

One

The phone rang at just gone three on that late-October morning.

It drilled into my skull and shattered my dream, unrelenting until I reached for the handset on the bedside table.

They say it's the calls you get in the small hours that are the ones you will never forget. Well, I guess they're hardly likely to be bringing good news.

But I wasn't thinking of that as I cleared my throat.

'Hallo. Hawkins.'

I kept my voice low, not wanting to disturb Marcia in the twin bed next to mine.

The voice at the other end was familiar, the Adjutant of the Parachute Regiment. 'Hi, Jimbo, sorry to disturb your beauty sleep.' He wasn't quite his usual chirpy self; he sounded a little weary round the edges.

'What is it, Bill? World War Three broken out?'

'Nah, that stuff's all over now, Jimbo. You really must keep up with things.'

My first name isn't Jimbo or even Jim. It's Jeff. But with a surname like Hawkins it was inevitable that someone would see the initial J. and make the *Treasure Island* connection. So it had been 'Jimbo' to my army colleagues ever since my induction to the Parachute Regiment as a boy soldier twenty-four years earlier – before I took the 'scenic route' in my career, finally making Warrant Officer First Class before being commissioned.

'Stop pissing about, Bill,' I said, 'and spit it out.'

'How soon can you be ready to leave?'

I glared down at the handset in the dark. 'I'm not on standby . . .'

'I know. How soon? This is an emergency.'

I threw back the duvet and swung my legs off the bed, now fully awake. 'I don't know. Forty-eight hours.'

'Make that twenty-four, will you? There's a lot of hairy shit going down in Bosnia just now. I've had a call from the MOD, asking for you personally. I've got to confirm back immediately. Someone's getting their knickers in a twist.'

I was surprised. 'I'm flattered.'

Suddenly the bedside lamp behind me snapped on, throwing the bedroom into twilight. Marcia was awake and I could smell trouble already.

'Who is it, Jeff?' She sounded anxious. 'Is it my mother; the kids?'

I put my hand over the mouthpiece. 'Everything's fine. It's just Bill. Something's come up.'

'That's ridiculous, you retire next year. Can't they leave you alone?'

I didn't reply, just turned my back on her and returned to my telephone conversation. 'So, what's happened?'

'A liaison officer with the Royal Wessex in Una Drina has gone down with acute appendicitis. Emergency casevac. Bad timing. They want someone with experience to fill his boots. Your name came up.'

Now I knew. The Hereford connection – a while back I'd done a three-year tour with 22 Special Air Service Regiment.

'Liaison' in this context meant negotiating cease-fires with the warring factions, doing some hearts-and-minds and accruing intelligence. Some of the exact qualities that are honed during SAS service.

And, of course, the fact that my step-mother originally came from Belgrade – I'd spent a lot of childhood holidays in the former Yugoslavia – and I spoke the lingo fluently was on their

records. Sometimes it's said that Hereford never really lets go of its former members.

Nevertheless, infantry battalion liaison officers – or LOs – were invariably drawn from the same cap badge or brigade. Pulling in an 'outsider', and a Para at that – even if I did have specialist knowledge and experience – was hardly going to make me flavour of the month.

'How long's the deployment?' I asked.

'The Royal Wessex have been there for three months. So you're looking at another three. There's a midday flight out of Lyneham for Split tomorrow. I'll get back with more details.'

I said, 'Can't you count? That's more like nine hours, not twenty-four.'

'Go with the flow, Jimbo. It'll win 1 Para some Brownie points with the MOD.'

It was pointless to resist. I said, 'OK, Bill. Cheers.'

'One more thing.'

'What?'

'Pack your thermals. It can get bloody freezing out there. Ciao.'

I shook my head and smiled to myself as I replaced the handset.

'What the hell's happening, Jeff?' Marcia demanded. 'Where are they sending you? Not bloody Bosnia?'

I turned back to look at her. A year younger than me, Marcia hadn't been a bad-looking woman when we'd met and married after I passed out in the Paras. But she'd never been good army-wife material and always resented the way it had become the third partner in our marriage. After our two kids were born, she'd neglected herself and had steadily put on the extra pounds. Long dyed-black hair now framed a still-pretty but pudgy face that seemed to wear a continuously sour expression as if she'd just sucked a mothball.

'At least someone loves me,' I said, standing up and pulling on my dressing-gown. But she missed the sarcasm.

‘They said you wouldn’t see active service again,’ she muttered.

Too bloody true. Due to be pensioned off at the tender age of forty-five, I’d been driving a desk round Aldershot HQ for the past year and it was doing my head in. ‘It wasn’t a promise,’ I pointed out.

‘And we’ve got Ralph and Celeste coming round for supper on Saturday . . .’

Marcia’s bridge-club friends. Well, that was one damn good reason to head for Bosnia. I said, ‘You’ll just have to manage without me. Like you always have.’

I left for the bathroom.

As I ran the shower I stared at my own image in the mirror as the glass began to mist. Forty-four years old, fairish hair that was thinning a little and grey at the temples, a face a little too weathered for my years due to a lifetime in the outdoors, too many cigars and too much booze. But I could still recognize a light of mischievous humour in the blue eyes and the same crooked smile that had been there in the years of my misspent youth. My body had survived better: still muscular, lean and taut from a job that involved relentless physical activity.

I leaned more closely towards the mirror and ran a hand over the bristles on my chin. ‘Well, Jimbo, life’s full of surprises,’ I mumbled under my breath. ‘Thought you were on the scrapheap – now suddenly you’re getting another slice of the action . . . last-chance saloon . . .’

Of course, there was no way I’d get back to sleep. So after my shower I went downstairs to the living room of our three-bedroom semi on the outskirts of Aldershot, poured a slug of whisky into a mug of black coffee and lit a miniature vanilla cigar. I’d given up cigarettes years before and didn’t need to inhale on these strong little fellas to get my nicotine fix.

I started to go through all the tedious domestic paperwork I’d have to clear before I left – bills to pay, a letter from the bank that needed a reply, car tax renewal form – but my mind wasn’t

really on the job. In those days in the early nineties, television and the newspapers were full of Bosnia: the mayhem, the fighting, the massacres, the ethnic cleansing, the refugees and the humanitarian aid effort by the United Nations.

Of course, being in the army and knowing some of our lads were deployed there wearing the blue berets of the United Nations Protection Force, UNPROFOR, I took a particular interest in the situation. Whereas most of the general public threw up their hands in horror at the complexity of the situation, I made it my business to get a general understanding of what was going on.

At the end of the Cold War, the disparate Balkan states that had been held together under the yoke of Communism to form Yugoslavia fell apart, each seeking independence from the dominant Serbs. Slovenia had managed to slip from Belgrade's grasp early on and Croatia's large and antagonistic population made it impossible for the Yugoslav Army to control for long. Thereafter the real battle was for who controlled the largely Muslim region of Bosnia-Herzegovina in the centre, and its capital, Sarajevo.

The situation wasn't helped by the fact that over the years all the ethnic groups had spread throughout the region, with enclaves or villages or towns full of one group living within an area run by another. In Bosnia there were Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Serbs, and in some places Bosnian Croats!

It made the Northern Ireland problem look simple.

Germany had been first to officially recognize Bosnia-Herzegovina, soon followed by the rest of the EU countries. Eventually the United Nations followed. At that point the UN was rather obliged to step in with humanitarian aid and try to stop everyone from killing each other. That's when UNPROFOR was formed, to which Britain made a large contribution.

By the time I'd finished my domestic admin, it was seven o'clock and Marcia was up, stomping round the kitchen as she

made her morning tea. She had this incredible, almost telepathic way of letting you know she was in a petulant mood and that you were the reason for it. Negative energy seemed to emanate from her very being until her hostility tainted the air like ozone.

I took the opportunity to escape back to the bedroom to pack my bergen. It wouldn't take long, it was permanently half-full with essentials and I had a checklist of stuff I'd need for any type of climate and mission.

The only downside to this sudden deployment was that I'd miss Christmas with the kids. Lucy and Joe, born just a year apart, were both away at university and had gone to Ibiza to work as club reps over the summer, so I hadn't seen much of them that year. Carefully I put a small framed photo of the two of them on the top of my bergen. Then I strapped it up before realizing that the picture of Marcia I always took with me on deployment was still on my bedside table.

I left it there and drove to town to pick up a few crucial provisions I guessed would be in short supply in Bosnia. Whisky and vanilla cigars would be two of them.

When I walked back into the house a couple of hours later the phone was ringing.

It was Bill with the final details. I was a bit surprised when he told me I'd be met off the C130 Hercules transport at Split airport on the Croatian coast by no less than Brigadier Alan Stowell, the Commander of British Forces in the Balkans. It seemed that, in typical British fashion, the MOD had appointed its own commander between our deployed units and the UN general whose orders they were supposed to follow. It was our way of letting 'Johnny Foreigner' at the United Nations know that we didn't fully trust him to play with our soldiers.

I was mystified. My role was to be a fairly humble battalion LO to the Royal Wessex, reporting to its CO on local matters. Brigadier Stowell, on the other hand, as CBF had fielded his own independent network of UKLOs – mostly special forces guys – to report to him direct.

So why was the Brigadier *and* his G2, the intelligence and security chief, going to meet me for the briefing as well as my opposite number, the UKLO in Una Drina?

Marcia came down the stairs just as I hung up. ‘Well, I’d better be off,’ I said.

Her expression didn’t change a fraction. ‘I suppose you must. RAF Lyneham, is it?’

I nodded. ‘I’ll write. And call when and if I can.’

It was my way of saying, don’t hold your breath. But I knew she wouldn’t anyway.

She gave a bleak little smile and offered her cheek for me to kiss. ‘Take care,’ she said. She didn’t wave me off.

By five o’clock that night I was high over the Adriatic, sharing the noisy, cold RAF C130 with a huge mountain of urgent military supplies that sat under a cargo net in front of me and half-a-dozen other ‘replacement’ personnel. It seemed that yet again a British government had salami-chopped our armed forces at a time of increasing commitment, so we were top-ping-up unit strengths in theatre by poaching members from other regiments and increasingly relying on the Territorial Army to plug specialist gaps.

As I felt the distinct cant of the aircraft’s wings and its nose dipped for descent over the Croatian coast, my own sense of anticipation soared until the adrenalin rush of old was back the same as ever. I had thought my days in action were over; now it seemed they might return – with a vengeance.

We hit the tarmac with a thud and the old workhorse trundled down the runway towards the terminal building until we gradually came to a standstill and the four propeller-engines wound down. There was a ten-minute delay before the rear ramp went down and I peered out of one of the ports while we waited. It was a dull, pinky-grey twilight, but I could see a frieze of ragged mountains in deep relief on the horizon, beyond the war-damaged perimeter fence of the single-strip airfield. On the grass there were a few old waterlogged artillery-shell

craters and several of the administration buildings were pock-marked with bullet holes and in bad repair. I could smell the war and sense the extent of the devastation even from inside the aircraft.

I'd been to Split before. With Marcia in the late seventies on a package holiday. It had been a lot different then, a much happier place.

I heard the whine of an electric motor and the tail ramp began to lower, revealing the bizarre and incongruous sight of Croatian airport officials setting up a wooden picnic table and a chair, complete with forms and a rubber-stamp for our passports. Instant immigration control. The message was clear: new arrivals might know that the Serbs had knocked the shit out of their airport, but it was still Croatia's airport and the Croatians were back in control.

Passport quickly dealt with, I shouldered my bergen and moved towards the gathering of military personnel and vehicles waiting for the new arrivals. I rubbed my hands together against the chill air as I scoured their ranks in search of my reception committee.

At first I didn't recognize the tall, grey-haired man in DPM camos in the poor light. It was that soft Edinburgh brogue that gave him away.

'Captain Jeff Hawkins, I believe . . . ?'

My mouth dropped. 'Bloody hell! Dave McVicar, you old bastard! What're you doing here?'

McVicar had been a senior sergeant when I'd done my tour in the SAS; it seemed like he'd been with them since dinosaurs walked the earth. Nothing had diminished the devilish twinkle in those grey eyes. 'Staff sergeant now, Jimbo. And G2 to the CBF.' The smile became more stiff and he turned to introduce the man standing just a step behind and to one side of him. 'Sir, this is Captain Jeff Hawkins. Jeff – Brigadier Alan Stowell, Commander of British Forces . . .'

I saluted and Stowell responded lackadaisically. 'Pleased to

meet you, Captain Hawkins.' He was a fairly short and slim man, his body bulked out by extra layers beneath his DPMs. His David Niven voice with its crisp but perfectly enunciated vowels and his black toothbrush moustache were straight out of 1940s Pinewood. 'Jeff, is it?'

'Yes, sir.'

'OK, Jeff. Glad to have you aboard. Impressed you made it at such short notice.' He glanced around the airport and grimaced. 'Welcome to the arsehole of the world! Well, the arsehole of the moment. I expect you've seen others at different times. I know I have.'

I smiled. I was taking a liking to him already. A big man inside a small one.

'Right, it's fucking freezing here. Let's get back to the hotel. At least the electricity came back on today and there's heating.' We started drifting towards a white-painted UNPROFOR Land Rover Defender. 'Have a hot toddy and give you a bit of a briefing. Afraid Cuthbert couldn't make it.'

I frowned. 'Cuthbert, sir?'

'Cuthbert's your oppo in Una Drina. Nigel Cuthbert. He's my UKLO there. Foreign Office wallah – well, you know, MI6's man really, more than mine. In uniform, but actually he's a civvy now. Ex-Guards. He and Captain Wells – not *so* well as it turned out, poor chap – shared the Liaison Office at A Company. Cuthbert was due to be here and drive you back to Una Drina. But the Bosnian Serbs have launched an unexpected offensive from the west and virtually cut the town off. Road in is under artillery, mortar and small-arms fire.'

I didn't understand. A Company had armoured fighting vehicles. 'What about the Warriors, sir? Couldn't one of them get Cuthbert out through the fight zone?'

Brigadier Stowell stopped beside his Land Rover and turned to me. There was a twitch of a smile at one corner of his mouth. 'Apparently the OC, Major Tring, doesn't think so. You're a Para, Jeff, right? And a former Hereford hooligan?'

I nodded.

'Well, you might find that Major Tring isn't quite as robust in his thinking as you are.' He opened the driver's door and slipped behind the wheel. 'And he hates Paras . . . Hop in!'

Dave McVicar threw a knowing glance my way, offered me the front passenger seat, then scrambled into the back.

Apparently Stowell liked to do his own driving and he drove the way he spoke, fast and furious, punctuated by hard braking and jerky little turns of the wheel. He explained that British HQ was at the Divulje Barracks – known, in the typical squad-die way of handling an unpronounceable name, as DJ – next to the airport, but he wanted to speak to me somewhere more private.

'Trouble is, Jeff, HQs are always the worst rumour-mills,' Stowell explained. 'Nature of the beast. Everyone knows too much and they all know too many faces. As a Para filling-in as an LO with the Royal Wessex, you're goin' to stick out like a dog's bollocks. So I want to bypass HQ completely and slip you in quietly. Won't stop the tongues wagging, but hopefully they'll have something else to gossip about by the time you get noticed.'

McVicar added: 'I've found you a room in a small hotel in town. It'll do until Nigel Cuthbert can pick you up.'

I was becoming increasingly puzzled by all this secrecy by the time we got into the town. The thoroughfares of Split were mean and bleak, the street lamps were off and the few people about were fleeting, hunched grey ghosts in the shadows. In the headlight beams I could see the shell damage to the buildings from earlier fighting. Apparently the town was bursting with refugees, filling every hotel and apartment block.

Finally, the brigadier turned into a fairly narrow cobbled side-street. A couple of minibuses and white UNHCR Discoveries were parked half on the pavement outside a hotel that looked as though it had been converted by knocking through three or four old houses. A faded sign above the glass double-doors proudly boasted Hotel Seavu. But my guess was you'd have to be stand-

ing on the roof to view anything at all, let alone the sea. Lines of washing hung from many of the upstairs windows, suggesting that this place, too, was now also home to a substantial number of refugees.

Stowell led the way into the lobby and got me signed in at a reception desk that was squeezed under the staircase to the first floor. The red carpet that ran throughout was threadbare, the walls were in dire need of a fresh lick of paint and there was a lingering smell of mildew in the air.

'Drop your kit in your room,' McVicar said, 'and join us for a drink.'

His last words were almost drowned out by a sudden explosion of boisterous laughter from the bar room to the left. It sounded like quite a party.

'British convoy drivers from UNHCR,' Stowell muttered disparagingly. 'Bunch of bloody pirates.'

McVicar just smiled gently and gestured to the 1960s plastic-wood door on the right. 'We'll meet in the lounge. Bit quieter.'

And a bit quieter it was when I joined them ten minutes later. There was no one there apart from the three of us. The lounge was all tired, deflated armchairs in red imitation leather, dusty pot plants and a sense of being trapped in a time warp. A waitress brought us three toddies of coffee and slivovitz as Brigadier Stowell spread out his map of Bosnia-Herzegovina on a tiled coffee table.

'Right, Jeff,' Stowell said, getting down to business. 'BiH – Bosnia – as you know, is geographically a triangle turned point downwards which rests on the Adriatic coast. The whole bloody thing is an invention – there's never been such a place historically, but that's politicians for you.'

'After the fall of Communism, Yugoslavia shattered into five pieces. Serbia and Montenegro became the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and Macedonia gained independence without bloodshed. But it was different with Slovenia, Croatia and then Bosnia. Trouble was, the various ethnic groups were scattered all

over the place. I mean, it was a fully integrated state under Tito. The predominating Serb leadership in Belgrade didn't like this break-up at all – Serbs do like *order*. They wanted things to continue as before.'

I knew all this stuff. 'Belgrade moved against Slovenia.'

McVicar smiled gently. 'Who gave the Serbian Yugoslav Army a bloody nose with a bit of Austrian help. Belgrade also deployed units all over Croatia but in the end they realized it was too big to hold down and they reluctantly had to let go.'

'So then Belgrade turned its attention to Bosnia,' Stowell went on, 'because this was *much* more contentious. The majority of the population in so-called Bosnia is Muslim.'

McVicar added, 'The Bosnian Serbs living there, led by Dr Radovan Karadzic in Pale, were furious at this independence thing. And, of course, they got the backing of the Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic in Belgrade to put up a fight against it.'

'And so this awful mess of a civil war began,' Stowell said with a grimace. 'Of course, most of the warring militias are locals, peasant farmers who used to form the old territorial defence reservists in the Communist era. All their arms were held at the local police stations and there's no young blood in the officer corps. Promotion used to be by dead men's shoes and Buggin's turn. It's rare to find a unit commander under forty, but there are several in their sixties – or older!'

'That's why the battle lines are so static,' McVicar explained. 'Like the trenches of World War One. Old, poorly trained officers, farmers who've got no real stomach for a fight, and no one anywhere who's got a clue about attack. The old territorial reserve only ever studied defence. That's also why there are so many bloody mines about.'

I asked, 'But out of all of them, the Bosnian Serbs are winning?'

Stowell scratched his moustache. 'That's putting it a bit strongly. Predominating, more like. Often depends in a local

situation whose side Croat forces are on, Muslim or Serb. But the Bosnian Muslims are between a rock and a hard place. No doubt about that, they're being squeezed.'

The brigadier jabbed at his map. 'Our job, UNPROFOR's job, is to protect innocent civilians and refugees and maintain the flow of aid, negotiating cease-fires and safe passage, escorting the convoys as necessary. Not to get involved in their war. To fire back only if fired upon. Thankless bloody task, but some silly sod at the UN thought it was a workable idea.'

'Where exactly are the Royal Wessex deployed?' I asked.

McVicar pointed a pencil at the top half of a roughly diamond-shaped area in the centre of Bosnia that was nearly all Muslim-controlled territory. 'The main aid-convoy route into this region enters from the south-west near Una Drina, where you'll be based at A Company. As you can see, Sarajevo is almost parallel in the south-east – with a near-starving population of three hundred thousand plus, and surrounded by Bosnian Serbs. The route from west to east is a big dog-leg through Donji Vrbas – known as DV – the CO and main body of the Royal Wessex are there. And then on to Zenica, the second biggest city. Then finally through to Sarajevo itself. Some of the convoy drivers call the whole area the "Devil's Triangle".'

Brigadier Stowell pulled a face at that and glanced at his watch. 'Look, I've got to get back to HQ – got a bloody early start for Zagreb tomorrow morning. I'll let Dave fill you in on the detail. Thing is, Jeff, the whole of the Royal Wessex deployment area is key to the failure or success of the entire UN mission in Bosnia. After all, along with UNHCR, it's responsible for feeding and securing the capital and the second largest city. And, frankly, it's losing its grip.'

So this was what it was all about. I raised an eyebrow. 'Sir?'

There was an awkward moment's silence as Stowell tried to find the right words. 'Let's put it this way. The CO of the Royal Wessex is a decent bloke. Colonel Rathbone . . . But he's no

Bob Stewart and the battalion is no Cheshires. Man's got no fire in his belly, just his eye on retirement. Trouble is, as always in fighting units, the rot starts at the top. Spreads down to junior officers and the ranks.'

I asked the obvious question. 'Can't he just be replaced, sir?'

Stowell twitched his nose as though his moustache was irritating it. 'Imagine it, changing the CO when the world's media attention is on the British Army's work here. Well, sod it, Jeff, yes, *I* would! But the suggestion has been firmly turned down by the Defence Minister. And for that you can also read the PM himself.'

McVicar added, 'Personally, I think the rotten apples have spread too far. But if we can't even replace the CO, then we certainly can't replace the *entire* battalion.'

I wasn't at all sure I was liking this. 'Look,' I said. 'I'm just one man and I certainly can't change the attitude of the entire battalion.'

McVicar smiled at that.

Stowell said, 'Won't have to, Jeff. The LOs' work is crucial. *You* and the other LOs advise the CO on what action to take, *you* try and negotiate the cease-fires, *you* do most of the talking between the militias. *You* are the CO's eyes and ears on the ground. *You* can influence decisions more than anyone else in the battalion. And *you* are my choice.'

I had a feeling I was Dave McVicar's choice. 'But I answer to the CO of the Royal Wessex, sir, not you. And as a Para I'll be resented from the off.'

Stowell shrugged. 'Can't be helped. I've had a quiet word with Colonel Rathbone. Explained your experience, special qualities and fluency in the lingo. Told him you've come highly recommended and that I'd appreciate it *personally* if you are allowed free rein to be a little more *proactive* than your predecessor.'

'The colonel knows you're not happy with the battalion's performance?' I asked.

'He's not a fool, Jeff. He can read between the lines like anyone else.'

'He'll also be my CO, sir.'

'Yes,' Stowell acknowledged. 'But *I* am asking you to make a difference. And I will back you to the hilt all the way as CBF here. With your experience, I want you to be independent and to push that independence to the wire. Even if it ruffles a few feathers in battalion HQ . . . You retire from the army next year, Jeff, right? Unless you do something bloody stupid, you're not going to get court-martialled or demoted. Falling out with Colonel Rathbone – if that's what it takes to get this job done – can hardly hurt your career prospects now, can it?'

He had a point there.

Stowell stood up, finished his toddy in one swallow and shook my hand. 'Glad to have you with us, Jeff. I know this is an impossible task, but it's our job to make it happen. Right?'

'Right,' I echoed as Stowell turned sharply on his heel and strode from the room.

As we watched him go, McVicar smiled. 'Always reminds me of Montgomery of Alamein. But he's an alright guy.'

When we sat down again at the map, he said, 'Liaison is the key to our mission here, Jimbo. Four officers at DV and the two of you at Una Drina. You guys are the main intelligence-gatherers. On the ground. Local negotiators and collectors of information that British force commanders need to make the best decisions – for their own protection and the success of the UN mission. It's used by your own local unit, of course, A Company, and the Royal Wessex Battalion HQ in Donji Vrbas – DV. Then it all gets collated by me, along with independent special forces and SIS intelligence reports from the UKLOs, for the brigadier.'

'What about UNPROFOR?' I asked. I meant did the British Army share its own intelligence with the overall UN military command?

He shook his head. 'We'll offer advice to UNPROFOR *based*

on our intelligence, but that intelligence itself is strictly for British eyes only. I mean if some Croat commander tells you in confidence – over a bottle of slivovitz – that he’s going to launch an assault somewhere, you don’t want it leaking out at the UN in New York or Geneva. Trust is everything.’

‘Likewise between factions?’ I guessed.

‘Exactly.’ He looked thoughtful. ‘Anything we find out from or about the Serbs, Muslims, Croats . . . Nothing is ever said to the opposing sides, no one’s ever tipped off. And that can be tough sometimes, believe me.’

I could see that. ‘So Cuthbert and I get to know all the local militia commanders, big-wigs, politicians, string-pullers and do the hearts-and-minds stuff.’

‘That’s it, Jimbo. Though mostly you just want to bang their stupid fucking heads together. Negotiating cease-fires or persuading them to let convoys through is enough to try the patience of a saint. You have to be cool, calm and as firm as a slab of concrete. Otherwise they’ll run rings round you.’

I grinned and lit one of my vanilla miniatures. ‘So what’s the good news?’

‘A Company’s inherited a good intelligence network but it’s not as good as it was. Captain Wells, who you’re replacing, let things slip a bit. Reading between the lines, I think his agents – well, informers and contacts, strictly speaking – have felt a bit let down. I expect that’s largely down to A Company’s OC, Major Tring, who very much has his own ideas about things and spends most of the time with his nose stuck up the colonel’s arse.’

That didn’t sound too promising, but I shoved it to the back of my mind. ‘So how long do I stay here in Split?’

‘I’m afraid it could be days, Jimbo. Until the fighting subsides enough for someone from A Company to get down here to pick you up.’ He stood up suddenly. ‘Well, Alan Stowell might be a party-pooper, but I’m in the mood to let my hair down. C’mon and join the drivers. There’s someone I think you’d like to meet.’

McVicar ambled towards the door and I followed him into the lobby.

By the reception desk there was a young and smartly turned-out subaltern engaged in light-hearted and animated conversation with a rather tall and striking blonde. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and she wore faded blue Levis and a natural sheepskin body-warmer over a plain rollneck sweater. Two rather expensive-looking cameras, one with a telephoto lens, hung by straps from her neck.

'Johnny Rigg's a PINFO from HQ,' McVicar muttered in my ear. 'Right little wanker.'

Rigg – a Public Information Officer, whose job it was to guide and advise the media in Bosnia – turned at our approach.

'Hi, Dave. How goes it?' The voice was clearly pukka public school and Oxbridge, polished to perfection at Sandhurst.

'So-so, thanks, Johnny,' was McVicar's reply. He didn't believe in wasting words on people he didn't like.

'This is Tali,' Rigg said quickly. 'She's a freelance press photographer.' Rigg's grin nearly split his face in half; he obviously couldn't believe his luck that this good-looking creature, I guess in her mid-twenties, had been put in his charge.

McVicar moved with smooth charm to take the girl's offered hand and press it briefly to his lips. 'An honour, Tali,' he said in his easy Edinburgh brogue. 'I'm Dave.'

I saw the look of mild shock in her powder-blue eyes and the sudden arching of her brows that were so light and fine as to be almost invisible. Her face was a slender almond shape, but a slightly pointed tip to her nose took away conventional beauty and put character and individuality in its place. As McVicar let go of her hand, I couldn't help noticing how very long and elegant her fingers were.

'Tali van Wyk,' she said. Her voice had a soft, melodic lilt to it.

'This is Jeff.' I was glad McVicar remembered how I hated

being introduced as 'Jimbo' to people outside the army, especially females.

'Jeff,' she repeated with a shy smile. McVicar's was a hard act to follow, so I made do with a firm handshake. I was a little surprised when she responded in kind. Our eyes met only fleetingly before she averted her gaze. It was almost as if she thought that to look at me for longer might give out the wrong signals. I decided then that she was fairly new to this and very unsure of herself and I wondered how the hell she'd get on in a hell-hole like Bosnia.

Rigg was saying: 'Tali's Dutch. Just arrived. Working for some of their colour supplements and magazines. Just wangled a room for her. Manager gave up his own bed. Amazing the wonders a pretty face works.'

'What subjects are you interested in?' I asked her.

This time her returning gaze held steady. 'Anything and everything. Anything that might sell. War and peace. Any picture that tells its own story.'

I think Rigg was getting worried McVicar and I would take her off his hands. He intervened quickly, 'You'll find the convoy drivers in there, Tali. But watch out, they eat young ladies alive.'

A smile flickered on her lips. 'And spit out their clothes after?'

With that Tali turned and moved away, her long legs and hips moving with a relaxed and easy grace. As she opened the door the noise from the bar rose several decibels, lots of loud talking, peals of male and female laughter, throbbing background music and a loud voice that sounded like a very bad impression of Elvis Presley doing 'Jailhouse Rock'.

'God,' Rigg muttered as Tali disappeared inside. 'Look at the *arse* on that! And legs all the way up to her armpits. Think I've died and gone to heaven.'

'Lucky to find angels that good-looking,' McVicar agreed.

'Wants to do a photo-story on the convoys,' Rigg explained. 'I was hoping I might keep her at HQ for a bit.'

'There you are then,' McVicar said in fake empathy. 'The

good Lord giveth us His angels and the good Lord taketh them away . . . See you around, Johnny.'

We then followed Tali van Wyk's path into the bar, where the fug of cigarette smoke and the warmth from the crush of perspiring bodies hit us like a wall. All around faces, male and female, were flushed and shiny with alcohol, voices raised so as to be heard against the background hubbub. The men were of various ages. Some had the tell-tale cropped hair and moustaches that marked them out as ex-military, but as many others had trousers slung around the low tide mark of their beer bellies. Several bright, beautiful eyes flashed in my direction, mostly darkish-featured women whom I guessed were local and just glad to see a good time after all the bad. Tali van Wyk had disappeared in the crowd.

I glanced towards the low platform in the corner where a big guy with wild, greying fair hair and a beard to match was cavorting with a microphone in his hand. I'd been right. It *was* a very bad impression of Elvis Presley. And, just my luck, it seemed that this was karaoke night at the Seavu.

'Wrap your laughing-gear round that!' McVicar said, fighting his way back from the scrum at the bar with two glasses of beer held aloft.

I took one of them. 'Cheers, Dave. Up yours!'

He inclined his head towards the stage. 'You'll have seen him, then?'

A roar went up from the more appreciative of the audience, including a gaggle of beautiful young Croatian girls getting an eager front-row view, as the huge, mop-headed Elvis did his finale and the background noise thankfully died away.

'Who?' I asked.

'Elvis. The King,' McVicar answered easily. 'King of the Road round here. Rocky Rogers.'

My mouth dropped. Jesus! I couldn't believe it.

The bear of a man, surrounded by his bevy of admirers, was stepping down from the stage as he caught my eye and

immediately changed direction to where McVicar and I were standing.

'Jimbo!' the familiar voice boomed. 'What the fuck you doin' here, you ol' son of a gun?'

We embraced like a couple of footballers, his enormous arms and chest crushing the air out of me in a brief but ferocious bear-hug. 'Rocky!' I returned, gasping for breath. 'I'm here with UNPROFOR. Drafted in for liaison. Just arrived . . . But you?'

The ex-Para, whom I'd last seen five years earlier, shook his massive tangle of curls like a lion's mane. 'No, mate, I'm a convoy leader with UNHCR. This bunch of ne'er-do-wells are relief crews. I'm just here to pick 'em up. But the route up to the Triangle's been closed because of fighting. We've got a convoy ready to roll out of Metkovic depot as soon as it stops. Thought I'd join the lads for a shindig. Could do with a day off, to tell the truth!'

'Tough going?' I asked.

I could see as he answered the tiredness in those piercing blue eyes. 'The toughest. But shit, the money's good.' He slapped McVicar on his back with a blow that would have sent a lesser man sprawling. 'Hi, Dave! How ya doin'? You two look after my girlies while I get the drinks set up. This calls for a celebration!'

He left us in the company of his delightful and inquisitive fan club of young-twenties females in their clubbing frocks and Friday-night smiles and, after he returned, we were to spend the rest of the evening with them and Rocky as the drink flowed and flowed like an unstoppable river.

Every now and again I was aware of the distracting pop and dazzle of a photo-flash and guessed it was probably Tali van Wyk. I only properly caught sight of her once, standing in a corner talking to one of the younger convoy drivers.

Later, when things quietened down, Rocky and I got chatting, me sitting next to Jelena, a moon-eyed waif who'd clearly taken a shine to me, and he with a girl called Marina clinging to his arm.

‘Take a tip,’ Rocky said under his breath. ‘If you’re waiting for someone from A Company to come and collect you, you’ll be here for a month of Sundays. Let’s just say Major Tring is the cautious type. Personally, I think he’s scared of putting a foot wrong in case it blots his copybook and ruins his career prospects. Got his sights set high, has that one.’

I shook my head. ‘Trouble is, blokes like that often get there. But, Rocky, I don’t have an option.’

He fixed me with a hard stare. ‘Course you do, old son. Ride with my convoy. As soon as there’s a window of opportunity, my boys will be down that road to Una Drina like a greasy snake. Be there while old Tring is deciding whether or not it’s safe to put his head out from under the bedcovers.’

I grinned. ‘I think you’re sorta enjoyin’ this job, Rocky.’

There was a twinkle in his eyes. ‘Tough, like I said, but more fun than in the Paras.’ He held up his left hand and counted off on fingers the size of Cumberland sausages. ‘Fifteen-ton truck with fifteen-ton load pulling a ten-ton trailer with a ten-ton load. In my convoy, UK Green, we go everywhere flat out up to seventy miles an hour . . . Safest way to avoid being shot up! But coming round a blind mountain bend to unexpectedly find a line of mines across the road’ – he paused dramatically – ‘concentrates the mind *wonderfully!*’ And he roared with laughter.

‘When do you leave?’ I asked.

‘We leave for the depot at sparrow’s fart. Be outside the hotel at 0400. Wear civvies.’

‘Thanks, mate, it’s appreciated.’ I rose unsteadily to my feet, aware that the room was starting to swim. ‘In that case I’d better crash.’

Rocky stood beside me, unwavering, and nudged my arm. ‘Better take Jelena with you, otherwise she’ll be upset. She’s not a tart, but a few Deutschmarks in the morning will be appreciated. Help her buy a few essentials to survive. You know, oil the wheels.’

By the time he'd stopped talking, Jelena was clutching my arm and helping to steady me as I began to make my way to bed.

I didn't remember much more until I felt her lips brush my cheek and her soft voice in my ear, 'It is time to go, Jeff. You must wake now, or you will miss your lift.'

Cranking open one eye, in the half-light I could see Jelena crouched on her knees beside me on the bed, leaning forward to run her tongue along my arm, her young-girl's breasts swaying slightly as she moved.

'What time is it?'

Her eyes glistened in the darkness. 'Ten minutes to four o'clock.'

'Oh, shit,' I said, forcing myself awake and throwing back the cover.

'I don't want you to go, Jeff. You keep me nice and warm in bed. You are very nice to me, make me feel very good.'

I looked back at her, not knowing whether to feel guilty or chuffed that I could have pleased someone so young. 'You made me feel good too, Jelena,' I lied. The truth was I could hardly remember a thing, just half-remembered dreamlike images.

But she saw through me. 'I didn't make you feel *that* good, Jeff. I think you still have a bad head. I have some aspirin in my handbag.'

I watched her as I started pulling on my clothes, watched her thin, almost childlike body, as she moved purposefully to the bathroom to fill a tumbler of water for me with all the maturity and purpose of a mother caring for her young.

After green thermals, I settled for jeans, my Norwegian army shirt and a blue polar fleece. As I finished strapping up my bergen, Jelena stood naked before me and handed over a tumbler and two aspirins in her upturned palm.

'Thanks,' I said awkwardly, and swallowed the pills. Then I remembered what Rocky had said and pulled out my wallet from my back pocket.

She frowned. 'I don't want your money, Jeff,' she said, but took it anyway. 'You will see me again when you come to Split?'

I hesitated. 'I'm sure . . .'

There was an earnest look in her eyes. 'You can take me to England. That's what I would like. Not your money. There is nothing for me here. This place is shit.'

I didn't answer; couldn't. I just touched her hair and cheek with my hand and kissed her on the forehead. 'Thanks, Jelena.'

'Thank you, Jeff,' I heard her say as I turned quickly and left the room.

Outside in the street, the night air was bitterly cold. The convoy drivers stood around, shoulders hunched and hands in pockets, their breath clouds mingling with the exhaust fumes as the minibuses and four-wheel drives spluttered and coughed into life. In the dim light of the hotel doorway I saw Tali van Wyk, a large rucksack on her back, with the same driver I'd seen her talking to earlier in the bar.

Just then Rocky Rogers, dressed in a tartan lumber jacket with a fleece collar, beckoned for me to join him in his white UNHCR Land Rover Discovery with its emblem of a dove between two cupped hands on the door.

'Christ,' he said as I climbed in beside him. 'Your eyes look like pissholes in the snow.'

I said, 'Haven't been on a binge like that . . .'

He finished the sentence for me. 'For too long, by the look of it.' He started his motor. 'And how was the lovely Jel?'

I managed a smile. 'Nice girl,' I said non-committally.

Rocky nodded. 'Likes a shag, our Jel does. But no young Croatian boys around, all off fighting. Anyway, all she wants is to find some Englishman who'll take her and her mother to the UK. Her mum's got cancer but isn't going to get treatment here. Jelena saves up all the tips she gets from the lads to save for a trip for her mum to go to London to see a specialist. Fat chance.'

If I'd felt bad before, I felt even worse now. I wished I'd

stuffed the whole contents of my wallet into those caring, exploring little hands.

Then we were away, working through the streets of Split for the coast road that would take us the 130 kilometres to Metkovic.

We arrived at the vast UNHCR depot at six, passing through the security gates guarded by Spanish troops wearing blue UN helmets and into the compound that stretched as far as the eye could see. The original brick-built administration buildings had been supplemented with Portakabins to support the influx of UN and UNPROFOR personnel necessary to run this huge distribution machine non-stop, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Under the arc-lights lines and lines of white UNHCR trucks and trailers were backed up into a series of vast hangar-like warehouses where all the provisions and equipment required to keep an entire nation alive were stored. Elderly fork-lift trucks were scuttling about their business, carrying and lifting pallets with that sense of chaotic order and purpose you see in a nest of ants.

Rocky parked up by the admin block and we climbed out. He pointed to a line of twenty gargantuan trucks and their enormous trailers, each gleaming white with a large black 'UN' stamped on its side. 'UK Green,' he said proudly. 'Ready and waitin' to rock and roll!'

It was an impressive sight. Quite as awe-inspiring in its way as any show of military might. It brought a lump to the throat to think that even in this selfish and heartless commercial world of today, someone somewhere cared enough to mount a humanitarian exercise of such dimensions to a people who were hell-bent on their own destruction.

'Magnificent,' I murmured.

'Nah,' Rocky said. 'Just a bunch of trucks.' He waved me to follow him. 'Let's get the latest security report from the Triangle . . .'

On the way he told me the office was run by a brigadier from

one of the British regiments of Guards. I gathered this was not considered to be a particularly 'good thing' in Rocky's judgement.

We entered into the welcome warmth of the spartan front office with large-scale route maps on the walls, trestle tables on the floor and a background buzz of radio traffic and the chatter of computer keyboards and Telex machines.

'Hi, Rocky,' the duty officer said, looking up. 'You're fucking optimistic, aren't you?'

'Born that way. I was breast-fed by a mother who drank Guinness.'

The duty officer smiled. 'Even that sort of optimism won't help here. Last A Company sitrep said forward Serb units are still controlling the road into Una Drina. And the Croats still aren't allowing convoys through their sector till the Serbs stop their attack.'

'That's stupid. There's no fighting in the Croat sector – at least we could get up the road.'

'Not stupid,' returned the duty officer with a smile. 'That's the Croats trying to prove to the UN what kind, caring folk they are. Don't want UN convoys getting shelled by accident.'

Rocky said, 'You mean it's the Croats being fucking awkward. Reminding us who's boss in their sector.'

'You said that, not me.'

'When was that last report?'

'At 2300 hours.'

'That was last night. Things might have changed.'

A new voice joined the conversation. 'Don't push it, Rogers.' The Guards brigadier had entered from the adjoining room, an impressively tall, thin man with a nose like a parrot's beak. 'We'll be getting a fresh sitrep at first light. Why don't you go and get some scan down your neck. I'll send someone to you if there's any change.'

'OK, Brigadier, that'll be appreciated.'

As we turned to go, the brigadier said, 'And who's that with you?'

I guessed he'd spotted the bergen slung over my shoulder. I stepped forward. 'Captain Jeff Hawkins, sir, 1 Para. On my way to join the Royal Wessex at Una Drina.'

The nostrils in the parrot's beak flared. 'Not in UK Green, you're not, Hawkins! That's a civilian UNHCR convoy.'

Before I could answer, Rocky stepped in. 'Forgive me, Brigadier, but that isn't your jurisdiction. I decide who rides on my convoys and Captain Hawkins' chain of command is through OC Major Tring and then Colonel of the Royal Wessex. If you care to contact them, I think you'll find they want Hawkins down there pronto, if not sooner!' He grabbed me and spun me round. 'C'mon, Jimbo. Let's get some breakfast.'

The last I saw of the brigadier that day his mouth was opening and closing like a goldfish come up for air. Officers hate it when challenged by civilians who know they're in the right; suddenly rank doesn't count for a hill of the proverbial beans.

And baked beans it was in the canteen. Along with the bacon, tomatoes, chips, sausages, mushrooms and poached eggs floating in a vat of water like gouged yellow eyes. We took our plates and giant mugs of sweet tea along to a long table where I recognized some of the faces from last night's party and those climbing onto the minibuses earlier. I didn't see Tali van Wyk anywhere and idly wondered where she was.

Before tucking into the mountain of food on his plate, Rocky announced loudly, 'Those of you who didn't meet him last night, this is Captain Jeff Hawkins, 1 Para. Jimbo to you lot. An old mucker of mine. He's replacing the unwell Captain Wells down at Una Drina, so hopefully we'll see an improvement in the situation there soon.'

That was one hostage to fortune I could do without, but I could hardly contradict him.

Rocky took a mouthful of sausage and kept on talking, jabbing his fork in the direction of different members of Convoy UK Green: drivers, mechanics, logisticians and storemen. He rattled off the names and I did my best to put them to the faces,

but it would take days and even weeks before I got to know them all as individuals.

'Bunch of fucking wankers,' he concluded. 'But they're *my* fucking wankers – and the *best* in the business! No one stops UK Green – we deliver!'

'Piss off, Rocky!' someone shouted back. 'Haven't you sobered up from last night yet?'

'In RADA before he joined the Paras,' another driver quipped. 'Bloody frustrated actor. Wants to play Hamlet.'

'Henry the Fifth!' Rocky came back swiftly. 'You know *nothing*.'

The humour subsided as everyone returned to nursing their hangovers and catching up with the latest sports results from copies of the *Sun* and the *Star* that had accompanied the new draft from the UK.

Rocky lowered his voice confidentially, 'Mostly ex-army. Lot of misfits and hooligans – joined the British Convoy team in preference to the Foreign Legion. Better pay and a better buzz. A few Scandinavians too, and a couple of Ruskies. But I meant what I said, salt of the earth.'

Daylight was just beginning to show in the grey sky outside as everyone moved on to toast and marmalade. It was then that the duty officer from the brigadier's security office came into the canteen and leant over to whisper something in Rocky's ear.

My friend listened carefully, nodded and gave a tight smile. As the duty officer disappeared, Rocky looked along the two lines of faces watching him expectantly. 'Right, lads. A little bird's whispered unofficially the Croats are going to open up the route at any time. Seems like the fighting's subsided around Una Drina – but the Royal Wessex haven't confirmed that bit yet.' He stood up. Convoy security decisions were the leader's alone to make. 'Time to burn some rubber!'

There was a spontaneous scraping of chair legs on the floor as everyone rushed to get up and out to the trucks. It was almost like a Battle of Britain squadron scramble.

I followed out at a trot as the team divided up and ran for their vehicles, climbing high up into their cabs and throwing over the reluctant and mighty engines. The roar was tremendous and absolutely deafening, the air instantly filled with the choking fumes and black smoke of diesel as the monsters came to life.

When Rocky and I reached his Discovery along with his number two – a quiet Irishman called Shaun – the brigadier appeared. ‘*Mister Rogers!* You are aware that the fighting hasn’t yet been confirmed as ceased?’ It was a rhetorical question. ‘I suggest you wait until it is.’

Rocky smiled sweetly. ‘Thank you for your suggestion, Brigadier. But while we wait, children could be dying of malnutrition.’

With that he climbed into the driver’s seat and slammed the door. The brigadier caught my eye across the roof as I went to get in. ‘I’ll be talking to you again, Hawkins. I’ve marked your card, be sure of that.’

‘Sir,’ I acknowledged, ducked my head and sat down as Rocky hit the gas, moving down the line of white trucks and trailers to the head of the convoy.

Before us the huge perimeter gates swing open. Behind us twenty twin air-horns let out one mighty co-ordinated scream that filled and shook the air like the wrath of God.

UK Green was go.

Rocky described it as ‘bimbling’ along. In fact he was as true as his word and led the convoy at a breakneck seventy miles an hour whenever he could.

We hurtled through the autumn mist of the Neretva river valley road towards the city of Mostar, Rocky and Shaun taking it in turns to give a running commentary. As it became light with a sky full of low, bruised cloud, a bleak and soulless landscape was revealed, its natural rugged and mountainous beauty seemingly covered in a grey watercolour wash of misery. Everyone we saw seemed to be dressed in drab clothes that had seen better days, and no one took any notice of the convoy, as

though wrapped in their own thoughts and own little world of worry. Frequently we passed ragged little columns of refugees walking one way or another, depending on which ethnic group they were from and where they were heading in search of sanctuary. Scattered throughout the rolling terrain were the wrecked remains of isolated houses and even entire hamlets. Sometimes smoke still spiralled from the ruins. You could smell both fear and death in the air.

Rocky's whispered intelligence had proved correct and we were cheerfully waved through several roadblocks manned by the Bosnian Croat militia.

Beyond Mostar our progress became a slow and steady climb, gaining altitude as we worked our way towards the inner mountainous area of the Devil's Triangle.

I noticed that as we went through built-up areas, the convoy slowed down and tightened up, travelling nose to fender. The tension of high-speed travel on mountainous roads was replaced by the prospect of trouble at every street corner.

'Give some bastards half a chance,' Rocky explained, 'and they'll squeeze some lorry or vehicle in between two of ours and chop off our tail. Some convoys lost a lot in the early days.'

The sense of imminent danger was especially high as UK Green trundled warily through Prozor, which had about it the dangerous air of an old Wild West town. Everything happened here and everything was available in this place awash with warlords, drugs barons and arms dealers. Groups of the feared Croat Black Swan commandos strutted round arrogantly or watched us from street corners with cold, emotionless eyes as we passed.

It was a relief to be out of there and beginning the straining zig-zag climb up to Makljen and the gateways to the Triangle. There was much changing of gears and cursing as we finally made it to the ridge and the last Croat checkpoint before entering Muslim-held territory.

Rocky pulled up at the barrier and threw open his door to get out and stretch his legs.

I noticed that the trucks had stopped in a staggered formation behind us to give each driver a better view of any trouble up ahead.

Two of the militia guards, in mix-and-match bits of army uniform with no insignia, sauntered over, sub-machine guns slung carelessly over their shoulders.

'Morning, gentlemen,' Rocky said, handing over the convoy's inventory to the taller of the two.

'Mr Rogers,' the man acknowledged and studied the list carefully. Rocky shuffled his feet, kicked at the ground. Then the guard found what he was looking for. 'I would offer you some coffee, but we have no sugar.'

Rocky had clearly been waiting for something like this. 'Maybe a box fell off the back of one of the trucks. We'll take a look.'

Shaun climbed out the back of our Discovery and ambled back along the line of trucks.

'Maybe two boxes fell off,' the guard called out. Shaun nodded.

'What's the situation like on the road to Una Drina?' Rocky asked the guard, now that our passage had been successfully 'negotiated'.

'You must ask my commander,' the man replied and nodded towards a rock-strewn area on the ridge a hundred metres from the road. There a Croat officer stood studying the Vrbas river valley below him.

Rocky beckoned me and we walked together across the rough ground to where the officer stood. He was a middle-aged, heavily built man and sported a thick moustache.

'This guy is also the Chief of Security for the town,' Rocky whispered.

Turning on our approach, the Croat officer said, 'Ah, Mr Rogers. How are you today?'

Rocky shook his hand. 'Colonel Markovic, I'll be *happy* if I can get to Una Drina.'

It was a spectacular view down into the mountainous valley, pine-clad slopes diving steeply down to the fast-flowing river which could be seen gleaming like quicksilver between the trees. In the distance, maybe some ten kilometres away, I glimpsed the smudged outline of buildings in a misty depression of land that was to be my home for the next few months. Una Drina.

There was no sign of smoke and no sound of firing. It seemed very tranquil.

'Then maybe you will be happy today,' Markovic said. He had one of those ready smiles that you never quite trusted. 'We have agreed to cease firing while you pass through if the Serbs halt their advance and agree to do the same. We are waiting to hear.'

Then he seemed to notice me for the first time. 'Who is this man? A new face? One of your drivers?'

Rocky turned to me. 'No, this is Captain Hawkins. He's replacing Captain Wells at Una Drina. I'm giving him a lift. No doubt you'll be seeing a lot of each other.'

I offered my hand and the commander accepted it with some reluctance. Despite the unchanging smile, there was no warmth in his eyes. I gathered I'd be expected to earn his respect the hard way.

At last he said, 'The convoy is free to move on, whenever you decide it is safe.'

Rocky and I headed back to the Discovery as Shaun handed over two large boxes of Tate & Lyle. 'Secondary distribution,' Rocky explained. 'That's what the UNHCR lads out here call it. Reckon delivering eighty per cent of something is better than a hundred per cent of fuck all.'

I gave a low whistle. 'Twenty per cent loss of aid? Is that typical?'

He nodded as we climbed into the vehicle. 'Can be. After all, they're all Bosnians and the militias need food and medicine, too.' He picked up the handset of the CODAN radio, a piece of Australian HF kit designed for their flying-doctor service. It

was the sort of gear the British Army signals guys would have died for. Rocky punched in his callsign, hit send and waited as we listened to the whirr of the aerial tuning itself. 'Hi, Rocky here. I'm on the ridge. I gather we're waiting for news from the Serbs on a cease-fire to let us through? . . . What? . . . Cuthbert . . . Sure, put him on . . .' He handed the receiver to me. 'Say hallo to your new oppo.'

'Nigel?' I asked.

The voice at the other end was good public school but sounded a little flustered. 'What? Who's this?'

'Captain Hawkins, your new partner in crime.'

'You with the convoy?'

'Yes. We're at Makljen and ready to run.'

'Thank God for that. Will I be pleased to see you.'

That was nice. 'Hear you're trying to negotiate a cease-fire with the Serbs?'

'Not trying, Hawkins. Done it. Just had it confirmed. I should get your arses down here before one side or the other changes their mind.'

'Roger that,' I acknowledged. 'Out.'

Rocky grinned and switched to a close-range inter-truck VHF set on which the drivers were gabbling and joking to each other. 'SHUT THE FUCK UP, YOU LOT!' he bawled. 'Keep the channel clear. We're rolling in five. Anyone got a problem with that?'

No one had. It was time for someone to have a last-minute pee, don Kevlar helmets and flak jackets and finish whatever else they might be doing.

Rocky shoved a CD into his portable player, hit the motor horn three times, long and hard, and started to move. Turning, I could see the first of the trucks rumbling after us, dust clouds billowing in their wake, just as the Discovery was filled with the stirring opening notes of *Ride of the Valkyries*. I guessed it would be picked up by every driver in the convoy.

We gathered speed, the downhill road opening up in front of

us and pine trees flashing by on our right where the mountain-side fell away sharply to the river far below. I was glad we kept a good seven hundred metres ahead of the leading truck, because if we had to stop in a hurry, I wasn't sure the one behind us could.

Ahead and still far below, the buildings of Una Drina were taking shape within the cold mist that wreathed them. The mountain to our left was levelling out now as we raced round its lower slopes, now leaving us exposed on all sides and an open, if fast-moving, hard target.

I glanced anxiously round at the surrounding landscape, but all seemed quiet and I could discern no movement.

I glanced sideways at Rocky and we grinned at each other. It looked like we were going to make it.

Then the road exploded right in front of us as a flash of flame and a geyser of smoke and debris erupted out of the tarmac without warning. A mortar round had narrowly missed us.

In a practised reflex action, Rocky hit the brakes and threw the wheel, then swung it back, just clipping the edge of the smouldering crater. If we'd gone down it, we'd probably have blown two tyres – or been bounced sideways over the precipice into the river valley. More explosions detonated on either side of the road and I heard lumps of dislodged tar and chippings pepper the Discovery's bodywork.

Above all that I suddenly detected the staccato chatter of machine-gun fire. One of the rear side windows shattered as a lucky round found its mark.

'You OK, Shaun?' Rocky bellowed.

After a moment's silence, a slightly anxious Ulster voice replied, 'You know me, Rocks. Shaken but never stirred. I'm fine.'

I turned round in my seat to see what had happened to the truck behind. The driver had coolly straddled the mortar crater, keeping it square between the two huge front wheels.

'The Serbs, I guess . . .' I murmured, half to myself.

‘No,’ Shaun said. ‘That’s Markovic’s lot, the Croats. They’re trying to hit us so they can then say it was those evil Serbs.’

More rounds, this time heavy artillery, exploded up ahead. It now seemed that the Serbs were retaliating. And we were in the middle.

Rocky shook his head in disbelief and gave a wry grin. ‘Welcome to fucking Bosnia!’