

It was a big bomb, a mixture of fertiliser, diesel oil and aluminium powder with industrial detonators and a mobile phone trigger. It had been three days in the making and now took up most of the back of the white Transit van. The explosives had been packed into aluminium beer kegs, each with double detonators. They had been stacked into the van, two dozen in all. Hundreds of six-inch nails had been duct-taped around the kegs to add to the lethal shrapnel. The wires from the detonators led to a central trigger unit which was connected to a Nokia mobile phone. It was a big bomb and a deadly one, designed to destroy its target and kill or maim anyone inside.

The bomb had been carefully constructed by a fifty-year-old man who had driven up from Limerick. The bombmaker had been making explosive devices for the best part of three decades and had been taught by experts. He had been involved in the London Docklands bombing in February 1996 that had put an end to a seventeen-month ceasefire, and had helped build the bomb that had devastated Manchester city centre just four months later. When the IRA had lain down its arms in 2005, he had joined the Continuity IRA but within a year had switched to the Real IRA, whose Republican views were more in line with his own.

Once he had finished putting the bomb together he had driven back to Limerick, and if all went to plan he would be sitting in front of the television with his wife and three daughters when it exploded.

The man who going to drive the van to its target was a sixty-year-old farmer from Warrenpoint, on the northern shore of Carlingford Lough. Willie Ryan was a committed Republican, like his father and his grandfather before him. He had left the Provisionals long before the peace process had begun because he was dissatisfied with the way things were going, and he had immediately joined the Real IRA.

The van had been stolen from Galway and driven across to the border to Ryan's farm. The plates hadn't been changed. There was no need – the next meeting between the Garda Síochána and the Police Service of Northern Ireland to discuss stolen vehicles wasn't scheduled for another two weeks.

Before he had driven back to Limerick, the bombmaker had explained to the four men in the cell how to detonate the bomb. It wasn't rocket science. The phone had to remain switched off until the van was in place. Then, and only then, was the phone to be switched on. All it took was a call to the number and the moment that the call went through to voicemail the detonators would explode.

'Are you all right, then, Willie?' asked Seamus Maguire, the leader of the cell, and at twenty-six the youngest. He was dark haired and fair skinned, wearing a Trinity College sweatshirt and cargo pants.

Ryan nodded as he pulled on a pair of black leather driving gloves. 'I'm fine,' he said.

Maguire put a hand on the older man's shoulder. 'I'm not going to teach my grandmother to suck eggs, but stay below the speed limit. If anyone stops you, stay calm and we'll take care of it.' He nodded at the two other men, Gerry O'Leary and Ray Power. They were hard men in their thirties, and they were both checking their weapons, brand-new Glocks. 'Gerry and Ray will be behind you all the way. You're not going to be stopped but if you are you sit tight and let them handle it. No playing the hero, OK?'

Ryan smiled without warmth. 'Like I said, I'm fine.' He finished putting on the gloves and cracked his knuckles. 'Fine and dandy.'

Maguire checked his watch. It was time. 'Right, guys, let's do it,' he said. It would take thirty minutes to drive to Old Park police station in North Belfast, by which time it would be getting dark. The plan was for Ryan to get into the car with O'Leary and Power and drive away while Maguire stayed behind to detonate the bomb.

'Rock and roll!' said Power, punching the air.

They all jerked as they heard a vehicle drive up outside. 'Are you expecting anyone, Willie?' Maguire asked.

Ryan shook his head. 'Could be a friend of the wife's.'

'Gerry, have a look-see,' said Maguire.

O'Leary reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a gun. He walked on tiptoe to the barn door.

Maguire gestured at Power and he also pulled a gun out from under his jacket.

O'Leary eased the door open and slipped out. Power and Maguire crept over to the door. Time crawled by but they heard nothing. No shouts, no gunshots, no footsteps. Just the cawing of crows in the distance and the sound of a tractor in a far-off field.

'Gerry, are you OK there?' shouted Maguire.

There was no answer. Ryan came up behind Maguire. 'If it was the cops, they'd have blown the doors off by now,' muttered Power.

'Gerry?' shouted Maguire. 'You OK?'

O'Leary appeared at the door, scowling.

'What's happening?' asked Maguire. 'What is it?'

‘Father bloody Christmas,’ said a voice, and the door was kicked in by a man in a ski mask and a knee-length black leather coat holding a sawn-off shotgun. A second masked man burst into the barn, holding a Glock. The man with the shotgun kept the twin barrels pointing squarely at Power’s chest. A third masked man wearing a brown leather bomber jacket pushed O’Leary into the barn and then pointed his handgun at Maguire.

‘Drop your gun, sunshine. However this plays out you’ll be dead if you don’t,’ said Leather Coat.

Power looked over at Maguire, screwed up his face as if he was in pain, and threw his gun down to the floor. The masked man with the Glock walked over, picked it up and stuffed it into his belt in the small of his back.

Leather Coat reached into a pocket and pulled out a cloth bundle. He tossed it to the ground in front of Maguire. ‘There’s four hoods there, put them on and then stand with your hands behind you.’

‘Who are you?’ asked Maguire.

‘I’m the guy who’s telling you what to do, and if you don’t do exactly as I say I’ll shoot you in the legs and then put the hood on you myself. Now do as you’re fucking well told.’

Maguire bent down and picked up the hoods. Her handed them to Ryan, Power and O’Leary and one by one they hesitantly pulled them down over their heads and then stood with their hands behind their backs.

The two men with Leather Coat walked behind the hooded men and used plastic tags to bind their wrists.

‘Now listen to me and listen good,’ said Leather Coat. ‘We’re going to walk you outside and put you in the back of a van. If you try to run I’ll shoot you in the leg and put you in the van. If you shout or even say anything I’ll shoot you in the leg and put you in the van. So however this pans out, you’re all going in the van. And if I do have to shoot you, we won’t be swinging by Casualty.’

The four hooded men were herded outside and one by one pushed into the van. They lay on their backs as the rear doors slammed and the van drove off. An hour later they reached their destination and the rear doors were opened.

‘Right, out,’ shouted Leather Coat. The two men in ski masks bundled the four hooded men out and pulled off their hoods. They were standing in an empty metal-sided factory unit, the oil-stained concrete floor suggesting that it had once been home to heavy machinery.

Leather Coat held up a small stainless-steel box the size of a packet of cigarettes. There were three aerials of varying lengths sticking out of the top and a small red light glowed on the side.

‘Anyone know what this is?’ Leather Coat asked.

‘It’s a cellular phone jammer,’ said Maguire.

‘Well done you,’ said Leather Coat. ‘You’re not just a pretty face. Just so you know, this has been on for the last thirty minutes and so it’s been blocking all mobile phone transmissions. If any of you are hoping that you’re being tracked through the GPS in your phones, you can think again.’

‘No one’s tracking us and anyway our phones have been off all day,’ said Maguire. ‘They have to be off while we’re around the bomb.’

‘The cops have phones that transmit sound and position even when they’re powered off,’ said Leather Coat.

‘What are you talking about?’ asked Maguire. ‘Who are you?’

‘I’m the man asking the questions here, that’s who I am.’

‘A name would be nice.’

‘Yeah, well, a night in bed with Angelina Jolie would be nice, but that ain’t gonna happen. You’re Maguire, right? The so-called brains of this outfit?’

Maguire nodded. ‘What the hell’s going on? Who are you? Are you cops?’

The man chuckled. ‘You think we’re fucking cops? If we were fucking cops we’d be in here with Hecklers and bullet-proof vests and a helicopter overhead.’ He gestured with his gun. ‘Down on your knees. All of you.’

The men did as they were told.

The two men in ski masks went through the pockets of the men and placed their wallets and mobile phones on the ground in front of them.

Leather Coat placed his phone jammer on the ground, and then straightened up.

‘Here’s the thing,’ he said. ‘One of you is a fucking traitor. One of you is a rat. The bloody SAS have got the police station staked out and I’m pretty sure that as we speak the cops are on the way to Willie’s farm to liberate the bomb.’ He grinned. ‘At which point they’re in for a hell of a surprise because we’ve swapped the mobile phone trigger for a timer.’ He looked at his watch, a chunky Casio. ‘So in about twelve minutes they’ll all be blown to pieces.’

‘What’s this about?’ said Maguire. ‘We were on a mission.’

‘Your mission was blown,’ said Leather Coat. ‘And one of you four blew it.’

Maguire shook his head. ‘That’s not possible,’ he said.

Leather Coat pulled a Samsung mobile phone from his back pocket and held it up. ‘We took this from a Special Branch officer in Belfast this morning. He was receiving text messages about a large Anfo bomb being prepared by a Real IRA cell.’

‘But no one knows what we are doing,’ said Maguire. ‘Just the four of us and the Operations Director. The OD is the only member of the Army Council who has details of the operation.’

‘I’m here on the OD’s authority,’ said Leather Coat. ‘He wants the rat dealt with.’

‘I know these men, I’ve known them for years.’

‘Yeah? Well, maybe you don’t know them well enough.’

‘We’re not rats,’ said Ryan. ‘And fuck you for saying we are. I was just about to drive a one-ton bomb into Belfast, so I don’t need anyone telling me that I’m a rat.’

‘We’ll soon find out,’ said Leather Coat. He bent down and switched off the jammer. He waved his gun at his two companions. ‘Switch on their phones,’ he said. ‘Be quick about it.’

The two men checked the mobile phones, then moved to stand behind Leather Coat.

‘Don’t worry, the phones won’t be on long enough for the cops to get a trace,’ said Leather Coat, taking a phone from his pocket. He looked at the screen. ‘Just have to

wait until we get a signal.’ He grinned. ‘There we are, four bars. Good old Orange.’ He looked over at the four men. ‘Anyone want to confess, before I call the number that we got from the Special Branch cop?’ The four men said nothing. Leather Coat grinned. ‘Let’s go for it, then,’ he said. He pressed the green button and watched as the pre-programmed number flashed across the screen.

There was a silence lasting several seconds and then the phone in front of O’Leary burst into life. The James Bond theme echoed around the warehouse.

‘There you go,’ said Leather Coat. ‘How easy was that?’

‘O’Leary, you bastard!’ screamed Maguire.

‘He’s working for the cops?’ shouted Ryan. ‘How the hell did that happen?’

Leather Coat walked over to the ringing phone and stamped on it. It shattered into a dozen pieces. Then he walked behind O’Leary and kicked him in the middle of the back. O’Leary fell forward with a grunt and lay face down, gasping for breath. ‘If it was up to me we’d have a long chat with you, you rat bastard, but the OD wants you dead,’ said Leather Coat.

Two shots rang out in quick succession and Leather Coat staggered back as blood spurted from two chest wounds. His gun fell to the ground and he stared at the man who’d shot him, his forehead creased into a surprised frown.

It was the man in the bomber jacket who’d fired the shots. The man standing next to him started to scream as he swung his Glock around but the shooter fired again, two shots that caught him high in the chest, just above the heart. The man fell back, his mouth working soundlessly, and he slammed into the ground.



The shooter slid his gun back into its holster and stood looking down at O'Leary. 'See what you've done?' he shouted. 'See what your stupidity has gone and done?' He walked over to the second man that he'd shot and pulled out a set of keys from his pocket.

O'Leary twisted around, trying to look up at the shooter. 'Who are you?' he asked.

'I'm the man who just saved your life.'

'Are you a cop?'

'Are you?'

O'Leary nodded. 'Special Branch. Long-term penetration. I've been undercover for more than two years.'

'Yeah, and in all that time did no one tell you about sending text messages to your handler?'

'That's the way he wanted it.'

'Then he's an idiot. You make calls and you use payphones or throwaway mobiles. You don't send texts because text messages can come back to bite you in the arse.'

'OK, I get it,' said O'Leary. 'Now will you untie me?'

The shooter bent down and picked up Ryan's mobile phone. 'Help's on the way.'

'You can't leave me here like this,' said O'Leary.

'It's your bed, you lie in it,' said the shooter.

'Who the hell are you?'

The man walked away without answering. He ripped off his ski mask as he left the warehouse and tossed it to the side. He tapped out a number on the mobile he'd taken from Ryan, putting it to his ear as it rang out.

'Yeah, it's me. Spider,' he said. 'It's all gone tits up. You need to get a team to this location now. You can track the GPS.'

'What went wrong?' asked Charlotte Button, Spider Shepherd's MI5 handler.

'Special Branch had an undercover guy on the team, He's here. They were going to kill him. Why the hell does the right hand not know what the left's doing?'

'I'll find out,' said Button. 'Are you OK?'

'No, I'm not OK,' said Shepherd. 'I've just killed two men. And you'd better tell the cops on the way to the farm that the van's on a timer, set to go off in about six minutes.'

'I'm on it,' said Button. 'We've got your location, we're on our way.'

'I won't be here,' said Shepherd. He tossed the phone away and jogged over to the van.