



## Prologue

The soldier had died instantly.

A single sniper round had shattered his skull without warning. One moment he was a bright and friendly nineteen-year-old on his first tour of Belfast, an entire lifetime stretching ahead of him; the next he was a corpse who would never grow old. A crumpled sack of camouflaged combat fatigues, virtually indistinguishable from the weeds and rubbish on the overgrown patch of wasteland.

Virtually trapped on the open plot and fearing another unerringly accurate shot, the dead man's foot patrol had been obliged to seek what little cover they could find for almost ten minutes. They couldn't fire because there was nothing to shoot at, and they couldn't manoeuvre because they were sitting ducks.

At last reinforcements of 1 Light Infantry moved in to surround the row of derelict houses from which the shot was believed to have come.

The body of the dead soldier had only just been retrieved when the Ammunition Technical Officer, Captain Tom Harrison, arrived.

The two Humber 'Pigs' and Saracen of 321 Explosives Ordnance Disposal Squadron, which had been tasked to the incident, pulled in behind the ambulance. Armoured Land-Rovers of the British Army and Royal Ulster Constabulary had already gathered.

Harrison jumped down from the cab to be met by the first subaltern to have arrived on the scene. With him was the Light Infantry sergeant who had been leading the patrol.

'Another shoot, ATO, I'm afraid,' the infantry officer confirmed. Despite his confident manner, he looked ridiculously

young for the job, the down of fair hair above his upper lip hardly looking as though it had need of a razor. 'Paddy is playing with his new toy again. That's the third time this month.'

Harrison watched the dead man being zipped into the body bag. 'The Tikka?'

'I think so, sir.' It was the NCO who spoke. Unlike the junior officer by his side, the sergeant looked a decade older than his twenty-five years, an age he shared with Harrison. The eyes amid the cam cream were wary and red-rimmed with fatigue as he introduced himself. 'Sarn't Copes, sir. I was leading the patrol when we heard the crack and the thump. Next thing we knew, Bates was down. Poor bleeder didn't stand a chance. Took half his fucking head off.'

Certainly sounds like the Tikka, Harrison thought.

According to 'Whiz', the Weapons Intelligence Section, it had been used in this Ballymurphy ghetto area on the two previous 'shoots' that month. A deadly new toy indeed for the terrorists. The Finnish-made bolt-action rifle capable of throwing a hollow point 7mm cartridge five hundred and fifty metres with deadly accuracy. As the veteran sergeant had said, the dead soldier hadn't stood a chance.

Harrison viewed the stretch of wasteland with its weeds, wind-strewn rubbish and abandoned household appliances. Each side of the redevelopment area was flanked by the gable-end walls of terraced housing. They were adorned with elaborate and sinister pro-Republican graffiti. The far side was denoted by the next parallel street and a row of derelict houses like rotten teeth awaiting extraction.

Car bombs and derelicts. They were Harrison's very private fears. Fears that he never shared with another human soul. And on which he didn't even allow his own mind to dwell. Yet those fears were always lurking at the back of his mind like the proverbial black dog. Because the truth was that a car or a derelict building was never necessarily what it seemed. Even if a vehicle had been subjected to a controlled explosion, there was never any guarantee that there wasn't something very nasty lying in wait for the unsuspecting ATO. There were a hundred hidden recesses in

which something could be secreted. Likewise with an empty house. Plenty of time for a terrorist to plan his deadly trap and even more places to hide a device.

That's exactly what had happened after the first sniper shooting. During their attempt to flush out the assassin, an unwary infantryman from the Unit Search Team had tripped a wire in an upstairs room. The blast from the hidden explosive device had taken off his right arm and left him blinded.

But the soldiers had been swift to learn their lesson. After the next sniper killing in similar circumstances, they had radioed 'Felix' – call sign of the bomb-disposal team – for an ATO expert to clear the sniper's eyrie.

Tasked to the scene, that time Harrison had found by a window some hand-rolled cigarette ends and a tin of Golden Virginia tobacco. Inviting inspection.

Harrison had declined the invitation. Having learned that you could never be overcautious, he had fitted a hook and line to the tin before giving it a tug from a safe distance. The tin had only contained an ounce of plastic explosive fitted to a trembler switch, but it would have been enough to destroy eyesight and remove the careless pair of hands that had touched it.

Now here he was again, faced with almost exactly the same scenario. And that black dog was right behind him.

It didn't help that there was a name being mentioned. Knowing a bomber's name just made it that much more personal. Harrison's friend Don Trenchard had told him of the man's suspected identity a few days earlier.

Harrison had known Trenchard, who was a few years older than himself but didn't look it, since his Sandhurst days when his friend was lecturing on the rôle of intelligence in Northern Ireland. Trenchard's groomed good looks and boyish charm were not what one associated with the murky world of covert warfare, but as a prankster and dedicated womaniser he was a welcome companion. Always to be relied on to bring more than one pretty girl to a party.

Although a major, Trenchard never introduced himself by rank and was rarely to be seen in uniform. Working as he did with 14

Intelligence Company under the Intelligence and Security Group, he was privy to many of the Province's secrets.

Hughie Dougan, he had told Harrison. That was the name that 14 Int and 'Whiz' thought was behind the latest rash of booby-trapped bombings in Belfast. Dougan was a 'Sixty-niner' who had joined the IRA after the August riots of that year. As a former REME technician in the British Army, his professional knowledge was soon put to good use by the fledgling Provisionals. He was finally arrested and imprisoned for nine years on a charge of conspiring to cause explosions.

According to Trenchard, Dougan had been released earlier that year before going 'on the gallop', in Provisional IRA slang, disappearing over the border to help plan the bombings and make the devices.

Harrison had gone back over the Dougan files from nine years earlier. There were, he had to admit, distinct similarities. The most glaring was the inevitable use of one or more antihandling devices and deliberate 'come-ons' to lure troops or ATOs.

After all, Trenchard pointed out, the Provos were currently paying a thirteen thousand-pound bounty to their members for a dead bomb-disposal operator. Thirteen. It had been unlucky for several of Harrison's oppos. But did it help having a name?

Not really. You still couldn't take anything for granted. Or assume you knew how the bomber's mind worked. Familiarity and contempt were dangerous one-way streets. If anything, having a name just added to the tension. Encouraged the black dog.

He became aware that the subaltern was talking: 'We've cordoned off this whole area down to those derelicts and around the back of them. We appear to have identified the building that the sniper used.'

'Yes?'

The officer shrugged. 'Three witnesses, kids who were playing behind the derelicts. Swore they saw a man jumping over the back-yard wall and running away. Said he was carrying what looked like a long canvas case.'

Harrison narrowed his eyes. 'Don't tell me, the kids were under fourteen?'

The inexperienced officer looked puzzled.

'Unsafe evidence, sir,' the sergeant explained with weary patience.

'Kids in the Ballymurphy aren't usually that keen to assist the security forces,' Harrison said. Probably recruited from the *Na Fianna Eireann*, the Republican boy scout movement, he thought. 'They've been put up to it. My guess is it's a come-on and we'll find your sniper actually fired from someplace else.' He looked up at the shabby concrete monolith beyond the line of derelicts. 'Maybe that block of flats.'

The officer looked suitably chastened. He'd learn, and fast too, if he wanted to survive for a second tour.

Harrison made two decisions. The first was to wait for another ninety minutes 'soak time', as the delays most commonly used by the Provisional IRA were one- or two-hour – although, of course, nothing was ever certain. Only then would he task in a specialist High-Risk Search Team of Royal Engineers to scour all the other derelicts in the row before he alone approached the suspect house.

His second decision was on the siting of the Incident Control Point. 'I don't like it here,' he said. 'It's too exposed and overlooked. There could be a command-controlled device anywhere on this wasteland and it would take a month to find it.' He consulted his large-scale map. 'I'll set up the ICP down nearer the derelicts on the next street intersection. We can't so easily be watched from there.'

The officer nodded, seeing the sense in that.

'Just one thing, sir,' the sergeant said. 'The stairways in those derelicts are very narrow with a tight bend on the landing. So if you need to go up I don't think you'll be able to send a Wheelbarrow in.'

Harrison smiled grimly. 'Anything else I ought to know?'

The sergeant grinned for the first time since the shooting. 'And I think it's about to rain.'

He was right on both counts. The Royal Engineers confirmed the restricted access on the stairways as well as the structural unreliability of the upper floors. And when Harrison was finally ready to be fitted with the armoured khaki bombsuit, the air had

been filled with a warm drizzle for over an hour. He stood at the new Incident Control Point with his arms outstretched as though beseeching the gods for good fortune as his Number Two – an earnest and moustacheoed corporal called Marsh – expertly strapped together the back of the jacket and slid the Kevlar armour chest and crotch plates into their respective pouches. Now he resembled a rather dowdy medieval knight, an impression completed by the bomb helmet with its thick Plexiglas visor.

A total weight of some seventy pounds reduced Harrison's forward movement to a waddling gait and turned the slightest action into a sweaty, exhausting effort. But that was the Army rule. Bombsuits to be worn until the threat was evaluated and neutralised unless it was judged directly prejudicial to the operator's safety.

'Let's at least get the Wheelbarrow up outside the house, Corporal,' Harrison said. 'See if we can't get a look-see inside.'

'Boss,' Marsh acknowledged. Harrison wasn't one for formality, but like many soldiers the corporal felt uneasy with undue familiarity. He liked to know exactly where he stood.

Returning to the back of the Pig, Marsh sat opposite the TV monitor which relayed from the video camera on board the little tracked vehicle that resembled a miniature tank some three feet in height. He picked up the separate control console. Then at the press of a button, the Wheelbarrow robot began its familiar defiant whir, trundling down the deserted street with the command-cable playing out from the coils beside the first Pig.

Harrison perched beside the corporal and studied the fuzzy TV picture from the boom-mounted camera. 'Give the door a miss, Corporal. Let's see if there's a way in through the window.'

Marsh nodded, slowing the 'barrow and executing a neat turn to bring it at right angles to the kerbstone. From that position they had a midget's eye view of the window. It had been barricaded with a sheet of corrugated iron held in place by cross-spars of timber nailed to the rotten frame.

The corporal began extending the telescopic boom to which a small metal attachment was fixed. Known as a 'door opener', its usual function was to open the doors or boots of suspect cars. But

now, with the front tracks of the 'barrow jammed against the kerb for leverage, Marsh was hooking the attachment under the cross-spars. There was little resistance as the boom retracted, yanking the nails free. Two minutes later the iron sheet flapped and crashed noisily to the pavement, revealing a gaping black hole.

With an energetic wheeze, the tracked robot struggled over the kerbstone and edged closer to the window. Nothing but darkness showed on the screen from the boom camera. Marsh switched on the mini-floodlight and Harrison involuntarily winced. Light-sensitive switches had been used recently to trigger hidden bombs in derelict buildings, just waiting for an unwary ATO to switch on his torch.

But this time nothing happened and the monitor showed only the dusty shell of a building as the circle of light traversed the one-time parlour. Plaster had crumbled from the walls and lay on dried-up yellowing newspapers; a door hung from a single hinge where vandals or vagrants had tried to remove it; festoons of lighting cable protruded from a hole in the ceiling like a hernia.

Harrison made his decision. 'I'll take a look now.'

Marsh avoided his eyes, perhaps not wanting to show that he feared for the officer's life. 'What you want to take with you, boss?'

'Just a Pigstick,' Harrison replied, smiling with a confidence he didn't feel. 'And a Jack-in-a-Box, so you can see what's going on.'

He didn't need to add 'in case things go pear-shaped'. Marsh knew.

While the corporal located the steel carrying case and plugged in the extension cable, Harrison took one last look at the dilapidated and empty street before snapping down his visor.

At once he was alone in another world. Outside sounds became instantly muted and he was aware only of the rasp of his own breathing. Through the thick scratched lens of the visor he could see the Wheelbarrow waiting patiently by the window fifty metres away; Light Infantry soldiers crouched at each end of the wasteland that flanked the left-hand side of the street, ready to retaliate should the sniper still be lying in wait.

Marsh handed over the carrying case and the long walk began.

A mere fifty metres but, as always, it seemed to take for ever.

Each footstep was laboured, his breath harsh in his own ears as he shuffled under the weight of the bombsuit and the portable camera.

He tried not to hold his breath, but that was never easy. However much rational thought reassured him that he was not in danger, the truth was that you could never be sure. Because the only man who knew the truth was the bomber, and he would be the very last person on earth to tell you.

The first few footsteps were the easiest because if a device went off where you expected it to be, then your face and body were well enough protected. But as you began to halve the distance you began to remember previous bomb blasts you had seen and the damage they had inflicted on their victims. The destructive power of explosives on soft body tissue was awesome, especially when nails and shipyard bolts had been added for good measure. At twenty-five metres it was impossible not to feel increasingly vulnerable, aware that the protective suit would probably keep you alive, but that the shockwave would invariably tear the limbs from your torso. However calm you might appear, you were aware of the increasing tempo of your heartbeat and the hot flush of fear that caused the sweat to gather in the small of your back.

He thought of his wife Pippa then, and her breathless voice on the telephone the previous night. Her hardly suppressed excitement and his impatience as she deliberately taunted him with her news, keeping it to herself for as long as she could before she finally admitted, Yes, she was pregnant. The doctor had confirmed it. About two months gone, so Harrison could expect to be a father before Christmas.

And then the image had flashed unbidden through his mind. Pippa pushing the cripple in the wheelchair. The child staring at the man who could neither see nor hear, who had no hands with which to hold his own child.

Harrison paused. The trailing cable from the carrying case had snagged and as he turned in slow motion like an astronaut, Marsh was already jinking it free. Thumbs-up signs were exchanged.

The walk began again.

There are only three types of bomb, Harrison reminded



himself, once more going back over his earlier threat assessment in order to quell his unreasoned feeling of panic. To shake off the black dog. There was the time bomb which logic dictated was no longer likely in this situation. Then there was the command-controlled device, perhaps detonated by wire or radio signal. That required an observer and no terrorist who valued his freedom was likely to be hanging around after a snipe; besides which the few occupied buildings that now overlooked him had already been searched by the infantry.

That left the third type of bomb: victim-operated. Cold military parlance for the booby trap.

To an outsider that might seem like a poor comfort. But for Harrison the rerun of his earlier mental process of elimination and his reaffirmation of the nature of the threat steadied his nerves. Whatever might lie in wait for him was not under someone else's control. Whether he lived or died would be up to him alone. His skill, his decisions, his mind against that of the unknown bomber.

He stopped beside the deactivated Wheelbarrow, feeling calmer now.

Ever aware of the possibility of light-sensitive devices, he extracted an Allen cold lamp from the equipment pouch in the tail of his bombsuit and shone the diffused beam into the dark interior. It gave poor definition but was at least preferable to a surprise explosion.

Inside he could see nothing to arouse his suspicions and, after checking the perimeter of the windowframe for wires, he climbed awkwardly over the sill. With his feet planted firmly on the bare floorboards, he flipped up his visor to improve his vision. If the cool flow of air on his face was welcome, the smell of mildew and dog faeces was not.

It took several minutes of playing the beam around the room before he was satisfied that there were no tell-tale electrical leads or tripwires.

So far so good. But then he was painfully aware that he couldn't double-guess everything. Every day more and more electronic sensors of one type or another were coming onto the domestic market. From infrared anti-burglar alarms to acoustic keyrings.

It was only a matter of time before such things were adapted by the bombers. And a derelict like this would be the perfect place to try them out. But at least not, it would seem, today.

Feeling more comfortable, he lowered his visor and edged towards the front door. Nothing appeared to be fixed to it. No wires, nothing.

He crossed the hallway to the foot of the stairs. Before attempting to climb, he tugged through more slack on the portable television cable. Each step creaked unnervingly underfoot. He tested his weight gingerly every time he moved until at last he could view the upper landing.

All the doors were missing here, no doubt taken for second-hand resale by the workers who had boarded up the place. He was thankful for that, because every closed door was a potential deathtrap.

He took another step up, then he saw it. From the top of the stairs he had a clear view across the short landing to where a wedge of daylight filtered through a gap in the boarding of the front bedroom window. It glinted on the half-dozen spent brass cartridge cases lying on the bare boards. Very possibly 7mm rounds.

Suddenly the doubts crowded in on him. Had he been wrong? Had this indeed been the sniper's nest? Had the Catholic kids really seen the assassin legging it away before the Light Infantry closed their net?

There was a discarded chocolate-bar wrapper and a can of Tango orange drink beneath the window where the gap in the boarding would have been sufficient to view the army patrol.

Carefully he placed the Jack-in-a-Box case on the floor and squeezed the carrying handle so that it opened, the pop-up legs lifting the closed-circuit camera automatically into position. Whatever he did now, Corporal Marsh would be able to observe from the monitors in their vehicle.

He moved forward cautiously, looking around for anything out of the usual, probing with his tripwire feeler. Only when he saw it would he know what he was looking for. A near-invisible length of monofilament wire, some exposed firing cable . . . ?

At the doorway of the bedroom he dropped to a crouch and

stared across the bare boards to the collection of cartridge cases. Then suddenly a thought occurred. Only one shot had been fired, that was the name of the sniper's game. One spent case only, normally retrieved by the sniper as a matter of routine. One, not six. He thrust up his visor and sniffed the musty air. Not a hint of cordite, a smell that normally lingered about in a confined space like this.

Was this a come-on? Should he exit now, take time to think it over? Hell, no, he'd only have to come back again eventually. So keep going and get it over with.

Once more he played his lamp across the floorboards, the ceiling and along the walls. At the light switch by the door, an edge of floral wallpaper had come adrift from the wall. Damp seeping in from missing roof tiles? Probably, yet there were no tell-tale watermarks and elsewhere the wallpaper appeared sound.

It was nothing, yet somehow it niggled him. A growing sense of edginess prevented him from putting a foot inside the bedroom. Something purely instinctive persuaded him to use the tripwire feeler.

He extended the end of it forward towards the light switch and pulled a length of wallpaper free. As it flapped down he saw the slightly darker patch amid the white friable plaster of the wall.

His heart began to pound; his hand trembled. Another hour or so and the patch would have dried and become virtually indistinguishable.

Had something been wired to the light switch? Surely the electricity was cut off to these derelicts? Dammit, he really should have checked that. Stupid! His eyes travelled down to the floorboards. He shone the Allen lamp. It was then he saw that the nails were loose, that there were scratch marks on the old dry timber. Frayed, fibrous scars where something like a screwdriver had been used as a lever.

Extracting a light chisel from his tool pouch, he tackled the board closest to the wall skirting, easing the thin blade into the gap and gently prising it free.

Although he'd been half expecting it, the sight of the white

twinflex wire still came as a shock. His mouth was suddenly dry, his heart beginning to palpitate.

Now he knew. He thumbed up his visor to see clearer, the effect of the air on his face helping to clear his brain.

Sitting back on his haunches, he went to work again with his chisel, easing out the two adjoining floorboards.

And there it was, a simple pressure mat. It was old and scuffed and had probably been taken from the front door of a grocer's shop. But instead of ringing a bell to warn that a customer had entered, it had been connected by a wire channelled into the wall to a home-made directional mine at chest level. The wall had then been thinly replastered and the wallpaper restuck with Copydex adhesive.

Now certain that he wouldn't be cutting into a collapsing circuit – a favourite Provo trick – he turned back to the wire leading to the mat. Flat twinflex, with positive and negative currents running side by side, could be lethal if carelessly cut. It was so easy for bare strands of copper to touch each other and complete the circuit accidentally. That's why he always used a small pair of needle-pointed garden secateurs, first snipping one line of the double-stranded flex with absolute accuracy, then moving an inch farther along before snipping the second half so that there was no possibility of the two arcing together.

That done, he cautiously scraped away the hardening plaster in the wall and removed the detonator from the explosive. It had been placed in a lidless rectangular biscuit tin set on its side, the open top facing into the room with four ounces of Gelamex kept in place by two layers of insulation tape between which was held a row of four-inch galvanised nails.

He felt his stomach turn to liquid and the nauseous bile rise up into his throat causing his eyes to smart.

It had been meant for him. Just like the last two come-ons after a snipe. The PIRA bomber, whoever he was, would be perfectly aware that an ATO would be tasked to clear a suspect house. It would be an ATO who took the first tentative step into the bedroom, momentarily overcome by the sight of the spent cartridges and the opportunity to seize crucial forensic evidence.

Harrison would not be the first bomb-disposal operator to become paranoid. To believe that a bomber was after him and him alone. That he had become a personal target. It had happened to several brave, rational men. They rarely returned for another tour.

Looking down at the pressure mat, he could understand how it could happen, how imagination could start to take over from logical thought.

The feeling of unease was still with him when he emerged from the gloom of the derelict ten minutes later and squinted at the watery sunlight squeezing out from behind the rain clouds.

As he retraced his footsteps towards the ICP, he saw that a few additional and familiar figures had gathered by the 'bomb wagons'. One was his immediate commander, the Senior Ammunition Technical Officer.

'Well done, Tom. Heard you had an interesting box of tricks down here. Mind if we have a look over it together when you're ready?'

'My pleasure, boss.'

The second onlooker was a fellow EOD operator out of Girdwood Park, Al Pritchard.

A warrant officer first class, Pritchard was a tall man with thinning black hair and a cultivated expression of gloom. Although the two men maintained a professional tolerance of each other, theirs had always been an instinctive mismatch of chemistry. This wasn't helped by the fact that, as ten years Harrison's senior, Pritchard had vastly more experience, although in the past Harrison had been required to discipline the older man on two occasions when he had been a senior NCO under his command. And Pritchard's was not a naturally forgiving nature.

Harrison couldn't resist a good-natured jibe. 'Come to see how it's done, Al?'

For once Pritchard responded with one of his severely rationed sardonic smiles. 'We were called out on a rubber duck. Thought this shout might be entertaining.' He indicated the TV monitor at the rear of the Pig. 'Better than an episode of *Coronation Street*.'

Harrison knew this was as near to a compliment as he was likely to receive from his rival. 'That exciting, eh, Al?'

'Good enough for me, sir.' Another smile. Was this a record? 'Another happy little memory for when I've got my feet up in London.'

The SATO overheard. 'What Mr Pritchard means, Tom, is that we're going to be losing him. Landed himself a cosy little number with the Met's Explosives Section at twice his army salary.'

So that's it, you smug bastard, Harrison thought as he offered his hand. 'I'd like to say how much I'm going to miss you.'

Pritchard's hooded eyes smouldered back resentfully, unsure how to take the words.

But Harrison only grinned and turned away just as a car pulled up beyond the cordon and he recognised Don Trenchard at the wheel.

'I understand double congratulations are in order, Tom?' he said, as he was escorted in by Corporal Marsh. 'A bun in the oven and a bomb in the bag.'

Harrison laughed, now beginning to enjoy the steady release of tension that was fast becoming a flood of euphoria. 'Make it a treble, I've just heard that Al's leaving us.'

But Trenchard was clearly in a hurry. 'Listen, Tom, just popped by on my way to XMG. The Regiment have pulled in a Provo unit crossing the border. One of them was that name I gave you. Hughie Dougan. Probably responsible for that thing you've just defused. Thought you'd like to know.'

The news was almost uncanny. The man who had just tried to kill him was already sitting in a cell at Crossmaglen while he had been dismantling the device. 'I'll see if I can't save you a nice set of fingerprints for the trial.'

As Trenchard drove away, Harrison joined Corporal Marsh to be helped in the removal of his bombsuit.

'By the way, Tom,' the SATO said. 'I've just had the results of the Pre-Ops course. Three got by on a seventy-five per cent pass, so I can relieve you at the end of the week. How would that suit?'

The perfect end to a perfect task. That Friday – ten years earlier – just couldn't come damn quick enough.



# 1

'Don't kiss him.'

The rusted orange Datsun slowed at the junction before turning right out of Harry's Road towards the Maze Prison set in rural isolation on the outskirts of Hillsborough in the province of Northern Ireland.

'I don't understand,' Caitlin Dougan murmured.

'You don't have to,' her older sister Clodagh replied evenly, changing gear. 'It's what our da wants.'

Caitlin stared out of the passenger window, glimpsing the green steel security fence through the roadside shrubbery.

She was apprehensive, confused and hurt. In all her nineteen years she had never once been permitted to visit her father, who had first been sent down three months before she was born.

The first time she saw him was when he was released in 1982. She was nine years old and they had been strangers. Even now she remembered vividly how she had pulled away as he tried to hug her to him. The hurt and the tears in his eyes.

And then he was gone again, doing a runner to the south and resuming his work for the Provies. Just six months later he was rearrested and sentenced for a further nine years. Again he refused to let her visit.

It had been his wish apparently, but she had never understood why. To her it seemed the only real proof of his existence were the faded black-and-white prints in the family album. A tall, handsome young man with black hair and a charming smile. Not the middle-aged man, the stranger who had hugged her. As she grew up she felt increasingly rejected by his continued refusal to allow her to visit. At one stage she even denied that he was her father to her school friends, only to

become a laughing stock because they all knew the truth.

Their parents had told them that Caitlin's father was a fêted freedom fighter of the Provisional IRA in its struggle against the British occupation. A local hero whose exploits had entered the boozy ballads sung in the pubs and clubs of west Belfast. Hughie Dougan was a champion of the cause, and she was the daughter he had never wanted to see.

She sighed. 'It doesn't make sense.'

Clodagh half smiled, applying the brakes as they approached the security ramp in the road. 'Everything our da says and does makes sense. Hasn't it been his way of protecting you all these years?'

'That's easy for you to say. You're the one he sees, the one he's always seen. You're the one he cares about.'

Clodagh glanced sideways. How easy it was to forget that her baby sister was ten years her junior. So young and naive, having been sent away to the quiet backwater town of Magherafelt to stay with relatives after their mother died, educated at the Rainey Endowed with its tradition of religious integration. Caitlin Dougan was an innocent, having been allowed to grow up relatively unaffected and untainted by the turmoil of the troubles – just as her father had intended.

'Believe me, Da loves you,' she reassured. 'Sure didn't he send you a card every birthday and Christmas.'

'But no letters.'

'Think on, Cait. What could he write to you about? Life at the Kesh?'

Her younger sister stared straight ahead, still sullen. 'And now he doesn't want me to kiss him.'

'Either of us, not just you. He has his reasons.' She gestured forward to the video cameras poised on gantries above the road by the entrance of the prison. 'Remember, Cait, the bastards are always watching.'

She signalled, slowed and pulled into the small lay-by in front of the gates. 'One more thing, wee sister, don't tell him about that. Not yet.'

Caitlin glanced down at her seat belt where it emphasised the



slight swell of her belly. Three months gone and fathered by a good-looking young Protestant lad who was a reservist in the Royal Irish Regiment, formerly the UDR. 'You think our da will be mad at me?'

Clodagh smiled uncertainly. 'Just give him a little time, eh?'

The gates swung open to admit them to the car park that was already full with families waiting to collect relatives due for release. Despite the oppressive presence of the razor-wired security fence and the watch-towers, there was almost a carnival atmosphere amongst those who waited. Much banter and jokes with strangers. For most it was a day of optimism, of a new start and better things to come.

Caitlin watched her sister pace beside their car, hands clasped behind the neat waist of her beige linen business suit as she kicked gently at the dust with the points of her high-heeled shoes. How smart and self-assured Clodagh looked, she thought. A university graduate like herself and now a research scientist with one of Ulster's leading manufacturers of electronic components. A career that she too had hoped to follow before the news of the baby. Still, not bad for two girls from the Catholic ghettos of the Lower Falls.

He was the last to come out through the security turnstile gate.

Caitlin saw immediately that it wasn't her father. A tall, thin man of about the right age, but his shoulders were stooped and his curling grey hair had receded to show the polished skin of his crown. The grey suit was crumpled, limp with age and sported wide lapels that had been all the fashion in the 1970s. His shirt was frayed at the open collar and he clutched a pathetic leather suitcase of the type that had been issued to servicemen in the Second World War.

The man paused to look around at the unfamiliar surroundings, momentarily closing his eyes. He drew a deep, deep breath.

'Da,' Clodagh said.

The eyes opened again and Caitlin could see how dark and alert they were beneath the black beetle brows that were now feathered with silver. She suppressed the small gasp of recognition in her throat. His eyes were the only clue, the only feature she could

recognise from the family snaps and her memory of ten years before.

He dropped the case by his feet and reached forward with arms outstretched to embrace her sister. But, as his lips went to brush her cheek, Clodagh stepped back suddenly as though irritated by the display of emotion.

Caitlin thought she caught the quick, knowing wink in her father's eye before his attention turned to her.

'Cait.' His voice was thick.

She didn't move, staying beside the car, unable to smile and not knowing what to say or feel.

His eyes didn't leave her, but he made no attempt to close the distance. 'You're looking grand, Cait. Your photos don't do you justice.' There was a ghost of a smile on his lips. 'Sure you've put on some weight.'

Clodagh said: 'Da always wants to see the latest photographs of you. He must have enough to fill that suitcase.'

Caitlin still didn't move, but found herself pulling a tight little smile in response. Yes, the photographs. Clodagh's frantic searches for the latest snaps each time she set off to visit the prison. Hugh Dougan wanted to see every one ever taken of his daughter, but still never wanted to meet her in the flesh.

'We ought to be going,' Clodagh said, dumping her father's suitcase in the boot.

Caitlin sat in a back seat, allowing Dougan to take his place in the front. An uneasy silence settled between them, Dougan immersed in his own thoughts and memories as Clodagh drove back along the narrow road. He was absorbing the colour and smell of the countryside, as though seeing grass and leaves for the first time. Viewed from inside prison, everything was seen in just a million shades of grey.

They turned off down Harry's Road. Sight of the simple sign triggered something in his head. How long was it since he had last passed down Harry's Road? Nine years, and even then he had not actually seen it, incarcerated in the armoured prison van. At first he had not understood the expression by other inmates: 'When I took the trip down Harry's Road.' And, anyway, who the hell was Harry?

Apart from six months spent 'on the gallop', mostly in Eire, he'd been away for eighteen years. Eighteen springtimes and summers missed. Eighteen Christmases. He looked down at the hands on his lap and splayed his fingers and thumbs over his knees. He clenched his fists and spread them again, this time with his thumbs folded in. Counting like that made you realise just how long it was. Each finger a year. Each year twelve long months with never a visit to a pub or a home-cooked meal. With never the taste of a woman's lips unless it was under the scrutiny of the screws. Certainly never feeling the warmth of a woman's body beneath the sheets. Eighteen years. A generation, a lifetime.

A lifetime that had begun when the Maze was called Long Kesh – the name by which it was still referred to by Republicans. The days when convicted Provos like Dougan still enjoyed political status under a loose and easy regime when they were housed in Nissen huts of the former wartime airbase.

Days of not waking until eight thirty or nine, education classes in Irish history and language and freedom to read, watch television or play records, with a mug of illicit poteen always on hand to lift the spirits. Before the prisoners burnt them down in a trivial dispute with warders and the notorious H-Blocks were built and the prisoners' 'special category' privileges were withdrawn under a tough new policy from Whitehall.

Then had followed the turbulent years when the inmates refused to wear uniforms, draped themselves in blankets, refusing to leave their cells. The infamous 'dirty protest' had begun; the ordeal was to last five years before the death of Bobby won them back their dignity. Even after all this time, Dougan only had to think of those times for the remembered nauseous stench of the excreta-smearred cells to fill his nostrils again.

They joined the dual carriageway at the A1, speeding north to join the M1 at Lisburn, which would carry them back to Belfast.

Even the traffic was of a different age. Boxy Cortinas and Maxis had been replaced by wind-resistant jellymoulds and sleek fuel-injected racers bearing unfamiliar Japanese names.

'They're behind us,' Clodagh announced flatly, adjusting her rear-view mirror. 'The bastards.'

Caitlin turned in the back. Just cars and lorries. 'Who?'  
'The Brits,' Clodagh hissed. 'The army, RUC or Special Branch – what does it matter?'

Dougan sighed resignedly. 'It's to be expected. The peelers don't leave you alone until they're sure you're not going back to old ways.'

Clodagh laughed bitterly. 'You're going soft, Da.'

'I don't think so. After eighteen years of waiting, I've learned to bide my time.'

'Eighteen years or not, Da, I can tell you some things haven't changed . . .'

And her prophecy was proved correct even sooner than she had anticipated. As the M1 ran into the outskirts of south Belfast and she slowed at the roundabout with Grosvenor Road, she saw it. A vehicle checkpoint manned by helmeted troops of the RIR. Khaki armoured Land-Rovers parked in the middle of the street and a soldier with an SA80 Bullpup across his chest flagging down each car. His mates hidden at the roadside beneath the towering wall mural of the Madonna and Child that marked the entrance to the Falls.

'Welcome home, Da,' she muttered beneath her breath and wound down the window.

The camo-streaked face peered in. 'Driving licence, please.' A harsh Ulster accent.

Clodagh deliberately took time to fish in her handbag, waiting until the soldier showed signs of impatience. Then she thrust it at him.

'Clodagh Dougan,' he said aloud and she saw the stiffening of the muscles in his face. He stepped back and looked disdainfully at the rusty door sills. 'Your car, is it?'

'Yes.'

'Can you tell me the registration number?'

She told him.

'And your passengers?'

'My sister and my father.'

A smile, or it could have been a sneer, appeared on the soldier's face. 'So Hughie Dougan's coming home?'

‘As if you didn’t know.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Ask your friends in the blue Mondeo two cars back. Don’t tell me they haven’t been in radio contact with you. I wouldn’t be surprised if you’re not here just for our benefit.’

The soldier handed back the licence. ‘Don’t flatter yourself. We’re not interested in geriatrics.’ He stepped back and waved them on.

‘Bastards!’ Clodagh spat as she accelerated away from the checkpoint.

‘Don’t let them get to you, Clodie,’ her father soothed. ‘Sure that’s just letting them win.’

But she was still seething when she turned off into the narrow back street of packed terraced houses where a small knot of neighbours and children waited expectantly. Strung between two windows, a makeshift banner made from old bed sheets bore the message in huge handwritten letters: **WELCOME BACK HUGHIE.**

And as Hugh Dougan peered through the fly-smeared wind-screen he felt the prickling sensation intensify behind his eyes.

This had been his street, his home. Now he was back at the two-up two-down house he had not seen for nine years. And eighteen years since he had been taken from his bed in a dawn raid on an icy December morning. Three years before his beloved Mary had died, and his house was sold to Uncle Tommy, his daughters moving to the countryside.

Everything had changed and yet nothing had changed. From the Victorian brickwork and peeling blue paintwork and the yellowing net curtains. No, he corrected himself, Mary would never have stood for those. They’d have been bleached, the holes neatly sewn and then rehung. But, of course, Uncle Tommy’s hands were too rheumatic to hold a needle and thread.

He emerged from the car to a ragged chorus of cheers and handclaps, the people pressing in on him, grinning and slapping his back and reaching out to shake his hand. As Clodagh cleared a passage across the pavement, the line of faces passed in a blur, some vaguely familiar, but most completely alien.

Then he found himself in the small front parlour with its wartime utility furniture and the coloured plaster cast of the Infant of Prague. Uncle Tommy, clutching his walking stick, sat in the big armchair and more well-wishers gathered around the sideboard set with bottles of drink.

More smiling faces, cheeks flushed with alcohol; more back-slaps and handshakes; the room seeming to spin with unreality, the hubbub of excited, chattering voices rising like a wall. Dougan felt unsteady.

‘Black Bush, is it, Da?’ Clodagh asked.

Dougan grimaced, shook his head to clear it. ‘A wee drop of water, Clodie, that’s all.’

A loud voice boomed in his ear. ‘Water! What they done to you in the Kesh? Sure this isn’t the Hughie we know and love!’

Who the hell was this prat? Who *were* all these people? He didn’t feel he knew any of them. Even those he thought he recognised had changed beyond measure in the eighteen years he had been away. At least two women, he knew, had been neighbours. Handsome women in their mid-thirties then, who had flirted with him after too much drink in the clubs – now pushing sixty with flabby bodies and fat faces. Young nephews and nieces, whose identities he could only guess at, had been playing hopscotch with Clodagh then, but now had homes and growing families of their own. And despite their welcoming words and cheerful familiarity, he sensed he was as much a stranger to them as each of them was to him. Even Uncle Tommy, already well pissed at the rare opportunity to drink like he used to, clearly had trouble in recognising him.

Dougan sought refuge in a corner and found, in confirmation of his suspicions, that the well-wishers soon drifted away into huddled, laughing groups, their duty done. And, in truth, he found it a blessed relief.

It was then that the man in the black suit, which he wore with a blue V-neck and tie, moved across to his side. Dougan had seen him earlier, standing back, nursing his drink and observing the proceedings in an aloof, detached sort of way. Very much the outsider, as indeed he himself was beginning to feel.

‘Welcome home, Hughie.’

Dougan looked up at the swarthy, bespectacled face. Mid-thirties with black wavy hair, strong eyebrows and piercing eyes. A mirror image of himself eighteen years earlier. ‘Do I know you?’

‘Tierney. Kilian Tierney. I know you, but I doubt you remember me.’

Dougan frowned. ‘Killy Tierney. Sure I remember you. A wee tearaway teenager on the barricades.’

Killy grinned. ‘In the good old days. You were my hero, Hughie.’

‘And they didn’t put you away?’

‘I did some time in the Crum. But then I got married and settled down in Andytown. Now I’m a councillor with Sinn Fein.’

Dougan raised an eyebrow. ‘You didn’t waste any time.’

‘It’s important for our people not to feel forgotten or neglected. So if there’s any problems, anything you need, I’m your man.’ He handed over a neatly printed card.

‘That’s not what I meant, Killy. After eighteen years in the Kesh, there’s nothing I can’t handle.’

‘Getting a job might be difficult. There’s rules now about any firm over twelve people employing a proportion of Catholics, but with your record –’

‘I’m not talking about a job, Killy!’ Dougan hissed. ‘I’ve been making plans. You can make a lot of plans in eighteen years. I need to talk to someone in the movement. Someone who’s connected, someone in authority.’

Killy stared down at his glass, swilled its contents in slow circles as he chose his words carefully. ‘If you mean what I think you mean, then I suggest you forget it. You’ve done your whack. You’re no longer a young man, so enjoy your retirement.’

Dougan couldn’t believe his ears. He glared around the room. ‘And end up like this lot, you mean? Forget it, I didn’t serve eighteen years for the good of my health. Have you all gone soft while I was away?’

The other man sighed. ‘Things have changed. The movement operates in tight cells nowadays. The big battalions have long

gone, as I'm sure you know. Now it's maybe two or three hundred active lads at most. There's no room for old-timers.'

'I'm the best.'

'Sure you are, Hughie. But for a start the authorities have got your card marked. You won't be able to fart without them knowing about it.'

'I know that!' Dougan snapped back. 'I told you – I got plans.'

The smile was sincere, but patronising. 'And the movement, Hughie, they'd want to be sure of you, too. A lot of the lads have been turned stag by Special Branch after they've been inside.' He saw the anger in the old bomber's face. 'Maybe, after a decent period, when you've been fully debriefed by the Sweenies, sure you could do a wee spot of lecturing for the up-and-coming. Tell 'em how it was in the old days.'

Dougan's explosion of indignation was defused by Clodagh's timely appearance at his side. Killy took the opportunity to make his excuses and move away.

'What's the matter, Da?'

'They think I'm finished,' he said hoarsely, holding her hand and seeking comfort in its warmth.

'They don't know anything.'

He forced a thin smile. 'No, of course not. Now, tell me, where's your man?'

'You haven't spotted him?'

'It's been a long time.'

'Over there by the door. Sweet-talking those two tarts from the Divis.'

It was the man with the loud voice who had spoken to him earlier when he asked for water. Jimmy Coyle. A big man with a mouth to match. Thirty-eight and married to a timid wife who'd borne him six children, kept house, and steadfastly ignored the numerous legovers about which he boasted to anyone who would listen. A self-professed Provie hero who in truth the organisation only used when it wanted a cheap thug to add muscle to its 'compulsory insurance' schemes.

'Have you told him?'

'Not yet.'



'Do it now. We have to go soon.'

Clodagh drained her glass to steel herself before she approached the man, took his hand and led him out of the front door to the empty street.

'Jimmy, I need to speak.'

'I thought you were ignoring me,' he chuckled, his voice slurred, his breath reeking of drink. 'Don't tell me you're pregnant, I won't fall for that one.'

She shook her head. 'Don't be silly, of course not. It's just that I'm going away with Da and Cait for a couple of weeks. Over the border, away from all this. A guesthouse in Sligo. Some peace and quiet for him to adjust.' She hesitated, forcing herself to go on as he slipped his arm around her waist and pressed himself against her. 'Look, Jimmy, we've hardly had any time together . . . There's a pub near the guesthouse that lets rooms. If you could get down there, I could get away. Spend some nights with you . . .'

She noticed how his chest swelled and the grin spread across his face. There was little doubt he'd take the bait; for months she'd been leading him a dance and now he thought he'd cracked it. 'I'm sure I could manage that.'

'Your wife?'

The smirk deepened. 'I'm a travelling salesman, Clodagh, always on the move. Sure Patty never knows where I am and knows better than to ask. Just give me the address.'

She handed him a scrap of paper. 'But it must be our secret, Jimmy. If I hear you've been bragging, it's off. Understand?'

'My lips are sealed,' he promised mockingly.

Just then they heard the whistle. It was the youth in jeans who had been leaning against the lamppost on the corner.

Clodagh's head turned in anticipation, her heart skipping a beat. It was only to be expected and yet she still felt her bile rise as the two grey Land-Rovers rounded the corner at speed. She had no doubt as to their destination.

They pulled up outside, the doors swinging open and the officers of the Royal Ulster Constabulary were out even before the vehicles were fully stopped. Pinched faces beneath their peaked caps, blue flak jackets and M1 carbines.

‘What’s this about?’ she demanded.

The tall, middle-aged sergeant with white hair gave her a quizzical look. ‘Hello, Clodagh. There’s been a tip-off, that’s all.’

‘Tip-off about what, a family party?’

His men bustled past, shouldering their way through the people gathered at the front door. ‘Hidden arms and explosives.’

‘This is harassment.’

‘This is crime-prevention,’ the officer retorted.

An army patrol vehicle had now pulled up at the end of the street to provide any backup that might be required. High above, almost invisible in the cloud, an observation helicopter hovered.

‘You know my da got out today, don’t you?’

The sergeant’s face was deadpan. ‘Someone might have mentioned it. So this will be a good opportunity to pay my respects.’ He turned abruptly and followed his men inside.

Within minutes the gathering had broken up, the guests returning to their homes.

Hugh Dougan appeared at the door with Caitlin, shielding his eyes against the sun that was breaking through the cloud to glint the surrounding hills.

He found himself standing next to Killy Tierney. In a low voice he said: ‘One day the movement will need me. And when that day comes, I’ll be waiting for the call.’

Tierney just smiled, polite.

‘Time to be going,’ Clodagh said.

He glanced back through the window at the RUC policemen riffling through the cupboards and drawers of Uncle Tommy’s furniture.

Eighteen years and nothing had changed. Absolutely nothing.

‘I can never forgive you for what you did, Da. Never!’ Clodagh’s voice rose above the hushed conversation in the crowded dining room of the Sligo guesthouse. Heads turned, mouths gaped. Cutlery poised above the plates of meat and two veg.

Caitlin could not believe her ears, had no idea her sister felt this way.

'Your actions brought shame on our family,' Clodagh continued, her words intense with suppressed anger. 'It killed our ma and destroyed our lives, ruined Cait's and my childhood! Damn you and your cause, I want no part of it. None, do you hear!' She shoved back her chair and stood up while her father just looked at her, stunned, and said nothing. 'We came here out of a sense of duty to you, but God only knows why! There's nothing left between us. Nothing. *You* destroyed it all!'

She threw down her napkin, turned on her heel and stalked from the dining room.

Slowly, very slowly, a murmur of whispered conversation rose to fill the shocked vacuum of silence, speculation and rumour abounding amongst their fellow diners.

Even now, as Caitlin lay on her bed, she could hardly believe what had happened earlier that evening. Could not believe that Clodagh had stormed out and taken their car, accelerating away angrily up the gravel drive. It was late when her sister returned, almost two when Caitlin heard the door slam. Not that her father would have known, not after the drink he had consumed that night, morose and silent in the guesthouse bar.

Still Caitlin could not sleep. The luminous hands of her watch told her it was now four o'clock and outside she could hear the first birds heralding the pre-dawn light.

Climbing out of the unfamiliar bed, she pulled on her dressing gown and drew aside the curtain. Below her she could see the dark figure swaggering towards the orange Datsun, still parked where Clodagh had left it on her return.

'Da!' she cried, but he could not hear and she could only watch helplessly as the engine started and the car weaved drunkenly up the drive and away.

She was still awake half-an-hour later when she heard the dull distant thud of the explosion.

Although it was late afternoon the blackened wreckage was still smouldering when the Irish Special Branch detective took his visitor from Belfast to the scene of the accident.

'Just took the bend too fast,' the detective explained. 'It's steep,

you see. Went smack into the dry-stone wall. One hell of an explosion.'

'A fitting way for him to go,' Don Trenchard said.

'Hugh Dougan – yes, I gather he'd only been out of prison a week. As soon as we realised who he was we thought your people would like to be informed. Some of us really do believe in cross-border co-operation, you know.'

'We're grateful for that.' He watched the crane of the recovery vehicle begin to lift the wreckage. 'And you say his daughters have identified the body?'

A sombre nod of the head. 'Not that there was much to identify. At least there was a signet and a wedding ring.' He held out his palm, in it a clear plastic bag containing a plain gold band and a ring featuring the interlaced Celtic birds from the *Book of Kells*. 'If it was suicide, he made a good job of it.'

'Suicide?'

'Too much booze, an accident, suicide, sure who knows? Apparently there was a terrible Holy Mother of a row with the daughters last night – a lot of witnesses at the guesthouse. They say the oldest daughter virtually disowned him.'

Trenchard sniffed the air. Despite the thin summer drizzle that was beginning to fall, he could still detect the cloying sweet odour of human remains amid the more pungent stench of burnt rubber and fabric. He was all too familiar with the smell in the aftermath of past bombings back in the north.

He said coldly: 'Then the murdering bastard will be no great loss to anyone.'

It was six months later, on a chill and damp December morning, that the body of Sean Shevlin was fished out of the River Liffey in Dublin from under O'Connell Bridge.

The fifty-two-year-old senior civil servant had been missing for three days. When he did not arrive home on the first night of his disappearance his wife was not unduly concerned. Shevlin had been working exceptionally long hours for several weeks, evidently involved in a series of high-powered meetings at Leinster House, about which he had told her little. But then he had always prided

himself on his discretion and ability to keep the secrets of high office to himself.

She had become used to dinners spoiled in the oven, his late evening phone calls apologising for conferences that had overrun. Sometimes, to her surprise, he would be calling from another town or city, or a country house miles off the beaten track. Sometimes from another country, from Belfast, Liverpool or London.

She was mildly irritated that first night when the telephone didn't ring as she expected. But she only began to sense alarm the next morning when his office rang asking where he was. Then at noon a plain-clothes officer of the Garda arrived at her front door.

Sean Shevlin's car had been found abandoned in the car park of the Royal Dublin Golf Course on North Bull Island. According to witnesses, her husband had last been seen at lunch time the previous day talking to three unknown men outside the clubhouse; he had left with them in their car.

There was no mention of his disappearance in the newspapers or on television. For that his wife was grateful, but she considered it mildly unusual because he was an important and well-known establishment figure.

When his corpse was retrieved, the same officer returned to break the sad news with carefully chosen words of sympathy. Her husband had apparently committed suicide; he had lately been under great pressure of work. Eventually the coroner would confirm the cause of death. But no mention was made of how Sean Shevlin had managed to shoot himself in the back of his head, or why he should have torn out his own toenails before he did so.

As the detective left the grieving widow, three men drove north out of Dublin towards County Leitrim. They were members of the All Ireland Philately Society which met irregularly at different venues around the country to exchange rare stamps. This day they were to meet in the back room of a run-down motel.

Two members had already arrived, made a discreet security check of the surrounding countryside and electronically swept the bare and cheerless meeting room for listening devices. They were

armed with automatic pistols and only opened the door on hearing the password 'Penny Black'.

Inside, the curtains were drawn at the high, cell-like strip of window and the bleak fluorescent tube light switched on although it was midday. The three men from Dublin sat on plastic chairs at the peeling Formica-topped table and waited impatiently, smoking and drinking coffee from paper cups.

It was to be another ten minutes before Donny Fitzpatrick arrived; the Chief of Staff of the Provisional IRA had driven down from his home in Scotsstown, County Monaghan.

Next to appear was the organisation's Quartermaster General, Maedoc Mallally, known to all as Q, from Black Rock in Dundalk. Two more Army Council executives arrived before the final member's car pulled up in the car park.

Pat McGirl, commander of Northern Brigade had farthest to come. He shared his home in Bundoran, County Donegal, with a former bank clerk who had planted numerous bombs at her lover's behest.

Travelling with McGirl was Killy Tierney of the 'Sweenies' – the movement's notorious security section which dealt with suspect agents and informers within their ranks.

The only people absent were Martin McGuinness from Londonderry and Sinn Féin president, Gerry Adams. Representing between them the Armalite and ballot box strategy of PIRA, they had become important figureheads but were now too high profile to attend planning meetings of this nature. Nevertheless their views were well known and it was the trusty Killy's job to see that both were kept fully informed.

As soon as McGirl took his seat, Chief of Staff Fitzpatrick opened the meeting; there was only one item on the agenda. The talks.

He addressed the three men from Dublin. 'Have you got the tape?'

A machine was placed on the table. 'It goes on some. I think the last hour is the most relevant.'

'We've got all the time it takes.'

'It's not – er – let's say it's not for the squeamish.'

Fitzpatrick's eyes were unblinking. 'Just play it.'

They listened in silence watching the recorder with its irritating scratch of cassette cogs, the rasping whisper of words extracted syllable by syllable from the unwilling speaker. Words that nevertheless seemed to fill the room along with the accumulation of cigarette smoke, their significance as shocking and awesome as anything the men around the table could have imagined in their worst nightmares.

When the dialogue was punctuated by a series of sickening screams, Fitzpatrick lifted his cup and sipped cold coffee. Q scratched at his nose, studied his fingernails. McGirl leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes as though listening to his favourite Sinead O'Connor number on his Sony Walkman.

The final, single slam of the gunshot came as a relief, breaking the spell. Someone switched off the tape.

Silence continued, heavy, until Fitzpatrick cleared his throat. 'Do they know that we know yet?'

'His body was found at first light this morning. We heard it on the radio on the drive up. They made it sound like it was suicide.'

McGirl gave a mirthless chuckle. 'They would.'

'The thing is,' Fitzpatrick said slowly, 'do we believe it?'

A Dublin man said: 'Sean Shevlin believed it. With his dying breath.'

'Then we have a problem.'

'It's a load of crap,' McGirl intervened, 'whatever Shevlin believed. Dublin is never going to change Articles Two and Three in the constitution and remove its claim to the Six Counties. Never! They just hint at it when it suits them. They've watched the North tear the heart and soul out of itself for over twenty years and haven't conceded, so why should they now? Any more than they'd agree to internment this side of the border. What would Dublin get out of that – except alienate its own people and betray its own historical rights?'

The leader of the Dublin men said: 'Shevlin said it's all part of the secret protocol that's *already* been agreed by both governments. That and internment on both sides of the border, including the Orange paramilitaries, is the cornerstone on which

everything else will be agreed. You heard him say it, the Americans are insisting that everything else is on the table. And he quoted that Yank – “There must be a big solution or no solution.” It’s all up for grabs, open negotiations on a constitutional settlement between all parties.’

McGill angrily stubbed out his cigarette end in the foil ashtray. ‘And us left with our noses pressed up against the window. That’ll be the Brits, insisting we’re excluded.’

‘I know what Brownie would say,’ Killy Tierney interjected, referring to Gerry Adams by his old *Republican News* pen name. ‘We have elected politicians who’ve done things the democratic way and yet their words still cannot be heard directly by the people. Banned from visiting England. We should expect nothing better from Whitehall.’

Fitzpatrick asked: ‘Do we know anything more about this secret protocol?’

The Dublin man shook his head. ‘Shevlin told us *everything* of what little he knew, believe me.’

The Chief of Staff was inclined to. ‘Look, these talks have got to be stopped unless we are part of them. With us and the UDA excluded there is *every* chance of an agreement. And almost certainly that will leave us marginalised, rebels without a cause. They *can* do it. They set a precedent with the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The door was opening, we thought then. Just one more long, hard push . . . But we were wrong. Now we know just how wrong.’

‘You make it sound hopeless,’ Q observed disapprovingly.

‘There’s something I’m sure Brownie would point out if he was here,’ Killy Tierney said. ‘That is Dublin’s insistence that nothing will be agreed until everything is agreed. I read that as meaning the secret protocol – whatever that really is – may be *already* signed, but it cannot be implemented until the whole final package is agreed by all sides. And that is going to take some time.’

The Dublin man agreed. ‘Shevlin anticipated the talks would continue for a year or more. Obviously there will be no quick fix.’



Fitzpatrick smiled gently. 'Then thank the Lord that there are still some sane heads at Leinster House. They may have given us the breathing space we need.'

Q said abruptly: 'We should interrupt the talks – a fucken great bomb, that'll stop 'em talken.'

The leader of the Dublin men leaned forward over the table, his voice low and earnest. 'First we have to know *where*. They move the talks down here in the South around like we do. The Garda Special Branch vets all the locations and they're chosen at random just one day before. Even if we find out, it's hardly enough time.'

'Hit Dublin,' McGirl urged. 'It's time they tasted blood in their mouth. They'll buckle soon enough.'

'Shit on our own doorstep?' Fitzpatrick sneered. 'That's very clever. It's something we've never done and never will.'

McGill said: 'Then it has to be London. Teach them it's just not worth carrying on unless we're included. The Brits can't take that. Campaigns in England are always what got things moving, one way or the other. Nothing like the blood of voters on the pavement to concentrate their minds.'

'I'm not sure Brownie will approve of this,' Killy Tierney said.

'He doesn't have to,' McGirl replied darkly. 'He's had his chance to try his way and it hasn't worked. It's our turn now.'

The faces around the table were impassive. They all knew it was easy to agree, but much more difficult to put into effect. Their men on English soil would be operating in hostile territory. They could not go near the enclaves of their fellow countrymen, because that was where the enemy would be watching. However successful they might be – and in the recent past they had been spectacularly successful – there was a sacrifice to be made. Namely the men themselves. Inevitably they would end up dead or behind the wire. No one around the table doubted the effort and resources the British Government would throw into the fray if its capital was under serious and prolonged threat.

At length Fitzpatrick broke the silence. 'We would have to start afresh. For all we know our active service units currently in England could already be compromised. They've been running

successfully for some time, perhaps nearing the end of their natural life. Any new campaign cannot be allowed to fail. For that we will require the very highest security, a new controlling unit and a new team. The best planning brains and the best bomb makers, because they'll have to be able to outthink and outwit the very top experts the Brits will set against them.'

'We could do with some of the old hands from the seventies,' Q said wistfully. 'Those boys really knew a trick or two . . . What about Willie MacEoin, what's he doing now?'

Kilian Tierney, whose Sweenies also had responsibility for keeping tabs on ex-cons, knew the answer to that. 'Willie wouldn't want to know. Sure he's a broken man, just sits and weeps by his dying ma's bedside all day.'

Q looked despondent. 'It's a pity they've buried Hughie Dougan, he'd have been your man. No one ever had a brain like him. Bright as sixpence. Completed *The Times* crossword every day in twenty minutes, a member of Mensa. What a mind!'

McGirl said testily: 'He'd be senile by now, for Christsakes. This calls for new blood, new thinking.'

Fitzpatrick sniffed heavily; this was no time for discussing the dead. 'There is still no substitute for experience, Pat, and that's what the old boys had. Anyway, that's by the by. We'll have a think and talk around, discreet like. Next meeting in five days, venue to be advised. Each of you put together a list of names of people who would be best suited to do the job.'

The meeting broke up, each member picking up his briefcase that contained a stamp album before leaving for the cars.

Donny Fitzpatrick lingered, deep in thought, reaching up to open the curtains and allowing a shaft of smoky sunlight to penetrate the stale air. As he turned back into the room, he saw that Kilian Tierney had returned.

'What is it, Killy?'

'I didn't want to say anything in front of the others.'

'Well?'

'I had a visit the other day from Clodie Dougan, Hughie's oldest girl.'

‘So?’  
‘Hughie isn’t dead.’

Rain dripped steadily from a cold and sodden sky. A crocodile of schoolchildren were the only other visitors to Belfast Zoo, lost in the dank mist that clung to the mountainside site.

Donny Fitzpatrick climbed the winding leafy path that led up from the entrance, the four-year-old boy clutching his hand. By the time they reached the rocky pool where the blind Californian seals swam, the man was out of breath. Nevertheless he felt compelled to light a cigarette, cupping cold pinched fingers against the hard drizzle. The boy hung over the railings, mesmerised by the circling mammals, puzzling why if they were blind they did not collide. He did not notice the woman approach.

‘Your boy?’

She stood a short distance away, a turquoise umbrella shielding her long black hair and trench coat from the rain. A good-looking woman, Fitzpatrick thought, with nice legs and dark steady eyes.

He moved towards her, away from the child. ‘I borrowed him for the day.’

‘You don’t have a son of your own then?’

He noticed the shaped arch of her eyebrows as she appraised him, approved of the fullness of her lips. ‘My own boy’s a wee bit older, serving seven in the Kesh.’

‘Perhaps he knows my father.’

‘Everyone knew Hughie Dougan.’ It sounded like a compliment, a recognition.

‘You turned him away when he came out. He didn’t like that.’

‘It’s policy. People get turned inside.’

‘Not my father. You must know that.’

‘Perhaps.’

She looked past him to the boy and the man saw the strange expression in those deep, dark eyes. A sadness perhaps and, just for a moment, vulnerability. ‘My father knew his time would come again. He’d made plans, just waiting for when he’d be needed. I told Killy Tierney that, told him to pass it on.’

Fitzpatrick put the cigarette stub to his lips and drew heavily,

but the rain, running in rivulets down his face, dampened the paper. He tossed the remains over the rail into the seal pool.

'Faking his own death, was that part of the plan?'

'The RUC won't hunt for a dead man.'

'How did you do it?'

'It doesn't matter.'

Fitzpatrick stared up at the mist coiling around the mountain-side. There was a distant barking sound from the gorilla compound. 'Jimmy Coyle went missing at about the same time Hughie was supposed to have died. Is that how you did it?'

She averted her eyes. 'It was easy enough. The explosion made a mess of the body, but I'd put Da's rings on his fingers first. I was asked to do the identification.'

'You killed Jimmy Coyle?' He couldn't keep the surprise from his voice.

Clodagh's eyes met his again, dark and fathomless. 'He was so eager to get his leg over, it wasn't difficult. A hammer, that's all it took.' There was an accusation in her expression. 'I was only doing your job for you. Jimmy Coyle fingered Da nine years ago, everyone knew that. The dog should have been put down then.'

He didn't like being told what he should or shouldn't have done by a woman, least of all one he'd only just met. 'That was speculation. I think you'll find it was the evidence of the bomb-disposal and forensic-science boys that put your da away.'

'Well, he's not going away again, we're all determined about that.'

'Where is Hughie now?'

'Only I know that. You reach him through me. Phone me at work, never at home.'

'What about your sister?'

Her eyes narrowed. Was there a sneer on his face? Did he know that Caitlin was living with the part-time soldier in the Royal Irish Regiment, who was the father of the child she carried? 'She knows nothing about all this.'

Fitzpatrick looked down at the grunting, bewhiskered torpedo flapping smoothly through the chill water. 'One thing worries us.

Your father was good in his time, but he's no longer a young man. Time has moved on, technology has changed.'

She leaned her back against the railing. 'I studied hard at school and made sure of a place at the Poly. CDT. Craft, Design and Technology. It went into the whole manufacturing process of electronics, vac-forming, PC boards, the lot. I'm a highly paid electronics expert. In fact I expect I earn more than you. And none of it was an accident, it was Da's idea for keeping abreast of developments. We've both waited eighteen years for this. We'll be working together.'

'I'm impressed.' He meant it.

'But I'll warn you of one thing. Any operations will be run our way, that's a precondition. And you can't expect my father to get involved unless it's for a good reason, an important campaign.'

Fitzpatrick's voice was low, earnest. 'There's never been a more important campaign.'

'What do you want done?'

'A short campaign here first. To be sure you're up to it, to iron out any problems.'

'And then?'

'We want you to set London ablaze. We want the capital and the government brought to its knees.'

Five minutes later he watched the slender figure retreating down the pathway, disappearing into the mist and rain.

The man walked on towards the penguin pool, the little boy skipping at his side.