

## *Prologue*

‘So tell me,’ she said.

He was standing at the window, holding the yellowing net curtain to one side, staring out at the warm, wet night. It had grown dark while they’d talked and now the soft August rain fell like sparkling grains of amber around the sodium streetlight.

Just like that, he thought, tell me. As if it was that goddamn easy. If it were that simple he’d have told them months ago. Chosen any one of the tabloid hacks who were trying to track him down, cheque-books out and pens poised. Name your price, Roddy Littlechild, just name it.

Perhaps he should have done. Taken the money and run. Let them splash their grotesque headlines between the bingo promotion and a picture of some semi-naked model. Let them run to a three-page spread, picking the juicy bits from his story, making up the parts he had deliberately left out, barely bothering to check the facts. Not that such facts were easily checked. No one would ever admit to anything.

But he hadn’t wanted that. If it was going to be told at all, he wanted it at least to be accurate. The cold hard truth.

She spoke again, her voice now edged with impatience. ‘It’s gone ten, Roddy. I’ve got to get home.’

‘Sure,’ he said, dropping the curtain and turning to face back into the kitchenette of the seedy little flat.

Lisa Hardcastle. Well-named. Hard-nosed, hard bitch, he thought. Pushy, thirtysomething director on the *Fifth Amendment* series for Channel Four. Working for Double Vision Productions, freelance documentary makers who appreciated her impeccable left-wing credentials. Journalistic teeth cut on the *New Statesman* and the *Guardian*, she was desperate for recognition and a media award before plunging into belated motherhood.

His face was in shadow so she couldn’t see how he glared at

her, sitting there in her Levi jeans and jacket, her long marmalade hair a frizzed mess. All carrot cake, non-fat yoghurts and spritzers, he thought unkindly. She was not happy with the glass of cheap Tesco plonk he'd poured her. He lit a cigarette and could sense rather than see her recoil at the spiral of grey smoke drifting in her direction.

Unfair, Littlechild chided himself. She was just doing her job and he knew he wasn't making it any easier for her.

And she had good reason to be annoyed. He had dragged her out here, to his temporary home in Southall, the dowdy western suburb of London. His bolt hole, his sanctuary. To talk, while his wife of two years worked the wine-bar shift, because he didn't want Evie to witness this. Didn't want her to see his act of betrayal. Because that was what it felt like.

He said: 'What do you want to know?' His Ulster accent had long since been softened by an easy South African drawl that wasn't unattractive to the ear.

Lisa sighed, tapping her pencil on the blank sheet of her notepad. 'This is what – our third meeting? And for the past two hours you've been chuntering on. Bits and pieces. Nothing coherent.'

He drew himself up to his full height, several inches over six feet. 'I can't give you details until we've agreed the money,' he said.

Money. Christ, that sounded awful, not like him at all. But that's how it was now, how it had to be, and they'd driven him to it.

'Chicken and egg,' Lisa replied with quiet exasperation. 'I've sold my producer on the general idea. He's taken soundings and the reaction was positive. *Panorama* and *World in Action* want you, not to mention several of the broadsheets. There's quite a buzz in the office that this could be big. We might even kick off the new series with you.'

*Fifth Amendment* – allowing the famous and infamous to give their version of negatively reported events, to defend themselves against unpopular public opinion on a platform free from rival bias. The opportunity to put records straight.

'So how much?' he asked.

‘Say a grand per big shock horror revelation,’ she replied, allowing it to sound like an auction for scandal. She smiled tightly and her voice was low as she added: ‘I’m sorry, Roddy, but that’s the bottom line. So tell me, when you were working for the South Africans in the late 1980s, *did* you help sell arms to Protestant Loyalists in Ulster?’

‘NO,’ he replied emphatically. ‘That’s the whole point.’

She leaned back in her chair. ‘So what *is* the point? What *are* the exclusive, earth-shattering revelations I can tell my bosses to expect?’

Littlechild lit a fresh cigarette from the stub of the last. Security lamps from the car-breaker’s yard opposite sent elongated shadows across the room, casting Lisa Hardcastle into darkness. He felt safer in the gloom, more secure. And the muted sound of traffic beyond the grimy glass of the window created a sense of forced, airless intimacy.

At last he said: ‘You can tell your boss two things. But no details, not yet. Not until we’ve agreed figures and a contract’s been signed. Okay?’

He was aware of her nodding, saw the glistening whites of her eyes, wide and intent in the deep shadow and thought how little she knew. Even this supposedly tough and cynical journalist was really just like the rest of them, taking everything at face value.

But then he realised he couldn’t blame her for not understanding. It had all begun so long ago, over twenty years. A generation. Lisa Hardcastle would have been in the fifth form, all ponytail and navy schoolgirl knickers, into Pink Floyd and maybe just attended her first CND rally.

Twenty years, he thought. How the time had flown, because to him it seemed like only yesterday.

Patently he said: ‘I doubt you remember 1969 and the Catholic civil rights marches. Protesting against discrimination in jobs and housing. Against gerrymandering by the Unionists, and the brutality of the old B Specials. It wasn’t a record for Britain to be proud of, the politicians had ignored the province for too long. Some people had a rough deal before the govern-

ment sent in the troops to stop Protestant mobs firebombing Catholics out of their homes.'

Lisa nodded. 'I've done my homework, Roddy, believe me.'

'Well, there's something your homework won't have told you. At that time, the Dublin Government was seriously contemplating a military incursion into the North.'

That stunned her; he heard her sharp intake of breath. 'Intervention? You're not serious?'

'They certainly were.' He moved across to the cheap kitchen cabinet and opened one of the sliding plastic doors, extracting two tumblers and a half-empty bottle of Bushmills. Perhaps she'd prefer this; he certainly felt the need of something stronger. 'The plan was to seize key installations and protect the Catholic enclaves. They'd gamble that the British Government wouldn't want the embarrassment of a fight. Dublin would risk an odd skirmish, knowing full well that the UN or the Americans would step in to mediate and that Britain would be forced out in the end. You have to remember the uncertainty of those times. Nightly riots, burning barricades, entire fleets of buses hijacked and torched, shootings and bombings. And all on the streets of British towns. Imagine those things happening on the mainland, in Glasgow or Cardiff – but with the additional threat of intervention by an adjoining foreign country. Thousands of Irish troops assembled on the border on the pretext of setting up first-aid stations for Catholic refugees from Ulster.'

She accepted the offered glass, aware that her hand had developed a slight tremor. 'Would you mind if we had the light on? This is spooky enough as it is.' As he obliged, she asked: 'So why didn't the Irish Army intervene?'

He shrugged. 'I don't know. But anyway, wiser counsels prevailed, probably when British troop reinforcements arrived from the mainland. But that incursion option has never been removed from the Dublin agenda. That threat has not gone away.'

She pulled a face, clearly not believing.

Littlechild said: 'The Irish Army has a fully prepared battle plan and they've rehearsed it regularly on at least two occasions in the past ten years. Their last exercise was Operation Autumn

Gold and that was mounted just prior to the Downing Street Declaration which triggered the current peace process.'

'But that was only – what? – two years ago. I can hardly believe it.'

'It was a way of putting extra pressure on the Major Government to co-operate. Dublin dressed the troop movements up as a hunt for Provo arms caches along the Irish border, but that didn't fool anyone in the know. You don't need armoured cars and artillery for a weapons search.'

'Did they find any?'

'What?'

'Weapons.'

'What do you think?'

Lisa looked up at him, unblinking. 'Don't fuck with me, Roddy. This is dangerous stuff you're saying.'

'Don't I know it, lady. That's why we're talking.' He knew he should have eaten something. The Bushmills had hit the mark and his head was starting to swim. His pent-up anger began to swell, filling his brain to bursting.

At that point the telephone rang. The sudden intrusive noise made Lisa Hardcastle jump as it shattered the hushed and secretive atmosphere of the kitchenette. He made no move.

'Aren't you going to . . . ?'

There was a click as the answerphone cut in, then the tape began to whirl. 'I always call back nowadays, in case it's someone from the press. I'll see to it later.'

She gave a tightly sympathetic smile. For a moment she felt guilty, sorry for him. Sorry she'd been one of those hounding him, contributing to that haunted look in his eyes. 'What was the other thing?' she asked, squinting down to read her notes. 'You said there were two things you'd tell me now.'

Littlechild swirled the remains of the whiskey round his glass and studied it intently.

'After backing down from the incursion idea at the start of the troubles, Dublin changed tactics. It went for the covert approach. And in 1970 the Provisional IRA was born. The splintering away of the Provos from the Stickies – sorry, that's

the old Official IRA – was actively encouraged by the members of the Irish administration.’

‘What exactly are you saying, Roddy?’

‘I’m telling you it was Dublin that organised, then funded and armed the Provos. They provided a black account and secretly arranged with dealers in Belgium to provide arms and plastic explosive.’

Lisa had recovered from her initial shock. ‘This *is* true, Roddy? You’re not winding me up – or setting me up?’

‘Oh, it’s true all right, lady. How else do you suppose those unemployed thickos on the Lower Falls so easily got hold of an arsenal of weapons and became experts in making bombs almost overnight? They were trained by Irish military intelligence at Fortnaree in Donegal.’

‘Can you actually prove any of this, Roddy?’

Now she could see his wry smile. ‘Ah, proof is it you’re after? Well, I doubt such things were ever committed to paper.’

‘These accusations have to implicate some important political figures or civil servants of the time.’ At least she sounded as though she believed him.

‘The problem is knowing who knew what was going on and turned a blind eye.’

‘Can anyone corroborate what you’re saying?’

He was silent for a moment. ‘There was some media coverage at the time, but nothing that showed the true extent of what went on. I’ve seen documents, though. Not from their side, of course, from ours. Classified stuff. Intelligence reports.’

‘You mean MI5?’

‘MI5, yes, and MI6 – they operate in the Irish Republic. A foreign land, you see.’

She completely missed the subtle point he was making. That, to him, Dublin represented a sovereign alien state. But Lisa’s mind was elsewhere, racing ahead to explore the possibilities and problems of making her documentary. ‘You don’t have copies of these reports?’

‘Of course not.’

‘Then it would just be your word.’

‘Others have seen them too.’

‘Who?’

He swallowed hard on the whiskey before answering. ‘Several people who’ve been connected with various Loyalist paramilitaries. And, of course, people in MI5 itself.’

‘Retired, you mean?’

He nodded. ‘No one currently serving would talk. Nor would ex-members unless it was strictly non-attributable.’

‘Can you think of anyone who would talk on camera? You know, back-lit? An anonymous silhouette?’ Now she could hardly keep the excitement from her voice.

‘I don’t know. Some of the paramilitaries might. Many feel cheated by the concessions being made to the Provos in this so-called peace process. Some might be willing to confirm what I’ve told you.’ He knew she was testing him. ‘All I know, Lisa, is that both the Loyalists and the British Government were fighting the PIRA terrorists by the only effective methods available to them short of provoking all-out war with the Irish Republic. It’s been a messy, dirty battle, but at least it kept the lid on the terrorists for over twenty years.’

‘So what part *did* you play in this dirty war, Roddy?’

He took a deep breath. ‘I’ve been working with MI5 since the beginning.’

‘You’re an agent?’

‘I think the term they use is an “alongsider”. An agent of sympathy, if you like. Not for money or any reward – just doing my duty to the Crown and helping protect my homeland from those set on destroying it.’

‘Very noble.’

‘I thought so,’ he retorted quietly.

‘How exactly did you help, Roddy?’

He sensed he’d already said enough. ‘That’s for later. When we’ve agreed a deal. You’ve enough there to go on.’

‘And you never arranged arms shipments to the Loyalists when you were in South Africa?’ she pressed.

His anger flared. ‘No, dammit. You’ll get all that after we’ve a deal, not before.’

She began gabbling then, clearly excited by what she’d learned. Talking enthusiastically about talking heads and

dramatic reconstructions. He smiled politely, but inside he felt like Judas. To Lisa Hardcastle it was all a game. Shock horror revelations to get the TV ratings up.

'I'll get back to you as soon as I can,' Lisa said, picking up her bag. On the dingy landing she hesitated and looked back at the big Ulsterman. 'Thank you for telling me, Roddy, it can't have been easy. What I don't understand is why you've decided to talk now?'

He leaned against the door jamb, feeling strangely relieved the deed was done. 'Because I've got no choice. It's the only way I can clear my name.'

'You mean the rumours?'

He nodded, running a large hand through the thick mass of curled brown hair in a gesture of exasperation. 'They've all but ruined me. Just look at this place! I've no job and I'm forced into hiding with my wife.'

Lisa was puzzled. 'So who do you think is behind these rumours?'

He seemed surprised she didn't realise. 'MI5, of course. Didn't you know?'

She shook her head. 'But you've just told me you've been helping them for over twenty years?'

'Yes, well, that's true enough. But in the end they started putting on me, and I refused to help. That's when they turned nasty.'

'Just because you stopped helping?'

He nodded. 'In their eyes I could no longer be trusted. If I wasn't with them, I must be against them. As far as they were concerned I knew too much, could do too much damage. They wouldn't have minded if I'd stayed abroad, tucked away safely somewhere. But not back here in London in the middle of this peace process.'

'MI5 told you that?'

' "Get out of the country or we'll drive you out." ' He gave a wry smile. 'I've even been head-hunted by a firm in Singapore. A totally unsuitable job I know nothing about, but great pay. I knew who was behind it.'

She was seeing him differently now, glimpsing what lay



behind the tense and haunted features. 'So why didn't you take it?'

He stared at her as though she were mad. 'Because this is my country, Lisa. I've come home. This is where I want to live with my wife and raise a family. And if the peace holds, I might even persuade Evie to move to Belfast, maybe one of the quiet suburbs . . .'

Lisa Hardcastle smiled awkwardly. 'Sorry, Roddy. Stupid question.'

When she was gone, he closed the door and returned to the kitchenette. He realised his hands were trembling. Too late now, old son, he told himself. You've done it. He stared at the bottle of Bushmills. He knew it wasn't the answer, but poured another one anyway.

What had he told Lisa Hardcastle before she'd left? All that stuff about going back to Belfast. He drained half his glass in a single gulp. If only. Dream on, old son.

The door opened then. It was Evie. She looked tired as she slipped off her damp raincoat and hung it behind the door. 'Who was that woman I passed on the stairs?'

Littlechild sat down on the threadbare sofa and regarded his wife over the rim of his glass. Thirty-three with pale good looks and fetching in the plain black waitress dress despite the four-month swell of her belly.

He hated lying, especially to Evie. 'That was Lisa Hardcastle.'

'The Channel Four woman? But I thought you'd decided . . .'

'I changed my mind. We can't go on living like this. Look at you, you're all in. It's no life for you and how are we going to manage when the wee one arrives?'

Evie poured herself a small measure of the whiskey, sat down by his side and eased off her shoes. 'You could have told me you were going to see her.'

'It wasn't something I was proud of. I felt like a traitor.'

She gave a short laugh of derision. 'You, a traitor? Ha, that's a good one. You don't owe those people anything. They owe you. If there are any traitors around, it's them. You know how I feel about it. Shout from the rooftops.'

He looked again at his glass, studying it as though some answer lurked within the golden liquid. It was good to have Evie on his side. But still—‘Your brother wouldn’t agree. He told me it wasn’t a good idea.’

She touched his wrist and gently moved his hand so it rested on the curve of her stomach; it was a comfort to her. ‘Chris is very sweet and very concerned about his kid sister. And you, ever since you saved his life that time . . .’

Littlechild shook his head dismissively. ‘It was nothing. I only did what any other soldier would do for his oppo.’

‘Perhaps. But where you and I are concerned, Chris is hardly impartial. If someone else was in the trouble you’re in, I’m sure he’d say to hell with it and tell the media exactly what’s been going on.’

But Littlechild wasn’t convinced. ‘Chris has been in the SAS, right? He’s worked with these people – MI5 and the rest. He knows what they’re capable of.’

‘Yes, darling, but he hasn’t had to go through what we’re going through. It’s not his decision to make. For what it’s worth, I think you’ve done the right thing.’

He grinned at her. She had the knack of always making him believe that everything would be all right, like a mother’s healing kiss. That short ash-blonde hair and those baby-blue eyes with their pale lashes that always lifted his spirits when he felt the world crushing down on him. He was so thankful he’d married her two years earlier and wondered why the hell he hadn’t asked her fifteen years earlier when they’d first met.

‘I love you,’ he said.

Her eyes glittered with mischief. ‘Let’s make love. Here. Now.’

‘Aren’t you exhausted?’

‘Yes.’ She patted the large hand that rested on her stomach. ‘But we ought to make the most of it while we can. And I think we both need cheering up.’ As she placed her glass on the telephone table beside her, she noticed the red light blinking on the answerphone. ‘Did you know there was a message?’

‘I’d clean forgotten. It rang when that journalist was here.’

Evie pressed the replay button and turned up the volume. A

metallic computerised voice said: *'Message One. Ten-o-five p.m.'* A click, then a pause. *'Hello, Roddy. This is Donny Fitzpatrick. Long time, no see. Did Billy Baker tell you I'd call? No, look, it's okay. No need to be alarmed, but I need to see you urgently. Please ring me back as soon as you get in. It doesn't matter what the time is. Okay?'* He gave his number and the tape clicked off.

Littlechild felt his blood chill. He wasn't aware that his jaw had dropped, wasn't aware that he was staring, unseeing, into space. For a couple of seconds he was aware of nothing in the room.

His head was filled with the image of the wet playground in south-west Belfast. Finaghy Primary. Grey skies and black tarmac. The shriek of children ringing in his ears. Grey flannel shorts, threadbare blazer. Skinny white legs, knees scabbed and grey woollen socks collapsed around his ankles. Conkers. His oncer, soaked in vinegar until it was as hard as stone. Invincible.

Donny Fitzpatrick, the Taig boy from the next street beating him. From the street that he and his Protestant pals never ventured into even then. Smashing his oncer to smithereens. Little Roddy, not feeling the pain where Fitzpatrick's conker had ricocheted and taken the skin off his knuckles. No pain, just shock and crushed pride. To be beaten was bad enough, but to be beaten by a Taig! That was something little Roddy would never tell his father. The stern-faced Presbyterian had warned him enough times not to play with them, not to mix with the Papist scum for fear of his very soul. It was a defeat he would have to suffer in silence.

'Who is he?' Evie asked. 'You look as if you've seen a ghost.'

Her voice came through to him at last. 'What?'

'Donny Fitzpatrick. Who is he?'

Who indeed? Donny Fitzpatrick, the wee Taig boy who had once smashed his prized oncer, had gone on to become Chief of Staff of the Provisional IRA.

'Just someone I used to know. We were at the same school.'

Evie frowned. Since she'd known him she'd learned the Ulster habit of analysing names, to establish whether they had Catholic or Protestant roots. 'Is he connected? Is he IRA?'

'I think so,' he said; knew so, he meant. Couldn't be more

connected than being a former Chief of Staff, but he didn't want to worry Evie. And he never told her of the last time they'd met, when the British Government was making one of its spasmodic attempts to put out feelers for peace. His controller at MI5 had remembered Littlechild's schooldays' anecdote and had asked him to front the contact. He'd obliged as he usually did, flying back specially from South Africa. But in the end, the talks had come to nothing.

It had been strange, though, seeing Fitzpatrick again. How he had changed. As a grubby little schoolboy he'd always had a cheeky grin on his face, but now he never smiled. The happy child had grown into a hard and angry man. Yet, for a while they had talked without rancour or bitterness, recalling shared memories of better times, not discussing their differences but remembering all they had in common. A childhood on the streets of Belfast.

'Were you expecting him to call?' Evie asked.

He drained his drink. 'Not really. I had a telephone call from someone I know the other day.'

'Was that the Billy Baker he mentioned?'

Littlechild nodded. 'King Billy. One of the Loyalist gang leaders. Said that he knew Fitzpatrick wanted to contact me, that it would be a good idea for me to meet him. He was smoothing the way. Said there'd be no danger.'

'You didn't mention it.'

'There was no point. Billy was persistent, but I told him I wasn't interested.'

'So Billy Baker's a Loyalist and Fitzpatrick is IRA. At least they're talking to each other, not shooting. Why does he want to meet you?'

He shrugged. 'I've no idea.'

'Did you give this Billy Baker our number here?'

'Certainly not.'

'Then how did he get it?'

'I don't know.' He did, of course. Baker had been playing along with MI5 for some time now; they'd have given it to him. But he didn't want to worry Evie on that score.

'Perhaps you should find out what Fitzpatrick wants.'

Maybe to kill me, Littlechild thought, despite Billy's reassurance. But he didn't say that to his wife, just: 'Perhaps I should.'

'I mean, if Fitzpatrick's got our number he can get our address. It wouldn't be difficult. So it wouldn't hurt to find out what he wants.'

'You want me to?'

She smiled tightly. 'If this Fitzpatrick's IRA, then I'd rather like to know he's not going to be calling round here on the off chance.'

Littlechild nodded. 'He sounded friendly enough.'

'And there is a ceasefire going on,' she thought aloud.

He made his decision. Evie was right. There was a peace of sorts and while he and Fitzpatrick had their political differences, they'd never exactly been sworn enemies. Besides, he was intrigued. He stood and walked to the telephone table and dialled the number, realising for the first time that it was a London exchange.

Almost immediately the receiver was snatched up at the other end. As though Fitzpatrick had been waiting for it to ring.

'Donny?'

'Yeah?'

'Roddy Littlechild.'

'Thank God for that. How y'doing? I was afraid you'd decide not to get back to me. But I'm really glad you have. I need to speak with you.'

'I'm here.'

'Not over the phone. I need to talk face to face. It's very urgent. And in our mutual best interest.'

'Look, I'm out of all that.'

Fitzpatrick sensed him slipping away. 'Please, Roddy, I must speak with you. There's no danger and this is no set up if that's what you're thinking. As you can see, I'm in London.'

Littlechild hesitated. 'How about lunchtime tomorrow, somewhere central?'

'I had more in mind now, tonight. As I said, it's just a wee bit urgent.'

'It's gone ten,' he protested, taken aback.

'Look, if you grab a taxi you could be with me in thirty minutes. I'll pay. It won't take long.'

Littlechild looked at Evie as she attempted to follow the one-sided conversation. She shrugged, bemused. He said: 'Okay, Donny, where are you?'

Fitzpatrick told him.

'No,' Littlechild decided. 'If we're going to meet, make it somewhere public.'

Fitzpatrick understood. 'There's a pub around the corner. The Duke's Head, you can't miss it. Do a nice drop of Beamish. If you hurry, we should get a couple in before they close.'

Littlechild hung up. 'This is crazy.'

Evie smiled. 'I can tell you're dying to see him. You're as curious as I am.'

'You don't mind?'

She shook her head. 'Only that we were just about to make mad passionate love, Rodney Littlechild. So you'd better make it up to me tomorrow night. With accumulated interest.'

The rain had eased up slightly which was probably why he'd scarcely stepped onto the pavement when a black cab came along with its hire light on.

He flagged it down and climbed aboard. For the entire twenty-minute journey he stared out of the window, deep in thought and not registering a thing he saw. His mind was elsewhere, deeply engrossed in what Donny Fitzpatrick could possibly want with him. Despite his and Evie's reassurance to each other that he was in no danger, still he felt unnerved. The war in Ulster might be over, temporarily at least, but there were still plenty of people with old scores to settle. So it didn't do to drop your guard.

'Here's the Duke's Head, chief,' the cabby said.

Littlechild leaned forward in his seat as the illuminated sign approached on their offside. Up ahead he saw another pub, its lighted windows reflecting on the rain-lacquered pavement.

'I've changed my mind,' he said. 'Drive on and drop me on the corner, will you?'

‘You’re the boss.’ The driver changed down and accelerated.

Littlechild noted the call box as they passed, then dug in his pocket for his wallet before the taxi pulled up. He thrust a note through the glass hatch. ‘Keep the change.’

Then he was out, moving back along the pavement in the direction from which the taxi had just come, until he reached the call box. Through its rain-streaked glass, he could see the Duke’s Head across the street. Dialling 192, he asked for the pub’s telephone number, memorised it and entered it into the keypad as soon as the computerised voice had come to an end.

The publican’s voice was gruff and disinterested, obviously irritated by the interruption.

‘Sorry to trouble you,’ Littlechild said, ‘but a friend of mine’s drinking in your bar – we are due to meet and I can’t make it. I wonder if I could have a word.’

A grunt. ‘What you think this is? Bloody lonely hearts?’

‘I’m really sorry. His name’s Fitzpatrick.’

The man didn’t answer. For a moment the earpiece was filled with the background noise of pub chatter and the thud of jukebox music. Then Fitzpatrick was on the line. ‘Roddy? What is this?’

‘A change of plan. Have you got a mobile phone?’

‘What? Er – no, I haven’t.’

‘Good. Then leave immediately. Turn right and you’ll find there’s a pub two hundred yards up the road. I’ll meet you there.’

Now Fitzpatrick understood; a last-minute switch of venue, just in case Littlechild was being set up after all. ‘I’ve a lovely tankard of Beamish smiling at me.’

‘Leave it, Donny. Exit this instant or it’s off.’

Littlechild hung up and stared across the street. If Fitzpatrick left within a few seconds, he’d keep the appointment. Any longer delay and the man might have time to make a call, warn others of the change of plan. It wasn’t foolproof, of course, but it was a wise precaution.

Suddenly, Littlechild realised that his heart was thumping, the blood pulsing in his temples. Then the door of the saloon

bar opposite opened and he saw the figure emerge. Old habits died hard, he mused. Fitzpatrick was hunched against the drizzle, wearing Northern Ireland's unofficial uniform for civilians: a hooded waterproof top, blue jeans and trainers. He walked swiftly, not looking up or around, hands thrust deep in his trouser pockets.

No one followed him. There were parked cars around, but as far as Littlechild could tell, none was occupied. He waited until he saw his quarry disappear into the Mortar and Pestle, before he left the call box and went after him.

He found Fitzpatrick at the bar, waiting for the head of the second Guinness to be topped up. The two men shook hands briefly.

'Rotten night,' the Republican ventured.

A smile twitched on Littlechild's face. 'Home from home. Let's grab a seat.'

They sat at a table in the window alcove, away from the boisterous chatter of the group of locals clustered around the bar. Fitzpatrick had put on weight, Littlechild thought. Probably because he was no longer living on the edge, his nerves were beginning to heal after a year or more of peace. His face was fuller and he was smiling more than when they'd last met. Maybe he had more to smile about. But then maybe not, because his eyes remained as dark and angry as ever.

'Where'd you get my telephone number, Donny?'

A shrug. 'Does it matter?'

'It matters.'

Fitzpatrick wiped the tideline of froth from his upper lip with the back of his hand. 'We're getting a lot of unofficial help during these negotiations with the Brit Government.'

'What sort of help?'

'Expert help. People who can show us the way around certain obstacles to agreement.'

Littlechild was already fairly certain who had given his number, for the simple reason that no one knew it. Not even friends and family. Evie hadn't even let her brother know when they'd last moved home a few weeks earlier. They were determined to cover their tracks.



He said: 'This expert help – you mean security people?'

Fitzpatrick's face remained a mask. 'Probably. They don't exactly say.'

'And they gave you my number?'

'A woman who calls herself White, Mrs Tabitha White. Claims to be something in the Northern Ireland Office.'

Littlechild felt the muscles tighten in his neck. Tabitha White. He might have known. Of all the controllers and handlers or whatever else they called themselves at MI5, he had good reason to remember her. Fortyish, upright with twinset and pearls and highlighted grey hair drawn severely back from her forehead to form a perfect bun at the back. Peering over the top of her spectacles like a headmistress, she had given it to him straight. Get out of the UK or we'll drive you out. Not in those precise words, but she didn't exactly dress it up either.

Fitzpatrick saw the recognition in his eyes. 'I can see you've met the lady. Quite formidable, eh?' A dry chuckle. 'And not unsympathetic to the Republican cause. She suggested you could be the one to speak to.'

'Before we continue this conversation,' Littlechild said suddenly, 'I'm going to the gents. If you still want to talk, come with me.'

For a second fear flickered in Fitzpatrick's eyes. Had the tables been turned? Had Littlechild arranged for a hastily gathered group of friends to be lurking in wait for him?

The bigger Ulsterman rose from the table and ambled through the door marked by a brass plaque. Fitzpatrick followed a few moments later.

No one stood at the chipped urinal bowls and a cursory check confirmed that the stalls were empty. Littlechild turned to Fitzpatrick. 'Sorry, Donny, but if you've been dealing with that woman, I've got to check you're not wired.'

The man raised his arms, a smile on his face. 'I can see she really got to you, Roddy. Be my guest.'

He was clean and when they returned to the bar, the tension had noticeably lessened.

A couple had come in while they'd been gone and had taken a nearby table. So when Fitzpatrick spoke he kept his voice low.

'I'll not beat about the bush, Roddy. These peace talks have reached a stalemate. The Brits are saying no all-party conference until we start talking about decommissioning of weapons. There's a fudge on offer by entering a twin-track process. That is, we agree to talk hypothetically about handing over arms and how we'd do it in return for all-party talks. Maybe Adams would go with that, probably McGuinness too. The big bananas at Sinn Fein just fancy themselves as feted politicians and stuff the rest of us. But I'm against it as are the hardline boys down in Armagh and the South. We see it as capitulation and we haven't fought all these years just to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.'

Littlechild regarded the other man carefully. 'Forgive me if I say I don't really give a stuff about the Provos' hand-wringing. You said you wanted to talk in our mutual best interest.'

Fitzpatrick leaned forward conspiratorially, his voice low. 'Am I right in thinking you're against the way this whole business is going? You believe the Brit Government is selling the Unionists down the river?'

Instinctively Littlechild pulled back. 'I'm out of all that, Donny. I haven't lived there for over twenty years. I just hope the peace gets established so my family can go back.'

'Peace at any price, eh?' Fitzpatrick was deliberately goading.

'No. But if the British Government sticks to its position on IRA weapons, then it won't be a sell-out.'

Fitzpatrick chuckled without mirth. 'Don't really think they'll willingly risk a return to violence, do you? They'll play the devolution card through the European Union, pass the problem to Brussels. Then the Eurocrats'll bow to pressure from the White House. You know that.'

Littlechild was very aware of the likelihood. He knew it was exactly what most of his Loyalist friends in Ulster believed would happen, sooner or later. Whitehall couldn't wait to wash its hands of the province, everyone was sure of that. Non-committally he said: 'Only time will tell.'

The other man smiled gently. 'I don't believe you mean that, and by then it would be too late. I think you're as opposed to this peace process as my people are – but for different reasons.'

You can't stop a boxing match before the twelfth round without a knockout. It can't be done.'

'So what do you want from me?'

'We're under severe pressure – I mean severe – to start handing over weapons. Yet we know you know that the Loyalists have a vast secret armoury of weapons. Maybe even more than we have. Don't deny it,' he challenged.

Littlechild said nothing.

'I want you to confirm that fact,' Fitzpatrick said, 'swear an affidavit just confirming the existence and true extent of the Loyalist armoury. Something we can wave in the face of the Brit Government and wipe the smug smile off the bastards' faces! Loyalist arms along with our arms or none at all. The arms they've always denied you have.'

'Was this Tabitha White's bright idea?'

Fitzpatrick took another swallow of his Guinness. 'It doesn't matter. It makes good sense.'

'Not to me, it doesn't. I know nothing about Loyalist arms.'

'Maybe you do and maybe you don't, Roddy. The point is everyone's seen that documentary and read the press reports. True or not, you've got a reputation. If you speak up, the Brits will have to listen. We'll have called their bluff, because they already *know* it's true. Then the pressure's off and we keep our guns and Semtex and no one sells you out.'

'You mean the war resumes?'

'Maybe and maybe not, but we keep the status quo. We've clearly not beaten the British Government into submission yet, and that's what it's going to take to get what we want.'

'The full twelve rounds?'

'Sure. Let's not stop it in the tenth. None of us likes it the way it is now.'

The landlord called time. Littlechild emptied his glass and rose to his feet. 'I'll think about it.'

'Not for too long, eh? You've got my number.' He extended his hand. Littlechild hesitated before taking it. 'Maybe some day, Roddy, our kids or maybe our grandchildren will play conkers together, eh? Like in the good old days.'

Rodney Littlechild turned and walked out into the mild

damp night. He was thankful to be away from Fitzpatrick, away from a world he thought he had finally left behind.

He walked for a while, mindlessly wandering along the quiet backstreets, his mind in turmoil. Just what game was Tabitha White – or whatever her real name was – playing at? He'd always felt she had a sneaking sympathy for the Republicans' aims, although she'd never come out and said so to him. But would she really go this far off her own bat? Sabotage everything the ceasefire had achieved so far? He couldn't believe that. There had to be another agenda, but for the life of him he couldn't think what it could be.

After half an hour he found he'd hit a mental blank wall, his brain refusing to function any more. He waved down a passing taxi and gave his address.

Well, to hell with Donny Fitzpatrick. If he rang again, it would be screened by the answerphone and his call just wouldn't be returned. It had been a mistake ever to have agreed to meet him.

When he climbed up the creaking stairs to their flat, he found Evie fast asleep. He was thankful in a way; he really didn't relish telling her what he had been asked to do. In the dark he stripped to his boxer shorts and slid beneath the duvet beside her. Gently he kissed the back of her neck before turning over and falling into a deep and dreamless sleep.

He seemed to hear all the noises at once. The smash of the hammerhead and the splintering of wood, the tinkling of shattered glass and the thud of heavy boots. They intruded rudely into the velvet nothingness of his sleep, a distant alarm bell deep within him starting to ring out urgently. He ignored it, rolled over, snuggling against the warmth of Evie's back. That was over, his life as a soldier in the African bush all finished. Even in the restless twilight between sleep and wakefulness, he reminded himself that his days of perpetual danger were over. Go back to sleep . . .

The bedroom door exploded under the impact.

'Christ!' He sat up in bed with a start, his heart thudding. The pale dawn light seemed blinding in its intensity, obscuring the menacing dark shapes moving all around him.

‘ARMED POLICE! ARMED POLICE!’ The voice was bellowing, deafening, filling his head. ‘DO NOT MOVE! ARMED POLICE!’

His mouth dropped as he recognised the uniforms, the flak vests and blue NATO helmets of the firearms team as they jostled for position. Tight, pale faces and intense, excited eyes behind the lowered visors, arms extended and half a dozen guns held in double-handed grips.

Someone grabbed the duvet, ripped it off the bed. Evie screamed, suddenly awake, naked and exposed to the gazing eyes of the intruders.

‘Check the pillows!’ a voice ordered.

Littlechild reached for Evie as she began to shake and cry hysterically, waking from a dream into an inexplicable nightmare of reality.

‘Leave her!’ another voice said. ‘Keep your hands in sight at all times – stretch out your arms, palms up!’

‘What the hell?’ he protested.

‘Shut it!’

Bewildered, he obeyed as Evie was told to leave the bed. She was given her dressing gown and told to face the wall. Handcuffs were snapped around her wrists and she was led out to the living room.

‘Now you,’ the officer said to Littlechild. ‘Swing your legs over the side. Stand – slow now – and step to the wall.’

Then he was ordered to kneel before he, too, was handcuffed.

He heard the voice in his ear, smelt the spearmint on the breath. ‘Rodney Albert Littlechild, I am Detective Chief Inspector Millman of the Anti-Terrorist Branch. I am arresting you on suspicion of being involved in the murder last night of one Donal Fitzpatrick.’ There was a short intake of breath. ‘You do not have to say anything. But it may harm your defence if you do not mention, when questioned, something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence. Do you understand?’

Already reeling with shock, it took a moment for Littlechild to register what was being said. Fitzpatrick – murdered – last night? He couldn’t believe his ears. It was crazy.

The hands on Littlechild's arms and shoulders lifted him to his feet and two officers bundled him into the living room.

Evie was waiting, trembling in the half-hearted hug of reassurance from a plump WPC who looked almost young enough to be her daughter.

'This is ridiculous,' Littlechild protested. 'I only met Fitzpatrick for a drink . . .'

'Save all that for the interview,' Millman said. 'But first I want you present while we conduct a search. Do you have any lawfully held weapons or drugs on the premises?'

As soon as Evie's identity was confirmed, her handcuffs were removed and the WPC took her to the kitchenette to make tea. Meanwhile, all curtains were closed as the SO19 search teams began their thorough and methodical work in pairs. They looked at, into, under and over everything, one hunting while the second nagged and reminded in case anything was overlooked. Furniture was moved, cupboards emptied, drawers taken out, carpets lifted, light-switch plates removed and plugs dismantled. Whenever anything of remotest interest was found, Littlechild was asked what it was and if it was his? All questions and answers were entered religiously in the search book.

When one search team finally began examining the answerphone, a sudden thought occurred to Evie. 'Wait!' she shouted. 'I can prove Roddy didn't go out to kill anyone! That man called Roddy, begging for a meeting. His message is on the answerphone.'

Millman appeared irritated. He gestured impatiently to one of the other detectives to play the tape.

Oh, bless you, Evie, Littlechild thought, relief flooding through him. Why hadn't I thought of that?

'There's only one message,' Evie said breathlessly. 'The first one.'

The officer pressed the replay button. Nothing. He looked up. 'The tape's clear.'

Littlechild felt sick, like dropping in a lift in a shaft. He was slipping into an abyss and could see no way out. This was all a terrible, terrible mistake. He'd been caught up in some deadly coincidence, seen the wrong man at the wrong time.

Then, inexplicably, a picture of Fitzpatrick's acned face was floating before his eyes, laughing and mouthing the words: 'I can see you've met the lady. Quite formidable, eh?'

Tabitha White.

Christ! Perhaps this wasn't just coincidence and mistaken identity after all. Was she somehow involved? And if she was, then he was so deep in the shit he'd never crawl out.

He struggled against the restraining officer. 'I *must* speak to a solicitor.'

'All in good time,' Millman replied flatly and Littlechild felt his only lifeline slip through his fingers.

The SO19 team leader approached them. 'We're all finished here now, sir.'

Millman turned to his prisoner. 'Right, let's get you out of here.'

'Where are you taking him?' Evie demanded.

'To the station for questioning.'

'Which station?'

'You'll be informed later.'

'No-o-o-o!' Evie squealed in anguish as two officers moved to her husband's side.

Littlechild resisted, dug his heels into the carpet, forcing against the muscle power of those trying to propel him forward. Gasping for breath, he managed to half-turn his head until he could just see his wife. She looked pale and shocked.

'Get a lawyer, Evie! Quickly!'

She couldn't think, didn't know any lawyers, didn't even have a family solicitor.

Littlechild was losing his battle of strength, the carpet sliding and rucking beneath his feet. His mind was spinning, panicking. He'd need someone good, very good. Then an inspiration. The solicitor who had defended his friend in Ulster six years earlier. God, what was the name? A blank, nothing.

His resistance crumbled, his body sagging, its weight held by the arresting officers and his feet dragging the carpet behind him. The name, the name, the goddamn name? Something to do with a uniform. That was it, an army uniform – that was it, like the army belt.

‘Sam Browne!’ he yelled breathlessly. ‘Browne with an e. In Belfast!’ Belfast was the last word she heard before he was bundled down the stairs, past the gawping faces of the other residents gathered on the landing below.



## *One*

It was dark and he was frightened. Really frightened.

And cold. Why hadn't he realised that the Iraqi desert would be this cold at night? Even in the scrape hewn into the shale – his gopher hole – with thermals and fibre pile and feather sleeping bag, he was still shivering.

Not Arctic cold, but a damp cold that gnawed into his bones. Or perhaps it wasn't the cold at all. Maybe it was just the fear. Fear despite the Armalite's reassuring feel in his fingers.

The fear and the dark and the noise. A slow irregular chime of a goat's bell. Nearer, ever nearer. Knowing that where there is a goat, there is a herdsman never far behind. And when the herdsman passed his hide, one of two things would happen. The herdsman would either not see him and pass by. Or he would see him and still pass by, pretending that he hadn't.

And then the decision would have to be made – how to respond? To accept that he had not been compromised and pray that he was right. Or he would have to creep out after the innocent old peasant or young boy and slit his throat. Quickly and silently, so as not to alert the Iraqi mobile patrol that was camped in the nearby wadi.

He peered out over the rim of the hole. It was pitch black – no moon, no stars. He felt very alone, still finding it hard to accept he'd become separated from the rest of the team. But the chime of the bell had receded now, and the immediate danger had passed. He must preserve his energy, get some kip. So cold, so tired.

The hand was on his shoulder, startling him. 'Get up!'

He tried to turn, to twist away and bring the Armalite into the firing position, but his body was paralysed. He stared at the blackness, heart tripping and the icy sweat drenching his body. Still he could see nothing. It was so dark that he thought

he'd gone blind. Again he felt the goatherd's bony fingers on his shoulder shaking him. Imagined the wizened face.

'Dad, for goodness' sake get up!'

Lomax awoke with a jolt. He was lying, shirt unbuttoned, on the sofa and a chill August breeze was jiggling the curtains at the open French windows.

'Come on, Dad, do you *know* what time it is?' Manda demanded. 'It's nearly eleven and the place is a tip. And it stinks of stale cigarette smoke. God, you'd never have got away with this if Mum was still living here. It's disgusting!'

God, his head hurt. The deep pulsing throb began at the back of his head and spread across his skull until it ended in red raw pain behind his eyeballs. He tried to move. Christ!

'Do you want an Alka-Seltzer?' Impatient.

He moved his mouth to speak. It was as parched as the Iraqi desert of his dream. 'I'd like – a little peace and quiet.' He looked up at his nineteen-year-old daughter. Techno college sweat shirt, blue jeans and a beguilingly pretty face had it not been for the sternly disapproving eyes behind those awful steel-rimmed Trotsky specs. 'And a ton of aspirin.'

'I'll get you some Codeine.'

Ah, she cares really, he thought, and watched her walk briskly towards the kitchen. Her mother's walk, purposeful with a sort of unselfconscious flick of the hips with each stride. Careful not to jerk his head, he looked around the living room. Party-popper streamers still hung from the light fittings and battalions of dead men lined the drinks cabinet. CDs and old vinyl 45s were strewn over the dining table, testament to their raucous singalong down memory lane.

And there had been a lot of memories to recall, he thought, and not a few ghosts to lay to rest. Friends and foes alike, but thankfully more foes. For some at the party those foes had been Communist terrorists in Malaya, Indonesian guerrillas in Borneo and Yemeni infiltrators in Oman. For Chris Lomax it had been Argentinians, Provo gunmen in Ulster, Bosnian Serb militiamen and Iraqi conscripts. Not to mention a lonely goatherd in the wrong place at the wrong time.

No, he decided savagely, definitely *not* to mention him.

And friends who hadn't made it, who had failed to 'beat the clock' that stood in tribute to their memory at the Stirling Lines barracks of 22 Special Air Service Regiment in Hereford. Scottie, Jatna, Mike Ash. Some Lomax had known personally, some not. All gone. They'd toasted them all.

Was it really twelve years since he'd first passed selection from the Parachute Regiment, already a 'mature' entrant of thirty-two years? It seemed like only yesterday. No, it *was* only yesterday. And here he was, unwanted, yet with still so much more to give. Rejected. Compulsory retirement they called it, but that wasn't how it felt. He felt as young today – well, perhaps not *today* exactly – as the day he'd stormed across the wind-ragged spine of Pen-y-Fan to establish a record time for the Regiment's 'fan dance' that was yet to be broken.

Manda returned with a glass of water, the tablets already dissolving. 'I'm cooking breakfast. D'you want some?'

He managed to hold down his bile at the very thought, and gulped the disgusting bitter liquid. 'I'll pass, thanks.'

'You look dreadful. I'd hate to be your liver.'

'And I'd hate to be your sense of humour. Or your compassion for that matter.'

'You've given me compassion fatigue, Dad. I'd feel sorry for you, only you're so busy feeling sorry for yourself there's no room left.'

A lop-sided grin cracked his face. 'Out of the mouths of babes . . .'

She laughed, smiling for the first time. 'It's a good job I love you.'

'You have a funny way of showing it.'

'It's for your own good.'

He handed back the glass. 'Now, don't I remember your mother using those self-same words?' He could focus more clearly on her now. 'Has everyone gone?'

'Tig, Bill, Gypsy Pete and Toothbrush got a taxi back to Hereford at seven. Most of the others went about half an hour ago, including Jerry Tucker – he wanted to catch the midday Belfast shuttle. But Ran's sleeping it off in the spare room – if anything, he's in a worse state than you.'

He pounced on that. 'See? The youngsters haven't got the stamina of us old-timers.'

'No, Dad, but he had flown halfway round the world to be at your farewell bash. He was zonked with jet lag before he even got here.'

'Mmm.' Grudging.

'Len Pope's running down to the newsagent's to get a paper . . .'

Ah, not so good. Pope was his own age and had left the Regiment a month earlier. And the newsagent's shop was three miles away.

'And Joe's waiting for his breakfast.'

Well, 'Big Joe' Monk would be, wouldn't he? He'd retired on the same day as Pope and had never been one to run when he could walk. Or better still, hitch a lift.

'It was a good turnout,' he thought aloud. 'And your cake was a great surprise. Thanks.'

Only a few crumbs remained of the shield-shaped rich fruit mix with its sand-coloured icing and skilfully piped winged danger and motto on a scroll.

'It's a pity most of it ended on the wall.'

'Ah.' His memory of that bit was foggy. 'Big Joe started that. Threw it at that officer he never could stand. Said he'd always wanted to frag him and this was his chance. Then everyone seemed to take sides.'

Manda looked at the wallpaper. 'So I see. Still, you've plenty of time now for redecorating, haven't you, Dad?'

He groaned as she returned to the kitchen.

Still, as he'd said to her, it had been a good turnout.

Shame Rob D'Arcy had to leave at midnight. Lucky the man managed to make it at all really because he was a big fish now out there in the civilian pond, running a multimillion-pound security company. High-powered stuff with worldwide government contracts. He might yet find himself beating a path to D'Arcy's door like so many before him.

But a greater shame was the fact that Roddy hadn't been there.

In fact, the big friendly Ulsterman wasn't *anywhere*, that was

the trouble. Lomax's sister and Roddy Littlechild had upped and disappeared just four weeks earlier. And they'd left no forwarding address.

Lomax wasn't unduly concerned. He knew the reason why, because Roddy had hinted heavily at what he might do the last time they'd met.

Since his late teens, Roddy had spent all but two years out of twenty-three in Africa. He had first gone to Rhodesia where he served in the army, returning to Britain only after the collapse of the white Smith regime when the country's name was changed to Zimbabwe.

That was when he had joined the Parachute Regiment, meeting Lomax – and his little sister Evie, just eighteen – for the first time.

After two years, during which both men had served together in the Falklands campaign, Roddy had gone back to the continent with which he was besotted and joined the South African security police. Foreseeing black majority rule and the country's likely collapse into chaos, he'd returned to England again in late 1992.

Within eighteen months he'd established himself in a job as senior vehicle mechanic, had bought a small house and had married Evie.

Then the TV documentary had been shown, hinting that Roddy had been involved in smuggling arms to Loyalist terrorists in Northern Ireland. Press stories followed.

He was sacked from his job. Just when he thought he'd secured another one, the offer would be withdrawn at the eleventh hour. In desperation, he'd set up his own small vehicle repair business, despite being badly undercapitalised. But the media stories of his Loyalist terrorist connections persisted and his customers deserted him. He and Evie were at their wits' end about what to do and were teetering on the edge of bankruptcy.

During a long and sombre night's drinking with his old friend, he had confided to Lomax that he'd long been associated with Britain's Security Service, but now they had fallen out. It was they, he claimed, who were behind the smear campaign in an effort to drive him from the country.

In truth, Lomax wondered if his friend wasn't becoming just a little paranoid. Nevertheless, it was hardly any wonder that Roddy and Evie had gone into hiding to escape the tabloid newshounds and attempt to start a new life.

Lomax knew they'd contact him again when the dust had settled over their tracks. It was just a shame it hadn't been before last night. Because whatever Lomax owed his oppos in the Regiment, past and present, he owed no one more than his old comrade in the Paras.

He owed Roddy Littlechild his life and you couldn't owe more than that.

Easing himself from the sofa, he walked unsteadily to the mirror above the sideboard. A monster with bloodshot grey eyes and tangled fair hair like a bird's nest stared back at him. He hardly recognised himself – only the determined sandpaper chin and straight nose looked familiar.

Monk appeared at the door. 'Shit, Chris, you look awful.'

Lomax looked over. The huge moustachioed man with the tombstone teeth was clutching a tumbler of gooey yellow liquid. 'You don't look so clever yourself. What's that?'

'Bombay oyster. Raw egg, brandy . . .'

'I know, I know.'

'Never fails.'

The thick smell of bacon and eggs was wafting from the kitchen. 'Serving up!' Manda called.

'She's a dream, that girl,' Monk said. 'I should divorce Marsha and marry her.'

'Don't even fantasise about it,' Lomax warned.

'Come and watch me eat.'

Monk amassed a mountain of sausages and mushrooms to go with his egg and bacon, taking Len Pope's share on the basis he was 'late for mess breakfast', a cardinal sin in army life.

'So how are you finding civvy street?' Lomax asked.

'Great, like being on permanent R and R,' Monk replied through a mouthful of food. 'Nice lie-in till it's time to stroll down to the boozer for a liquid lunch.'

Lomax knew his old friend well enough to read between the

lines: he was bored out of his skull. 'Don't think Manda would let me get away with that.'

She dumped the toast rack on the table. 'You seem to be making a good start, if you ask me.'

'I'm not asking you, sweet child.' He looked back at Monk and his true feelings, his suppressed anger, bubbled to the surface. 'It's all such a bloody waste, Joe! I ask you, forty-five, that's all. Years of practical experience, all dumped because of some edict from paper-pushers in Whitehall who've never seen a shot fired in anger.'

Monk regarded his friend through the steam of the coffee mug he nursed between his enormous hands. 'Was a time, Chris, when you and me would have been running down to the newsagent's with Len. When we reckoned a fifteen-klick run was the only cure for a hangover. Maybe them pen-pushers aren't so much green as cabbage-looking.'

Lomax grinned. Monk had a point, maybe they had slowed up. A bit. 'What's on the job front?'

'Bugger all. But I bent Rob D'Arcy's ear last night. Plenty on if I don't mind a divorce and ten months a year in Moscow or Kazakhstan. Marsha won't put up with that, but I don't see I've an option.' For a second, his cheerful expression appeared to fade. 'And what about you? How's that book of yours coming along?'

Chris Lomax's account of his harrowing exploits in the Gulf War had been a major talking point and source of good-humoured ridicule in the Squadron for the past six months. Jokes about how he'd be a millionaire if he followed in the footsteps of *Bravo Two Zero* and *The One That Got Away*.

'I've spoken to a couple of publishers,' Lomax said, 'but they both reckoned it would be a book too many on the subject. Said the market's been saturated.'

At least its writing had been a sort of therapy. There'd been a sense of relief in spilling out his fears and emotions on paper, baring his soul about the mission that had damned near turned him into a nervous wreck and had driven Fran out of his life after twenty-one happy years of marriage. That must have taken some doing, he realised now, and all because he couldn't face

up to the fact that his bottle had gone. Couldn't accept that he'd become a coward overnight, that he jumped every time he heard a car backfire, and froze in action because all he could see in his mind's eye was the enemy's rounds whistling directly towards him. Only him. Each with his name clearly engraved on it. But at least now the bad dreams were less frequent.

Manda said: 'Maybe your appalling spelling and bad grammar had something to do with it.'

Lomax frowned. 'That's unfair. It's not that bad.'

'What about a book on tracking and survival?' Monk asked. 'You're the best I've ever known.'

'A compliment from Joe Monk – I'll treasure this moment.' They shared a laugh. 'Thanks anyway, but old Lofty got there first.'

'You're better than he ever was!'

'Makes no difference, Joe, no one's interested.' His daughter had removed her apron and joined them at the table. 'Manda thinks I should set up a business of some sort.'

'What sort?'

'No idea.'

Manda said: 'Trouble is, Dad hasn't got a clue about the commercial world.'

Lomax laughed: 'A vote of confidence from the Business Student of the Year.'

The telephone rang in the hall.

His immediate thought was Hereford. The adjutant at Stirling Lines, calling him in for an emergency. But then he remembered and the thrill of anticipation died before he even lifted the receiver. Probably a cold canvas call from a double-glazing firm.

'Lomax speaking.'

'Oh, Chris, thank God you're home!'

'Evie? How are you? Sorry you missed the party.'

'Chris, something awful's happened,' she gabbled. 'They've taken Roddy away.'

He realised something was wrong, badly wrong. His sister was almost hysterical and making no sense. 'What d'you mean, sis? Calm down. Who's taken him away?'



'The police, this morning. They just smashed their way into our bedroom. It scared the life out of me. It was awful.'

'Why, Evie?' This was madness, he thought, as he tried to sound reassuring. 'What did the police want?'

She was starting to sob now, her words almost incomprehensible. 'They arrested him, Chris. They accused him of murdering a man he met last night. It's not true, Chris, it's just NOT true!' She was almost screaming.

'Of course it's not, Evie,' he consoled, still bewildered. Murder? God, had Evie really got this right? It was too improbable for words. 'Where are you now?'

'I'm calling from our new flat in Southall.'

'Have they taken him to the local nick?'

'I don't know where, they refused to say. Oh, Chris, it's awful! The police seemed to think he was some kind of terrorist.'

'You're joking!'

'No. Maybe that's just because of the man they say he murdered. Someone called Donny Fitzpatrick.'

The small hairs sprang up on the back of his neck. He really wasn't hearing this. If it was the same man, Donny Fitzpatrick was a former Chief of Staff of the Provisional IRA.

'He hasn't even got a lawyer. Chris, he must have a lawyer, mustn't he? I mean this is a *murder* charge.'

'Er – lawyer? Yes, yes, of course.'

'He told me to get this solicitor in Belfast. A man called Sam Browne. With an e. I've tried Directory Enquiries, but they haven't got a number for him and I've no idea which firm he works for . . .'

'Look, don't worry, sis, I'm on my way. I'll sort it out. Don't fret.' He glanced at his watch. 'I'll be with you around two. Give me your address.'

She told him, his words of calm authority like a balm, and her blubbing sobs reduced to an occasional sniff as she fought back the tears.

He hung up and returned to the kitchen. Monk and Manda were staring at him, sensing something was wrong.

'What is it, Dad?'

'Roddy's been arrested for murder.'

Monk's mouth dropped. 'Your mate, Roddy? Your sister's bloke?'

'And it gets worse. If I understand it right, he's supposed to have murdered someone in the Provos. In London last night.'

Manda looked stunned, the blood draining from her face. 'Roddy wouldn't? . . .'

Lomax shook his head. 'I don't know. But I can't stop to discuss it now. I've got to get down to London.' He turned to his daughter. 'A chance to put your business management training to use – I want you to get onto the Law Society in London and find the current whereabouts of a solicitor called Sam or Samuel Browne, with an e. Used to work for a practice in Belfast. Roddy's in deep shit, so don't take no for an answer. Call me on the mobile as soon as you've got a number for him.'

'Solicitor called Sam Browne,' Monk repeated thoughtfully. 'Rings a vague bell.'

Lomax nodded as he picked up his car keys from the rack by the door. 'I think Browne was the name of the solicitor who defended Peter Keegan in Belfast about six years back.'

'I remember Keegan. An agent the army was running in the Ulster Defenders, that Loyalist paramilitary lot. Overstepped the mark and got done for conspiracy to murder.'

Lomax said: 'I was backup to Keegan's army handler for a while. Point is that Keegan and Roddy knew each other from way back, went to the same school. I guess that's why Roddy thought of this bloke Browne.'

Manda said: 'So this man Keegan was found guilty?'

'Yes,' Lomax replied. 'It was a stitch-up. He went down for twenty years.'

'Then are you sure this solicitor Sam Browne is a good choice?'

Lomax's and Monk's eyes met across the table. There was no answer to that.

Rodney Littlechild stared up at the fluorescent tube that cast its stark light around the bare walls of the interview room. There was only a burly and untalkative uniformed officer by the door.

They were letting him stew, he knew. For maybe half an

hour now they'd gone to the canteen for a break. Millman had promised him a cup of tea. It hadn't yet materialised.

Littlechild wasn't surprised. He'd sat in on enough police interviews in South Africa, when they'd had a suspected ANC terrorist in, to know all the tricks, all the wrinkles. Some of those Afrikaner slopeheads could get the Pope to confess to devil worship and they'd been none too fussed about how they extracted their information. Resorting to physical force wasn't unknown and mental torture quite common. Even his protests when they went too far were unheeded. Not a few suspects had hurled themselves to their deaths through windows rather than face another bout of questions.

Thank God this was Britain, he thought, where things like that didn't happen. And he was grateful now for the hours of horrific anti-interrogation training he had endured both in South Africa and in Rhodesia before that. In those days it wasn't mild-mannered English cops they were expected to be up against, but thumbscrews from Cuba backing up terrorist guerrilla forces in Angola and Mozambique.

He glanced at his wrist. Just a pale strip of skin where the strap had been. Bastards! No window in the airless room with its closed-circuit TV cameras and wall-mounted pad mikes. Nothing to tell him if it was night or day. Around noon, he guessed, but in a few hours he'd start to lose all track of time.

Without warning the door opened. Detective Chief Inspector Millman was back, big with broad shoulders encased in a slightly crumpled charcoal suit, hair dark and wavy with flecks of silver at the temple, and blunt unsmiling features that might have been chiselled out of a lump of rock.

With him was the slim, ginger-haired DS Henwick whose slight harelip gave him a quite sinister look when he smiled, which he did a lot. Mostly he played 'soft man' to Millman's 'hard man', although already they'd swapped roles too often to be convincing.

Millman gave a wintry smile. 'Sorry, Rodney, the tea machine's out of order. Still, a service engineer's due in later. Won't be long.'

'No problem,' Littlechild lied. His throat was parched and he

knew damned well you didn't run a nick the size of Paddington Green without a constant flow of hot liquid. But he wasn't going to let such a crude tactic get to him.

Millman seated himself on the opposite side of the interview desk next to Henwick who reached for the twin-deck tape recorder and snapped it on.

Millman said boredly: 'Interview with Rodney Albert Littlechild resumed at 12.30 hours. Present: DCI Millman and DS Henwick of the Anti-Terrorist Branch.'

'I demand a solicitor,' Littlechild said. 'You're not holding me under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. This isn't right.'

'Don't be obtuse, Rodney,' Millman replied in an even tone. 'The custody sergeant explained it to you and you said you understood.'

'It's still not right.' Worth pushing it, he thought.

Millman sighed. 'You're being held under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, Section 58, as authorised by Detective Superintendent Dymock. That means that for a serious arrestable offence I can refuse you permission to consult a solicitor for up to thirty-six hours.'

'Look, Roddy, a little co-operation and we can all get some rest,' Henwick added amiably. 'It's not nice being without representation and we don't like doing it, but it serves a purpose. We know you've had accomplices in this murder and we want them too. Someone must have tipped you off about when and where Fitzpatrick would be. And someone else probably supplied you with the murder weapon.'

'That's nonsense,' Littlechild replied.

'And we want those people too,' Henwick persisted. 'You're known to associate with members of Loyalist terror gangs – no point denying it, Special Branch has confirmed as much – and therefore witnesses to your crime could be in serious danger from your associates.'

Littlechild shook his head. 'Even if it were true, what difference would it make if I had proper legal advice?'

'Because a lawyer could deliberately or unwittingly tip off the rest of the gang,' Millman interjected. 'So to my mind, it justifies the precaution in this case.'

‘So tell us who else was involved,’ Henwick said with that well-intentioned smile of his.

Littlechild sighed. ‘I had no accomplices for the simple reason I haven’t murdered *anyone!*’

‘You’re not making things any easier for yourself, Roddy. So okay, let’s go over your version of events again, starting with what you were doing yesterday evening. You say you had a visitor at your flat. A television director-journalist called Lisa Hardcastle, right? And you were discussing the making of a programme that denies your alleged involvement with shipping arms to Loyalist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland?’

‘Correct.’ He’d earlier considered hedging, but no doubt the police would be interviewing her anyway. ‘The phone rang while we were talking, so I let the answerphone pick it up.’

‘So when did Miss Hardcastle leave you?’ Henwick asked.

‘About ten fifteen. At the same time my wife came home. She noticed the answerphone light was on.’

‘Ah, the mysterious vanishing message,’ Millman said.

‘It was Donny Fitzpatrick asking to meet me. Ask Evie, she heard it.’

‘Had your wife ever met Mr Fitzpatrick?’ Millman asked.

‘No.’

‘So she’d never heard his voice?’

‘No.’

‘Therefore, this person could have been anyone impersonating him?’

Littlechild shook his head. ‘That’s crazy. Who’d want to do that?’

‘An accomplice perhaps? If you or your wife hadn’t accidentally wiped the tape, it might’ve given some credence to your story that Fitzpatrick asked to see you. I mean, we are aware that your wife has no criminal record, is of good character and has never even set foot in Northern Ireland. *If* she heard such a message, she’d believe it and you. A jury might find her testimony quite convincing.’

‘I phoned him back. She heard that too.’

‘But your wife only heard one side of the conversation, right? Your side?’

‘Yes.’

‘So again, it could have been anyone.’

‘But it *wasn’t*!’ Littlechild protested.

Millman persisted. ‘It could have been your accomplice again. Tipping you off where Fitzpatrick could be found, or perhaps just confirming?’

‘It was Fitzpatrick who answered.’

‘Fine. We will check your telephone records.’

Littlechild felt a sudden flood of relief. He’d never thought of that; the phone company’s records would back his story.

‘Fitzpatrick’s address was written on the pad by your phone,’ Henwick pointed out mildly, ‘yet you say you never went there.’

‘I wrote it down, then changed my mind. Thought it could be a trap. I arranged to meet him at a pub.’

‘The Duke’s Head?’

Littlechild agreed.

Millman said: ‘You are seriously asking us to believe that you, who have friends in the Loyalist paramilitaries and have been alleged to have supplied them with arms, went voluntarily and unarmed to meet a former IRA Chief of Staff alone?’

It sounded lame, he knew, and he wished to hell he’d never even considered it. ‘We were at school together as kids. There was never any personal animosity between us. And he sounded genuine on the phone, as if he needed my help. He said a meeting would be to our mutual benefit.’

‘Only such a meeting never took place, did it?’ Millman challenged. ‘You see, we’ve traced the taxi driver who picked you up outside your home and took you to the Duke’s Head. He says when you got there, you told him to drive on. You alighted several hundred yards away. I suggest it was so that you could watch and stalk Fitzpatrick back to his apartment where you shot . . .’

‘NO!’

‘We’ve spoken to the landlord of the Duke’s Head. He recognised a photograph of Fitzpatrick. Says he was drinking alone, having arrived about ten thirty. He remembers particularly because Fitzpatrick received a call from someone to say he couldn’t make the meeting.’

'I know,' Littlechild hissed. 'That was me!'

Millman looked perplexed. 'But you'd just been dropped across the road. If it was you, how come you couldn't make it? Bunions playing you up?'

'I've already told you. I phoned from a call box to change the venue. To the Mortar and Pestle just down the road. I wanted to see Fitzpatrick leave *alone*, to be sure there was no one with him. To be sure it wasn't a trap.'

'So despite once being schoolboy chums, you didn't trust him after all?'

Littlechild fell back in his chair, drained. Even in his exhausted state he knew it sounded contradictory. But why does anyone do anything? Not all actions and decisions are based on sound logic or reason, we just do them.

'I can look at this one of two ways,' Millman continued. 'Either that call was made by the man Fitzpatrick was really meeting there and who genuinely cancelled their rendezvous. Or I can believe your story so far, except that you phoned to cancel the meeting – to enable you to avoid being seen by witnesses, having safely established his whereabouts so you could stalk him to a place where it would be safe to murder him.'

'For Christ's sake, I phoned him to change the venue, not cancel the rendezvous.'

'That's not what you told the landlord. Why should you lie to him?'

Littlechild felt his exasperation rising and fought to hold it in check. 'I just wanted to speak to Donny. The landlord didn't want my whole life history. Anyway, I did speak to Donny and we met at the Mortar and Pestle about ten minutes later.'

'What time?'

'I don't know. About ten to eleven. I think they'd already called last orders. You can check it out, the barman will have seen us and probably the crowd at the bar – I think they were regulars. Oh, and a couple – a middle-aged man and a younger woman – who came in just after us. Looked like a husband and wife, didn't say much, just shared a packet of pork scratchings.'

The wan smile on Millman's face looked curiously out of

place as he extracted a notebook from his inside pocket. 'While I was on my break, I called the investigating officer who has been to the Mortar and Pestle and I have to tell you informally that the landlord does not recall seeing anyone resembling either you or Donny just before closing time. Nor your colourful description of the married couple. Maybe one of the regulars will remember you. We haven't traced them all yet.'

Littlechild sat stony-faced. He remembered the group, standing around laughing and joking, celebrating someone's birthday, all eyes on some wag who thought he was a comedian. He wouldn't be surprised if none of them had noticed him or Fitzpatrick.

Henwick spoke next. 'What did you do after this meeting you allege you had with Fitzpatrick?'

'I went home.'

'How? By public transport or taxi?'

'Taxi.'

'Straightaway?'

'No, I walked for a bit.'

'How long?'

'I don't know, thirty minutes, maybe forty. I wanted to think.'

'Are you aware,' Millman added, 'that we are able to pinpoint the time of death to eleven forty-five? Where were you then?'

'Walking.'

'I see. Well, unfortunately for you, Mr Littlechild, we know otherwise. What you will not have been aware of is that, because Mr Fitzpatrick was a leading IRA figure involved in the peace negotiations, he was being kept under discreet surveillance. He was watched entering the Duke's Head alone and leaving alone. I understand he took a short stroll before returning to his flat. Shortly afterwards a man was seen in the grounds and entering the premises. Moments later one of the team realised where they'd seen that face before. Your face, Mr Littlechild.'

The Ulsterman gave a snort of derision. 'Your people wouldn't know me from Adam!'

'My people – no, perhaps not. But this was an MI5 surveillance team and one of them had seen your picture on file.'



Apparently, you keep contact with some pretty unsavoury friends in Belfast.'

Littlechild stared at the man opposite. Any doubts he had were dispelled. Now he knew and he felt the clammy hand of fear run its fingers down his spine.

'Sorry, Roddy,' Henwick said cheerfully, 'but it looks like you walked straight into it. When the MI5 officer finally put a name to the face, you were followed inside. It was an unfortunate delay. Barely a minute later, Fitzpatrick was found dead.'

'How was he killed?'

'Why don't you tell us?'

'Because I don't frigging *know*!'

Millman said: 'Then let me remind you. A silenced .45 automatic. Six rounds, fired through the front door. Four hit him. A nasty mess.'

Henwick couldn't bear to be 'Mr Nice Guy' any longer. 'Looks like you could be facing a life sentence, Roddy.'

The blood drained from Littlechild's face. This was no coincidence, this was far, far more than just being in the wrong place at the wrong time.