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Opening Extract from...

Vagabond

Written by Gerald Seymour

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VAGABOND

Gerald Seymour



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1

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PROLOGUE

Behind them a smear of a softer grey crested the mountain and the forest's tree tops, but in front the rain, in usual obstinacy, refused to move on. They had been in the makeshift hide since an hour after dusk the previous evening, and had alternately slept and kept watch on the farmhouse. In front of them, way beyond Camaghy and Shanmaghry, and in line with the chambered grave of Neolithic times, was the building and the lit yard. Now, both were awake and alert. They watched and waited.

It was, of sorts, a reward for their patience. The flash, beyond the Pomeroy road, even in the low cloud, was brilliant.

'That's our baby,' Dusty murmured.

The sound of the explosion seemed slow to reach them, as if the cloud and the rain impeded it. Desperate – as he was known with some affection inside the only family he had – thought the noise, distant and muffled, sounded like a paper bag bursting after a kid had blown it up. 'Went off like a good one,' he whispered into Dusty's ear.

What Dusty had called 'our baby' and Desperate a 'good one' was likely to have been the blast of an eighth of a tonne of chemical fertiliser fired by a commercial detonator buried in the pliable putty of a pound and a half of Semtex. The flash was fast spent and the sound had dissipated against the higher slope of the mountain. The cloud was too dense for any smoke to force its way up against the rain.

They needed good hearing and the vantage-point in the hedgerow. Cattle had come close when they had first moved into the hide, dug two nights before. Cattle were always the worst. Sheep could be sent away, and most dogs could be quietened with

biscuits and a tickle. Cattle lingered longest, but they had gone on before midnight and found shelter closer to the farm buildings. It was quiet around them and they could identify far-away gunfire.

Most on automatic. Few single shots. Men who didn't engage in a primitive form of warfare might have flinched at the barrage of bullets fired around the point where the light had flashed. At least two hundred shots. Out there, the ambush team would have been slapping on fresh magazines and keeping the belts fed through the machine-guns. The noise did not have the crisp tone of a drumbeat or a champagne cork's pop, but was a messy blur. It was the reward for waiting.

Both men – Desperate more so than Dusty – had imagination. It was easy enough for either to picture the scene close to the culvert drain that took rainwater off the fields above the lane. The culvert was of good-quality concrete and well built but had sufficient bramble and thorn growing around its mouth for it to be an ideal place to secrete an explosive device. It had, too, the necessary cover, with the reeds that grew in the field, for a command cable to be laid; would have been unwound until it reached a shed – the firing position for the bomb. The target, as they knew, was to be a Quick Reaction Force sent out from the barracks eight miles away where a fusilier unit was based. The troops would respond to a hoax call from an anonymous man, using a public phone box to report a rifle left on a verge close to the culvert. Both men, cold and soaked, would have known what had happened. In the darkness the 'bad guys' would have struggled to get the fertiliser, in sacks, clear of the Transit and manhandled it towards the ditch and culvert. Their last moments would have come as they slid to the concrete mouth. The night sights on the rifles and machine-guns would have locked on them. An electronic switch would have been thrown to detonate the bomb and the firing would have started. Maybe two had died in the blast, and the other two would have been cut down by the volume of bullets. All would have been mangled, body parts spread . . . Neither Dusty nor Desperate winced at what they imagined.

The rain was heavier and the shooting had stopped. They were

probably too far from the culvert to hear the helicopter come in. If the shooting was over it would have been called for, and it would fly low, hugging the contours, from the barracks, and set down momentarily in the sodden field to take in the Special Forces men, the 'Hereford Gun Club', who had been the ambush team. Blacked up, weighed down with their kit, they would heave themselves past the helicopter's machine-gunner and flop onto the metal floor. Then it would lift, bank and disappear. Behind the helicopter there would be a scene of carnage. Dusty and Desperate were silent. Neither was a killer at first hand: both took more responsibility than the men who had slapped in the magazines and fed the belts.

They could imagine the scene where the culvert drain bored under the lane because Desperate had been told that was where the bomb would be laid, when it would be brought there, at what time the hoax call would be made, and which men would be settling into their firing positions to wait for the military response. He knew the features of those men and their histories in the war being fought out on the shallow slopes of the mountain, and where they lived in the Townlands between the Chambered Grave and the summit point called the Seat of Shane Bearnagh. His files carried their biographies and he could trace the tribal links that held them together: he had the names of the wives, girlfriends and kids. Desperate had furnished the information that had brought the special forces up from Ballykinler. He could have predicted each moment in the killing process. He had choreographed it.

The helicopter would have gone, and the guys inside the cabin would soon be showering away the stench of cordite, then heading for the canteen and breakfast. Not Desperate and Dusty.

The cows were on the move. They came across the open field into the teeth of the wind and rain. Through his glasses, an image intensifier built into the lenses, Desperate could see their steady progress, and hear the squelch of their feet. For a full minute they masked the farmhouse and the buildings where the man stored his agricultural plant livestock lorries, the weapons and bombs he dealt with. There were no lights on in the house. It was too close to the explosion, the firing and the ambush. Desperate felt no

particular satisfaction at the part he had played in the matter and didn't imagine Dusty wanted a high-five. What both men would have liked was a cigarette – forbidden. The absence of a Marlboro Lite might have mattered more to Desperate and Dusty than their part in the deaths of four men.

They were good cows from a pedigree herd – not that they were milked by the man who owned – had owned – the farmhouse, the outbuildings and forty-nine acres of poor, if serviceable, land. They were led each morning and evening to a neighbour's parlour and milked there. When they had come back the previous evening, the man had been flitting from his back door to his buildings and had returned with heavy-duty navy overalls. He must have forgotten the balaclavas because he'd had to return to the big shed. They'd watched him.

Dusty had dug out the pit that was the basis of their hide. He had many skills and building hides was one. They were low in the hole – bracken and gorse grew around its edge. A man would almost have stepped on them before he realised they were there. Dusty and Desperate feared the cows. The animals had the habit of coming to the hide and forming a half-moon round it, obscuring any view. Both men now sat in a pool of water that had formed in the pit. The damp penetrated their trousers and underwear, and their thermals no longer kept out the cold. It was what they did, nothing exceptional. It wasn't exceptional either for Desperate to preside over the killing of four men. That was what he did.

Rescue came. A vixen strutted from the hedge to their right, threaded between the clumps of nettles and attracted the cattle's attention. They veered off in pursuit of her. The view of the farmhouse was restored.

Four men would have died. There could have been no survivors. The blast of the premature detonation would have killed some and the gunfire would have done for the others. There would be another killing on the shallow slope of Altmore mountain within a week or, at most, a month. Desperate would be as responsible for the final death in this sequence as he was for the others. The cold gripped him, the damp shrivelling his skin. His eyes

ached from gazing through the image-intensified lenses. He had seen the man carry the gear between the farm buildings and the kitchen door, and later had watched as the lights went on upstairs – the child being put to bed.

Late in the evening, when the wife's television programmes were over, he had come out of the back door, then had turned, taken her in his arms and kissed her hard. A moment of seeming weakness and she had clung to him until he'd broken away and gone. They had watched him lope down the track leading from the farm to the lane and a car had come.

Later, the ground-floor lights went out and those in the principal bedroom came on. Desperate saw her for a moment as she stood at the window and gazed down the hill. They had no bug in the house so Desperate didn't know whether she knew about the culvert. Some talked to their women, most didn't. She was tall and straight-backed, with good bones and a clear complexion. Her expression, at the window through the lenses, was vacant. She would have been accustomed to her husband slipping away as night fell, and of him returning. She would have known what he did, but perhaps not the detail. She would have recognised the risks he ran because there were enough widows on the side of the mountain who had experienced what now confronted her.

'You all right, Desperate?'

'Grand, Dusty. Never better.'

There had been heavy talk in the small operations area at Gough. Inside that old heap of grey-stone misery, which the British Army had populated for more than a century, the issue had been thrashed out: no minutes taken, no written record. Could arrests be attempted? Could they be rounded up individually and linked to a murder conspiracy that stood a chance in the Central Criminal Court? The answer had been decisive: 'Blow the beggars away.' A last question had been put: 'Do we lose the source? Is he collateral?'

A response from Desperate: 'I think we can live with that if we're taking down four of that calibre.' Sergeant Daniel Curnow had spoken, and he was the oracle on matters concerning

informers, agents, 'touts': a warrant officer, a major and a full-ranking colonel listened to him. He was called 'Desperate' because of his first name.

Two nights later, awake for hours, he gazed down at the farmhouse. He knew how he'd find out that the enemy were dead. They wouldn't send their own people, not yet. The priest would come. The light was growing from the east, beyond the Pomeroy road, and the rain fell. Wind rustled the hedgerow. A small car came along the lane, the headlights feeble in the weather. It turned onto the track, bouncing over the potholes, that ran between fields where more cattle were out and some sheep. Either the police or the fellow travellers supporting the Organisation would have called the man out.

The dog barked and ran from the buildings behind the house. A light came on upstairs.

The priest stood at the door and seemed to pause, as if reluctant to take a further step. Then he knocked. Desperate could see, with the magnification of the glasses, that she had thrown on a dressing-gown: as soon as she heard the vehicle progressing at snail's pace up the track she would have realised that the news was bad. She took the priest inside. As Desperate pictured it, she would lead him into the kitchen, sit him down, put on the kettle, then allow him to speak.

A child came outside in striped pyjamas, a size too small – he was well built, with a tousled mass of thick hair. The file back at Gough said Malachy was eight. Desperate had seen the child from that vantage-point in the hedgerow three days before, when the boy had ridden with his father on the back of the tractor as they took silage out to the cattle. Now he howled – not with misery but anger. It was an animal sound, primeval. Desperate blinked, then cleaned the lenses so he could see better. The child's face was twisted with hatred – the face of a fighter, he thought.

Dusty said quietly, 'He'll be a problem, he will. Remember his name.'

They covered the hide, picked up their rubbish and went on their stomachs along the hedge to the gap they could squeeze

through. When they were clear, Dusty would summon the transport to the appointed rendezvous – using Desperate's call-sign, Vagabond – and they'd return to Gough.

He was responsible, not for the first time and not for the last. The face of that child seared in his mind as he began to trudge across the grass. He saw, too, the face of an older man who believed in him, had trusted him, pocketed money and thought himself Desperate's friend. He was despised as a traitor, the source of the information that had killed four men. A victory in a war now in its third decade had been won – and had taken the life of the child's father.

The informer, whose life might now be forfeit, was Damien. He did a bit of carpentry to eke out his unemployment benefit and the hundred pounds a month from his handler. He lived in a bungalow two miles to the east along the mountain, and was thought to be not the full shilling. He had been doing panelling in a man's home when he had heard the plan talked through in the open air. He had told Desperate, who had recruited him seven months before. His handler knew that the agent, Damien, was now vulnerable: the Organisation's security people would come from Belfast and check who had known of the plan, where the briefings had been given. Damien had been worth a few hundred pounds, but was not in line for a resettlement package in England, which involved heavy expense. He'd take his chance. If the Organisation identified him as a potential risk, he would be taken to a safe-house, interrogated, burned and beaten. Then he'd be hooded, stripped to his underpants, pinioned and driven to a lane close to the border where he'd be pushed to his knees and shot, one bullet, in the back of the head. The hood would be lifted and a twenty-pound note stuffed between his teeth.

His handler had manipulated him. That was the work Desperate did, and Dusty protected him while he did it.

He'd catch up on his sleep at Gough after the debrief. The kid, Malachy, had howled at the low clouds, but it was the hatred Desperate would remember, how it had creased a young face and made lines in the clear skin. The voice rang in his ears.

I

They'd killed him – not shot or strangled him, but when they'd sent him up the road.

The hut in which they had taken refuge from the weather was part collapsed. Three of the walls still stood and half of the tin roofing was there, but storms had taken down the rest; the floor creaked when any of them moved. Manure and a carpet of damp straw lay over the debris, and the place stank of cattle, and of the cigarettes smoked incessantly by the police who guarded them.

It was clear to Hugo Woolmer that he might as well have fired the bullet himself. His partner in the agent's death was Gaby Davies. Hugo was three years older, at a higher grade in the Service, so had nominal control of the operation. What else might he have done? He could have refused permission for the agent to drive off into the fog that hid the road that snaked up towards the mountain. He might have insisted that he would not allow his agent to be at the beck and call of those who had called him and go to them, without back-up, in the hire car.

The agent had worn no wire under his vest and no microphone in his watch. No bug had been fastened to the small car he had collected at the airport. It had been thought that a wire, a microphone, or a bug was too simple for 'them' to locate.

The agent had flown from London, had stayed the night in a modern hotel within a stone's throw of the police barracks. They had demanded a meeting with the agent. Two alternatives had faced Hugo Woolmer: he could allow his man to drive into the cloud and the labyrinth of narrow roads and farm tracks, which dictated vehicle pursuit was impossible, or he could accept that an agent who had worked with the Service for almost five and a

half years should now be reined in, the contact with 'them' lost. The chance of replacing the agent was minimal. It had been his decision to make, and Gaby Davies's voice had been insistent that morning in the hotel when visibility across the car park was negligible.

At the heart of the decision was the agent's personal safety. He would be beyond reach, with no panic button because it was likely that he would be subjected to a search with detectors. To let him go forward, or not? A crushing weight had burdened Hugo Woolmer.

He was crouched against one of the hut's surviving walls. The wind came through the trees, whipping twigs against them. He sat on his heels. His head was down on his chest.

She had said, 'Of course he'll do the meeting with them. It's what we brought him over for. It's a tough old world out there. You should know that and so should he. If he's blown his cover, then that's a sound reason for them to summon him to their territory. Or maybe they have a different role for him and want to talk it through. He put himself into this situation. He should have known things might get tricky before he associated with them. To cancel his meeting with them and break the link would mean that any trust they had in him is gone. And they won't leave it at that. He'd be walking dead. He does the meeting, Hugo. You can't call MB and tell him you've lost your nerve. For God's sake!'

His chin was hard against the zip of his anorak. His arms encircled his shins. His fingers were locked together, and knuckles white, and he had begun to shake.

The hire car from the airport would have been driven by one of them into a farm gateway and torched. He wouldn't have seen the car burning. They would have picked him up and slipped him into the back of a van without windows. They might have trussed him, even hooded him, and gone to one of the little homes on the mountain. There, he would be sat on a hard chair and slapped around a bit, if they suspected anything. One would be the smooth talker and would tell the agent that confession would save his life. Or maybe he'd swear at him, put a lighted cigarette close to his eyes and tell him how bad the pain would be . . .

He heard whimpering and realised it was his. He had become fond of the agent, and reckoned Gaby Davies – for all her bluster about people making their own beds and having to lie on them – liked him too. He was one of those people who seemed to make the sun shine a little brighter, and had an infectious chuckle. He could have cancelled the business, and had not.

Hugo Woolmer was protected: he and Gaby Davies had four taciturn police watching their backs, with Heckler & Koch rifles. Their faces showed disapproval of the two young 'blow-ins' from the mainland: they reckoned that Service people from across the water were clever and had good kit but a negligible understanding of problems in the Province. The agent was without protection.

If 'they' broke him, which Hugo Woolmer believed was almost certain, they would forget about beating him and burning him with cigarettes. They would sit him at a table, give him pencil and paper and instruct him to write the names of his contacts, handler and the length of his association with the Service. Then they would extricate from him every detail on the extent of his betrayal. He'd be told that if he wrote it all down he would be driven back down the hill to pick up his hire car and drive away. That was what they would tell him, and it would be lies. Hugo Woolmer knew, of course, of the Second World War saboteurs and wireless operators who had been rounded up in the occupied territories, tortured and never broke: he didn't understand how that was possible. He had heard it said, by a Service veteran, that raw volunteers in the Organisation sometimes fought among each other for the privilege of killing an agent of the British occupation. He knew the agent's wife and daughter by sight. He could have stopped him going into the fog.

The police watched him, impassive. He wouldn't have said that Gaby Davies was pretty. From the corner of his eye, Hugo Woolmer could see her face. She was small and stocky, with short dark hair. She wore walking boots, faded jeans, a couple of T-shirts and a heavy anorak. She smoked with the police – kept pace with them. Her rucksack rested against her legs and held sandwiches, a flask of coffee, the communications equipment they'd use at the end of the day and her Glock pistol. Hugo was not armed. They

had a correct relationship but when any issue needed closure she had the last word at the discussion stage, and he would make the decision. The agent had gone forward.

Rooks shrieked in the trees and the wind sang in the branches above them. His shoulders shook and tears came.

He was watched with a hawk's intensity.

It was Dermot and Dymphna Fahy's home. Daft, the pair of them. They had been sent in their car to the town with a twenty-pound note, which would last them the morning as they pushed a trolley up the aisles of the Spar, then the pound shop. They'd have enough left, maybe, after their shopping for a glass of Guinness each in O'Brien's. The bungalow was a good place, quiet, not overlooked by neighbours, the Fahys had no record with the police so there wouldn't be surveillance. The front garden was a wilderness – there was an old pram in it, and a bicycle frame; the paintwork on the window frames was flaking and the door knocker was askew. Nothing happened at that bungalow so it was the right place for him to have been brought to. There was a dog, a collie-cross, but the Fahy woman had shut it in the shed. It had barked when they'd arrived, but was quiet now.

He was watched closely and they looked for the signs – sweat on the neck and forehead, nervous blinking . . . Malachy stood beside Brendan Murphy and the two filled the doorway into the back bedroom. There was no bed – it had gone with the Fahys' boy to a room he rented in Lurgan town. A dressing-table with a mirror, cracked on the left side, was covered with old newspapers and some plastic bags from the Spar, and there was a pile of brown envelopes, unopened. Across them a cable, plugged to a wall socket, led to a well-used electric drill – not for heavy use, but big enough to make a hole in a wall for a Rawlplug or to damage a man's kneecap. Also under the cable there was a length of towel, folded into a strip, and a coil of baling twine from a farmer's yard. The man had his back to the dressing-table but would have seen what was on it, as was intended, when they'd led him in. He was sitting on a straight-backed wooden chair and kept his knees

together – protection of sorts. He didn't make eye contact. Interesting that he hadn't complained at being bundled into the back of a van, or when he had been blindfolded at the end of the journey, or when he had stubbed his toe on a step between the collapsed gate and the front door. The curtain was drawn. He wouldn't know where he was. It was good that he didn't show fear: either he didn't feel it or he hid it well.

Brennie asked Malachy, 'Are you liking him or not liking him?'

A murmured response: 'We'd be putting a lot in his hands – maybe too much? I don't know.'

'And big money.' Brennie grimaced. He was the father figure. Brennie Murphy's reputation was different from Malachy's. He wasn't a soldier or a marksman; he was no good with a soldering iron and a circuit board. He seemed prematurely aged – his wrinkled, colourless skin and straggling hair gave the impression that he was older than the sixty-one from his birth certificate. He had judgement. From his teenage years, the younger man had listened to what Brennie Murphy said and hadn't contradicted his advice. If the man was a police or Five spy and a plant, Brennie Murphy would smell him. His nose seemed to slant towards the left side of his mouth – the result of a baton blow struck by a screw in the Maze during a protest. If Brennie reckoned he'd smelt a spy, the man wouldn't be alive in the morning. They needed this man and his contacts, but it was high risk. They hadn't seen him before; others had dealt with him, but only for cigarettes. An organisation resurrecting a war couldn't survive on cigarettes: it needed weapons. It was 'big money'. It would clear out bank accounts and strip away the limited funds that supported the dependants of the men in HMP Maghaberry. Brennie rolled a wooden toothpick between his teeth. 'He's not messed himself.'

The man gazed at the floor. His breathing was regular – he wasn't panting with panic. He hadn't demanded to know why he was there. He was sort of docile, which confused Malachy. He thought Brennie Murphy hadn't yet read the man – they knew his history, his address, his family, his circumstances. The link with the cigarette trade had run for years and the contacts were in the

Inchicore district of Dublin, across the border. They didn't know him, nor he them. What sort of Englishman would offer to facilitate, for a fee, the purchase of weapons for their organisation? He hadn't launched it, but had been propositioned by the cigarette people: he hadn't refused. Brennie Murphy wouldn't waste time looking for the answer. Malachy watched. He was the soldier, the marksman, and understood how to build a mercury tilt switch into a device, but he didn't have the nose for a spy.

'Would you stand up.'

He did.

'Would you take off your clothes.'

Brennie Murphy's voice was quiet, not aggressive, but it would have been a brave man who refused. The fingers were clumsy and the shirt buttons, the belt buckle and the shoe laces were awkward. If he was wearing a wire or his wrist watch was bugged, this was crisis time. Two at the door, two more closer to him, and one held the kit: it was the size of a cordless phone and was switched on. The shirt came off, the shoes, socks, trousers and vest. He paused, looked questioningly at Brennie Murphy. His underpants? Malachy understood. It wasn't necessary for the man to strip stark bollock naked. The detector could operate easily enough through flimsy cotton, but . . .

'Take them down.'

It was about domination. It wasn't like when he'd played Gaelic football and they were in the showers with nothing on: this man wasn't in their team. He was a stranger, and to be naked would humiliate him – the intention. The man was forty-one, they'd been told his age, and seemed in poor condition. He had a little spare flesh at his waist and his shoulders slumped. The detector was over his clothes and shoes, then his body, but the tone didn't alter. The little bleep was the only sound in the room, other than the wheeze of Brennie Murphy's breathing. It was switched off. Would intelligence people have allowed an agent to go forward without communications? They might have because they were hard, cold bastards, and Malachy knew it. He saw Brennie's head turn a little: his eyes were on the drill on the dressing-table and he nodded.

It was switched on.

It was carried round the chair and held in front of the man's stomach. Not a clean sound but searing, as if it needed fresh oil. The drill head, a blur of movement, was no more than a foot from his flesh. Malachy watched: the penis had shrivelled, the knees were closer and the hands were clasped. The eyes stared at the drill, but the man didn't flinch.

Brennie said, like it was conversation, 'If I get a bad smell about you, it goes into you. If I reckon you're a tout, it's the drill in you. At the first touch of it you'll be blathering to me the names of your handlers and where they are down the road. You'll have an hour to live, but you'll be telling me about your handlers or it comes into you again. You'll get the drill every time your tongue stops flapping. You with me?'

The man nodded.

'And if I'm liking what you say, you get to have your trousers. If I'm not liking it you get the drill and the cigarettes. . . . It stinks when skin melts from a cigarette burn. Why'll you do this?'

The man bent and reached for his clothes. 'Did I get it wrong? Seems I did. I thought you were in the market for assaults, launchers, commercial bang stuff and perhaps some mortars. If you want to go through this charade with me, forget the goodies.'

The man gazed into Brennie Murphy's face. Then he put on his vest, then his underpants, and picked up his shirt.

Brennie Murphy hissed, 'Don't get cheeky with me—'

'I'm talking of assault rifles, launchers, grenades, mortars, military explosive, and the groundwork's done.'

Malachy saw the flick of the fingers. Brennie Murphy's order was obeyed. The drill whined close to the man's ear. He kept his expression impassive. He didn't know of any stranger who had given lip to Brennie Murphy without a self-loading rifle in his hand and a section of paratroopers or Special Task Force police. The man didn't bother to button his shirt and slid into his shoes. He folded his arms across his chest. Time to talk business or to call it off.

Brennie Murphy took a step sideways, grasped the cable and

yanked it from the wall. The drill was off. 'Why would you do this for us?'

'There's a recession on where I live, and I've a family to keep. You pay me. Good enough? I need the money.'

His backside was lower, his shoulders had subsided further and he pulled his knees closer to his chest. He was still whimpering.

She was ashamed to be with him. Hugo Woolmer was superior to Gaby Davies in the Service hierarchy, and had outperformed her with a first-class honours degree at an Oxford college while she had a lower second from a provincial university. His family had connections and she was a 'token' from a sink school in the north-east. If it would have silenced him, she would have kicked him, hard, in the groin. When they were back at Toad Hall, as the local guys in Belfast called Thames House, home of the Service, she'd knife him. It was, she accepted, a unique moment for her: she had never before seen a man disintegrate in nervous collapse.

'We've killed him. He trusted us.'

She'd make certain he was dead in the water as far as his future went with the Service.

'He was paid peanuts, manipulated and compromised, and we betrayed him.'

She'd go down in a week's time, two maybe, and watch when he went through the barriers at the main entrance for the last time. His ID would be shredded.

'It should never have been allowed and we'll carry the burden of it to our graves.'

She liked the man who had driven away – without cover or back-up – into the cloud that had grounded the surveillance helicopters. He made her laugh. There was mischief in his humour and he was frank about the bullshit he peddled in his business dealings. Gaby Davies liked him – but he was an agent, a Joe. It wasn't for her or Hugo to call him off when a meeting was arranged. She'd thought him more remote the last week, vaguer in spitting out the detail of what these people wanted of him but . . . She thought, looking out of the hut and through the trees, that the

rain had eased. There might even be a hint of sunshine in the west.

'They'll torture him, he'll talk, and then they'll kill him. I'll never forgive myself.'

Her phone stayed silent. She assumed her agent's would have been left switched off in the car. He would have been taken in one of their vehicles to the meeting place. If they had called him over it was not to discuss the next consignment of cigarettes shipped out of a Spanish or North African port and brought ashore on the wild south-west coast of Ireland. Gaby Davies had gone through in her mind, many times, every contact with her man to explore the chance of a show-out. She couldn't see the danger moment when suspicion might have arisen. Of course they couldn't have called him off.

The crying was louder.

A policeman spoke, a soft voice, faintly mocking: 'Makes a habit of it, does he?'

She said, brittle, 'It's brightening in the west. That was what my mum used to say when we were kids on the beach at Blyth and it rained. It always did the week we had the caravan – brighter in the west . . . but it was the bloody east coast.'

He was a big man, overweight, and his vest bulged. He held his weapon as though it were part of him – he most likely slept with it, was fonder of it than he was of his wife. The weapon entitled him to sneer. 'Not what you'd call suited to the work.'

'We'll save the inquest for later.' It was her way of telling him, a uniformed oaf, that it was none of his effing business how Hugo Woolmer behaved. 'Could be OK here by late morning.'

'And he's not suited for the place, miss . . . Mind if I say something?'

'If it's about the weather.'

The cloud remained locked on the mountain's slopes, still dense, but she could see a little gold on the summit ridge – watery sunshine on dead bracken.

'You've not been here before, miss. It's about as bad a part of the Province as you'll find, plenty of wicked wee boys here. There's communities that have bought into what we laughingly call the

'peace process', and there's communities that haven't. They keep going at it in these parts. It's tribal and the families don't know another life. Me, going off into that mist on my own, no panic kit, no one listening and watching out for me, I'd want to be in a main battle tank, hatches down. This part of the Province, they've not given up on the war.'

'I've had that briefing, thank you.'

'It's a hard place, the hardest. Lawless now and always has been . . . You were saying, miss, that the weather's clearing. You'll see the high point – that's Shane Bearnagh's Seat, a fine vantage-point on a better day. I'm talking of more than three hundred years ago and Bearnagh was what we call a 'rapparee', a thief, smuggler and killer. Before the military got him, he bedded the wife of a British officer while they were all out hunting him. It's a nasty place, miss, and has been for centuries. Has your man strong nerves?'

'I don't know.'

'Pity you didn't find that out before he went up there.'

'Have you got a cigarette?' He gave her one. 'Thanks.' Another man passed her a flask of coffee. She detected a trace of brandy in it. The cigarette and the drink warmed her. As an officer in the Security Service she wouldn't normally discuss an operational deployment with a police constable but asked: 'How long until we worry about him?'

'I heard there was a drone they were wanting to use, but it's broken. The helicopter can't deal with a low cloud base. What would you say, Baz?'

'I'd say, Henry, that if he's for the jump they'll have started on the heavy work. By now they'll have your name, miss, and his over there,' he nodded at Hugo Woolmer, 'and they won't hang about after that. They'll assume the mountain's crawling with security and that there's vehicle blocks. They'll want to nut him, then clear off home for a wash.'

'Too right. Might have done it by now, miss.'

'You know him well enough – how would he take a rough-and-tumble with them? Round here there was once a fist fight between

two of the volunteers – the old days – about which of them should fire the bullet that killed a tout . . . How would he stand up to a beating, miss, burns and the full works? Another time, again in the old days but little's changed, they turned on the hob rings on a cooker and got the tout's trousers and pants off. When the rings were glowing, they sat him on them . . . Most don't last long. Might already be over.'

She nearly tripped over Hugo Woolmer's legs as she went outside. She threw away the barely smoked cigarette and was sick against a tree. He'd been staying in a hotel in London and had been with the cigarette people the night before. They'd needed to do the briefing early, and she'd knocked on his door. He'd unlocked it – must have come straight from the shower: a towel was knotted at his waist and she'd seen his skin. Nothing special – a few birthmarks, some straggly hair, no burns, no contusions from a club. His fingertips had been intact. The leaves at the base of the tree were saturated with her vomit.

Brennie Murphy didn't know. He should have known.

The men on the mountain looked to him for decisions on tactics and strategy, and for his guidance on targets in the mid-Ulster and Lurgan areas. He had good antennae and understood weakness in the enemy. Some had turned their back on the struggle, and the television each night carried clips of former fighters who now chuckled with the people they had tried to kill. It was as if the old colleagues of Brennie Murphy now pissed on him. He wouldn't compromise, take government grants, become a paid stooge and call himself a community officer: the armed struggle, for him, was alive. With so few engaged in – as they called it – 'keeping the fire lit', it was inevitable that the attention of the police and Five would be intense, worse than anything he had known when he was young. The attacks on what remained active of the Organisation were based on the technical excellence of the surveillance systems and also the infiltration of their cells by paid informers. Did he trust this man? Should he trust him?

The man sat on the chair. He did not quiz them, argue with

them or cringe. Men Brennie Murphy knew, who he might have believed were taking twenty, fifty, a hundred pounds a week would have come here and shown terror. The switching on of the drill would have brought a stain to their crotches, and they'd have pleaded their innocence too hard.

He and Malachy were in the hallway. They could see the man through the open door into the back bedroom. He asked, 'Do you believe him or not?'

'I don't know.'

'He's promised the shipment.'

'He's promised to bring it to a point in Europe. Then we get it home.'

'We need it.'

'The weapons bring the kids to us, not to the collaborators.'

'It's against every instinct in my body.'

'And mine.'

'But you must have the weapons.'

'Must have them, Brennie, or we're nothing.'

Brennie Murphy's nostrils flared. It wasn't strange, he told the kids, that a man of his age could harbour such hatred. More than anything in his life he dreaded abandoning the memory of the many who had died, old comrades. He prayed he would die before weakness pushed him towards compromise. The dead didn't deserve it. 'You'd have to go to test-fire – all of that,' he said. 'So's we're not skinned.'

'If I have to.'

Brennie took his arm. 'You do.'

They went back inside.

He sat on the chair, could have killed for a cigarette, but he wasn't offered one. Smoke came through from the hall where the two of them spoke in low voices.

He had realised that the room with the awful wallpaper would be easy to turn into a torture chamber. The makeover would be straightforward. He didn't doubt that in the kitchen or the main bedroom there was a roll of plastic sheeting, which would go

over the carpet and a Stanley knife would cut it. The blood, if they used the drill, would be spread low but they might use more plastic sheeting to cover the walls, pinned up near the ceiling. How did he feel? Not great. What could he do? Not much. Who'd give a damn? Not many. The two main men, the older one and the younger – the minders were 'soldiers' and of no relevance – wore no face masks. So they didn't mind if he saw their faces. He studied them so that he could remember them and, in time, go through the books of activists' photographs and identify them. It meant, even to a man far less bright and without his survival instincts, that either he had passed their tests or failed. Failure meant death.

Quick? No.

Possible to appeal to their better natures? Inappropriate.

Time to front up.

They'd stand over him and look down into his face. The younger man would likely smack him and blood would spill from his nose. Then he'd hear the drill start up. Others would be tying him to the chair and he'd hear the plastic being unwound. Before they put the gag in he'd yell for paper and a pencil. Whatever they wanted they could have. He'd name them all, starting with Matthew, the recruiter: a sly, cold bastard and he'd never known his surname.

He knew the full name of the team leader. He shouldn't have, but a mobile had rung in the man's pocket during a meal one summer evening on the Thames – their treat. It had been answered, 'Hugo Woolmer.' They could have that name. A few revolutions of the drill tip and Hugo Woolmer was theirs.

The girl was Gabrielle Davies. Another time, she'd been rooting in a purse for a credit card to pay at Starbucks and he'd seen her Service card, just a glimpse of her name. She'd noticed him looking and had flushed at her lapse. Woolmer had called her Gaby when they'd walked in Windsor Great Park. She'd bailed out of a trattoria with a train to catch in Birmingham and the waiter had called that the taxi for 'Davies' was outside. They could have her too. She was nice, pretty, a striver, different from the tossers and their women, but she'd go on the paper if the drill started up.

Would he keep his mouth shut to protect Queen and country? Dream on. If the drill started up, he'd want the paper and the pencil. He hoped that, afterwards, they'd make it quick.

The one with the bent nose spoke. He met the man's eyes, as a prisoner did in the Central Criminal Court when the jury came back, and tried to read the verdict in the foreman's posture. The sweat was cold on his neck. He'd give them all the names they wanted if the drill started up.

'We want to get on with the business, get it moving and in place. A cup of tea would go down well. Milk and sugar?'

A call was made. The handset had not been used before. Numbers and seemingly random letters were routed off the island to a second mobile on the UK mainland. The code incorporated was sufficient to move it through a consulate in central Italy to a trade mission in the Danish capital, then to its destination. Its journey ended at a villa in a Croatian town close to the German border.

Such arrangements were in place only for a man of considerable importance to the regime ruling his country: only a long-standing, trusted friend of such a man could access the transfer of the signal. It was well disguised and would confuse the computers of a hostile intelligence organisation.

Theirs was a peculiar relationship. Timofey Simonov and Nikolai Denisov lived together in a hundred-year-old house built on three floors and covered attractively with variegated ivy. It was set back a few metres from the prestigious street, Krale Jiriho, and was halfway up the hill. It commanded majestic views over the spa town. The houses on that road were the most expensive in the town, which had the most inflated property prices within the Czech Republic. They were within easy walking distance of the town centre and its promenade, with the better boutiques. It was also near to the Orthodox church of St Peter and St Paul and that day the sun shone, making brilliant reflections on its gold-plated roof. Equally convenient were the dry cleaner's, the mini-mart and the restaurants, where the menus were in Cyrillic. It was a

town of affluence, and the reputations of many who had arrived from St Petersburg, Moscow and Volgograd meant that the criminals who preyed on the wealthy had long ago realised that this town was best ignored. It was, anecdotally, the safest in the country, perhaps in the whole of central Europe. Big men, in their trade, lived securely 'under the radar', and walked securely at night on the pristine streets. Although the town was best known for its industry of health care, first publicised after a visit by Peter the Great, the most secretive residents bothered little with lymphatic drainage and hydro-colonotherapy. They ran empires producing vast revenues, and their assets were measured in hundreds of millions of American dollars or euros.

Kicking off his boots at the back entrance, shielded from public view by a high fence, Timofey Simonov crouched, grinning, to pet his dogs. He had walked his Weimaraner bitches on the wooded hillside behind the villa and now they licked his cheeks. He had been, far back, a captain in the GRU, military intelligence, with the motto 'Greatness of Motherland in Your Glorious Deeds'. A slip of paper was passed to him. The man who had brought the message was five years older; Nikolai Denisov had been promoted in his extreme youth to brigadier. Simonov had been little more than a clerk and paper-pusher in the section of the general's staff Denisov had headed. But the days when they had served the officer leading the Central Command of the Soviet forces confronting those of the North Atlantic Treaty were in the far past. The former captain now employed the former brigadier as driver, close-protection bodyguard, housekeeper and minder of secrets. The relationship was kept from public view, known only to a few.

He straightened. The message had been decoded. The smile spread. 'He's coming.'

'He has confirmed the list of items required.'

'It'll be good to see him.'

'He's your friend but . . .' He handed back the paper and began towelling the dogs. '. . . is it wise to help on a deal that's worth so little?'

'It's where they're going. I'd provide a bow and arrow if that

was what they wanted. And he's my friend, however small the trade.'

Three days had slipped past since his friend had made his first approach. He had known the man for fourteen years when he himself had been at the bottom of the heap and hadn't known where his next meal would come from. An Englishman had helped him on his way. The friend's fortunes had now slipped, but the request had come with a list, and he knew where any consignment would be unpacked. A friend was a friend for life. Other concerns: a former bureaucrat who had worked in the finance ministry auditing tax and Customs revenues, had 'blown a whistle' and was talking to Swiss investigators, about confidential accounts in Swiss banks. The official was junior but his head and memory sticks were stuffed with detail. He had 'betrayed' his country, had embarrassed the ruling élite, and was all but dead: Timofey Simonov had been awarded the contract for the killing. Other concerns: Timofey still had 'commercial interests' in the city of Yekaterinburg; a hood there had climbed too high and had burned two kiosks by the river from which dealers operated and paid small sums that ended in Timofey's accounts. As with the official, death would send a message to others who contemplated similar actions. The smile split his face. 'It will be fantastic to see my friend.'

He hugged the dogs and sent them to their baskets, then slipped on his shoes. His man, who had been the brightest star on the general's staff, would take the boots outside and wash off the mud, then make coffee.

He was told who would travel and when they would fly. The bent nose, behind the front door, gave a final warning. 'We have your face, your wife's and your kid's. We have your home. If you scam on us, we'll come for you. You can't hide from us.'

In reply, Ralph Exton stretched out his hand. The bent nose took it and a close, cold grip crushed his fist. It surprised him that a man with so little meat on him was so strong. He gave a smile from his repertoire that indicated quiet confidence and

trust. When his hand was freed, he offered it to the younger man. No response. He pocketed it and pretended not to notice the refusal. He said, as if it were a small matter, that a float for travel costs should be paid into the Guernsey account he used for cigarette dealings. Then the men who had brought him up the hill hurried him down the path, past the broken gate and across the road to the van. Some of the slope above him was clear, but the cloud was still low over the bungalow.

He was pushed, not violently but without ceremony, into the back of the van. He saw the shovel, the pickaxe and plastic bags. They would have stood over him and made him dig the pit, then pushed him aside and done it faster themselves. He had heard that they always took the shoes from a man they were about to kill – as if that mattered when the pistol was cocked beside his ear. They drove fast, swerving round the bends and potholes.

The driver braked. The door was opened and he crawled out. The damp mist seemed to cling to his cheeks and he blinked. The door behind him was slammed and the van was gone. He walked through the mud at the field's gate and fumbled for the key in his pocket. He tried many times to slot it into the lock but his hand was shaking. Eventually inside, he had the same problem with the ignition. His legs were rigid, the muscles cramped.

He drove out of the field, went into the fog and through it. He was panting and sweating. In the bungalow his confidence had been pure theatre and nerves now overwhelmed him. He went from one side of the lane to the other, past houses he barely registered. A girl swung her handlebars to avoid him and ended up sprawling. He didn't care. His heart was pounding.

He murmured, 'Fuck me. Just another day in the office. Fuck me.'

And he laughed.

'Fuck me. What a way to spend a Sunday morning.'

She was behind him. Gaby Davies jabbed her left knee into the back of Hugo Woolmer's lower thigh, propelling him down the aisle towards their allocated seats.

They went past the agent – white-faced, holding a small antique

hip flask – and she didn't acknowledge him. When they came to their row, she grabbed Hugo Woolmer's collar, swivelled him and flung him into the seat beside the window. He seemed still in shock. She eased down beside him and leaned over him to fasten his seatbelt.

She hissed: 'You won't walk off this aircraft if you embarrass me again. You'll need to be carried.'

North of the bassin Saint-Pierre, where the wind rattled the masts and riggings of pleasure yachts and launches, and above the central streets of the city of Caen, a man used a sponge to clean a minibus. The logo on the side of the fifteen-seater vehicle was 'Sword Tours'. A thin, pale man, stubble on his cheeks, dungarees clinging to him, he worked with almost passionate commitment to get the paintwork glistening. A bell chimed from the church beside the Abbaye des Dames for the late Sunday-morning celebration of Mass. Worshippers hurried past but acknowledged him – he was, indeed, after so many years, almost one of them. His hair was spiky and grey-flecked, but his eyes were keen. When the bucket was empty, he turned towards an old house in a terrace, and shouted, 'Dusty! Bucket's empty. I need more water.'

He knew what *they*'d be doing – it was always the same on a Sunday morning.

They *were the clients. Clients always followed a routine on the eve of the trip. They'd be getting the computer's weather predictions for the Channel coast of France for the coming week, or filling in the baggage labels supplied by Sword Tours. The clothing would be laid out, and they'd ponder over their rainproof gear in case the forecasters were wrong. They would all have, in a travel pouch, the itinerary Sword Tours would follow: Dunkirk, Dieppe, the key places where the para-troopers had landed, and the gliders, Sword, Juno, Gold and Omaha beaches, and Falaise, with the closing of the Gap. Most of those clients would have had a friend's recommendation – 'Can't praise him highly enough. He knows his stuff. You won't find better than Danny Curnow. He lives those places, breathes them.' That Sunday, as every Sunday,*

clients would be preparing to head for a rendezvous in the morning. It was so difficult to decide what to take.

Dusty brought the bucket. 'That the last, Danny?'

'Yes, thanks.'

'There's a sandwich in the kitchen.'

'I'll be there in a minute.'

Dusty watched him, lingered. Danny said softly, 'Problem, Dusty?'

'No.'

Dusty left him to finish. Danny Curnow understood. They had history together, almost thirty years now, from when he was Desperate. For the last sixteen they had been in an historic Normandy town. The moment that bound them was when he had walked out of Gough, a spent vessel, with his officer's shout in his ear for him to turn round, but he had kept on down Barrack Street and then had heard the footfall behind him. Dusty had followed him. They'd gone to the bus station and taken the coach together. Technically it was desertion, but they'd kept going and had finished up here. He knew that the older man was lonely when Danny was away. He had Lisette and Christine to look after him, good food and a warm bed, but he missed the company of his one-time sergeant, the man he'd shared ditches with.

Danny used the last of the water, paused to admire his work, then turned and walked down the hill, heading for his home. It was the right place for Danny Curnow to be because of his nerves and his memories.