnikovs. Again he peered inside, and lifted out several cardboard boxes of ammunition.

'Boss,' Villiers hissed. 'O'Neill's almost out of sensor range.'

D'Arcy ignored the remark, instead mentally reminding the stranger not to forget the greaseproof pack of explosive.

Again the figure glanced around, listening to the rustle of the treetops. Once more he reached inside.

The sheer brilliance of the flash caught D'Arcy by surprise. Magnified through the nightsight, it blinded him instantly. He was equally unprepared for the ferocious power of the blast which contemptuously tore apart the body of the man at the cache, and sent shockwaves of displaced air pulsing over the hide.

D'Arcy fell back, gasping, his eardrums throbbing with pain.

He did not, could not, hear Villiers utter his astonished profanity.

'And you say you had no idea it was rigged?'

D'Arcy held Major Johnny Fraser's penetrating gaze. 'I inspected it three days earlier. I suspected the lid might be wired, but it wasn't. And inside there was no sign of a booby-trap that I could see.'

The atmosphere in the small office was tense and claustrophobic. D'Arcy felt like a man on trial and, despite his commanding officer's usual relaxed manner, he had a suspicion that he was exactly that.

Roy Bliss's brooding presence behind him confirmed his worst fears. The man had been sitting on the hardback chair, his very inclusion at this debrief as silently intrusive as a schools inspector in a classroom. Listening, observing, saying nothing, missing nothing. Ensuring that he would have the right answers to give his masters.

For the first time he spoke. 'May I ask a question, Major?'

Fraser glanced at D'Arcy, who nodded his agreement. The sooner he knew what was on the SIS field officer's mind the better he'd like it.

Bliss said: 'You were the only person to go to that cache in the entire period of the observation? Is that what you're saying, D'Arcy?'

The formal use of his surname, he knew, was deliberate. A distancing of old friendship. 'Apart from the unidentified stranger the night before the explosion, yes, I was the only one.'

Bliss sniffed and lit an untipped cigarette. 'And it's not possible that some third party could have got to it unobserved? Maybe one night when a mist came down?'

'No way.'

The SIS man smiled crookedly. 'And what about your own chaps? I suppose there's no chance that one of them could have decided to take a private initiative?'

'No, sir. They're all trained professionals who've served for many years.'

Bliss studied his cigarette end closely. 'What about Villiers? He's a bit of a cowboy, isn't he?'

Major Fraser shifted awkwardly behind his desk. 'I'm afraid, Mr Bliss, that comment is *decidedly* out of order.'

While D'Arcy welcomed the support from his chief, the intervention had no effect on Bliss; in fact the reverse. The ruddy colour of the man's cheeks deepened. 'Out of order, Major? This whole business is *decidedly* out of order. I must remind you that Villiers has a somewhat chequered history. How many weeks did he spend in the glasshouse at Catterick?'

It was D'Arcy's turn to feel resentment. 'That was years ago – long before he even joined the Regiment. A young roughneck from the Glasgow back streets.'

Bliss's cold grey eyes narrowed. 'Leopards and spots,' he murmured. 'Leopards and spots.'

'The captain's right,' Fraser added. 'He'd never have been admitted – let alone have been allowed to stay in the Regiment – unless we were completely satisfied with both his behaviour and psychological make-up.'

'I understand,' Bliss said softly, 'that Villiers generally approves of setting up what we term "own goals"?''

'He approved of the *idea*,' D'Arcy agreed. 'He's seen too much of the Provos' barbarity and cowardice, their intimidation of the innocent. He's seen too many killers walk free from the courts with smiles on their faces. Yes, he approved in principle, but that was just his private view. Villiers does what he's told.'

Bliss wasn't to be deterred. He was like a dog with a bone and wouldn't be shaken. 'And I gather you share that view, Captain?'

D'Arcy was taken aback. 'Well, I'm not opposed to it – like half the Regiment. In certain situations.'

The crooked smile returned to Bliss's face. 'I'm glad you have the good grace to admit it. On more than one occasion you have been overheard approving the concept.'

'A soldier cannot be prevented from holding a private opinion,' Fraser reminded. 'Provided it isn't made in public, nor affects his actions in the line of duty.' Momentarily his eyes met D'Arcy's. Clearly he was as concerned as his friend with the line and tone of the SIS man's questioning.

Bliss rose to his feet and brushed spilt ash from his crumpled brown suit 'So if neither you nor Villiers – nor any of the other three at the OP – had a hand in this "own goal", how do *you* explain that you failed to see the wiring?'

D'Arcy shrugged; he'd pondered the same question

countless times himself. 'The only rational explanation is that some sort of pressure-plate was used. Or a mercury tilt-switch. Arranged to detonate as the packet of explosive at the bottom was lifted.'

Fraser nodded uncertainly. 'That's feasible. Tell me, Mr Bliss, do the lab reports shed any light on what was used?'

The SIS man leaned with his back against the door, arms folded across his chest. 'The explosion was so strong that any detonation device evaporated. But I must tell you that the explosive was PE4 as used by the British Army. Plastic-coated packaging fragments have been found.'

D'Arcy swallowed hard. The implication was as clear as it was deadly to his defence. 'The Provos have used stolen explosive before.'

Bliss appeared not to hear as he stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray on Fraser's desk. 'You realise what you are saying, D'Arcy? If a cache is booby-trapped it is normally to prevent it from falling into the hands of the security forces. The lid would have been wired in such a way that the Provos could disarm it themselves and retrieve their weapons. But a pressure-plate or tilt-switch couldn't be defused by anyone. It would have been solely to catch an RUC or Army patrol. It might explain why you didn't see it, but certainly not why the Provos set it off themselves.'

D'Arcy sighed. This was going round in circles. 'Some internal feud?' he suggested. 'Do we know the identity of the victim yet? I'm damn sure it wasn't one of O'Neill's men.'

Bliss raised a quizzical eyebrow. 'You haven't heard? It was an Algerian student from Dublin.'

'What?'

'He had come over from Teheran on an Iranian passport. One of several hundred youngsters who study there. His code name with French Intelligence was Tashakkur. That's Farsi for Good Luck. It looks like his ran out.'

D'Arcy was stunned.

'So you see, Captain, we've been landed with a difficult diplomatic incident. Exactly what we were at pains to avoid. Your men were on the scene immediately afterwards, and we are faced with explaining a dead Iranian student scooped into a bodybag on one hand. And on the other, how do we explain to the French DGSE that one of our overzealous SAS soldiers has blown up one of their top undercover agents?'

'Just a minute!' D'Arcy protested, springing to his feet.

'No, Captain, *you* wait!' Bliss retorted. 'In view of your pronounced approval of this type of waste disposal method, I've had the Criminal Investigation Branch inspect your quarters and your equipment. Amongst it is a considerable quantity of unauthorised explosive, ammunition, detonators and fuse wire.'

D'Arcy was astounded. 'Everyone squirrels odds and ends . . .'

'Enough!' Fraser snapped, standing behind his desk. 'Forgive me, Mr Bliss, but you had permission to sit in on this debrief. Not to turn it into a witch-hunt.' His eyes were steel. 'Correct me if I'm wrong, but no legal proceedings are being considered?'

'That's down to the Crown Prosecution Service,' Bliss replied matter-of-factly.

'On what evidence?' D'Arcy demanded.

Bliss shuffled uneasily, and fumbled in his pocket for his cigarettes. He looked straight at D'Arcy. 'No, pal, you're right. There's no evidence to prosecute. Couldn't be really, could there?' He smiled thinly. 'But what we've found is enough to convince those who matter. I've got it in the neck over this. More important, my boss at Century House has too. A high-flying young Turk who made his name over the Shalayez defection a few years back. He's looking for a scapegoat to appease the Foreign Office. Unfortunately for you, pal, he doesn't have to look too far.'

'What are you trying to say?' D'Arcy asked darkly.

Bliss drew deeply on his cigarette before replying slowly. 'I'm not *trying* to say anything, Captain, I *am* saying it. Look, we've always worked well together. Christ, most SIS officers and the men from the Regiment we work with are damn near blood brothers. There's no room for acrimony. So I'm warning you as a friend.'

D'Arcy frowned. 'Warning?'

'I know my boss. The evidence against you may be a bit circumstantial – but it's enough. Even if the entire Regiment give you their support, and I'm sure they will, it won't count for tuppence when my boss tells the MOD and the Foreign Office he knows who was responsible. In his position he doesn't need evidence, pal. Just a nod and a wink in the right places.'

D'Arcy wasn't at all sure he welcomed Bliss's friendly words of advice. 'But you, Roy – my blood brother – are quite prepared to make a detrimental report in the first place? Ignoring my protest of innocence?'

Bliss said smoothly: 'Your statements will be noted. I'm just doing my job. It's in the hands of the Criminal Investigation Branch now.'

Those bastards, D'Arcy thought savagely, they were far more ruthless and insensitive than any civilian equivalent. If anyone could make an innocent visit to grandma seem like attempted murder for an inheritance, they could. Expert stitchers-up.

Suddenly Bliss decided he'd said enough. He stubbed out his second cigarette and announced: 'I need to be going. No doubt you've much to discuss.' He nodded farewell to Major Fraser, then turned to D'Arcy. He didn't offer his hand. 'Sorry, pal.'

As the door shut D'Arcy felt relief.

'Evil little creep,' Fraser growled from behind his desk.

D'Arcy shook his head. 'No, Johnny, Bliss is okay really. As he said, he's just doing his job. How the hell is he supposed to know if I'm telling the truth?'

Fraser steeped his fingers on the desk before him and

studied D'Arcy carefully. He'd known the man who stood in front of him for more years than he cared to recall. They'd long ago become friendly rivals as two of the few officers who returned to the Regiment regularly for additional tours of duty which had frequently coincided.

Already second-in-command of 22 SAS, Fraser was hotly tipped to become the Regiment's colonel within the next five years. D'Arcy was due to push a desk in Whitehall for three years, after which he was equally expected – according to rumours in the Mess – to fill Fraser's shoes as 2IC, heading up the antiterrorist CRW Wing. Two professional competitors and great personal friends. Two high-flyers who were more than likely to become full brigadiers and generals in the fullness of time . . .

And if one high-flyer should accidentally fall, Fraser thought angrily.

'Pardon?' D'Arcy didn't catch the muttered words.

'Did you do it, Rob?' The edge to the soft Edinburgh brogue was as hard as steel.

D'Arcy felt his hackles rise. 'Do you have to ask?'

'I am asking you.'

'I didn't do it, Johnny. And you don't have to ask.'

Fraser nodded. 'I didn't think you did. Neither does the Old Man.' He took a deep breath. 'But Bliss is right about his boss. I've come across him. Bloke called Lavender. And if you want to know about him, just ask Sarn't Major Hunt. He had the misfortune of working with him when old Mike Ash failed to beat the clock.'

'The Old Man is under pressure to have you "Returned to Unit". He doesn't like it any more than I do. But, apart from the FCO, SIS and now the MOD screaming for blood, there's the bad press coverage in the tabloids. Typically they're speculating that an SAS team on surveillance set up an "own goal" as though it were gospel. The Opposition is even demanding an inquiry.'

D'Arcy watched his friend closely, scarcely believing

the words being spoken. Any moment now he had to awaken and find himself in the cold sweat aftermath of a nightmare.

‘The colonel wants you in his office tomorrow morning at 0900 hours,’ Fraser added. Then, carefully: ‘Don’t be surprised if you find your majority waiting for you.’

D’Arcy’s eyes narrowed like a cat’s. In these circumstances the rank of major at this stage in the game had all the hallmarks of a farewell gift. The only card the CO had left to play.

Fraser read the expression on his colleague’s face. ‘Advice from another friend, Rob, have your resignation with you tomorrow. Take the initiative and go on your own terms. What do you think?’

The SAS captain didn’t reply immediately. He was trembling with the suppressed rage and anguish of the helpless.

He looked down at Fraser. ‘I think, Johnny, that either the Provos or this Iranian terrorist Sabbah discovered the identity of Tashakkur in their cell and set him up to blow himself to smithereens. That’s why they started evacuating while he was still at the cache. And that’s why they’d stowed only four obsolete Kalashnikovs. I think they didn’t even know my men were there.’ His chest heaved with indignation. ‘What do *you* think?’

The silence that followed hung bitterly in the air between them.

Quietly Fraser said: ‘I think that’s very likely.’

D’Arcy said: ‘The CO will have my resignation at 0900 tomorrow. From the Regiment – and from the Army.’

Before Fraser could reply, D’Arcy had turned on his heel and left. As the door shut his military career ended.