

Assault

K2
Book 2

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Glossary of abbreviations

P-26/P-27 - Swiss secret sleeper armies

UNA - Swiss Military Intelligence

MI6 - British Intelligence, aka, SIS - Secret Intelligence Service, for overseas operations (non-domestic), aka, 'Circus'.

MI5 - British Intelligence (domestic)

CIA - Central Intelligence Agency, USA, overseas intelligence service

SAS - Special Air Service, British Special Forces (similar to US Green Berets/Delta Force)

SBS - Special Boat Squadron, British, similar to US Navy Seals

DOD - Department of Defense - USA

MOD - Ministry of Defence - UK

NSA - National Security Agency, USA, aka 'No such agency'.

SOE - Special Operations Executive, British WWII covert operations
OSS - USA, like SOE, WWII, overseas

DGSE - French Secret Service/counter terrorism - domestic and foreign

IRA - Irish Republican Army, terrorist movement

ETA - Spanish/Basque separatist/terrorist movement

Red Brigade - Italian communist/terrorist/crime gang

KGB - Soviet Intelligence, prior to 1990s.

NAAFI - Navy Army Air Force Institute - shops on British military bases.

SIB - British Military Police

BKA - Federal German Police, similar to FBI

SVR - Russian Intelligence, formerly KGB

Special Branch - British Police, anti-terrorism/organized crime

Wehrmacht - general term, German armed services WWII

COBRA - Cabinet Office Briefing Room 'A', used by British Prime Minister for meetings with security staff.

FARC - Colombian guerrillas/communist

British military slang

Oppo - opposite number/close working buddy

Pongo - soldier - derisive

Ponce/poncey - upper class/educated/effeminate - derisive

Regiment - he was 'Regiment' - he was SAS

Rock Apes - RAF Regiment - defensive unit of airfields

Rupert - officer/upper-class - derisive

Beast - punish soldier

Stripy - Air Force Officer, derisive term for ranking stripes

Billets - accommodation/food

Civvy - civilian

Badged - qualified entry to SAS, receipt of cap badge

Best bib and tucker - best suit/outfit/military dinner suit

QT - on the QT, on the quiet

Stag - on guard duty

England, 2007. The hunt

The K2 guard waited, stood frozen to the spot, his comrades visible from the corner of his eye. He took a measured breath. Adjusting his pistol grip, and breathing out in a controlled fashion, he lined up the sights of his pistol.

Movement.

He knew that many others had tried to kill this quarry; this slippery, illusive quarry that showed no fear, nor respect, of K2. This quarry did not know what it meant to *get the chair*.

More movement.

He held his breath, and quickly fired off six rounds in quick succession, his comrades jumping up and running forwards. In an instant he had his trowel out, digging away the light brown soil, frantically searching for the quarry that had eluded him five times already today.

He dug. With a fierce, angered determination, he dug. He found nothing, just a small tunnel. His comrades pushed him over, laughing.

‘Twenty English pounds!’ they shouted.

He stood, dejected, handing over the cash. Two hours of hunting Beesely’s lawn moles had produced no results. He had a new appreciation for Johnno’s dilemma.

A very British wedding

1

A large wall poster advocated the merits of cleaning your teeth regularly, a picture of a beautiful Caribbean girl with a smile that could light up a room. It now fluttered slightly in the draft caused by a ceiling fan with worn bearings. Wearing colourful Hawaiian shirts, Beesely and Johnno sat opposite each other on low cushioned chairs as they waited.

‘Why do doctor’s surgeries always have year old magazines?’ Beesely complained. ‘Is it some unwritten rule?’ He flicked through Caribbean News, Time Magazine and others, a strong American influence on the available selection. A tatty and worn Playboy 1982 was an interesting find in the pile.

‘You do realise ... that I *really, really* hate doctors?’ Johnno quietly, but firmly, mentioned for the third time, picking at a scab on his knee.

‘How about nurses?’ Beesely asked without looking up, sitting back and opening the well-worn Playboy. He cocked an eyebrow at playmates with bushy pubic hair, the ‘fir bikini’ of that era.

Johnno swung his head around to the nurse sat at her station, catching her watching them. ‘They’re OK.’

‘Quiet backwater, low paid jobs ... she may desire a rich western sugar daddy,’ Beesely suggested as he turned the pages. ‘Why don’t you go flirt, it will take your mind off the smell of antiseptic.’

Johnno stood without a second thought and stepped across to the receptionist. Lifting his leg, Beesely studied his purple toe, cursing to himself. Then crying caught his attention, a young British woman being consoled by her parents.

‘Everything is ruined!’ the girl sobbed, her head nestled into her mother’s shoulder.

The family wore tourist clothes, displaying severe pink sunburn on their shoulders and faces; ‘lobsters’ as the locals called them. The girl appeared to Beesely to be in her early twenties, her parents greying and in their fifties. Beesely listened in. The wedding had been planned for tomorrow, but the groom had injured himself on a ... jet ski ... nothing serious. Ah, no insurance, Beesely noted; at least no medical insurance that would payout for a jet-ski accident. And the hotel had lost their wedding booking ... or something.

Placing down the Playboy, he stood and stepped towards them; the toe would have to wait. ‘Excuse me, but I could not help overhearing about your mishap. I own several hotels on the island, and have a seat on the board of the Bahamas Tourist ... Board.’ That did not sound as good out-loud as it had done in his head.

The father spoke first, the very man prideful. ‘Our damn hotel screwed up our wedding booking,’ he said through gritted teeth, hand gesturing as if he was enthusiastically orchestrating a band. ‘Now our boy has injured himself, and this bunch of crooks won’t do anything without insurance. Our insurer says they don’t cover jet-ski accidents.’

Beesely nodded, offering a sympathetic expression. ‘Yes, that is normal for any kind of dangerous sports, I am afraid. Which ... hotel are you staying you at?’

‘The Wyndham,’ the mother answered, now regarding Beesely suspiciously.

‘And how many of you are there, might I enquire?’

‘Twelve in total,’ the father answered with a questioning look. ‘We’ve been planning this for two years.’

Beesely took out his phone and straightened. ‘Otto, please.’ He waited. ‘Otto? I want the honeymoon suite in The Paradise, Coral Towers, for the next week, plus –’

‘We can’t afford that!’ the father protested.

Beesely raised a hand and cut the man off. ‘Plus executive rooms for another ten people. I want two stretch limos and a

yacht for a wedding, the largest we can find. Have an extra car brought to the doctor's surgery straight away. Thanks.' He lowered the phone.

'We can't afford that –' the father began again.

'It will cost you nothing, it will all be taken care of,' Beesely quietly insisted.

A doctor appeared from a side room; white coat, wide collared shirt straight from the 1970s, dark skin and a potbelly.

'Is that your doctor?' Beesely softly enquired, tipping his head towards the man. They confirmed it was. 'Doctor! If you please.'

The man glanced at the family, whom he had just rowed with, before reluctantly walking up. 'Yes?' he curtly asked, looking Beesely over.

Beesely produced a wad of high denomination dollar travellers cheques from his trouser pocket. 'This is towards the bridegroom's medical bills. Is twenty thousand enough?' he asked as he signed the cheques.

The doctor finally took the wad, staring wide-eyed at the dollar cheques. 'Of course,' he finally said in a deep and joyful West Caribbean accent.

'Good, good. The rest goes to a local children's charity. Have the young man transferred today to the honeymoon suite at the Paradise Hotel, Coral Towers, and treated on-site at the hotel from now on. OK?'

'Yes, sir,' the doctor enthusiastically boomed.

Beesely gestured the stunned family towards the door. 'Shall we?'

A large American jeep pulled up a moment later, the guard in the passenger seat jumping out. Beesely walked up to the jeep and addressed the driver through the open passenger door. 'For the next two weeks you are to drive this family around, cater for their every need. You are off other assignments, so move your belongings to The Paradise Hotel.'

'Yes, sir.'

The second guard opened the doors for the family to get in. They clambered up into the spacious rear, the daughter on one of the fold-down seats facing the rear.

‘So,’ Beesely began, clearing his throat when he noticed that the daughter was not wearing any knickers under her short skirt. ‘Let’s go spend some money shall we? First stop, your hotel. Let’s break the news to the gang.’

The guard without a ride ambled into the doctor’s surgery, Johno now resting an elbow on the secretary’s station and flirting. ‘OK, Boss?’ he quietly let out.

Johno glanced at the guard. Frowning, he asked, ‘What you doing here?’

The guard shrugged. ‘Herr Beesely asked for another car. He’s taken an English family to the Paradise Hotel.’

Johno quickly checked the waiting area. ‘Balls.’ He gave the girl his card and walked briskly out, getting into the jeep that had brought them originally, parked now across the road in the shade. ‘Paradise Hotel. Quickly.’ He grabbed his phone as the guard jumped into the rear.

* * *

When Beesely, and his newly adopted friends, arrived at the Paradise Hotel complex, a large pink pyramid blocking the horizon, they found Johno stood with four guards and a dozen members of the hotel staff lining the hotel’s busy entrance.

Beesely addressed the concierge. ‘Arrange for the luggage of my guests to be brought from a hotel called The Wyndham, would you. Thanks.’

The overweight man, dressed in white short-sleeved shirt and short trousers, bowed slightly. ‘Very good, sir,’ he grunted.

Otto appeared with the hotel manager, Beesely leading the family towards him.

‘Everything sorted?’ Beesely asked.

Otto tipped his head to the family. 'The ceremony can take place on the yacht whenever it is desired, a Minister is ready,' he informed them in his mildly accented voice.

'Excellent,' Beesely enthused. 'I do love a good wedding.' He led the quietly stunned family into the air-conditioned interior.

Standing to one side, Beesely called the newspaper reporter, Duncan. 'Beesely here.'

'Ah, how are you, Sir Morris?'

'Fine, fine. Listen, I have a job for you. I want you to persuade Hello magazine, or similar, to do a wedding cover of an ordinary family. Bribe whoever you must, get someone out to the Paradise Hotel in the Bahamas straight away. It's an English family - in the honeymoon suite - who've had a few setbacks. I want to make the piece a ... *real life* story.'

'I'm with you, Boss. What's their name?'

'I have no idea; call operations and ask them.'

'Will do. Leave it to me.'

Beesely turned to Johno as he put the phone away. 'Have you been to any good weddings lately?'

Johno gave it some thought as he stood with his hands in his pockets. 'Not for about ten years. And then it turned into a punch-up. SAS weddings have a bit of reputation.'

'Pink tuxedos, I'm thinking.'

Johno leant closer. 'Fuck off!' he whispered. 'And what is it with you and weddings? I've seen you attend loads of weddings back in the UK, even people you didn't know.'

'Fond memories, my lad, fond memories. You see, back in my day a wedding was where you met the nice girls, especially during the war. Clean pressed uniforms, girls in nice dresses, *excess food* - and such a contrast to the front line.' He sighed contentedly. 'Going to a wedding during the war was like winning the lottery today. You dressed up, you got fed, you

drunk a little and danced the night away without worrying about your own mortality.’

Johno nodded to himself.

‘Are you with our tour?’ a middle aged American woman asked, stood now beside them in a size eighteen floral dress.

‘Which one?’ Johno asked. ‘The crocodile wrestling, or the naked parasailing?’

She seemed put out. ‘Oh, I didn’t see those advertised,’ she complained to herself, frowning hard at the brochure in her hand as she wandered back to the desk.

They waited and watched. The girl behind the desk with the huge smile listened attentively, then stopping smiling.

2

The following day, the wedding party were all gathered on the luxury yacht, moored now in the shallow and calm water of an isolated inlet. The lucky couple stood in front of the Minister and the yacht’s Captain, Beesely and his family gathered in a line at the rear of the large quarterdeck. Unfortunately, they were in the sun, and wishing proceedings to hurry along, the rest of the congregation gathered mostly in the shade.

‘Medium blue’ had been a compromise, although Beesely wished he had not been so drunk, or so tired, when he agreed the compromise with Johno. Now they all stood in medium blue tuxedos on the top, Bermuda shorts on the bottom, finished off with socks and sandals.

Then Beesely noticed a woman from the family turning and making eye contact with Johno. ‘Oh ... gawd,’ he muttered.

‘What?’ Johno whispered. ‘It’s a wedding - you’re supposed to find someone screwing in the cupboard. It’s a British tradition!’

Otto tipped his head forwards and whispered, ‘I thought it was traditional at English weddings for there to be a fight between relatives?’

Beesely rolled his eyes.

Johno whispered, 'That comes later.'

'Oh,' Otto whispered. 'Good to understand your traditions.'

Beesely shot him an unfriendly look as the Minister finished up.

'...may now kiss the bride.'

'She is two month's pregnant,' Otto whispered. 'Another English tradition?'

'No,' Beesely sighed. 'It is more usual for the British to get married a year or so *after* the kid is born!'

'Or in some cases, just piss off and enjoy yourself, and let the mother raise the child,' Johno muttered.

Beesely took a step and signalled to two guards, the men walking quickly over. He whispered in their ears. They smiled, grabbed a startled Johno under the armpits and threw him over the side head first, the family turning and laughing, cameras snapping. Thinking it part of some organised fun-and-games, several guests linked arms and jumped overboard, followed quickly by the bride and groom.

'You do realise,' Otto calmly pointed out as chaos erupted, helping himself to an abandoned cocktail, 'that we have to return those tuxedos.'

Beesely turned to him, offering an exasperated look. 'It's a British wedding; if we get out alive ... it will be a good day.'

'Where is Thomas?' Otto enquired, glancing around. They couldn't find him, so peered over the side, finding him sat in a dinghy with a girl of his age, a bridesmaid in a pink dress.

Beesely sipped another of the abandoned cocktails as they observed the young couple. 'Well, depending on who he takes after, she will either be treated like a princess, or offered a few stiff drinks for a touch-up. Hard to say *who* he takes after.' She slapped his face, so he pushed her over the side, Beesely and Otto exchanging a look.

The two sets of parents approached as their hosts sipped cocktails through straws, the quarterdeck now almost empty.

‘We’d just like to thank you all,’ the mother of the groom began, offering a beaming smile. ‘We couldn’t have dreamt of a better wedding day.’

The other parents were equally thankful. ‘Who are the photographers?’ one asked.

‘Hello Magazine,’ Beesely informed the shocked group. ‘Luckily, they shot plenty of good photographs before everyone jumped into the salt water in their ... *hired* tuxedos.’

The parents suddenly felt guilty, glancing over the side at their offspring and guests swimming fully clothed in their expensive outfits.

‘Not to worry,’ Beesely offered, appearing unconvinced of his own sentiment. ‘Love to see the look at the shop owner’s face tomorrow.’

Otto offered, as neutral as ever, ‘To be fair, he warned us about not getting sand on the clothes, nothing about salt water.’

Beesely forced a smile and turned to him. ‘Let’s tell him the boat sank then, shall we?’ he said through gritted teeth. They all peered over the side at the swimmers.

‘Could arrange that,’ Otto muttered, slurping his cocktail through a straw.

Busman's holiday

1

K2 guards, now stood watch outside the rented villa's gates, looked on with a professional interest as a taxi pulled up and parked on the opposite side of the dusty road, causing a chicken to scurry away; visitors were not expected. One guard discreetly pressed his phone three times, alerting those inside. Men began to move. The gate guards carefully scanned the area; the road, the vehicle, the sand dunes and the scrub leading down the beach and the choppy sea.

'Johno, we have company!' a guard shouted across the pool. 'There's a taxi here.'

Beesely lifted his head from where he lay face down, and squinted in the bright sunlight. 'Johno?'

Johno eased up off his deckchair and walked around the edge of the pool to Beesely, slurping his beer - with ice cubes in - through a straw. He stopped level with Beesely's head. 'Yeah, what?'

'I was expecting some ... *unexpected* guests. Do me a favour, and try hard *not* to be surprised by *whoever* it is, or what they say or do. Defence comes in a certain ... *laid back* attitude.'

'Now that ... I can do.'

'Go meet whomsoever it is.' Beesely went back to his sunbathing.

Johno turned and grabbed his t-shirt. Approaching a guard, he lifted the man's radio. 'Front gate: whoever it is, tell them they were expected. Be very cool, pretend we were expecting them.' Barefoot, he walked across the soft spongy grass and joined the main track down towards the front gate. The guards watched as Mr. Grey eased out of the cab, smiling welcomingly at them, if not smugly. He paid the local driver, who now waited

with a curious gaze towards the guards, an elbow resting out of his window.

Dressed suitably for a hot Bahamian afternoon, a short-sleeved shirt and sunglasses, Mr. Grey stepped across to the villa's gate. 'I'm here to see Mister Beesely. Tell him I'm from The Lodge.'

'You were expected,' a guard informed him as his associate opened the front gate.

Mr. Grey stopped smiling. 'I was? Me ... specifically?'

The guard nodded, as ordered, before checking the road in front of the villa's whitewashed walls. Puzzled, Mr. Grey stepped inside, to be met by Johnno walking down the sandy track from the villa. As he neared, Johnno held out his hand to shake. Surprised by the friendly gesture, Mr. Grey shook hands.

'Want a cold beer?' Johnno asked. Then, without giving the visitor a chance to speak, Johnno shouted past him to the guards at the gate. 'Hey, tossers! Next time someone comes calling, offer them a cold drink, huh! It's hot as hell today!'

'OK, Boss,' came back with a lazy wave.

Mr. Grey turned, squinting and frowning at the same time, before joining Johnno walking back up towards the villa.

The dusty track was lined with Jamaican Walnut trees, affording some shade from the hot sun, some occasional and welcome extra cooling coming from the mist of overlapping sprinklers on the neatly trimmed lawn. The villa's high wall afforded it plenty of privacy, as well as plenty of shade for the guards dotted along its length.

'Good flight down?' Johnno asked, as matter of fact as he could make it sound.

Grey studied Johnno slurping his beer through a straw, noticing the ice cubes. 'Fine. You ... were expecting me?'

'Actually, we were expecting you this morning. Get held up?' Johnno was making it up as he went along. 'I hate airport spy novels.'

Now Mr. Grey struggled with many thoughts. His flight had been delayed four hours, but how the hell did they know; his identity was one of the world's best-kept secrets.

'Did anyone tell Mister Beesely I was on my way?' he enquired, trying also to sound as matter of fact as he could, and remembering that Robert Ludlum novel he had read at the airport.

Now Johno remembered where he knew that face from; American Sergeant, part of the chemical clean up team at the castle. He smiled, and the timing was perfect, Mr. Grey now considering himself to be the butt of some joke. 'No, no one told us,' Johno suggested. 'We have an old witch with a crystal ball. She came with the villa, along with melted chocolates on the pillows, and a fruit basket.'

They walked on; one amused, one confused.

'Welcome,' Beesely formally offered with a handshake, avoiding eye contact. Wearing a bright Hawaiian shirt and shorts, he sat down on the veranda and gestured Mr. Grey towards a comfortable wicker seat adjoining his, not opposite. A guard offered Mr. Grey a cold beer as he sat.

'No ice-cubes?' Mr. Grey dryly queried.

Beesely shot Johno a look, as Johno stirred his beer with his straw, clinking the ice-cubes as he leant against the veranda railing.

Grey continued, 'The Lodge sends its regards, sir. They're arriving as we speak.' He sipped his beer.

Beesely sat deep in thought, staring out across the villa's carefully tended gardens, the sun reflecting off the umbrella-shaped spray created by the sprinklers. 'Give them time to freshen up. We can meet at the casino tonight. Say 10pm ... when it's cool?'

'I will communicate that suggestion to them, sir.'

'Good, good. Well then, time for a swim, some food and a rest first, I think. Not as young as I was, you know.'

‘May I enquire, sir, how you knew I was coming down?’

Beesely made direct eye contact. ‘With K2’s resources and my talents, young man, two plus two makes twenty-two, not four!’

Mr. Grey nodded to himself as Beesely stood and walked to the pool.

Johno walked back over, trying to hide a smile. ‘Guess I’ll show you out then.’

Beesely swam to where Otto bobbed on an inflatable chair in the villa’s large pool.

‘All OK?’ Otto asked, a drink in either hand, his face turned towards the sun. He was naturally pale, never having had a tan, and previous attempts had simply led to more freckles. Now he bobbed on the chair, greased-up with high factor suntan cream, and looking like a long distance swimmer.

‘Tonight I will introduce you to the most powerful men in the world. And, if they don’t buy the lies we tell them ... they will probably kill us all.’

‘No pressure then,’ Otto muttered. Beesely smiled, flicking an insect out of the pool. ‘Are you going to brief me on what to say?’

‘No, it may sound rehearsed. Say little, let me take the lead, and remember one thing: react to the small things, those of no consequence, yet do not react to the important stuff. Beyond that, we may be bugged ... so we cannot discuss it further out of the pool.’

‘It should be interesting.’

Noticing Thomas sneaking around a bush, Beesely swam a few strokes away, stopped and waited. Thomas ran, jumped, curled, and landed next to Otto, the wash knocking Otto - and his two drinks, into the pool.

The casino's staff were used to rich American visitors, tourists off cruise ships with plenty of money to spend. So as the rented limo pulled up they were not surprised, and went into a well-rehearsed routine. Otto had been told not to call ahead, as he had wished to. It was, apparently, safer not to advertise the fact.

Young valets in bright red jackets opened the limo's doors as guards pulled up behind in their jeeps, all now suitably dressed in black tuxedos. Otto, Beesely and Johno stepped out, straightening their jackets before walking up the red-carpeted steps. Thomas, kitted out in a perfectly tailored child-size tuxedo, bounded up the steps to keep up. Stepping through the shiny, gold-plated glass doors, the benefit of the casino's air-conditioning could immediately be appreciated.

Beesely stopped and asked for the manager. The casino manager, who turned out to be an American, greeted and welcomed them with a soft southern drawl. Beesely informed the man, 'We shall need a private poker table, big enough for ten or so.'

The manager bowed his head. 'Very good, sir. When you're ready, just let me or the other staff know. In the meantime, please avail yourselves of the bar or any of the other facilities.'

Beesely turned and nodded to a guard, who now approached with a large silver case. Turning back to the manager, he stated, 'And we would like one million dollars in assorted chips.'

The manager's cool composure slipped for just a moment. 'Of course, sir.' He beckoned two of his security staff and led Beesely, and the case, to the cashiers.

Ten minutes later, the Beesely party all had their pockets bulging with high value chips, the smallest denomination five hundred dollars. Even the guards had chips. With two of the guards leading Thomas to the slot machines, Beesely led the others to the bar, the remaining guards now adopting a discreet distance and blending in.

At a quiet end of the bar, the Beesely family settled, waited upon by attractive coloured girls wearing skimpy aprons adorned

with large 'snake-eyes' dice motifs. As their drinks were placed down, onto beer-mats fashioned after roulette chips, Mr. Grey approached and sat without being invited to. A waitress hovered, but he waved her off.

'They will be here in moments. Where would you like to meet, sir?'

'We have a poker table booked,' Beesely informed him as Johno slurped his cocktail through a straw.

'That's not a Singapore Sling!' Johno complained, handing Otto the drink.

Otto took a loud slurp. 'No, it's a Moscow Mule!'

'No way!' Johno objected.

Beesely grabbed the drink and slurped just as loud. 'Ah, now that takes me back. It's an old fashion Daiquiri.'

A discreet argument started up as Mr. Grey stood, trying to hide a puzzled look. 'I'll let them know where you are.' He was ignored as the debate raged.

'Olly!' Beesely enthusiastically called as he shook hands with the head of The Lodge. Then quickly, to the second and third man, he said, 'David, Henry, how good to see you both again.'

They greeted each other warmly before settling around the poker table. A young lady dealer had appeared, but had been dismissed for now. Drinks were ordered as the group settled themselves, everyone sitting on high stools with small back rests.

Otto quickly studied the men sat opposite; they were all white-haired, and appeared to him to be in their seventies. The men's casual suits were expensive and perfectly tailored, their watches a statement of wealth, their demeanour one of quiet confidence.

Johno had been given firm orders: lose everything in your pockets, and he now stood ready to give it a good go. First bet

on the roulette table, number thirteen, ten thousand dollars whilst smiling coyly at the pretty woman next to him.

He lost, without taking his eyes off the girl.

Same bet, ten thousand. She frowned at the bet.

He lost, hardly registering which number had won, but noted her delicious cleavage.

Same bet, ten thousand. She stood open mouthed, leaning in and enhancing his view.

He won.

‘What?’ he asked as people began tapping his arm.

‘Sir, three hundred and fifty thousand dollars.’ The pile of chips filled a two-foot square area of the table in front of them.

‘Oh, is that mine?’

‘Yes, sir.’

He shrugged, before turning to the girl. ‘Pick a number. If we win, you get half.’

‘Didn’t I see that in a movie somewhere?’ her husband asked in an accent Johno couldn’t place, manoeuvring between them. ‘My wife does not need to be playing games with you, thank you.’

‘She’s got to get her fun somewhere,’ Johno muttered. Then louder, ‘Everything on black.’

Gasps went up around the table as the wheel spun. He lost the mound of chips on the table, grabbing more from his pockets.

‘Good,’ he said as he placed another ten thousand on thirteen. ‘I would’ve hated to carry those chips around all night.’ The man led his wife away, the lady glancing back over her shoulder at Johno.

Otto had found the contents of his pockets uncomfortable, and now emptied them onto the green felt tabletop.

‘So,’ Beesely began. ‘You old dogs are still alive and going strong!’ They laughed.

‘Don’t know about going strong!’ Oliver joked.

‘Thought *you* left us long ago,’ David said with a smile.

‘What? And no lavish funeral for you guys to mourn over me? How could you miss such an event?’

They laughed again as Otto earnestly focused on his chips, putting them into neat symmetrical piles.

‘Gentlemen,’ Beesely said as he swivelled his upper body. ‘This is my number two, Otto.’ Otto looked up and smiled politely, bowing his head to each man before returning to his study of his chips.

‘How much does he ... know?’ Oliver delicately broached.

‘Nothing yet,’ Beesely informed them.

‘Is his being here ... *wise*?’ David gingerly enquired.

‘When I die, he gets everything and takes control of K2,’ Beesely informed them, a glint in his eye. That sparked their interest, Henry particularly surprised, his eye’s narrowing as he focusing on Otto. Beesely cleared his throat. ‘Perhaps I should begin ... at the beginning.’

The visitors nodded their approval of that idea and sipped their drinks.

‘Just over a year ago I received word that old man Gunter was not long for this world. I hit upon the idea of altering his Will in some way, perhaps getting someone we like in there - someone other than Otto here - who was the logical heir as Gunter’s son.’

Oliver appeared confused, as did the others.

‘But when I ... *gained access* to the Will, I was handed a real gift. It turns out that Otto here *is not* the biological son of Gunter. He *was* raised by Gunter, but everyone assumed he was not a union of Gunter’s marriage. Gunter *Schapphaust*, Otto *Schessel* – his mother’s name.’

The guests were now surprised, as well as confused.

‘Yes, it came as a surprise to poor old Otto as well,’ Beesely explained, enjoying their looks. ‘The will stated that a great deal of the money was to go to various neo-Nazi groups, the rest to various people who Gunter liked, almost thirty in total.’

‘So I approached Otto, and took the risk of telling him what I had discovered. He went off for a few months, underwent a few blood tests, and did some of his own checking. Then he found out that Gunter had killed his real father ... *and* his mother.’

Otto lifted his gaze, suddenly adopting stern features, glancing from face to face as the three geriatric powerbrokers shifted uneasily on their stools.

Beesely continued, ‘He came back to me, and we hatched a plan. I had Gunter’s family tree traced, and it turned out that his elder sister fled to England in 1937 and married some soldier in 1946. We forged some very old records, did a master job, made that soldier my brother.’

Oliver quietly laughed, shaking his head.

Beesely continued, ‘We then forged a new Will and made sure that Gunter’s ill health did not ... improve. When he died ... well, the will reading was a shock for those in K2.

‘We kept in the stuff about Otto not being his biological son, since we did not know if Gunter had confided in anyone. And it would have been very easy for someone to do a blood test. It then took months to track me down, going through the motions. Otto manoeuvred his people into place, and we removed the dissenters.

‘Otto had so many of his people in management positions that the transfer was seamless. A few raised eyebrows in the Swiss Government, but the legal evidence was there. Besides, easy enough to frighten the Swiss Government, what it is.’

‘Hell of a job, Beesely,’ Oliver commended, seconded by the others. ‘And getting access to the Swiss Banking Society as well ... a hell of a job; the crowning point of your career.’ They gently rapped the table with their knuckles.

‘Thanks, but if it had come twenty or thirty years ago...’ His voice trailed off.

The old men considered it, each with their own memories.

Thomas appeared at the table edge, his two chaperones a few yards back. 'Hello, sir,' he said in English, addressing the guests.

'Good evening, young man,' Oliver said with a smile. Then, in German, 'You look very smart tonight. Are you winning?'

Thomas shook his head and turned to Otto. 'A woman slapped Uncle Johno.'

Otto sat counting chips. In German, he answered, 'I would be very surprised if a woman *did not* slap Uncle Johno.'

The men laughed as Otto gave Thomas his lowest value chips. 'Lose these on the roulette table.'

'They say I am too young!'

Otto straightened, fixing on a member of staff who had been stood ready to attend them. He waved the man over. 'Get me the manager. Quickly!'

The man raised his arm and spoke into his sleeve, the manager walking briskly across a few seconds later.

'Sir?' the manager enquired.

Otto remained seated, but turned his head, not fully. 'You will allow my boy here to play on the roulette table, and any other table he likes, or we will buy the hotel chain that owns this casino ... then fire you.'

Two K2 guards closed in as the manager straightened. He glanced at them, then at the stern faces around the table. After a moment's consideration, he relented and bowed, gesturing Thomas towards a table. Otto sipped his drink, Oliver, David and Henry now studying him carefully.

Beesely hid a smile. 'When I die, Otto takes over. And *he* ... will be your point of contact.'

Now Oliver addressed Otto directly. 'Herr Schessel, Otto, how much do you know about ... *us*?'

Otto raised his head, glancing at Beesely before facing Oliver. 'Sir Morris has said that you are a group of powerful American industrialists. Also something about *groups within groups, secrets inside secrets, lies on top of lies.*'

Oliver smiled at the colourful description of them. ‘And how ... *in-tune* are you with Beesely’s view of the world?’

Otto again glanced at Beesely, this time as if studying him. ‘We agree on most things.’ He and Beesely nodded their joint approval of the notion.

‘And what do you see ... as K2’s future role?’ Henry asked.

Otto straightened his back and stretched a little. ‘The preservation of a stable Switzerland, economically, and free from crime and terrorism, then the same for Europe where we have influence.’

The white-haired trio smiled and nodded their approval.

Beesely added, ‘Being Swiss helps: discretion from birth, stability ... and everything in measure.’

Johno walked up to their private poker table and grabbed a pile of Otto’s chips, quickly disappearing. Otto had not reacted.

‘How *is* Johno these days?’ Oliver asked, watching him go.

‘His old injuries are still a problem,’ Beesely said with a sigh.

Oliver reflected upon that statement. ‘You always felt for those you sent into harm’s way.’

Beesely stared at the green felt tabletop for a moment. ‘Especially those that never came back.’

‘You’ve kept him on ... even though he’s not in top form as a bodyguard?’ Henry asked.

Beesely shrugged. ‘You get used to people, even those as annoying as him!’ Otto smiled widely. ‘And those injuries he carries around - I put them there.’ He took a breath. ‘They say that most men can remember the faces of all their lovers. Well, they did in my day. I can certainly remember the faces of all those I sent out, never to return.’

Oliver considered Beesely’s words. ‘You always were a bit sentimental, especially towards the end. Not the ruthless killer you were in your youth.’

‘We all change,’ Beesely softly suggested.

‘I guess so,’ Oliver added after a moment’s reflection. ‘So, anything you need?’

Beesely noticed the single-finger gesture that Oliver made out of sight of Henry and David. It was gone in a second, but a clear signal that he needed to talk alone to Beesely. ‘There will be, so make sure we have clear lines of communication. At some point you can spend some time with Otto, brief him, and get him up to speed - I won’t be around much longer.’

Otto suggested, ‘You will have to come and visit, we will show you around Switzerland and K2.’

‘Thanks for the offer,’ Oliver replied, Henry remaining silent.

Beesely eased himself up. ‘Otto, go and have some fun, look after Thomas, please. David, Henry, if you don’t mind, me and young Olly have some catching up to do and a few drinks to down. Please, gentlemen, go and have some fun!’

Beesely and Oliver sat at the bar for an hour, the manager intervening several times to stop Johno from being thrown out. Thomas showed an uncanny knack for picking winning numbers at the roulette table, and was now attracting quite a crowd. Otto kept trying to suggest a methodical system, but Thomas was on a roll and having none of it.

Johno had then discovered the secret lap dancing room, and began to make the girl’s night with pink chips per every dance. Then he discovered the double-secret VIP area, now empty of male patrons. Fortunately, he still had close to sixty thousand dollars in his pockets, and so became the centre of attention. He carefully examined all twelve girls present, lining them up naked and selecting his chosen four, before retreating to the hot tub room.

It was a warm and clear night as Otto and Beesely sat on the veranda of the villa, sampling the local rum. Crickets made themselves heard from the grass, tree frogs competing above the din, whilst dozens of moths fluttered about the porch lights.

‘Will we work with these people?’ Otto quietly asked, staring out into space.

Beesely took a sip. ‘They would be a very valuable ally. If what they want is in line with what we want ... then yes, we would work with them. It’s also important to note that they *will not* ... leave us alone to do what we want. *They* ... have their own plans for us.’

‘You do not seem to trust them completely.’

Beesely sipped his drink. ‘It’s a long story.’

‘And one that my best efforts could not reveal about you.’

‘Groups within groups, secrets inside secrets, lies on top of lies,’ Beesely ran off. ‘There are many things about me you do not know, nor should ever risk trying to find out; simply *knowing* some things would get you killed. K2 is a good organization, but it lacks the length of service that other agencies have, or their resources.’

‘What can you say about these people? They knew you well and, I think, respected you.’

‘I used to work closely with them. In fact, I did so for fifty years on and off.’

‘American Intelligence? CIA? NSA?’ Otto probed.

‘Not exactly. I suppose they are closer to NSA than anything else, they had a hand in its set up and mandate, but their group works above and behind all the others. They ... are the original establishment, the *men in grey suits*.

‘They go back to the American Civil War, when it was decided by the richest families that power should lie outside of the White House. After all - and they are correct in this, presidents come and go every four years. And the problem ... is that politicians and presidents often do things to get themselves

re-elected, not what is best for the economy or the nation. These people help smooth out the excesses.'

'And the American people do not know?'

'There have always been rumours about secret groups, but The Lodge is way too powerful to get caught. Like us, they have people in every institution, including newspapers and television. And especially in The White House.'

'Do you *approve* ... of what they do?'

Beesely took a sip of his drink, and gave it some thought. 'I used to believe very much in what they do. I still agree with much of it, the principles at least. We manage to elect some real idiots - people capable of harming capitalism; *they* help to counter-balance the excesses. The Kennedy brothers were eliminated - well, allowed to be eliminated - because they risked lowering the standards of the Office of the President.'

Otto appeared surprised, making eye contact. A moment passed.

Beesely continued, turning away, 'What they got up to was going to get the White House into a lot of trouble. Not just Marilyn Monroe, but a string of affairs, prostitutes, financial irregularities. The Lodge brought me in because I was neutral and unknown to our American cousins. I spied on the Kennedy boys. And if they had asked me, I would have killed them to save what we believed in.'

He turned to face Otto squarely. 'If Oswald, or *others*, had not successfully hit President Kennedy that day, I was waiting ready on the famous Grassy Knoll.'

Otto turned his gaze back to the heavens. 'The Swiss Banking Society killed one Swiss Federal President and removed some others. Very discreetly, of course.'

'Oh, of course,' Beesely sarcastically agreed.

'So I understand this principle. *When the population sleeps, the soldiers of freedom patrol the streets.*'

Beesely lowered his head in thought. 'I've heard that before.'

'You said it, 1964, at a meeting at MI6.'

‘God, how did you come across that?’

‘It was in an old file on you, stored at MI5.’

‘You must let me have a read.’

‘Did your work with these people influence the arrival of the American and Israeli decontamination teams?’ Otto delicately broached.

‘Without a doubt, as well as the helicopters to scare the Serbs, and that man Burke wouldn’t have had a clue as to why they were approved.’

Otto flicked away an insect that had landed on his knee. ‘How would this group react if they knew about us, my group, and what I did?’

‘They would probably be bloody delighted, but may also use it as leverage for blackmail. That’s why I lied to them, to keep you out of it. The less they know the better, to protect you.’

‘Blackmail us? For what?’

Beesely studied him for a moment. ‘A subject that we must be very careful when discussing.’ Otto turned his head fully. ‘They want access to the secret banking society, they have done for sixty years.’

Otto did not follow. ‘Why?’

‘Because a great many terrorist groups use numbered Swiss bank accounts, and could not operate effectively without them. Plus the likes of North Korea, Iran and Syria. What I did to the Nigerian Minister - in liberating his stolen aid funds - they would like to do on a larger scale. Rightly so, I suppose.’

‘Such action would harm Swiss banking, and the Swiss economy. The Society would never co-operate.’

‘Exactly,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘Catch-22. Stop terrorists and criminal gangs, wreck part of the economy of Switzerland.’

Johno walked past. ‘Going to check the perimeter.’ Then, as an afterthought, and calling out through the dark, he added, ‘Otto, watch the little monster, he still ain’t asleep.’

Beesely suggested, ‘Over here your body clock goes funny, sleeping in the day time when sunbathing, you don’t want to

sleep much at night. I feel wide awake.’ He studied the contents of his glass. ‘I was kind of hoping this rum will send me off.’

Otto stood. ‘I will check on the *little monster*. Then check on *you* later.’

‘Yes dad.’

Back to work

1

At twelve-noon in a Hungarian forest, Ricky walked through a heavy summer rainstorm to the rear of a car he had just stopped. K2 agents had the driver and passenger spread over the bonnet, guns to the backs of their heads. Hungarian police stood guard nearby, ready to get rid of any passing motorists who might take an interest in the action on this quiet country road.

After glancing at a tractor labouring across a nearby field, Ricky opened the car's boot and peered inside. A strong smell of oil and cigarettes greeted him, mixed with the smell of sweat and damp from the prior occupants, the two men now spread-eagled at the front of the car and getting wet.

Cold water ran off the car and down the back of Ricky's neck. 'Bastard!' he quietly cursed.

He found rags, blankets, tools, and bottles of half-drunk spirits with Cyrillic writing on the labels. One looked the colour of piss. Then there it was, the object of his interest, a large metal chest. It lay clipped shut, but not locked in any way. The reason for stopping this particular vehicle had been a tip-off about gunrunners, driving across Hungary and heading for Western Europe. They had, supposedly, come from the Ukraine.

Cautiously, he eased up the heavy lid of the box. 'What the hell?' he whispered to himself.

There were just ball bearings inside, thousands of shiny metal ball bearings. Propping the lid open with his shoulder, he dug deep with his fingers in case there may be something hidden, his fingers finally touching the bottom of the chest. Nothing.

He withdrew his hand, the heavy lid slamming down, only to find his skin stinging. Realising that there may have been a hazardous chemical in there, he quietly cursed himself for

having dug his hand in, grabbed a rag and dried off his left hand. Stepping back and straightening, he shouted, ‘There’s nothing here!’

The guard who had been searching the front seats stood and raised his hands. Nothing. A very wet, and now very dirty, guard emerged from under the car, cursing. Also nothing.

Ricky kicked the side of the car. ‘Release them!’ With rain spattering off his face, he turned to the Hungarian Police. ‘Are you sure it’s the right car?’

They glanced at the car number plate, then at a piece of paper, finally nodding.

‘Fucking useless,’ Ricky muttered, waving the local police away. Then louder, ‘Back to the helicopter, boys.’

As the car made off, the driver and passenger were both laughing.

‘That man, he put his hand inside the box!’ they said in a language that none of the K2 agents would have understood. As they drove away, they laughed, long and loudly.

* * *

Guido Pepi stood inspecting his vines with his vineyard manager. Noticing the Cardinal stood patiently at the end of the terrace, and looking rather warm, he thanked his manager and walked down the slope. ‘A fine afternoon,’ he offered.

‘Indeed,’ the cardinal replied, Pepi leading the visitor towards the olive grove, a gentle stroll into the shade of the trees.

‘And what news from ... where was it, the Bahamas?’

‘Yes, the Bahamas, and a strange tale from Mister Beesely. He met with my contact, and some other American men – power brokers with influence, but not CIA.

‘Mister Beesely explained how he and Otto got together after Otto discovered Gunter’s Will, the Will cutting Otto out of any

inheritance, and apparently leaving money to various right-wing political groups.’

Pepi frowned at that suggestion. ‘I can see Gunter doing such a thing, but the Swiss Government would have had a copy of the Will. They would have challenged it.’

‘Beesely suggested that they ... *dispatched* Gunter, that Otto moved his people into place, and that between them they carved up K2, admitting the inheritance was faked.’

‘Ah, I had suspected the inheritance had been falsified by the British, but the action of this man Otto surprises me. I met him several times, and I always considered him a bit weak, especially around Gunter. What else? Any suggestion of involvement by the Swiss Government?’

‘None. It would appear as though Otto and this man Beesely organised the whole thing, re-directing the inheritance.’

‘Which the Swiss Government would have never allowed, unless ...’ He smiled. ‘Unless they saw where the inheritance led, and considered that having someone like Beesely sat in Gunter’s seat would assist them in their actions against us. Besides, K2 is – technically – a private body. So if this man Beesely gets into a fight with us –’

‘The Swiss Government could always deny involvement,’ the cardinal put in.

Pepi laughed. ‘A proxy war! How typical of the Swiss.’

* * *

In their wet clothes, Ricky’s crew began their forty-minute flight back to Zug, and the chance of a warm shower and a change of clothes. But as they flew across dense Hungarian forests, Ricky could feel the pain building in his left hand. Now he noticed a redness developing on the skin.

The first spasm shot up his arm, his violent jerk noticed by his fellow agents.

‘Ricky, what is it?’ they asked over their headsets.

Ricky grabbed his wrist and held up his hand, several blisters now visible. 'I touched some chemical in that box, maybe acid.' He grimaced with pain, cursing under his breath.

An agent produced a water bottle and emptied it over Ricky's hand, showing little regard for the inside of the helicopter. Between them they rubbed it down as best they could, stopping when they noticed skin starting to come away.

'It could be a chemical agent, or nerve agent!' a man shouted.

The pilot glanced over his shoulder, nosed down the helicopter and increased the pitch, rapidly accelerating through a mountainous valley and skimming low over a lake the colour of lead. He got on the radio to Zug. 'Emergency! We are coming in fast with Ricky injured, he may have been exposed to a chemical weapon. All hazard protocols to be observed.'

'We should stop!' an agent suggested.

'No!' Ricky shouted, clearly in pain. 'It's only thirty minutes to Zug. If this is a chemical weapon we can't risk going anywhere else!'

'Then we are all infected!' an agent protested.

'Check yourselves!' Ricky barked. 'Check all your skin! Does anyone feel unwell?' They were all fine. Ricky insisted, in a horse whisper, 'It's a chemical I touched, you're not at risk.'

'But *your* life is at risk!' they protested as the helicopter banked hard through the mountains, the rain-blurred visibility making this high-speed and low-level journey life-threatening in itself.

Domestic Austrian police, having a cigarette break on a bridge over a weir, ducked and cursed as the French-made Squirrel helicopter shot overhead. They radioed in their complaint.

'Put a tourniquet on my forearm!' Ricky shouted. The man next to him obliged with a length of cord. Holding up his hand, Ricky stared at it, amazed to see now that his skin was all red, covered in blisters, and starting to bleed.

* * *

Johno took the call: Ricky had put his hand in some chemical and burnt his skin, due to land at Zug soon, medical staff standing by. Stupid sod, he thought.

It could have been worse, he considered, Ricky could have been shot or injured. He went back to his breakfast, Otto and Beesely off for a typically Swiss early morning dip.

2

By the time they touched down at Zug, some thirty minutes later Ricky lay incoherent, an agent having administered a morphine shot. Now they bundled his limp body out of the helicopter and into the hands of the spacemen who stood ready on the tarmac in front of the castle. Placed onto a trolley, Ricky was quickly wheeled to a new decontamination unit that remained in the process of being completed and decorated.

Inside the all-white clinical area, the bio-suited medics started to cut Ricky's clothes away, careful to place the garments into sealed containers. Ricky groaned, drifting in and out of consciousness, his vitals monitored by a doctor.

'His breathing is OK, pulse a little erratic, but not life threatening.'

'We need a chemical work-up on his skin. We must identify the chemical quickly. Atropine!' A doctor injected Ricky with Atropine, the universal antidote to nerve agent and other chemical agents. It did not alter his condition.

'Look, there is blood from his eyes and nose!'

Now down to his underpants, Ricky lay still, and seemingly lifeless, red blotches and blisters on the left side of his pale torso.

'This is odd,' a doctor said, pointing. 'He has blisters under his clothes, but there could not have been any chemical transfer.'

‘It is only on the left side.’

An assistant sat preparing chemical test swabs when he noticed three white plastic badges clipped to the wall; they had small black dots on them. ‘My God!’ he muttered. Then louder, ‘Radiation. Radiation!’

The medics jumped back from Ricky’s body, turning to face the assistant, who now grabbed the white badges off the wall. That man held them up for everyone to see.

The senior doctor opened a cabinet, fetching a brand new Israeli Geiger-counter, still in its box. Through his suit gloves, he fumbled to switch it on. It started to click. He turned the volume up full, then adjusted the sensitivity.

He pointed it at the first man, head to toe. ‘Normal!’

He pointed it at the second and third man. The same.

He swung it around the room. Nothing.

Then at Ricky’s legs. An elevated reading.

Then at Ricky’s arm; a high reading, a lethal dose.

‘Everyone out! Now!’

The senior doctor was the last to leave. He was about to go, when Ricky began groaning. The medic hesitated, grabbed two morphine vials, and then quickly emptied the entire contents directly into Ricky’s neck. ‘Good bye, my friend.’

* * *

Johno took the call at the villa. Otto and Beesely were still swimming at the nearby beach, Thomas in the pool with one of the guards. For a moment, Johno simply let the phone hang down, staring ahead. Then he tipped his head back and screamed, causing the guards at the villa to come running. He took a deep breath. ‘Alarm!’

They sprinted towards the beach, several with guns drawn, eliciting worried looks from the sprinkling of tourists nearby.

‘Beesely!’ Johno screamed, trying to run across the hot sand barefoot and ignoring the pain.

Guards had already been in the water with Otto and Beesely, swimming at a discreet distance, and now grabbed their charges, helping them towards the beach and struggling to move quickly through the surf.

Johno met them at the water's edge. 'We need to get back to the castle!' They started to head up the beach, the guards flanking the wet men as they ran. When Johno noticed an agent handing Otto his phone, he shouted, 'Get us a helicopter, ready the Gulfstream, we need to get back to Zug!'

Otto started shouting into the phone.

'What is it?' Beesely asked as they reached the road that separated the villa from the beach. Their jeeps were pulling up, screeching to a halt on the sandy tarmac and skidding.

Johno put a hand on the back of Beesely's head, their faces almost touching. 'Ricky's dead,' he quietly stated. 'Fucking radiation poisoning!'

Beesely said nothing as he was helped into the back of a vehicle, still wet and trying to slowly put on his shirt. After a moment, he faced Johno, but again said nothing as they exchanged a look. Their jeep pulled off, skidding and screeching on the sandy surface as Otto screamed down his phone, too fast for Johno and Beesely to understand.

Beesely put a hand on Otto's shoulder, quietly ordering, 'Condition Black, all facilities and operations.'

Otto half turned his head and nodded. They drove on, the hot sun beating through the windows, the glass polarising its rays.

Beesely stared out of the window. Tourists were enjoying the warm morning, local buses ambling along poorly maintained roads. Scooters flitted past, and roadside shacks plied their wares. Beesely let his head drop, suddenly desperately tired. He noticed sand on the vehicle's black carpet, moist areas in the carpet, a fly walking across his sand-covered feet, a small piece of seaweed, and the purple toenail that still hadn't been seen to.

Johno simply stared ahead. They said nothing until they reached the helipad some fifteen minutes later, Otto and Johno jumping out.

Beesely raised his phone. 'Put me through to Oliver Stanton, Chairman of The Lodge.' He waited, the sounds of a helicopter engine whine filling the car.

'Beesely, hi,' came a cheerful voice. 'I just landed back in Washington.'

'Listen, we've suffered an attack,' Beesely quietly stated in a hoarse whisper. 'And this time it's radiation contamination, not nerve agent.'

'My God, are you sure?'

'My man Ricky is dead, from radiation poisoning.'

'Jesus. Any clues as to who may be behind it?'

'It can only be at government level.'

'I hear you. East European?' Oliver suggested.

'It's hard to tell yet. We're flying back, so see what you can find out.'

'I will do. On top of that Russian defector killed in London a while back - this is going to stir things. And if it turns out to be Russian -'

'Yes, I know. I will call you when I have further information.' Stepping out of the jeep briefly, Beesely told Otto to hold the helicopter. He needed information, and he eased back inside, ordering the doors closed to insulate himself from the helicopter's growing wash and noise.

'Operations, sir,' came from his phone.

'Beesely here. Is anyone else sick?'

'No, sir, it is only Herr Ricky. The staff who were in the helicopter with Herr Ricky only have very small traces of radiation, sir.'

'Has the facility at Zug been checked?'

'They are going around now with Geiger-counters, sir, but so far there is no sign of any problem.'

'What do we know about how he was contaminated?'

‘He was in Hungary, on a mission to intercept Russian gun smugglers. The agents with him stated that he put his hand into a strong metal box and afterwards he had a rash on his left hand, which they thought was from a chemical.’

‘What was in the box?’ Beesely puzzled.

‘Small metal ball bearings, sir.’

‘Oh, hell!’ He rubbed his forehead. ‘When was this exactly? What time did Ricky touch the box?’

‘That would have been one and a half hours ago, sir.’

‘Thank you.’ He pressed the red button. Stepping down from the jeep, he waved Otto and Johno back over. As they neared, he shouted ‘Get in!’ above the roar of the helicopter’s engine.

When it fell quiet again, he pressed green on his phone. ‘Oliver Stanton again, please.’ He waited, Otto and Johno listening intently. ‘Oliver? Situation critical, radioactive dirty bomb, central Europe, attack imminent - Western Europe.’

Stanton paused. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. Now go do what you’re good at. Give me an hour, and then alert the heads of state in Western Europe.’ He hung up.

‘Dirty bomb?’ Johno asked with a heavy frown.

Beesely explained, massaging the bridge of his nose, ‘Ricky intercepted a car after a tip-off, supposedly smuggling weapons. He found no guns, but a metal box in the rear had thousands of small metal ball bearings, all highly radioactive, the components of a dirty bomb.’

‘Dirty ... bomb?’ Otto repeated with a puzzled expression.

Beesely quietly explained, glancing out at the guards flanking the car, and at a small domestic airliner landing in the distance, ‘You put the radioactive ball bearings around normal explosives, and then set it off. The ball bearings cover an area of maybe a square mile, making that area radioactive for the next five thousand years. Alternatively, you just dump the ball bearings in the streets and watch the hospitals fill up with millions of sick people, the doctors baffled as to what’s going on.’

'We can't have been the target then!' Johno snarled, Otto agreeing.

'No,' Beesely confirmed with a shake of his head. *'The target would more likely Frankfurt, Paris or London.'* He turned to Johno. *'The radiation level was so high it killed Ricky in an hour.'*

'An hour? That's fucking impossible!' Johno snorted.

'That is not correct,' Otto reluctantly informed them, glancing at Johno from under his eyebrows. *'The senior doctor gave Ricky ... a lethal dose of morphine to the neck.'*

'He what?' Johno screamed directly at Otto, a flash of anger in his eyes. *'I'll kill him!'*

Beesely put a firm hand on Johno's arm. *'If the doctor did that, then he had his reasons,'* he calmly stated. *'Radiation poisoning at that level ... is like nerve agent; Ricky would have been screaming his lungs out –'*

'I could have still spoken to him! ONE ... LAST ... TIME!' Johno jumped out of the car, slamming the door before setting about smashing the vehicle's rear lights.

Otto watched him through the rear window, concerned. *'First Jane, and now Ricky.'*

Beesely stared at the sandy floor. The fly remained, still walking about. *'We are in the front line.'* He took a deep breath, raised the phone, and dialled. *'Dame Helen, MI6.'* He waited.

'Sir Morris, how the devil are you?'

'Shut up and listen,' he croaked, losing his voice. *'Condition Black, attack imminent, Western Europe, radioactive dirty bomb.'*

'Do you realise what you are saying?' she queried in a whisper.

'Yes, my dear, and I have another funeral to arrange. Ricky's dead, from radiation poisoning.'

'How?'

'He actually intercepted the components of the bomb, but he didn't know what they were. He handled a metal case full of

small ball bearings, but not knowing what it was he let them drive off, and an hour later he was dead.'

'An hour! The level of radiation must have been off the scale.' Fogged, Beesely overlooked correcting her assumption. 'What intelligence do you have on the target?'

'We have nothing on the intended target, I'm afraid. The vehicle was intercepted in Hungary two hours ago. It could be in Italy, Austria, Germany or the Czech Republic. My concern is the ferry ports in the Channel.'

'Yes, of course; they're not going to get a heavy metal case on a domestic flight!'

'Get moving, Helen. Oh, and Helen ... God help us all!'

3

Dame Helen placed her phone down, the colour having left her face. She took a breath and rubbed her forehead. 'Christ!' She pressed a button on her desk phone.

'Ma'am?'

'Condition Black, all ferry ports and channel tunnel; I'm declaring an emergency.'

'Ma'am?' the woman's voice repeated.

'You heard me!' Dame Helen barked. 'Condition Black, attack imminent. Get me the Minister!'

'He'll be in Parliament.'

'Christ!' she cursed. She tried to think clearly. Gambling her career on Beesely's word, she shouted, 'I want Parliament evacuated on my authority, and call a Terrorist Incident COBRA meeting on my authority. Now move!' She packed her bag, grabbed her mobile, and headed for the door as Willis walked in.

'I heard shouting?'

As she drew level with him, she stopped. 'We have a dirty bomb heading this way from Europe. Call down for the car.'

As the door closed behind, her Willis dialled. ‘Honey, get the kids out of school. Yes, right now, and then get down to your mum’s in Newbury. Yes, big problem in London.’

* * *

Driving down through the Tivoli Hills, down towards Rome, Pepi took a call as they passed through Villa Adrianna.

‘Guido?’ came a German voice.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Several European Governments have just been warned about the ball-bearings.’

‘I have heard nothing!’

‘Then you are slacking, Guido.’

‘Was one of the cars stopped?’

‘No, that is the concern. The cars are proceeding, but K2 has issued the registration of one.’

‘A leak?’

‘You must check back carefully, find this leak and deal with them.’

‘Yes, sir. Leave it with me.’

* * *

In the galley of a small yacht, moored at a Washington marina, Henry O’Sullivan now sat opposite senior CIA manager James Kirkpatrick. He tapped the boat’s brass barometer, the arrow pointing towards ‘Fair’.

‘How were the Bahamas?’ Kirkpatrick asked, his tone clearly indicating that he was not making an enquiry into an innocuous holiday.

‘Oliver spent an hour talking with Beesely alone,’ Henry informed him.

Kirkpatrick took off his glasses and eased back into his wooden chair, which responded with a squeak. ‘Do you think Oliver said anything to Beesely?’

Henry made a face and shrugged. ‘They were probably just chatting about old times.’

The yacht moved slightly, stretching its moorings, a creak of rope issued. In the distance, the bell of a buoy gently rang out as Kirkpatrick suggested, ‘There’s been no enquiry or interference to this project from any quarter - especially not in Europe. And some elements are right under Beesely’s nose.’

Henry stood and peered out of a porthole, clasping his hands behind his back, many things on his mind. A moment passed.

Kirkpatrick asked, ‘What do you make of this dirty bomb alert?’

Henry turned his head, but without making eye contact; he stared at the slatted wooden floor. ‘A worry. If it’s a credible attack and goes off, a whole new playing field. We’ll all feel the fall-out.’ He lifted his gaze and quickly tipped his eyebrows. ‘No pun intended.’

He returned to the porthole. ‘But there may also be an ... an opportunity here. Beesely is going after the bomb, and *that* is a dangerous pastime. *Whoever* sent the bomb ... may take umbrage at K2 intercepting it.’

Kirkpatrick frowned as he puzzled that odd statement. Finally, he said, ‘He may not survive the tangle.’

Henry glanced over his shoulder at Kirkpatrick. ‘Which would certainly close a concern we have, and without destroying the structure of K2.’ Henry turned back to the porthole. ‘There are many factors in play, so we must be ready to react at a moment’s notice. And I’m suspicious about Oliver.’

* * *

‘My Government will outline our policies on that area within the next few weeks and –’

The commotion from the main entrance to the chamber of Parliament distracted the Prime Minister. In ran two men in suits holding radios, followed by a dozen uniformed police officers.

‘Evacuate the chamber, gentlemen, we have a terrorist incident!’ the first officer shouted. He focused on the Prime Minister, and rushed directly at him. ‘Come on! Move it, sir. You must go now.’ He grabbed the P.M. under the armpits and headed him towards the rear entrance, behind the Speaker’s chair.

‘Slowly, gentlemen, slowly,’ the Speaker called. ‘Keep it orderly please!’ The noise level rose as members of parliament started to file out, mostly in an orderly fashion.

‘What the hell’s going on?’ the P.M. demanded as they navigated the narrow corridors.

‘SIS has pushed the panic button, sir; attack imminent.’ They rushed towards the rear entrance.

4

Beesely dialled, now sweating as they sat in the warm jeep. ‘Get me German Minister Wilhelm.’ They waited.

‘He is in a meeting, sir.’

‘Tell him it is an emergency ... and that I must speak with him now.’ They waited another minute.

‘Sir, I cannot get past his secretary. She will not disturb him.’

‘Ask his secretary to pass him the following note: nuclear device on German soil in the hands of terrorists.’

‘I think this may get his attention,’ Otto quietly stated, a look of pain and anguish etched into his face. He turned his head, and peered through the rear windscreen. Johno now sat on the ground outside, propped up against the wall of a nearby building and chain-smoking in the shade.

* * *

Wilhelm glared at his secretary as she interrupted the meeting. With him sat the German Chancellor herself and two French Ministers.

The secretary approached, looking terrified, but not of her boss. 'Sir, there is that English man on the phone, Herr Morris Beesely.'

Wilhelm glanced awkwardly at the French Ministers, his Chancellor frowning her recognition of that name, recent events still fresh in her mind.

Unfortunately for them, the secretary blurted out, 'He says that terrorists have a nuclear bomb ... and it is on German soil!'

* * *

'You sound out of breath, Minister,' Beesely sarcastically stated as Wilhelm came onto the phone a few minutes later.

'Beesely, do you know what you say?' Wilhelm shrieked.

'Yes, I do. And we have another funeral to go to; one of my best people just died from radiation poisoning!'

'What?' Wilhelm screeched.

'Listen carefully. There is a radioactive dirty bomb heading from Hungary towards England. By now it may be driving across Southern Germany.'

'We are not the intended target?' Wilhelm asked, a degree calmer.

'I don't know. Maybe Frankfurt, Paris or more likely London. I just don't know. Do you want to take the risk that they just drive through?'

'What information do you have?' Wilhelm asked, much calmer now.

'Two men in a green estate car, a large metal box in the rear full of radioactive ball bearings. It came from the Ukraine. My people will send you the car number plate. That's all I know for now. What you do is up to you.'

Unknown to both of them, the two French Ministers were screaming down their mobile phones as they ran through busy corridors.

Beesely hung up, and then asked for Minister Blaum.

‘Herr Beesely? What is going on, we are all on alert?’ came a concerned voice.

‘My man Ricky was killed by radiation poisoning.’

‘Radiation?’ Blaum shouted. ‘My God, is the castle contaminated?’

‘No, thankfully; this happened in Hungary.’

‘Hungary? What is the connection?’ Blaum asked in a normal voice.

‘There is a green estate car driving from the Ukraine to - I believe - England. It contains the components of a radioactive dirty bomb. My man Ricky stopped the car, handled the radioactive metal and was contaminated. But he let the car go ... and by now it could be anywhere.’

‘Inside our borders?’

‘Most likely they will drive through Germany towards the channel ports, Calais maybe.’

‘But they *could* pass through Switzerland?’

‘Yes, it is possible,’ Beesely admitted.

‘I am closing the borders!’ Blaum hung up.

Beesely held the phone. ‘That’s what I like to see,’ he quietly stated, ‘a man of action.’

Without the engine running the car grew rapidly warmer, both of them now covered in sweat. Beesely twisted around, and studied Johnno through the rear window, Johnno now sat with his head in his hands. ‘Time to go. I’ll handle Johnno.’

The helicopter took them on a short, twenty-minute flight across an inviting blue ocean, and to the main international airport at Freeport, where their Gulfstream business jet stood waiting. Otto

had ordered their luggage brought, and they sat quietly in the plane as it awaited permission to leave and an available slot.

As they waited, sat in the air-conditioned Gulfstream, Beesely got a call. 'It's who?'

'Herr Mole, sir. He is a new recruit with us,' came from the phone.

'A new recruit?' Beesely puzzled. 'And he wants to talk with me?'

Otto eye's widened, the operator explaining, 'He was friends with Herr Ricky, sir. He says he has some important information.'

Beesely glanced at Otto, and took a breath. 'OK, put him through then.'

'Herr Beesely?' came a slow voice, a heavy Germanic accent.

'Yes. Herr Mole?'

Now Otto remembered the man, the short man who stared down Ricky at gunpoint.

'Yes, sir. I have some information I believe may help.'

'Help with what?'

'With finding the car with the radioactive ball bearings, sir.'

It came over as an oddly threatening accent, Beesely considered, like the words spoken by a Nazi interrogator in a black and white movie about the Second World War. 'What do you know?'

'I remembered reading about the launch of an American satellite three years ago, NSA I believe. It is said to be able to detect small amounts of radiation, for this very purpose.'

'By God, why did I not think of that! I just had a drink with the men who launched it.'

'You did?'

'Thanks, Herr Mole, you have been very helpful.' He hung up, and asked for Oliver Stanton. They waited.

'Beesely?' came Oliver's deep, rich voice.

‘Olly, do you have a satellite that can detect low levels of radiation?’

‘Yes. Oh, I see where you are going with this. But it’s in geo-stationary orbit over the US; it scans us only.’

‘Damn it! Can it be moved?’

‘Not without a Presidential order!’

Beesely breathed deeply. ‘Still, you could earn some real smarty points from the Europeans on this. If you come to the rescue of the French or Germans, it would help.’

‘I can see that, but it would be very tricky, plus about eight hours to move it, probably longer. But ... but there is another way. We have the same technology stuck on an Air Force 747.’

‘Where is it?’ Beesely asked, squinting out of the small round windows as men in orange plastic waistcoats and ear muffers moved about.

‘Israel at the moment, can’t say why.’

‘I want it!’

‘I’ll get back to you,’ Oliver promised, and broke the connection.

Beesely gave Otto a questioning look. ‘Herr Mole?’

‘I met him,’ Johno quietly offered without taking his gaze off the aircraft window. He now sat alongside Beesely, but faced away from him. ‘Five foot nothing tall ... bald ... tubby ... a limp ... bad eyesight ... strange accent.’

Beesely gave the side of Johno’s head and intolerant glance, and then addressed Otto. ‘No, really, who is he?’

Otto replied, ‘He is just as Johno described.’

Beesely’s eyes widened. ‘And we recruited him to do what, exactly?’ he asked with a pained expression.

‘He helped us track the Nazi fundraiser, Rudenson, without even being asked,’ Otto explained. ‘Ricky put a gun in his face and he did not move. Afterwards, Ricky brought him in. He is very intelligent.’

‘So it would seem; he may just have saved Western Europe.’

Thomas arrived in another helicopter, a little bewildered, and complaining about cancelling the holiday early. Johno offered him a ride up front with the pilots as compensation, no one mentioning that they had all forgotten him and left him behind in the villa. An hour later, and they were heading towards the Azores for their next refuelling stop, Otto calling ahead and offering large sums of money for a fast refuelling.

Neither here nor there

1

At Number Ten Downing Street, the COBRA meeting quickly came to order. Dame Helen was present, but on the phone - they were all waiting on her attendance. Finally, she finished the call and sat down next to the usual representative of MI6. Rawlins from MI5 was also present for this session, but it was not usual for either of them to attend in person.

The PM's personal secretary interrupted, stepping quickly through the door, 'Prime Minister, the French have closed their border with Germany, absolute chaos. Swiss have closed their eastern borders as well.' The man disappeared as quickly as he had arrived, leaving Rawlins puzzling that statement.

The Prime Minister addressed Dame Helen directly. 'Can you bring us up to speed on what we know.'

'We've received intelligence from Europe, suggesting that a radioactive dirty bomb is on its way west from Hungary by car.' Members glanced at each other. 'It is thought to have originated in the Ukraine.'

'Dear God!' the Home Secretary muttered, clearly stunned. The rest were equally as shocked.

The Prime Minister took a moment to consider it. 'Do we know who the target is?'

She shook her head. 'No, Prime Minister.'

'And how accurate is this intelligence?' the PM asked.

'I trust it,' she stated. 'The group who sent us this information just lost one of their agents, the man dying from radiation poisoning an hour after intercepting the suspect car.' People whispered to each other.

'If they intercepted it, how come the car is still out there?' the Police Commissioner's representative asked.

Dame Helen answered, 'They didn't recognise what it was until their staff started getting sick.'

'You wouldn't,' the SAS representative confirmed. 'Radiation takes time. It's invisible, has no odour or taste. You can't *see* radiation.'

'Yes, quite,' the P.M. stated. 'Recommendations?'

Rawlins turned to Dame Helen. 'Which agency sent us this info?'

She seemed reluctant to answer that in an open meeting. 'It came from our friends in ... Switzerland.'

'You mean, Sir Morris Beesely?' Rawlins asked, enjoying her discomfort.

'Beesely?' the P.M. repeated. 'Didn't he tip is off recently?'

'Yes, Prime Minister,' Dame Helen answered. 'Those two al-Qa'eda suspects on their way to Toronto.'

'Small fry,' Rawlins commented dismissively.

She rounded on him. 'I'll stake my job on Beesely any day of the week, Mister Rawlins.'

'So would I!' the SAS representative added.

'As would I!' the Police Commissioner's representative added.

The P.M. raised a hand to silence them. 'I am not sure we have the luxury of doubt at this juncture.'

The door opened, and the P.M. was handed a note. He read it quickly. 'Oh dear,' he said as he finally looked up, a tinge of sarcasm in his voice. 'American Ambassadors to most West European countries have been ordered out. The US State Department is warning of an imminent attack.'

'Is the UK on that list?' Dame Helen asked.

'I'm afraid we are.'

Another note arrived. The P.M. read it quickly. 'This is an official warning from the US State Department: dirty bomb, central Europe, attack imminent.' He turned to Rawlins. 'It would seem that Mister Beesely is about ... an hour or so ahead of our American friends, when it comes to warning us about

stuff like this.’ He waited, Rawlins shifting uneasily in his seat. The P.M. finally stated, ‘I guess we will go with our original plan. And panic.’

‘We need to check every vehicle coming across the channel,’ Dame Helen stated.

‘Agreed,’ the P.M. said. ‘What ... what sort of damage could a dirty bomb do?’

It was Rawlins who answered. Flatly, he stated, ‘It could make ‘the square mile’ - our financial centre - uninhabitable for a thousand years.’

‘That *would* have an effect on the economy, I dare say,’ the P.M. dryly commented, staring at Rawlins.

‘This vehicle is said to contain radioactive ball bearings, thousands of them,’ Dame Helen explained, diverting the PM’s gaze. ‘They could just drop them in the streets in every area of London. That would make *all* London uninhabitable, sir.’

‘And the complete collapse of the economy of Western Europe,’ the Home Secretary pointedly suggested. ‘If this stuff is said to come from the Ukraine, maybe it began its journey in Russia. Maybe someone over there still wants to destroy NATO.’

‘That idea cannot be ignored,’ the P.M. agreed. He rubbed his forehead. ‘OK. Cancel all ferries from the continent, turn back those that have not docked, and handle the media.’

The Home Secretary pulled out his mobile and dialled.

‘The channel tunnel, sir?’ Dame Helen reminded him.

The P.M. reluctantly nodded. ‘Let’s start talking with our counterparts in France, Belgium, and Holland. Yes?’

An hour later, the Prime Minister lifted his face out a file as General Rose entered with Dame Helen. The Prime Minister eased back, studying General Rose as if an unwelcome visitor. ‘Is there any link ... between this current threat... and other matters?’ he unhappily enquired.

‘Not yet,’ General Rose admitted.

Helen glanced at him. ‘And I’d be very surprised if there was,’ she scoffed.

General Rose shrugged. ‘I’d also be very surprised if our *European friends* employed such a tactic, since it would hurt them as much as us.’

‘Agreed,’ Helen firmly stated, again glancing at General Rose.

The Prime Minister focused on the General, a slight frown forming. ‘There was suggestion, by you, that this strange Swiss organisation might be linked to our European problem. And yet ... here we sit, being tipped off by them.’

Helen stiffened. ‘If there was anything underhand about K2 –

‘K2?’ the Prime Minister repeated.

‘The Swiss intelligence organisation, Prime Minister. If there was anything underhand going on, Beesely would spot it.’

The Prime Minister faced General Rose. ‘Anything further on that ... other matter?’

‘No, sir.’

‘And we have someone ... *inside* this K2?’

‘Yes, Prime Minister.’

‘And you, Helen?’ the Prime Minister enquired. ‘Someone ... inside?’

She stood proudly taller. ‘Yes, Prime Minister. His name is Sir Morris Beesely, Victoria Cross.’

* * *

Herr Mole limped slowly from the castle, down into the East Camp, and to the temporary rope barrier now erected around the decontamination room.

Many of the staff knew that Ricky had recently recruited the odd little Bavarian man, and that they had socialised together, both staying at the same boarding house. Out of respect for

Ricky, and the knowledge that Mole had helped with the pursuit of Rudenson, they tolerated the little man.

Now Herr Mole stood next to a guard, the man towering over him. Short, bald and with bad eyesight, Herr Mole was not the typical K2 agent.

The guard lowered his head reverently. ‘Sorry about Ricky,’ he offered.

‘We all are,’ Mole answered. ‘He was ... what is that English saying, a rough diamond?’

‘A rough diamond. I like it, it fits.’

‘With some luck, I will find these men. And hopefully they will let *me* give them the chair.’ He turned and limped slowly back towards the command centre, the guard watching him go.

Back inside, Herr Mole studied the camera image of the inside of the decontamination room. There lay Ricky’s pale body, his left arm red up to the elbow and swollen, several red patches visible on the left side of his torso. His head faced the camera, lines of blood streaking down from his eyes and nose and pooling on the white tabletop.

Mole touched the screen. ‘I will look after your child.’

2

Rain now pelted the Bavarian petrol station forecourt. K2 agent Simon, a senior guard, waited for a break in the relentless rain, then just lowered his head and stepped out cursing.

He carefully supported three cups of steaming coffee in white plastic containers, the liquid’s temperature starting to hurt his hands. With his head down against the rain, he concentrated on not dropping the drinks. Glancing left, he noticed a dark green car, the wiper blades moving, and in slow motion he read the number plate.

The plastic coffee cups hit the ground and burst steaming hot coffee across the wet concrete as his hand reached inside his jacket, his heart pounding. He spun left and drew his weapon as

a woman with a child ran quickly towards the covered area, and to some protection from the rain. His pistol now rested in his hand. The woman stopped, screamed, grabbed her child by the head and jerked him violently backwards, the child's head just a few feet from the prone pistol.

Simon started towards the car, the vehicle less than four metres away, the driver just visible through the moist windscreen. He fired the first round at the lower windscreen, in the hope of breaking it. He saw the slide fly back and the cartridge eject in slow motion, a small puff of smoke. The glass shattered, now becoming white. His second and third shot were aimed at where he figured the driver's chest would be as he ran forwards. The windscreen now presented a hole some six inches across. The fourth and fifth shots were towards any passenger that might be sat there unseen, making a larger hole this time.

He reached the left side of the vehicle, smashing his left fist into the windscreen as he leant across the bonnet. It gave way and buckled. Peering inside, he shoved his pistol right through the hole and fired twice into the face of the passenger. Withdrawing his weapon, he reached further across and shot twice into the top of the head of the driver, who was now slumped forwards.

His K2 companions were there a second later. The first man put four rounds quickly into the driver, four rounds quickly into the passenger.

'Halt!' Simon shouted as he edged sideways between the car and a camper van. He reached the boot and grabbed at its push button, fumbling to opening it. Blankets were covering something. He grabbed them, flinging them onto the wet ground, now hearing screams in the distance that seemed oddly muffled. He found a large metal case. 'It's here!'

He rushed back to the front of the vehicle, holstering his weapon as his two companions remained prone, weapons pointed at the dead occupants. 'We must evacuate this area!'

One guard grabbed his phone and called in the incident as the other two now produced false identities of the German Federal Police Service, the BKA. Heads down and squinting against the heavy rain, they ran to nearby motorists, waving their badges and ordering the area cleared. One attended the kiosk window, and shouted for the area to be evacuated.

A moment later, a green and white police car pulled in to the petrol station, unaware of what was happening; they just needed fuel. An agent ran towards it through the rain, pistol in one hand, identity in the other.

The young policeman and his female companion were armed, as were most German officers, but still terrified by the gun-wielding man now running towards them. Gun crime remains uncommon in Germany, especially in Bavaria, but after events in recent weeks between neo-Nazi groups, everyone remained on edge. They could see the identity badge and held their nerve, winding down a window as they slowed to a stop.

In perfect German, the K2 agent shouted, 'Evacuate this area. This vehicle is the one we have been looking for - it has radioactive metal in the rear!' He thrust his Federal Police ID in their faces just long enough for them to see which department he was; BKA, Wiesbaden. 'Quickly!' he shouted before turning and running back.

The female officer got on the radio a second later, screaming requests for backup.

* * *

Stepping out of a meeting, Pepi lifted his phone. 'Yes?'

'Sir, one of the cars has been stopped by the German security services.' Pepi closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. 'But, sir, I have checked with the BKA in Germany, a surprise to them as much as us. I believe the vehicle was stopped by K2 agents in Bavaria.'

'K2!' Pepi exploded.

‘The second car has not been stopped, sir,’ the voice offered. ‘But the English, they have closed the English Channel crossings, all of them.’

Pepi closed his flip-phone, closing his eyes for a moment before stepping back into the board meeting of this Pan-European construction company, its headquarters in Genoa, Italy.

3

Otto took the call as they sat on the tarmac at Aeroporto das Lajes, Azores. ‘We found the car!’ He listened as Beesely and Johno eased forwards in their seats. ‘Killed the drivers. German police have the area sealed off.’

Beesely tapped Otto’s leg, Otto lowering the phone. ‘Make sure that it looks like the *German* security services found the car,’ he whispered.

Otto listened a while longer, then explained to operations what he wanted done.

When he finally lowered the phone, Beesely asked, ‘Have they checked radiation levels?’

Otto dialled again, taking several minutes to confirm that the German police had found low levels of radiation outside the box. They had not looked inside yet. Beesely dialled Dame Helen. She had been in a meeting with the Home Secretary and others, but recognising the number, told them she had to take it.

‘Beesely?’ she whispered, stood now in a corridor.

‘Yes, we have some good news for you, my dear. My boys just found and killed the drivers of the vehicle, in Bavaria. Germans are dealing with the radiation as we speak.’

‘Oh, thank God!’

‘Talk soon, I’ll be back in Zurich in about five hours.’ He hung up.

Dame Helen turned to find the Home Secretary behind her, and with an expectant look. ‘The Germans intercepted the

vehicle in Bavaria. They're dealing with the radiation as we speak.'

The Home Secretary raised his hands then clasped them together. 'Oh, well done,' he let out. 'C'mon, let's go tell the P.M.' They walked back to the COBRA meeting room where most of the members were still assembled, eating food that had been brought in for them.

Dame Helen's smile caught the eye of many in the room. 'The car has been stopped by the Germans,' she announced with a beaming smile. Sedate cheers went up, and people stood as the P.M. appeared in the doorway.

'The Germans stopped the car!' the Home Secretary enthused. 'We're in the clear.'

The P.M. smiled and shook hands with Dame Helen, then turned and addressed them all. 'I would like to thank you all for your hard work today under these difficult conditions. We were lucky, and we had little help from our friends. I'm cancelling this meeting, but I will be ordering a quick review of how we may have handled this type of crisis, should it have landed on our shores. I want all of you back here at a convenient time in the next few weeks with a view to ... not only reviewing our current procedures, but how we may improve them as well. Thank you all once again.'

Dame Helen quietly took him to one side. 'It wasn't the Germans who intercepted it.'

The PM raised his eyebrows. 'Oh. I see. Contact the German Counter Terrorist Service - or whoever - and get all we can on that car, especially the drivers.'

A funeral to arrange

1

Johno peered out of the Gulfstream's window. 'Ricky wanted to be buried in Malvern,' he quietly mentioned.

Beesely turned his head as the jet climbed smoothly away from the beautiful small islands of the Azores. 'His family?' he delicately enquired.

Leaning back in his reclined chair, Johno lazily turned his head. 'He has a sister, and his father's still alive. They live in Malvern somewhere. We spoke about it in Kosovo.'

'Going to be tricky, moving the body,' Beesely softly stated, staring out of focus. 'Even in a lead lined casket.'

Johno gave it some thought, adjusting the cold air vent above him. 'Can't cremate him,' he pointed out. 'Radioactive frigging ash blowing in the breeze.'

Beesely grimaced. 'We'll put him in concrete inside a lead lined casket and test it. If there's no radiation leak, we can ship him to the UK.'

Looking half asleep, Otto picked up his satellite phone and got things moving.

Beesely rang AGN Security in London. 'Max?'

'Beesely, how you doing? It's bloody panic over here, terrorist threat at highest level, talk of radioactive dirty bombs.'

'No need to worry, my boys bagged the bad guys a while ago.'

'*You* got them? Christ, you *are* up there in the big league. Probably get a bleeding peerage of some sort!' he laughed.

'Hardly. Listen, need to arrange a funeral for Ricky.'

Max paused. 'Ricky's dead?'

'Sorry, forgot you were not in the loop on that, it's been a bit hectic. Ricky was the first to spot the dirty bomb, and he got too

close; he died of radiation poisoning. And I want everyone in the game to know that - he died fighting for England!’

‘Will do, Morris.’

‘Find his family in Malvern, break the news as nicely as you can. Make sure all their financial needs are met and that the family is taken care of, very well taken care of. Let the boys in Hereford know that I want a large funeral.’

‘No problem, we’ll sort it. You coming over?’

‘Of course we’re coming!’

‘Sorry, Morris. Just thought it may be a bit ... you know - public - for you.’

‘I don’t care, we’ll all be there. Let’s aim for day after tomorrow. That will be a Friday, yes?’

‘Yes. I’ll make the arrangements.’ Max hung up.

‘He’s Welsh,’ Johnno muttered.

‘What?’ Beesely quietly asked.

‘Ricky. He’s Welsh; he born in Swansea. His sister got married, and moved to Malvern. When his father got sick, he moved in with the sister, she divorced, so it was just the sister looking after the old man. He was from Latvia originally. Original name was Daulis, so changed it to Davies, which apparently was on a chip-shop sign when he landed at some place called Barry Docks by boat.’

‘Who did?’ Beesely puzzled.

‘His dad. He came over as a kid during the war.’

Beesely nodded to himself, glancing out of the window.

* * *

Herr Mole limped slowly into the guards barrack room, to be met with the sounds of a celebration going on. The large room overflowed with agents, many with drinks in hand, several managers also present. He navigated through the crowd, and up to a tall agent named Simon, the high-spirited group halting their celebration as he approached.

Mole put out a hand and they shook. ‘Well done,’ he offered, his features neutral and unreadable. ‘Pity we could not have taken them alive.’

Simon agreed with a nod. ‘Yes, but I was not about to take any chances of them driving off. The engine was running, and they were looking directly at me.’

Others commended Simon’s actions.

‘You ... are the experts, not me,’ Herr Mole stated. ‘Thanks once again.’ He walked slowly out, leaving Simon watching him go.

* * *

Johno, Thomas and Beesely were sound asleep, so Otto grabbed Johno’s phone when it started to chirp. Bent double, he moved forwards so as not to disturb them.

‘Hello,’ he whispered.

‘Johno? Is that you?’ came a female voice, a soft and young American accent.

‘No, Herr Johno is asleep –’

‘Asleep?’ she barked.

Now Otto remembered: the secret meeting with the twenty-one year old American glamour model that they were not supposed to know about. She must be waiting in the restaurant. ‘We are on his personal jet, heading back to Switzerland on urgent business. My apologies, ma’am.’

‘And who the hell are you ... exactly?’

‘I am the head of one of his banks.’

She paused. ‘Oh. So when’s he coming back to the Bahamas?’

‘Hard to say, ma’am, it’s an emergency. He has a meeting with the ... British Finance Minister in the morning,’ Otto lied.

‘Oh ... well ... tell him to call.’

‘May I request that you remain at the restaurant for another fifteen minutes, I believe he did organize a gift for you.’

‘Oh ... OK.’

Otto hung up, rubbed his eyes, then re-dialled to sort out a gift for her.

People were starting to stare at her. Men often did that, even when they were with their wives, their spouses none the wiser about their partner’s porn surfing. But now she waited in Nassau’s best seafood restaurant, alone and glancing at her watch.

Nine minutes later, six violin players walked slowly in, starting to play whilst walking in step. Behind them came twelve men carrying huge heart-shaped bouquets, each made up of an odd number of roses.

She smiled, even though everyone started staring – wives and all.

* * *

At the Swiss border, the two Arabic men previously stopped by Ricky sat in their Ukraine-bought car, now with a different set of number plates. The rain had eased, but the queue of cars and lorries crawled slower and slower and dusk came on. They stared at each other.

‘I think this is a roadblock,’ one commented.

They turned off along a side road. In the rear nestled a large metal case.

‘Oliver? Beesely here.’ He glanced out of the window at the night sky.

‘Ah, well done, old man!’

‘Thanks.’

‘Quite a coup; the European leaders should be very happy with you.’

‘Finding the car strengthens our position somewhat. Listen, what happened to that 747 in the end?’

‘It should be landing at one of our military bases in Germany ... right about now,’ Oliver informed him.

‘Let’s not waste the opportunity, I’ll let the Europeans know how helpful you *may* have been. I’ll push the story my end, it may do some good.’

‘Sure.’

‘I will get my people to run an unofficial story on what that 747 may or may not do,’ Beesely suggested.

‘Good of you,’ Oliver offered.

‘Take care. We should all get some peace now.’

Otto made eye contact. ‘Your room at the castle has not had its final test, so we are expected at the Spa.’

Johno opened his eyes. ‘Where are we?’

‘Final descent into Zurich,’ Otto informed them. ‘We will be driven to the Spa.’

Johno checked his watch, still on Bahamian time.

‘It is 1am local time,’ Otto informed them, Johno and Beesely altering their watches. Thomas stirred.

2

Security remained tight the next morning as Beesely’s convoy drove through the compound and up to the castle. Noticing men in yellow hard-hats on the castle roof, Johno strained to see what they were doing.

Building work continued at a pace in the old restaurant, now fully decontaminated and tested a hundred times over. The concrete in the restaurant had been burnt, sanded down then burnt again, after which it had been painted with a plastic waterproof sealant, dried and then painted again with a special absorbent paint that the Israelis had sent over. Today it was due to be fitted with carpets and furniture.

In response to any lingering threat from nerve agent, the compound now housed permanent pens for a handful of piglets, adopted and fed by the staff. They were even named, 'Johno' being a favourite. The castle's air-conditioning had been modified, and it now blew its warm exhaust air directly through a pen of some dozen or so happy pigs. Twice a day, guards walked around the castle and its rooms with the best detectors money could buy. Beesely's room was situated two floors under the restaurant and had been largely unaffected; by coincidence, today would be the first day of re-occupying it, and the first day it would be ready after lengthy inspections.

The convoy stopped short of the castle at Johno's request. The gang clambered out, stepping slowly towards the short-lived decontamination centre, now not only completely filled in with concrete, but covered with twelve inches of concrete on top; just a smooth grey oblong. They approached at a casual pace, Johno at the head. He stopped and stood with his hands in his pockets, noticing the graffiti.

Thomas started to read some of the messages with a finger. 'Rest in peace ... my friend,' he slowly and carefully pronounced in German, repeating it in English. Pointing at some words in English, he turned to Johno.

'The same,' Johno informed him in German. He noticed the SAS 'winged daggers' drawn at several points close to the messages. Stepping forwards, he placed a hand on the smooth concrete, but then faced Otto with a concerned frown. 'The fucker's not still inside, is he?'

'No,' Otto informed him, sounding tired. 'His casket is in a small cave at the back of the camp.'

Johno noticed the three SAS 'old dogs' walking down from the castle in camouflage clothing, and so waved them over.

Kev began, 'If Ricky was still alive I'd beat his arse around this camp; putting his fucking hand in something like that!'

Johno hugged him. The two men held each other's forearms. 'Not the smartest move.'

‘Aye, as fucking daft as you when it comes to getting ‘imself injured!’

Johno gave a reluctant nod. ‘Funeral tomorrow. Malvern.’

‘Aye, sister still alive. Dad was too, if I remember right.’

‘Be a big show, Max is organizing old members. Wake after.’

Kev straightened. ‘Shit, that should be interesting,’ he said, his expression suggesting trouble. ‘Be a few drunken words said in haste that night! Wee a few good punches as well.’

Johno lifted his eyebrows and nodded in agreement as Beesely approached the group.

Kev let go of Johno and shook Beesely’s hand. ‘Sorry for ya loss, sir.’

‘It is I who should be saying that to you,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘You knew him longest.’

‘Maybis ... maybis. We’ll ha’ a few good drinks at the wake.’

Beesely instructed, ‘Get your best bib and tucker sorted, we’ll be flying in the morning, couple of jets. Call anyone you need to, in the UK, that might wish to attend.’

The ‘old dogs’ wandered off, chatting amongst themselves and making plans. As Beesely and the others approached the castle entrance, an olive-skinned stranger came out, the man accompanied by a manager and a guard. Noticing Beesely, the man walked straight up to him with a broad smile.

‘Sir Beesely,’ he pronounced badly, shaking hands. ‘I am from Zohar Chemicals, the Israeli chemical company. We have installed the latest technology all over the castle and compound, both chemical and radiation detectors.’

‘That is ... good to know, I shall sleep better.’

The man took it as a compliment, not the sarcasm it was meant as. ‘My boss has asked me to say to you that you have a lot of problems here, so we want to test our new systems here; beta site.’ He stood erect and smiled.

Beesely lowered his head. Curling his lip, he glanced at Otto before storming off. Otto gave the man an unfriendly stare, following Beesely inside.

Johno walked up to the salesman, grabbed his brochure, and said, 'About as tactful as a fucking Israeli arms dealer!'

In the corridor to the command centre, Beesely commented, 'The annoying thing is ... he is correct. In two weeks we have suffered two similar attacks.'

'We are in the front line,' Otto stated, repeating Beesely's earlier statement.

In Beesely's office, they all slumped into chairs, Thomas off to his room for a sleep, his body-clock disrupted. Beesely dialled. 'Get me Dame Helen, MI6.'

Muffled ringing could be heard. 'Hello?'

'Helen, Beesely here.'

'Just got back? That was a long flight!'

'We stayed the night at the nearby hotel Spa, but still pretty tired. Body clock is all to hell.'

'The P.M. wished to express his thanks.'

'Good to know. Listen, there's a funeral tomorrow for my man Ricky, it's in Malvern, between Gloucester and ... er ... Hereford, I think. We could do with a tight police presence, plus some discreet friends of yours hanging around, just in case.'

'I'll get on it. Anyone coming that we should be ... concerned about?'

'There's us lot, plus a bus load of old SAS troopers, and some currently enlisted men no doubt.'

'So, tight security then; sniffer-dogs, drains and hedgerows, helicopters?' she suggested.

'That seems a bit ... excessive, just for little old me?'

'Given what's been happening ... no, I think I'll play it safe.'

'Very well, it's your patch.'

'Ricky was one of ours for six years -' she quietly began.

‘And he was left to rot in a Chinese jail!’ Beesely firmly pointed out.

She paused. ‘Different management now. Still, I think we should show our respects.’

Beesely took a breath. ‘You are always welcome. Contact Max at AGN Security for the details.’

‘I know Max quite well, so I’ll co-ordinate the whole thing. Ricky worked for our gang for quite a while, so if I find anyone that knew him ... then I’ll let them know.’

‘Very well. Bye for now.’ He hung up and eased back, clearly fatigued. Turning to Otto, he said, ‘Can we get those black suits dusted off? Again! And extra planes for those staff here who may wish to attend. I would suggest just the English contingent, plus anyone who knew him well - such as his line manager here.’

Otto offered a professional Swiss head-tip.

Johno suggested, ‘I guess that little guy, Hairy Mole, would want to come.’

‘I saw him outside,’ Otto informed them.

Beesely dialled and requested his presence, Herr Mole appearing in the doorway a minute later. He looked exactly as Johno had described, the anti-hero if ever there was one. Beesely stood as Mole entered. ‘Come in, please. We were just discussing Ricky’s funeral. It’s tomorrow, in England, if you want to go.’

‘Thank you, sir, but there is something in the town I have to do for Ricky.’

Otto and Johno glanced at each other, then swivelled around to face Herr Mole.

Puzzled, Beesely asked, ‘For Ricky?’

Herr Mole stepped closer. ‘I suppose it is of no matter now. Herr Ricky has a woman in the town ... and she is four months pregnant. I have been looking after her since his death. And before. She is the owner of the boarding house.’

Otto seemed shocked. ‘I did not know this!’

Herr Mole shrugged. 'He was a secret agent.'

'The best,' Johno offered, a wry smile forming.

'Why ... did you not tell us?' Beesely calmly, but firmly demanded.

'He asked me to keep it quiet. I saw no security risk or breach of confidence.'

'Bring her here,' Beesely insisted. 'Straight away, she will be looked after.'

'No, sir, I cannot do that.'

'No?' Beesely repeated in disbelief as Otto stood. 'You said ... no?'

'Herr Ricky *insisted* that she and the child were to have nothing to do with K2. Ever.'

Otto stepped closer and stared sternly down at Mole. Herr Mole clasped his hands behind his back and cranked his head up, fixing Otto defiantly with a stare through his thick lenses. After two seconds, Otto turned to Beesely, unsure of what to do.

Beesely sat, letting out an audible sigh. 'If it was Ricky's wish ... then we will honour that wish. He had his reasons and, quite frankly, to quote our friend from Israel, *we do have a lot of problems here*. Probably safer if the kid was outside.'

'Ain't that the truth,' Johno mumbled.

Beesely gave him an unfriendly glare, then finally turned to Otto. 'Give Herr Mole Ricky's wages to give to her, and if anyone tries to find this woman and child they will answer to me. Clear?'

Otto finally lowered his head and relaxed, slumping into his chair.

'Thank you, Herr Beesely,' Mole offered, and left.

'He's got balls,' Johno remarked.

'Yes,' Beesely agreed. 'I can see why Ricky liked him.'

Johno held up the Israeli salesman's brochure. 'Who'd want to bring a kid near us fuckers? This ain't the brochure for Pampers!'

Beesely turned to Otto. 'I think we need to increase our budget on security equipment, and on our *offensive* capability.'

3

The Chief Constable of Worcestershire took the call just as he was about to leave his office. He was already running late. 'What? Tomorrow?' He listened. 'Yes ... yes, Ma'am ... we will do, Ma'am.' He put the phone down. 'Bloody hell.'

'Who was that?' his deputy asked.

'The head of MI6 herself!'

The phone started ringing again. 'Hello? Who? The Junior Defence Minister? Yes, put him through.'

The other phone in the room began to ring, answered by his deputy. He held it to his chest, a hand over the mouthpiece.

'Who's that?' the chief constable whispered.

'Someone from the SAS,' came the concerned reply.

The Chief Constable listened intently to the Junior Defence Minister. Ten minutes later, every available officer was on the phone, calling colleagues and ordering them in at 5am. Officers from Gloucester and Hereford were requested, asking those forces to spare one or two firearms teams, plus sniffer dogs.

* * *

Kempsey & Alfrick police station was not normally manned at night, and Inspector Clive Crosswel was just about to go off duty when three uniformed, and armed, SAS troopers wandered in. His mind leapt between the reasonable knowledge that they might be armed officers ... and that they might be terrorists. He just stared, open-mouthed.

'Evening, Boss,' the first man said. 'SAS: Specially Annoying Service tonight, I'm afraid.'

'How ... er ... can I help you gentlemen.'

‘There’s a big funeral in the morning, just up the road, an ex-SAS guy. We’re part of the advance team, so we’re going to be poking around all night, and we’re going to need you to stay here tonight, plod. This is temporary command central, I’m afraid.’

‘Plod?’ the officer quietly repeated.

‘Get the fucking kettle on, mate,’ came from the rear.

Two men stepped into the police station, this time in suits. The first man pushed to the front, then looked the SAS trooper rudely up and down. ‘Hope you wiped your fucking boots!’ He produced his ID; they were from MI6.

The first trooper had a good look at the ID. ‘What you doing here then, Boss?’

‘Funeral tomorrow; there’ll be loads of VIPs, probably director of MI6, plus a few politicians. I heard your boss is putting in an appearance.’

The trooper didn’t know. ‘Really?’ He faced the other troopers. ‘Shit, be under the microscope, boys.’

‘There’re people flying in from all over.’ The MI6 officer turned to the Inspector. ‘Is there a room we can use?’

The Inspector held up his hands. ‘Look, I have to call the Chief Constable’s office first -’

The phone nearest began to ring. The man from MI6 pointed at it. ‘Bet you ten quid that’s him.’

The lead SAS trooper said, ‘Twenty quid says it’s plod’s wife, wondering where he is.’ They shook.

The Inspector answered the call. ‘Hello? Yes, sir.’

‘Fuck!’ the trooper cursed, handing over a note.

The MI6 officer smirked. ‘Stick to the muddy field, eh, pongo.’

* * *

‘It’s who?’ the Queen enquired.

‘Dame Helen Eddington-Small, Director of MI6, Ma’am,’ her houseman informed her.

The Queen was surprised, glancing at her watch. ‘I’ll take the call in my study.’

‘Very good, Ma’am.’

The Queen listened at length to Dame Helen. Finally she said, ‘I’m grateful that you have brought this to my attention. Leave it to me. Good night.’

4

Dawn started to break over the cemetery as two of West Mercia’s armed response teams pulled up in their Volvos, parking on the grass at the entrance to the cemetery. A local patrol car was already in attendance, the two local officers easing out as the others arrived. Judging by their slow egress and cat-like stretching, the new arrivals figured that their colleagues had been here all night.

‘You look like shit,’ the first armed officer offered.

‘Thanks. Feel like it as well,’ came back.

‘Been here all night?’

‘Night’s not over for most sane people, home with the wife, all nice and toasty. Today’s a rest day, was supposed to be taking the missus shopping down in Cardiff.’

‘Bet ya glad you’re here then!’

They laughed. The new arrivals geared up, heading inside to start their sweep.

‘Graveyards at dawn,’ one complained. ‘Perfect.’

They made their way slowly up the main cemetery road, a gentle incline, and shaded on one side by tall trees. After a hundred yards they noticed a British Army Land Rover.

‘What’s that?’

They glanced at each other, and walked on, checking the area carefully. Slowly stepping up to the open driver’s window, they noticed what appeared to be steam coming out. They drew level.

‘Morning,’ a soldier called, watching them through the vehicle’s mirror. ‘Show on already?’ He downed warm tea straight from the flask.

‘You probably know more than we do,’ the officer complained. ‘We don’t know what the fuck we’re supposed to be doing here, we just got pulled off our normal duties.’

‘Could be worse, could’ve been here all night.’ The soldier put a finger to his lips, giving a ‘*shhhh*’, before pointing to the rear of the vehicle. Whispering, he said, ‘They get grumpy if woken an hour too soon. The command vehicle up the road.’

The officers walked slowly on.

A light mist hung over the graves, a few birds already calling, dew twinkling off the gravestones and off the grass. At the far end of the cemetery, some fifty yards further up the gentle incline, they came across several Land Rovers parked up on a patch of grass, a large green tent erected, but no soldiers were visible.

They halted. ‘Hello?’

‘*Shhhhh*,’ came from above them.

They glanced up and around, taking many seconds to locate a camouflaged soldier in a tree. ‘Morning,’ one quietly offered. ‘That looks uncomfortable.’

‘That’s because it is, flatfoot. Boss is in the tent, probably asleep with his teddy.’

‘*Boss* ... is awake, now,’ the Captain stated as he stretched. He stepped over and held out a hand to shake. ‘Cavalry here already?’

‘We’ve only seen one other patrol car so far, two of ours on the way. We’re supposed to have this place checked by 7am, because then the dogs get here.’

The Captain checked his watch. ‘Not to worry, nothing moves around here unless *we* let it. Do what you need to, go through the motions, then handle the road; we’ve got snipers all over the perimeter. Best stay out of the woods and the edges of the cemetery; we wouldn’t want to shoot you, now would we?’

‘That’s nice to know,’ one officer quipped. ‘And we won’t give you a ticket for parking in a fucking cemetery!’

The Captain laughed as the officers turned. They ambled back to the main entrance, arriving just as a small lorry pulled up.

‘Marquee,’ the driver shouted. ‘Where’s it going?’

‘God knows,’ the first officer replied before turning and studying the cemetery. There seemed only one place it could go, a neatly mown field off to the side, through a small gate. He pointed. ‘Over there,’ he suggested, walking around to open the gate as the lorry navigated around the main entrance and into the field.

A mobile burger van pulled up on the opposite side of the road.

‘Oh, there is a God,’ an officer mumbled.

Five minutes later, the sniper in the tree shouted down: ‘Boss, you there?’

The Captain emerged from the tent, shouting up an unfriendly, ‘What?’

‘Plod’s got themselves a burger van on the main road!’

‘Really?’ The officer perked up. SAS troopers started to appear from nowhere like magic. He reached into his pocket and produced thirty pounds. ‘Blinky, Dave, get a dozen burgers. And don’t take no crap from plod. Oh, and bring me back a receipt. Signed!’

The troopers glanced at each other, then set off.

From the western edge of the cemetery, two men in civilian clothes appeared, flanked by camouflaged troopers. The Captain noticed them then clicked his fingers. ‘Get back on the clock, boys.’

Weapons were cocked, faces turned to stone. The ‘prisoners’ approached, two stocky men in their fifties with weather-worn faces.

The Captain stood with his hands on his hips. ‘What we got here then?’

‘Tubby Jones,’ the first man announced. ‘And this Wilko.’

‘Well, with names like you’d have to be old boys.’ He shook their hands.

‘We both served with Ricky for a few years, back in the eighties, *and* lived to tell the tale. Then we ran ops with him for private agencies for a good few years.’

The Captain frowned. ‘Wilko? Wilko Thomas?’

The man smiled and nodded, he and his *oppo* producing their old ID cards. ‘Warrant Officer Scottish Kev gave us a call last night.’

‘Ah, now there’s a name I know. He’ll be here?’

‘Yeah, works for old man Beesely now,’ Wilko explained.

‘Beesely? Sir Morris Beesely?’ the Captain puzzled. ‘Wasn’t he Regiment, back in the fifties or something?’

‘Guards officer originally, then Regiment. He got decorated in Korea,’ Wilko explained.

The Captain added, ‘There’s a photo of him getting the Victoria Cross on the wall of the Officers’ Mess.’

‘Wouldn’t know, never went near the bleeding Officer’s Mess. We worked for a living!’

The Captain laughed. ‘So ... what’s Beesely doing these days? He must be getting on a bit.’

‘You’ll see later today. Old man Beesely will be the one that everyone else bows their heads to: your boss, head of military intelligence, the fucking Prime Minister.’ The Captain’s eyes widened. ‘Can’t say any more than that, Beesely’s people have ears everywhere.’

‘There’s a burger van down the road if you want something,’ the Captain offered.

‘No, we’re off to scrub up and then come back, show kicks off at 11am. I don’t live far, and I know Ricky’s father, so we’ll drive them in.’

Wilko had started to walk off, when he suddenly stopped and turned. In a loud voice, he addressed them all. ‘Do you know how Ricky died?’ It had not been meant as a question. ‘You

know that car they stopped in Germany, with the radioactive dirty bomb in the back? Well, it wasn't the Germans who stopped it, it was Ricky - and it cost him his fucking life. He's coming here today in a lead lined casket full of concrete. He died a hero, and don't you young fuckers forget that!

The Captain lowered his head.

A dangerous place to be buried

1

Quite a convoy had assembled in front of the castle, the security oppressive, with two-dozen guards encircling the vehicles. The SAS ‘old dogs’ stood in a line, five of them now, plus four younger ex-troopers; the ‘wet-work’ team. All of the men now wore black suits, and stood chatting quietly as they waited. Alongside them stood Ricky’s Swiss line manager and two K2 agents who had been part of his team.

Beesely walked briskly out with Otto and Johnno in tow, a sleepy Thomas bringing up the rear with a guard gently nudging him onwards. Beesely stopped in the centre of the vehicles and reviewed the scene. ‘Gentlemen, are we all here and ready?’

Managers glanced around and checked the faces, nodding and indicating that all was in order.

‘Let’s go,’ Beesely ordered.

* * *

Staverton Airport, Gloucestershire, was never busy at the best of times; a few private light aircraft coming and going, the odd flight to the Channel Islands or the Isle of Man, the occasional businessman flying to London Docklands. So two dozen armed police officers, walking now into the small dual-purpose arrivals and departures lounge, became quite the event of the year. The airport’s manager was soon on his way, hurriedly rushing across the airfield to meet the officers. Out of breath, he jogged in to find more machineguns than he had ever seen, or ever wanted to see at his rural airfield.

An officer in a suit held up his ID: Special Branch. ‘You are?’

‘Brooks, the airport manager,’ he panted. ‘What’s going on?’

‘VIPs flying in, landing in an hour, two private Learjets.’

‘I hadn’t been told anything –’

‘That’s why they call it security: it’s *secure* information.’

‘Does air traffic control know?’ Brooks delicately enquired.

‘They’ve just been informed,’ came the curt reply.

‘Oh.’ Brooks took a breath. ‘Does their arrival clash with any local traffic?’ he nervously enquired, picturing in his mind the Learjets coming in to land as a local Cessna 172 lined up to take-off.

‘Tough shit if it does.’ The Special Branch officer took Brooks by the arm to his office, the other officers fanning out, setting up roadblocks and sweeping the area.

* * *

Beesely glanced out of the Learjet’s window, down at the River Severn and the Second Severn Crossing, its cables a bright blue-white colour, contrasting with the brown mud underneath.

‘Five minutes,’ the pilot informed them over the tannoy.

The Learjet bustled. Full to capacity, it now carried eight passengers, no room for any guards; security on this trip was strictly down to British Special Branch. Beesely woke up Johno and Thomas in turn. Otto had been reading a file, but now glanced out of the window and put away his paperwork.

‘Let’s look sharp, gentlemen,’ Beesely instructed. The troopers started to adjust ties and suits, and check to each other over.

Away from the airport terminal, a convoy of Range Rovers waited patiently, all with Special Branch drivers, plus a uniformed local officer sat in the front of each. Four patrol cars surrounded them, two at the head of the convoy, two at the rear.

Beesely stepped down first, followed by ‘the family’, finally the troopers. The lead Special Branch detective welcomed him and shook hands, leading them towards the convoy.

Malvern proved to be just a fifteen-minute drive up the M5 motorway, followed by slow side roads to the cemetery. The last two hundred yards were a disturbingly slow crawl, Beesely noting hundreds of mourners.

‘You told Max to make a show of it,’ Johnno pointed out when he noticed Beesely’s concern.

‘I know, I know,’ Beesely said as he took out his phone. ‘Get me Duncan.’ They waited.

‘Duncan here.’

‘It’s Beesely. Listen, look out today and tomorrow for any stories and pictures from a funeral in Malvern -’

‘It’s already on the wire.’

‘Then I want to know exactly what is said; any pictures or mention of me then jump on them, hard. Any stories about the death of a former SAS trooper then ... then fine. But any mention of radiation and try and kill it. Understand?’

‘Yes, boss, leave it to me.’ He hung up.

‘We should have sun-glasses, maybe,’ Otto suggested, glancing at the crowd.

Beesely rolled his eyes. ‘Then we *would* look suspicious!’ He took a breath. ‘Oh, well.’

The convoy crept slowly into the cemetery, turning hard left and into the field with the marquee, carefully navigating through the crowds before finally parking on the grass against a stone wall. They stepped down, and joined the crowd around the marquee, two Special Branch officers flanking Beesely.

Johnno’s name got called immediately by a handful of former troopers. He waved and walked over to them.

Beesely checked his watch; they had thirty minutes before the service and burial started. Concerned, he glanced around the field, holding Thomas by the shoulder. ‘Stay close,’ he said in German, leading the boy into the marquee, the only thing on his mind being Max and the family.

Max emerged from a loud group of men, noticed Beesely, and walked briskly over. He shook Beesely's hand. 'Anything you need?'

'Where's the family?'

'I saw them outside a minute ago.' Max grabbed one of his staff and sent the man to look for them.

The inside of the marquee was quite the party already, a mixture of uniformed soldiers wearing best No. 1s, soldiers in fatigues with machineguns slung over their shoulders, men in black suits, some in casual dress, uniformed police officers, strange groups of twos or threes of serious looking men huddled in corners.

Dame Helen walked in with the Junior Defence Secretary, plus Colonel Milward from the SAS flanked by two armed troopers. The two groups immediately closed the gap and greeted each other.

Beesely smiled formally. 'Dame Helen, surprised to see you here today, but you are always welcome.' They shook.

'Sir Morris, may I introduce the Junior Defence Secretary.' They shook. 'And I believe you know Colonel Milward.'

'Yes,' Beesely confirmed as they shook. 'Hello again, it's been a while.'

Milward informed them all, 'My first tour with the Regiment ... when I was a Captain. You were with our Military Intelligence liaison group in Northern Ireland.'

'Well, let's not have a history lesson; it will make me look old!' They laughed.

The Junior Defence Secretary inched forwards. 'The P.M. wishes to offer his condolences for your loss, and to thank you for ... *recent assistance*.'

'Good of him.'

'I hope you don't mind,' Dame Helen began, 'but we've arranged a posthumous award for Sergeant Davies, a rush job.'

Beesely straightened, a little surprised. 'Always appreciated. I am sure his family will be pleased.'

A police officer brought in an elderly man in a wheelchair, accompanied by Max and a woman dressed in black, Ricky's sister, Beesely presumed. Beesely gestured Dame Helen towards them. Ricky's father and sister seemed completely overwhelmed, and did not seem to be handling the attention well. The crowd parted, and they were presented to Beesely.

'Mr. Davies, I'm Sir Morris Beesely. Your son was working for me when he ... died.' He swivelled his upper body, and gestured with an open hand. 'This is Dame Helen, the head of our Intelligence Services. This is the Junior Defence Minister, and this is Colonel Milward, Commandant of the SAS.'

'Max told us about you, Mister Beesely,' Ricky's father managed to get out between coughs. 'He bought us a new house, a car ...' He could not continue.

'Your son was a hero,' Dame Helen offered as she knelt in front of Ricky's father, keenly observed by Beesely. 'He died fighting for his country, and we have a medal for him that we would like to give to you.' She stood and signalled Milward by tipping her head.

Milward turned and shouted, 'Men of the Regiment. If you please!' The marquee fell silent, men stepping in from outside. 'Make some space!' Milward shouted, gesturing for people to move to the sides of the tent.

Soldiers moved back and stood in silence, holding their drinks. Johnno appeared with a group of former troopers, and stood to one side.

Milward made eye contact with a man, who stepped out, reappearing a moment later with a large photo in a frame. 'We managed to find an old photo of Sergeant Davies in uniform.' He displayed the photo for all to see before handing it over to Ricky's father.

'He looks young there,' Ricky's father noted.

Milward gave a quick head-tip to the same man, who disappeared out of the tent. In walked a man in a formal morning

suit and bowler hat. He took off the hat, and walked to the middle of the room.

‘Mr. Davies,’ the newcomer called, bowing his head. Quietly, he began, ‘Her Majesty the Queen has asked me to attend here today. After consultation between the Army, the Queen’s Office and Her Majesty’s Government, it has been decided to formally award your son a posthumous Distinguished Service Medal.’ Whispers shot around the room. Beesely smiled, nodding. The Queen’s agent produced a thin, dark blue box from an inside pocket, opened it to show people then handed it over.

Beesely began clapping, soon followed by those who could clap – those without drinks in their hands. A few cheers went up.

The Queen’s agent walked up to Beesely as former soldiers closed in on Ricky’s family. ‘Her Majesty wishes to convey her deepest sympathies for your loss, and her gratitude for your continuing loyalty to your country.’

Beesely shook the man’s hand, and turned to Dame Helen. ‘A nice gesture for Ricky,’ he said as they were both brought champagne flutes. ‘You broke a few rules with the speed of that award. Still, twelve years late is better than nothing.’

Dame Helen responded, ‘You’re taking care of the family, so least we could do.’

Ten minutes later, a police officer whispered in Beesely’s ear that the casket had arrived.

‘Casket is here,’ Beesely informed Milward as he checked his watch.

‘Do you need a burial detail?’

Beesely explained, ‘It weighs a tonne. Literally! It’s lead lined and full of concrete; the handles would probably break off if we could get enough men next to it. No, we have a forklift arranged.’

Milward stared, wide eyed. ‘A forklift?’

‘It cannot be helped. If you can get everyone to line the road...’

Milward turned, and started requesting groups to down drinks and line the roadway, the vicar appearing and joining the family.

2

Herr Mole was sat eating in the staff canteen when the German regional news came on, the news from his home district in Bavaria. He glanced up as someone increased the volume.

It was a continuation of the story about the radioactive metal case, which they had all watched several times over the night before. Now there seemed to be some fresh items of discussion. He watched the image of a man in a protective suit carrying the large metal box from the car and into the back of another vehicle. Mole was about to sip his coffee, when he slowly lowered it. Turning back to the TV images, he frowned. 'Something is not right,' he mumbled.

The person sitting opposite heard him, glancing at the TV screen as Herr Mole stood and walked back towards the control room. There he ordered up the report of the encounter in Hungary, and started to read, making notes. His manager noticed him and, in passing, enquired what he now worked on.

'I will need your help and some staff,' Herr Mole cheekily informed his manager without detracting from his studies. 'There is a problem with the box we stopped in Bavaria.'

'A problem with it?'

'Yes. Can you please find out for me if the German authorities emptied the metal case of ball bearings before they removed it?'

'Emptied the case? Of course not! Who would open that box and remove the ball bearings with that level of radiation? They would have to be crazy to attempt it.'

Mole looked up. 'Then we have a very serious problem. Can you call the German authorities and double check, then get me a

metal box of these dimensions.’ He handed up a piece of paper. ‘Plus several thousand small metal ball bearings.’

‘What are you suggesting?’

‘I am suggesting ... that if I am right, that we have a very big problem. That metal case may not be the right one.’

‘What?’ his manager gasped. He turned to other staff, starting to issue orders before dialling a senior official of the German Federal Police, the man a K2 operative himself.

Herr Mole made sure no one was watching, and then sent an email. He ordered the two K2 helicopters on stand-by in the UK, to the funeral to pick up Beesely – in exactly thirty minutes; they had been waiting discreetly at Shobdon Aerodrome, Herefordshire.

Mole studied the replica metal box, checking the details on the paper in his hands. ‘The box is roughly of the correct dimensions, and so are the ball bearings. Ricky put his arm in, up to the elbow.’ He signalled Simon the guard, who stood ready with a sleeve rolled up. The man worked his hand down through the ball bearings until he touched the bottom.

‘Stop,’ Mole requested. ‘Notice where the ball bearings reach his elbow.’ He turned to the doctor. ‘Doctor, would you say that the radiation burn pattern on Ricky’s arm would have been caused in this way?’

‘Yes,’ the doctor confidently confirmed as others looked on.

‘And the Germans did not remove the ball bearings?’ Mole asked. His manager confirmed that the German authorities had just tested the box before removing it. ‘Simon, would you please close the lid of the box and then lift it up,’ Mole requested, standing back a step.

Simon rolled down his sleeve, closed the lid, braced himself, and then tried to lift the box off the table. He couldn’t. At best he could move it sideways. And Simon was six foot five and eighteen stone.

The senior manager stepped forwards, looking horrified. 'The box in Bavaria, it did not have the ball bearings inside!' He turned to Mole. 'So where are they?'

Calmly, Mole responded, 'It is not the same box. The ball bearings are in another box, being assembled into the dirty bomb that they were always intended for. The captured box was never part of the plan, but maybe a decoy.'

The senior manager's eye bulged. 'Alarm!'

3

The forklift crept forwards in loud, jerky movements, eliciting strange looks from the crowd lining the cemetery road. A few of the former soldiers stood with drinks in hand, making rude comments about the unusual burial method.

Behind the forklift's laboured progress came the local vicar, followed closely by Ricky's father and sister, the wheelchair pushed by John. Behind them trailed the others, finally Colonel Milward, and his honour guard of twelve uniformed troopers.

Today promised to be a pleasant July day, warm, but no sign of the sun breaking through the clouds yet. As the tail of the honour guard inched along, bystanders 'fell-in' and followed on from behind.

* * *

Herr Mole found the phone number he had been searching for in the computer. The Lodge: access by Beesely only. With the chaos of the control room behind him, he dialled the number.

'Hello?' came an American accent.

'My name is Herr Mole, I work for Sir Morris Beesely at K2, Switzerland.'

'One moment please.' Mole waited.

'This is Oliver Stanton.'

‘My name is Herr Mole, I work for Sir Morris Beesely at K2.’

‘Where’s Beesely?’

‘At a funeral in England.’

‘Ah, yes. How can I help, exactly?’

‘The dirty bomb that we - the Germans - found, it was a decoy –’

‘Decoy! Are you sure?’

‘Yes, sir. There were only a handful of ball bearings in it.’

‘So where are the rest?’

‘We have no idea, sir,’ Mole informed him.

‘Jesus!’

‘I was wondering if that 747 you kindly offered before was still available?’

‘Wait on the line.’ Mole waited a full two minutes. ‘You there?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘It’s on its way here, over Ireland by now.’

‘Can you turn it around, sir?’

‘I’m trying to reach it now. Where would you like it sent?’

‘I would suggest a high altitude search of Southern England and London to start with.’

‘Leave it with me.’

A long wake

1

Beesely's, Johno's and Otto's phones began to vibrate and bleep at the same time, the signal for a security alert.

Beesely turned to Milward. 'We have company!'

Johno began glancing over the heads of onlookers to see if he could see anything wrong. Soldiers copied him.

Milward ordered the honour guard forwards to protect the VIPs before shouting, 'Men of the Regiment, heads up! We've got trouble.' Men started to run and cock their weapons. The police at the gate jumped out of their vehicles, making ready their weapons.

Beesely answered his phone, then listened. 'What?' He hung up then turned to face Dame Helen. 'That metal case the Germans found, it was emptied of its ball bearings. It was a decoy. They are still out there somewhere!'

Dame Helen grabbed her mobile as they started to work their way through the crowd, and back down towards the gate.

Noticing the 'old dogs', Beesely pointed back towards the forklift. 'Look after the family!'

Milward shouted, 'Serving men of the Regiment, back to base! On the double!'

Dame Helen shouted down her phone, 'That first dirty bomb was a decoy, there's another one! It could be anywhere! It could be here!'

It took a full ten minutes to get to the road through the crowd, sirens wailing as fresh police arrived.

Beesely grabbed a senior officer. 'We're going to need a fast escort back to the airport!'

They headed for the line of Range Rovers, before Otto stopped them. With his phone still to his ear, he stated, 'Our helicopters will be here soon.'

‘How soon?’ Beesely asked.

‘Two minutes,’ Otto informed him with a puzzled expression. ‘They were activated thirty minutes ago.’

‘Who activated them?’ Beesely asked, studying Otto’s expression.

‘I do not know,’ Otto admitted.

They stared at each other for a moment, before recognising the sound of helicopters in the distance. A few seconds later, two black Squirrel helicopters circled the area at high speed and low altitude, before putting down in the field the other side of the road to the cemetery. Unfortunately for everyone, the hay in the fields had just been harvested.

Beesely sought out Dame Helen in the chaos. ‘Helen! You and the Minister take one, we’ll take the other!’

They scrambled across the road, across a ditch, and into the field. Running bent double, they clambered in, Johno getting into the co-pilot’s seat. Both helicopters took off immediately and sped off at low altitude.

‘Pilot, Staverton airport,’ Otto ordered.

Beesely adjusted his headset. ‘Pilot, head for London, best speed, please. And pilot, can I connect with operations on this headset?’

‘Yes, sir. One moment. OK, go ahead.’

‘This is Beesely.’

‘Operations here, sir,’ came a detached and professional female voice.

‘Give me an update.’

‘We have determined that the box stopped in Bavaria is not the one that Herr Ricky put his arm into, there were not enough ball bearings in it, sir.’

‘OK, alert all European security agencies.’

‘Already done, sir.’

‘Excellent. Right, put me through to Oliver Stanton at The Lodge.’

‘One moment, sir. It may not be a good line ... standby ... go ahead both parties.’

‘Olly, that you?’ Beesely shouted

‘Beesely, yes, where the heck are you?’ came the crackling reply.

‘In a helicopter, heading for London.’

‘We got the 747 turned around as you requested –’

‘What do you mean, we requested?’ Beesely asked, now confused.

‘Your people called me, asked for the 747. It was over the Atlantic heading home, now it should be over Cornwall.’

‘Who called you from K2?’ Beesely pressed.

‘Some guy named Mole, twenty minutes ago.’

Beesely made eye contact with Otto. ‘Oh, OK. I would suggest that they climb to altitude and make a general sweep of Southern England and then London.’

‘That’s what it’s doing, as your people requested.’

Again Beesely made eye contact with Otto.

Johno laughed. ‘Ricky picked a winner, Boss.’

‘Listen, Olly, can you get me the 747 comms’ frequency?’

‘Got it here –’

‘Don’t tell me, my people already asked for it?’

‘Yep, it’s 302.1.’

‘Call you later. Operations? End call. Pilot, can you access 302.1?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Make contact with them.’

‘Their call sign, sir?’

‘Try ... 747 Radiation Bird,’ Johno suggested.

‘And who do we tell them we are, sir?’ the pilot asked.

‘British Military Intelligence,’ Beesely suggested.

The pilot set the frequency. ‘747 Radiation Bird, this is British Military Intelligence, do you copy?’

‘British Intelligence, this Mike Whiskey One-Niner,’ came back in a calm and soft American accent.

‘Mike Whiskey One-Niner, this is Kilo-Two. What is your altitude, bearing and position, over?’ the pilot asked.

‘Kilo Two, we are level three-zero, bearing zero-eight-seven, just started scanning Cornwall.’

‘Mike Whiskey, this is commandant aboard Kilo-Two,’ Beesely began. ‘Please concentrate on London, and the area between London and south coast, over.’

‘Kilo-Two, roger. We’re nine minutes from London, over.’

Beesely tapped the pilot’s shoulder and made a throat cutting sign. The pilot gave a thumbs-up. ‘Pilot, how long to London?’

‘Forty minutes, sir. Normally’

‘Break every speed limit and restriction, just get us there. Put operations on.’

‘Operations, sir?’

‘Put me through to Dame Helen.’

‘I can do that directly, sir,’ the pilot interrupted. ‘Helo to helo.’

‘Fine, do it.’

‘Kilo-Bravo, come in, over.’

‘Kilo-Bravo here, half a mile on your six.’

Johno stared out of the window, twisting his head around as he scanned for the other K2 helicopter.

‘This is Beesely, give me Dame Helen.’

‘Beesely, Helen here, go ahead.’

‘Helen, there’s an American military 747 ten minutes away from London. It’s kitted out with radiation detectors specifically designed for this sort of job. If there is a dirty-bomb in the UK, we’ll find it.’

‘Beesely, just how the hell did *you* get the Americans to send us that? And how come *we* didn’t know about it?’

‘I have friends in high places, my dear - thirty thousand feet to be exact. That 747 was on its way home after we tried to use it the first time, so we turned it around. It can pinpoint that bomb. If the bomb is here, then I’m going to fly this helicopter to wherever it is, hover above it, you can track us.’

‘OK, will do. We managed to get through to the PM, he’s being flown out to Chequers and we’re heading there.’

‘Good luck, Helen. We’ll relay what we find, stay on this frequency.’

2

The two helicopters flew on across the pleasant Gloucestershire countryside, and towards Oxford.

Five minutes later, Beesely’s helicopter was contacted by the USAF 747. ‘Kilo-Two, this is Mike Whiskey One Niner. Copy, over?’

The pilot responded, ‘Mike Whiskey, this is Kilo-Two. Go ahead, over.’

‘Kilo-Two, we have an unusual signal. It’s coming from Kentshire.’

‘*Kent-shire?*’ Johnno repeated, turning to the pilot with an amused frown.

‘Mike-Whiskey, this is Kilo-Two commandant. Is the target moving?’

‘Kilo-Two, affirmative, it’s tracking slowly northwest, less than twenty miles from central London.’

‘Mike-Whiskey, descend and pinpoint the target, we will clear it with air traffic control. You fly where you need to, forget the rest of the traffic. Understood?’

‘Kilo-Two, understood. What’s your transponder code? We’ll track you, over.’ The K2 pilot gave the 747 crew his transponder code.

‘Pilot!’ Johnno called. He pointed ahead with a broad smile. ‘To *Kent-shire!*’

Pleasant countryside and small towns shot by in a blur.

Beesely tapped the pilot’s shoulder. ‘Dame Helen.’

‘Kilo-Bravo, come in.’

‘Kilo-Bravo here, go ahead.’

‘Helen, it’s in Kent. Or, as our American friends just reported, *Kent-shire*. Get air traffic control to clear a path for

that 747, call sign Mike Whiskey One-Niner. Then I suggest you close all the roads south of London!’

‘Will do.’

He tapped the pilot’s shoulder as they sped across brown and dry fields. ‘Fly directly towards Kent. Try and picture the position of where it is, and then cut straight across London, screw the regulations. Understand!’

‘Yes, sir.’

Beesely took a breath and turned to Thomas. He forced a smile, but did not need to worry about the boy, who was loving the helicopter ride, sat now in his oversized headset. Beesely addressed Otto, ‘That car is twenty minutes from the centre of London, the one good thing being British traffic and crappy Kent roads! So maybe an hour.’

‘If Herr Mole had not broken protocols, it would be too late,’ Otto pointed out, looking disappointed.

‘Going to buy that fucker a big drink when we get back,’ Johno stated from up front.

‘He certainly shows initiative,’ Beesely commended.

‘Sir, we’re being followed by a police helicopter,’ the pilot informed them.

‘Does it have a flashing blue light?’ Johno quipped, straining to see it.

Beesely reminded them, ‘They’re *supposed* to be following us.’

‘They can’t! This is faster,’ Johno pointed out. ‘By about twenty knots.’

They sped on.

‘That’s Oxford, Boss,’ Johno pointed out ten minutes later. Time passed slowly, despite the ground rushing past in a blur.

‘We’ll pick up the M40 motorway soon, sir,’ the pilot informed him. ‘That’s Didcot power station in the distance, two o’clock.’

Thomas checked his watch.

‘No,’ Otto informed him in German. ‘Direction, military direction.’ He pointed. ‘Ahead is twelve o’clock, behind is six o’clock.’

Thomas worked it out, glancing out of the window, pointing at the power station’s stacks with a smile.

Ten minutes later, the pilot announced, ‘Approaching restricted Heathrow airspace, sir.’

‘Avoid frightening them, but stick to the fastest route to Kent. Go low if you have to.’

‘There’s going to be some awkward questions afterwards, sir.’

‘If there’s anyone left alive in London,’ Beesely quietly pointed out.

A pleasant, yet professionally detached female voice came on. ‘Unidentified helicopter bearing zero nine five, passing Heathrow one mile north, please identify yourself.’

‘How should I respond?’ the pilot asked.

‘I’ll handle it,’ Johno suggested. ‘Heathrow control, this is SAS assault team Kilo-Two, bearing zero-nine-five, heading to London on active service. All enquiries to the Home Secretary, or Commanding Officer, SAS Barracks, Hereford. Kilo-Two out.’

They waited. Nothing.

Johno turned his head. ‘That did the trick.’

‘Call up the Yanks,’ Beesely ordered.

Johno altered the radio settings, leaving the pilot to concentrate on flying as London streets began to flash by. ‘Mike Whiskey One-Niner, this is Kilo-Two, over.’

‘Kilo-Two, go ahead, over.’

‘Mike-Whiskey, do you have an update on the target, over?’ Johno requested.

‘Kilo-Two, the target is moving slowly north-west. We don’t have a street name over-lay mapping ability, but can give you an exact track and distance. Change to heading zero nine one, nine miles out.’

‘Shit, they’re in London!’ Johno shouted.

‘Get me Dame Helen!’ Beesely barked.

‘Kilo-Bravo, receiving? Over,’ Johno asked.

‘Kilo-Bravo here, go ahead.’

‘Helen, they are in South London!’ Beesely told her.

‘We’ve closed all the roads north over the river, roadblocks everywhere.’

‘I need you to get everyone on the ground to track us, and the police to look up for us; black helicopter with numbers on the side –’ He tapped the pilot’s arm.

‘Hotel-Golf-Kilo-Two-Nine.’

‘Get that, Helen?’

‘Yes. Look out for some help from above.’

‘We’re coming up on the river,’ Johno pointed out. ‘Got to talk to the Yanks. Mike-Whiskey, this is Kilo-two. Update, over.’

‘Kilo-two, change track to zero eight nine, six miles.’

‘Fuck me, there’re RAF Harriers up there,’ Johno informed them. They all peered up.

‘What the hell can they do?’ Beesely scoffed. ‘They’re not about to bomb London streets, waste of bleeding time.’

‘Police helicopters ahead,’ Johno shouted. ‘Fucking loads of them. I can see at least five of the fuckers!’

‘That’s more like it,’ Beesely suggested. ‘It’s not the bleeding Battle of Britain!’

‘Thomas,’ Johno called. ‘Look out for Spitfires!’ Missing the joke, Thomas peered up. ‘They’re following,’ Johno informed the gang, craning his neck around as the yellow and blue police helicopters changed direction.

‘Kilo-two, change heading to zero-nine-seven, target has turned south-west. Three miles.’

They flew southeast at speed, Thomas delighted at the London scenes to the north. He could now see the city, Battersea Power Station’s distinctive towers, and the bridges over the river.

‘Beesely,’ Johno called. ‘They’re already far enough in to cause panic, and to devastate a big chunk of South London.’

Beesely took a breath, and glanced at Otto, but answered Johno. ‘Should the cards fall face up, do what you can.’ Otto did not understand.

‘Shit,’ Johno shouted. ‘Someone order up a 747?’

They all stared out of the windows. Mike-Whiskey appeared through the clouds at around five thousand feet, slowly circling.

‘Kilo-Two, change track to one-zero-five. 1 mile.’

Beesely gazed down at the houses, and at the traffic. People were going about their lives; off to work, shopping, coming home from work, unaware as to what was going on. His stomach started to knot. They descended even lower, houses now shooting by.

‘Kilo-two, reduce speed, track zero-nine-one, we’re going to real time updates. ‘Port five ... port five ... ease down ... starboard five ... starboard five ... port five ... steady ... standby to stop ... standby ... on-target.’

‘There’s a line of traffic down there,’ Johno shouted. ‘But I can’t see which one is our vehicle. Mike-Whiskey, there are a lot of vehicles, we can’t detect which one.’

‘Kilo-Two, real-time again, watch for movement. ‘Port five ... stop ... ahead slow ... stop ... overhead.’

‘This is fucking useless!’ Johno screamed.

‘Look,’ Otto shouted. ‘Police cars approaching, from the left.’

‘They’re stuck in traffic,’ Johno observed.

‘There,’ Beesely shouted. ‘Nine o’clock position, two patrol cars closing in.’

‘This is Blackheath,’ the pilot informed them. ‘We’re over the road going past the park if you want to call it in.’

‘They can see us,’ Beesely said.

‘Port five ... steady ... wait, vehicle now moving in opposite direction,’ came from the 747.

‘There!’ Johno shouted. ‘That car’s done a u-turn on the grass, heading back. Get behind it.’

‘Steady ... on target ... on target ... starboard five... on target.’

‘That’s it, green estate car,’ Johno shouted. ‘It’s going across the park.’ He checked the streets ahead. ‘All the coppers are north of here, behind us.’ He glanced over his shoulder at Thomas, the boy wide-eyed with curiosity and excitement, then seized the control column. ‘I have control.’

‘What are you doing?’ the pilot protested.

Johno swapped hands on the control column, took out his pistol, and thrust it into the neck of the pilot. ‘Two seconds to live or die, I don’t care either way.’

‘Johno!’ Otto called.

Terrified, the pilot raised his hands off the controls. Johno put the pistol under his groin and nosed the helicopter down, straight for the estate car, the windscreen filling with the view of the road through the park.

Otto shot forwards. ‘Johno! What are you doing?’

Beesely pulled him back. ‘His job.’

Clearly terrified, Otto stared back at Beesely.

Johno banked hard to miss electricity lines before banking sharply the opposite way. The surprised driver now glanced out of his side window, directly at Johno, closer than any motorist would ever want to be to a helicopter in flight.

The estate car neared the crest of the rise as the helicopter passed it, the road surrounded by flat parkland - as Johno had hoped for. Johno hit the pedals hard and spun around so that they were angled down and flying backwards with their momentum, pinned into their seats.

‘Jesus!’ the pilot screamed, a warning now sounding out.

The estate car was going too fast to stop. Johno edged forwards, the rotor-blades inching towards the road, the helicopter now little more than ten feet above the ground.

Driving towards a helicopter's rotor-blades was just about as frightening an experience as any driver could face - even in London traffic! The driver panicked, hit the brakes and tried to turn at the same time, something they teach you not to do in defensive driving classes. He lost control, hit the kerb and rolled.

Before the estate car had a chance to end up in the helicopter's rotor-blades, Johno accidentally clipped the road. Rotors shattered and flew off. With little more than ten foot of altitude their downward momentum was not great, Johno focused on a drain covering as it rapidly filled his forward view.

They were on their side in an instant, hitting the road hard on their right side. The windows shattered, showering them with glass. The tail rotor touched ground and shattered, its blades tearing through their housing. In two seconds they were a wreck of metal, the engine screeching its complaint, gears registering a lack of resistance and burning themselves out. Thomas screamed, the pilot now unconscious.

Johno hung in his harness, fighting to get it off, blood trickling across his face. Lights flashed on the control panel, and a warning sounded for a brief second before the helicopter lost all power. Smoke started to rise. Through the gaps where the windscreen used to be, Johno could now see the car, the vehicle now upright but dented all over, its engine issuing steam.

Holding onto his door with his left hand, and pulling with all his strength, he righted himself, pulling his head away from the pilot - and wondering why it was suddenly so quiet. Fumbling around, he found the pistol still underneath his groin. Grabbing it, he pulled hard with his left arm, tilted his head and aimed, hanging little more than fifteen feet from the estate car.

First shot. The driver's door glass fractured, turning white.

Second shot, a small hole.

Third shot, more careful, all the glass gone now.

A head popped up and looked directly at him. Two shots straight to the face. The face dropped out of view.

More movement. Passenger? Two shots. Pause. No movement.

Lowering his aim, Johno fired into the driver's door. Three careful shots, creating a metallic echo.

He gripped the pistol in his teeth, unbuckling and falling onto the pilot. Pulling on the broken glass that edged the smashed windscreen, he clambered awkwardly out. Immediately his right leg gave way as passing motorists stopped. Someone with a kite was running towards them. He tried to stand, hobbling as best he could. Four small steps and he was there, walking through an odd bubble of silence.

A woman in a red sweater, on the grass. Her lips were moving, mouthing something at him. She offered him a hand. 'Are you alright?' It sounded as if she was talking to him underwater.

Johno raised the pistol, shooting the driver in the head at point blank range. From the corner of his eye he could see the woman screaming and running in slow motion. He leant right into the car, pistol against the temple of the passenger, a single, muffled, shot. Back seat? Clear. He holstered his pistol.

Dragging himself around to the boot in slow motion, people came running and shouting, odd, muddled screams. The boot was already open an inch, and so he lifted it higher. Blankets. He tore them off. Large metal case. Closed, two clips. Big handles.

He grabbed a handle, pulling. It was too heavy. Bent double, he dragged it to the edge of the boot and stopped. His hearing suddenly came back, so to the pain. From everywhere!

Helicopters, lots and lots of helicopters flittering about above him, the sky full of them. A loud noise, coming from behind, caused him to turn. He raised a hand against the bright sunlight and squinted: an Army Lynx helicopter, soldiers jumping out and running towards him. They ran past, one either side, firing at the driver and passenger, ten rounds into each man.

'Johno! Johno!' a soldier called from somewhere.

Johno grabbed the first trooper, bending him towards the metal case. 'Pick it up! We can't leave it here!'

The soldier grabbed the other end, a third helping. They started towards the Lynx. Johno limped, every step agony, the pain etched into his face as the Lynx pilots frantically tried to wave them off. A third soldier opened the rear doors of the Lynx, the floor space more than enough to get the box in. Awkwardly, four of them laboured to get it inside.

The soldier started climbing in after it. Johno grabbed him and flung him back hard, closing the door, and turning the handle so that it sank into its recess.

Sergeant Mason, the SAS team leader, grabbed Johno by the shoulder and swung him around. 'What the fuck you doing?' he shouted over the helicopter's engine noise and downdraft, their faces almost touching.

Johno grabbed the man's shoulder and put his face up against the sergeant's ear. 'That bomb could go off at any time! It's a nuke!' The sergeant raised an arm, stopping his men from approaching the Lynx - or from punching Johno.

In the roar and downdraft, Johno opened the navigator's door, the man trying to shout above the noise of the engines, and failing. Johno leant inside, grabbed the man's harness buckle and undid it. He dragged the struggling man out and dropped him on his head, the co-pilot's helmet connection left dangling out of the door.

Surprisingly fast, the man jumped back onto his feet. Johno noticed him out of the corner of his eye just as the man grabbed his left arm. He swung around and hit him square on the chin, knocking him backwards, the co-pilot dazed. Sergeant Mason grabbed the navigator and dragged him back several yards as Johno clambered awkwardly inside and closed the door. Taking out his pistol, he put it under the chin of the pilot, pointing skywards with his left hand.

Considering the amount of blood streaming down Johno's face, combined with what the pilot had just witnessed - both

from in the air and with his navigator - the pilot decided not to argue, and pulled back on the cyclical control. They began to climb, leaving the aircraft's previous occupants - the four SAS troopers, stood on the grass and watching.

3

Johno put the pistol under his groin. He could now see Beesely and Otto crawling away from their wrecked helicopter, Thomas trying to drag them. Checking behind the pilot's seat, Johno found and grabbed a headset, fumbling with it and eventually plugging it in. 'You hear me?'

'Who the hell are you?' the pilot barked as they gained altitude.

'SAS.'

'Not for long, arsehole. You assaulted my navigator ... and you're commandeering a military helicopter at gunpoint!'

Johno took out his pistol. 'There's an unstable nuclear bomb on the back seat.' The pilot's eyes widened and he strained to glimpse it. 'We can stay here and chat about it, waiting for it to go off, or we can take it somewhere other than central fucking London.' He put the pistol under the pilot's chin again. 'What ya reckon, fly boy?'

The pilot swallowed. 'You don't need the gun.' He checked over his shoulder again as they climbed. 'Christ.'

'Head east, down the Thames, keep it low. If it goes off then we want to minimise the blast area.'

The pilot glanced at Johno, clearly terrified, before heading north the short distance to the Thames, turning hard right at rooftop level and speeding towards the Thames Barrage, the barrier glistening in the sun a quarter mile ahead.

Employment references

1

Beesely stood laughing, watching the Lynx fly off. Blood oozed out of a cut above his eye, his lips bleeding as well. ‘Fly you bastard! Fly!’ he shouted with what energy he had left. ‘Fly you magnificent bastard! Fly!’

Soldiers began to help him away from the wrecked Squirrel, but they all stopped to watch as the Lynx disappear behind houses. Sirens wailed, a dozen helicopters buzzed overhead, some now following the Lynx.

‘Fly you bastard,’ Beesely quietly repeated, linking arms with Otto and now being helped by Thomas - who had managed to come away with no injury and was enjoying it all greatly - concerned only that Uncle Johnno would have to pay for the damages.

Otto made direct eye contact with Beesely. ‘Are you crazy?’ he whispered. ‘Why are you so happy?’

Soldiers started to tend their cuts.

‘He did it!’ Beesely announced, straining to catch his breath. ‘He did it, by God.’

‘What are you saying?’ Otto pleaded, their faces close.

Beesely made eye contact. ‘He saved us all.’

‘Saved us?’ Otto snarled. ‘He nearly killed us all! You, me and Thomas.’

Beesely held him by the shoulders, their faces close together. ‘Everything Johnno cares about is right here - you, me ... and especially Thomas. The British Government, they let him down many times.’ He forced a breath. ‘But ... but when it really mattered, when London was under threat, he did not hesitate to sacrifice us all - everything dear to him - to try and save London. Magnificent.’

‘I don’t understand!’ Otto barked.

‘No ... you probably don’t. Not yet.’ Beesely took a few steps, wobbling a bit, before taking out his phone. ‘Get me Dame Helen.’ He waited, panting and trying to catch his breath.

‘Beesely, what’s happening, have you found its location yet?’

‘Yes, we found it. It’s in the back of an army Lynx helicopter, heading ... well, heading somewhere fast.’

‘Thank God.’

‘Listen, track that Lynx ... find out where it’s going.’ He made eye contact with Otto. ‘I suspect the English Channel or the North Sea.’ He hung up.

‘The North Sea?’ Otto asked, frowning. ‘To do what?’

Beesely breathed in and out, holding his chest. ‘To get that bomb a long way away from here,’ he quietly stated.

‘And how will he get back?’

Beesely smiled, slowly shaking his head.

Otto then realised what Beesely had been implying. He slowly straightened. ‘He’s not coming back,’ he whispered.

Otto turned, stepping away, holding his head and running blood-stained hands through his light brown hair. Yellow-clad officers rushed around, sirens wailed, the drone of helicopter engines overlapped and competed with each other, soldiers walked around with machineguns slung. ‘Jane, Ricky, now Johno ... what have I done?’

A trooper approached Beesely. ‘Sir, your pilot is dead.’ Beesely glanced towards the wreckage. ‘Looks like a broken neck, sir.’

2

Heading down the Thames, Johno wiped his forehead with his sleeve, the blood starting to block his vision.

The pilot regarded him suspiciously. ‘You look a little old to be a trooper.’ They sped under Queen Elizabeth II Bridge,

turning hard to follow the course of the river; a sharp left then long right turn, missing the mast of a yacht by a few feet.

Johno checked his pockets for cigarettes. Distracted, he said, 'After the SAS I worked for MI6 for ten years, then private agencies.'

'So just how the hell did you end up tracking this bomb? And where the hell are we going with this thing?'

Johno continued to search his pockets. 'Follow the Thames straight out to sea thirty miles then turn northeast, up the North Sea till we run out of fuel.'

The pilot turned his head, his eyes wide, but said nothing. He turned back as they buzzed a ship at high speed, workers on the ship's bridge ducking.

They flew on, nothing said for five minutes.

'What happened back there?' the pilot finally asked, now sounding a little calmer.

'We tracked the radiation with a special American 747 kitted out to do that stuff. Car was going one way, plod the other, so I crashed my chopper into the road in front of it. Actually, I was aiming for the driver with the rotor blades.'

The pilot turned, looking horrified. And also amazed. 'Are you completely fucking mad?'

'It's a question ... that's been asked before, not least by me.' Johno glanced out of the window, and at the blur of riverside buildings as they flashed by. 'You got a family, fly boy?'

The pilot seemed uncomfortable with the question. 'Wife and two kids, third on its way. What the fuck's it to you?'

Johno scanned the controls. 'I can fly this. When we get near the coast, fly up towards Ipswich, you can drop to the beach, I'll fly on.'

The pilot turned his head, as if studying Johno, then just stared ahead. They said nothing for a minute. 'So I go home to my family ... you fly the bomb on – what - out to sea? That's your great plan?'

‘I hadn’t given a great deal of thought.’ He tapped his jacket pockets and faced the pilot. ‘Are you sure you don’t have any cigarettes?’

They flew on, the pilot shaking his head.

‘Why are you so damn casual about life and death?’ the pilot asked a minute later. ‘Where did you get that attitude?’

‘Can’t speak for anyone else ... but mine started as a kid - getting beat senseless by an old wino of a step-dad when I was twelve. The rest ... the Government had a hand in.’

The pilot nodded his understanding, but said nothing. He judged the next yacht and deliberately buzzed it, noting Johno’s glance as they dipped lower. Any enquiry would reveal that he had been held at gunpoint, so no comeback.

The radio crackled into life. ‘Golf Romeo Two, receiving, over?’

The pilot responded. ‘Golf Romeo Two, receiving.’

‘Golf Romeo Two, what is your heading and speed, over?’

‘Golf Romeo Two. We are bearing zero-eight-five, two-zero-zero knots. Altitude ... around twenty feet!’

‘Golf Romeo Two, what is your intended destination, over?’

‘We’re heading towards the middle of the North Sea, over.’

‘Golf Romeo Two, do you have the package on board, over?’

‘I have package and passenger, over.’

‘Golf Romeo Two, standby.’

Open water lay ahead. Johno pointed, ‘Follow the coast, I’ll drop you off somewhere.’

‘This has auto-pilot, dumb fuck.’

Johno shook his head. ‘We can’t take the risk of it circling and crashing.’

‘It’s pretty good, but I suppose a mechanical failure could cause it to turn.’

‘What’s our fuel and range?’

‘We’re good for another hundred miles.’

‘It’s enough.’

The pilot studied Johno. ‘There’re life rafts under the seats, and the water is warm enough this time of year, so you could be picked up. Wait until there’s just ten minutes of fuel, then jump. That way it couldn’t circle back around from a system failure or mechanical fault.’

Johno stared back at him. ‘You’re awfully frigging concerned for my safety all of a sudden.’

‘I’ve had time to think. What you did back there, stopping the soldiers getting on board, throwing out my navigator, letting me jump - pretty damn selfless.’

‘Ha!’ Johno snorted. ‘Like I give a fuck about your navigator.’

‘How did you get so bitter?’

‘How long have you got?’

‘Rest of my life, by the looks of it. All thirty minutes of it.’

Johno glanced at him. ‘You’ll live, if that thing don’t go off.’

‘So could you.’

Johno stared at the mass of instrumentation: the dials, the flashing lights, the artificial horizon adjusting itself - lower half brown for the ground, upper half a light blue-grey for the sky. ‘This is as good an end as any. Probably get a posthumous medal and be buried by fork-lift truck.’

The pilot frowned heavily. ‘Fork-lift truck?’

‘Long story. My mate died from radiation poisoning...’

‘That guy Ricky?’

‘Yeah?’ Johno queried, facing the pilot. ‘How’d you know?’

‘The SAS guys were talking about it earlier, on the flight down. Funeral in Malvern, wasn’t it? So you must be other one they spoke about; something about Kosovo and some miracle rescue. So which one of the two were you: the first in, or the rescuer?’

‘First in; I took seven rounds.’

‘So, I’m sat with a celebrity. And that guy Ricky went in after you. And now he’s dead.’

‘Yep. Lead lined casket filled with concrete –’

‘Hence the need for a fork-lift!’

‘Yep. He found the box in the back. Stupid bastard put his hand in it, dead two hours later. He was a good man, not least for saving my arse in Kosovo.’

‘So all this is connected. This device killed him, now it’s going to kill you. If you let it.’

‘Symmetry, eh?’ Johnno quipped, wiping blood off his face.

The pilot looked Johnno up and down. ‘And what would Ricky say if he was here, now?’

Johnno stared ahead, giving it some thought. ‘He’d probably say, *jump out and let the ponsy Army Rupert get a posthumous medal.*’

The pilot laughed. ‘I’m a Sergeant, arse-hole, I work for a living. This is Army Air Corps, not the frigging Royal Air Force! Most of us are Sergeants or Warrant Officers.’

‘In which case ... I feel a little worse for putting a gun in your neck. But just a little.’

The pilot pressed a button. ‘Golf Romeo Two to base, over.’

‘Golf Romeo Two, go ahead over.’

‘Golf Romeo Two, launch air-sea rescue and notify shipping; I’ll give you headings and positions every ten minutes. Expect to ditch forty miles east of Cromer in ... twenty minutes. Look for two life-rafts, over.’

‘Golf Romeo Two, roger. Be advised, you have military traffic high, tracking you.’

They both peered up and around, squinting. ‘There,’ the pilot pointed. ‘Tornados. You know, once we jump they could shoot this thing down.’

‘It’s an option. You got any morphine?’

The pilot looked Johnno up and down. ‘You banged up?’

‘Big time.’

‘You’ll not survive the jump if you are doped up, not that I could reach the first aid kit; it’s right next to our *package*. Doubt there’s any morphine in there anyway.’ The pilot changed

course. ‘See that beach, *you’re* getting out. Or you’re going to have to shoot me!’

Johno cranked his head around. ‘And the package?’

The pilot stared straight ahead, swallowed, and took a breath. ‘I know what’s required of me. And out of the two of us, I’m the only one who can get it done.’ He faced Johno. ‘And you look like you are about to pass out.’

They slowed, landing on the beach, Johno dropping unceremoniously onto the wet sand, the Lynx pulling up sharply a second later and heading out to sea without delay. Johno managed to sit upright and ease off his jacket as a bewildered old lady holding her dog looked on. He reached for his phone, lying back down on the damp sand as two RAF Harriers screamed overhead, circling. He closed his eyes against the bright sun.

‘This is Johno. Fix this location and send my co-ordinates to Dame Helen. Put me through to Beesely.’ He waited.

* * *

Leaning across his study desk, Pepi rested his weight on his hands, his eyes widening and his mouth involuntarily opening. ‘Say that again,’ he got out in a forced whisper, two of his assistants stood in front of the desk.

‘The Americans provided a special aircraft designed to detect radiation on the ground. They tracked the second vehicle to South London, a joint venture with K2.’

‘The Americans, and K2, in a joint venture?’ Pepi challenged, still whispering.

‘Yes, sir. The Americans guided K2 to the car, the helicopter being flown by this man Johno –’

‘Johno! Piloting the helicopter! That fat drunken idiot!’

‘Yes, sir,’ the man timidly responded. ‘Beesely, Otto and the boy were in the back ... when this man Johno crashed the helicopter into the car with the ball bearings.’

The assistants wondered if their boss was well enough to continue. The first man added, ‘Johne killed the drivers, took the ball bearings to a military helicopter and flew it out to sea.’

Pepi collapsed into his chair, loosening his tie as his assistants rushed around, one pouring a water for him.

3

Beesely’s phone rang, being handed to him by Otto as the ambulance wailed its way, very slowly, to the nearest hospital through all the roadblocks.

‘Beesely here. What? Hello? Johno! You’re alive! Where the hell are you? Where? A beach in Norfolk? Stay put, help is on its way. Where’s the bomb? Heading out to sea? Excellent. Good work today, my boy, really good work. Call to let us know where you are. You what? You forgot that date with Alison Star, left her standing? She’ll probably want you all the more now!’ He hung up.

Thomas was pleased, Otto smiling and nodding. Otto suggested, ‘It will be hard to avoid the publicity.’

‘It does not matter; London *was not* destroyed today.’ Beesely stared out of focus for a moment as he thought, then grabbed his phone and dialled. ‘Get me Duncan!’ He waited.

‘Duncan here.’

‘It’s Beesely, what’s on the wire?’ He had to shout to make himself heard.

‘Bloody world’s coming to an end! Panic, stock market crash, people rushing to get home, trains and tubes blocked –’

‘Listen carefully, I want this story on the wire immediately, quoting an official source, out to everyone, especially radio.’

‘MI6 agents, with the help of a special American Air Force 747, tracked the dirty bomb that was in a car as it approached London. They intercepted it in Blackheath, where MI6 agents deliberately crashed their helicopter into the car. Despite being injured, they engaged the terrorists in a gun battle and killed

them. SAS troopers landed in an Army Lynx on Blackheath Common and mopped up, securing the bomb and taking it away to a safe location. Got that?’

‘Shit ... how much of that is true?’

‘Basically ... all of it. Get to work, and don’t worry about the stock market. OK?’

He hung up and made eye contact with Otto. ‘Get the CEO of our bank on the line, Mathius, then the head of the Swiss banking society, the secret one.’ Otto lifted his phone as the ambulance cornered hard. Beesely shouted into his own phone, ‘Get me Oliver Stanton at The Lodge!’ He waited.

‘Beesely? Olly here, what’s happening?’

‘We found the bomb and dealt with!’

‘Oh, thank God, we –’

‘Listen, the UK stock market is crashing, but we dealt with the bomb. Tip off everyone you can ... to buy into the UK market, it’s going to bounce right back up. Got that?’

‘Yes. God, what *is* that noise?’

‘I’m in an ambulance.’

‘Are you hurt?’

‘We all are, but nothing serious. Johnno rammed the terrorist car with our chopper!’

‘He did what?’ Oliver screamed.

‘Talk later. Must go.’ Beesely redialled. ‘Get me Dame Helen.’ He waited, Otto indicating he had someone waiting on the line.

‘Beesely? What’s that noise?’ she yelled.

‘I’m in an ambulance.’

‘Are you hurt?’

‘Yes, but never mind. Listen, tell the Chancellor I’m going to prop up the UK stock market. Oh, and I’ve put a story out on the wire, back me up.’

‘What?’

‘You heard, just tell the chancellor to relax. Call you later.’

Otto handed him his phone. ‘Bank CEO.’

‘Hello, this is Beesely, that you Mathius?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Listen, the UK stock market is crashing because of the nuclear bomb incident –’

‘Nuclear bomb?’

‘Yes, but we intercepted it, Johno has flown it out to sea–’

‘Johno?’

‘Long story. Listen, the UK stock market is crashing, but it will recover quickly. Use all available, and practical, resources to look for bargains and buy them up. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. In fact, use all of my personal cash funds to buy into the UK market, pick some good stocks. What we know, the markets don’t know yet. Not for thirty minutes at least. Understand?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Get to it!’

Beesely handed back Otto’s phone as his own chirped. The ambulance began to slow, and then to reverse.

‘Herr Beesely?’ a heavily accented voice asked.

‘Yes?’

‘It is director the bank *society*. You have the urgent problem?’

‘*We* have an urgent opportunity. The UK stock markets have crashed –’

‘And as well in Europe.’

‘Really? Well, it was on news of a nuclear bomb in London. We have dealt with that bomb, it has been made safe and flown away. The markets do not know that fact yet.’

‘I understand.’

‘Buy what you can, especially in the UK, it will bounce back tomorrow.’

‘Thank you.’

Beesely hung up as the ambulance doors opened, to be greeted by five doctors and a dozen armed officers, the street behind filled with patrol cars, lights flashing. ‘Oh shit.’

With her arms folded, Dame Helen looked out over the helicopters on Chequers lawn, at the soldiers patrolling, and the armed police officers in bright yellow jackets circling the residence. The P.M. and the Home Secretary walked briskly in, both looking harassed.

‘Helen?’ the P.M. called. ‘What’s the latest?’

She smiled. ‘Bomb is on its way to the bottom of the North Sea, along with one of our Army Lynx helicopters.’

The P.M. stiffened, looking horrified. ‘And the pilots?’

‘They’re in the water, in life rafts. The weather is good, and air-sea rescue is on its way.’

The Prime Minister brightened. ‘Excellent.’

‘Beesely has put a story out on the wire –’

The Prime Minister straightened. ‘He what?’

‘We don’t know what it says yet. One more thing, he said to tell the chancellor that *he* is going to prop up the crashing stock market.’

The Prime Minister’s eyes widened. ‘He’s what?’

An assistant walked in with a piece of paper. ‘Prime Minister?’ he called as he approached, but did not wait to hand over the note. He read it. ‘Radio is reporting that MI6 agents rammed their helicopter into the terrorists’ car, there was a gun battle, SAS jumped out of another helicopter and killed the terrorists, grabbed the bomb and flew it to an undisclosed location.’

The P.M. turned to Dame Helen, smiling. ‘We’re going to have to co-ordinate the news carefully today.’

‘Yes, Prime Minister.’

The assistant added, ‘They’re lapping it up, sir, the media.’

The P.M. offered them all a formal smile. ‘Let’s get some coffee and nibbles, and then we can continue the COBRA

meeting in –’ He checked his watch. ‘- say ten minutes. I have a few calls to make.’

Helen took the Prime Minister by the arm and to a quiet corner. ‘I’ll have to apologise to General Rose and eat my words.’

‘Oh?’

‘Beesely, he does seem to be an American asset. The terrorist car was tracked by a special USAF 747, especially equipped for this very purpose. *He* ... organised it, by himself. We had no idea.’

‘That confirms what General Rose has, apparently, always maintained. Still, it’s clear that Beesely’s position in this Swiss outfit is ... NATO led, shall we say. Whether he’s in bed with the Americans or not, I don’t think there could have been a sterner test of his loyalty to this country ... than that which we witnessed today.’

‘Yes, Prime Minister,’ Dame Helen whole-heartedly agreed. ‘Does that mean that I *don’t* have to apologise to General Rose?’ she toyed.

Dame Helen walked out through the patio windows and onto the lawn, breathing slowly and deeply. She dialled. ‘I want all camera footage from all of the police helicopters near Blackheath today, to be grabbed by armed agents, ‘D’ Notice on it all. Top priority, I want men there when they land. And that story in the press, I want an *official* confirmation of the main points. Yes, I’m sure. And I want it done now. Also use our usual outlets to confirm the story - *unofficially official*.’

She re-dialled. ‘Colonel Milward? Helen Eddington-Small. Yes, you too. This morning? Seems like a lifetime ago, I know. Listen, pick four men and two pilots, those closest to today’s action, they are going to be nominated for medals. I’ll explain later, just get me the details of the warm bodies – we’re going to rush it through for the press, keep certain other people *out* the press.’

She took a breath, and re-dialled. ‘Yes, it’s me. Beesely is in an ambulance. Track it down and get some protection for him. Find out where he is, and then get him shipped to a private hospital, use ours if you can.’

* * *

Milward lowered his phone, stood now facing six officers crammed into his office. All had been previously shouting bits of info. He held up his hands to cut them off. ‘OK, now is there a problem with the space-time continuum? Have I just jumped across to some strange parallel universe?’ He slumped into his chair. ‘MI6 wants four of our lads, any four, to be nominated for medals.’

‘How about the four who landed, they *were* there?’ an officer suggested to a glum-looking Milward.

Milward waved his hand. ‘Fine,’ he said without looking up.

‘Should we recall all the active units?’ another officer asked.

‘No,’ Milward answered. ‘Wait until the Cabinet Office stands them down officially.’ He rubbed his face, pointing at his adjutant. ‘Start from the beginning, nice and slow, what we definitely know.’

‘Right, Johnno tried to ram the suspect car with his helicopter —’

‘Didn’t just crash nearby?’

‘No, sir, our guys had a ringside seat. He carefully manoeuvred to try and hit the car with his rotor blades, the daft sod. Then he shot the occupants whilst still in the wrecked chopper, crawled out, shot them again, grabbed the box with Sergeant Mason, put it in the Lynx, pushed Mason away, dragged the navigator out and smacked him cold, put a gun to the head of the pilot and flew off.’

‘And does anybody else feel like they need a really, really big Brandy?’

A few officers nodded, not realising it had been meant sarcastically.

5

Quite a crowd had gathered around Johnno as he lay on the sand, his jacket off and shoulder holster visible, the blood from various minor head-wounds slowly congealing. The old woman had rushed off after her dog started to lick him, and he had threatened it at gunpoint. A family of five had offered first aid, which Johnno had refused, but he had accepted a cigarette. Or ten.

People were enjoying the RAF Harriers circling closely, something of a fun-day-out for the kids, and new arrivals were being told of the man who fell out of a helicopter. Now, sirens wailed in the distance as Johnno worked on his tan. His injuries were not severe or debilitating, but with the adrenaline rush now over he felt completely drained as the drone of an RAF Sea King helicopter grew rapidly louder.

‘You best head up the beach,’ Johnno suggested the family. ‘Be safer for you.’

They hurried off up the beach, but stopped where they could view the excitement, others moving back as the helicopter descended. Johnno covered his eyes with a hand, knowing what would come next.

The large yellow rescue helicopter hovered, setting down a few yards away, its winch-man jumping out whilst it hovered, still a foot off the ground. Now he knelt on the sand next to Johnno, Johnno’s bloody cuts being neatly filled in with sand.

‘Are you Sergeant John Williams?’ the crewman shouted.

Johnno gave him a thumbs-up, just as the downwash blew his cigarette out of his mouth. He watched it roll away. ‘Bugger.’

Another crewman knelt down a moment later, stretcher in hand. They laid it next to Johnno, tucked his jacket in and eased him over. Strapping him in, they took either end, and manoeuvred the stretcher into the back of the helicopter.

A police officer tapped the shoulder of the second crewman, who remained stood on the sand. The crewman turned and led the young officer away, the officer holding on tightly to his hat.

‘What is it?’ the crewman shouted, lifting his helmet away from his ear.

‘That man, he threatened an old woman at gunpoint!’

‘Must be some mistake, he’s fucking SAS!’ The officer stared back, confused. The crewman added, ‘See those planes up there, they’re here for him, now piss off.’ He turned and ran, hopping into the back and sliding the door closed. With the door slammed, shut the noise level dropped, but remained at such a level that normal conversation was difficult.

‘Were you injured?’ a crewman asked, putting a white dressing on Johnno’s head.

‘Superficial lacerations on the scalp, right knee screwed up, right ankle, ribs. I’ll live. Got a smoke?’

The crewman smiled at each other. ‘No chance, mate. Not in here.’

The second crewman offered Johnno a drink from a white plastic bottle with an adjustable straw, lifting Johnno’s head.

‘What happened?’ the first crewman shouted as the helicopter climbed, the man carefully cleaning blood and sand from Johnno’s eyes.

‘I can’t say, it’s classified.’ Johnno stared up at the dark green roof.

The two crewmen glanced at each other, the first man tapping Johnno’s pistol. ‘With face fungus like that, you’ve got to be old school SAS.’

Johnno offered a coy smile. ‘You might think that, I couldn’t possibly comment.’ The crewmen laughed.

‘We were listening to the radio chatter. Half the Air Force looking for that Lynx, the other half is flying around not knowing what to do.’

‘Sounds about right, panic after the action is over,’ Johnno commented.

‘I’ve got some Nicotine patches, if you want some?’
‘Might help. Stick a dozen on.’

‘Another fucking stretcher, another fucking ambulance, another fucking hospital,’ Johnno stated to no one in particular.

This rarely used RAF ambulance had seen better days, and few patients other than new recruits with blisters and sprained ankles. Its siren wasn’t very loud, Johnno considered, wondering if it used to be an ice-cream van. Or maybe it was that ice-cream vans were all former RAF ambulances, he considered. It was just enough out of tune as to annoy its involuntary passengers.

The RAF ambulance technician turned around as they sped from the airfield to the base’s small hospital. ‘Don’t like ambulances, mate?’

‘Don’t like getting shot up.’

The medic frowned. ‘Are you shot?’

‘Not recently.’ Johnno lifted his shirt.

‘Bloody hell, mate! Are those gunshot wounds?’

‘No, they had trouble finding my appendix!’

‘Really?’

Johnno rolled his eyes.

Johnno eased out of the wheelchair without any help, now with his jacket back on. Sand fell everywhere, earning him an unfriendly glare from a middle-aged nurse. The blood on his head and face had mostly dried, now speckled with sand.

He was the only patient in this long ward; ten beds on either side with neat military hospital blankets, uninviting pastel colours with drab grey thrown in. The ward displayed large painted radiators and visible pipe-work, and it offered visitors and patients alike the all-pervading smell of antiseptic. A shiver went through him.

‘On the bed,’ the senior doctor ordered, a grey haired man with an unfriendly stare. As with the others, he wore a white doctor’s coat with his rank on the shoulders; light blue stripes on

dark blue cloth. Johno's arrival had dragged the man away from something more important, or more interesting. Johno was getting the impression that he was the only visitor so far this year.

'First things first,' Johno stated, taking out his pistol and causing worried looks from the medics. He pressed the magazine release and let it fall onto the bed. Then he angled it down and pulled the slide back, ejecting a round.

'That was loaded!' the doctor complained. 'You didn't even have the safety on!'

'And recently used to kill several people,' Johno added, easing the slide forwards, pointing and firing, a click, before reloading the magazine and setting the safety on. He placed it on the bedside cabinet, easing off his wet, sand dabbled jacket.

He tossed the ejected round to the nurse. 'Souvenir, love.' Easing off his shoulder holster proved painful. Next, he slipped off his blood-soaked shirt.

'Flipping blink!' the doctor said as he observed Johno's scars. 'What the hell happened to you? And just who the hell are you? We were told to expect a serving Sergeant, Army Air Corps.'

'When I was younger I was into really kinky bondage and S and M. I went a bit too far,' he lied. 'Rest is classified.'

'What on earth are these?' the nurse asked, peeling off numerous nicotine patches.

'Nicotine patches.'

'Aren't you supposed to use them one at a time?' she asked, frowning.

He sat on the edge of the bed, easing off his trousers and getting down to his Simpsons shorts. He laid back and sighed. 'Do your worst.'

The nurse began cleaning his scalp as the doctor went toe-to-head, examining him.

'Ankle sprained,' the doctor announced. Johno winced, confirming the brilliantly insightful diagnosis. 'Knee sprained,

maybe ligament problem. You had surgery on your knee before?’

‘Had fucking surgery everywhere before.’

‘Well, it looks as if you have exacerbated an old injury there.’

‘Two broken ribs, five and six, right side,’ Johnno announced to the magnolia ceiling.

‘You some sort of medic?’ the doctor asked as he probed them.

‘SAS field medic; I got a merit badge for putting on plasters. I also got a merit badge in the Scouts for warming up sausages in tin foil.’

A Wing Commander strode purposefully in, halting at the foot of the bed. ‘Are you Sergeant John Williams?’ Johnno gave a lazy, and insolent, thumbs up. ‘I just had the Defence Minister on the line.’ The base commander put his hands on his hips. ‘It seems ... that some daft-sod SAS trooper just intercepted a nuclear bomb in London, and then flew it out of the capital and to the North Sea, having first killed a car load of terrorists.’

The doctors and nurses stopped what they were doing and stepped back.

‘Anyone you know?’ the Wing Commander teased.

Johnno lifted his head up, turning on his side, his weight on an elbow. ‘Listen, stripy –’ the Wing Commander raised his eyebrows at the insolence, a reference to the many rank stripes on his shoulders. ‘- there’s an Army Lynx pilot heading out to the middle of the North Sea –’

‘We picked him up a few minutes ago. Apparently, the first thing he did was to check if *you* made it. He’s on his way here, one shiny new Lynx on its way to the bottom of the North Sea.’

Johnno sighed. ‘I’m going to have to insist on maximum security on all this, Biggles. As well as a mug of tea and a fag.’

The Wing Commander smiled. ‘Get the insolent little bastard *anything* he wants. And I mean anything! Now I have to go and call the Defence Minister.’

‘It’s not serious,’ Beesely protested as the doctors began to undress him. Otto sat on the next bed, being tended to by a nurse for his cuts, Thomas annoying the uniformed officers by playing with their equipment belts.

The young Asian doctor glanced over his shoulder at the armed officers. ‘Are they really necessary?’ he complained.

The senior officer stepped forwards. ‘Mate, you do your job, we’ll do ours, OK. Mister Beesely does not go out of line of sight, got it!’

‘Your cuts are superficial,’ a second doctor began, ‘but at your age they’ll take weeks to heal. You’re going to have one hell of a black eye. In fact, the whole of your face is probably going to go yellow, purple and black. Your knee is jarred, but nothing looks broken. Were you unconscious at any time?’

‘No,’ Beesely answered.

Otto casually informed the doctor, ‘There is a specialist geriatric cosmetic surgeon in Switzerland. He can remove the discolouration.’

‘If you’ve got the money!’ the doctor quipped.

‘We do,’ Otto flatly stated.

The doctor made eye contact, looking peeved. Beesely smiled. Lights were flashed into his eyes, his tongue pulled out as he said ‘Aaaah’, his pulse checked and his blood taken.

A hard-faced officer in a suit walked in, flashed his badge, and ordered the police to wait outside. They went without argument.

‘Head of SIS sends her regards. We’re the *subtle* security, and we’ve got you a room in a private government hospital ready just as soon as you are, sir.’

‘Fine, wait for the doctor’s OK.’ He lay back. ‘Oh, get us some hats and sunglasses, and concoct a storey for the medical records. Car crash, let’s say.’

The doctor paused his treatment. ‘Just who are you, exactly?’

‘Best not to know, Doc’,’ the officer suggested as his phone rang. He stepped forwards, ‘It’s the Prime Minister for you, sir.’

The doctor stood upright, raising his hands as if in surrender before directing the rest of the medical staff out for five minutes.

* * *

Herr Mole had requested a file, now brought to him by the senior administrative manager himself, Claus. The man handed it over, but sat next to Mole and waited. Mole glanced up at him, then opened the file and found the page he wanted, the original transcript of the intelligence that led to Ricky intercepting the car in Hungary. With the aid of a pen he read it, moving the pen along under the words.

‘You read Russian?’

Mole gave a quick nod. ‘This is mostly Ukrainian slang Russian, not the native Ukraine language itself. Unusual. I would suspect that the person who uttered these words was from the east of the Ukraine, a pro-Russian mining town.’

The admin manager raised his eyebrows. He pulled out a piece of paper from the file without disturbing Moles reading. ‘Horlivka, in the southeast.’

Mole raised his head. ‘Yes, that would fit. And there is a nuclear power station not too far.’ He read on. ‘This man spent a lot of time in Russia, he probably studied in Moscow, but is a native of the region in question.’ He underlined two words. ‘This was wrongly translated.’

The admin manager leant forwards and studied the German translation. ‘Weapons?’

‘No, it actually says *dangerous weapon*, singular, not plural, a subtle difference. I believe this man to be lying, but this is clearly not a set-up for us because he was correct in his warning. Still, I will need the tape of the original conversation.’

‘It is in the computer.’ The manager pushed back on his wheeled chair and typed at a keyboard. Finally he held up a pair of headsets for Mole to use, others now gathering as Mole listened to the digitised recording.

‘He is afraid ... concerned ... but also trying to warn Interpol. It sounds as if he is lying, but I think that is because he is not sure of what to tell them. I would assume that he was one of the people responsible for the radioactive ball bearings, but someone who changed his mind afterwards. We must establish his place of work.’

The manager stood. ‘Make plans to get him, top priority.’ He dialled Otto.

* * *

Otto took the call, listening at length. Finally, he said, ‘Move him to Zug.’ He hung up.

‘Problems?’ Beesely asked, sipping tea. The small ward was now empty of the previous bustle, just the three of them, and a Special Branch officer sat quietly in the corner.

‘We are going after the man who originally gave us the information about the vehicle we intercepted in Hungary. Actually, he called Interpol, which we intercepted.’

‘Good.’

‘Herr Mole re-translated the original documents and phone call, found some problems with the translation.’

‘Do we think this man set us up?’ Beesely asked, his face now covered in numerous opaque plasters supporting stitches.

‘No. Herr Mole believes he supplied the ball bearings, but then changed his mind and tipped off Interpol.’

Beesely pointed a finger. ‘I want him unharmed. For now.’

Otto acknowledged with a quick nod.

Beesely dialled The Lodge. ‘This is Beesely, tell Oliver that we have a lead on the radioactive ball bearings, and it may not be government level. Understand?’

After the call, he let the phone hover. To Otto, he said, 'Contact the Germans, and see what they have on the first car, and on the driver and passenger.'

7

Johno lay staring up at the ward's high ceiling. The ward's lights were now off, a solitary nurse at her station at the end of the long room, which seemed a hundred yards away. The headlights of traffic passing nearby cast long mobile shadows across the ceiling, the light penetrating through high windows. He lay under sheets, many parts of his body throbbing, considering escaping through the windows at the end, since there was no way that he was getting any sleep tonight. Not in here.

Footsteps caught his attention. An officer in a blue RAF uniform, carrying a rucksack, walked up to the nurse, barely exchanging a word before stepping up to Johno's bed. 'You awake?' he whispered.

'Yeah, who are you?'

The officer knocked on a sidelight. 'My name is Flight Lieutenant McNamara. I used to be Captain McNamara, 'G' Squadron.'

'Ah ... Regiment Rupert.'

'Call me Rupert, and I'll make sure they keep you here for a month!'

'No need to be nasty,' Johno joked. 'I'm wounded.'

The officer laughed quietly, producing several Whiskey miniatures. 'These are low calorie, so long as they go down in one go.'

Johno cracked a seal, unscrewed the top and downed the contents in one go. 'Sweet. What else you got, stripy?'

The officer handed over three more. 'That should take the edge off; I know you have a thing about hospitals.'

Johno squinted at the man through the poor light as he undid another bottle top, seeing if he knew him. 'We met?' He downed the contents.

'No, but I worked with MI6 for two years, keeping an eye on ex-troopers, seeing what they were up to.'

'Oh. *That* unit.'

'Yeah, *that* unit.'

'Thought it was mostly SIB flatfoots?' Johno queried.

'It is, but a mix. You need anything?' the officer asked.

'Got any cigs?'

Smiling, the officer produced three packs and a lighter. 'Keep them.'

'Not such a bad twat after all. You based here?'

'RAF Regiment,' the officer explained. 'Repetitively teaching the Crabs how to put on their respirators and survive a nuclear attack with a one millimetre thick cloth suit.'

'Rock Apes, eh? Ricky was a Rock Ape before the Regiment.'

'Sergeant Ricky Davies?'

'Yeah, he got himself killed a few days ago.'

'The funeral in Malvern, I know; I keep my ear to the ground. Some people turned up that SIB were after.'

'Did they *pinch* them?'

'Nearly, it turned into a big punch up, and two SIB Captains went through a window.'

'Good enough for 'em.'

'This outfit in Switzerland has a lot of people in a flap. No one can figure out what it is, or what it does.'

'Best not to.'

'Rumour has it that MI5 tried to get close to some of your lot a few weeks back. First MI5 agent got pulled on a drink drive charge, second got caught with child porn on his computer, and the third woke up in a crack-house being raided by the local plod.'

Johno laughed quietly, glancing at the nurse. 'If you know anyone interested, just tell them that Beesely spent forty years putting together this outfit,' he lied. 'Not to be screwed with. Besides, we do work for MI6, CIA and Mossad - plausible deniability.'

The officer frowned slightly. 'So why are these Cambridge spooks trying to spy on you?'

'Since when has the left hand known what the right had is doing, eh?'

The officer laughed, also checking over his shoulder. He opened a miniature and raised it for a toast. 'Who dares wins!'

'Who cares who wins?' they said together. They clinked bottles and downed the contents.

McNamara hesitated. 'What's your relationship with General Rose?' the officer enquired.

Johno studied him. 'Why'd you ask?'

'*You* ... were never on our watch list. He slid you back on a few weeks back.'

'That was nice of him. How much do you know about me?'

'Just what's in your file, and chit-chatting to troopers.' He waited.

Johno turned away, taking a reflective moment. He sighed. 'MI6 sent me into Kosovo; they asked General Rose if they could borrow me. And I got shot the fuck up, as you know. MI6 wouldn't organise a rescue, which I knew before I went in.' He glanced at the ceiling. 'Beesely was my handler – AGN Security, giving the Government plausible deniability. He wasn't ready to give up on me, so he sent a rescue –'

'Against the good General's wishes,' the officer finished off. 'So Beesely got the cold shoulder, not a pat on the back.'

'Politics,' Johno carefully mouthed.

McNamara let out a deep breath.

'What can I smell?' Johno asked.

'Ah, almost forgot. Double triple bacon quadruple cheese puke burger with extra cholesterol.'

'Is it low calorie if eaten quickly?' Johno whispered.

'Yes.'

Johno tucked in, soundly asleep thirty minutes later, the 'evidence' removed.

A new dawn, an old house

1

‘You OK?’ Beesely asked as they ate a late evening meal. They had said nothing for ten minutes.

Otto chewed, realising that it was not his health that Beesely was enquiring about. Otto put down his fork, but did not look up. Softly, he said, ‘I was not prepared to sacrifice us all. We could have lost everything, all of us, in one moment.’

Beesely idled with his food. Quietly, he stated, ‘If that bomb had gone off ... well, you saw what it did to the stock markets. Just how much would have been knocked off our stock? Seventy five percent, maybe?’ He lifted his head and focused on Otto, waiting.

Otto reluctantly agreed. ‘Or more. Yes, I understand this, but at that moment you and Johno were not thinking about money.’

‘No, my boy, we weren’t,’ Beesely answered as he picked at his food. ‘We had a single purpose - to save lives.’

Otto considered it. Without making eye contact, he said, ‘I felt very angry, not proud of Johno. Angry that he risked us all, that he risked me.’

‘That’s understandable, to a degree,’ Beesely delicately suggested. ‘But what would *you* have done if that bomb was on its way to Zurich, and we were the only ones capable of stopping it?’

Otto reluctantly gave it some thought. ‘Yes, I would have sacrificed myself to save the people there. I hope.’ He looked up, taking a deep breath. ‘But there are so many things I wish to do with K2 and the money, so many more things I want to achieve. I saw that all washed away, all the potential of what I want to achieve in my life.’

Beesely nodded to himself. ‘I read a story once, true story, of a man in Los Angeles, America. He played the same lottery

numbers every week for years. One day they came up whilst he was in a bar. His friends knew he played those numbers, they all did. So he rushed home for the ticket, which was worth ... probably more than fifty million pounds. When he arrived home he found that his wife had thrown out his trousers that day. He searched the bins, but they had been emptied. He drove to the local tip, spoke to the people there, and tried to find where it may have been dumped.

‘He then spent a year searching through that rubbish dump, living on the side of the dump and getting by on handouts. TV interviewed him several times. After a year he killed himself, I think.’

‘It is a very sad story.’

‘Very. To have so much potential, and then to lose it.’

Otto nodded and took a mouthful.

Beesely continued, ‘I sometimes feel like that man. I have a few years left, and there is a hell of a lot I want to do as well. K2 has been a wonderful opportunity for me, but it looks like the universe, or God if you are that way inclined, has put conditions upon us. We get the money, but we also get the responsibility and the risk. Neither of us could just go and live on a Caribbean Island; something would draw us back, or our enemies would come for us. If we had a small problem, we’d wish we had the power to solve it. I’m afraid there’s no going back from here, we’ve opened Pandora’s Box.’

Otto’s expression suggested he firmly agreed with that sentiment. ‘It is not how I pictured ... how we might do things.’

‘They never are. And Johno did not get that attitude all by himself; he was firmly shit on from a great height many times. I’m surprised he keeps it all together as well as he does. You ... should give him more slack.’

‘I know. I also know I am not the hero,’ he reluctantly admitted, as much to himself as Beesely.

Beesely and Otto had slept well, side-by-side in a lavish room normally used for senior government or intelligence service staff, this non-descript and unlisted building just off Harley Street.

Otto had already been awake for an hour when Beesely's phone roused him. 'Yes,' Beesely answered, still groggy.

'OK, Boss?'

'Johno? Where are you?'

'RAF Marham. Listen, I'm discharging myself today, so send a car. I'm going back to the old house, it's not so far. Tell Otto to contact them and put the kettle on.'

'Will do.' They hung up.

Beesely turned to Otto. 'He's going back to the old house today, send a car and have the place made ready would you. He's at RAF Marham.'

'I would like to see the house again.'

Surprised by that, Beesely carefully studied his offspring

2

As Beesely's helicopter touched down, Johno observed it from the new conservatory, the insulation from the helicopter's downdraft and drone perfect. He now sat in shorts and t-shirt, bandages around an ankle, bandages around a knee and his ribs, plasters covering stitches on his forehead. A guard sat opposite, they had been playing on the X-box 360 that the man had brought with him.

Beesely walked with a cane, Otto a bit of a limp, both now oddly kitted-out in blue tracksuits. Thomas jumped down and ran full pelt across the grass, into the house, and found his way to Johno quickly.

'Hey, brat!' Johno called, holding out a hand.

The guard caught Thomas before he could jump on Johno.

'Careful,' Johno pleaded in German. 'I'm hurt.'

'How many times were you shot?' Thomas excitedly asked.

‘I’m not shot, just hurt.’

Thomas was disappointed, his shoulders dropping.

‘What?’ Johno asked. ‘You’d be happier if I was shot?’

‘I told my friends you had been shot,’ Thomas admitted, lowering his head.

The guard laughed, earning a reproachful glare from Johno. Beesely and Otto waved as they walked around the conservatory and into the main entrance. The guard set about fetching more chairs.

‘OK,’ Johno sighed. ‘I was shot in the knee and the leg. OK?’

Thomas smiled, and started to undo the bandages, the guard pulling him back.

‘We have enough milk in?’ Beesely asked as he hobbled in.

Johno lifted his head. ‘You look worse than me! You been jogging?’

‘It’s all bruising, just a few small cuts. And the tracksuits, they were courtesy of Dame Helen.’ Beesely sat in a wicker chair, lifting his leg up onto a glass coffee table. The guard placed a cushion under it immediately.

Otto stood over Johno. ‘How are your injuries?’ he flatly asked.

‘I’ll live. It’s nothing serious.’

Otto bowed his head, then sat at the far end of the conservatory. Johno observed him for a moment, before making eye contact with Beesely whilst tipping his head towards Otto.

Beesely stated, ‘I don’t think Otto has quite forgiven you for risking us all.’

‘It had to be done.’

‘I know. And we now have the loving support of the British Government. I’ve spoken to the Prime Minister twice.’

‘Yeah, well he can use his influence. I just had Max on the phone; the wake got a bit lively after we left.’

Teas were placed down onto the glass coffee table.

‘Christ, I’d forgotten all about it. How did it go?’

‘The vicar did the service, all nice and proper, then the forklift couldn’t get into position properly, so the ‘old dogs’ offered to lift the casket, stupid sods. It took ten of them. Then they slipped on the mud and dropped the casket, the casket ending up upside down - and at an angle.’

Beesely looked horrified, as Johnno laughed.

‘Then they filled in the grave with shovels. Wilko slipped in, got stuck, so they had to make a chain and drag him out, leaving a shoe behind. They took the family home, and then had a few drinks in the marquee. Don’t know how or when that burnt down —’

‘Burnt down?’

‘- but they all moved to a nearby hotel.’

‘How’s the hotel?’ Beesely glumly enquired.

Johnno gave him a pained look. ‘Wrecked!’

Beesely turned to Otto, who raised his phone, then back to Johnno. ‘Anyone hurt?’

‘Nothing serious, a few coppers hurt.’

‘As far as SAS wakes go ... quite sedate. So, what happened after you flew off?’

‘We flew down the Thames, then up the coast. I had a chat with the pilot, nice guy. I offered to drop him off on the beach, but he talked me round, so *he* dropped *me* off on the beach, then flew out forty miles and jumped.’

‘Is he OK?’ Beesely asked, concerned.

‘Yeah, I spoke to him when I was at RAF Marham, they brought him in.’ Johnno looked out over the lake. ‘I figured this was a good spot for recovering.’

Beesely studied Johnno for several seconds. ‘Otto?’ Otto walked over. ‘The paper?’ Beesely called without taking his gaze off Johnno. Otto handed Beesely the document, Beesely holding it up. ‘This is a Swiss banker’s draft for ten million pounds. If you want it, it’s yours ... you can go your own way and do whatever you like. Nice house, nice cars, big yacht, girls with big boobs, a life in the sun.’

Johno glanced up at Otto, then back to Beesely, squinting at them. 'What's the catch?'

'No catch. You've earned yourself a rest, and by God you deserve it more than most. You can take this and go your own way, or stay with us.'

'Can I take that, and visit and annoy you once in a while?'

'Anyway you like it. But if you stay with us ... you'll probably end up in harm's way again at some point.'

Johno stared out across the lake. 'Otto, there's a Lynx pilot who lives near Middle Wallop, who needs a new house if you can sort it. Now, one of you fuckers who can walk without pain - get some food sorted. And you, old fart, put your paper away.'

Beesely smiled and looked up at Otto, handing back the paper. 'I told you he'd be too daft to take it.'

Otto frowned down at Johno. 'I will never understand you English types.'

* * *

Lynx pilot, Sergeant Peter Raines, had not long finished calming his family after the night away from them; police at the door, missing at sea. All was slowly coming back towards normality. A knock at the door, and he insisted he better answer it, just in case in might be a reporter.

'Hello?' he said, eyeing the two men in suits suspiciously.

'You are Sergeant Peter Raines?' the first agent asked with a mild accent.

Raines cautiously nodded.

'This is from Johno. He says that he will be in touch soon, and that if you don't have a good life he will track you down and kill you.'

Raines smiled as the second guard lifted up a large leather bag and opened it. Bursting out was a quarter million in cash.

The next morning, when Johno hobbled into the conservatory, Beesely and Otto were already sat having coffee and cake. He slumped down into the same wicker chair, footstool ready with a cushion. 'I've been thinking.'

Beesely looked up from his newspaper, the pages cover-to-cover with the story of yesterday's action. On the floor were dozens of other papers, their front pages featuring the same story.

Johno continued, 'We got anything on those four drivers?'

Otto lowered his paper. 'Arabic. The Germans and Interpol cannot match any fingerprints, they are trying to trace their passports, which were Lebanese. We have copies of all the forensic materials in Zug, their chief investigator is one of ours.'

'Lebanese?' Johno quietly repeated, staring out towards the lake.

Beesely studied him for a moment. 'A penny for your thoughts.'

Johno pointed at Beesely's satellite phone, laying on the coffee table, and gestured for him to pass it over. He pressed green. 'This is Johno, get me Elle Rosen, Mossad, London.'

Beesely glanced at Otto, sat back, and folded his arms.

'Hello?'

'Elle, Johno here, K2.'

'Ah, Johno, congratulations!'

'Sorry?'

'Excellent job yesterday, quite the hero.'

'Team effort. Listen, we're going to send you details of the Lebanese passports of the first two terrorists killed in Bavaria. Do me a favour, when you find out who they really are, see if there is a Russian connection with these men.'

Beesely glanced at Otto.

'Will, do, Johno. You rest yourself.'

He hung up, tossing the phone back to Beesely.

Beesely tipped his head forwards. ‘Ten million pennies for your thoughts.’

Johno took in the view over the lake. ‘Be easy enough to find some al-Qa’eda guys willing to do the martyrdom thing. Not so easy for them to approach a nuclear power station in the Ukraine and ask nicely for some radioactive ball bearings.’

Beesely considered it. ‘So ... the ball bearings were ready *before* the drivers were contacted? Interesting.’

Two quiet shots rang out, quickly followed by another two. Unconcerned, Johno sipped his tea, Otto casually lifting his phone.

Beesely glanced from one face to the next, a concerned look. ‘Was that gunfire?’

‘Thomas,’ Johno muttered as he tried some cake. ‘Target practice.’

Beesely’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Here?’

Johno eased himself up, glancing down towards the lake. He sipped his tea. ‘We’re going to need some more ducks. Otto, order some more ducks.’

‘Christ, it’s like the bleeding Adams Family,’ Beesely muttered as he sat back and dialled. ‘Get me Dame Helen.’ He waited.

‘Beesely, how are you? Read the papers?’

‘All of them, and it seems to be contained for now.’

‘So far so good, lots of credit for my department and the SAS. Milward is not happy - crates of champagne arriving at the SAS barracks.’

Beesely laughed. ‘Just like after the Iranian Embassy Siege.’

‘Were you there?’

‘Yes, the good old days. Listen, need all the forensics on that car and those two chaps.’

‘I’ll fax you what we have. But I have to be careful, you’re not supposed to exist.’

‘I’m sure the PM will understand, given what small part we played in their ... apprehension.’

‘He will, but there are a great many people not in the loop. Containment is proving hard.’

‘Listen, we’re at the old house, pop down tomorrow. You can sit and watch us heal.’

‘Will do, need to talk about Buck’ Palace on Friday.’

‘Buck’ Palace?’

‘Have they not contacted you yet? PM has organized a private ceremony, an award for Johnno. It’s after the official ceremony for the pilot – a rush job for the press - and the semi-official awards for the troopers, part of the cover story.’

Beesely glanced at Johnno. ‘We’ll chat tomorrow.’ He hung up. Easing back into the chair, he carefully studied his offspring. Ten minutes later, a guard walked in with two telegrams; one for Beesely, one for Johnno. Beesely read his: *From H.M. the Queen, Buck. Palace. Well done. Your continued loyalty to this country is appreciated, in many quarters. E.R.*

‘I got a telegram from the Queen,’ Johnno stated with a heavy frown.

‘Really?’ Beesely asked, quickly pocketing his. ‘What does it say?’

‘Says ‘well done’, and be at the palace, 11am Friday.’ He frowned hard at it.

‘I know what that will be,’ Beesely began. ‘They are going to decorate that pilot –’

‘Peter? Good, he deserves it.’

‘And the navigator and the four SAS troopers; it’s a cover story.’

Johnno nodded to himself as he thought. ‘Good. Read about it today. So far *we’re* in the clear.’

Beesely turned to Otto. ‘We’ll need formal morning wear. I have one, still upstairs, but we’ll need one for Johnno. We could not take you inside, Otto, you would be difficult to explain. Besides, you’re always scruffy.’

Otto cocked an insulted Swiss eyebrow as Johnno chuckled.

* * *

A few hours later, Johno knocked on the door of a cottage in the village.

His 'lady friend' opened the door. 'Johno?'

'Hey. How you doing?'

She stared back at him. 'That's the first time you've ever asked? What's wrong? And what the hell happened to you?' She stepped out and scanned the line of Range Rovers, drivers and guards stood near their vehicles.

'Long story. Got the kettle on, love?'

She stepped back inside, holding the door, her gaze fixed on the Range Rovers.

Johno limped into her lounge and sat. 'I'd help, but I'm all busted up.'

She stopped and glanced down at him, then put the kettle on, returning and sitting opposite him. 'So what the hell happened to you? Last time we spoke you were off to Switzerland.'

'We were in Switzerland for two weeks, then Bahamas, then back here for a bit of bother.'

'Bit of bother?' she queried, a concerned look.

'I crashed a helicopter in London.'

Her features hardened. 'Christ, Johno,' she whispered. 'Aren't you busted up enough already?'

He offered her a quick smile. 'Good thing about being fucked-up ... is that there's less good stuff to damage. It's all second-hand!'

She gave him a disapproving look, shaking her head. 'You're not back on operations, are you?'

He shrugged apologetically. 'Oh,' he suddenly let out, remembering something. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a thick wad of fifties, handing it over.

'Christ, Johno. How much is here?'

'Five grand.'

‘Five grand!’ She raised her eyebrows in mock concern, putting her hands on her hips. ‘What, exactly, did have in mind?’ she teased.

He laughed. ‘That’s back-pay.’

‘Back pay?’

‘I’ve come into a lot of money, so that’s for you. A gift, for ... helping me over the years.’

She examined it. ‘A gift? Five grand?’

He shrugged. ‘Like I said, I came into some money.’

‘And you felt you wanted to ... what, thank me? Johnno, we had a *working* arrangement.’

He gave her a coy smile. ‘So that’s danger money, for putting up with me. Get someone to fix the garden. And that squeaky bed.’

She handed it back to him. Their eyes met. Softly, she said, ‘If you hadn’t always been such a drunken arsehole it wouldn’t have cost you anything. In case you hadn’t noticed, I often slipped the money back into your jacket - you were too pissed to notice. You kept saying you won more on the horses than you thought, plonka!’

‘Really?’ He tried to remember back, staring down at the floor. Lifting his head, he said, ‘I want you to have it have anyway; I have more than I know what to do with.’ His features hardened. ‘And you *did* help.’ He handed it back over.

‘Well ... thank you, I guess. How ... how long you back for?’

‘Couple a days, rest my leg.’

‘I could make you something?’ she offered.

He beamed a huge smile. ‘Full English breakfast?’

‘It’s little late in the day,’ she said as she stood. ‘But just this once, seeing as you’re being so generous.’

‘So what happened?’ she asked as they sat down in the lounge after his massive breakfast. She held a half-drunk cup of tea as Johnno lit up.

‘As before, babes, not a word of this to anyone.’

‘I know the drill.’

He lowered his head as he thought, staring out at her overgrown garden. ‘Jane was killed.’

She straightened, horrified. ‘Jane? Christ! What happened?’

He held his gaze on the garden, as he explained, ‘Short version? Some unhappy chappies stuck a bomb in our canteen in Switzerland, packed with nerve agent. She and six others got covered in the stuff, dead a minute or two later. An horrific way to go.’

‘My ... God.’

‘Beesely took it badly.’

‘I can image, she was with him as long as I’ve known them. She was with him when I left school!’

‘Twenty years.’ He made eye contact. ‘She was his daughter.’

‘His daughter? No ... she was his housekeeper.’

Johno took a long drag. ‘He kept it from her, in case the bad guys found out,’ he quietly explained. ‘He revealed it to her a few weeks back.’

‘God. And she was so frail!’

‘She always liked *you*,’ Johno mentioned, staring out of the window.

‘We used to gossip about *you*, that’s why. Always loved a good chat, Jane did.’

Johno nodded to himself. ‘After that we went psycho’ on the bad guys, we killed dozens of the fuckers. Then we went off to the Bahamas for a holiday, and all hell breaks loose back here with that dirty bomb.’ He faced her. ‘You don’t know about Ricky?’

‘No? What about Ricky?’

‘Dead.’

‘Dead?’ she gasped.

Johno nodded. ‘He died trying to stop that dirty bomb.’

‘God,’ she gasped. ‘You and him were tied up with that?’

‘I crashed my chopper into the road in front of the terrorist’s car –’

‘That’s how you got hurt?’ she asked in a strained whisper.

He faced her. ‘I killed the drivers of that car in London, grabbed the bomb, and flew off.’

‘*You ... killed them?*’ She was stunned.

‘We planted a cover story for the papers, to keep me and Beesely out of it.’

‘Beesely?’

He gave her a pained look. ‘He was in the back of the fucking chopper.’

Her mouth hung open. ‘Is he alright?’

‘A few bruises, bit of a limp. Pop up the house if you want, say hello.’

‘Christ, Johnno. You and him back working for –’

‘No,’ he quickly cut in. ‘Can’t really say what we’re into.’

She sipped her tea, quietly stunned.

‘Funny thing,’ Johnno began. ‘When I grabbed that bomb I knew it was all over, and I didn’t really care, I was just focused on getting the job done.’

‘What job?’

‘Getting the bomb out of London. I threw the co-pilot out of an Army chopper, jumped in and forced the pilot to fly off at gunpoint. Plan was to fly the bomb out to the North Sea and then ditch the chopper. All over in a splash.’ He stared into his mug of tea.

‘So what happened?’ she quietly pressed.

Still staring into the mug, he explained, ‘I had a long chat to the pilot, or he had one with me more like. He talked me around. I was going to drop him on a beach and fly out to my death.’ He took a drag and peered out the window. ‘Strange.’

‘Strange? It’s amazing!’

He faced her, a questioning look. ‘Amazing?’

‘What you did. You were prepared to give your own life to take the bomb out to sea.’

‘Been doing the work shit for a long time, love, brain was on autopilot. I didn’t give it any thought.’ He took a drag. ‘I don’t think I wanted to end it, not with the money we have now, I just wanted to get the job done.’

‘If you’ve got all this money, what the hell are you doing back on operations?’

‘Good ... question,’ he carefully mouthed. ‘But it’s not that kind of money; with *this* money comes responsibility. Beesely hasn’t long left, so he’s going to use it to bust up a few fuckers. Me, I’m along for the ride - see what happens.’

‘See what happens?’

He took a breath. ‘I shouldn’t be here –’

She checked her watch.

‘No, I mean, I should be dead - several times over. I’ve had my life, I’ve done a lot. Now, Beesely wants to make a difference and I agree with him. We may last a week, or a year. But the way we’ve been going, more like a week.’ He offered her a smile, getting back a scowl.

‘I’m not working tonight,’ she ventured.

‘Can’t, sorry, war’s not over yet. But ... you know ... thanks for everything. Don’t know when we’ll be back this way. If ever.’ He stood.

She lifted up, placed down her tea and hugged him. ‘You take care.’

He touched her up and left.

* * *

Away from the house, walking around the lake, Otto dialled Minister Blaum.

‘Otto, my God, what has been happening?’

‘We intercepted a second dirty bomb, this one heading for London, as the first may well have been.’

‘Do you think it was al-Qa’eda?’

‘At the moment, all evidence points that way, Minister.’

‘My God. What do the British say?’

‘They must be delighted, but also concerned in just *how*... we intercepted the terrorist’s car.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I had a talk with Beesely in the Bahamas after we met with a group of Americans.’ Otto took in the beautiful lake.

‘And?’ Blaum asked after Otto paused.

‘It would appear that Beesely is a ... long standing and high ranking member of a secret American intelligence agency.’

‘Ah ... so now we know why the decontamination teams came so readily.’

‘And yesterday he made a phone call, the result of which was that a special USAF 747 flew over England and spotted the bomb in the terrorist’s car. The English intelligence services were ... surprised and perplexed at that.’

‘They did not know?’ Blaum queried.

‘Apparently not. And Minister, this American group are very, very powerful by all accounts.’

‘That is both a potential benefit, and a concern. Do you think they have their own agenda?’

‘Beesely does not trust them completely. He seems to be working on his own agenda, whatever that is.’

‘Any enquiries about...?’

‘None, no interest at all.’

‘That *is* odd.’

‘Should our ... friends get to know of Beesely’s position within this American group –’

‘They’d be as horrified as we should be. If the Americans got hold of *the list*...’

‘They will not, Minister. But they may prove to be very great allies.’

‘You are forgetting the link between the Americans and the Vatican.’

‘Then the question remains, as to how much influence Beesely has with them. From what I have observed so far, his influence is great.’

‘Keep me informed.’

Otto pressed red and lowered the phone. ‘You know what you need to know, Minister. No more, no less.’

4

Dame Helen pulled up in a people-carrier with husband, two daughters and Cocker Spaniel in tow, being observed from the conservatory. Johnno sat in t-shirt and shorts, his leg up. Otto had on a short-sleeve shirt and tie, Beesely smart but casual for their visitors.

Beesely and Otto walked out and greeted Dame Helen’s family on the gravel, bringing them inside to Johnno, the dog sprinting around the grounds. The conservatory was warm on this clear summer’s day, two small fans now blowing cool air around, the leaves of numerous rubber plants swaying.

‘So, how’s the wounded hero?’ she asked as she entered, sitting opposite Johnno and tucking her legs underneath herself. Today, her casual clothes - jeans and t-shirt, made her appear ten years younger, and not unattractive.

‘Sore. I managed to jar the knee in the same place I was shot in Kosovo,’ Johnno explained.

She winced sympathetically. ‘Ouch,’ she quietly mouthed.

‘Plus two broken ribs, a few cuts. Nothing serious. Like a night out in Newport nightclub.’

Her daughters walked in, her husband with a hand on each of the girl’s shoulders. Johnno raised his head.

‘This is my husband, Mike. He’s in marketing. And these two trouble-makers are Sophie and Tabitha.’

‘How you doing girls, cold drink?’

‘Please,’ they politely said in unison, the girls appearing to Johnno to be around twelve years old.

He gestured for Mike to sit, studying him for a second. ‘How much do you ... know, Mike?’

‘What the newspaper’s said, plus a few hints. Such as ... you didn’t get those injuries in a Newport nightclub.’

Johno lifted his eyebrows in mock concern. ‘Have you ever been to Newport? You take your life in your hands. And that’s just the women!’

Mike laughed. ‘I had a sheltered upbringing.’

Johno explained, ‘Back when I was first *badged* - joined the SAS - we used to get the train down to Newport on a Saturday night. That’s where that slogan comes from - ‘Only the SAS go clubbing in Newport!’”

Looking a little embarrassed, Mike answered, ‘Can’t say I’ve ever come across that one in marketing circles. And I dare say that the Newport Tourist Board has not used that one either; can’t quite picture it on billboards as you drive over the Severn Bridge.’

Johno stared ahead. ‘You’ve given me an idea, Mike.’

Thomas walked in with a large .22 air rifle, greeting everyone politely in his improving English. The girls caught his attention. He asked Johno, in whispered German, if he could show the girls how to shoot. The eldest girl, Sophie, answered him in German, linked arms and led him out as Beesely and Otto walked in, drinks in hand.

‘Is that ... *wise*?’ Beesely asked Johno, carefully observing the two children running towards the lake.

‘There’re no ducks left,’ Johno pointed out with a smirk, immediately regretting it. Helen sat scowling.

‘He shot the ducks with his air-rifle?’ she asked.

‘No, to be truthful,’ Beesely answered, sorting the drinks.

‘He got them with a 9mm automatic,’ Johno pointed out, trying not to smile.

Otto added, dead pan, ‘And the swans with an MP5.’

Beesely snapped his head around to Otto. ‘The swans are dead?’

Otto nodded, tipping his head towards Johnno. Dame Helen shook her head.

‘She’ll be fine,’ Johnno insisted.

‘Not her I’m worried about,’ Dame Helen admitted.

Mike cut in with, ‘She knocked the boy next door cold the other week. Bit of a tomboy, that one.’

‘I’m not!’ the younger daughter proudly pointed out, sticking to her father’s leg.

‘Should be a challenge for him then,’ Beesely offered as he placed a drink for Mike. ‘Helen, why don’t we walk and chat business for ten minutes, then we don’t have to talk shop later.’ They stepped out, soon walking around the grounds, whilst keeping a careful eye on Thomas. The youngest daughter went exploring the old house.

‘So, Mike,’ Johnno began. ‘What’s it like being married to ‘M’?’

Mike gave it a moment’s thought. ‘Taking the kids to school, picking them up, stopping them fighting, balancing the bills, fixing the house, doing the dishes.’

‘That good, eh? Can she cook?’

‘Oh, yes, she’s pretty good. Sunday roast is always great, Christmas and the like.’

‘Well, we know where to come next year.’

Mike adopted a serious stare, taking a long, deep breath. ‘How close did we come?’

Johnno regarded him carefully for a moment. ‘Ten minutes or so.’

He held his stare on Johnno. ‘Not much of a margin.’

‘Still, would only have been Southwark uninhabitable for a thousand years,’ Johnno quipped.

‘So, no change there then,’ Mike joked. Then, again serious, he added, glancing out of the windows, ‘The girls were in music study that day, near Blackheath.’

Johnno glanced at Otto, who had now lifted his head out of his newspaper.

Mike added, looking at his feet, ‘All the time she was at Chequers ... and ... those reports were coming in ... Blackheath this, Blackheath that. I know she had a good cry afterwards, don’t know how she kept it together. She was a terrible wreck when she got home, she didn’t stop hugging the kids for an hour. I went to fetch them early, but couldn’t get close because of all the roadblocks.’

He raised his head. ‘Thank God for mobile phones, eh. I must have rung them fifty times.’ He glanced at the lake, taking a moment. ‘She’s a bit more fond of you lot now, I dare say.’ As he took his drink his hand was shaking, carefully observed by John and Otto.

Beesely and Dame Helen walked at a leisurely pace, around the old house and towards the woods.

‘If it *is* Russian backed, then things might get hairy,’ he calmly pointed out.

‘Well ... we have kind of a *request* for you.’

‘Oh dear, not sure I like the sound of that.’

‘PM had a chat with his European colleagues. We don’t want to rock the boat too much –’

He stopped dead and faced her. ‘It was a radioactive dirty bomb, possibly tracking straight back to the Russians!’

‘We’ve not confirmed that, and the terrorists are Mid’ East, not Russian. That makes it difficult –’

‘Because of the new gas pipeline into Europe, and the bloody Europeans putting pressure on the PM! Yes?’

She turned away, taking in the pleasant grounds. ‘You might think that, I couldn’t possibly comment.’

Beesely took a deep breath, then walked on. ‘So, I guess they want me to *aggressively* investigate and ... and then deal with the participants as best I can with *plausible deniability*.’

‘Something like that, although I’m not really allowed to give you any direct requests. But ... there may have been an email to you today. List of ... persons to consider.’

‘Very well, I would have retaliated in any case. They killed Ricky, so someone will pay dearly. We are presently trying to track down the man who tipped us off originally.’

‘How did he know to call your people in Switzerland?’ she puzzled.

‘He didn’t, he called Interpol - a phone number in the back of a local Ukraine newspaper, inviting people to report serious crime, paid for by the European Union as part of some initiative with the Ukraine Government. And we intercept everything Interpol does.’

‘Going to pretend I didn’t hear that.’

He glanced at her as they walked on. ‘When the time comes, I will probably ask for some pressure to be exerted on the Ukraine Government.’

‘PM has spoken to them, a complete denial, and they’re being as helpful as they can. Germans love them to bits, so tricky.’

‘Germans owe me. I’ll bring some pressure to bear, and financially.’

‘Financially?’

‘I could destroy the Ukraine economy,’ he snarled. She looked sceptical. He smiled sadistically. ‘Did you see the trading volumes brought to bear on the British stock market yesterday? I have an influence over twenty five percent of the world’s stock buyers. Something else you don’t know about me.’

‘We don’t want the Ukraine Government toppled.’ She stopped and faced him. ‘That’s official.’

‘How about just ... *ruffled*?’

‘It’s your call, but be careful.’

‘Mossad is working an angle for me, an idea that Johnno came up with. If he’s right, then the PM would not have much of a choice. And if you lot want me to go toe-to-toe with Moscow, then there will be favours asked. Large ones.’ He stopped. Raising his voice, he said, ‘I lost Ricky, Jane, nearly lost us all a

few days ago. Be sure of what you are asking me to do, because there will be bloodshed!

She lowered her head as if a naughty schoolgirl. A moment passed. She sighed, stating, 'We'll support you any way that is practical.'

'Fine. First request ... nay ... first insistence. I want two four-man SAS teams, best you have, two officers and their kit, encamped with me.'

'And any action will be outside of the UK?'

'Unfortunately, it's likely to be on my bloody doorstep in Switzerland. But also in eastern Europe.'

They walked on towards the lake, suddenly stopping dead.

'Did he just kiss her?' she asked.

'Madam, I think the little lady just kissed *him*.'

'God, she's a handful!'

They walked briskly across.

'Wait until she starts dating bikers!'

5

As Dame Helen drove off, Beesely joined Otto and Johnno in the conservatory. 'Brandy!' he barked at a guard.

Otto looked up. 'Problems?'

Beesely sat, clearly not pleased.

'What's up?' Johnno asked, concerned.

'What's up, my boy, is that if you are right in your theory about how this all got started, the British Government and the European Union do not want to upset Moscow. They have an energy problem, and a European gas pipeline to consider.'

'They nearly lost London for fuck's sake!' Johnno pointed out.

'Nearly, but did not. And they still need energy. And there are probably some quarters happy to see Middle East terrorists get the blame. If we are going to deal with those behind it, we are on our own.'

‘On our own,’ Johno repeated. ‘Up against the SVR?’

‘I do not believe it was the Russian Government,’ Otto began, as detached and emotionless as normal. ‘Their economy would reduce to zero if London was destroyed. They have a very heavy investment in the European gas pipeline and the UK stock markets. They want their customers alive, not dead.’

‘There is a lot of sense to that,’ Beesely agreed. ‘So we investigate and see where it takes us. To whom.’

‘And we investigate aggressively?’ Johno pointedly enquired.

Beesely offered him a concerned look. ‘Very!’ He turned to Otto. ‘I want security on this place doubled, personal security on us all increased, and permanent state of alert at our offices until I say so.’

Otto eased upright and grabbed his phone. ‘From what direction should we assume trouble?’

‘East, for now,’ Beesely suggested.

After his brandy, and time to cool down, Beesely grabbed his phone. ‘Get me Elle Rosen, Mossad.’ He waited.

‘Beesely?’

‘Elle, listen, there’s no time for pleasantries. The day after tomorrow, 6pm, Zug: I need you and a senior decision maker, government level.’

‘Problems, my friend?’

‘Big problems.’

‘We will be there. And Beesely, some day you just call me to say ‘hi’ ... eh?’

Beesely hung up, smiling. ‘Get me Oliver Stanton.’ He waited. Otto leant forwards, now concerned.

‘Beesely? You damn well went and woke me!’

‘Sorry, but we have a few problems. I want a senior decision make at my place in Zug for 6pm day after tomorrow.’

‘Why is the sound of that going to keep me awake?’

‘It should.’

‘I’m coming over myself.’

‘Always welcome.’ Beesely hung up then turned to Otto. ‘I want a representative of the Swiss bank society, their spokesman, *and* Minister Blaum, at Zug for 6pm.’

Otto sat quickly upright, grabbing his phone.

‘Pin out of the grenade?’ Johnno asked, taking a long drag.

‘Yes, and with us holding it!’ Beesely answered, making strong eye contact. Turning the other way, he said, ‘Otto, I want all intel’ and leads followed up by twelve noon day after tomorrow, all British and German forensics.’

6

‘What’s up, Doc?’

Dr. Manning was offered a seat in the warm conservatory by a guard, seating himself opposite Johnno, who now sat with his leg up, Simpsons Family silk shorts and a t-shirt that announced, ‘Only the SAS go clubbing in Newport!’

‘Johnno, you look ... injured. Again.’ He placed down his faded leather bag.

‘Spot of bother with a helicopter. Tea?’ Johnno asked, the guard hovering.

‘Please.’

Johnno glanced up, the guard walking out immediately.

Manning took in the conservatory. ‘This is the first time I’ve been back here for most twenty years. Surprised you got planning permission for this conservatory, what with the listed building status. It’s not exactly tucked away.’

Johnno offered him a wide, confident, sneaky grin.

Dr. Manning squinted. ‘Something you’re not telling me?’

‘Beesely didn’t just inherit a Swiss bank, he inherited one of the world’s largest, and most capable, private intelligence agencies. We do the fuck what we like.’

‘Sounds ... dangerous, Johnno,’ Manning offered in disapproving tones.

‘There you go, always concerned about my health.’

‘Well you are, after all, my patient.’

Johno made a face. ‘I never liked that word. From now on I’m your mate, OK?’

‘If that’s what you prefer.’ Dr. Manning took in the conservatory, Johno’s injuries, and the rather large K2 guards patrolling with dogs and guns. ‘Beesely not here? In Switzerland?’

‘He’s up the road, he’ll be back anytime.’

‘So, you had an accident? Same leg, if I recall.’

‘You do recall, and yes, it hurts like fuck. I twisted it where I was shot, couple a busted ribs, few cuts. Nothing much.’

‘Nothing much *to you* perhaps. Remember those chats we had, about the value of you own self worth.’

‘Sorry, Doc’, but you’re not here to go all psycho’ babble on me.’

Manning was puzzled. ‘Then why did you call me?’

‘We’ve now got some space and buildings in Switzerland, so I’ve been thinking. I’m going to open up a clinic over there for ex-soldiers and ex-spooks. You see, getting away from here, the UK, seems to work for me, and over there I’ve resources which I can use, especially in the summer. You see, the way I figure it, most people like me are miserable because they think they’ve lost some ... potential future. If they get it back, they’re cured.’

‘Quite insightful, Johno. Picked up a book ... have we?’

Johno grinned. ‘Not for a long time.’ Three Range Rovers pulled up on the gravel. ‘Family is back,’ Johno quietly stated.

‘Family?’ Manning repeated, back in character. ‘You see Beesely as family now?’

Johno smiled and wagged a finger. ‘Time for a few surprises.’

Dr. Manning stood as Beesely, Otto and Thomas walked in.

‘Doc’ Manning?’ Beesely said with a welcoming smile and a slight frown. They shook.

‘The *patient* called me,’ Manning explained. ‘How are you?’ He stopped smiling when he noticed the cuts. ‘Christ, you weren’t in the same helicopter crash, were you?’

They all sat, Thomas stood next to Johnno and studying Dr. Manning.

‘Afraid so,’ Beesely announced. ‘Good to see Johnno is keeping up his chats with you.’

‘He isn’t, exactly,’ Manning replied.

Beesely faced Johnno. ‘Oh?’

Johnno explained, ‘I’m going to open a clinic in Switzerland for ex-soldiers, nutcases like me.’

Beesely stopped smiling, took a breath, and lowered his head for a moment. ‘An excellent idea,’ he quietly commended.

‘Doc’ Manning here is the only head shrink I know, so he can advise, or help if he wants.’ He gestured toward Otto. ‘The smartly dressed good-looking young fella over there is Otto, head of our Swiss operations. And this monster is my adopted son.’

‘You adopted?’ Dr. Manning repeated, wide eyed.

‘We all did,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘No need to worry or to call child services, we don’t leave the boy completely in Johnno’s care.’ Beesely faced the psychiatrist squarely. ‘Has he told you ... anything?’

Manning tipped his head. ‘About?’

Beesely faced Johnno. ‘Did you say anything?’

‘Some about the Swiss money and K2, very little.’

‘Perhaps you should fill him in then,’ Beesely suggested as drinks were placed down for him and Otto.

Johnno took a breath. ‘Have you seen the news, about the dirty bomb in Blackheath?’

Manning studied Johnno for a moment, before glancing at Beesely. ‘Yes, you could hardly miss it.’

Johnno explained, ‘We, us four, were in that chopper, not MI6 or the SAS; they got there late. I tried to ram the terrorist car with our chopper.’

Manning glanced at Beesely, who nodded. ‘What the hell are you back into Morris?’

‘Everything. I don’t have long left, so to hell with it all. We ... are going to make a difference.’

‘Dear God, Morris –’

Beesely held up a hand, ‘I know, I’m almost eighty. But what worth is my last few years sat on a beach?’

‘There’s more,’ Johno said with a grin, enjoying the doctor’s expression. ‘He’s my real father.’

Manning faced Beesely, who again nodded. ‘Well, that explains a hell of a lot all in one go.’ He blew out. ‘Bloody hell.’

‘And me,’ Otto said with a wave.

‘And you? You’re Swiss!’

‘He gets about a bit, does our Morris,’ Johno quipped.

Beesely shot Johno a look, then took a breath. ‘So was Jane,’ he quietly stated.

‘Was ... Jane?’

‘She’s dead,’ Beesely explained.

‘Sorry to hear that, Morris. Are you OK?’

‘Never better, strangely enough.’

‘Was it ... an accident?’ Manning delicately broached.

‘No, she was murdered ... with nerve gas, at our place in Switzerland,’ Beesely answered.

‘What? Are you joking?’ Manning asked, a worried look for Beesely. ‘What the hell are you into, Morris?’

‘Hell ... is *exactly* what we are into, Doctor,’ Beesely firmly pointed out.

Manning took a breath, shaking his head. ‘So, what is that you want from me?’

‘Best ask my son,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘I never knew you were here.’ Manning faced Johno.

Johno explained, ‘Like I said, I’m going to open up a place in Switzerland, fly ex-soldiers over there, give them something practical to focus on. So if it’s OK with you, Doc’, I’ll give you a call when we’re back, send a Learjet for you; it’s the same as

you've been doing here, just ... over there. And, without trying to step on your toes, I'm going to try some of my techniques on the guys.'

Manning sighed. 'With some of the people I've found, radical programmes are all that is left to try. We picked up quite a few sleeping rough.'

'What?' Beesely barked.

Manning faced him. 'Sizeable small fraction of ex-servicemen in hostels or on the streets in the UK, I'm afraid. Some estimates say that fifteen percent of *all* homeless are ex-services.'

'Find them,' Beesely firmly ordered. 'Money is no object. Send them over to us, we'll clean them up.'

Back in his office, later that day, Dr. Manning was surprised to find General Rose in the doorway. 'General?'

'Long time no see.'

Manning eased back. 'And you're here just after I get back from a session with Johno.'

General Rose sat. 'So ... how is he?'

'Is that a *professional* interest, or a ... *breach of client confidentiality* interest?'

'Just a general interest, Doc.' He waited, drilling the doctor with a strong glare.

Manning interlaced his fingers, resting his arms on the desk. Attempting to look sincere, he asked, 'Tell me about your fondest childhood memory.'

General Rose frowned. 'What?' Then he smiled, letting out a quick laugh.

Manning smiled back. 'Sorry. I couldn't resist that one, you sat in that chair.'

General Rose laughed again. 'So, how is ... our boy?'

'The hero? Johno? That boy? The man who rammed a helicopter into a terrorist's car with everyone who matters to him sat in the back?'

General Rose checked his nails for several seconds. Finally, he made firm eye contact. ‘Are you saying that you’ll not co-operate with us?’ he quietly posed.

‘Co-operate?’ On what, exactly?’

‘It’s just ... that in my position I’m interested in matters that involve people who ram helicopters into terrorist’s cars.’

Manning offered him an exaggerated frown. ‘Why not ask Johno directly?’

General Rose sighed, irritated. ‘If Johno said anything that is of interest to national security –’

‘I’d tell the relevant authorities. And, just for the record, who is that, given that you don’t *officially* exist.’

General Rose stared back. ‘Did you see Beesely?’

‘Quick hello as I left. Like I said, it was a session with Johno, which are always strange at the best of times.’

‘So, he didn’t happen to say how he knew about that car?’

‘Americans told them, I think.’

General Rose straightened. ‘Americans?’ Manning nodded. General Rose looked quite put out. ‘What else?’

‘I have to be very careful, as you know. But, if there was something I thought you should know ... you’d know.’

General Rose sighed and stood. ‘You have my number. Oh, what’s this new work you’ve started; ex-servicemen?’

‘I donate my time on weekends to a few charities; we lookout for ex-service amongst the cardboard sleeping bags, see if we can help.’ He stood. ‘Care to contribute?’

‘Christmas.’

‘What?’ Manning queried.

‘My fondest childhood memory is Christmas.’ He turned and left.

A strange new feeling

1

‘Nervous?’ Beesely asked as they stood outside the reception hall, Buckingham Palace, a butler stood ready to open the large doors when they were called.

Johno adjusted his waistcoat. ‘Why?’

‘It’s the Queen. You’ve never been inside before.’

‘If the dogs bite me, they’ll be trouble,’ he whispered.

‘If you make any trouble in *there*, I’ll bite you!’ Beesely threatened.

‘OK, keep your knickers on,’ Johno whispered.

The K2 photographer stood ready, already having snapped them at the house, outside the palace, and stood together inside. The doors clicked opened.

‘Gentlemen, if you please,’ the Queen’s houseman called.

‘Follow me, but two steps ahead of me,’ Beesely whispered.

Johno quickly quizzed him with a look before stepping inside. Lining the sides of this large room were two hundred people. ‘Oh ... shit,’ he muttered, now realising that they were all focused on him.

He could see uniformed officers from all branches of the armed services, huge braids signifying high rank - many holding ceremonial swords, ladies in ‘race-day’ hats, men in morning wear and grey top hats. With a deep breath, he limped slowly toward the Queen, who stood waiting some twenty yards ahead, catching Beesely out of the corner of his eye. Then they began to clap.

He limped slowly forward, eyeing the assembled dignitaries.

There stood Dame Helen and her assistant Willis, smiling and clapping. He recognised the Home Secretary and Defence Minister, a few other politicians, many men in suits; no idea who they were. Then he noticed the Prime Minister, looking very

business-like. With his head down, but smiling politely, Johno limped on.

Next, he noticed smartly dressed men with small American flag badges on their lapels. Minister Blaum came as a surprise. Then came some foreign looking gentlemen; no idea who they were, or what they knew, but they were all clapping.

Lynx pilot Peter Raines, stood in No.1 dress uniform, smiled widely and clapped loudly. His navigator stood at his shoulder, a big bruise on his chin. Johno forced a quick smile for the man, looking apologetic. He made eye contact with Sgt Mason and the SAS troopers from the Lynx, all in No. 1 dress uniform today, all sporting medals and grinning. Milward and his staff, not looking too enthusiastic about today's event, looked on. Some high-ranking police officers stood behind them, more army officers; Navy, RAF, all sorts thrown in.

Finally, he reached the Queen, the clapping subsiding, the Queen stood in formal attire next to a table.

'Ma'am,' he coughed out. His face remained bruised, scars and stitches visible, but the 'face fungus' had been trimmed

She waited for the room to fall silent, then made eye contact and indicated he should kneel.

'Apologies, Ma'am, but I can hardly walk, let alone kneel and get back up.'

'That is quite alright, Mister Williams. Do you require a chair?'

'No, Ma'am.'

She lifted her head and glanced over his shoulder, Johno following her look, and finding Beesely waiting back near the door. 'Sneaky bastard', he muttered.

'We are here today ... to honour someone who showed exceptional insight, bravery ... and concern for his fellow man. Sergeant John Williams - formerly of the 22nd Special Air Service Regiment, deliberately crashed a helicopter into the path of a terrorist vehicle when he suspected that it was the vehicle carrying a bomb towards the heart of our capital. With no regard

for his own safety, *or those around him*, his only aim was to stop the terrorists, which he did in the gun battle that followed.

‘What came next was remarkable in its humanity. Sergeant Williams carried the bomb to a waiting Army helicopter, whose aircrew - I understand - were not so delighted at the prospect of the bomb aboard their aircraft. He stopped the other soldiers from climbing aboard, as they had intended. He *ejected* the aircraft’s navigator and *persuaded* the pilot to fly quickly off.

‘It was Sergeant Williams intention to fly on alone, into the North Sea, and let the helicopter pilot jump to safety, whilst he himself made sure the bomb found its way to he bottom of the North Sea.

‘Injured, and unable to control the aircraft, Sergeant Williams was dropped-off on a Norfolk beach, the pilot flying on and ditching a safe distance off the coast.’

She turned to the table and lifted up a box. Opening it, she turned back to him, stepping closer and pinning the medal onto his jacket. ‘For conspicuous bravery in your previous military career – belatedly, and after much research - you are hereby awarded the Distinguished Service Medal.’

Surprised, Johno lowered his head. ‘Thank you, Ma’am.’

She took another medal. ‘In addition to which we are also awarding you the George Cross for services whilst serving with Military Intelligence.’ She pinned it.

‘Thank you, Ma’am,’ he said with a puzzled look.

‘And for services to your country, it gives me great pleasure to award you the highest honour we have for servicemen, past and present, the Victoria Cross.’ Polite applause swept around the room, a camera flashed. She half turned. ‘Mister Ambassador.’

The man stepped forwards, ribbons in hand. ‘Sergeant Williams, for services to NATO during the Kosovo Campaign,’ he began in an American accent, ‘and with grateful appreciation of the Office of The President of The United States, you are

hereby awarded the Congressional Medal of Honour. Well done.’ They shook hands, a camera flashing.

‘Thanks,’ Johno offered, now bewildered.

She beckoned Beesely forward as Johno turned, grinning at the troopers and pilots. Beesely limped level and the Queen closed to a confidential distance.

‘I have been following your career for quite some time,’ she informed Johno. ‘In fact, since the day you were born.’ Johno’s eyes widened. ‘Sir Morris kept me quite up-to-date with your ... *exploits* over the years.’ Johno glanced at the smirking Beesely. She continued, ‘I knew when you joined the army, the SAS, and when you were lost in Kosovo. And Sir Morris and I both had sons in the Falklands.’

She turned to Beesely. ‘Now you, you old rascal, have never failed to surprise me over these past sixty years. I was amazed when I heard this story. In fact, I thought it a joke, given how old you are now - chasing terrorists in helicopters, gun battles, radioactive bombs. And now I am reliably informed that you direct a secret Swiss Intelligence company that no one knew about, least of all me, and that you propped up the UK stock markets this week.’

‘One does ones best, Ma’am.’

‘You, sir, have always managed to make ‘Ma’am’ mean a myriad of different things. I can never tell if you are being facetious.’

‘Yes. Ma’am,’ he joked.

‘Hmmm.’ She gestured towards a door, ‘The reception party,’ then led the way.

* * *

‘Sorry about the chin,’ Johno offered, shaking hands with the navigator.

The navigator forced a quick flat smile, seeming a little embarrassed. ‘This is my wife, and our eldest Sarah.’

Johno smiled awkwardly at the navigator's wife.

She shook his hand. 'Thanks for what you did,' she said, suddenly becoming serious. 'If he had flown off with that bomb he might not be here today.'

Awkwardly, Johno replied, 'My brain was on auto-pilot, love.' Next came the Pilot, Peter.

'Hey buddy,' Peter quietly let out as they shook, a warm and welcoming smile.

'Got yourself a medal,' Johno noted as Peter's wife inched closer.

'A real one, a DFC,' the pilot responded.

'You deserve it, mate, flying that bomb out to sea.'

Peter raised his eyebrows, mockingly. 'I had a little *persuasion*. And thanks for the ... *bag*. How the hell can *you* afford that?'

Johno eased his face closer, a quick glance left and right. 'I have a very, very rich patron.'

Peter glanced at Beesely. 'I've heard rumours,' he whispered.

Next, Johno stopped in front of Dame Helen. 'Watcha babes? You scrub up well,' he offered with a smirk. She gave him a disappointed, motherly look. He shook hands with her, and with a grinning Willis.

Johno stopped next to General Sir Christopher Rose, stood now in a civilian suit. 'General, how nice to see your wrinkly features again.' They shook.

'Well done,' the General coldly offered. 'Anything ... to report?'

'The local apple strudel is lovely. Try some. As for the other matter ... not a sausage. Not even a hint of a sausage, nor smell of one. In fact, you could say the whole place is sausage free. And, if you threw a sausage up the wrong tree whilst observing a pack of hungry dogs they'd be ... you know ... barking up the

wrong fucking tree.’ He walked on, General Rose staring at the back of his head with a heavy frown.

Beesely stepped up to the General. ‘Ah, General Rose. It’s been a while.’

‘How are you, Sir Morris? Besides the obvious injuries, of course.’

‘A bit too old for all this, I’m afraid. But, I still know where my *loyalties* lie, where my *heart* is. And my *sense of duty* ... is just as great as it ever was.’ With a cheeky smile and a theatrical wink, he stepped away, leaving General Rose now frowning heavily at the back of Beesely’s head.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ Beesely called ten minutes later. ‘Ladies and gentlemen.’

Most of the guests were surprised, especially the Queen, thinking it some impromptu toast. They quietened down and adjusted their positions as four butlers walked in with large display boards.

‘I have a presentation to make, and I also have some favours to ask.’

‘Oh dear,’ the Queen whispered toward the PM.

The boards were laid out. The first showed a tree-diagram of some sort, the rest cartoon-style graphics of what appeared soldiers in white uniforms.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, I am about to start a new project, although I have left it a little late. For this project I desire Royal patronage, the kind co-operation of the British Government, the international co-operation of the Swiss Government, plus the kind assistance of the British Army, Air Force and Navy.’

He had them all intrigued, and many concerned. The people mentioned stepped closer to the boards, the Queen still looking a little irate at the cheek of it.

‘I am going to found an international rescue service, of mostly volunteers, but with a strong leaning towards ex-military medically trained staff. This organization will aim to have a

thousand staff, all trained to a very high degree in a variety of subjects.

‘The purpose? Following a disaster somewhere around the world, I want to be able to deliver up to one thousand well-equipped, well trained, rescue medics within twenty four hours.’

There were a few gasps from those who understood the logistics.

‘I aim to open training camps in several countries, starting with the UK and Switzerland. Those camps will make use of the wealth of unemployed talent amongst our young people - paying them, and training them, in a variety of subjects, not least how to be good citizens.

‘I will supply this force with aircraft and helicopters, plus the equipment they need. They will be trained in survival, first aid, search and rescue, fire fighting, bush fire fighting, flood assistance and foreign languages. I will also have a parachute force that can land people anywhere in the world, even in the most inhospitable of places.

‘For this endeavour I will gratefully accept the part-time patronage of retired or senior military, police or fire brigade officers.’ Men glanced at each other, nodding. ‘I will also accept any kind assistance, from any suitable persons who wish to contribute. This organization will be set up as a charity, with a board, and will be answerable to that board as well as to the laws and procedures of whichever country they are in. There are displays here, outlining the proposal, and you can also contact me via the Swiss branch of the International Red Cross. Thank you for your time.’

The crowd started to clap politely.

Minister Blaum walked up and stated, in a loud voice, ‘You shall have the full co-operation of the Swiss Government and Swiss Red Cross.’ They shook.

An Air Force officer had been stood close by, and now stepped up. ‘I’m retiring in a few months and you’ll have my complete support, whatever time you need.’

Army officers made similar moves, the Prime Minister stepping up. ‘Sir Morris, I will study the proposal with great interest, and you have my support in principal.’ They shook.

Beesely turned to the Queen, a question in his expression.

‘Like you, Sir Morris, I am not so young. I think maybe Charles or William may better suit your needs. Especially William.’

He bowed. ‘All help gratefully accepted. Ma’am.’

She offered him a mildly scolding look.

2

The next day, Beesely’s helicopter landed on a disused airfield near Swindon, on its dilapidated runway, weeds growing out of cracks in the tarmac. Several caravans stood parked in a row beside two yellow Portacabins.

As they stepped down from the helicopter men walked forwards, builders hard hats held down against the helicopter’s wash. With their heads bent low, Beesely and company walked towards the men as the helicopter’s engines quickly wound down.

‘Morning, sir,’ the first builder said with a handshake.

‘How’s it looking?’ Beesely asked.

The builder pointed towards hangars and barrack rooms some three hundred yards away. ‘Still have water in the buildings and hangars, no problem there, sir. Electricity will be up in a day or so, gas turned back on when we need it. They’re doing site surveys now.’

‘Are the buildings all useable?’ Beesely asked.

‘Yes, sir, good condition structurally. Hangars are built to last as well.’ Otto and Johno took in the scene.

Beesely turned towards the runway. ‘That needs to be fixed to acceptable standards for a C130 to land on, maybe a C5 Galaxy.’

‘Tricky, sir, but we have the architects coming down in a day or so.’

Beesely put his hands on his hips, turning the other way. ‘Right, perimeter fence: half decent, but not Colditz. Gate house fixed up, twenty four hour security. What are those houses over there?’

‘They were married quarters in the fifties, sir. Government was going to sell the land to a developer.’

‘Are they salvageable?’

‘Got asbestos in them, loads of it.’

Beesely straightened and sighed. ‘OK, pull them down,’ he softly ordered. Then louder, ‘But I want houses for maybe twenty permanent staff, flats for another fifty visitors, the rest sleep in the barracks. They’re being trained to go up jungle, not be comfortable.’

He turned. ‘Right. Here –’ He pointed with both arms. ‘- four hundred yard assault course, the toughest in the world; make it a bitch. I want the Army asking us for favours, sending their boys here. Far corner, a parachute school. And a large muddy pond, deep enough for rowing or swimming across, say a hundred yards.’

They walked towards the hangars. ‘In the hangars we need an indoor assault course, lots of ropes and climbing gear. I want a climbing wall or two, a few crashed airliners on the airfield to practice body recovery.’

‘Going to need some lecture halls,’ Johnno suggested. ‘Surgical bays and a freezer for dead stuff.’

Beesely turned his head. ‘Dead stuff?’

‘Can’t teach field surgery without dead stuff. And dead people.’

‘Best get some pigs as well,’ Beesely suggested.

‘Pigs?’ the man asked.

‘Field medics shoot or stab them, then practice stitching them up,’ Johnno explained.

An Army Land-Rover drove onto the airfield and towards them. Two minutes later, an officer stepped out. ‘Anyone call for the Army,’ the man joked.

‘Who are you?’ Beesely enquired, shaking the officer’s hand.

‘Engineers, sir. Advance party. Got a battalion arriving Monday.’

Beesely glanced towards Johnno.

‘Nice to have friends in high places,’ Johnno commented. ‘What did this used to be, it seems familiar?’

‘Well, if you did a parachute course at RAF Brize Norton in the seventies or eighties it might. There used to be a balloon jump school here.’

‘Fuck, I knew I recognised it.’

‘And with a handsome moustache like that I can picture you here.’

3

It neared 11 a.m. the following day when they arrived at the gates to Zug compound, Beesely asking the driver to stop when they were a hundred yards inside the main gate.

‘Johnno, be so kind as to step out,’ Beesely instructed.

‘What? Why?’

‘The staff wished to show their respects, they are lined up waiting.’

‘Oh?’ He gave it some thought, reluctantly stepping down. ‘God’s sake,’ he muttered. The convoy drove on, through the crowds, stopping at the castle.

Johnno lit up, took a long drag, and began labouring slowly up the camp road. Guards stood smiling and waving, some making rude comments. He exchanged words with a few he knew, trudging slowly onwards, his leg hurting.

As he neared the castle the crowds began, lining the road three or four deep, many with cameras in hand. Then they began clapping. Pleased at the number of ladies in the crowd, Johnno

smiled politely back, noting many new faces. When he reached a group of guards he knew well he gave them a regal wave, a few rude comments coming back.

The road was now blocked by the ex-SAS contingent, all holding champagne bottles. ‘Oh well, didn’t want this suit anyway,’ he muttered.

As he stepped up to them they closed in, the crowd blocking any escape to the rear, not that his leg and ribs would have allowed him to run or fight his way through. The first cork ‘popped’, the signal to the rest to shake, pop and spay.

‘Bastards,’ he let out as they closed in, showering him with champagne.

The crowd cheered, cameras flashing from all sides. Then the first bag of flour went over his head. Then another, some ketchup, followed up by sugar and a large dollop of margarine rubbed in.

The crowd cheered more, flashing away with their cameras, until Johno became one big sticky blob of white. Clearing the various foodstuffs out of his eyes, he walked on, Beesely and Otto waiting ahead.

‘You’re not going inside like that!’ Beesely insisted in a quiet yet threatening tone. ‘Take it all off, right here.’

As guards laughed at him, Johno began to strip, more cameras flashing. Down to his shirt and underpants, and with his head wiped, he walked inside.

‘Call over the SAS,’ Beesely told Otto.

Otto went and fetched them, the men lining up in front of Beesely, still smiling but expecting some sort of rebuke.

‘Right, gentlemen. For what happened in Malvern, would anyone care to tell me just why I should not punish you?’

Silence. They looked at their boots.

Beesely stepped closer. ‘You buried Ricky upside down!’ he barked. ‘And at an angle, I understand!’ Furthermore, some idiot burnt down the marquee –’

‘Not us,’ one started to protest.

‘Shut up!’

‘Sir.’

‘And as for the damage to the hotel ... you screw-ups represent me, and K2, when you are away from here. I expect you to set an example.’

He patrolled along the length of the line. ‘For the damage to the hotel - which I know you were involved with, you are all docked one week’s pay. For burying Ricky upside down, you will clean out the pig pen each morning at 6am and each night at 7pm for the rest of this week.’ The men groaned. Beesely turned to Otto. ‘Have you fed the pigs Chicken Vindaloo?’ The troopers looked up.

‘Yes,’ Otto said with a nod.

‘And mixed in a laxative?’ Beesely enquired.

‘Yes.’

They cringed.

‘Shut up! Now fuck off, before I really punish you.’

Aftermath

1

At twelve-noon the meeting came to order, all managers sat facing Beesely, their deputies nestled in behind them.

Beesely waited for them to settle. 'So, this meeting is to recap, and to collate all we know about what happened.' Beesely took out his pen. 'What do we know about the drivers of the vehicles?'

The relevant manager eased forwards. 'Their passports were genuine. They were Jordanian for the vehicle stopped in Bavaria, but Lebanese-Palestinians for the vehicle stopped in London.'

'Any links to known terrorist groups?'

'None at all, sir. We have checked with Mossad.'

Beesely considered it. 'So, they were picked for the fact that they had clean records and a straight passport. What visa stamps were on their passports?'

'None had any Russian visa stamps, or even Ukraine - prior to them getting the bomb - but all had visited Turkey on the same date. Istanbul.'

Beesely turned to Herr Mole. 'And from Istanbul to the Ukraine?'

'A boat journey, or a short flight. Not long.'

Beesely nodded to himself. 'That does not mean that they took that journey, but they could have met someone in Turkey. Try and get the hotel records for those dates, see who else stayed there and cross match.'

'It is in progress,' Otto stated.

'And the vehicles themselves?'

Another manager tipped his head forwards. 'They were bought second-hand, in Kiev, sir.'

'Not in the east of the Ukraine?'

'No, sir.'

‘So, whoever bought them may have flown in. Do we have dates?’

‘Yes, sir; three weeks before they crossed into Hungary.’

‘Three weeks is a long time to be hanging around, they must have left a big footprint,’ Beesely suggested.

‘No, sir,’ Herr Mole stated. ‘They stayed with someone, no hotels were used.’

‘And that someone?’ Beesely pressed.

Herr Mole replied, ‘Unknown at the moment, but a Ukraine national most likely. The vehicles were bought by a native, not by a foreigner.’

‘So they had a little help. And the cars went from Kiev to the east, picked up the ball bearings and drove back. That’s quite a journey, so they were probably stopped by the police and asked for money. Let’s bribe who we need to in the Ukraine police along the route they would have most likely taken.’

Managers made notes.

‘Any visits by the drivers to Iraq, Syria or Pakistan?’ Beesely asked of the assembled managers.

‘Nothing on their passports, sir.’

‘The Jordanians may co-operate on talking to the families,’ Beesely suggested. ‘I’ll ask the British Government to put pressure on them to do so.’

Herr Mole put in, ‘I have the English language versions of several Jordanian newspapers; I have been monitoring them. The police in Jordan have spoken to the families. The only point of interest ... is that they both lost sons who went to fight in Iraq.’

‘A very big point of interest indeed!’ Beesely noted.

‘Yes, sir.’

Beesely eased back. ‘So, we have Ukraine cars, local assistance, Ukraine ball bearings, Jordanian and Lebanese martyrs ... and we don’t know who thought it all up. What has the man who tipped us off said?’

Otto answered, ‘He says that the man who paid him was Georgian. Beyond that he was not much help. He alone prepared

the ball bearings, they are used as part of an internal mechanism and so naturally radioactive. It was his job to safely dispose of them twice a year, buried in concrete.'

'So, no one would miss them. Clever!'

Herr Mole offered, 'The name used by the Georgian buyer is more common for Chechens.'

'That would make more sense; they have a border near the Ukraine and easy access to Turkey. Start bribing people in Georgia and Chechnya, maximum speed. We need answers.'

Otto made eye contact. 'We found out today that two separate groups of Russians are asking questions about us. One pair in Austria, one pair in Bavaria.'

Beesely rubbed his face. 'At the moment, we are not allowed to upset the Russians; we still don't know who was behind it. But ... no one said anything about embarrassing them. Have them picked up by local police on routine stops, and make sure that they have something illegal on them, some sort of spy equipment - Russian of course, but nothing too serious. We want them sent back with some difficult questions, not sent to jail.'

'What timescale for this?' Otto asked, making notes.

'In the next few hours,' Beesely responded. 'Right, are there any other facts - not opinions - that we have not covered?' Managers glanced at each other. 'Herr Mole?'

'I do not wish to make a judgement until the facts are clearer, as you say.'

'Otto?'

'I do not believe the Russian Government would be so stupid. We must look at the Chechens, or others.'

'Yes, but what would *they* gain from a collapse in The West?'

'They have no economy to destroy,' Herr Mole pointed out. 'They live off the land.'

'An interesting point. We meet again tomorrow at 9am sharp in the morning. Thank you all.'

* * *

Beesely was resting on a bench in front of the castle, enjoying the weather, when Otto walked out to him.

Otto took in the view. Without looking down, he began, 'Herr Mole just took and translated a call from the Russian gangster we used with Rudenson - Vladimir.'

'What did *he* want?'

'He wanted to sell some information.'

Beesely looked up with a quizzical frown. 'On what?'

'On who may have been behind the dirty bombs. He wants fifty million dollars.'

Beesely took in the pleasant summer scene, a fresh breeze off the lake helping to cool him on this hot day. 'Well, for that money he must think he has something.'

'He said he killed two people to get it, and spent a million dollars in bribes.'

'That sounds doubtful. Still, make an agreement in principle and send him one million dollars. Ask him what he knows.'

'And if it points towards the Russians?'

Beesely took in a loud breath, then stood up square to Otto. 'We stopped the cars, both of them. Now there are groups of Russian agents asking questions about us. Coincidence?'

'It is suspicious, yes. I will call back this Russian, he is waiting.'

As Otto walked in, Johno walked out, now changed and showered. Beesely noted his t-shirt, words in German that translated to: 'Poor old English, they only have one beach towel each!' He allowed himself a brief, distracted smile.

Jhono sat. 'Nice day, lovely view. How long till some fucker spoils it and the bullets start flying?' he asked, lighting up.

'Two separate Russian groups of spies were spotted, one in Austria and one in Bavaria. Coincidence?'

'Maybe we're just popular.'

‘Maybe we’re just unlucky. Oh, SAS team arriving discreetly this afternoon, make them cosy.’

‘I wasn’t expecting anyone?’ Johnno complained.

‘They’re active, on loan. I want one team on standby all the time.’

Johnno took in the view. ‘Where?’

Beesely turned and pointed to the front of the castle. ‘Right bleeding there on the doorstep.’

2

Otto found Beesely on the same bench thirty minutes later, but now with a cold drink, sandwiches, and his jacket off.

‘Well?’ Beesely asked, not taking his gaze off the lake.

Otto stood with his hands clasped behind his back. ‘Not so good, this news.’ Beesely sipped his drink. ‘This Russian was holding a man, a man who knows everything. He was in a safe house outside of Moscow, which was raided by Russian Special Forces ten minutes ago.’

‘So, *they* have him, we don’t.’

‘But he got some information first. No links to Russian government, these men were paid ... in oil.’

Beesely snapped his head around. ‘The men who organized the attacks ... were paid in oil?’

Otto nodded. ‘Unrefined oil.’

Beesely lowered his head, thinking hard. ‘Where was the delivery made?’

‘Tanker to tanker, off the Yemen coast,’ Otto informed him.

Beesely cracked a brief smile. ‘In some ways that pleases me, in others it concerns me.’

‘You know who it is?’

‘Yes, a good idea. But, find out for me the exact grade of oil and percentage of water.’

Otto turned and stopped. ‘Don’t forget the six o’clock meeting, perhaps a rest first?’

Beesely nodded, taking in the beautiful scenery once more before standing. 'Try and get the Russian Ambassador here for 6pm.'

Otto hesitated. 'Are you sure? Will he be in the meeting?'

'He *is* the meeting.' They walked up to the castle together. 'Oh, did you send that photo of Johno getting the medals to that glamour model whatsit ... Alison Star?'

'Yes.'

'Good, good.' He dialled. 'Dame Helen, please.'

'Beesely, I was just cooking, house full. How goes it?'

'The war has been called off.'

'Sorry?'

'Not Moscow.'

'Who then?'

'Looks like Tehran.'

There was a long pause at her end of the phone. 'I'll call you tomorrow, after I speak to the PM. Who else knows?'

'Within a few hours, all of the interested parties will know.'

'Understood. Sophie says 'hi', think she has been emailing your young lad.'

'Emailing Thomas? I'll keep an eye on it. Bye.' He put his phone away. 'So, Thomas has email?'

Otto explained, 'Thomas has a 3g mobile, a PDA, wireless laptop with download to his MP3, text messaging on his wrist watch –'

'Good to see he's bright; it's all a bit beyond me.'

'Would you like him to give you some lessons?'

'Cheeky bugger.' They walked on. 'That's what I employ you for.'

Otto's phone chirped. After a few seconds he stopped Beesely. Holding down the phone, he asked, 'What about the Ukraine technician?'

Beesely did not hesitate. 'The chair. Ask Mole if he wants to do it. Then send a video to all Ukraine nuclear power stations via DVD, but make sure there is no trace back to us. And a

message in Russian saying what he did. He may have had second thoughts, but he released radioactive material to terrorists. Make the bastard suffer.'

* * *

Thomas led Johnno on at a pace, through the shops and into an ornate arcade, the local tourist trap of Zug. Half way along the narrow passage, they entered a pastry shop which doubled up as a coffee shop. With two guards positioned outside, Thomas and Johnno stepped in, the doorbell announcing the arrival of new customers.

A middle-aged woman at the counter looked up and around. 'Thomas,' she called, a welcome recognition and a warm smile.

Thomas closed the distance quickly, then stopped and swivelled, introducing Johnno.

The lady forced a smile onto her worried look. 'Hello,' she said in reasonable English.

Johnno smiled back at her. 'Thomas says that this is best pastry shop in Zug, if not the whole world.' The shop owner was pleased. 'You make everything yourself?' Johnno asked, glancing at the selection.

'Yes, of course.'

'In that case, I'd like a sample of what you consider your best offerings, love.' He turned and selected a table, one of six, just one other occupied, and lit-up despite the signs.

The owner called out a younger woman, a sales assistant. Thomas requested a variety of pastries, and sat.

'You're English?' called a grey-haired and overweight man sat with his wife.

Johnno lifted his head from the menu and turned. 'Yeah, mate. Where you from?'

'Orpington –'

'Kentshire!' Johnno loudly announced with a smile, Thomas laughing.

The man glanced at his wife. ‘Kent-shire?’

‘We had some dealings with some Americans recently. They referred to Kent as Kent-shire.’

The man and his wife nodded. He said, ‘I can see how they’d mix it up. You got Oxfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Derbyshire – easy enough for foreigners to mix up.’

‘You on holiday?’

‘No, visiting my younger brother. Well, step-brother, almost fifteen years between us.’

‘Is he working here? Finance maybe?’

The first dish of pastries was placed down, Thomas snatching up a slice and wolfing it down.

‘No, he’s a security guard of some sort.’

Johno’s eyes narrowed, focusing on the British couple. ‘At the ... International Bank of Zurich?’

‘Yes, that sounds like it. Don’t get to see him much,’ the wife commented. ‘He always abroad, doing something or other.’

Johno lifted his eyebrows. ‘I know the feeling. If you don’t mind me asking, what’s his name?’

‘Michael Huntley,’ the man answered. ‘But everyone calls him Mavo.’

Thomas looked up, recognising the name. ‘Our Mavo?’

The couple focused on Thomas, their brows knitting.

Johno lifted his phone. ‘Send Mavo to the pastry shop in Zug arcade, fast as you can. Ta, love.’ He put his phone away, biting into a pastry.

‘You know him?’ the wife asked.

‘I’m his boss. Or one of them,’ Johno explained as he tried to swallow. He faced Thomas. ‘Oh ... this is good.’

‘I told you.’

‘What’s it called?’

‘Bavarian Napoleon ... I think.’

‘Ah, same stuff as in the castle?’ Thomas nodded. Johno faced the couple, who were still staring. ‘Try some of this.’ He

beckoned the sales assistant and ordered some for Mavo's family.

'That's good of you, but we're trying to cut down,' the wife suggested.

'Nonsense, you're on holiday. Work it off when you get home. How long you here?'

'A week, just touring around,' she explained. 'We only have tomorrow to see Mavo; he's working the rest of the time.'

'Where are you staying tonight?' Johno asked between chewing and swallowing.

The man explained, 'We got the camper van, we came over on the ferry. Be on a campsite tonight –'

'No you won't, you'll be my guests. This is Switzerland, known for its hospitality – as well as getting up early and polishing your shoes.' Thomas laughed, cake now around his lips. 'So we're going to spoil you a bit.'

Two off-duty guards paused outside the shop, exchanging greetings with Johno's bodyguards. When Johno noticed them he waved them in.

'Grab a seat,' he told them. 'Pastries are on me.'

They glanced at each other, then sat. 'We've got an hour, sir.' The sales assistant welcomed them as if family members, the guards ordering pastries and coffees.

'Does she deliver to the guard canteen?' Johno asked the men, thumbing towards the sales assistant as she made the coffee.

'No, unfortunately,' a guard grumbled.

Johno faced the woman, a mouth full of food. 'Excuse me, love?' The guard called her by name. 'I wanna buy your pastries and have them delivered to the guards at the castle.'

She frowned her lack of understanding, the guards then jumping in and explaining.

'Which pastries, sir. And how many?' she nervously enquired.

‘Enough ... for a hundred guards a day?’ Johno suggested to the guards, a slight shrug and a questioning look. They explained, shocking the woman.

‘Thank you, sir. It would be an honour,’ she managed to get out in broken English.

‘As many as you can make, just like these, delivered every day. Money is no problem.’

Thomas assisted with the translation, before noticing three school friends walking past. Seeing him, they trotted quickly in.

‘You are Johno!’ they excitedly stated at the same time.

‘Johno?’ Mavo’s stepbrother loudly repeated, now adopting a stunned look.

Johno glanced at the man, before giving the boys his attention. ‘Who broke security?’ he demanded, standing up. ‘Guards!’

The two off-duty guards stood, blocking any escape for the boys, who now looked terrified. Johno drew his weapon. The sales assistant took a sharp intake of breath. Mavo’s brother gasped, and his wife yelped.

Johno released the magazine and pocketed it, cleared and checked the chamber then handed it to the first boy with a smile. ‘Had you there!’

The boys laughed, grabbing the pistol and examining at it, the guards laughing and sitting.

Johno held up a flat hand to Mavo’s family. ‘Sorry, just winding up the kids.’ He faced the boys. ‘Anything you want in here, boys, it’s on me.’ He sat as they shouted orders for cakes and pastries, pulling up chairs next to Thomas and still examining the pistol.

‘You used this to kill the terrorists in London?’ they excitedly asked.

‘Yep,’ Johno answered with a smile, now surrounded by attentive boys.

‘And then you flew the helicopter with the nuclear bomb in it!’ they gasped.

‘Shhhhh,’ Johno let out. ‘People ain’t supposed to know.’ He winked at them, taking back the pistol.

Coffees were hurriedly served, a tea for Johno and a lemonade for Thomas. The boys were soon munching quickly through their favourites, speaking too quickly in German for Johno to follow.

Five minutes later, Mavo jogged to the shop, entering in a hurry and out of breath, still in his black fatigues. ‘Johno?’ he called, thinking something wrong, his head alternating between his brother and Johno.

Johno waved him over. ‘I bumped into your bother here. Are you on duty?’

‘Till nine o’clock tonight,’ Mavo explained, catching his breath.

‘Not any more. I’ll fix it.’ Johno pointed at one of the off-duty guards. ‘Tell the castle that Mavo is off duty today and tomorrow.’ The man raised his phone.

‘Thanks, Boss,’ Mavo let out, pulling up a seat next to his family.

‘They’re in a crappy camper van,’ Johno loudly commented. ‘So take ‘em up to the Spa and spoil them tonight, tell them I sent you. You get yourself a room there as well. And don’t forget to nick some of those fancy robes and towels!’

Mavo laughed loudly. ‘I’ll wear ‘em around the guard barracks.’

Johno tipped his eyebrows. ‘I wouldn’t. K2 guards – dodgy bunch of fuckers.’

The off-duty guards offered him playful, scolding looks.

An hour later, and Johno was struggling, leaning back and letting out his belt buckle, the boys covered in flour and pastry. Five more friends of Thomas had joined them, and one parent, the shop now a wreck.

Johno sipped what was left of a flat lemonade, waving over the shop owner. ‘We have an account, love?’ Thomas helped

with the translation. They did. Johno faced one of the off-duty guards as he stood. ‘Make sure she bills everything to us, yeah.’

‘OK, Boss.’

‘And don’t forget the deliveries.’ Johno stood. ‘Thomas, you’re driving us back.’

‘Yes!’ Thomas said as he jumped up, actually believing he was in with a chance, his school chums amazed.

When they reached the compound gates, Johno relented, giving Thomas his first driving lesson, carefully observed by the guards – who were hurriedly radioing each other.

Beesely stood with Otto, talking to a manager when the man’s radio came to life.

‘Warning! Clear the camp road – Johno is giving Thomas driving lessons!’

Beesely took a breath, closed his eyes for a moment, before continuing with the previous conversation.

The road was now clear.

Thomas started the Mercedes, easy enough for him to manage, the vehicle being automatic. He progressed slowly and carefully up the east camp road and turned into the drawbridge, missing the sides and coming to a halt in the courtyard. Finally he pressed hard on the brake and turned the engine off.

‘Very good,’ Johno commended. ‘Next week, hand brake turns.’

Thomas was proud of himself, bounding out with a huge smile.

Simon, a senior guard, walked up. ‘Johno, we’ve taken a vote – and from now on we want Thomas to drive you around.’

‘Fuck off,’ Johno quietly let out, holding his stomach, the courtyard guards laughing at him and congratulating Thomas.

In the foyer, Johno raised a hand towards Mr. Freiserling, stood now in his usual spot behind the reception desk. ‘I’ve arranged some pastries to be delivered to the castle from a local

shop. Make sure there're always some in my fridge and some upstairs, yeah?'

Mr. Freiserling offered a quick, Swiss head tip. 'Very good, sir.'

In the cool dungeon, they slumped, both now full.

'UB40. Beer,' Johnno managed.

Thomas eased up, selecting the correct music CD before pulling a draft lager.

Johnno sipped. 'I could give you driving lessons, but you're too young for the roads. What's the age here ... to drive?'

'Seventeen, I think,' Thomas said with a slight frown.

'So don't whinge. It's not like I don't want to. OK?'

'OK.'

'OK then,' Johnno whispered, listening to the music.

After a minute, Thomas said, 'I copied this CD for my friends. They like it.'

Johnno took a sip. 'How'd you copy it?'

'The computer,' Thomas explained, pointing.

Johnno nodded. 'What about that compilation you did for me?'

'Downloaded it all from Napster, straight to disk.'

'Good. You're a smart lad. You take after me.'

'No I don't,' Thomas protested with a tired smile.

Johnno studied him. 'Know anything about your real father?'

Thomas shook his head, losing the smile.

'Swiss?'

Thomas nodded.

'Not curious?'

Thomas shook his head, leaving Johnno wondering about many things.

The spokesman for 'The Society' was the first to join Beesely in the re-decorated restaurant, the man uncharacteristically early.

But then this was not a society meeting, and it was daylight. The man noted the strange arrangement of chairs as Beesely greeted him. Beesely did not explain the arrangement, he just asked his visitor to sit at the back and to observe quietly; he was there as a courtesy.

Next came Minister Blaum and the Swiss Foreign Minister, again asked to sit at the back and to observe.

Oliver Stanton stepped in by himself, warmly greeted by Beesely, but sat separate to the others without being introduced. Blaum and Delgarcia glanced at each other, then across at the stranger, drinks being brought out to them by kitchen staff as they waited, the two men puzzling over many things.

Elle Rosen and his 'superior' were next, also not introduced to anyone, although his superior tipped his head slightly at Stanton. They were seated apart from the others, but closer to the centre.

Otto arrived last with the Russians, followed by John. The Russians were seated as if this meeting was all about them, directly opposite Beesely and Otto, but with no one behind them; everyone basically sat in line of sight of each other. Beesely gestured the Russians to their seats and arranged food, checking they both spoke English. The modestly dressed Russians, both in their fifties, checked every face in the room, as well as also the ceiling scanners.

Otto finally sat, Beesely remaining on feet. Beesely began, 'Welcome to you all, and thank you all for coming here today, some at very short notice. I am not going to introduce all of the people here today ... because many of you work in secret.' He finished that sentence by making direct eye contact with the Russian Ambassador.

'I am sure that you are curious as to who I am, and who I represent. Well, for the purposes of this meeting, I unofficially represent British and American Intelligence agencies.' The Russians glanced at each other.

‘So, to who’s who?’ Beesely pointed first towards Oliver Stanton. ‘The American Government.’ The Russians studied Stanton. Beesely next pointed towards the Israelis. ‘The Israeli government.’ Next, Beesely gestured towards the Swiss Ministers. ‘The Swiss Government.’ Finally, he gestured towards the representative of The Bank Society, ‘The world’s largest financial trading block.’

The Russians were now a little bewildered. ‘We can make no agreements on behalf of our government –’

Beesely raised a hand. ‘You will not be required to. Now, gentlemen, we recently had a problem involving two radioactive dirty bombs.’ He began pacing around the table. ‘The result was a stock market crash, panic and - if the bomb in London had gone off somewhere strategic - we would have seen a complete collapse of the economy of the West. That, gentlemen, would have hurt us all.’

He made eye contact with the Russian Ambassador. ‘Including Russia, which now has a great many financial interests in The West. For that reason, I do not believe that the Russian Government was behind the attacks, although the attacks were executed in such a way that they would have pointed the blame towards Russia.’

The Russians were shocked. ‘Blame us?’

Beesely focused on the Russian who had been doing most of the talking. ‘Your special forces raided a house outside of Moscow a few hours ago, arresting some of the men who were paid to organize the attacks.’

‘How do you know this?’ the man demanded.

‘I have my sources. Once you have interrogated those people, I will be happy to receive a call from you, explaining what they said. We expect closer co-operation in the future on terrorist and criminal matters.’

They nodded their reluctant acceptance of that idea.

He leant across the table, his weight on his hands. ‘Gentlemen, if the bomb in London had gone off, and the

evidence led back to Moscow - as it did for a while - then The West could have been looking at a nuclear retaliation against Russia.’

The Russians straightened in their chairs, looking horrified.

‘So, gentlemen, when I talk about co-operation, it’s in your best interests. Would you not agree?’ They nodded. ‘That bomb was ten minutes from the centre of London. That means, gentlemen, that we were all maybe ten minutes from a nuclear incident and a potential retaliation from NATO.’

He let them think about it for a while, the Russians sipping their drinks nervously.

‘Now, we have been investigating the matter closely, using up a great deal of time and money. We have also lost some of our people. Oh, by the way, your agents in Bavaria and Austria are being arrested as we speak. They will be sent back to Russia.’

The Russians said nothing as he handed them business cards.

‘If you want to know something about me, pick up the phone, don’t send agents.’

Beesely glanced out of the window. ‘We have determined that the Chechen man at the centre of this, and his Russian friends, were paid to plan the attack.’ As he uttered the next line, with careful emphasis, he glanced from Stanton to the Israelis. ‘Paid in oil, transferred ship-to-ship off the coast of Yemen.’

Stanton glanced at the Israelis. They looked back, both straightening in their seats.

‘Further investigations are taking place, but we - Western Intelligence - do not believe that the Russian Government was behind the attacks.’

Beesely stepped to the spokesman for The Society, whispered in his ear, shook hands, and then directed the man out. Next he shook hands with a surprised pair of Swiss Ministers, and they also left, as requested. Next he addressed the Russians. ‘I will be looking forward to a response from your government very soon. You will be flown back to Bern.’

A little bewildered, they stood, shook hands and left.

‘Well that was short and sweet,’ Johnno said as he stood. He stretched and grabbed a drink.

Beesely gestured the Israelis and Stanton towards the centre, adjusting chairs for them. He ordered a red wine for himself, and then sat. Blowing out hard, he said, ‘We were gearing up for a bit of a fight with Moscow; the British Government having decided that anything I did would give them plausible deniability. They even gave me some logistical support, which I will not give back, not yet anyway.’

Stanton smiled. ‘So how’s the old body holding up?’ He sipped his wine, easing back.

‘At my age, multiply everything by ten. So, down to business. The Middle East is not my area, and I don’t give a rat’s arse what happens off the coast of Yemen. You, gentlemen, can solve that problem without me. Before anyone asks, I’m not getting involved. My area of concern ... is Central Europe.’

The Israeli Government representative asked, ‘You’ll send us what you discovered?’

‘We will have to bribe and shoot a few more Russians first, if we want names and dates.’

Otto tipped his head forwards. ‘I will arrange for the Russian police to be bribed; they are holding the key suspect. I think the Chechen is dead, bodies were taken out of a shoot-out in Grosny a short while ago.’

Beesely explained, ‘When I called this meeting ... I thought we would be going up against Russian Secret Service, the SVR as it’s called these days. It’s a strange relief that it now points towards the Iranians.’

‘Not for us,’ Elle scowled.

‘Like I said, it’s your problem; I’ve done enough.’

‘More than enough,’ Stanton commented. ‘We’ll take it from here.’

‘Take it a long way off,’ Beesely scoffed before sipping his wine. ‘Oh, we have rooms for you at our five star Spa hotel, or

you can stay here if you wish; they are nice rooms - and very secure these days; lots of Israeli detectors in the ceilings!’

They laughed.

‘When do the new weapons arrive?’ Stanton asked.

‘Couple of days, they are flying down from your airbases in Germany,’ Beesely replied.

Stanton said, ‘I’ll be staying at the US Embassy tonight, got some difficult calls to make.’

‘Cars and helicopter ready when you are,’ Beesely offered.

Elle said, ‘Same for us, we are expected in the Embassy, but kind of you.’

They chatted for ten minutes before the visitors headed off, the kitchen staff starting to clean up.

‘Now is a good time to tell you both something,’ Otto stated after the guests had left. Their interest was piqued, Johno sitting closer. Otto sighed, ‘Next week I am getting married.’

Beesely and Johno stared at each other, open mouthed, then turned back to Otto.

‘When did this happen?’ Beesely asked.

‘I have known this girl for some three years, but I kept it quiet.’

‘No shit,’ Johno quipped. ‘Got a picture?’

‘I don’t carry one, in case I am captured and they see her.’

‘Yeah, good thinking,’ Johno said with a sceptical frown.

‘Will we get to meet her?’ Beesely keenly asked.

‘Yes of course. At the wedding.’

‘Is she up the duff?’ Johno joked, Beesely slapping his arm.

‘Up the ...?’ Otto repeated. ‘Oh, I see. Yes, she is pregnant.’

Beesely sighed and rolled his eyes. ‘Well that makes sense, you’re my boy after all.’

‘It will be a small, private wedding, a few guests,’ Otto explained.

‘When do you find the time to see her?’ Johno asked.

‘Before *you* came ... it was not a problem.’

‘He’s got a point,’ Beesely reluctantly admitted.

Johno smiled, making eye contact with Otto. ‘Well ... er ... where does she work?’ he asked, trying to say the right thing.

‘In the bank. She is a risk analyst.’

‘Bright girl,’ Beesely commended.

‘Yeah, so what does she see in you?’ Johno asked, smiling.

‘Large cock,’ Otto answered with neutral features, Johno and Beesely laughing.

Beesely pointed at Otto. ‘You, my boy, have been spending too much time around *him*.’

Thomas walked in.

‘Hey brat, what’s up?’ Johno called.

‘When are you going to England next?’ he enquired without making eye contact.

Beesely made eye contact with Johno, hiding a grin. ‘Not sure. It may not be for a while.’

‘You will not be visiting Dame Helen again?’ he softly enquired.

Again Beesely made eye contact Johno. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘No reason. She is a nice lady ... and you are friends.’

‘Love is in the air,’ Johno announced with a broad smile.

Otto made eye contact with Beesely, tipping his head towards Johno. ‘His turn next.’ Beesely grinned.

‘Ha!’ Johno laughed. ‘No chance.’

* * *

In his Tivoli hilltop villa, Pepi faced five of his lieutenants over his grand desk. He tapped his cigar over an ashtray, taking a long draw as he studied the men. Blowing out a large pall of smoke towards the ceiling, he said, ‘So, we have a puzzle.’ He made eye contact with the first man. ‘What do we know about this meeting?’

‘There was a senior representative of American Intelligence, also of Israeli Intelligence, Ministers Blaum and Delgarcia, the bank society and the Russian Ambassador to Switzerland.’

Pepi gestured with a hand, an invitation to continue.

The same man added, ‘It was a short meeting. They confronted the Russians, told them it may be best to co-operate, because the attacks looked like coming from Russia.’

‘So, they believe that the attacks were not Russian?’ Pepi pondered.

‘At first they did, yes, but not now.’

‘And who, now, does K2 suspect?’ Pepi calmly enquired.

‘They believe that Russian mafia were involved, Chechens and others. They have received information from Russia.’

‘So they may soon track back to our good friend, Mister Luchenkov.’ He glanced up at the ceiling, resting his head on the chair back. Tipping his head forwards, he added, ‘Something is not right here.’

‘Sir?’ a man asked.

‘Our people in France have confirmed a great deal of activity within certain gangs. Strange movements, very tightly guarded, even to us. It would appear that the Americans are going to move against K2, and yet Henry O’Sullivan has said nothing to the good cardinal, despite their very close relationship – which dates back fifty years.’

‘The Americans helped K2 against the ball bearings,’ a man puzzled.

Pepi raised a finger, ‘Making themselves look good in front of the British perhaps?’

‘They send high level officials to K2,’ another mentioned.

Pepi lifted his eyebrows and nodded. ‘As I said, something is not right here. Somewhere along the line, our information is being spoon fed to us. If we could rely on all our sources, we would not be this confused. So, the Americans may attack K2. If they do ... fine, the publicity will hurt them both and we can then move. But someone is lying.’

‘Who is the traitor? Luchenkov or O’Sullivan?’ a man asked.

‘I believe the term is ... double-agent. Still, neither Henry O’Sullivan, nor Luchenkov, know what we have planned in England. But they *will* ... get the blame. We have even used their people to organise it without them knowing about it.’

It's a very strange war

1

It was a beautiful morning for a stroll around the lake. Beesely had completed his daily health ritual, a fifteen-minute brisk walk, and sat now enjoying the sun and the view out over the lake and mountains. Two guards stood a discreet distance to the left, another two to the rear.

Johno's arrival back from his shopping trip had been loudly announced with a screech, a hand brake turn designed to frighten the guards. He figured their bruising would heal in a few days and offered large sums for their silence. Now he approached Beesely's bench. 'Nice day for it.' He took in the view, sucking in a deep breath and loudly exhaling as he took his sunglasses off.

'Wonderful,' Beesely agreed, still fixed on the pleasant vista. 'A new car?'

'Yep, I thought I'd treat myself.' Johno thrust his hands into his pockets. 'Mercedes dealership the other side of Zug, never knew it was there.'

Without bothering to look up, Beesely said, 'You know, there is a rather efficient intelligence agency around here somewhere, if I can just remember where I put it. They may *tell you* where the car dealerships are.'

'That's handy.' Johno picked his nose. 'What's on the agenda?'

'Oh, nothing too strenuous today; some healing, a little relaxing, and some recovering.'

'Sounds good.' Johno slumped down next to Beesely, leaning back and resting his elbows on the bench top.

'Tell me, does the leg hurt when you drive?' Beesely casually enquired.

'Yeah, but I ain't going to let that get in the way.'

Beesely nodded his approval of Johno's stoic attitude, just as his phone rang. 'Beesely here.'

'Sir, it's a Peter Hawthorn, AGN Security, England.'

'OK, put him through.'

'Sir Morris?'

'Yes. You're Max's son?'

'Yes, sir. Got some bad news,' the voice sombrely stated. 'Max rolled his car.'

'Is he hurt?' Beesely asked as he stood, Johno turning his head and following Beesely to his feet.

'Yes, sir. Badly busted up, he might not make it.'

'Is he getting the best possible care?' Beesely firmly pressed.

'He's in an NHS hospital at the moment; they can't move him, he's critical. He's got a spinal injury.'

'Hell and damnation.' He made eye contact with Johno. 'Max always did drive like an idiot. Was he ... you know ... a bit tipsy?'

Johno raised his hands in exasperation and turned away.

'No, sir, this was early this morning. Police say that it looks like he was rammed off the road ... and last night he called me to say he was still being watched.'

'Don't say another word.' Beesely hung up as Johno snapped his head around. 'Someone rammed Max off the road. Deliberately! And he was being watched.'

Johno took out his phone. 'I'm all over it,' he said as he turned and stepped away a few paces, across the neatly mown grass.

Beesely sat back down and heaved a sigh, thinking hard as Herr Mole walked slowly across. He turned his head, offering Mole a disappointed look. 'Herr Mole, given your leg, you should simply call if you want to speak to me.'

'If I do not walk, sir, it becomes worse,' the little man explained as he drew near.

Beesely's features softened. 'I understand. How can I help?'

‘We had a call from the Russian, the man who helped with the capture of Rudenson.’

‘Oh yes? More news?’

‘Of a sort, if it can be believed. He has reported that he is in hiding, and that a rich Russian businessman has placed a one hundred million dollar bounty ... on your head.’

Beesely forced a sadistic smile. ‘Well, I would be insulted if it was any less. Don’t you think?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Herr Mole agreed, tipping his head. ‘On another matter, I was curious about your interest in the composition of the oil. Crude oil can be analysed and traced to its source, a very clever idea of yours if I may say so, sir.’

‘You may say so as often as you like, I never grow tired of people calling me clever. Go on.’ Johno could now be heard shouting into his phone, causing Mole to glance his way.

‘I have taught myself the basics of oil geology, an interesting topic.’

Beesely raised his eyebrows. ‘Since yesterday?’

‘Just the relevant parts.’

‘And?’ Beesely nudged.

‘According to what information we did get from our Russian friend yesterday, I have determined where it was sold: the Rotterdam junk oil market, for sixty percent of its worth.’

‘Now that’s clever work of you. I would have figured they’d sail down to South Africa or round to Nigeria.’

‘They did, but were not offered a good price.’

‘Hold on ... the time taken to sail around Africa -’

‘Is at least two weeks at full steam,’ Mole finished off.

‘And the preparation time, ship to ship transfers, would mean -’

‘That this payment was in process four weeks ago.’

Beesely turned his head and took in the lake view. ‘Before Otto contacted me.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Beesely turned, 'OK, you were saying something about Amsterdam?'

'Rotterdam, sir. They sailed to Rotterdam, where each oil consignment is logged and its quality recorded on computer. We hacked into the computers.'

Beesely tipped his head. 'And it came from?'

'Siberia, sir.'

Beesely slowly stood, his features hardening.

Johno shouted down his phone. Turning, he said, 'Beesely! Wilko Thomas, an old boy from the funeral, was tortured at length then had his throat cut. Sergeant Mason is missing.' He went back to his call.

'Problems, sir?' Mole enquired.

Beesely rubbed his forehead as he thought, not making eye contact with Mole. 'Someone is attacking our English associates,' Beesely informed him, lowering his head and thinking hard.

'Have we a problem with some element of British Intelligence?'

'If we did I would know about it,' Beesely insisted, struggling now with many thoughts.

Mole's phone warbled. Taking it out of his pocket, he answered it, starting to speak in Russian and observed with great impatience by Beesely. It was a short conversation. 'That was the Russian Ambassador to Switzerland, sir. He insists that the four Russian citizens arrested yesterday, two in Bavaria and two in Austria, were not Russian Government agents –'

'Not bleeding surprising, is it!'

'He insists that they are criminals, working for a certain ... Boris Luchnikov, the same man reported to have placed the bounty on your head.'

Beesely studied the little man carefully for several seconds. 'That's starting to make some sense. Did this... gentleman make his money in Siberian oil?'

'Yes, sir, if memory serves.'

‘I trust your memory,’ Beesely strongly enthused. His phone rang again, so Mole started to limp slowly away. ‘Beesely here.’

‘Sir Morris? It’s Willis here, assistant to the director.’

‘Willis? Yes, I remember,’ Beesely stated as if interrupted from something very important.

‘Got some bad news I’m afraid. The director’s car was in a smash this morning –’ Beesely jaw dropped open. ‘- on her way in. She’s in critical condition, but I’m afraid to say ... her daughter, Sophie ... was killed.’

‘And Mike and Tabitha?’ Beesely asked in a forced whisper.

‘They were not in the vehicle, sir.’

Beesely closed his eyes. ‘Thank God.’

‘I thought you should know and –’

‘It was deliberate.’

There was a long pause at the other end. ‘What?’

‘Several of our people in the UK were hit last night. Listen, I need you to get a message to the Home Secretary. Tell him that a Russian billionaire has declared war on K2, and its friends and allies in the UK. You got all that?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Then move it, mister!’ Beesely barked.

Johno was still shouting down the phone, now walking in small circles. The guards had closed in, appearing concerned.

Beesely pressed the green button. ‘Get me Colonel Milward, SAS, fast!’ He waited, the beautiful scenery a surreal backdrop to what was going through his mind.

‘Beesely?’ came ten seconds later.

‘Milward, listen well. A Russian billionaire has put a large bounty on my head. So far today, Max Clifford has been run off the road and paralysed, former trooper Wilko Thomas was tortured for information and then killed, your Sergeant Mason has been abducted, and Dame Helen is fighting for her life in hospital, her daughter dead! Do us a both a favour and earn your bloody keep today!’ He hung up.

Johno approached, fuming. ‘Someone’s hit a lot of our people in the UK.’

‘It’s the mastermind behind the dirty bombs, some Russian billionaire gangster called Boris something or other. Guess what, he’s put a bounty on my head.’

‘He’s fucking with the wrong people!’ Johno snarled.

Beesely put a hand on Johno’s shoulder, bringing him in to a confidential distance. ‘You know that, and I know that ... but does *he* know that?’ They exchanged a look. ‘The one thing about a *very* secret organization ... is that people in the outside world don’t know your capabilities. The people and the groups that Gunter gave the chair to know to stay away, this idiot doesn’t.’

‘So he’ll send some mercenaries our way, guys who don’t know us ... and don’t frigging fear us,’ Johno quietly surmised.

Beesely raised an eyebrow. ‘With that kind of money, you can buy a lot more than tired old mercenaries.’

Johno nodded to himself as he thought. ‘You could buy Yanks, French, maybe even some Brits.’

‘Maybe hell.’ They turned and walked towards the castle, the guards closing in.

Johno suggested, ‘If they started this last night and this morning –’

‘Then we may have a little unwelcome visitor or two already.’

‘Nothing reported,’ Johno noted as they both glanced around the otherwise calm camp.

‘Like I said, with that money you can get good help.’

The SAS ‘old dogs’ were walking past the castle.

‘Call them,’ Beesely whispered.

‘Hey, you lot! Front and centre!’ Johno shouted.

The ex-SAS gang stopped, glanced around then closed the distance.

When close enough, Johno whispered, ‘We’ve got unwelcome visitors inside the perimeter. Tool up, hide the

weapons, then go about your business, tip off the rest.’ Then loudly, ‘And next time clean the fucking pigs out properly!’

‘Yes, sir!’ they collectively shouted, turning and walking briskly down towards the camp barracks.

As Johno and Beesely passed the guards on the drawbridge, they whispered, ‘Silent alarm, attack imminent.’

In the great hall, they met a team of the regular SAS; four troopers, one Captain and one field medic doubling up as communications man.

Beesely waved them over as he walked towards the control room. ‘Listen up, and listen well. There are highly trained and well paid mercenaries on their way here; their objective being to kill me and my command staff. You, gentlemen, picked a bad time to arrive: you’ll probably all be dead by dawn tomorrow.’

The soldiers glanced at each other as they cocked and checked weapons. Beesely added, ‘They have already killed several troopers in the UK, including old boys, and Max Hawthorn is on life-support. Captain, with me, get your other buddy, rest of you ... your battleground for today is here, the foyer and up the stairwell. Pick yourselves a spot, expect trouble.’ He turned and walked briskly on, his head lowered.

* * *

From the boardroom windows, Pepi gazed down at the distant ocean, the water’s surface a brilliant sparkling blue on this cloudless day. The other directors of Encosol Construction gathered around the boardroom table at their Genoa headquarters, cordially greeting each other.

A man drew level at the window, Pepi not looking around. ‘The attacks in England have gone well ... for Luchenkov. The attack on K2 by the Americans will begin soon.’

‘And our assessment of the force attacking the castle?’ Pepi casually enquired.

‘They will probably fail.’

‘Which begs the question, why would Luchenkov fund it in this manner? More to the point, why would he accept logistical help from Henry O’Sullivan?’

The second man considered his reply. ‘The Americans have rendered assistance to K2 twice now, and yet they attack ... in this odd manner. Perhaps the Americans don’t know of K2’s strength.’

‘They ... have their own agenda. And I believe that the good cardinal’s friend ... may be playing him as much as we are playing them.’ He let out a loud breath. ‘Still, by the end of today we should have moved a few pieces on the chessboard.’

‘Forwards ... or backwards?’ the second man pointedly asked.

The two men made eye contact briefly before Pepi’s phone warbled. He stepped away. ‘Yes, sir?’

‘It has begun?’

‘Yes, sir. The English targets were hit this morning, Luchenkov has no idea about them, neither does O’Sullivan – they are focused on K2.’

‘We should not have allowed this situation to develop. I trusted your judgement –’

‘By the end of today, sir, K2 will be exposed to the world’s media,’ Pepi quickly cut in with. ‘That is ... as we discussed. They will also be at odds with the Americans, closing that concern.’

‘We did not discuss Luchenkov and O’Sullivan becoming bed fellows! I have found out today that they met last week.’

‘Last week?’ Pepi puzzled.

‘And said nothing to us!’

‘That ... is a concern, sir.’

‘Find out what they are up to. I don’t like surprises!’

In Fernbank Road, Ross-on-Wye, Sergeant Trevors had just received a call; someone was attacking troopers, current and serving. He had taken the call in his bedroom, his wife shopping down in Newport with the new neighbour's wife.

The new neighbours had been next door for almost a month now, but their initial warmth had been tempered by the fact that the sergeant's dear lady wife had revealed his occupation to the new neighbour's wife: soldier, Hereford. The husband was ex-RAF, so had put two and two together straight away, then decided to distance himself for some reason. The wives were getting along well enough, and he was away a lot, so the neighbour's attitude was not a problem. Still, that coming Saturday was due to be the first barbecue together, Trevors under strict orders from his wife to 'be nice'.

By a stroke of pure luck, he had taken the call in his bedroom, stood now behind the curtain and viewing the end of his garden, and the overgrown bushes that the good woman had been complaining about that very morning. Unfortunately, the gardens here backed onto farm fields, making them easy access for unwelcome visitors.

He noticed movement; a boot striped with green paint. Opening his wardrobe doors quietly, he reached up and pulled down his Bergen, slowly and gently lowering it. His Browning 9mm was in his hand a second later. Magazine out, eyeball check, tap the mag', load, slide back – a well practiced drill.

With his back to the wall, he peered through a slit in the curtains, noting their cat walking up the garden path. It stopped, crouched down, hissed at someone unseen then ran back towards the house. Now he could see the end of a barrel.

Opening this particular window to fire would be noisy, spotted instantly. Wait, he remembered, the bathroom window was already open. Ducking down below window level, he crawled quickly next door. Yes, it was open! One foot on the bath, one on the sink, he rose up behind the frosted glass, taking aim through the open top window.

The shed roof was in the way. Thin wood, he remembered; really thin wood. He aimed.

A head popped up, camouflaged. He aimed carefully, then fired.

The head dropped out of sight. He fired four rounds through the shed, dropped to the bathroom floor, and then ran downstairs as fast as possible, straight out of the back door, pistol held up on probable position of target. He fired two more shots through the shed.

Running, diving, sliding on the moist grass, pistol pointed towards the back of the shed. A body, slumped. He fired two rounds into the face, knocking the man's head backwards.

He stopped, breathing hard. Survey the area, he told himself; damp grass, big slug, next-door's dog barking, no one else visible.

Standing, he quickly grabbed the man and dragged him onto the lawn, lifting his rifle. 'Nice piece of kit,' he muttered, no response coming from the body.

He gave the body a good kick to the stomach, then stood on the man's neck. Breathing deeply, he turned back towards the house. Then he noticed his new neighbour, up a ladder, just staring at him, mouth open, paintbrush in hand.

Foot off neck. Wonder how much he saw?

The police officer surveyed the scene at Sergeant Wilson's home, Shobdon, near Leominster. The body lay covered with a white sheet – apparently taken from the neighbour's clothesline - blood visible where the would-be assassin was shot twice in the chest and once in the head. He stepped forwards.

No, he told himself, no bullet holes visible in Sergeant Wilson's garden, the shed a bullet-hole free zone. As was the rear fence and the birdbath.

And yet...

He peered over the low wooden fence that separated the gardens, as numerous fellow officers bustled about. The

neighbour was obviously very proud of his garden and had spent a great deal of time, money and effort on it. The collection of garden gnomes numbered more than a hundred, the occupier obviously an avid fan of such garden ornaments. Many of the gnomes surrounded a large ornate carp pond, those that were left standing.

Several large carp lay belly-up on the surface, apparently suffering from gunshot wounds. Wilson drew level with the officer as the man rested his hands on the garden fence, taking in the scene of carnage next door.

The officer did not bother to look around. ‘So, mister SAS fucking crack shot fucking marksman. According to your provisional statement, the dead man shot at you from over there, ran around dodging your return fire – all thirty fucking rounds of it – jumped the fence to this side ... and then you shot him deader than hell.’

Now he turned to face Wilson. ‘And yet, whilst the would-be assassin ran around over there, you missed him – but managed to quite accurately destroy your neighbour’s garden gnomes, plus the fucking Koi carp!’

Wilson shrugged, glancing left and right from under his eyebrows.

‘My fucking wife can shoot better than you!’

Again Wilson shrugged. ‘That’s my story ... and I’m fucking sticking to it, plod.’

Another trooper stepped up, slapping Wilson on the back. ‘Good one, Will-oh, got the fucker. Pity you couldn’t have got that neighbour you fucking hate in the crossfire,’ he laughed, stepping away.

The police officer folded his arms.

The corridor to the command centre was now lined with guards kitted out in body armour, wearing helmets, and carrying M4 assault rifles.

Beesely stopped at the top of the steps leading down to the control room floor, at the edge of the brighter lights. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' he loudly called. The managers and staff all stopped what they were doing. 'I stood on this spot a few weeks ago, greeting you all for the first time. Since that time ... I have come to respect your abilities and your talents. We all went through the nerve agent attack together, and you performed very well. But today will be different. Today we face imminent attack by some of the world's best mercenaries, highly paid ... and highly motivated.' He took in their faces. 'Many of us will not survive.'

They glanced at each other.

'I want all non-essential personnel to go home, but please leave slowly and quietly, we must not let those watching this place know that we are onto them. Then, I want all non-essential female staff to leave, again slowly.'

He sought out Otto, now moving towards him through the managers. 'We must give them no hint that we are expecting an attack. If we do, we simply delay the inevitable, and I want these bastards in close.

'To quote a famous North Vietnamese general, *we will grab them by the belt buckles*. Otto, I want all remaining staff - who know how to use a pistol - to be armed, weapons hidden. All gate guards are to be warned, but numbers are *not* to be increased; everything outside must appear to be normal. I want all trainees to be sent on a camping and climbing exercise immediately, a long way off. No one must remain here who is not trained, able, and willing to face death. All managers, my office.' In his office, he sat and opened his drawer, taking out some chocolate, Johno sitting on the side of the desk.

Otto rushed in. 'Who will be attacking us?' he gasped.

Calmly, Beesely answered, 'Apparently, the guy with the money behind the dirty bomb attacks on London.'

‘Why?’ Otto asked, almost a demand.

Beesely carefully studied Otto for a moment. ‘I would assume ... because *we* stopped the bombs, and he knows that.’ He took a breath as Otto digested what he was saying, a glance at Johno. ‘Unless, of course, you know of anyone ... else, who might be behind the attacks on our people in the UK?’

‘If I did, you would know instantly, of course,’ Otto insisted, another quick glance at Johno.

‘Well then,’ Beesely began, taking a breath. ‘Let’s hope K2 is as ... *well prepared* as we would all like to think it is. This will be quite some test.’

Otto and Johno stood off to the left as the SAS Captain stepped in, interrupting the conversation. The managers stepped in quickly, arranging chairs. Herr Mole sat to Beesely’s right, shoulder holster now on and looking way too big for him. Last to arrive was the second SAS Captain, escorted by two guards.

‘OK, I guess we are all here.’ Beesely rubbed his forehead. ‘Gentlemen. And lady. What we face today will test us all to the limits, and beyond. We may lose people, we may even lose everything.’

The managers were aghast at the suggestion.

‘A Russian billionaire seems to have been behind the radioactive dirty bombs, and he has hired some of the world’s best mercenaries, and others, to hunt us down and kill us. Judging by the way they have attacked in the UK, I would say they have some good help from an ex-community figure, someone high up. They managed to take out the head of MI6, so let’s not kid ourselves about how good they are.’

‘Dame Helen is dead?’ Otto gasped.

‘Near as,’ Johno put in.

‘In hospital, probably paralysed, her daughter dead,’ Beesely explained, noting the shocked looks.

‘And so is Max at AGN,’ Johno sourly added.

Beesely took a sip of water. ‘If we are going to win today ... we shall have to think our way through the problem. Our

greatest weapon is that we know they are coming. Our greatest defence will be *not* to do what is expected of us.'

'Sir,' the first SAS Captain called, stood in his camouflage clothing. 'Why don't we just get *you* the hell out of here?'

'No!' Herr Mole firmly cut in, everyone focusing on him, and his out-of-character outburst. 'That is what they want. How easy it will be to shoot down a helicopter or attack a vehicle convoy. No, they will expect one of two things: for you to hide in the lower bunker, or for you to leave.'

Beesely nodded in agreement. 'Absolutely right. The last thing they expect is to see me in my shorts swimming in the lake. Unfortunately, after they have recovered their initial shock, they will probably just shoot me. So ... we need to formulate some plans, and we need to think as they think. Johno -' Johno stepped forwards. '- if you were paid many millions to attack this place, how would you go about it?'

They all focused on him.

'There're two ways a well-trained soldier could get close; over the hill behind us, or the lake. First, the hill. Plenty of cracks and crevices, you could hide twenty snipers up there and we'd never know about it. Not to mention ten miles of dense fucking forest! You could move a battalion to within striking range and we'd never know about it.'

Beesely pointed at the managers. 'Let's work on the assumption that there are snipers on the mountain.'

Johno continued, 'The one good thing is that we've got some of the world's best mountain climbers right here. That's a big advantage, because their snipers will be moving slowly over the rocks. We need two or three four-man teams, with sniper rifles and night sights, enough food for a few days. They can sweep the area, or just wait for the first few shots and then zero in on them.'

Beesely turned his head towards Otto and carefully mouthed, 'Pronto!'

Otto grabbed a manager and they stepped outside.

‘What else?’ Beesely asked.

Johno paced. ‘We won’t get all the snipers, it’ll take days.’

The first SAS Captain stepped forwards. ‘I saw fifty calibre rifles in your armoury. Get them to the lakeside, they can pin down any snipers above us,’ he confidently recommended.

‘Yeah,’ Johno agreed, cynically adding, ‘Good idea, Rupert.’

Beesely pointed at a manager, who stepped quickly out, Johno and the young officer exchanging looks.

‘The lake could be an issue,’ Johno said, thinking out loud. ‘A good team of divers could cross it. Then they’re within two hundred yards of the castle. They won’t do it till dark, so we need to stop them from entering the water in the first place.’

‘Probably enter from a boat,’ the second SAS Captain suggested. ‘Save some swimming time.’

Beesely ordered, ‘I want the local police to stop all boats on the lake until we say so.’

A manager hurried out as Otto returned.

Johno continued, ‘If they do make it to the lakeshore they can keep us pinned down all night. They can pop up, take a shot, and then disappear.’

Beesely pointed towards Otto. ‘Ribs, on the lake, grenades, random use. Let’s try and confuse or deter them.’

‘Not till dusk,’ Johno cautioned. ‘Waste of time till then.’ He took Otto by the shoulder. ‘We need people dressed like tourists on the far shore, looking for divers.’

Otto raised his phone, stepping into the corridor again.

Johno added, ‘The best way to get you – or us - would be to wait for us to fly or drive somewhere.’ He thrust his hands in his pockets.

‘Can’t sit here forever,’ Beesely considered. ‘Oh!’ he proclaimed, a revelation hitting him. ‘Of course! Why do you think they didn’t kill Max or Dame Helen?’

‘So we’d fly over with porn mags, lucozade and some grapes,’ Johno pointed out. ‘Get us all in one go.’

Beesely pointed at a manager. 'I want the Learjet grounded, and our helicopters! Check them for mechanical faults or tampering and look to see if there could be a sniper near the airfield in a position to shoot them down on take-off.'

Otto returned as tea and coffee was brought in.

The first SAS Captain asked, 'Are you expecting any *visitors* today? The welcome kind?' Beesely glanced at the managers.

'Yes,' a man replied. 'There are decorators, Israeli technicians, and a Swiss Army medical team on its way for a joint exercise.'

'Assume some of them have been compromised!' the Captain insisted. 'Replaced with the fifth column.'

Beesely lowered his head as he thought. 'We want them all alive for ...' He addressed the managers. 'Do we have silencers?'

'Yes, sir. Many of them.'

'Good. Issue as many as possible, we want prisoners for interrogation.'

Herr Mole tipped his head forwards. 'We must sweep everywhere for bugs, and a finger-tip search of the command centre.'

Beesely put down his tea. 'Otto, Johnno - this room. Captains, you and your men, plus the old dogs, every room upstairs. Managers, search the command area.' People stood. 'Everyone back here in ... in exactly twenty minutes.'

When the staff had filed out, Johnno took off his jacket and crawled under the desk. 'Another round of drinks going cold,' he muttered as Otto started on the cabinets, Beesely on his desk draws.

'Anything even remotely suspicious or unknown, in a box and outside,' Beesely quietly ordered as he sipped his tea.

Ten minutes later the phone buzzed.

'Yes?'

'Sir, they have found two listening devices in the restaurant.'

‘Good, good. Anything else?’

‘An unusual package in a guest quarter.’

‘Remove it carefully, drop it in the lake.’ He sat back, nibbling on his chocolate and observing Otto’s systematic, and symmetric, search of the office.

‘Nothing in here,’ Johno insisted with a heavy sigh.

‘I agree,’ Otto added.

‘Start ripping out lights and wires, then floor tiles. Our lives may depend on it,’ Beesely quietly insisted.

Otto and Johno both took a breath at the same time, before starting a more rigorous search as guards patrolled back and forth along the companionway with earphones and detectors.

Beesely pressed a button on his phone. ‘Get me Oliver Stanton.’ He waited.

‘This is David, that you Beesely?’

‘David, hi, they have you answering the phone now?’ He checked his watch. ‘And in the middle of the night, your time!’

‘Oliver is missing.’

Beesely glanced at Otto, who had been listening in. ‘He’s probably dead. Murdered.’

‘What are you saying?’ David asked.

‘We’re under siege. The head of MI6 was attacked, along with the head of my private security firm in the UK, a ploy to get me over there and out in the open.’

‘Who do you think is behind it?’

‘Russian money, lots of it. Fella by the name of Boris Luchenkov.’

‘He’s on our active list. What do you think he wants?’

‘All of us dead, I would assume. So watch your back, David, he’s probably hired himself some ex-community people, good people.’

‘I hear you.’

‘You can assume Olly was tortured, maybe truth drugs, so look out for trouble.’

‘I’ll get back to you.’ The line went dead.

Otto stepped forwards. ‘We must notify the Swiss Government. If they hear reports of trouble here they will send police and soldiers; a great many ... police and soldiers.’

Beesely made firm eye contact. ‘Really? Well, it’s good to know that we are so popular with the government, that they’d come running.’ Otto stiffened, puzzling Beesely’s tone. Beesely pressed a button, still focused on Otto. ‘Get me Minister Blaum, please.’ He waited. Otto returned to ripping things out of walls.

‘Herr Beesely?’ came from the phone.

‘Minister Blaum?’

‘Yes, how can I help?’

‘Where are you, exactly?’

‘I’m in my office. Why?’

‘Get yourself a ten-man police bodyguard, then call your family and move them somewhere safe. Quickly. Don’t take any car journeys or helicopter rides.’

‘What are you saying, that I’m in danger?’

‘Yes, we’re under siege here. Many people close to me in the UK have been attacked this morning by professional assassins. We expect this facility to be attacked when it gets dark.’

‘Who ... *exactly* do you believe is attacking you?’ Blaum asked.

Beesely stared at the phone for several seconds, the move noticed by Otto. ‘The same people behind the radioactive ball bearings, obviously.’

‘They are not so happy you stopped them!’

‘Quite.’

‘We must mobilise the police and army –’

‘No, Minister, people will get hurt. We want to deal with them quietly, and here; I don’t want your officers getting hurt. We could well be up against some the best mercenaries in the world. We also do not want to warn them, we want to catch them. Otherwise, they will just keep trying. Besides, this place is built like a fortress – no pun intended.’

‘You are playing a dangerous game, my friend,’ Blaum unhappily pointed out.

‘Better that *we* do it, than innocent civilians or police officers. We ... are geared up for this sort of thing. Would you not agree?’

Baum paused. ‘I will make preparations, just in case. If you need us, call.’

‘If we need you, it will probably be around dawn tomorrow. Try to contain any news leaks.’

‘Keep me informed, please.’

‘We will do. Now get your family somewhere safe. And do it quickly.’ He hung up as Thomas wandered in. Suddenly pale, Beesely glanced at Johnno, who had stopped dead.

4

Thomas halted in his tracks, as if he had done something terribly wrong and was about to be punished. ‘What have I done?’

Beesely used all his strength to maintain his composure, holding a hand over his eyes for a moment. Johnno stepped quickly to Thomas and led him outside, down to the dungeon.

Ten minutes later, managers began to assemble, the office looking as if a grenade had already gone off. Beesely cleared his throat.

‘Are you OK, sir?’ Herr Mole enquired, standing to the side of Beesely’s desk.

‘Johnno has probably broken the bad news to Thomas by now. The lad was very fond of Dame Helen’s daughter, who was killed this morning.’

Herr Mole sat down. ‘At that age, the boy will take it very badly.’

Johnno appeared in the doorway, glancing back down the corridor before stepping in. Thomas followed, but now with a shoulder holster on housing his personal Walther PPK; a small

9mm pistol that suited his size and age. He stood next to Johno, his tear tracks clearly visible.

‘Thomas Beesely, reporting for duty,’ the boy croaked, his voice breaking.

‘Well done, lad,’ Beesely quietly commended, Otto stepping closer and putting a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

Thomas asked, ‘The bad men, they are coming here?’

‘Yes, my lad, they are coming here,’ Beesely informed him. ‘And before this day is out, you may well get the chance to use your pistol.’ He turned to the group. ‘Right. What have we found?’

‘Two listening devices in the canteen, sir, three strange devices attached to trees, they could be motion detectors, and two strange packages. They are in the lake, as you requested.’

Johno stepped closer to the manager. ‘When he said *in the lake*, he didn’t mean it literally, Swiss knob! We could’ve got forensics off them!’

‘Quite.’ Beesely waited for Johno to settle back. ‘OK, so no penetration of any important areas we know about. And we can assume that this command centre is secure.’

The two SAS Captains stepped in.

‘Three staff did not show up for work today,’ a manager pointed out.

Beesely rubbed the bridge of his nose. ‘Assume they have been captured, and tortured for information. Whatever useful information they had - change our systems or access codes.’ People took notes.

‘Two police officers in the town have disappeared,’ a manager mentioned.

‘They probably stumbled upon some of our visitors,’ Beesely suggested. ‘Or they have had their identities stolen.’

His phone buzzed. ‘Sir?’

‘Yes?’

‘There is a senior police officer at the gate, but not from this Canton, he is from Bern. He is a Federal officer and he wishes to speak with you.’

‘Talk of the devil,’ Beesely quietly said towards Johno. Then louder, ‘Is he alone?’

‘No, sir, there are four other police officers with him.’

‘Wait two minutes, and then send them to the castle courtyard.’ He hung up. ‘And so it begins,’ he stated with a sigh. ‘Let them get into the courtyard, then grab them, strip them, and carefully search everything they have; tie them up.’ He faced Otto. ‘Send someone to identify them, just in case.’ Facing the SAS Captains, he said, ‘You lot are back-up on this deal.’ He pointed at the door, and they rushed out.

Johno stepped forwards. ‘Blaum may have sent them.’

Beesely nodded an acknowledgement. ‘We’re not going to kill them. Well, not until we’ve checked anyway.’ He forced a breath. ‘OK, let’s get back to first principles. Herr Mole: if you were paid a hundred million dollars, how would you go about attacking this place?’

Mole stood, not a great difference in head height. ‘This facility can withstand attack by bomb, chemical agent or similar – as has already been proven. A rocket attack would not work, nor any attack from the air. They need to get us outside.’

Beesely rubbed his chin. ‘And being the kind of people we are, anyone bothering us would result in us chasing them.’

Mole agreed. ‘And into a trap. No, I do not think they intend to try and enter this place by force, unless they have not been well informed.’

Johno stepped forwards. ‘Which gives me a sneaky idea.’

‘Which is?’ Beesely asked, lifting his head towards Johno.

‘You split your mercenary force in two. Those who are aggressive, but not too bright, you send in to distract us. The really good secret squirrels use the smoke to get into place.’

‘Sacrificing some,’ Beesely agreed, ‘for the greater good of the mission. Yes, that makes sense. So the real danger won’t present itself until the shooting stops.’

Johno folded his arms. ‘They could put mines in trees with motion sensors and two week delays, plant bombs with remote detonators, or sit on the mountain for weeks till just the right moment.’

‘So we have to avoid the smoke and mirrors,’ Beesely suggested, staring down at the desk.

His phone buzzed. ‘Sir! Gunfire in the courtyard!’ Managers jumped up.

‘Sit down, ladies and gentlemen!’ Beesely barked. ‘Sit! We will not survive today by reacting to things like that. Keep a cool head.’ He tapped one of his computer screens. ‘Can we call up the video feed of the courtyard?’ he asked a shocked looking Otto.

Otto switched it on, mouse clicked a few icons, and then there it was; five dead Swiss police officers, the SAS contingent stood over them.

Beesely’s eyes widened. ‘Oh dear. I do hope they were not actually Swiss police.’

Otto pressed Beesely’s phone. ‘SAS Captains to the control room.’

‘Yes, quite. Let’s get some coffees organised, it’s going to be a very long day.’

The Captains appeared a minute later, weapons in hand and a little out of breath. One had blood on his hands.

Beesely stood. ‘What happened?’ he asked without any hint of blame.

‘Your guards smiled nicely and asked them to stop. Next thing we know the visitors had their weapons out, pistol to the necks of your guards, so we dropped them.’

‘Anyone hurt?’

‘One of your guards is wounded, a stray round through-and-through.’

‘Well done anyway; first blood. Any of them still alive?’

The officer tipped his eyebrows. ‘Be a fucking miracle, sir; we put about ten rounds in each man.’

‘Ah well.’ Beesely turned to Otto. ‘Put them on ice for now, out of the way, clean up the mess, no trace. We’ll identify them later. Our injured man - no hospital, all wounded are treated here as best as possible. Captains, the stairwell for the castle, the lobby, that’s your killing ground. How many men do you have?’

‘Twenty one in total, sir, with your lot.’

‘Too many for that area; they will be falling over each other. Split them: first team, second, reserve. Pick your kill zones, and your choke points. Get rations in pockets, water, raid the kitchen. You could be there two days.’

‘Yessir.’ They hurried out.

Beesely sat and sighed. ‘OK, first round to us, gentlemen. But let’s not get complacent. What other visitors are we expecting today?’

‘We can cancel the exercise with the Swiss Medical Corp,’ Otto suggested.

‘No, bring them in, all nice and cosy. Oh, the vehicles of the Swiss police officers, move them to the end of the compound, hide them quickly.’ A manager ran out as Beesely eased back. ‘Right, are there any other suggestions?’

Otto tipped his head forwards. ‘The best assassins will wait until morning, dawn I think, after we have suffered a night of fighting. We will be at our weakest.’

Beesely was a little surprised by that statement, especially coming from Otto.

‘Yep,’ Johno agreed. ‘Wear us down first, probing attacks.’

A manager said, ‘They are assuming we will not bring in the Swiss authorities.’

‘And they’d be right,’ Beesely stated. ‘They know how I will react to this. That’s their strength and our weakness. My weakness. They must know that we are publicity shy. We don’t want to be in the papers any more than our attackers do.’

Using his mouse, and looking over the rims of his glasses, Beesely clicked icons as he had witnessed Otto doing. Otto stood ready to assist, pointing where Beesely should click. Up came the restaurant, Scottish Kev and two others now visible. Beesely pressed a button on his phone. 'Restaurant, please.' The phone there rang for a while in stereo before anyone figured they should answer.

'Hello?' came a Scottish accent.

'This is Beesely, I can see you on the monitors.'

'Oh, right sir. What you want us to do?'

'How are you old boys coping?'

'Never better, sir. Wee bit ah' action.'

'You never were too bright. Listen, some bad news from the UK - Wilko Thomas had his throat slit, others missing.'

Kev took a breath. 'We gonna get the chance to meet these fellas, sir?'

'You help yourself, you're going to see plenty of action today, but mostly tonight, so shift sleep through the day.'

'Will do, sir.'

Beesely hung up. 'That goes for us as well, we have to pace ourselves so that we are fresh around dawn. OK, decoys. What can we do to draw out the bad boys?'

Johno stepped forwards. 'Wait till dusk, boat to the lake, four men run for it, it speeds off.'

Beesely considered the idea. 'If they think I have gone, they may go. Good, but we don't want them gone, we want them captured.'

Johno suggested, 'Then dress those five dead coppers like guards. Later on, we spread them around outside the castle, it looks like we took a beating, and they get cocky.'

'Excellent. Let's get that organized.' People took notes.

His phone buzzed. 'Sir, Israelis are here.'

'Send them up to the castle. Get me the lobby.'

'Sir? Lobby here,' came a Swiss voice.

'Get me an SAS Captain, would you.'

They waited. ‘Sir?’ came a British voice.

‘Listen, your next visitors will be here in two minutes. Go to great lengths *not* to kill these, I want them alive. I know they’re salesmen, but resist the temptation.’

‘Will do, sir.’

Johno tipped his head forwards. ‘Fucking Israelis will go mad if we drop their staff.’

‘Then let’s hope they are who they say they are.’ Beesely pressed his phone. ‘Get me Elle Rosen, Mossad.’

They waited. ‘Hello?’ came a few seconds later.

‘Elle? Beesely here.’

‘Ah, Beesely, how are you?’

‘Not good, we are under siege. Tell your boss that Oliver Stanton has been murdered, and head of MI6 is critical.’

‘What on earth is happening?’

‘That oil was Siberian!’

‘But we traced the boat, it was owned and crewed by Iranians!’

‘Then we have a bigger mystery; the oil belonged to Luchenkov –’

‘He’s a nationalist, and he wants to be President of Russia!’

‘He’s put a prize on my head, and he has already got to some of my friends. Anyway, got some Israeli arms dealers about to arrive, so I will need you to stay on the line and identify them ... to make sure they could not have been compromised.’

‘The men from Zohar Chemicals? I know them, I can identify them.’

‘Good. Not ... er ... Mossad agents ... are they? *Spying* ... on us?’ Beesely toyed.

‘Certainly not,’ Elle insisted. ‘But we stay in close touch them.’

‘I’m putting you on hold.’ Using his mouse, he clicked on the icon for ‘Map’, zooming-in on the courtyard. Final click, and there came the image: two worried looking Israelis down to their underpants, six machine guns pointing at their heads.

‘Now that’s the way to treat salesmen,’ he muttered. He lifted his gaze to Otto. ‘Bring them down here, please.’

A minute later they entered, waved over by Beesely. ‘I recognise this obnoxious git,’ he said, pointing at the taller man, stood now shivering in his underpants. Releasing ‘hold’, he said, ‘Elle, you still there?’

‘Yes, still here.’

‘The two men are here, one I recognise anyway. Do your thing.’ He turned the phone and pushed it to the edge of the desk.

They began to talk in Hebrew. After a minute of chit-chat being shouted back and forth, the second man was looking nervous, the taller Israeli salesman stepping away from him, eyeing him suspiciously.

‘Beesely!’ Elle called. ‘The second man!’

Johno kicked the man in the groin. Whilst bent double, the man received another kick to the face, flying backwards. Guards grabbed him, forcing him upright.

‘Hold him!’ Beesely ordered. Then quieter, ‘Give this other man his clothes and possessions back. Quickly!’

‘Beesely,’ Elle called. ‘Do what you want with him, but I want his fingerprints, a photo and any possessions.’

‘We have a *chair* that he can sit in. Thanks, Elle.’

‘No problem, you let me know what’s happening. Oh, and Beesely, some day you just call up to say ‘hello’, eh?’

Beesely hung up, and then walked around to the struggling man. ‘You made a big mistake, my friend. We ... are going to burn the skin off your body, inch by painful inch.’ He tipped his head at the guards, and they dragged the impostor out. The genuine salesman dressed quickly. ‘Apologies,’ Beesely offered. ‘But we have a security problem today.’

‘It’s no problem. I am just happy I am who I think I am,’ he panted.

‘Get this man a coffee,’ Beesely ordered. Then, facing the salesman, he explained, ‘I am afraid we cannot let you leave just

yet. To quote a phrase - *we have a lot of problems here*. You will get to see how your equipment works - for real.'

'For real?'

'We are under attack,' Beesely calmly informed the man. 'Sit behind a monitor and observe.' The salesman was led out Beesely sat. 'So, two-nil to us.'

'Won't all be that simple,' Johno curtly pointed out. Then he added, 'And I *seriously* wish I had not just kicked that bastard!' He bent double, holding his knee.

'Your leg?'

'Just set back four days of healing. Bastard!'

'Sir!' the phone buzzed. 'Gunfire on the castle roof!'

Beesely moved the mouse. 'How do you call up the bleeding roof?'

Otto adjusted the parameters quickly. Then there it was, a man dangling by a rope on the cliff, obviously dead, another advancing cautiously, but cut down a second later. Otto split the screen as people stood to look, the second screen switched on by Johno and the image called up.

'That's Kev!' Johno pointed out.

Kev could be seen crouching, checking the body, a second later knocked down by a shot from above.

'Stupid sod!' Johno shouted. 'Get them off the roof, there're snipers up there!' They could see another man dragging Kev by the foot, dropping down through a skylight a second later.

Beesely lifted his phone. 'Get me the kitchen.'

Otto called up the kitchen in a new window. Several SAS troopers were rushing about. One answered the phone.

'Yes?'

'Get off the fucking roof, we have snipers!'

'You noticed that too, did you!'

Beesely slammed the phone down. 'Stupid old sod, trying to be a bloody hero.'

'Beesely?' came from his phone, an English voice.

'Yes?'

‘They’re trying to shoot out the glass above the restaurant.’

‘It’s solid!’ Beesely insisted.

‘I can see that, sir, but maybe they know that as well.’

‘Stay out of line of sight of the mountain.’

‘Will do.’ The line went dead.

Beesely turned to Otto. ‘How strong is that glass?’

‘It would be broken by a fifty calibre, nothing less.’

‘There’s no way they lugged a fifty cal’ up that mountain!’

Johno suggested.

‘Let’s hope so. Johno, go check on them.’

Johno straightened. ‘No.’ Beesely made eye contact, Johno adding, ‘To quote a dead friend of mine, my place is right here, keeping you alive.’

Beesely creased a cheek and smiled. ‘Good lad.’ He pressed his phone. ‘Get me one of the SAS Captains.’ He turned to Johno. ‘What *are* their bleeding names, anyway?’

‘Turner and ... er ... Colette.’

‘Captain Turner here.’

‘Is Kev alive?’

‘Yes, sir; clean through, nothing serious.’

‘Anyone else?’

‘No, sir. We had the ‘old guard’ watching the roof and the kitchen, in reserve. There seems to be two or three snipers up there. We got two, well Kev got one and his oppo the other on the roof, Kev got a second as he rappelled down.’

‘I feel a bleeding pay rise coming on,’ Beesely muttered. ‘Bring him down here, and any other wounded.’

‘Will do, sir.’

A bang was heard down the phone.

‘What the hell was that?’ Beesely shouted.

‘Sounded like a fifty cal’ from the lake,’ Turner replied.

‘Talk later.’ Beesely hung up. ‘Get the lake,’ he hurriedly urged Otto.

A few mouse-clicks, and up came nine images of the lakeside. ‘Where are they?’ Beesely asked.

‘They’re camouflaged,’ Otto whispered.

Another distant bang revealed a puff of smoke. ‘There!’ Beesely pointed. ‘Get them on the radio.’

A manager turned up the volume of a radio attached to his hip. ‘Lake side fifty calibre, how goes it?’ he asked in German.

A voice crackled back, ‘We got two snipers.’

A high-pitched whining noise began, the volume quickly turned down.

‘Jammers!’ Johno pointed out.

‘What do we have that cannot be jammed?’ Beesely demanded.

‘The satellite phones,’ Otto responded.

Johno added, ‘And the radios can be intercepted.’

‘Yes,’ Beesely agreed. ‘Let everyone know, no radio use - at all - from now on.’ Managers ran out.

‘Sir?’ burst from his phone.

‘Yes!’

‘We have a report of up to ten men in the woods at the base of the cliff, to the west of the emergency bunker entrance.’

Johno stepped closer. ‘Why are these idiots attacking us in daylight?’

‘How far are they from the entrance?’ Beesely asked.

‘A hundred yards, sir, moving slowly.’

He turned to Otto, ‘Ten men there. Now! Through the tunnels.’ Otto moved towards the door. ‘Wait!’ Beesely called. ‘They will have explosives, we have got to get them before they are inside the tunnel!’

Otto ran out, guards running along the companionway a moment later.

Johno moved around to where he could control the computer screen, calling up images of the tunnel, its entrance, and then the view outside, *dragging-and-dropping* image windows. ‘Can’t see them on this resolution, they’ll have to be closer. They’re probably camouflaged anyway.’

‘Cannon fodder,’ Beesely snarled.

‘An old term,’ Herr Mole stated. ‘But correct in its use today.’ Beesely glanced at him briefly before turning back to the screens, Mole adding, ‘If you want prisoners, I have an idea.’ They all focused on him. ‘Our Israeli friend can help.’

‘Him? How?’ Beesely demanded.

‘He has test-gas, brought to test the nerve agent detectors. It has the effect of short-term nerve agent, but does no harm to a person in the long term.’

‘By God that’s excellent,’ Beesely commended. ‘Where is it?’

‘Locked in a room in the lower bunker,’ Mole informed them. A manager jumped up.

‘Get it and use it! Quickly!’ He pressed a button on his phone. ‘Tell the guards at the west bunker entrance not to fire, but to use the stun gas that’s on its way.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Get me Captain Turner!’ He waited.

‘Turner here, sir.’

‘Find some way to offer suppressing fire towards the west. As you look down from the top floor you’ll see the cliff to your left, trees, and then grass and the road. Down beyond the office block you’ll see a dark coloured Swiss chalet. Beyond that is a small army creeping along.’

‘We’ll pinch the M-16s off your guys, we’ve only got MP5s for close quarter.’

‘I’ll get you some more, hang on.’ He pointed at a manager then slid his finger towards the door, the man bolting out.

* * *

K2 guard Hans now peered through the telescopic sight on his M82, self-loading .50 calibre rifle. His elbows dug into the soil and tightened. He took a breath, focusing on the mountain to the right of the cliff-top, his cheek moulded into the rifle stock. A

tree protected his far right, another tree protecting his immediate left.

A crack of the air was followed by another clump of grass floating through the air.

‘They are shooting from more than eight hundred metres,’ he casually informed his colleague, the man hunkered down six foot away. ‘And with 5.56mm or smaller.’

‘Too light for that range,’ his colleague commented, still prone behind his own .50 calibre rifle.

‘And too much wind. See the flag on top the castle?’

His colleague opened his left eye and re-focused, his right eye now closed. The small triangular flags atop of the spires were wagging briskly. ‘Yeah, maybe ten kilometres per hour.’

‘They are not factoring that in.’

‘They can’t see it, that’s why!’ his colleague quipped.

Hans allowed himself a quick smile; something caught his eye. He re-focused and strained to see.

They waited.

The top of a head appeared from behind a rock; a flash, a crack a second later, a clump of bark falling down between him and his partner. ‘Zeroed him!’ Hans called. He checked the target, no more than three inches of the top of this sniper’s head visible.

‘How’s it look?’ his colleague enquired.

‘No good, just the top of his head, he is staying down.’

Hans adjusted his aim a fraction right: he found trees, but no one else visible. He adjusted very carefully the other way: a rock, a small promontory, maybe two metres from the sniper. ‘Bank shot!’

He aimed carefully for the right hand side of the rock, considered the ricochet, and fired. Urgently, he tried to re-acquire the sniper’s last known position, sure that he had the correct rock. Then he noticed a rifle barrel pointed up at an odd angle.

A face. Hands. The sniper stood, holding his face. The ricochet had worked. Hans aimed mid torso and fired. Quickly, he tried to re-acquire, finding nothing.

‘I saw that one go down!’ his colleague shouted.

Hans observed the sniper’s rifle for a few seconds. It rested pointing up at an odd angle, no movement evident.

* * *

Above the entrance to the bunker, many guards waited in the wooden chalet, out of sight and ready. Ten more were lined up at the rear of the office block, all now crouched down.

Hurried footsteps could be heard in the tunnel as the new arrivals ran past a dozen guards armed with M4 assault rifles. Three men ran to the front, talking in forced whispers. At the tunnel entrance they stopped behind a guard with a telescopic sight.

‘How close?’

‘Fifty yards.’

The lead guard, panting heavily, turned around, all three of them kneeling in a line. ‘We throw together, maybe twenty yards, out so that the wind takes it.’

‘Which way is the wind blowing?’

They all looked, studying the bushes beyond the tunnel entrance. The wind blew north-east to south-west. Perfect.

The guard with the telescopic sight turned. ‘They are getting ready to attack. Looks like grenades!’

The three guards with nerve gas glanced at each other ‘OK. We run, throw and lie down. And hope.’

As Beesely and the managers observed from the control room, the three men ran, threw their grenades and jumped down, the last man too slow. He got hit twice and lay clutching his abdomen.

The guard closest to the door thrust his head out. ‘Nerve gas! Nerve gas!’

The misty cloud wafted quickly towards the attackers, who were unsure of whether or not it was a trick. Little more than five seconds later, the first attacker screamed, standing and turning, his hands and face covered in red blotches, his eyes puffed up and his lips swollen. A shot from the SAS took him down. Other attackers began to retreat, opening fire towards the tunnel entrance as they did, to lay down covering fire.

The SAS opened up from a break in the roof tiles, hitting several men in the legs. At the same time, guards burst out of the tunnel, running bent-double along the bushes at the base of the cliff, stopping to firing intermittently at attacker's legs.

* * *

On the hillside, a man listened in to the radio chatter of the attackers. He raised a satellite phone. 'Leaf to Tree, over,' he said in a distinct Texas drawl.

'Tree here, go ahead,' came back a heavily accented voice.

'K2 have started using nerve gas in their compound.'

'Nerve gas! Are you sure?'

'Yeah, they just got the team attacking the entrance to the emergency bunker.'

'They risk killing themselves. Good. Press ahead with the attack. Out.'

'You're welcome,' the Texan sarcastically let out. He focused his telescopic sight on the camp. 'Nerve gas? What the fuck are these Swiss boys up to?'

5

'They're on the run,' Johno informed the room.

Then everyone could hear an explosion.

'Where was that?' Beesely asked, Johno now calling up images.

'Beesely!' burst from the phone.

‘Yes!’

‘Captain Turner, sir. Remember those decorators that were supposed to come in, to finish the restaurant? Well, you’re going to need some fucking builders as well!’

‘What happened?’ Beesely puzzled.

‘That was a blob of C4 on the restaurant’s roof glass. It’s wrecked!’

‘Watch for unwelcome visitors!’

‘We’re retreating to the stair well, two men down with minor wounds.’

‘Keep them with you. If they can shoot, they fight!’ He hung up and took a breath. ‘Let’s organize some food, some coffee, everyone wash your faces with cold water. We need to stay focused and sharp.’ He stood. ‘Herr Mole, well done, that was a good idea with the test gas. Otto, prisoners to be held in the tunnels.’

The room cleared of the managers.

Johno sat on the desk. ‘Turner’s men are going to get worn down. They already have four injured.’

Beesely tipped his eyebrows, and suggested, ‘Before dawn tomorrow we’ll be lucky if four are left alive.’

Johno studied Otto as he slumped into a chair. ‘You holding up?’

Otto took a long time answering. ‘I am very angry.’

Johno glanced at Beesely, then back to Otto. ‘At who?’

‘At the ... people out there ... who do not realise what I will do to them for attacking me. I am not angry at them, I am angry at them not knowing who we are.’

‘We’re a secret organization,’ Johno sarcastically pointed out. ‘You want to put an advert on the TV, *screw with us and you get the chair!*’

‘Yes, I do,’ Otto snarled, an unusual display of emotion.

Beesely eased back in his chair. ‘It’s not just a few mafia hit men now,’ he pointed out.

‘That seems like a long time ago,’ Otto quietly admitted.

‘For us all,’ Beesely agreed. ‘If you had not contacted us, then Johnno and I would be on a beach right now.’

‘With Jane and Ricky,’ Otto pointedly suggested.

Beesely took a deep breath. ‘With Jane, at least.’

‘I started all this,’ Otto quietly let out.

Beesely carefully studied his offspring. ‘And if you had not contacted me? Then what? London possibly contaminated, a new Russian dictator, World War bleeding Three! Right now, Otto, just about everyone on the planet is very grateful that you did contact me, they just don’t know you ... and what you did. Your actions saved everyone in London.’

‘I gave *you* ... the opportunity to save everyone,’ Otto unhappily noted. ‘You and Face Fungus.’

Johnno ran a hand down his moustache, a grin for Otto.

Beesely again took a moment to study Otto, a quick glance at Johnno. ‘Which matters most? The person who bought the lottery ticket, or the person who gave him the money and prompted him to do it?’

‘It is a difficult question,’ Otto admitted.

Beesely again made brief eye contact with Johnno. ‘Otto, I have no regrets. We are where we are supposed to be, doing what we are supposed to be doing. Even Johnno gave up ten million to be here, slowly getting killed in an underground bunker.’

‘Is it too late for that cheque?’ Johnno asked as managers started to wander back in.

One said, ‘Sir, we have five prisoners alive. All are seriously ill from the test nerve agent, as well as a few of our guards.’

‘Treat them all; you get some advice from our Israeli friend on how best to go about that.’ The man walked back out as others entered.

Johnno counted on his fingers. ‘I make it twenty-one bad guys chopped down so far. How many you reckon in total?’

Beesely made a face. ‘Who knows? Some stupid sod has told these mercenaries that we are a soft touch, otherwise they

wouldn't be so blatant. Their commander is toying with us, throwing away these idiots.'

'Sir!' his phone buzzed.

'Yes?'

'We have reports of an explosion and gun battle near the Zug airfield. One of our men dead, two wounded, six intruders killed, two captured.'

'Thank you.'

'Our boys are holding up well,' Johnno commented.

'Against the cannon fodder, so far,' Beesely pointed out.

'Sir, our snipers on the lakeside got another two,' crackled out of the desk phone.

'Very good, thank you.'

With a lull in the fighting, everyone had a bite to eat. Beesely and Johnno sat back as Otto and the managers dealt with situation as well as any seasoned British Army officer might.

'Beesely?' came from the phone half an hour later.

'Yes?'

'Turner, sir. Boys near the roof say they can hear choppers.'

'Watch the skies, Captain, and if any choppers get close, run down to a lower level and take cover.'

'Will do, sir.'

Beesely cut the call, pressing INTERCOM. 'Get the boys near the lake with fifty calibre rifles to look out for helicopters. Tell them ... any hostile action by helicopter and to shoot it down.'

'Yes, sir.'

Beesely turned towards Otto, tapping the screen. 'Can we get an aerial view?'

Otto adjusted the computer displays. 'Nothing visible.'

'Wait for a direction,' Beesely suggested, before lifting his head towards Johnno. 'What will those fifty calibres do to a helicopter?'

'For a civvy helicopter – no armour? They'll go straight through, they'll make hell of a mess. In the US they're trying to

ban them from civilian rifle nuts; they could bring down a plane.'

'Bring down a plane?' Beesely queried.

'Back when the Russians were in Afghanistan, the Yanks helping the resistance fighters had bolt action fifty cal's. They'd sneak up to the Russian airfields, hide in the flight path a mile away, then when the planes were taking off they'd shoot through the wings - anything up to a thousand feet. They crippled a few Russian aircraft, brought down a few others. You know who the CIA taught that technique to?'

'Osama Bin Laden himself,' Beesely answered with a peeved expression.

'Yep. And now they use that same technique against the US forces in Iraq,' Johno added. 'Fortunately, there're not many fifty cal's in the hands of the rag-heads. And those they have ... the CIA reckons were bought in US sport gun shops.'

'Marvellous,' Beesely muttered.

His phone buzzed. 'Sir, there is a boat on the lake.'

Otto called up a single image, that of the lake in front of the castle. He zoomed in. 'Police launch.'

'Check with Zug police, quickly!' Beesely ordered no one in particular.

'Fifty cal's are exposed to the rear,' Johno pointed out.

'Can we reinforce them?'

'Not without running across the compound,' Johno insisted. 'And if we bring *our* boats in they're well exposed to the snipers.'

Beesely faced Otto. 'What about the sniper teams we sent up the hill?'

Otto answered, 'They are going the long way around, cutting off the snipers retreat.'

Beesely pressed a button. 'Get six camp guards with rifles to the lake edge, and along the lake to protect the fifty cal' position.'

'Yes, sir.'

‘There,’ Otto called. ‘The boat. It is coming towards us.’

‘And there,’ Beesely pointed, squinting at the screen, ‘is a helicopter. Johno, what is that thing?’

Johno walked around and peered at the screen. ‘Christ, it’s an old Russian Mi2; that’s forty years old.’

‘Armed?’

‘Could be, that one ain’t.’

‘How many men inside?’

Johno made a face and shrugged. ‘Ten to fifteen.’

‘Otto, any reason why that thing should be flying past here?’ Beesely asked, pointing at the image.

‘I cannot think of any.’

‘Tell the fifty cal’ boys to hit the tail rotor if it looks like it may land. Tell them to hit the pilots if they open their doors. And tell the rest of our people to be ready for it if it lands. Remember, prisoners.’

A manager stepped out with the instructions, Thomas nudging into a position where he could see the action, rudely moving Otto aside.

6

Hans and partner, the ‘fifty calibre boys’, observed the helicopter’s approach whilst keeping an eye on the boat.

The boat suddenly changed course, now parallel to them; several men dressed in Swiss Police uniforms could be seen moving about on the rear. They waited, fingers on triggers. Nothing, it was just heading past. The launch slowly advanced two hundred yards, turned towards shore, before turning back the opposite way.

Hans could see a man with a long-barrelled rifle, definitely not local Swiss police. He aimed where he figured the engine should be, and fired, a deafening bang and powerful recoil into his shoulder. His weapon automatically reloaded, a second shot

fired to the same spot, smoke starting to rise from the rear of the boat.

A shot cracked past his ear. He aimed, firing at the first man, and knocking him off the boat and into the lake. He fired again, this time into the wheelhouse. Another crack passed his ear, so he ducked and waited. Ten seconds later the boat was well ablaze, men jumping into the water. Hans aimed again.

‘Hey! Prisoners,’ his buddy shouted.

They surveyed the men in the water, of which none seemed armed.

‘OK, just checking,’ Hans offered.

They peered skyward as another crack tore bark off a nearby tree.

‘We are popular today,’ Hans noted.

‘How is your ammunition?’

‘Another ten rounds, then we have to start shouting at them.’

The drone of the helicopter wafted up and down in volume as it bounced off the hills around the lake. Now it grew stronger and more distinct. They took up position, ignoring the swimmers, and the million small flies that had recently hatched. Ducks were moving their way, away from the surviving attackers off the police launch.

‘I don’t like that lead duck,’ Hans suggested. ‘Shoot the bastard if he gets too close.’

The helicopter drew near.

‘That’s a very strange looking helicopter.’

They zeroed in on it, observing it for many seconds before noting a door opening. Before they had a chance to do anything, a dark figure dropped out and into the water. They both fired at the cockpit, shattering the glass. The helicopter nosed down immediately and crashed a second later, huge plumes of water sent up by the rotor blades. It rolled onto its back, blew out bubbles, and sank quickly.

* * *

‘Did you see that?’ Johno called, pointing at an image on the screen. ‘A diver in the water!’

‘What about the others? Those inside?’ Beesely hurriedly asked.

‘Unlikely to have got out, but they do probably have scuba gear on,’ Johno suggested.

‘Could they survive?’ Otto asked.

‘How deep is it there?’ Johno asked.

‘The lake centre? Very deep, three hundred metres,’ Otto answered.

Johno theatrically raised his eyebrows. ‘Then no, not unless they got out quickly. But that first jumper is a threat to the fifty cal’ position. He can pop-up, shoot and then disappear.’

Beesely pointed at a manager. ‘Tell the fifty cal’ to move to a position where they are not exposed to the lake.’ He pressed a button. ‘Get me Turner.’ They waited.

‘Turner here, sir.’

‘Get someone up high with an M-16, cover the lake in front of the castle; we got a Navy Seal in the drink.’

‘We saw him land; crazy to attempt that in daylight!’

‘Yes, very brave. Now shoot the nice man, would you.’ He hung up, turning to Johno. ‘*Could* they get him?’

‘Oh yeah. The diver will make a wake when he surfaces, which is why no one would ever do that in daylight, on a lake with iddy-biddy little waves on. It’s fucking suicide.’

‘Sir,’ came from the phone. ‘Ten men on the roof.’

‘Get me Turner!’

‘Turner here, sir.’

‘There’s a heavy assault coming in from the roof! Get ready.’

Turner dropped the phone and ran to the stairwell. ‘They’re coming in from the roof, mob handed! Get into pairs in the guest rooms, evacuate the stair well!’

Bodies moved quickly as a dull thud echoed and reverberated; a grenade. A second blast was closer, and louder.

‘They’re clearing a path with grenades! Take cover!’ Captain Turner shouted as he sprinted down the stairwell. More dull thuds echoed down the stairwell after him as grenades cleared out any possible resistance in the now empty restaurant.

Smitty and Robbo were trapped in the kitchen storeroom.

‘Pisst!’ Smitty called. ‘They’re going to grenade, and then storm in two seconds later.’ They both moved behind a heavy metal food locker, inching it out.

Smitty pressed his face up against his oppo. ‘Door, bounce bounce, bang, one two, they kick in door, we fire.’

Robbo shook his head, holding up two grenades. ‘Door, bounce bounce, bang, we throw into corridor, duck, run and shoot.’

Smitty curled his lip, grabbing a grenade.

A few seconds later the door burst open, the sound of two grenades rolling on the tiled floor clearly heard. They closed their eyes. First bang, second bang, ears ringing. They moved, pulled the pins, threw, finally ducking behind a counter. A shout registered through the thick smoke.

First bang, muffled screams, second bang. They charged, firing through the smoke as soon as they were in the doorway. Man on floor. Short burst to the head. Second man, slumped against wall, short burst.

‘Two down!’ Smitty shouted, walking backwards and firing through the smoke into the stairwell, kicking the door closed, back behind the metal locker a second later.

‘How many more grenades?’ Smitty whispered, coughing out smoke.

‘That’s it.’

‘Right - door, bounce bounce, bang, one two, they kick in door, we fire.’

‘Now you’re making sense.’

A burst of fire near the roof caught their attention, a prolonged burst. It was soon followed by another, a third overlapping. They looked up.

‘Must have been fifty, sixty rounds,’ Smitty whispered.

‘Not our lot then.’

They listened as another long burst echoed down to them. Then silence reclaimed the restaurant.

‘Smitty?’ came a loud, familiar voice.

They emerged, weapons prone, inching towards the door, the smoke lingering.

‘Smitty?’ the voice called again. ‘It’s Turner. You two tossers still alive in there?’

‘Yes, Boss. Just having a kip.’

‘Cover us.’

Smitty and Robbo stepped cautiously to the door, checking the bodies, three in total, before aiming up the stairwell to the roof. ‘Clear!’

Troopers came up the stairs, hugging the walls and covering each other.

‘What happened?’ Robbo asked his boss.

A little out of breath, Captain Turner said, ‘The K2 boys climbed up the side of the cliff, and wiped out our friends from above.’

‘We got these three!’ Smitty protested.

‘Got it on tape?’ Turner said with a smile as he stepped over the bodies.

‘How’s that for gratitude,’ Robbo commented.

‘Anyway,’ Turner pointed out. ‘You said you were having a kip, and that’s going in the official report.’

* * *

Beesely's phone buzzed. 'Yes?'

'Captain Turner, sir. The roof is cleared.'

'Well done.'

'We got three, maybe four. Your boys on the cliff got the rest.'

'Mop up. Any wounded?'

'Just a few cuts from ricochet.'

* * *

The crack of a high velocity round passed the fifty calibre position, coming in from the lake, followed by a burst of automatic fire. It was too close for comfort. Then they could hear rustling in the bushes nearby. They glanced at each other, drawing their pistols.

'Hans? Alles in ordnung?' came from someone unseen.

They breathed again. 'Yes, but keep down. There are snipers, and dangerous ducks!'

Guards crawled along the lake edge and up to Hans and his partner. They slapped down extra magazines for the fifty cal's. 'We got the diver in the lake. You're supposed to aim at the cliff again.'

They reloaded the fifty cal's, and again took up position, now flanked by six guards dug in against the good cover afforded by the lake's muddy bank. They found three targets on the cliff straight away, firing quickly, leaving the new arrivals to cope with the million small flies.

8

An hour later, Johno walked into Beesely's office, 'Most of the snipers on the cliff have been sorted.'

Beesely smiled at Thomas, pointing out various images on the computer, the boy now officially in-charge of video feed.

Then they could all hear a dull thud, most glancing up at the ceiling.

‘What was that?’ Otto puzzled.

Beesely glanced at the monitors, now noticing a large black cloud of smoke in front of the castle.

‘Beesely, this is Turner,’ burst from his phone.

‘Yes, go ahead.’

‘Mortars coming in, get everyone under cover!’

‘Mortars?’ Beesely repeated. ‘Christ! Warn everyone. Now!’

‘That’s not good,’ Johnno cautioned.

‘Why?’ Beesely asked, concerned.

‘With our heads down they can sneak up.’

‘*They* can’t sneak up with shells landing!’ Beesely insisted.

‘They’ll try,’ Johnno firmly countered with.

Beesely put his face up against the screen. ‘Johnno, some of those guys out there may know you. Personally.’

‘Doubt it, but it’s possible,’ Johnno agreed. ‘Why?’

‘That mortar hit your new car.’

‘Bugger. Wonder how I’ll put that on the fucking insurance form? Hit by a mortar!’

Beesely took a breath, turning back to the images. ‘How far off could they be?’

‘Two miles.’

‘Two miles? We’ll never find them in those woods!’

Beesely’s satellite phone warbled. ‘Yes?’

‘Beesely? It’s David. Help will be with you in a few minutes.’

‘Really? What kind of help?’

‘Help from our bases in Germany, under the radar. Tell all your people to get inside quickly. Call you later.’

‘What now?’ Johnno complained.

‘The Americans have organized some backup for us,’ Beesely excitedly explained.

‘About bloody time! They’re always late coming to help out us Brits!’

‘Beesely, it’s Turner.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Assault helicopters coming in, American Apaches. Fucking hundreds of ‘em!’

Beesely clasped his hands, smiling broadly. ‘Get all staff inside, no one left outside at all. Quickly! Oh, and those helicopters, they are on our side.’

* * *

On the hillside, the Texan put down his telescopic sight and raised his head, listening hard as the drone grew louder and more distinct. He swung around his rifle sight and peered out across the lake, his lens suddenly filled with the image of an Apache. He snapped the sight down and lifted his head. ‘Sweet mother of God!’

He grabbed his satellite phone. ‘Leaf to Tree, American Army assault helicopters have arrived to assist K2, over.’

No response came back.

‘Hello ... anyone there?’ He took in the line of helicopters. ‘Scotty, if you’re there ... beam me the fuck up!’

* * *

Beesely’s phone rang again. ‘Yes?’

‘Sir Morris Beesely?’ came a distorted voice, an American accent.

‘Yes.’

‘This is Apache squadron leader. Where do you want it?’

‘All around the outskirts of the compound, but mostly the cliffs and hills above us. And there are some mortar positions a mile or two away.’

‘Take cover. Out.’

Beesely hung up and faced the managers. 'Contact our people up on the hillside, and get them into cover or to hold up white flags. Quickly!'

Thomas zoomed in on the Apaches. 'There! Look!'

'What a beautiful sight,' Johno quietly stated, peering over Thomas, his hands on the boy's shoulders.

Turning point

1

The drone of Apaches grew louder as guards ignored the potential threat of snipers and ran for their lives. The last man into the emergency bunker glanced back to see eight Apaches on the horizon, advancing on the compound in a line abreast a hundred feet above the lake.

Noticing assailants advancing along the lakeshore, an Apache rotated its chain-gun and fired a three second burst, tearing foliage from the trees and throwing up clumps of turf. Two bodies were now visible.

After careful radio chatter with K2 staff, the Apaches got into position and selected rockets. Eight rockets shot forwards, climbing slightly from their current altitude and impacting on the cliff top a second later.

In the command centre, everyone glanced up at the ceiling as a dull rumble reverberated around the room.

‘Wouldn’t want to be up there right now,’ Johnno suggested.

‘Beesely, it’s Turner.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Are these fuckers on our side?’ he screamed, his voice badly distorted by background noise.

‘Yes, why?’

‘Oh, nothing,’ Turner replied, talking softer now. ‘Just take a look at your frigging restaurant later. Fucking Yanks.’ He hung up.

‘What does he mean?’ Beesely asked Johnno.

‘They hit the cliffs with rockets. Restaurant will have rocks in it that fell a few hundred feet. Guess they were under it at the time.’

‘Hell, it can be fixed - it’s only glass. No matter.’ Beesely waved dismissively as his satellite phone came to life. ‘Yes?’

‘This is Apache leader, safe to move around now.’

‘Thank you. Check the mountains and find that damn mortar position, would you.’

‘Roger, we see them on infra red.’

Another dull thud registered, another mortar, but no additional blasts came for five minutes.

Beesely pressed a button. ‘Get me Minister Blaum.’

‘Beesely? Are you OK?’ came a few seconds later.

‘Yes, we are fine at the moment.’

‘We have had reports of strange helicopters in your area.’

‘Yes, but we shot them down. They are in the lake, no evidence left behind.’

‘In the lake? My God.’

‘I would like you to make a very big effort, Minister, to suppress the news. We will do so as well. If the news gets out ... it will harm us all. We cannot have people believing in large scale terrorist attacks in the heart of Europe, now can we?’

‘I will see what I can do. We have given the British aircraft permission to land at Zug.’

Beesely shot a questioning look at Johno, but asked the question of Blaum. ‘Who is landing at Zug?’

‘The British Army. I thought *you* requested them.’

‘I’ll get back to you, Minister.’ Beesely hung up then addressed a manager. ‘Get hold of the airfield at Zug, find out what’s happening.’ He turned to Johno, a quizzical look. ‘British Army?’

Johno shrugged his shoulders and made a face.

Beesely’s phone went again, answered with an irate, ‘Yes?’

‘Beesely, it’s Colonel Milward.’

‘Ah Milward, how goes it your end?’

‘We killed three, captured two. Boys are having a word with them right now.’

‘When they are finished I’ll send a plane for them on the QT.’

‘You read my mind. The P.M. does not want this public.’

‘After everything that has happened lately, not bleeding surprising.’

‘Anyway, take a look out the window. No trainers or canoes, or fishing rods - just warm bodies.’ Milward hung up.

‘Gentlemen, some fresh air, I believe.’ Beesely stood and led them outside, despite Johnno’s cautioning against it.

The great hall now bustled, crammed with armed guards, its large antique tables doubling up as first aid stations. The courtyard appeared just as crowded, the entrance a blinding shaft of light in contrast to the dark interior. Squinting, they emerged into the warm summer’s sun, guards running in all directions. At the drawbridge entrance they halted, flanked by guards.

‘Sweep for intruders,’ Beesely ordered. ‘Set up police road blocks for up to ten miles to pick up stragglers.’ He squinted down towards the lake, past holes in the tarmac and grass, and Johnno’s wrecked car, then held up a hand against the sun as four RAF C130 Hercules transports descended towards the Zug airfield to the east. ‘British?’

‘Yep,’ Johnno replied, stepping forwards. ‘Looks like the Rapid Reaction Force out of Brize Norton.’

Beesely turned around and took Otto by the arm. ‘Alert the airfield, have whoever it is directed here, close the roads.’

‘Gonna need a new flag,’ Johnno pointed out.

Beesely glanced up, the Zug flag now in tatters, caused by shrapnel from the mortar. Otto put his phone to his ear and stepped away, glancing up at the flag. He tapped a guard on a shoulder and pointed at it.

‘This ain’t over yet,’ Johnno suggested, nervously studying the cliff behind the castle.

‘Johnno, no matter how well paid they are, they can see a dozen Apaches and now four Hercules. And they will have also seen the cannon fodder chopped up. They will sod off, regroup,

and try again later. And anyone within a five mile radius we will get.'

'Maybe. Anyway, me and Thomas have a chore.' They walked back inside, Beesely watching them go with some concern.

In the lower bunker's access tunnel, Johno grabbed the healthiest looking of the prisoners, just a wound to the man's arm, which was now bound up. He dragged the man to the middle of the tunnel, and then kicked him with his good leg. Guards moved back the walking wounded, giving Johno some space.

'My young friend here would like to have a word. You see, his young lady was killed by one of yours.'

The man cursed at them in French.

'Not helping,' Johno pointed out. He turned to Thomas. 'Thomas, hands.' Johno signalled two guards. They lifted the prisoner and held him up. 'OK, Thomas.'

The boy stepped forwards and started to punch. The lad's best efforts were not hurting the man much, but they were helping Thomas. After five minutes he started to cry, Johno leading him away.

2

Beesely and Otto were joined by Herr Mole as the roar of vehicles grew louder. Turner and his men came out carrying their wounded, some limping, but all covered in masonry dust. The two Captains stopped level with Beesely.

'Well done,' Beesely congratulated them.

'What happened to that cushy number Johno promised us?'

'That comes next, if we don't have any more visitors!'

Scottish Kev was carried out on a stretcher, bound with white bandages over his drab camouflage fatigues.

'How are you?' Beesely asked, taking Kev's hand.

'A bit too old for all this, Boss.'

‘You will be well taken care of, and very well compensated!’

‘Sounds good, Boss.’ They carried him off.

‘And the cavalry is here,’ Beesely shouted after him.

A dozen army jeeps drove up the compound road, six soldiers in each, machine guns mounted at the sides. They pulled up, troopers piling out with their weapons at the ready, led now by a Major.

‘Major,’ Captain Turner called with a lazy salute.

The Major acknowledged him with a nod, noting Kev, and then the damage to the top of the castle, mortar holes in the tarmac. ‘Been having fun?’

‘You are?’ Beesely firmly asked.

‘Major Phillips. Plus forty odd troopers of assorted shapes and sizes. But unfortunately, our jeeps are still in desert pink.’

‘You missed the action by a few hours. Your boys here did an excellent job holding the castle.’

‘I’m sure I’ll hear all about it. Where would you like us?’

‘Sort out your wounded, then split into teams. Two of my guys with four or so of yours, search this area for any more snipers, booby-traps or insurgents, before dark. Then hunker down and wait for trouble.’

‘Who’re the insurgents?’ the Major puzzled.

‘Mercenaries,’ Beesely explained. ‘Yanks, French, one Brit I believe.’

The officer’s eyebrows shot up. ‘What the hell are they doing attacking a fucking Swiss hotel retreat?’

‘They came for me, I’m afraid; they were paid a great deal of money by a Russian billionaire.’

‘Pissed in his pool?’

‘He’s the idiot behind the radioactive dirty bombs. And, he’s the guy who killed some of your lot this morning.’

Phillips’ features hardened. ‘Then let’s hope he sends some more our way.’

Three buses eased up the camp road, tooting their horns for people to get out of the way as the drone of helicopters grew louder. They pulled up near the drawbridge.

‘They are our agents,’ Otto stated. ‘Collected from other areas.’ They both walked forwards.

Beesely raised a hand, stopping them from disembarking their buses. To the first man, now stood on the buses lower step, he said, ‘Stay on the buses, go around to the side of the mountain, and spread out. We need the mountain cleared before it gets dark, then we need patrols set up.’ The man nodded to the driver, and they quickly moved off in convoy.

The echo of automatic gunfire in the distance caught their attention. Beesely turned to Major Phillips. ‘Major! Stragglers! Let’s not get complacent just yet.’

The Major dispatched his men as Beesely turned to Otto. ‘Get us some searchlights, from anywhere. Beg, borrow, buy, or steal them.’

Otto raised his phone.

‘Herr Mole,’ Beesely called, Mole limping over. ‘Get onto the Internet, and contact every mercenary company you can find, every private security agency that might know some of people who were here today. Send them a message: a hundred mercenaries killed in Switzerland, no survivors.’

Mole bowed his head, turned and limped off.

Beesely glanced at his watch as Otto stepped closer. ‘At dusk I want every vehicle we have ... fuelled, parked here and with their lights on full - shining in the eyes of any night-sight watching us.’

* * *

On the hilltop, the Texan observed the scene below with a powerful telescopic sight. He lifted his satellite phone.

‘Leaf to Tree.’

‘Tree here, go ahead,’ came back in a strong Russian accent.

‘Leaf to Tree, situation hopeless, targets in place, mercenaries all dead or captured, American Apache attack squadron circling overhead, hundred plus regular British SAS just arrived by plane, maybe what looks like five hundred regular Swiss soldiers are here now, swamping the area, more arriving all the time, over.’

‘If they do not kill you, I will.’ The line went dead.

The Texan stared at the phone. ‘Now there’s gratitude for ya.’ He sat upright and surveyed the scene, taking a deep breath. ‘Beam me up, Scotty, for fuck’s sake.’

He put a cigarette on his lip and lit it, taking in the scene over the lake.

3

‘Beesely!’ the Major called across the tarmac in front of the castle. ‘Someone just gave themselves up; white flag, says he wants to make a deal.’

‘Strip him, and then bring him to me.’

Johno returned to the front of the castle, now crammed with guards and soldiers. ‘What was that?’

Beesely stood with his hands clasped behind his back, looking defiant as he observed the hurried activity around him. ‘Maybe a lucky break; a prisoner who wants to make a deal.’

John surveyed the scene. ‘Only a fucking madman would try and get in here tonight.’ Three K2 helicopters flew past, heading for the mountain. ‘Those merc’s we fished out the lake were South African. The dead diver... it looked like genuine US Navy Seal kit. Brave man.’

An SAS jeep pulled up five minutes later, a half naked man flung to the ground, rolled painfully on the tarmac and then kicked by a few troopers. With a crowd gathering, they lifted him up and pushed him forwards, his hands tied. The muscle-

bound mercenary did not appear afraid, more resigned to the fact of his failure.

Johno noted the man's scars. 'Been shot a few times.'

'Yeah, a couple,' came back with a Texas drawl.

Beesely folded his arms. 'Speak. Quickly.'

Soldiers cocked weapons. Johno stood to the man's side, close enough to hit him.

'Well, old buddy, it kinda looks like we weren't told of your full strength here,' the prisoner began.

'Obviously,' Beesely retorted. 'Who would attack a place like this ... and in daylight?'

'Yeah, well we weren't expecting much resistance ... and nobody knew about the British SAS either.'

The Apaches came back over the mountain, drowning out any conversation, the prisoner watching them with keen interest. They were closely followed by a flight of eight jets screaming over.

'Johno?' Beesely called.

'American F-18s, Swiss Air Force. Those are in ground attack configuration, 30mm cannons on the wing. They'll make hell of a mess of anyone resisting up there.' They all refocused on the prisoner.

'You really think you stood a chance?' Beesely snorted. The prisoner shrugged. 'What was your role, some sort of manager? Team leader?'

'Sort of, yeah; I recruited a lot of the guys.'

'For whom, pray tell?'

'I'd like to make deal, old buddy.'

Beesely thrust his face forwards. 'I'd like to let my people peel your skin off.'

The man's confidence waned a little. 'I can give you the people behind it.'

'Like ... Boris Luchenkov?' Beesely toyed.

'He's the money, but not the brains behind this party.'

‘You know who helped attack my people in the UK?’ Beesely pressed.

‘I know the key three players, yeah. But that info’ is no good to you if I’m dead.’ He straightened. ‘Listen, buddy, I wasn’t captured, I gave myself up to make a deal - because these guys want me dead now. And you want what I know before nightfall, or you’re gunna lose more people.’

‘Take a look around you. No one will survive an attempt on this place.’

‘Maybe not, but they *will* try.’

Johno turned to Beesely. ‘He’s got a point. More snipers, and we lose a few people before we get them.’

Beesely sighed. ‘Put some clothes on him and bring him inside.’

Beesely sipped his tea before slowly unwrapping chocolate. The prisoner sat opposite, glancing up at the guards, Johno stood ready next to him.

‘OK,’ Beesely finally said. ‘If you help us capture the organizers alive, and play a material part in doing so, you walk with some money in your pocket.’

‘Sounds like the making of a deal,’ the prisoner enthused.

‘So, who’s at the top of the food chain?’

‘Met the fella twice; American, mid sixties, white hair. New Yorker by the sound of him.’

‘And his background and skills?’

‘Some sort of CIA type, but I have my doubts.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Too well groomed, this fella; he’s more ya Harvard money type. Perfectly manicured nails, old college tie.’

‘What college?’

‘Hell, as if I’d know.’

‘What did it look like?’ Beesely pressed.

‘Yellow-ish, castle in blue, some birds holding something in their mouths.’

Beesely turned to Otto, who stepped out, handing a manager the notes he had taken before returning. ‘Didn’t happen to get this smart gentleman’s name?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Height, weight?’

‘Five eleven, hundred sixty pounds. Prominent mole on cheek. Hell, maybe two.’

‘And you met him ... where?’

‘Washington always, in a marina café near the Pentagon.’

Beesely made brief eye contact with Johnno, a signal that he had a suspect in mind. ‘And the other men?’

‘English fella I followed, just in case, after we met in London.’

‘Just in case?’ Beesely repeated.

‘In case I needed some bargaining chips,’ the prisoner said with a sadistic smile.

‘I see. And where did you follow him to?’

‘Small English pub, end of Curzon Street.’

Beesely shot a glance at Johnno.

‘A spook,’ Johnno stated.

‘Any name?’ Beesely nudged.

‘Got his car number, I memorised it, not difficult. Charlie One Romeo Charlie Uniform Five.’ C1RCU5. Otto stepped out.

‘Circus!’ Beesely translated. ‘A slang term used for British Intelligence, old school.’

‘If ya say so.’

Beesely eased back. ‘Describe him.’

‘Bald, maybe sixty-five, seventy, a bit tubby. Round face, very round. Red cheeks.’

A manager appeared. ‘That car is registered to an Oscar Thompson, Chigwell, Essex.’

Beesely lowered his head, frowned, and pursed his lips. ‘Oscar ... Thompson?’

‘You know him?’ Johnno asked.

‘A long time ago maybe.’ He pressed a button on his phone. ‘Get me Colonel Milward, SAS, at home if necessary.’ Beesely sat back, nibbling his chocolate.

‘Beesely?’ came from the desk phone.

‘Milward?’

‘Yeah, I was dozing at home, it’s been long day.’

‘Try living in this postcode! Listen, we know the spook who gave the info’ that led to the attack on your boys.’

‘I’m all ears.’

‘Oscar Thompson, lives in Chigwell. He’s retired, fat and bald apparently. Find out who and what he is, then be a love and pick him up.’

‘I’ll get back to you.’ He hung up.

‘OK, person number three,’ Beesely probed.

‘He’s Swiss, or German, hell if I could tell.’ Beesely made eye contact with Otto. The prisoner added, ‘We met in Bern. No names; they knew me, they paid me, so they were calling the shots.’

‘Did you follow this one?’

The man gave a large theatrical smile. ‘I’m a sneaky bastard, if truth be told.’

‘Then tell the truth,’ Beesely quietly insisted.

‘Centre of Bern is a new apartment block. It’s got a café on the ground level, Martina’s, and a shop that does those European bagels.’

Otto raised his phone and spoke quickly for two minutes. ‘We have the address.’

Beesely turned to the prisoner. ‘What else?’

‘Tall fella, bit of stoop, about fifty, sixty. Always wore a smart blue suit with a waistcoat. His apartment is the one whose buzzer is top right on the board.’

Otto spoke quickly with an agent at the other end of the phone. Then they waited. Five minutes passed, Beesely using the toilet and freshening up.

Otto's phone rang. 'They have him, they are bringing him here.'

'You know this man?' Beesely asked.

'Yes, he was a Swiss Minister, but he lost his job because of scandal with young boys.'

'Did K2 help with the evidence?' Beesely knowingly asked. Otto answered with a quick nod, Beesely turning back to the prisoner. 'Can we expect any more company tonight?'

'Ya sure can. And I know where, when and how.'

'If this all pans out, you walk with one million dollars. At least... you get a head start.'

The man lost his smugness. 'Head start?'

'One of the men missing, presumed killed, was a gentleman named Oliver Stanton.'

'I know that name, I heard him mentioned.'

'Well, what you don't know is that he was highly placed in the American intelligence community. His associates ... won't be pleased.'

Concerned, the Texan asked, 'Can you make a deal for me?'

'I can make a deal for myself, no one else. If you wish to try and deal with them I will get you an introduction.'

The Texan forced a smile. 'Guess I'd better hit the ground running, eh?'

'So, unless you wish us to tie you to a tree out front and leave you there tonight, you had better tell us what to expect.'

With Otto taking notes, the prisoner listed those attacks yet to be made. Traps were set.

* * *

Guido Pepi's drawing room now hosted twelve smartly dressed elderly men sat around a large table, the cardinal sat off to one side against a wall.

Pepi calmly cut the end off a cigar. 'We are here, brothers, at this unscheduled meeting, to discuss the strange course of events

in Zug today. Despite the fact that the Americans have - quite openly – come to the assistance of K2 in recent weeks, we saw today a large-scale attack by ... irregulars and mercenaries, instigated by the Americans. Some of the men were French, some Americans, a few South Africans – a mixed bunch.’

‘And that attack failed!’ a German man curtly pointed out.

Pepi nodded as he lit his cigar. ‘Not least because of *direct* military assistance by British and American special forces.’ He shook the match and tossed it into an ashtray.

Many of the ‘brothers’ glanced at each other, exchanging concerned looks.

Pepi waited, taking in their faces before speaking. ‘What we can be sure of now, is that the British and Americans are falling over themselves to help K2, and I am certain that is because it is a race to see who gets to the files first.’

Now the assembled men let out their concerns with numerous overlapping comments.

Pepi again waited, taking a long draw on his cigar. ‘Any doubts we had ... have gone. They have shown their hand.’

‘Then we must plan to get the files first!’ a man growled at Pepi.

Pepi raised a hand, silencing the group. ‘We can be sure now that any attack on the castle would fail, not least from the assistance *forced upon* K2 ... by the British and Americans.’

Men nodded their reluctant acceptance of that premise.

‘We shall have to *increase* our budget for taking action against K2,’ Pepi suggested.

Again the men nodded their reluctant acceptance of that premise.

Five minutes later Pepi, stepped down into the basement, a bank of monitors showing his drawing room table and the assembled ‘brothers’. Three elderly men in smart suits sat watching the screens, the volume now turned down.

Pepi sat. *‘They ... are fine, and behaving as expected. It is the other matter we must be concerned with.’*

The first elderly man offered Pepi a grizzled expression. In German, he said, *‘We introduce Luchenkov to O’Sullivan and play them like puppets, then they get together for this attack on K2 without discussing it with us. Who was playing who?’*

Pepi offered a soothing expression. *‘It can only work to our benefit, both within the group and with K2. The publicity may well force the Swiss Government to close down K2.’*

The three power brokers seemed appeased by that.

One wagged a warning finger. *‘Unravel what Luchenkov and O’Sullivan were doing together, besides what we already know. For them to be this secretive it must be something very important.’*

* * *

Dusk was coming on as the Swiss prisoner arrived by helicopter, bundled out onto the grass. As per Beesely’s instructions, all of the dead mercenaries were laid out at the edge of the grass, thirty-seven bodies so far.

The Swiss prisoner had been marched past the bodies before being met by Beesely, Otto and Johno - plus more soldiers than he had ever wanted to meet, all now staring at him.

Beesely gestured towards the corpses. *‘Your people.’*

Horrified, the prisoner took in the long line of blood-soaked sheets, the legs sticking out. He turned back to Beesely.

‘You have only one chance of avoiding us keeping you alive for a year and torturing you every day. I want the name of the American.’

‘He kill me,’ came back in poor English.

‘We will keep you alive, in a small room, your hands and feet cut off, your tongue cut out and your testicles set on fire every day.’ Beesely put his hands in his pockets.

The man was terrified. *‘Henry O’Sullivan.’*

Beesely took a sharp breath and looked away, clearly angered.

‘You know him, Boss?’ Johno asked.

‘You met him at the casino in the Bahamas,’ Beesely quietly stated.

‘He is Lodge?’ Otto asked in a forced whisper. ‘The Lodge wants us dead?’

‘No, not The Lodge, just him. It’s probably some internal power struggle.’ He tipped his head towards the Swiss prisoner. ‘Give him the chair, tape it. Same for the American prisoner.’

‘Nein!’ the man screamed as he was dragged away.

‘We will not release the American?’ Otto asked, concerned at breaking his word.

‘So I lied. Burn him.’ Beesely paused, a stern look for Otto. ‘Do you really want that guy walking away?’

Otto lowered his head.

Beesely took a step, then halted, spinning around. ‘No, don’t kill him, I have a better idea. Make him watch as the others are given *the chair*, and as they are incinerated, then send him back to America. He’ll talk, and say what he saw.’

Otto nodded his acceptance.

The Israeli salesman walked out, decidedly not as cheerful as the first time Beesely had encountered him. ‘I will be go now,’ he said in poor English.

Beesely folded his arms. ‘Why? This is a great place to test your equipment?’ He raised his eyebrows. ‘*We have a lot of problems.*’

‘If I want to make this test I go to Gaza, not so much trouble!’ He glanced from face to face, giving them a disgusted look before walking towards the main gate.

Johno watched him go. ‘We should talk to his boss, request him back.’

‘Johno, don’t be cruel.’

Beesely's phone chirped as he stood in the courtyard. 'Yes?'

'British Prime Minister, sir.'

'Put him through.'

'Sir Morris?'

'Yes, Prime Minister. How are you?'

'I was about to ask you that question.'

'Still alive and going strong, is the answer.'

'And what can you tell me about what happened today?'

'The short version is this. Our good friend the Russian billionaire, who wants to be President - nay dictator - of Russia, paid for those dirty bombs. He had some help or collusion from the Iranians, which is still a work in progress.

'Having stopped the bombs we became a target. He paid a great deal of money, and he got himself some good help. He recruited a Swiss Minister with a grudge, someone from British Intelligence, and then made contact with an influential American - who used the opportunity for a bit of ladder climbing and score settling. They hired a hundred of the best mercenaries they could find and sent them my way.

'Fortunately, we are a tough nut to crack, and your SAS boys sent many of them straight to hell. That's the short version.'

'The British man is a bit of a disappointment.'

'For that much money, Prime Minister, many people would have turned.'

'You'll be glad to know that I spoke with the President a little while ago, and he called the Russian President. I believe that Boris fellow was captured or wounded in a shoot-out, his assets seized.'

'Good, that may be an end to it. Thanks for your boys today.'

'Least we could do for *you*. Let's talk at length tomorrow, it sounds as if you have a lot on your plate. Good night.'

Beesely walked back inside. At his desk, he asked for The Lodge. Johnno and Otto slumped, Thomas wanting to see more shooting.

‘Beesely, David here, how goes the good fight?’

‘To quote a phrase from our colonial cousins, we kicked ass!’

‘I hear the British Army landed in force?’

‘Enough men to invade some small countries, yes. Listen, you sound as if you’re on speakerphone. Who is with you?’

‘Full assembly here, given what’s happening.’

‘Good. Then this will save time. Henry O’Sullivan ... killed Oliver. And ... he was behind today’s attack on K2. He took Russian money.’ He waited, listening, some words being exchanged in the background.

‘Beesely, do you have the evidence?’ David asked.

‘Yes, we do, and key witnesses are being tortured as we speak. I don’t suppose you’d like to hand Henry over to me, would you?’

‘We’ve got to go now.’ They hung up.

‘Guess they want a word with him in private,’ Beesely muttered.

Johno stood. ‘Are we done?’

‘I think we ticked all the boxes. Now, if you don’t mind, I need to collapse in this chair before I collapse out there. Johno, Otto, clean up outside. Thomas, go to bed. Otto, wake me in an hour, please.’

With the room emptying, Beesely called back Johno.

‘Yeah?’ Johno curtly asked.

‘Do you have any ... observations, on today’s extraordinary activities?’ Beesely asked.

Johno gave it some thought. ‘They kept the hot tea coming. Gotta be grateful for that.’

‘Indeed,’ Beesely quipped.

‘Gimme a hot cuppa and I could solve all the world’s problems.’ He sat on the edge of the desk, and waited.

Beesely began, ‘We just took part in the largest terrorist - and counter-terrorist - operation since, well, Munich probably.

Right here in picture-postcard quiet old Switzerland, right at the heart of Europe.’

‘Keenly assisted by the British and American governments,’ Johno pointed out.

‘Does it not give you a warm fuzzy feeling, to know that you are at the centre of things?’

‘Like the fucking Alamo centre of things, yeah.’

Beesely slowly nodded. ‘If I did not know better, then I would say that we were ... important to the outside world.’

‘Us two? Hah! We’re not worth two bent pennies.’

‘So, in that case...’ Beesely paused for dramatic effect.

‘K2 is important to the outside world, not us. Very ... fucking important.’

‘And us two, we ... are steering the ship.’

Johno headed for the door. ‘The Mayflower, or the fucking Titanic,’ he posed as he stepped out.

‘Titanic, I think,’ Beesely muttered, heaving a heavy sigh. He eased the chair backwards, but held his gaze on the door. ‘*Better to live the life of a king for a day, than that of a peasant for a lifetime.*’ He checked his watch. ‘Is my day up yet?’

Snoring and gunfire

1

Otto walked around the companionway and to the top of the stairs. 'All managers,' he quietly called before sitting on the top step, an unusually casual gesture for him. Johno leant on a railing with Thomas. The managers assembled quickly, all looking surprisingly neat, clean and fresh.

'First, I want all available agents to assemble here. I want our builders in the morning, our decorators and cleaners. Check them all very carefully.

'Newspapers and TV: we must contain everything. The families of those killed or wounded must be spoken to and compensated immediately.

'Prisoners: ship them to the mountain camp, all dead bodies to be finger printed, photographed, and blood samples taken. I want twenty handed over to the Swiss Authorities, use all the dead Americans and some of their equipment. Then incinerate the rest without any trace.

'Weapons: try and trace weapons back to the dealers, keep the weapons for now.

'Tonight: all vehicles shine their lights, as well as all search lights we can get. I want a patrol roster set up, the mountain area must be checked, every inch.

'No one will go home, so please telephone your families. After ten o'clock tonight, set-up a four hour sleep in rotation. Do not disturb Herr Beesely, if he sleeps all night that is OK, please be quiet here. Now, this is the story I want to tell the press, a copy to Herr Blaum.'

Johno straightened, concerned. This was not what Beesely had asked for, or agreed to.

Otto continued, 'Today, a well-funded gang of international criminals, which included many American mercenaries, attacked

a facility owned by the International Bank of Zurich, falsely believing that the bank's gold deposits were stored there. That attack lasted some six hours in total, near a facility in Zug, and included helicopters and dozens of armed men. Many members of staff were taken prisoner, and the Swiss authorities allowed in a large contingent of British SAS counter-terrorism and hostage rescue teams to supplement the Swiss police.

'The attackers were all killed in a gun-battle with the SAS, but Swiss authorities are searching the area of Zug for some persons who escaped. The gang was funded by Russian billionaire Boris Luchenkov, who was behind the burglary attempt.'

Johno slowly formed a wry smile and nodded. Otto stood and, tipped his head towards the exit, so that Johno and Thomas would follow. They descended to the dungeon, where Otto poured out three beers.

'Here,' he said to Thomas. 'Try and drink quickly, in one go.'

Thomas tried, getting half way through. Johno accepted a beer, and they sat on the sofa.

Otto commented, whilst gazing at Thomas, 'I think he will not sleep without some drink.'

Johno agreed, encouraging Thomas by a hand under the boy's glass. 'Been quite a day,' he let out with a sigh.

'For sure.'

Thomas burped and laughed.

Johno faced Otto. 'It was a good story to put out, it solves a lot of problems with the press. It also makes the mercenaries look like criminals ... *and* the merc' agencies they worked for.'

Otto sipped his drink. 'There will be a great deal of resentment from the Swiss, towards these men. And in Europe.'

'Best call your woman, your *fiancé*.'

'And what do I tell her?' Otto asked, his eyelids heavy.

'The truth, to save it slipping out later.'

'There are many things about K2 she does not know.'

Johno studied his half-brother. ‘You got a problem then; she’s about to marry someone who tortures and kills people for a living. It’s same problem for troopers, but their wives soon get bored of the war stories and just want better sex.’

Otto laughed, spilling his beer. ‘I hope she does not want better sex, she is very demanding now.’

‘Need to be careful, mate. Sex kittens can turn into lazy old cats.’

Otto lowered his head and gazed into his drink. ‘Right now I would settle for a lazy old cat, and a small house where no one knows where we are.’

Johno sighed. ‘Nah, no you don’t, you like the buzz as much as the short-arse here. He kept asking to see dead bodies.’

Otto glanced at Thomas as the boy tried to improve upon his last burp. ‘At that age, they do.’ He lifted his beer. ‘Prost!’

‘Prost!’ Johno repeated, Thomas copying.

An hour later, Johno put Thomas to bed. He put an exhausted Otto to bed in a guest room, before returning to the control room. With a cushion on the floor, he stretched out in front of Beesely’s office door, pistol under the pillow, curiously observed by the command centre staff.

2

The Texan was already blindfolded as he was dragged into the chair room, roughly dumped into a chair and tied to it, the blindfold finally removed. His nostrils filled with the pungent odour of dead bodies, burning flesh, and human waste. Opposite him sat the Ukraine technician, naked and sobbing, his pale old body a pathetic image as he sat tied to his chair.

Hungry and thirsty, and trying hard not to breath through his nose, the Texan took in the room; a large TV set, a video or DVD player of some sort, guards stood near the door, a body lying in the corner. Then he noticed it; a wheeled metal trolley with surgical instruments on it. He swallowed.

The door opened, and in walked a strange little man with a plastic apron. With a pronounced limp, the very short man hobbled towards him; bald, thick lens glasses, shirt and tie under the apron.

‘You’ve got to be shitting me,’ the Texan muttered.

‘Are you comfortable?’ Herr Mole asked him.

‘Just what the hell are you supposed to be?’

‘I am the torturer,’ Mole informed him.

‘Torturer?’ the Texan repeated, his eyes widening.

‘It is a dying profession,’ Mole pointed out.

The Texan smiled. ‘Beesely sent you to screw with me, right?’

Mole lifted a blowlamp, turned on the gas and ignited it, its bright flame illuminating the darkened room and throwing shadows up the walls. He took a step closer, and torched the Texan’s knee for two seconds, burning the polyester tracksuit bottoms the man was now in. The prisoner winced in agony, but controlled it. ‘Perhaps you think you are dreaming?’

‘I made a deal with Beesely!’ the man forced out, gasping.

‘And you will not be killed. You are here to watch.’

‘Watch ... what?’ he gasped.

‘To watch the others getting *the chair*. But if I notice you closing your eyes or turning away you will be burnt.’

Mole limped towards the technician. ‘You, my friend, released radioactive ball bearings to terrorists, causing the death of a friend of mine.’

Mole turned his head to the Texan. ‘He is old, so his heart will probably give out after six or seven hours.’

Wide-eyed, the Texan stared.

Mole continued, ‘After him, there are eleven of your men to follow. You, my friend, will watch them all die... all the men you recruited. Then we will send you home. Unfortunately for you, my friend, I have made sure that the Internet chat rooms are blaming you for the deaths of the American mercenaries, claiming you sold out. Now, please watch carefully.’

An hour before dawn, Johno wandered outside, Beesely still asleep. He acknowledged the SAS commander in front of the castle as the officer stepped down from a jeep, the Major's face now painted with green and brown streaks.

'Mister Johno Williams; VC, Congressional Medal of Honour, DSM.'

'Please, just call me VC-CMH-DSM.' They laughed. 'Been up the hill having fun?' He lit up, offering one to the Major.

'I've been up the bloody hill all night. We found a bunch of stragglers re-grouping and trying to evade the roadblocks, held up in a farm. We had to *persuade* them to come out.'

'And?'

'Five prisoners, three dead, some wounded. Three of your guys were injured in a fire-fight before we got there. I don't think there's anyone left up there, at least not alive and moving around. There must be five hundred people up there right now.'

'We do have resources. Is Kev OK?'

'Dunno. He'll be in one of your hospitals, I guess.'

'In which case, being pampered silly. They bring in hookers and masseurs if you want them.'

The Major straightened, raising his eyebrows. 'I might just have to trip over a man-hole cover.'

Johno smiled. 'C'mon, I'll get you a tea and a sandwich.' He led the Major inside.

'We've been ordered out at twelve noon,' the Major mentioned.

Johno snapped his head around, surprised, then let his shoulders drop. 'Ah, well. We probably got it covered.'

'The original two original squads are coming back with us as well.'

'Something we said?'

'Politics.'

Johno feigned hurt. ‘No need to swear.’ They laughed as they walked on.

In the staff canteen, the Major sipped his tea. ‘Listen, Johno, I’ve been doing some scouting around here and some thinking.’ Johno frowned slightly. The Major continued, ‘Unlike your good self, I’m an experienced officer, experienced in men and equipment logistics. What went on yesterday makes no sense to me *at all*. Granted, there may be things going in this spooky place that I don’t know about, but something seriously don’t add up.’

‘You noticed that as well.’

‘Let’s take what we know. A Russian billionaire offers up a load of dosh to kill you lot and destroy this place. No matter how good your boys here are, or how much of a tough nut to crack these bunkers are, with that kind of money he could do it. No ... problem. So why are you still alive?’

Johno shrugged slightly.

Phillips continued, ‘These mercenaries got into Switzerland without you noticing, yet I understand no one takes a dump around here without your say so ... so a puzzle. They use great, great expertise and planning to get here; it would have taken a few days for a lot of these boys to get into place without getting noticed ... *and* a shit load of cash. That dirty bomb was stopped in London what, five days ago now? Nowhere near enough time to arrange this attack. I’d take two to three weeks minimum to get a job like this sorted.’

Johno stirred his tea, heaping in another three sugars.

Phillips added, ‘So the plan was already in place. Did you upset someone earlier?’

‘We weren’t *here* earlier,’ Johno quietly stated, looking up. ‘But the previous owner was a real arsehole who upset a lot of people, so someone may have made a plan to attack him back then. And he was an old Nazi fucker.’

‘Johno, this attack - and the mercs’ used - has CIA written all over it. Who else can you think of who would put something like

this together? Russians, Israelis? No, this is Bay of Pigs all over.'

Johno stared ahead, out of focus. 'And for these mercs' to attack in daylight..? That was downright stupid; suicide against *us*.'

'Then they weren't briefed on you. Each group probably thought they were the only ones, up against some poofy Swiss bank with a few ageing guards with pistols.'

'It's the only way any of this lot would attack. But who, and what we are, is not widely advertised.'

'With a big budget they could have found out,' Phillips insisted.

'It had me confused all day.'

'What you've got here, is this: a very expensive, well oiled plan, ready made to get these people into place, then rank stupidity by attacking in daylight. At best this whole thing was a giant distraction.'

Johno straightened and stretched his aching back. 'Yeah, but to distract us from what? The only other thing that happened was that a high ranking Yank spook got killed, or kidnapped, day before yesterday.'

'Really?' The Major considered how that may have affected things. 'And if you lot hadn't been distracted, you could have found him ... or the kidnappers?'

'We certainly would have had a better chance at it. But like you said, with that much money they could have got this guy anyway, so why such an elaborate distraction, drawing in a lot of attention and publicity?'

'It's going to take some thinking, but there's something else going on around here.'

Johno lifted his eyebrows. 'Trust me, there's always something else going on around here.'

* * *

‘Did you kick me in the night?’ Johno asked as he entered Beesely’s office. Otto sat hunched, sipping coffee and looking fatigued.

‘No, I tripped over you, idiot, when I went for a pee.’

‘First time, second or third?’ Johno asked as he tested the temperature of a tea on the desk.

‘Second time actually, the first time your snoring woke me.’

‘I think one of the managers put me on my side.’

‘I think I phoned them!’

Johno laughed. ‘Seen the news?’

‘Yes, a bloody good idea of *his*; it ties up a great many loose ends in one go, makes them all look like criminals, heaps of praise for the British.’

‘Some awkward news in the States,’ Johno pointed out. ‘Bit of guilt, their mercenaries attacking Switzerland. All Yank tourists are cancelling their flights here.’

‘I can imagine.’

The desk phone came to life. ‘Sir?’

‘Yes.’

‘Call from a David at The Lodge.’

‘OK.’ Beesely glanced at his watch. ‘Late night his time, about 2am.’

‘Beesely?’

‘Yes. How goes it, David?’

‘Not so good, we’ll be feeling the fall-out from this for a long time, especially with the Swiss practically blaming us for the attack on you.’

‘Er, David, the team leaders were Americans, so were many of the mercenaries. If you are feeling some heat ... so you bloody well should be, they were your bleeding boys!’

‘And we will have to try and deal with that –’

‘And so will I. I will track back to the agencies that sent some of these boys, and have a word.’

‘Well ... we’d appreciate some time to do our own research first.’

‘Fair enough. Where’s Henry?’

‘He suffered a heart attack last night.’

‘Tragic, I will send a card. Are you chairman now?’ Beesely asked.

‘For the moment; there’ll be a full vote in fourteen days.’

‘You’ll have my support.’

‘And *you* ’ll have my support and vote.’

Beesely paused. ‘What do you mean, exactly?’

‘Around fifty five percent of top table members are mentioning your name. Everyone loves the hero of the moment.’

Beesely straightened. ‘How very odd. It’s nice to know I’m popular, but thanks and no thanks; chairmanship requires continuity, and I’m too old. Whoever gets that seat needs to be in it for ten years, and I would like you to make that point on my behalf at the next meeting. Besides, there has never been a Limey occupying that seat. It would be awkward.’

‘Always doing the right thing –’

‘You’re next in line, David, so take it. Just remember what happened to Olly, and clean house.’

‘Will do. Do you need anything?’

‘You can save me some time, effort, and resources by tracking down any Americans who failed to realise just who they were up against.’

‘That’s already in progress. It seems that the chat in the Internet forums for these guys is nothing but that. Don’t expect anyone from this side of the pond to bother you for a while.’

‘Good to know. Let’s talk in a day or so.’ Beesely hung up.

Otto leant forwards. ‘You have given up ... the chance to be chairman ... of The Lodge? My God!’

‘I could never stand American politics. Besides, there’s a great deal to do here; I need to keep an eye on you two! Right, was there any more trouble overnight?’

‘Nope,’ Johnno offered. ‘And the SAS - all of them – are leaving at noon.’

Beesely considered it. 'Organize some gifts, and then recruit a fresh team or two. I want them here yesterday.' He clapped his hands together. 'C'mon, laddy, chop chop.'

Johno stood and walked out of the office. 'Like my bleeding father,' he muttered.

'So,' Beesely began, turning to a bleary-eyed Otto. 'We have a wedding to plan. Pink tuxedos?'

'Fuck off.'

They laughed.

'Yacht?'

'No fucking yacht!'

Beesely raised his hands. 'Can we at least agree that we can throw Johno into the nearest lake?'

'Yes. It is traditional for you English types.'

Family

1

As Johno set-off to locate the remaining SAS 'old dogs', now re-labelled the 'walking wounded', he was called to by a guard - who informed him that a Mr. Grey from The Lodge was at the main gate. Johno ordered the guards to allow him in, but under escort. Grey arrived a few minutes later.

'What *you* doing here?' Johno demanded, hands on hips, the visitor now flanked by six guards.

'I was sent to try and find Oliver Stanton,' Mr. Grey calmly stated.

'And?'

He paused. 'No sign of him, or a body.'

'Professional hit; the body won't ever be found,' Johno coldly stated, Mr. Grey looking tired and dejected. 'What you after from us?'

'Some assistance in finding the body; this is your turf.'

Johno studied Grey's worn features for a moment. 'I'm sure Beesely will do what he can. Are you hanging around Switzerland?'

'Yeah, for a while at least. I was hoping to catch up with whoever killed Mr. Stanton.'

Beesely walked out, squinting against the bright sunshine and shielding his eyes with a hand. 'I heard we had a visitor.'

'Sorry to trouble you, sir,' Mr. Grey formally offered. 'I heard you're nominated for chairman.'

'And rejected, my place is here.' He glanced at Johno, then back to Mr. Grey. 'Why are you here, exactly?'

'I was Mr. Stanton's personal agent for fifteen years, sir. He was like a father to me.' Johno glanced at Beesely, who lowered his head. 'I'd like to find the men behind this, and then to take his body home. I ... lived with his family for a long time.'

Beesely took a breath, glancing at his shoes. 'To hold the position of personal agent to the chairman for fifteen years you would have to be very good.'

'That's correct, sir.'

Beesely straightened. 'Well, if they are happy enough, and you are happy enough, *we* could find some use for a good man.'

Grey's eyes widened. 'I'll discuss that with them. Thank you, sir. This does seem to be where the action is.'

Beesely held up a warning hand. 'If you say we have a lot of problems you will be shot where you stand.'

Grey suppressed a smile. 'A lot of ... opportunities, sir, for men like me and Johnno.'

Beesely nodded. 'Yes, unfortunately. And in the meantime, Johnno here will help you turn this country upside down trying to find Olly's body.'

'That's very good of you, sir.'

'You look as rough as we do. How long since you slept?' Beesely probed.

'Washington, three days ago.'

'Johnno, feed this man and get him a room at the Spa. Kick back for a day or two, Mr. Grey, you don't want to be out and about in Switzerland with an American accent just now.'

Grey smiled. 'Yes, sir.'

2

'Problem?' Beesely asked an hour later, noticing Johnno's expression as he entered his office, a doughnut box Johnno's hand.

'I'd avoid the builders and decorators for a while; I just showed them the restaurant.'

'Not happy?' Beesely asked, easing back.

Johnno gave him a pained expression. 'The head-man decorator sat down and started crying.'

'Oh dear,' Beesely said, a look of mock concern.

‘It seems that after the last attack, he and his gang worked sixteen hour shifts, trying to impress us with their dedication.’ Beesely shook his head. Johnno continued, ‘Poor old guy nearly worked himself to death. He was due to go on holiday today with his family. Apparently, their lad is studying in London.’

‘What’s his name?’

Johnno shrugged. ‘Fuck knows.’

Beesely pressed a button on his phone. ‘I want the head decorator who worked on the restaurant to be sent home, then his family taken to England in one of the Learjets. Give him a ten thousand euro cash bonus, and then find a replacement for him.’

‘Oh ... er ... yes, sir,’ came a female voice.

Beesely glanced at Johnno, but spoke towards the desk phone. ‘You do not sound sure.’

‘May I go with him, sir?’

Beesely and Johnno exchanged questioning looks.

‘Go with him?’ Beesely repeated.

‘He’s my father, sir.’

‘Come to my office.’ They stood, Johnno shrugging his shoulders at Beesely.

The telephonist, aged twenty-five, knocked and walked straight in with a beaming smile.

‘The decorator, he’s your father?’ Beesely enquired.

‘Steffan? Yes, sir. We were going to visit my brother in London. That’s where I studied languages, sir.’

‘Why on Earth are you here today then, young lady?’

‘With all the problems yesterday, sir, all of the staff were recalled.’

Beesely stepped closer. ‘Young lady, take your father to London. Now go.’

She quickly closed the gap, hugged him and kissed him on the cheek, then ran out. Beesely tried to hide a huge smile as he sat back down.

‘I didn’t get a peck on the cheek,’ Johno complained, but she had gone.

‘Well, perhaps you should spend less time skidding your car into guards.’

Johno slumped into a seat. ‘Don’t want to take all the fun out of being here. Seen the way they get off the road when they know I’m coming in?’ He stuffed another doughnut into his mouth.

Beesely put his glasses on, and glanced at Johno over the rims. ‘You use your techniques, and I will use mine.’

They both looked up as a casually dressed woman entered. She was in her late forties, had shortly-cropped dark hair with a few grey flecks, and an authoritative air about her. She stood heavily built, but not overweight.

She carefully studied Beesely, then noted Johno and his shoulder holster, as well as the MP5 lying on the desk. Otto appeared in the doorway and stood level with her, but she did not react to Otto, suggesting that she already knew him. Beesely turned his gaze to Otto, a question in his look.

‘This is Detective Susan Hayes, Metropolitan Police,’ Otto informed them.

‘We not paid some parking tickets?’ Johno quipped.

Beesely’s brow creased. ‘The Met?’

Otto took a big breath. ‘Apologies for not mentioning this before, I wanted it to be a surprise. And this lady’s appearance here today was ... overlooked with everything that happened yesterday.’ He took a breath and straightened, running a hand down his tie. ‘Detective Hayes, this is Sir Morris Beesely - your father.’

Beesely slowly stood, his jaw dropping.

Johno jumped up. ‘Christ, what a day to arrive!’ He wiped his hand hurriedly on his jacket, then put out his hand and shook. ‘This will be awkward,’ he said with a pained expression.

Beesely walked around the desk and approached her, studying her carefully. A moment passed. 'I have no idea where to start,' he softly admitted. 'How ... how much do you know?'

'My husband is in Special Branch ... and your name has been bouncing around for weeks. It's been quite surreal. Mister Otto contacted me almost eight weeks ago - without giving away your name - and he left me his number. But it was only a week ago that I agreed to come and meet you. I thought it was a joke at first.' She coughed out a nervous laugh. 'I always thought my real dad was the kind of arsehole that ran off and just left my mum to cope.'

Johno lowered his head and gave Beesely a quick glance from under his eyebrows. 'There's a lot of it about,' he muttered.

She glanced from one face to the next. 'Then just as he -' she thumbed at Otto. '- told me your name, all hell breaks loose, and you're rumoured to be right at the centre of it all; my own damn biological father.'

She turned to Johno. 'And you - *face fungus* - you're the one, aren't you?'

Johno raised a flat hand. 'That girl was over sixteen.'

She stepped closer. 'I have a sixteen-year-old daughter, so that's not so funny.' She studied his forehead. 'You got those stitches crashing a helicopter in Blackheath.'

Johno sat back down. 'Vicious rumours. Shouldn't believe everything you hear, love.'

'So the rumours of a Victoria Cross were untrue then?'

'Must be,' Johno answered, looking uncomfortable.

'I live in Woolwich, along with two cats, a goldfish, three dogs, and three teenage daughters.'

'Ouch!' Johno said. 'Food bill must be six foot long.'

She forced a quick smile. 'It is.' She added, 'That food bill would have been a lot shorter if that bomb had gone off.'

Embarrassed, Johno turned away.

Otto tipped his head forwards. 'Perhaps now would be a good time for the rest of the bad news.'

She turned. ‘Sorry?’

‘He ... is your half-brother.’

She snapped her head back around to Johnno, who waved and forced a smile. ‘Oh. So you work together, father and son? Strange.’

Johnno smiled, genuinely. ‘You have no idea. You see the smartly dressed guy next to you? Gunna need to stick him on your Christmas card list as well.’

She frowned at Otto.

‘I am also your half-brother.’

She raised her eyebrows as far as they would go, and then turned to Beesely. ‘Well ... after twenty years in the Met I thought I had seen it all. But this is very, very strange.’

Thomas walked in with an MP5 slung around his chest. Johnno made eye contact and shooed him quickly away.

It was too late, she noticed. ‘That kid had an MP5?’

‘He’s part of the family,’ Beesely unhappily reported as he sat back down. ‘Everything else around is strange, so why not *him!*’

His phoned buzzed. ‘Sir, the American Ambassador.’

He pressed a button. ‘Not now, please.’ He lifted his gaze to Susan. ‘Would you like some tea?’

‘Something a bit stronger would help,’ she suggested.

Beesely shot Otto a glance, who popped out and quickly returned. Susan sat as a drinks tray was brought in. She grabbed a whisky miniature and downed it in one.

Johnno tipped his eyebrows. ‘A woman after my own heart.’

‘So,’ she said, pouring herself another whisky. ‘Those people outside?’

Johnno answered, ‘SAS rapid reaction squad; we had some unwelcome visitors yesterday. This is one of those postcodes, you know, when you ask for car insurance and you give the postcode, then the girl on the phone laughs and doubles the quote.’

‘I thought Switzerland was very quiet and peaceful?’

‘It was ... until *they* came here,’ Otto mentioned. Johnno laughed, stopping when she focused on him.

She reached into her jacket and produced three small photographs, placing them on the desk in front of Beesely without comment. He picked them up and studied each one carefully. ‘You don’t remember her, do you?’ It was asked without any hint of malice.

‘No, my dear, I’m afraid I don’t. Is Hayes your maiden name?’

‘No, it’s Hodge.’

Beesely made eye contact, and apologetically shook his head.

‘She was a secretary in MI5, 1962. She died of cancer more than ten years ago. Still, she lived to see at least one grand kid. She married a year after I was born. *He* died a few years back, and he was a good father.’

‘I’m afraid I never was,’ Beesely quietly stated.

‘Given what you do, that’s hardly surprising.’

‘No, my work is no excuse,’ he admitted to himself. ‘Others managed it.’

‘And many managed to do a *really* bad job of it, too!’

He regarded her coolly. ‘Just sitting there puts you in danger. Being my daughter puts you in a great deal more.’

‘Hence the small army outside,’ she noted. Beesely and Johnno exchanged uneasy looks. She continued, ‘I’ve been in the Met’ for twenty years. I’ve been shot, stabbed, I’ve lost colleagues, I’ve attended way too many funerals, and put scumbags away - to only arrested them again a year later.

‘You know, I have enough years *in* to retire and take the pension. And I was left a good amount of money when my ... parents died. I don’t need to do what I do. But you know why I do it?’ Her features hardened. ‘Because every morning I say goodbye to my three girls, I wonder if they will be safe that day. What stands between them and harm’s way ... is me.’

‘Well said,’ Beesely commended.

‘I understand ... that you are a very wealthy man,’ she commented before taking another sip. ‘And yet here you sit, bruised face, machine gun on the desk. You could be sat relaxing on a beach.’ She waited, glancing at Johnno.

Beesely sighed, taking a sip of his drink and easing back in his chair. ‘If *we* were not in harm’s way, then somebody else would be - someone less capable. Better the bad guys bump into us first. We ... push back.’ He took a sip of his drink. ‘It was an odd twist of fate that led to us intercepting those dirty bombs. And if we hadn’t *stretched* a few laws and rules—’

‘My family would have been right on the front line, scrambling to get out of London with the rest.’ She took a gulp. ‘I’m not mad at you, although I was a few weeks ago. The father that raised me was a good man. Hell, I only found out when I was twenty.

‘The last few weeks have caused mixed emotions. Sometimes I was curious, sometimes angry.’ She studied her glass. ‘But hey, most of my friends and colleagues are from broken families, and most have created their own broken families easily enough, the Force does that in good measure.’

‘Is there ... anything you need?’ Beesely tentatively asked.

‘New washing machine,’ she joked. ‘No, seriously, we’re well-off compared to most.’ She straightened. ‘I wasn’t sure who you were, or whether or not the rumours were true, but I sat down with some colleagues and we broke a few rules of our own.’

She produced a two-page crumpled document from a pocket and handed it to Beesely. ‘Shopping list.’

He puzzled over it. ‘There’s just a list of names and addresses?’

‘Not that kind of shopping list. Those are people who got off on technicalities, or people we can’t get the right evidence on.’ She sat upright and faced him squarely. ‘If you want to be a good father, forget the washing machine, and have a go at that lot.’ Without taking his gaze off her he handed the list to Otto,

who stood and walked out. She watched him go. ‘Something I said?’

Sternly, he stated, ‘You, young lady, are a bit of a tough nut.’

‘I like her,’ Johnno offered.

Otto re-entered and sat, picking up his drink.

‘So, was that a yes or a no?’ she asked. ‘My shopping list?’

‘We will research the people on the list, and then see what we can do,’ Beesely offered.

‘I can’t ask for more than that.’ She saluted him with her glass. ‘Husband is dying to meet you.’

‘You will have to be very careful, my dear, I have a great many of enemies.’

‘Let them show their faces, and I’ll bite their fucking noses off!’

Beesely’s jaw dropped.

‘See,’ Johnno began. ‘She’s a Beesely alright.’

She stood. ‘Rest of the gang are up the road in a posh hotel, thanks to Mister Otto. We’re here for the week, so stick your head in when you’re ready, show us around. And don’t feel bad about spoiling us *at all*. If you’re giving it, we’re fucking taking it.’

Beesely stood, open-mouthed, as she stepped out.

Johnno laughed, topping up his drink. ‘So, Otto, any more of his offspring out there?’

‘Not that I could find, she was the last.’

‘Probably a few more,’ Johnno suggested. ‘He was active for a lot of years.’

Beesely stared at him, not pleased. ‘Johnno, would you like Otto to track down some of yours?’

Johnno stopped smiling. ‘No, I frigging wouldn’t. Me and kids, ha!’

‘You’re not so bad with Thomas,’ Beesely began before remembering the MP5, the swans and ducks, the prisoner beaten. ‘I take that back. We should sterilise you.’

Otto laughed.

Johno pointed at him. 'It'll be your turn soon enough.' He wagged a finger.

Otto stopped smiling, took a deep breath and dropped his head. 'It is true, yes.'

'And you will do an excellent job,' Beesely suggested. 'Of that I have no doubt.'

Otto brightened. 'I have had much to consider in my life, when it concerns family.'

Thomas walked back in, less the MP5, stopping next to Otto.

Otto added, 'And if Thomas wants, he can live with us.' He repeated it in German. Thomas gave it some thought, before standing next to Johno.

Beesely raised his eyebrows, clearly surprised, but smiled anyway. 'Otto, concentrate on *your* kid, let Johno struggle with the little monster.'

They laughed - without translating.

Only the SAS go clubbing in Newport

1

Newport Borough Council and the Chief Constable of Gwent were not happy; three-dozen billboards had been pasted with new adverts overnight, on roads leading into the town. On them were pictures of SAS troopers storming into battle, plus a large slogan at the top. ‘Only the SAS would go clubbing in Newport!’

Investigations had been made, advertising companies spoken to. Nothing could be found, the ‘cat food’ advertisers not happy either.

* * *

Two days later, Johno stood outside the new ‘hotel’, in front of a group of twenty ex-soldiers, plus two former spies. His t-shirt said, ‘You *do* have to be crazy to work here.’

‘OK, crazy people,’ he began, noting their odd looks. ‘Welcome to The Hotel. It’s not a funny farm, nor a psych’ hospital, or any of that bollocks. You are all guests at my little hotel here.’ He limped forwards, two K2 guards stood close with MP5s.

‘Who did you say you were?’ a man asked.

‘I’m Johno. I’m Ex-SAS, and head of security for a charming organization called K2, which is paying for all this. And, if you fucked-up old heroes sort yourselves out, your potential future employers.’

‘And what does this ... K2, do exactly?’ a man asked.

Johno smiled, stood with hands on hips. ‘Industrial espionage, security, casino security, counter-terrorism advice and support, hostage rescue, bugging, stealing, torture and murder. *Any ... questions?*’

The men glanced at each other.

‘OK,’ Johno continued. ‘Some rules. You each have a nice room. You will each be provided with clothes. You will all have unlimited food and alcohol, no cost. There are TVs with satellite tele’ in each room, a small cinema, a reading room, games room, a gym and a pool. And, for those who may wish to partake, you are each granted one hooker a day.’

‘Did you say ... *hooker*?’

‘First things first. Each of you will have five grand in cash, and help with opening a UK bank account if necessary.’

‘Why you giving *us* all this stuff?’ a man enquired.

‘Good question,’ Johno answered, pointing directly at the man. ‘But the answer is not so easy. Here, gentlemen, is the short version. I was SAS, then MI6, got shot the fuck up, and I had some help from some good people. A month ago I came into a large amount of money, so now I’m going to give you crazy fuckers the kind of help I got. And if you respond well to treatment, there’s a job waiting for you with us.’

Twenty gorgeous ‘ladies’ walked around the corner, the malnourished and dishevelled men turning and staring.

‘OK, this is the drill. Every one of you has a quick shower, two beers and good shag. Condoms please! Then we have some nice food for you, more beer, and another shag. Tomorrow morning we start with a medical and some gentle exercise, more shagging and more booze. And, well, that’s the routine ... basically.’

Many of the men stood with their mouths open.

Johno pointed toward the entrance. ‘If you please, gentlemen. To the showers!’

Men started to walk inside, a little bewildered. One walked up to Johno.

‘You were in the Falklands with me,’ the man suggested. He had piercing black eyes in a thin face.

Johno shook his hand. ‘What Regiment?’

‘I was bomb disposal.’

‘An officer?’ Johno asked, glancing up and down the pathetic man.

The former officer nodded. Quietly, he stated, ‘I hit the bottle. And I lost it.’

‘Got news for you ... you just found *it*. Guess you’d better stay off the booze, but help yourself to the ladies and the rest of the goodies. See if we can’t build you back up.’ Johno patted the man on the shoulder, registering just how thin he felt under his clothes as he led him inside.

* * *

Pepi lifted up as the white-haired German stepped out onto the veranda.

The German took in the view, his hands clasped behind his back, stood hunched forwards. ‘I was seventeen years old when I passed through here first. I remember being elated at the sight of Rome.’

‘It has not changed much,’ Pepi suggested, also now stood at the veranda’s ornate railings.

‘Here? No, not much – farmland does not change so much. Cities change, although a large part of Rome is just the same, dirty and grubby in the summer.’

‘You are the same age as Beesely,’ Pepi noted.

The German turned, his head lowered, a slight frown. ‘Yah.’ He made eye contact. ‘He fought in the war?’

Pepi nodded. ‘Operation Market Garden –’

‘Ah, the Netherlands; a stupid, desperate campaign.’ He looked back out over the olive groves and distant vineyards as Pepi waited. ‘So, what of our people inside K2?’

‘No mention of the list, or the treasure.’

‘Is it possible ... they do not know?’

‘There are no excavations at the castle. None.’

‘It is very strange. I am beginning to think they manoeuvred into K2 for its other values, not what is hidden.’ He turned his

head to Pepi. ‘Try and arrange the escape of Luchenkov. Now that he has the blame, we can use him again without worry. And he will be ... grateful.’

‘That will not be easy, not from Russia.’

The German faced Pepi squarely. ‘We do not appear to be in a hurry. So, be thorough.’

* * *

An hour later, Johno sat on the lawn with two ‘inmates’, as he described them. All now sat on deckchairs, enjoying the weather with beers in hands. His two drinking buddies were curiously called ‘Big Dave’ and ‘Big Mac’. Dave was, indeed, tall and heavily built. ‘Big Mac’ was not named after the burger, but for the fact that his surname was McAvoy.

‘What happened after you left the Army?’ Johno asked Dave.

Dave took a sip. His hair remained wet from his shower, and he admitted that the sexual exercise had lasted less than two minutes. ‘I was married, early on; Army married quarters, UK and Germany. We divorced about a year before I got out, had fuck all money in the bank – maybe less than three grand.

‘I did some of the courses the Army offered: How to adjust and resettle – all that bollocks.’ He studied his beer. ‘Got the usual pittance towards looking for work, a few postage stamps, and notes on how to apply for a fucking job.

‘My brother had a small building and decorating business, so I went to work for him. It wasn’t much, but it got me started, and I got a little bed-sit in Bristol. He got divorced, and she fleeced him – had to sell the business. He lost it ... hit the bottle, so I went off to work as a security guard, twelve hour shifts at night looking at the fucking wall. I used to love it when some fucker tried to break in, it gave me something to do. All the other lads there were ex-service, the boss didn’t like employing illegal immigrants.

‘They let me go, so I went to work for the competition, same site, different bosses. But these fuckers were knee deep in illegals, so they got raided, fined, and shut down.

‘I scraped around after that, did a long distance delivery job. Then I just got right ... *fucked-off* with the whole thing.

‘One day I came out the pub and two guys were hitting a little guy, so I tried to break it up. I got arrested, did six months. After that they stuck me in a hostel full of wankers trying to kill themselves ... or trying to kill the staff. I ended up on the street one summer ... and that was that.’

‘Where did Doc’ Manning find you?’ Johno asked.

Dave stared into his beer. ‘London Bridge, stoned on cider.’

‘Wipe the fucking slate clean,’ Johno firmly told him. ‘You got a second chance here ... and we’ll appreciate you and look after you if you do right by us.’

Dave glanced up from under his eyebrows. ‘Just waiting to wake up; it’s all too good to be true.’

‘Not all good,’ Johno informed him. ‘If you come to work for us you’ll be in the front line.’

‘I got no problem with that,’ Dave suggested. ‘I have, according to your psychiatrist, *anger to work out*.’

Johno laughed, causing Dave to look up. ‘Me too. You should see my old Army file – two foot thick! When I first came over here the Swiss boys just didn’t know what to make of me. These guys get to work at 7.15am, on the dot, or they’re taken out and shot. Shoes shined, ties straight, ‘yes sir, no sir’. I was a bit of a shock for them.

‘First day here I was supposed to meet the quacks at 7.15am. I turned up four hours late and hung over, and the poor fuckers nearly died of a heart attack. Then they did my medical.’

Johno lifted his shirt, causing the men to wince. ‘They don’t employ anyone here if they have anything wrong with them. I ticked twenty out of thirty boxes on the first page. I’ve had malaria twice, plus a long list of tropical diseases. I’ve had time in hospital for snake bite, poisonous spiders, all sorts of shit.’

‘How did you get this job?’ Mac asked.

‘After the SAS I worked for MI6, unofficially, for ten years odd. Beesely was my sponsor in AGN Security, gave the government deniability - as they say. But that also meant that no fucker would come for me if I got caught. I did get caught, in Kosovo, I got shot the fuck-up. But Beesely sent a rescue, fetched me out. I’ve been his bodyguard and driver ever since.

‘He paid for my rehab. If he hadn’t, then I’d be in some NHS psych’ ward shitting through a tube, my arse being wiped by some giant African nurse.’

‘You seem ... OK?’ Mac delicately ventured.

‘I had some good help,’ Johno said, suddenly saddened. He took a breath, and raised his head proudly. ‘And so will you!’

‘He’s worth a lot, Mister Beesely?’ Dave asked.

‘Billions!’ Johno emphasised, a wry smile forming.

‘Billions?’ Dave repeated. ‘Shit...’

‘How was the bird?’ Johno asked Dave with a broad smile.

‘Quick,’ Dave said, tipping his eyebrows.

Johno laughed. ‘How long since the last time?’

‘About four years,’ Dave admitted.

Johno eased his head towards Mac, a question in his expression.

‘About the same,’ came back. ‘Always been pretty crap with women. I used a lot of prostitutes in the Army.’

Johno raised an eyebrow. ‘Most of the time I just get the old todger out, I keep the clothes on. Most hookers probably got strong stomachs, but I don’t show ‘em my cute little body.’

‘Is all your body ... like that?’ Dave delicately enquired.

‘No, some bits are worse!’ Johno said with smile. ‘Where I was shot I lost body tissue and some muscle, so big dents.’

‘Can’t the plastic surgeons do –’

‘Me and scalpels don’t get on,’ Johno cut in, suddenly serious. ‘I have a thing about scalpels. You won’t see me heading to the doctors unless I’m fucking dying.’

‘Dunno which of us is in worse shape,’ Dave commented, a glance at Mac.

‘That’s easy,’ Johno answered. ‘I am. So get yourselves fixed up, then you can help me shoot up some fuckers who deserve it.’

* * *

Otto walked into Beesely’s office three days later. Johno sat sprawled across two chairs, feet up, tea-mug in hand, his Simpsons mug retrieved from the old house. His t-shirt read: ‘True success is measured in how many women you *really* piss off!’

Beesely put down his pen and lifted his gaze. ‘How did we do on the stock markets?’

Otto took a breath. ‘Try, if you will, to image the scale of what happened, and that it all appears as if it was *your* doing.’ He read the detail off the paper. ‘The bank society took your advice, more so than I would have believed for them, and over three days made themselves collectively an estimated two hundred million euros.’

Johno asked, ‘Did they send a little thank you card? You know, those little cards that are like Christmas cards, I really like those.’

Beesely faced Johno. ‘Shut up.’ Johno sipped his tea.

Otto continued, ‘Our bank group made four hundred million pounds across Europe, but mostly in the UK. Profits are currently tied up in stock, of course.’

Johno smiled widely. ‘Sweet!’

Otto added, ‘Your personal wealth increased by two hundred million pounds, more than Gunter made in ... in ten years. Also, your American friends sent you fifty million dollars.’

Johno stood. ‘Right, I’m going shopping for a new car. In fact, I may buy one every week.’

Beesely eased up, and stepped around to them. He put his hand on Johnno's shoulder. 'Johnno, you know what ... I think you should buy yourself a new car. In fact, I think you should buy one every week.'

'Good idea, Boss.' Johnno bounded out.

Beesely turned to Otto, placing a hand on his shoulder. 'Transfer one hundred million into a hidden account for Johnno, to be accessed upon my death. Put that American money into an account for yourself, straight away – a wedding present.' Otto stiffened, mildly stunned. 'Spread the money around, set up safety protocols and hide it well, handle the tax. Some day we may need to fall back on that money.'

'Don't bank it in Switzerland,' he said with a glint in his eye. 'Oh, and transfer two hundred million direct from my personal account to the new rescue force in England, I want that pushed along *very* quickly.'

Beesely led Otto out to the control room walkway. 'May I have your attention please,' he called.

The control room fell silent. 'Ladies and gentlemen, all managers will be receiving a one hundred thousand euro bonus.' They stood in stunned silence. 'All Grade Two managers and senior admin' staff will be receiving thirty thousand euros.' Modest cheering began. 'All junior grade staff and agents will get between five and ten thousand euros each.' Otto made a careful note.

Beesely noticed Herr Mole. 'Herr Mole!'

Mole walked forwards until he stood directly below Beesely and Otto. 'If you please,' Beesely gestured towards his office.

Mole limped slowly up the stairs as Beesely sat down, knocking and entering a moment later. Otto sat with notepad and paper ready.

'Take a seat,' Beesely said, gesturing to a chair. 'You will be receiving a two hundred thousand euro bonus.' Otto made a note.

‘Thank you, sir. I will be buying a house for myself and Herr Ricky’s *former* partner. I look to her as the sister I never had.’

‘It’s good that you are looking after her,’ Beesely quietly stated. ‘Family is important.’ Mole bowed his agreement with that statement. ‘Now, we have a job for you, if you are up to it.’

‘Sir?’

‘We are promoting you to full manager, but without a departmental remit. Instead, we want you to work as an *auditor*. Do you know this word?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘You will scan all files and reports, all projects, looking for problems, errors, omissions and potential future problems. Understand?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Is it work that you think that you can do well?’

‘Yes, I believe so.’

‘And work that you would enjoy?’

Mole nodded. ‘I believe so.’

‘Good. You will answer directly to Otto when he is here, if not then the senior admin’ manager, Claus.’ Mole nodded again as Beesely stood. ‘Right, grab a pad and paper and come with us.’

The three of them walked outside, to the grass in front of the castle.

Beesely stopped, turning and studying the castle. ‘Right. In light of recent events, we are going to tighten up security a bit. I want proposals on extra levels of security, assuming that our enemies will be more capable in the future - if indeed that is possible. I want cameras everywhere, including on the hills around here, up to ten miles away; if a helicopter or a plane is flying down a valley towards us I want to know about it.

‘Put an outpost on the top of that cliff, permanently manned with telescopes, fifty calibre sniper rifles, machine guns. If something approaches this facility I want to know about it, and be able to shoot it down or destroy it.

‘OK, the same for the lake. If a boat approaches, we need know about it. And let’s make our perimeter ten miles out. Make sure as many of our staff as possible live in houses nearby, and that they have cameras mounted on their houses in strategic positions.

‘Day and night, we want an SAS trained and led team, maybe four to eight men, on permanent standby and armed to the teeth, ready to deal with any problems. And I want all managers and administrative staff to be weapons-trained, as well as trained in advanced first aid, combat field first aid and unarmed combat.

‘In the lower bunker I want seven days of food and water, the blast doors checked and improved if necessary. We need to be able to withstand a two thousand pound bomb, a ‘bunker buster’, just like the Americans used in the Gulf Wars. Extra stores are to be kept inside, first aid, advanced medical equipment, always a doctor.

‘OK, new agents. We want penetration into all of the former Soviet states, but particularly Russia. We want the border police of Poland, Hungary, etc, in our pockets and sewn up. Herr Mole, you will temporarily head up the new Soviet section until we recruit a suitable manager.’

He turned, put his hands in his pockets and looked out across the lake. ‘Enough to be going on with, gentlemen?’

‘A great deal,’ Otto commented.

‘It is a challenge,’ Herr Mole stated.

‘Go to work, gentlemen. Go to work.’

Otto’s phone rang. ‘Here? Now?’ He stopped and turned, tipping his head to one side. ‘The Bank Society is here.’

‘It’s daylight?’ Beesely questioned.

Otto shrugged. ‘They are coming up the road.’

They turned and walked slowly towards the castle, carefully observing the East Camp road. A convoy of five silver Mercedes pulled up, drivers jumping out and opening doors for the

passengers, the first being the society's leader himself. The rest Beesely did not recognise from their last meeting.

'The restaurant finished?' Beesely whispered.

'Not one hundred percent, but OK,' Otto replied as they walked forwards.

'Welcome,' Beesely offered the head man.

The Society's leader noticed Beesely's bruises with a grimace. 'Are you the good health? OK the visitors?' he asked, slowly and heavily accented.

'Yes, fine, fine, you're always welcome.'

The man took in the damage to the castle, the scaffolding and the builders, as the other members drew level, many carrying boxes. They were clearly not the full society, just twelve, and not the twenty-two Beesely had noted on their first encounter.

'Please.' Beesely gestured inside, but then limped slowly in, more of a pronounced limp all of a sudden, as Otto noticed.

In the restaurant, Beesely set about ordering drinks and food. 'Not the gourmet buffet I promised, I'm afraid.'

'It's not the concern,' their leader said as he sat on the new furniture. 'All is made good now?'

'No, it will be a few weeks more, but we are nearly there.'

'And many ... er ... sensing apparatus?' their leader said, pointing at the ceiling.

'Right now this is the most secure facility in the world!' Beesely stated, sitting next to him.

The other members placed down their boxes and pulled up chairs. Several female members of the kitchen staff arrived, and hurriedly adjusted aprons and uniform dress.

As Otto sat, the Society's leader produced a cheque. 'You helped without asking for the percentage in return. You trusted with us this information, even when you were hurt and on the vehicles to the hospital. We now trust you the more.' He handed over the cheque; three hundred million Swiss Francs, fifty million pounds.

‘That’s very kind of you,’ Beesely offered as he handed it to Otto. ‘But not necessary. I would not have asked you for anything.’

‘This was ... in meeting ... discussed yesterday,’ the old man began in his hard to follow accent. ‘You are the strange-ed man!’

Beesely laughed. ‘I shall try and take that as a compliment.’

They opened the first box. Inside nestled an ornately carved emerald green box, not much smaller than the box it came in. The lid was lifted and the contents presented for Beesely to review.

The leader pointed at the box’s contents with a shaky hand. ‘These is the very old trout flies, hand made by royal peoples from Switzerland, and Europe.’

‘Excellent,’ Beesely enthused.

The next box offered a similar collection of trout flies. ‘These are for the fishing, the other box is not.’

‘Heavens! Of course,’ Beesely loudly agreed. ‘I would not wish to lose a priceless fly to a trout.’

The next box contained a pair of rare silver goblets, encrusted with gems, and some three hundred years old. The final box contained simply a piece of paper.

‘This,’ the old man began, ‘is your hon-her-he membership the Society for the life. And, promotion the first deputy.’

‘A promotion?’ Beesely smiled. ‘Already? My mum would be so proud.’

They chatted for almost an hour; discussing banking information, future plans, and a few problems that could be solved by K2. They handed Beesely a list of suspect employees to be watched, from various banks and businesses around Switzerland, reports of a few breaches of security, and a list of three people they wanted ‘removed’.

Beesely agreed to help them in every aspect, before making a request of his own, one he knew they would not particularly like.

He wanted to part African politicians from their stolen money, and to make sure it was turned over to the Red Cross. They were not joyfully keen, but respected his request. And he made it just that, a request for assistance, not a condition.

Loose ends

1

The door to Dame Helen's home was answered by her husband, Mike. He straightened in surprise. 'Mister Beesely.'

'Mike. May we come in?'

'Uh, please.' He ushered them in whilst still holding a tea towel, Johnno taking in the detail of the house – the photographs on the wall. Mike led them into the lounge, to find Tabitha and a friend sat in front of the television, watched over by a professional nanny that Beesely had arranged the day after Dame Helen's accident. In the kitchen stood a professional home help and cook, also provided by K2. Tabitha noticed and recognised the visitors, but very determinedly turned and ignored them all.

Mike ushered them through the lounge into the conservatory. 'Please, sit down ... sorry about the mess.'

Johnno and Beesely remained standing.

'How's the help working out?' Beesely asked. 'Need anything?'

'It was very good of you to send the help, Sir Morris. Reckon I would have had a hard time of it, Helen's quite the organizer.' He glanced every which way, apart from making eye contact with his visitors.

'Anything you need, Mike?' Beesely repeated.

'Uh ... no, I don't think so.'

'How's Helen?' Beesely asked after a moment.

'Much better, the doctors say. No spinal injury, just a few broken ribs, a fracture in the leg – not too bad. They reckon two weeks, and she'll be out and back home.'

'And then, Mike, you deserve a good rest at a health Spa somewhere,' Beesely quietly stated. 'It will help with the healing. We'll organize it.'

‘I’ll ... er ... talk with Helen about it,’ Mike said, still avoiding direct eye contact.

‘Do you want to know what happened, Mike? And why?’ Johno asked.

Now Mike made eye contact. ‘What do you mean?’

Johno coldly stated, ‘Her *accident* was no accident, Mike. They meant to ram her off the road.’

Mike sat, his face in his hands. ‘They?’

Beesely sat near him, letting out a sigh. ‘That radioactive dirty bomb was funded by a Russian billionaire, one Boris Luchenkov. When it failed to do its job he ... got mad. All the papers were praising the SAS and MI6, so he spent a large sum of money, and he hired himself some good help. They rammed the manager of my private security firm off the road - he’s paralysed. They killed two SAS troopers and tried to kill a few more. They rammed your dear lady wife off the road, probably because MI6 received most of the credit for stopping that bomb.’

Mike just stared ahead, trying hard to hold it all together. ‘Should have been you who got the credit,’ he quietly stated.

Beesely could not be sure if Mike had meant that to sound as cold as it did. He regarded the side of Mike’s head for a moment. ‘They sent more than a hundred mercenaries to us in Switzerland. We killed them all.’

Mike stared at the floor for several seconds.

‘Mike,’ Johno firmly called. ‘We have the two men who rammed Helen off the road.’

Mike stood, twisting the tea towel absentmindedly. ‘They’ve been arrested?’

‘No, Mike, not arrested,’ Johno explained. ‘*We* have them.’ He inched closer. ‘I was wondering if you wanted to talk to them?’

‘Talk to them?’ Mike repeated in a strained whisper, suddenly annoyed. His face darkened. ‘I’d like to rip their hearts out!’

‘Fine,’ Johno said. ‘Get your coat.’

For a moment, Mike just stared at him. Then, in a daze, he grabbed his coat, letting the tea towel drop to the floor.

After a ten minute drive, they pulled into a farmhouse, checked at the gate by several guards. Their vehicle made slow progress along a narrow gravel track before parking at the rear of the small farmhouse, next to a large steel-fabricated barn. They led Mike inside.

The cavernous barn lay empty except for two men sat tied and gagged in the middle. They sat naked, their bodies now white with cold. The base of the structure was bare concrete, the sides of the metal barn purposely built with gaps; this building offered no warmth or shelter for its two unwilling guests.

Willis appeared at his side. ‘Hello, Mike,’ he said, no warmth or joy in his voice.

Mike stared at him for several seconds, before turning back to the two men. ‘*They* did it?’

Willis glanced at the two prisoners. ‘Yes, Mike. They rammed Helen off the road ... and killed Sophie.’

The last two words struck deeply, Mike recoiling as if struck. Johno gestured him towards the two men, Mike seemingly reluctant to hurry in that small journey. He stepped very, very slowly towards them.

When close enough, Johno stamped down hard on the foot of one man, causing the man to groan through his gag. ‘Mike, there are no witnesses here. And these wankers will disappear afterwards.’ The men struggled against their restraints.

Mike stared down at the two men, starting to cry.

Dame Helen woke and turned her head, her eyes half closed.

‘OK, darling?’ Mike softly enquired.

She smiled as best she could, one side of her face a mass of purple bruises and stitches. Reaching for his hand, she touched

bandages. Squinting hard, she raised his hands to where she could get a better look. ‘What happened?’ she coughed out, the words painful to form.

Mike studied his hands. ‘I did a terrible thing.’

She frowned as best she could. ‘What, Mike?’

‘Beesely caught the men who rammed you off the road. He had them tied to chairs in a barn ... a few miles from the house.’

‘What did you do?’ she forced out.

‘I hit them,’ he finally answered. ‘I hit them until I had no strength left in me.’

She looked away. After a moment, she turned her head back. ‘It’s what our psychologists call ... definitive resolution of pent up anger or fear. It’s recommended as a means of curing people of chronic fear, or curing agents after they’ve been shot up.’ She coughed with the strain of talking. ‘Did it work?’

Mike looked up with a puzzled frown. ‘Work?’

‘Do you feel less of a victim, Mike?’ she quietly asked.

He reluctantly nodded. ‘A lot better. And ashamed of it.’

‘Don’t be. Beesely knows what he did, it was no simple revenge.’ She coughed. ‘He wanted to help you so that you can help me - help *us* move on. It may seem barbaric, but it should help with closure.’

A moment passed. ‘Will you be going back to work?’ he asked, avoiding eye contact.

‘Do you want me ... to go back to work?’

‘Yes,’ was not the answer that she had expected.

‘Why?’ she puzzled.

‘I had a long chat with Mister Beesely; he’s a very wise old man, and he made me see things clearly. You’re very good at what you do, and there’s a chance that some other idiot will try and attack London. If you’re at your desk you might just stop them, and some other family won’t have to go through this.’

She stared at the ceiling. ‘Well, I’m not giving him back the ten million he gave me to retire on!’

‘Ten million?’ Mike whispered, checking over his shoulder.

‘A week from now he’s moving us to a health Spa in Switzerland. Sort it with work, if you can.’

‘Screw work ... it’s about time I went self-employed.’

She eased her head towards him, surprised by many things now. ‘You’ve been saying that for twenty years.’

‘Life is short. This is not a dress rehearsal, we got to make a go of it.’

She raised an eyebrow. ‘You *are* changing.’

‘I only have one regret,’ he softly admitted, glancing at the door.

‘What?’ she asked, concerned.

He made strong eye contact. ‘That I didn’t kill them both.’

She rested her head on the pillow, turned away, and then back. ‘Don’t worry, what Beesely will do to them is nothing compared to the injuries I have here.’

His eyes widened. ‘You’re telling me. That guy with the funny moustache, Johnny something, he ripped their ears off with his bare hands. I think *that one* needs anger-management lessons.’

* * *

At Membury services, on the M4 motorway, Beesely took a call, leading Johno out of the shop. They stood beside their Range Rover, guards nearby, Johno holding a large yellow packet of Fruit Pastels.

‘Max is dead,’ Beesely flatly informed him.

Johno lit up, neither surprised nor shocked. ‘Complications?’

‘No. I ... arranged his passing.’

Johno straightened, a slight furrow of his brow. ‘You what?’

Beesely glanced at the closed Little Chef restaurant across the car park, putting his hands in his pockets. ‘He was paralysed, no hope of ever getting off a ventilator. His boy called me, held the phone to Max’s mouth.’ He turned back to Johno. ‘He didn’t want to hang around. He pleaded with me to ...’

Johno nodded, taking a drag. ‘Makes sense.’

‘I’d do the same for you,’ Beesely stated, no hint of emotion in his voice.

‘I should hope so. I’m not that keen about being here now, let alone paralysed.’

‘You seem better than a few months ago; I have noticed some real progress in your attitude towards life.’

Johno screwed up his face then shrugged. ‘I feel a bit different.’

‘Any regrets? Anywhere else you’d rather be?’

‘No regrets,’ Johno firmly stated. He took a drag, taking a reflective view of the car park ‘Would be nice if Jane and Ricky could be here to see things ... but I’m quite happy to be right in the thick of it.’

Beesely offered him a warm smile. ‘Good lad. Fight the good fight, eh?’

Johno cocked an eyebrow. ‘I got the frigging scars and medals to prove it!’

‘C’mon, let’s go home.’ They clambered into the car.

‘Strange,’ Johno began. ‘But Zug feels like home now.’

‘I know, I hardly think of the old place.’

‘See, all you need to feel at home in a place is to be nearly killed a few times,’ Johno suggested.

‘I’ll mention that to Wimpy Homes. It might catch on as an advertising slogan.’

3

A week later, Beesely and Johno sat on comfortable chairs on the grass in front of the castle. Managers were assembled nearby, along with many other staff members, some with their families, something of a *family day out* feel to things.

Otto walked down with Minister Blaum, past the buffet tables, and to the spare seats next to Beesely. Noticing Blaum, Johno hid the helicopter manual he had been reading.

‘Ah, Minister, you are just in time,’ Beesely said without getting up. ‘Please, have a seat.’

‘So,’ Minister Blaum began, ‘where are the new helicopters?’ He accepted a cold drink from a guard.

‘Should be here any minute,’ Beesely informed him, making a sly glance toward Otto.

‘What’s that on the lake?’ Blaum asked, pointing.

‘On the lake?’ Beesely pretended not to have noticed. ‘Oh, that. I believe it is a target ... for the helicopter pilots to line up on ... as they fly in.’

Johno let out a sarcastic laugh.

Otto tipped his head forwards, ‘I would suggest, Minister, that you drink your beer very quickly.’

Blaum became suspicious. ‘Target?’

‘Here they come,’ Beesely announced, sipping his beer. ‘Oh, and Minister, I would like to remind you that it was *you* who signed the document allowing us these helicopters.’

Blaum turned, frowning. ‘Which will be under the control of the Swiss Army, these ... *second-hand* American Hueys?’

‘Oh, yes, of course,’ Beesely agreed.

Blaum was now worried as the drone of helicopters grew louder. In the distance he could see them coming into view across the lake, indistinct blobs on the horizon.

‘Ten seconds to heart attack,’ Johno muttered, loud enough for Blaum to hear.

The helicopters drew closer. Blaum squinted, making out ten or so in the distance. The sun was behind them, making their outlines hard to discern. The drone grew, reverberating off the nearby hills as Blaum glanced from face to face. Everyone seemed relaxed and happy, sipping their drinks. He held a hand up against the sun, squinting. Then his face dropped.

The first Apache fired a missile towards the target. It exploded with an almighty bang that echoed around the valley. Blaum shot upright in his chair as two more Apaches fired, hitting the target with loud bangs.

People cheered, kids clapped and jumped up and down. Photos were snapped, video taken, the guards pointing and discussing the relative merits of the helicopter's firepower and speed. The assault helicopters started to strafe the water, large lines of spray rising up as thousands of rounds tore up the water.

'And don't forget, Minister, that *you* signed for these ... *second-hand* Hueys,' Beesely calmly stated.

Blaum peered between the gaps in his fingers, his hands covering his face as Johnno laughed. The Apaches banked east, and flew up the lake in a line astern, a deafening crescendo of overlapping droning resonating off the hills.

Then a missile shot out from behind where they sat, snaking out across the lake with a tail of white smoke, exploding next to the target.

Blaum jumped up and spun around to find a man stood with the missile's shoulder-launcher, the man now enveloped in smoke. He pointed at the man. 'I did not sign for those!'

'Well, almost true,' Beesely stated as he stood. 'They ... are listed on the page of spares and extras, which is part of the document you signed.' Blaum glared at an amused Otto.

Johnno laughed. 'Could be worse, mate, you could be related to us.'

Otto glanced over his shoulder as a convoy of two Range Rovers pulled up. He turned to Johnno. 'I think you have a visitor, Johnno.'

Johnno sipped his beer. 'What?' Otto tipped his head towards the road. Johnno frowned his lack of understanding, then glanced up at the road as a curvy American glamour model stepped down from a Range Rover, her escorts smiling widely. 'Oh, shit ... I forgot all about her!'

Beesely smiled, slapping Johnno on the back.

Otto said, 'If you think that funny, guess where Thomas is?'

Beesely faced Otto, before turning and followed the line of Apaches, his smile slipping. 'He's not?'

‘Who do you think fired that first missile, a few seconds early?’

Beesely shook his head. ‘If I didn’t know better I’d swear that bloody kid was mine. Maybe we should have a blood test, just in case.’