



GEOFFREY ARCHER

EAGLE TRAP



REVENGE IS NOT A POSSIBILITY, BUT A CERTAINTY

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Also by Geoffrey Archer

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About the Author

Geoffrey Archer is the former Defence and Diplomatic Correspondent for ITN's *News at Ten*. His work as a frontline broadcaster has provided him with the deep background for his thrillers - the bestselling *Skydancer*, *Shadow Hunter*, *Eagle Trap*, *Scorpion Trail*, *Java Spider*, *Fire Hawk*, *The Lucifer Network*, *The Burma Legacy* and *Dark Angel*. A keen traveller, he now writes full time and lives with his wife and family in Surrey.

ALSO BY GEOFFREY ARCHER

Skydancer
Shadow Hunter
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EAGLE TRAP

Geoffrey Archer



**“Avoid shame, but do not seek glory - nothing so
expensive as glory.” -**

**Sydney Smith
1771-1845**

Prologue

The Trans-Caucasus Military District Early January 1992

The orders from Moscow were to make it look like a food convoy. Safer that way, the Generals thought. If the nationalists knew what the trucks were really carrying. ...

Major Alexander Kabanov watched the uniformed drivers stamp their feet to banish the cold of the early morning. It was not yet dawn, and the sky showed no sign of lightening over the hills of Armenia.

Floodlights bathed the concrete square a dull pink. On the far side, the steel doors to the underground bunkers gaped open like hungry mouths. The men wore long, grey coats and fur hats with the gold star on a red background, their breath misty in the cold air.

It was a race against time, to tidy away the nuclear warheads before the disintegration of the Soviet Union became total. Kabanov listened to the Russian service of the BBC. He'd heard the assurances the Kremlin had given the West. They'd spelled it out - don't worry, nuclear weapons are under strict central control, and will stay that way.

Kabanov knew these words to be lies. Control would be impossible to maintain in a few more weeks. Every day thousands more Red Army soldiers were swearing allegiance to some republic or other. There'd be no Red Army soon.

That's why they were spiriting the warheads out of the republics and back to Russia as fast as the big Antonovs could fly them there.

This was the third such convoy in ten days. The first two had worked like a dream. They'd reached the airfield fifty kilometres to the south without a hitch. Departure times had varied, so as not to set a pattern, but the planes always left in the early morning.

Time to start. Kabanov gave the signal. The drivers swung up into their cabs and backed the trucks up to the bunkers. Ordnance men pushed heavy trolleys out of the stores. The drab-green steel canisters tied to wooden pallets were lifted by mobile crane, two pallets to each lorry, two ordnance lorries to each convoy.

Four nuclear weapons.

The missiles to which the warheads belonged had been standard equipment in the artillery units of Soviet tank divisions. There were thousands in existence, and hundreds here in the Trans-Caucasus Military District. Standard procedure to plan to use them in a war with their neighbours.

The more Kabanov had learned, in the years since Gorbachev, of the real nature of the rest of the world, the more astonished he had become at the paranoia that had dominated his country's military thinking for so long.

For what, other than paranoia, had driven their leaders to invest so much in weapons that could turn the entire hemisphere into a wasteland?

He recognised the weapons had the power to deter or persuade. But that power increased little as the numbers grew. If anything it was the weapon's scarcity that made it almost priceless, a fact brought home to him in recent days.

The missile base was in southern Armenia, twenty kilometres from the Azerbaijani enclave of Nakhichevan.

It was another enclave, Nagorno-Karabakh, that had sparked off civil war between the two peoples. Now, with the break-up of the Soviet Union, national militias were

expanding, aiming to take over the role and the hardware of the old Red Army.

Security at the Tochka missile base had always been drum-tight. The guards were all KGB, trained to trust nobody. The blue collar tabs and epaulettes, the letters GB on their shoulders, gave the clue. *Gosudarstvennaya Bezopasnost* – State Security.

But in recent weeks discipline had crumbled. Word was out that their unit would be disbanded in a matter of months. No jobs, no homes, no money. The effect on morale had been catastrophic.

'All right! Get moving!' yelled Kabanov. He climbed through the open side hatch of the armoured vehicle.

The striped pole was raised; the heavy gates swung open. Kabanov's BTR-80 eight-wheeled APC led the way; then came the two Gaz 2-ton covered trucks and finally another BTR-80 at the rear.

Kabanov sat in the right-hand seat behind the armoured glass screen, the young driver to his left. The boy wasn't from this area – none of them was – he came from Omsk in Siberia.

They were all Russians in the security guard. The KGB had always liked it that way – all on the same side, united against the often hostile republics where they had to operate.

Yes, thought Kabanov, his men were united all right. United in the determination to seize any opportunity that might improve their prospects.

For much of the journey south along the Arak river valley the pot-holed road was straight and, at this hour, free from heavy traffic. As the grey dawn light began to illuminate the fertile flood-plain they could make out the patchwork of orchards and irrigation ditches that cut the landscape into rectangles.

The air was remarkably clear. Occasionally the young driver took his eyes from the road to glance to his right at the distant, icy peak of Mount Ararat.

When he was a small child, his grandmother had told him stories from the Bible. She'd talked of Noah and the Great Flood. He glanced again to the West. Could it have been true? Was the Ark still up there, somewhere?

'Keep your eyes on the road!' Major Kabanov snapped as the APC veered perilously close to the ditch.

'Yes, comrade Major. Sorry.'

The back of the boy's shaven neck flushed red. Nineteen? Kabanov wondered. Twenty at the most. What sort of life lay ahead after he was demobilised?

Back to his home village, he supposed, to drive a tractor. A grim future in the chaos of economic stagnation. But maybe the boy faced a better future than himself; if your expectations were low, you had less far to fall.

For Kabanov, home for the past fifteen years had been army married quarters. Small apartments with damp walls, and usually just a single bedroom for themselves and their twelve-year-old son.

Now the powers-that-be were promising a new flat in Moscow when he lost his job in three months' time. Fat chance of *that* happening! He thought of the thousands who'd been withdrawn from Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and were now living in tents.

A horse-drawn cart with soft rubber tyres passed in the opposite direction. He noted the sullen eyes of the two Armenians driving it. The local people hated the Russians, accusing them of siding with the Azeris. Eighty thousand men the CIS army had in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Not a conscript too many for the dispiriting task of containing the civil war.

Before, the army had had a proud, patriotic role – defending the motherland against the Turkish hordes just

the other side of the Arak river. In those days NATO had seemed a real threat.

The cold war had given them a sense of purpose, at least. For a moment he longed for those days to return.

What was there now to motivate them? No Motherland, no party privilege to aspire to. Nothing but their own survival.

That's why food supplies had been disappearing from the kitchens, stolen by his soldiers and sold for vodka or hashish. And, worse, Kalashnikovs and rocket grenades had vanished from the armoury, sold for dollars to Armenian militias for use against Azeris in NagornoKarabakh.

The officer glanced across at the fresh-scrubbed face of the driver. He looked innocent. But was he?

'Do you smoke hashish?' Kabanov asked sharply.

'Not me, sir,' the driver answered quickly, the back of his neck flushing again. 'But I've heard of it in the tank regiments. They pay with meat stolen from the kitchens.'

The officer nodded.

Drugs, alcohol. There'd always been an insatiable demand in the military. With the erosion of discipline the problem was getting unmanageable.

'Only last week I heard something,' the conscript continued. 'Tank driver got completely stoned. Drove his T.62 into the side of a house. Totally demolished it. Killed an old woman.'

'Tsch! There you are! Shows what can happen. And the boy?'

'They say he's in a labour camp ...'

The officer smiled. The story was apocryphal. It had been circulated deliberately amongst the conscripts as a cautionary tale. He was happy to see some had swallowed it.

'And you? You must've sold things. Everyone has.'

The boy glanced sideways in acute discomfort.

'Comrade Major, I've done nothing wrong ...'

Kabanov punched him playfully on the shoulder.

'It's all right. This isn't a court martial!'

The driver continued to frown, then broke into a sheepish grin.

'I once sold my hat to a girl ...'

Kabanov laughed.

'I hope she paid you well!'

The boy flushed scarlet and nodded.

Suddenly Kabanov flinched.

Ahead of them on the road was a grubby, pale-blue truck, halted by the verge, just where the apple orchards started. Kabanov flicked off the safety-catch of his automatic. Men were jumping down into the roadway. A party of labourers? Or something else?

'Slow down!'

The driver pumped on the footbrake.

Alarmed, Kabanov made a count of heads. At least a dozen men in overalls, just fifty metres ahead. No sign of guns.

But this was how an ambush could start. A truck-load of dynamite, 'workers' scattering for cover seconds before it detonated beside the escort vehicle at the front of the convoy.

Suddenly he relaxed again. Something had reassured him.

Two of the men had begun to urinate at the side of the road. No man could afford that luxury if he was about to kill.

Labourers, that's all they were, making a reluctant start to their day's work filling pot-holes.

The major kept his finger loosely on the trigger-guard as the convoy crawled past, the road gang hardly glancing up at the trucks.

He rose from his seat and poked his head out of the command hatch to look back at the sullenly staring

peasants. They would know nothing, the simpletons. But there were some who did.

What would partisans want with a nuclear warhead? Such a weapon was hardly suitable for the guerrilla warfare that would surge out of control here once the Red Army was withdrawn.

Yet they wanted one, a *serzhant* had told him. The same Armenian militiamen who'd bought guns and grenades from the guards at the barracks had been asking questions about the nuclear missile warheads, offering unspecified riches.

Crazy! Kabanov thought. They could never use the weapons, even if they got hold of them. The warheads were packed with safety systems to prevent unauthorised use; codes, switches, arming devices that only worked when the thing was fired on a missile – all this was known to anyone who handled the weapons, even the KGB guards.

Kabanov dropped back into his seat and closed the hatch.

The driver gave a nervous chuckle. He'd seen his officer ready the gun.

'Did you think they might try something?' he asked timidly.

'Maybe. Maybe not.'

Kabanov glanced sharply at the youth. Not so innocent as he looked? A conspiracy? With all of them? Had his men already been bought?

The officer placed his weapon across his knees, and watched the driver's face.

'Bastard partisans!' he exploded. 'You can't tell who they are. They could even be in our uniforms!'

The driver frowned, not understanding.

'I hate this place,' the conscript confided after a while. 'Armenians, Azeris, Kurds – they're all the same. They don't like Russians.'

Innocent, thought Kabanov. This lad's not a conspirator. But the others? The *serzhant* had warned him; there'd been

a lot of talk.

Would they do it? Turn on their officers? Shoot them and hand over the warheads to the partisans? But then what? There'd be no hiding place. The KGB would hunt them down like dogs.

Unless they could be spirited out of the country with their dollars.

He wrenched his head round, suddenly conscious of the eight, heavily-armed, well-trained fighting men sitting behind him in the vehicle. A ninth stood, manning the 14.5mm machine gun in the small turret.

No sign of revolt, just tension. But then there was always tension inside these APCs. Wheeled coffins, they called them.

'Comrade Major!'

The driver hit the brakes – Alarm sounded in his voice.

Ahead of them the road looked blocked. The engine note sank lower. A truck loaded with timber had broken down on their side, and a fuel tanker coming the other way had stopped to give advice.

An accident? Maybe. Maybe not.

'The stupid ...!' Kabanov cursed, pushing open the hatch above his head and cocking the automatic.

'Get that bloody truck moving!'

The APC stopped. He looked round. The convoy was tight behind them.

'Hey!' he yelled, trying to raise the attention of the truck drivers.

An icy hand clasped at his heart. The cabs were empty.

As he spun round to order his men out, he caught the flash of the first missile, fired from behind an apple tree not fifty metres away.

Mesmerised, he watched its split-second flight, the eruption of flame as its warhead bored through the armour of the BTR-80 at the rear of the convoy, the fountain of fire as the vehicle exploded.

Our missiles, he thought. Bought from our men!

Then the second missile struck, just below the turret of his own BTR.

Moscow, 15.00hrs the same day

Marshal Zhukov stood in the long, marble-panelled corridor of the Defence Ministry, snapping his fingers to hurry up the others. The left side of his broad chest was stiff with medal ribbons. Several members of the General Staff were out of Moscow for the day. He'd have to make do with those who were there.

At one end of the extensive red and gold runner covering the polished parquet floor, a cleaner was hustled out of the way by a guard. The suddenness of this meeting had taken everyone by surprise.

Inside the meeting room, they gathered round one end of the green-baize covered table, beneath a crystal chandelier.

'Comrades ...' Zhukov began, his expression thunderous, heavy eyebrows jutting ferociously. 'We face a disaster. What I have to tell you is a matter of the utmost secrecy.'

Two others at the table already knew what had happened, the Commander of Ground Forces and the head of the KGB troops. The ten others looked deeply alarmed.

'Early this morning,' Zhukov continued, 'one of our transportation convoys in the Republic of Armenia was attacked by unknown assailants.'

'Two *Tochka* nuclear warheads have been stolen!'

There was an audible intake of breath around the table. The Commander-in-Chief gestured to the KGB chief to take up the story.

'Four of the weapons were being transported - inconspicuously,' he continued flatly. 'The guard of some thirty men was led by Major Alexander Kabanov. Their armoured vehicles came under simultaneous surprise

attack with RPG-22 rockets. Only two men survived; neither is expected to live.

‘One of the weapons carriers was also hit, and the two warheads on board were badly damaged by fire. The other weapons carrier was driven off by the assailants. It has not yet been found.’

‘Assailants? What assailants?’ The question came from the Head of the Air Defence Forces.

‘Armenian irregulars, we assume. But they could have been Azeris – the attack came close to the border with Nakhichevan.’

A look of horrified incredulity spread across several faces.

‘Two nuclear weapons are missing, and we don’t know who’s got them?’ The Air Defence Chief again.

‘That is the situation,’ the Ground Force Commander confirmed. ‘But don’t forget, these weapons are safe. They cannot be used without codes which have to be released from Moscow. There are safety locks; the warhead has to be launched on a rocket to activate the trigger. Whoever has the bombs is most unlikely to have the technology to deactivate those locks.’

Marshal Zhukov unbuttoned his uniform jacket and lit a cigarette.

‘In an ideal world, what you say would be correct, comrade. But this disintegrating nation in which we find ourselves today is far from ideal,’ he growled.

‘You are all aware, I assume, of the situation at Arzamas-16? The research scientists developing the next generation of nuclear warheads have not been paid for two months. Their families will be hungry by now. If the Armenian partisans were to offer enough money ...’

‘We don’t intend to let it come to that,’ the KGB chief cut in. ‘A vigorous search is under way. The scene of the incident was detected within minutes by a helicopter patrol. The area’s been sealed.’

Zhukov's raised eyebrow was noted by the others. 'Detected within minutes'? More like hours.

They all knew that the days when the Red Army controlled Armenia were over. Since it had declared itself independent, the NVD Interior Ministry troops had been withdrawn, two Red Army divisions had sworn allegiance to the new republic, and the border with Turkey had been opened to smugglers in several places.

'Comrades!' Zhukov's gravel voice called them to attention. 'I'm sure that everything possible is being done to find these warheads. The President of Armenia has assured us his own military were not involved in the ambush. They're helping in the search. We've told him the missing truck contained missile-guidance radar sets. But ...'

He raised his finger in warning.

'There is one crucial matter we must decide at this meeting.'

All eyes turned to him.

'Should our President be told what has happened?'

His words sent a shock wave round the table. Puzzled frowns, then the Air Defence Forces Commander spoke up.

'Of course he must be told. We've sworn to support the democratic process!'

Several looked down at their hands. They had all opposed the coup to oust Gorbachev, but none had expected the collapse of the Union to follow so quickly.

'The President is at his dacha,' Zhukov intoned. 'I have to tell you that he is "nursing a headache".'

Heads shook in dismay. Some sighed. The President's drink problem was no legend.

'If I tell him that we've lost two nuclear weapons, his reaction could be ... unpredictable, to say the least. I doubt he'll keep it to himself. He might pick up the hotline to Washington! And that could be disastrous; it would destroy

the one thing that matters most to us just now - our credibility with the Americans.'

Zhukov had held a meeting in Moscow with his Pentagon counterpart just a week ago, to discuss the arrival of the Galaxies loaded with emergency food aid.

'You see, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs is obsessed by our nuclear security. The Americans are petrified of weapons getting into the wrong hands. I reassured him. I insisted everything was under tight control. Now, if they find out how quickly I've been proved wrong ... pouf ...'

He threw his hands into the air.

'All the treaties we've signed with Washington to reduce nuclear weapons could be in jeopardy - that's what he told me. If we lose control, the arms reduction process goes into the deep freeze.'

'That's an idle threat,' the KGB chief retorted. 'They need to cut arms just as much as we do.'

He rubbed two fingers together to indicate the reason - money.

'Nevertheless, it's not a threat I want to put to the test.'

Zhukov brought his fist firmly down on the table.

'We must keep this secret. Only for a matter of days, I hope. Long enough to find those blasted warheads.'

He looked round, testing the opinion of his comrades.

'Agreed, then? The President should not be told?'

A few sideways glances, then one by one they nodded.

One

Lebanon

November 1993

SO THEY WERE coming. That very night. Around a dozen of the best men he knew. For a military mission that broke every rule in the textbooks.

Peter Brodrick watched the sun setting over the city below. He stood back from the window so as not to be seen from outside. Pretty. Too damned pretty for a dump like Beirut.

'That bugger's blubbin' again, sir.' Sergeant Blight's soft Brummy accent a few inches from his ear. 'Shakin' his head and blubbin'.'

'Terrified at what they'll do to him for spilling the beans,' the Captain muttered.

The Arab strapped to a chair in the back room had told them what they wanted to know. Eventually.

Brodrick was still clutching the UHF radio from which he'd transmitted the single code word that gave the okay to proceed. Within a minute it had been heard by the helicopter flying twenty miles offshore, relayed to the carrier steaming near Cyprus, and an acknowledgement had come back.

One word was all they'd allowed him. Go or no-go. His decision. No chance to discuss the dangers, to question whether it was really worth the risk.

The politicians wanted the raid to go ahead if there was any chance of success, however slight. Brodrick still didn't know why. Waite and McCarthy had been held hostage for years in Beirut and the government had hardly raised a

finger. Why the 'big stick' this time? Why did this man matter so much?

Brodrick and Blight had flown to Beirut posing as journalists, one carrying a notebook computer, the other with cameras round his neck. Brodrick, tall and lean and with even features broken only by a small scar through his left eyebrow, was commander of the Special Boat Squadron counter-terrorist unit.

Hardy, the Embassy security man, had given them guns. He'd also told them as much as he knew.

The Brit who'd been kidnapped had arrived unannounced five weeks ago from London. Some big wheel in the financial world. Personal friend of the PM. There was a bit of a mystery as to why he'd gone to Beirut. 'Negotiating contracts for rebuilding the war-ravaged city' - was what the spokesman for Celadec, his finance company, had said. Strange that he hadn't let the British Embassy know he was coming. Still, everyone said, that's the way Richard Bicknell operated. In secret.

Bicknell had wide contacts in the Arab world. A deal he'd done with Gaddafi the previous year, to free a Briton held in Benghazi on corruption charges, had turned him into something of a national hero.

That hadn't helped him in Beirut, however. He'd got himself kidnapped by a Shi-ite gang, - 'men who did the dirty business for the fundamentalists' was how Hardy had described them. Extortionists. Drug merchants. The group, called *Mustadhafin*, had delivered a photograph of Bicknell to the British Embassy with a demand for a million pounds in ransom. Just when everybody thought the days of kidnapping foreigners were over.

'Are we on?'

Hardy emerged from the back room, sub-machine-gun in hand. In his late forties, he looked more like a PE instructor

than the ex-soldier he was. His normally ruddy face was drawn and pale.

Brodrick nodded.

'Affirmative. When's the transport due?' he asked.

'In a couple of hours. Hope to God they get here. They're Druze. Usually reliable. But if they get wind of what we're up to ...'

'You'll have to make sure they don't ...'

Hardy shrugged. It wasn't that simple. People who came in from outside, people like Brodrick, never understood just how crazy this place was. Nobody could understand until they'd lived with it for a while.

'You gonna take another look at the house once it's dark?'

'Too bloody right! I want every wrinkle out of this plan before my men arrive.'

Brodrick pictured them, huddled, waiting to go. He could almost smell the close air of the submarine – diesel, sweat, fried onions from the galley. Billy Randal was in charge. He'd been in the batch Brodrick had instructed on the commando course at Lymptone three years earlier. He had nearly broken. Brodrick remembered standing over him as he lay on the moors, weeping with exhaustion. But he'd made it. He was Lieutenant Randal now.

Randal panicked. For a second, which felt like an age, his life was on fast-forward, out of control.

His breathing bottles had snagged against the rim of the hatch. That one moment had been enough.

They trained not to feel claustrophobia underwater in total darkness. But the fear was still there. They all felt it.

There was another fear, on this mission. The fear of not coming back.

Free now, Randal propelled himself to the surface, ten metres above the casing. He broke through and rocked in the light swell. A pitch black night, no moon, no stars.

In one hand he held a limp flotation-bag attached to a line trailing down through the water to the submarine. He jerked at the toggle on the air bottle and the bag hissed full.

Two tugs on the line told the others they could come up. Within minutes they were sixteen on the surface, guided by the line. Four sections of four marines. A sergeant's soft voice called the roll.

Gas bottles roared as the Gemini dinghies inflated drum-tight. Two by two the men hauled themselves into the boats, one from each side.

They checked their kit by feel. No torches were allowed; the beams could alert a militiaman on the shore.

Lieutenant Randal unsealed the watertight pouch protecting the thermal imager. His finger found the switch, the lithium battery for the electronics, the compressed air bottle to cool the infra-red.

He pressed the eyepiece to his face, the green image ending his blindness. Switched to wide-angle, his men showed clearly around him. He counted their heads, checked the look of the Geminis and the outboards.

'We're looking good,' he told them, just loud enough to be heard above the wind and the lapping of the waves against tight neoprene.

Then he switched to telephoto and searched the shoreline. The built-in compass told him the distant blur of light to the northeast would be Beirut. Swinging right, the contrast between warm sea and cool land marked the coastline.

The Gemini rolled unevenly and balancing the imager was hard. They were about a mile from the shore. They'd need to get closer before he could see the heat beacon marking the LZ - the landing zone - that Brodrick had set up.

'Check your weapons. We're going in.'

Four silenced outboards purred into life. Each helmsman wore night-vision goggles. The Geminis fell into line astern, the lieutenant's in the lead. He followed a compass bearing for the shore, allowing for the wind data the submarine commander had given him.

Luck was what they needed on this mission. Too much had been left to chance. Captain Brodrick had planned it, and he was one of the best. But there'd been no time. They were having to depend on local help, but was it reliable? These were bloody Arabs they were dealing with.

They lay flat in the boats, the helmsmen the only ones with their heads up. Randal felt his way to the bows and rested the imager on the rubber prow. He could see hotspots moving, a short way back from the shore. Vehicles on the coast road. At two in the morning? Lebanese army or Syrians most likely. One of many dangers.

Where was that damned beacon? He looked for landmarks. There were precious few on a flat coastal strip planted with citrus trees.

He'd memorised every inch of the map, every detail of the photographs taken earlier through the submarine periscope. Now he searched up and down the coast for anything he recognised.

There was a shape, difficult to make out, colder than the surrounding trees. A building, its stone shell a lighter shade than the surrounding vegetation on the thermal-imager.

He remembered two buildings from the map. One was a ruined, abandoned hotel a kilometre north of the LZ, the other a house, half a kilometre south. Which was it? Either way they were off position.

It looked a big building. He chose the hotel. Must've overcompensated for the wind.

'Give it another twenty degrees. We're too far north,' he breathed to the corporal on the outboard, then checked to see the other boats were following.

Where was that damned beacon?

Sixty-five miles west of the Lebanese coast, the aircraft carrier HMS *Eagle* was operating under electronic silence. Radars were off, radios listening but not transmitting. No clue was being given as to what the ship was about to do.

The deck boomed dully as the aft lift locked in the up position, delivering the last of the five Sea Harriers from the hangar.

Four of the fighters, known to their pilots by the acronym SHAR, each had a fat, laser-guided, thousand-pound bomb under the belly and two Sidewinders on the wing stations. The fifth carried three slim pods, holding the infra-red navigation system, a laser target marker, and jammers.

In Briefing Room 1 on Two Deck the flight crews fell silent as the lieutenant from Flight Ops held out his watch.

‘In ten, time will be zero-two-thirty.’

He paused, then counted down.

‘Five, four, three, two, one. Mark.’

Watches synchronised, the briefing began.

Cloud base three thousand feet, visibility good. Ideal conditions to escape from SAMs – surface-to-air missiles – if there were any.

‘Two Sea King Whiskies taking off at zero-three-fifteen, then the first two SHARS at three-thirty.’

The Whiskies were helicopters with early-warning radar. They’d need a start on the Harriers to take up position ten miles from the coast, ready to yell a warning if Syrian MiG-29s got airborne.

‘Target’s a large house on the southern edge of Beirut. Enemy HQ. It’s set back from other buildings by a walled garden. There’s some recce photos to look at afterwards.’

Enemy. They’d never been in action, none of them. They’d used the word in exercises, called out their ‘kills’, but it had just been a game. Now it was for real.

None of the pilots was over twenty-five except for the CO, and he was only thirty.

‘Just remember why we’re doing this. The gang you’re to hit are criminals. They’ve kidnapped a Brit. Mr Bicknell, financier and philanthropist ...’

The description slipped uncomfortably from his tongue, like an unfamiliar script.

‘The gang’s not political or religious. They’re not Islamic fanatics living under the moral code of the Koran. They live on the profits of other people’s misery. Drugs is their big thing. Heroin, shipped to England. Remember, it could be your kid brother or sister that gets hooked on it back home.

‘Again, nothing political about the kidnap. No demands for the release of Arab prisoners in Israel, or wherever. Just money. A million pounds. Mr Bicknell went to Beirut to help them rebuild their city. Instead of accepting that help, they took him prisoner. Our government’s decided it won’t tolerate that sort of behaviour. It didn’t tolerate it in the Falklands, nor in Kuwait. So these guys are to be taught a lesson they’ll not forget in a hurry.’

The pilots looked uncomfortable. Enough of the Agincourt stuff.

‘Okay, gentlemen. Lecture’s over. Onto the practical details. As you know, there’s a bunch of Royal Marines going ashore. They know where Mr Bicknell’s being held and they’re going to rescue him ...’

The lieutenant held up crossed fingers.

‘Your job’s to take out the gang’s HQ. You approach from the south. You’re all on night-goggles so stick at two hundred feet. Bug your radar altimeters to squawk at that height. No accidents please. The SHAR with the designator is “Catseyes”. The bombers are “Polecats” and “Cougars”.

‘Polecats make the first run. Cougars go next, but only if there’s no resistance. HMG doesn’t want any of you splattered all over Beirut.’

Too right! If this went wrong, there'd be questions in the House. Politics. That's what it was all about, and they all knew it.

The marines killed the outboards two hundred metres from the shore. They'd paddle the rest of the way, silently. They'd found the heat beacon.

The beach had been well chosen. It had a small, wooden jetty projecting a few feet from the shore, which a citrus farmer had built so that he could ferry his crop to Beirut and avoid the threat of gunmen on the road.

Randal cocked his Heckler and Koch MP5, and used the thermo-optic sight to search for the warmth generated by a human body. Sergeant Blight was due to meet them here, with transport.

Suddenly Randal spotted a man rise from the ground and move through the orchard towards them. Two brief flashes from an infra-red torch, then two long ones. It was Blight.

'Welcome to suicide valley, sir,' the Midlander growled. 'A soddin' nuthouse, this is!'

'Got transport?' Randal cut in. He could do without Blight's comments.

'Two pick-ups with hoops and covers over the back. And two shit-scared drivers with only six words of English between them.'

'Where's Captain Brodrick?'

'At the RV. It's an empty house just a hundred metres from the target. Interpreter's with 'im. Security man from the embassy. And the prisoner.'

'What prisoner?'

'An Arab who's told us where Mr Bicknell's being held.'

'Volunteered the information, did he?'

'After I hit 'im, sir.'

'How long from here to there?'

'Ten, fifteen minutes if we're lucky. Maybe never, if we hit a road block.'

'I saw stuff on the road, through my scope. Heading north?' Randal queried.

'Syrians. Army, the driver said. They seem to control things around here.'

'What's the odds on running into some of them?'

'Not good, sir. There's stuff in the back of the pick-ups to hide under.'

Randal shuddered. The thought of being buried under sacks in the back of a truck while 'ragheads' emptied their automatic weapons into them did not appeal.

'Okay. Let's get at it. Those boats hidden yet?'

'Sir!' came a voice from the darkness.

'Right. Blue and green sections secure the beach. Red and black, dump the immersion suits, check your weapons and report to S'arnt Blight.'

Randal lifted the cover on his luminous watch. Two thirty-five am. Just over an hour to go before their attempt to free Bicknell. Madness.

On the southern edge of Beirut the night was quiet. Nowadays the Syrian army had a tight grip on the city. The darkness that for years past had been punctuated by the flash and crack of gunfire, was silent.

Abdul Habib had slept little for the past three nights. He dozed fitfully, part of his mind alert, listening for the shout that might mean news.

The large, flat-roofed house he used as headquarters for his *Mustadhafin* militia was never at rest. His men came and went at all hours. Extortion and the black-market operated twenty-four hours a day.

For Habib the past three days had been a nightmare. Ahmed Bizri, his close friend and loyal chief of staff, had disappeared. Kidnapped. Tit for tat for the Englishman he himself had seized.

For the first time for a long time he was afraid. He sensed a threat to his entire 'business' - all because of Mr Richard

Bicknell.

The English cheat had walked into his hands five weeks ago. The gall of the man! Claimed he'd come to renegotiate terms. No chance! A deal was a deal.

The decision to make Bicknell his 'guest' had made sense at the time. A quick capture, a fair ransom demand, and a quick release. That was the aim. He had no political agenda like Hezbollah. No point in that – the fundamentalists had got *nothing* for their years of trouble.

For two weeks there'd been no response to the photo and the ransom demand he'd sent to the Embassy. It was as if Bicknell hadn't existed. Then word of the kidnap had leaked in the London newspapers, triggering an explosion of outrage from the British government.

London had applied diplomatic pressure on Damascus, and the Syrians had tightened surveillance of any Lebanese group that could be behind the kidnap.

Habib had covered his tracks well, but knew he was being watched.

Suddenly, three days ago, the British had taken the bait. A coded message in a newspaper had given him a name to ring at the embassy. A negotiator was coming from London.

He'd sent Ahmed Bizri to meet the man. Had to – there was no one else he could trust. But he'd been outwitted. The British had seized Bizri.

His anger had cannoned through the corridors of his headquarters. Fury at the British, fury at himself for having let Bizri go alone to meet the negotiator. Ahmed was his right hand, the man whose advice he invariably heeded. Without him, he felt paralysed.

For two days he'd sat watching for news, planning a bloody revenge against those who'd outwitted him. His younger brother, Farouk, was the only one who could still his temper.

Habib treated Farouk more as a son than a brother. Farouk had been just eight, and Habib twenty, when they

fled the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon. They left the dead bodies of their parents in the ruins of their village, and since then Habib had been father and mother to the boy. Now Farouk was just twenty.

Whoever held Ahmed Bizri would want to exchange him for Bicknell, Farouk told him. What else?

‘Stay calm and be patient, my brother.’

It was unsettling to have a boy tell you what to do. But Habib took it. And there was no one else in his organisation who dared speak his mind.

But now three days had passed and there had been no word.

They’d moved their own prisoner. Every day meant another hideout for Bicknell. But Ahmed would know the places they’d chosen. Would he talk? Would he tell the men from England where to look?

Maybe the British had given Ahmed to the Syrians. Habib shuddered at the thought. He knew what *they’d* do to a man who smelled of rose-water.

If Bizri confessed, the Syrians would destroy *Mustadhafin*. They’d have to. Just to preserve the fiction that they were fighters against terrorism.

Habib lay on a rough, wooden bed in the corner of his office. He had not been home to his wife and three small children for a week. He wore only a tee-shirt and underpants, and stank of sweat.

Suddenly he sat up. It was if a gust of wind had blown the clouds from his mind. Heart pounding, he swung his feet to the floor.

He smashed a fist into his thigh. Exchange of prisoners? There’d be no exchange! Not now! Not after three days!

He cursed himself. How foolish to have listened to a boy!

Exchanging prisoners meant ‘dealing with terrorists’; the British government had sworn never to do that. Look at the Falklands. Kuwait. What had Britain done when challenged? Resorted to the gun.