

Kidnap

**K2
Book 7**

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www.geoffwolak-writing.com

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

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

The Rhine, 1945

Second Lieutenant Morris Beesely glanced skyward, the clouds breaking and the moon illuminating the road below his position. He silently cursed the moon, the clouds soon cooperating by pulling a grey curtain across the inconvenient source of illumination.

Below him he could see a winding road, a long line of German vehicles moving east. With a break in the column, Beesely waved his detail forwards, three men falling into line as Beesely ran down the embankment and across the road, their boots clattering on the tarmac. Safely across, Beesely jumped a hedgerow and entered a muddy field.

With his men collected, nods given, they turned and ran across the field.

Beesely woke to find his cheek being cupped by a man from his detail, Corporal Smith. ‘Take it easy, sir. Bit of nasty bump.’

Beesely eased up onto his elbows, finding a dilapidated concrete cell full of the aroma of wet clothes, a line of American servicemen sat against a wall, a fat German guard in a grey uniform near the door. ‘What happened?’ Beesely puzzled.

‘A mine, sir; Hobson stepped on a mine, bought it straight away. Dix got cut up pretty bad – they took him away on a stretcher, don’t know where yet. And you and me, sir, we had some flying lessons. Bit of a hard landing for you, sir.’

‘It’s just us, Smitty?’

‘Aye, sir. Just us.’

Beesely eased up and sat against a cold stone wall, taking in the tired faces of the soldiers. None were talking, all were alone with their own thoughts, huddled for warmth.

‘Got some Schnapps, sir, if you’d like some,’ Smitty offered.

‘Schnapps?’ Beesely repeated.

‘Off the fat guard.’ Smitty lifted the bottle, Beesely taking a few swigs.

Coughing a little, Beesely noted, ‘If our fat German friend is giving us drinks, then he knows it will soon be over - and he wants to make a deal. At least, he doesn’t wish to make enemies of us. It should not be difficult to get past him.’

‘No, sir. But the other side of that door is a long passage, and at the end is a strong metal door, with some great strapping lads the other side, all of them a little more professional than our well-fed friend here.’

Beesely eased up onto his feet, helped by the corporal. He stretched, noting now which limbs ached. ‘Feels like I landed on my shoulder.’

‘Broken, sir?’

‘Don’t think so, but a bit numb down the arm.’ He stepped to the wall, positioning himself directly underneath a rusted metal grill, noting cracked glass the other side. Having studied the rusted grill, he turned and stretched his legs as best he could, walking through the tangle of men lying about. At the guard he said, ‘Morgen.’

The guard forced a smile and nodded.

‘Do you ... speak any English?’

The guard shook his head.

‘Pity, that; I was hoping to tell you what a fat waste of time you are.’

An American chuckled. ‘We already tried that, fella. Can’t bait the guy.’

Beesely knelt next to a medic, the man's armband giving away his profession. 'Got anything on you that would make a man ... sick?'

'Sick, sir?'

'Sick like a dog, sick.'

'They left me my bag, sir. Potassium inside would make you right sick very quickly.'

Beesely nodded conspiratorially. Standing, he stepped to a hole in the corner that passed for a toilet. Peering down and getting a whiff, Beesely could see that it was a deep hole, the sound of running water echoing up. He relieved himself.

Back at Smitty, he asked, 'Do you know where we are?'

'Still on our side of the river, I reckon, sir. When our fat friend stepped out I climbed up and had a look out the window, certain I can see the river – and that we're on the west side.'

'If we're that close to the river, then the RAF will bomb the hell out of us before too long.'

The Americans sat up and took note.

Beesely added, 'There's also due to be an artillery barrage in this sector. So, I hope this building is solid enough, would be a poor show to be killed by our own side.'

Sitting back down, his back against the wall and legs stretched out, Beesely began thinking.

At midday the door clanked open, a large soup cauldron brought in, hard and stale bread thrown at the men by younger German soldiers. With the door closed, no one seemed to be in a hurry to try the soup.

'I will take a wild guess here, and say that the establishment's chef is not up to scratch.'

'It'll go right through you, fella,' the same American said.

‘I’m counting on it,’ Beesely told him. ‘Gentlemen, if you were all to try some of the soup, and have a little potassium from the medic, you would all be sick as dogs.’

They glanced at each other with puzzled frowns, then stared at Beesely.

‘And, once you have all been sick – on the floor – and enjoyed a good bowel movement - on the floor, I would hazard a guess and say that our fat friend would leave our company. That would then give me time to get us out of here.’

The Americans glanced at each other as Smitty crawled forwards, taking some of the soup. ‘Dear God, sir, but this is bad. I think they peed in it.’ He downed more of it, the medic lifting his bag ready.

The Americans again glanced at each other, smiled and shrugged. The first two men eased forwards.

‘What the hell,’ an American said. ‘I need to go anyway.’ He stood, dropped his trousers and crouched, a long rasping fart given out, followed by a horrible sound as liquid shit hit the hard stone floor.

‘Nein, nein, bitte!’ the guard shouted.

‘I feel sick without the damn soup,’ a British soldier said. He vomited on his own legs. ‘Crikey, I don’t even remember eating that.’

The Americans laughed, two standing and dropping their trousers, crouching. The guard was on his feet, shouting and pleading for the men to stop. He banged on the door with his fist. It clanked open a few seconds later, the guard escaping the horrendous smell, words exchanged with the other guards. The door clanked shut, the lock turned.

‘Hope you know what you’re doing, fella,’ the first American said. ‘We could be here a week!’

‘First, we need to keep the guards out. Find something to jam into the door hinges, or underneath it.’

The American soldiers found it easy enough to break up the wooden crate that the guard had been sat on. Pieces were jammed under the door, more into the hinge join and tapped in.

‘That’ll slow them up,’ an American said. ‘Just hope our boys get here soon.’

Beesely checked his watch. ‘There’s only one town this side of the river with a big old police station in it - I saw it on the map at the briefing. So, if I’m correct ... we have thirty-five minutes before the RAF hit this town.’

The Americans were now concerned.

‘We will need to be ready. Gentlemen, I need everyone’s belt, and I need them made into a long length. Come on, gentlemen, let’s be making our way out of here.’

The Americans copied Beesely as he took off his belt, the men soon linking their belts together.

‘If there is a weak link, don’t use it. We need a strong rope,’ Beesely told them. ‘That’s it. And test the strength.’

Thirty minutes later, the RAF were early, distant dull thuds registering with the prisoners.

‘Now!’ Beesely ordered.

The belts were quickly fed through the rusted metal grill and back down to the men. Twelve soldiers pulled, many with feet against the wall, the sound of the bombing growing louder. As a bomb landed in a nearby street, the concrete beneath the grill cracked and splintered, causing the soldiers to close their eyes. The grill came away, a sedate cheer given.

Smitty knelt next to wall, a leg-up offered to Beesely. Beesely reached up and punched through the already cracked glass, knocking the edges away and into the street outside, the sound of the falling bombs getting ever closer. Grabbing the sides of the window, he said, ‘Push!’, many

hands pushing his boots up. Beesely disappeared through the window.

A moment later he popped back up. ‘Come on! Quickly, the streets are empty.’

Smitty came through next, the two of them helping the next American up and out. With that man helping his colleagues, Beesely led Smitty away, and down an alley.

The air was full of the sounds of exploding bombs, clouds of black smoke wafting by and blinding them as it enveloped them, the visibility gone for a few seconds at a time. Coughing, and using a few choice words towards the unseen RAF bombers, Beesely and Smitty ran for all they were worth, soon to a hedgerow.

Diving across a low stone wall, the lane they had just run down exploded, showering them with stones.

‘Close one, sir.’

‘If we don’t get going we’ll be in more pieces than they could put back together.’ Beesely lifted up, his face cut, and ran full pelt across the field.

Thirty minutes later, both men were sweating profusely and in need of a rest. Noticing a grey German car approaching, they jumped a wall and landed in hedges. Beesely found himself face to face with an American officer. They stared at each other for a few seconds, the German vehicle trundling past.

‘Second Lieutenant Morris Beesely.’

‘Hanks. Captain.’

‘Some of your chaps on the road behind us; we were in the local police station together. Failed to pay our bar tab at the local house of ill repute.’

The Captain nodded. ‘Brits are three miles south.’

‘In which case, it’s been fun, but we will have to go.’ Beesely led Smitty through the bushes, past surprised American soldiers and into a field.

Three days later they again entered the town, but this time with a division behind them. Stopping their jeep next to the police station, they glanced at its ruins.

‘Lucky call, sir,’ Smitty suggested. ‘I reckon if we had stayed there we’d be goners.’

Beesely stood with his fists on his hips. ‘Just hope the Yanks got out in time. Never pays to just sit around and be a prisoner.’

A cold shoulder

1

At midnight, Johnno stepped out of the warm control room and into the chilly corridor leading towards the foyer, turning right into the Great Hall. As ever, he was dressed in a loosely fitting old black suit and a white shirt.

The door of the Great Hall was often either propped open or left ajar, people coming and going at all hours. An extra door had been put on the foyer itself, to keep the staff there warm – and its visitors happy, and electric lamps had been rigged up in the Great Hall itself. It would have been a straightforward enough task to make the room warm, despite its size, but the K2 managers knew that it was the most important staging area for the ready squads; and that the British soldiers always left the doors open.

A two-inch square sign had been placed on the door: Please close door. The sign was in English, since the Swiss guards always closed the door. That sign had been gradually increased in a size, experimented with in a variety of eye-catching colours, eventually surrounded by flashing Christmas lights before the Swiss had finally given up.

Johnno stepped past tonight's ready squad as they attended the vending machines, the troopers wrapped up warm against the early December chill. He waved lazily as he lit-up, stepping through the reinforced doors to the courtyard after two Swiss guards had opened them for him. They acknowledged him with polite head tips.

The courtyard was positively frosty, and Johnno shivered a little as he stepped around the numerous parked vehicles, stopping to draw smiley-faces in the ice formed on windscreens. He took the door on the right that used to be

the Templars treasure vault, now imaginatively labelled 'Templars Vault' by the ex-SAS staff. Its official title to the Swiss was 'Castle Guard Ready Room Two'. He slammed the door shut behind him and stepped into the warmer stairwell, the ancient stone steps now decorated to a high standard and well lit. He took two flights down, now back under the courtyard as he opened the inner door. 'Right Kev?'

Kev looked up. 'Right, boss.' He checked his watch. 'She kicked you out again?'

'Yep. Another row.'

'Same one?' Kev probed, returning to his paperwork.

'Yep,' Johno slowly let out before taking a drag. The sign on the wall said 'No smoking – unless you're British!'

Johno took in the large room, running a hand down his bushy moustache. This room had been converted into a mini-barracks for the primary castle guards and ready squads, who were now nearly all British. It housed a dozen desks, filing cabinets, vending machines, a kitchen in the corner and several sinks. Plus enough boob pictures pinned to the wall to cause Otto to raise an eyebrow. Since he, and the other Swiss managers, were banned from the room, there was not much chance of them being offended by the lack of political correctness on display.

Mavo eased up from a TV set, the sound turned down. 'You after me?'

'Nah, just stretching my legs.'

Johno ambled across to an open door on the right, the room that had previously housed 'The List'. Stepping into the darkened interior he could see a dozen bunk beds, several pairs of boots sticking out the ends, and could detect the quiet hum of breathing and snoring. With a grin, he turned about, wandering past Kev filling in a form.

Kev had spent two months in the Scottish salmon farm he had bought with K2 cash, part of the dispersal, before nagging Johno at length to return. Since the Basel freemason group had been dealt with, no one saw a problem with the dispersal being reorganised. Big Simon, the wounded guard commander, had also returned.

Through the opposite door to the sleeping troopers, Johno entered the armoury, both walls filled with wire cages fronted by workbenches. Each partition housed several weapons, each labelled to a specific individual by nickname.

Matt the armorer, known as 'Old Matt' on account of his age, sixty-six, lifted his head as he worked on a GPMG. 'Nothing ta do, laddy?' he asked in a thick Scottish accent.

'Haven't you fixed that yet?' Johno asked as he drew near. 'You were working on that same weapon when I first joined up.'

'Aye, and ya still ain't learnt jack shit.'

Johno grinned as he stepped past, opening the next door, and to the rooms that previously housed the Templar treasure.

'Sir?' a Swiss guard commander called, standing.

'Sit, sit. Just passing through.' Johno waved the man down.

This room housed the Swiss guard commanders responsible for the castle, and was notably cleaner and better organised than the previous areas. Its walls were devoid of posters, its desks squared-off symmetrically to the walls. Two camp beds at the rear allowed at least one Swiss guard to be present all of the time, since the British had taken to playing numerous practical jokes on them - and their neat desks.

Johno stepped through another two rooms, now stood directly under his old bed in the dungeon, which was still used on occasions like tonight.

Reaching a small corridor, he turned right and stepped down to the previously waterlogged tunnel that Mr. Grey had opened up. If he had not seen it before, he certainly would have never believed it had been submerged for sixty years. He nodded to a Swiss guard at the bottom and turned left, a twenty-metre walk in chill air before a corkscrew stairwell presented him a hundred steps.

He forced a deep breath, cursing himself for having come this way, cursed Helen, and then started upwards. At the top of the steps his forehead was glistening, his breathing laboured. He opened a strong metal door with a 'clank', a surprised face peering in.

'Sir? What you doing coming up there in the middle of the night?' The guard, a former British 'crazy', looked past Johno and down the metal stairs.

'Just wandering.'

The man rolled his eyes. 'Another row?'

Johno nodded, looking peeved, the slight breeze chilling the sweat on his forehead. He turned his head to the right and peered along a hundred yards of tunnel and to a barely discernable door in the distance, beyond it an indoor shooting range. He turned left. Seventy-five yards, and he was to the 'tank room', now the main K2 barracks. A guard opened the door with a nod, and Johno stepped into the warm interior.

A glass partition now sectioned off the motor pool on the left, the original concrete ramp leading down toward the west field, three Range Rovers parked up. He stepped past four doors in sequence, sticking his head into the fifth since it was already open, the sounds of numerous overlapping conversations coming from within. The junior guards stood, the senior guards nodding or waving.

This was the main assembly room on the ground floor, the floor above it crammed with dormitories, just over two

hundred beds now in use. This room offered sufficient space for the roll call of a hundred men.

As Johno stood just inside the door, he could see a dozen desks around the walls, cabinets and equipment lockers, as well as a first aid station. He ambled through, observing some of the earnest weapons cleaning going on, a few guards gearing-up for their shift; white snow smocks covering the black fatigues. He clicked open the far door.

Simon lifted his head. 'Not again!'

'Don't ask,' Johno grumbled.

A guard commander handed him a mug of tea. 'They telephoned to let us know.'

Johno sighed loudly, sitting on a sofa in front of a TV that was now showing a skiing programme.

This room, the old 'throne room', was now the main guard commander's office, not least because it led directly down to Helen's office – a closely guarded area. It housed eight men typically, but was decidedly more comfortable than the other guards' quarters, not least because Johno visited often and insisted on the sofas, large TV screens, the bar and the kitchen. The guard commanders had not complained; if it was the boss' wish, then so be it.

'Burger?' another man called.

'Nah,' Johno let out.

'Doughnut?'

'Yeah ... why not.'

Simon settled next to him, a beer in hand. 'Your good health.'

'That ain't funny,' Johno quietly grumbled. 'She's still on about the fucking plastic surgeons.'

'If I woke up to you every day, so would I!' Simon said.

'Fuck ... right ... off.'

They watched five minutes of skiing.

'I fancy a holiday,' Johno mumbled.

‘Can you afford it?’ Simon dryly enquired.

‘I’ve saved up my overtime bonuses,’ Johnno retorted, still fixed on the TV.

‘Might do you good then,’ Simon suggested. ‘Where do you think you will go?’

‘Well, the short-arse had been nagging. He’s done his basic scuba training in the school pool, now wants to try the real thing. I told him we got a great big lake out front.’

Simon chuckled before sipping his beer.

Johnno glanced at the drink with a frown. ‘You off duty?’

Simon nodded. ‘Heading off soon.’

‘You drive alright?’

‘I have power steering, but I’m not allowed to drive myself, Otto would kill me.’ He took a sip. ‘Helen on your case?’

‘I’d like to strangle her, but I’m not allowed to, Otto would kill me’

‘Rules, eh.’

A minute later, Johnno said, ‘You had the chance of an easy life, but you came back. Either you love us to bits, or your pretty damned stupid.’

Simon took a moment. ‘If you walk down a street of strangers, you’re just a man in his forties with an arm in a sling. You are ... the man sat in the corner of the bar wondering why the pretty girls are not throwing themselves at you. In the gym, you cover your scars.’

Johnno nodded absently.

Simon continued, ‘Otto had the psychiatrist talk with me. Well, not Otto personally - it’s normal after injury and compensation. The man says I have Johnno Syndrome.’

‘They named a Syndrome after me?’

‘Yah, and Johnno Syndrome sounded better than Smelly Arse Git Syndrome.’

‘They used the words ... Johno Syndrome?’ Johno puzzled with a heavy frown.

‘No, idiot, but we both know why we are here; the job gives us respect, and purpose.’

‘And distracts us from the mirror too much,’ Johno reflected. ‘I’d hate to be left alone with myself too long.’

‘I know you now better than you do,’ Simon said, still focused on the TV.

‘Do you know where I left the remote for the TV in my room, because I’ll be buggered if I can find it.’

Simon smiled widely. ‘It will be in the last place you look.’

They laughed.

* * *

Ten minutes later, Johno stepped into the inner corridor. A left turn would take him to the kitchen storeroom, now permanently locked, so he turned right and stepped the short distance to a set of concrete stairs and down to the small room that the gold had been found in.

A Swiss guard unlocked a heavy metal door, but Johno had to also punch a four-digit code for it to open. He stepped through, and into a room that could have been found in any five star hotel. It offered a double bed, an en suite toilet and a shower, a desk and a sofa.

He took in the little-used room before corkscrewing down the narrow spiral stairs to Helen’s office, emerging six feet to the right of her desk. Stood there, an unlit cigarette balanced on his lip, he could see the faces of all the people who had occupied the big seat; Gunter, Otto, Beesely, himself, and now Helen.

With a sigh, he stepped across the empty office, out of the open doorway and onto the companionway, his journey

having come full circle. A few heads turned upwards from the command centre.

Noticing the French DGSE liaison, Pascal, Johno stepped down to him. They shook. 'Hey buddy. What you doing here in the middle of the night?'

'You are just about to launch an operation for us,' he replied. Checking his watch he added, 'It starts in ... ten minutes.'

'The kidnapped French group?'

Pascal nodded. He pointed at a glass partition between two desks, one of many glass partitions. 'You have made some changes?'

'Bullet-proof partitions. If someone came in the main door they could shoot the place up; now they can't.' He shrugged. 'So, how much are we charging you for this operation?'

'You are not,' Pascal reminded him, a slight grin evident.

'That's fucking good of us,' Johno grumbled.

'Very good of you. Which is why we have re-designated your French divisions as charities; no tax liabilities.'

'Ah, that the company Otto stuffed a load of money through?'

Pascal nodded. 'When is the ... day of reckoning?'

Johno let out a sigh. 'Last month, supposedly. But Otto got an extension for ... re-organising.'

'The Swiss Government ... they want seventy-five percent of your net value handed over to them?' Johno glumly nodded. 'That is, of course, what their auditors can find.'

'Their auditors, buddy, are Swiss. Probably take a year going through the fucking books.'

'I am sure that Otto can be ... very creative, with the books,' Pascal stated. 'When is the baby due?'

‘Three weeks, if it’s on time. Since its frigging Swiss – half Swiss - it’ll pop out right on cue.’

Pascal chuckled. ‘I have four girls.’

‘Sorry to hear that,’ Johno offered.

‘All in private schools, so I only have to suffer the holidays. They range from thirteen to fifteen, two sets of twins.’

‘Ouch!’

‘Yes, ouch! In the summer holidays I had to keep track of six boyfriends.’

Johno lifted his eyebrows. ‘Six?’

‘Teenage girls are allowed to dump a boyfriend in their minds - and then to accept them back – without notifying the relevant boy verbally, or by text.’

Johno turned, grinning, and headed for the dungeon. He found Thomas sat behind his computer.

Without looking up the boy said, ‘What you doing in my room?’

‘I like your company. I missed you.’

Without detracting from his game, Thomas said, ‘Helen kicked you out again?’

‘Yeah,’ Johno sighed, pulling a beer. ‘Same old row.’

Now Thomas looked up. ‘Johno, you are the world’s bravest man. What can the doctors do?’

‘They can put me under and then cut me up with scalpels.’

Thomas offered a sympathetic expression. ‘I made up your old bed. They called me.’

‘Does everyone know?’ Johno snapped.

Thomas turned back to his game. ‘No, there are some who just came on duty. They will find out later.’

Johno could not help but smile. ‘You got school tomorrow?’

‘Only if they have school on Saturdays now, dopey head.’

‘Shit, yeah – it’s Friday. And here I am, stuck in with you.’

‘Otto said you would have trouble adjusting.’

‘Did he now.’

‘Yes. He said that no one shooting at us for many months may be a problem for you.’

‘And he’s right.’ Johnno slumped onto the sofa and grabbed the TV controls. He found a program about mercenaries in Iraq almost immediately, starting to watch with a keen interest.

‘How about a holiday?’ Thomas risked.

‘Sure,’ Johnno replied without putting up a fight. ‘Got a big meet on Monday, then we’ll head for the Bahamas.’

‘You can take me diving!’ Thomas excitedly got out, running across and plonking down next to Johnno.

Johnno put an arm around the lad. ‘Us boys gotta stick together.’ His phone chirped. Lifting it he said, ‘Yeah?’

‘A message from Herr Stanton in America, sir. He asks for a video conference at 2pm tomorrow.’

‘OK, let the gang know.’ He hung up. Brightening, Johnno said, ‘That’s more like it; yanks must have a big problem for them to want a video conference on a Saturday.’

‘Maybe someone will attack us,’ Thomas offered. ‘You will feel better then.’

Johnno focused on the lad. ‘Look, mate, I have no desire *whatsoever* ... for any more shooting around here. Conflict costs lives, and we’ve lost enough people. OK?’

The lad lowered his head. ‘OK.’

As the gang assembled around Helen's desk the next day, Claus manipulated the video screen.

'Ma'am', came from the desk phone.

'Yes?' Helen answered, expecting the call to be notification of the start of the videoconference.

'A message from Mister Stanton's assistant: he has suffered a blood clot ... and is in hospital.'

Beesely made eye contact with Johno, Otto stepping closer.

'Kindly send a card and flowers to his wife,' Otto loudly said towards the desk phone.

'Yes, sir.'

They stared at each other for several seconds before the screen came to life. It revealed just a single man, the Lodge table and fireplace clearly discernable in the background. 'Can you see and hear me?'

'Yes,' Helen answered. 'We got the message about Mister Stanton. Do you know what this meeting was to be about?'

'No, Ma'am.'

'No?' she queried.

'He organised it himself - it was to be just him. Beyond that I have no idea. Sorry.'

'Oh ... well as soon as you know anything about his condition please let us know,' Helen suggested.

'Will do, Ma'am.' The screen turned back to a blue background, and the digital clock with the odd time zone.

Helen took in the faces. 'Should we be worried?'

'Probably just a blood clot,' Beesely suggested. 'He's the same age as me.'

'A few years younger,' Otto put in.

'There's no need to be that helpful,' Beesely scolded, Otto grinning. 'Especially when it comes to my age!'

Thomas wandered in with a puzzled frown. 'I got a text message from Mister Stanton.'

Johno was immediately concerned. 'Let me see.'

Thomas handed over his mobile phone, the message reading, From Stanton: Iraq, oil tankers, mercenaries, money.

Johno slowly lifted his head, inch by inch. 'Alert state Charlie, please.'

Helen tapped a button on the phone. 'Alert status Charlie, this is not a drill.' They all focused on Johno as he deleted the text message.

'Well?' Beesely finally asked.

'Just a wild guess here, but I think he's got problems with the in-laws,' Johno replied.

'Lodge?' Beesely asked.

Johno nodded. 'So I'll keep that message to myself for now. Walls have ears, and my in-laws have great big ears.' He took a big breath. 'Anyway, now that we're all here ... I think ... I think we should be more involved in the security companies supplying mercenaries to Iraq. Some ... *money* to be made there.'

Beesely exchanged a look with Otto. 'Are we about to get involved in something we probably shouldn't?' They focused again on Johno.

'I have to do right by my in-laws. So do you!'

'What are in-laws?' Thomas asked.

'Wait till you're older,' Johno told him. 'You have that pleasure yet to come.' He elevated his gaze to Claus. 'All managers here in one hour, me and the gang have a park bench to visit.' Claus stepped out. 'Ladies and gentlemen – dress warm!'

* * *

With the castle grounds hidden under a light covering of snow, the gang were wrapped up warm, Johnno pushing Beesely's wheelchair toward the edge of the grass in front of the castle and to the first bench, the sky a dull grey filled with specs of snow.

Johnno plonked down onto the moist bench, Helen next to him, Otto remaining standing. Johnno said, 'Can't be bugged here.'

'We expecting trouble with the Lodge?' Beesely asked through the softly falling snow, his expired breath making it appear as if he were smoking.

'Dunno ... is the simple answer. But Stanton asked for a private videoconference on a frigging Saturday. Then the strange text message to Thomas.'

'So that no one their end knows,' Otto put in.

Johnno nodded. 'It's something about Iraqi oil and mercenaries.'

'We have many men working in Iraq,' Otto pointed out.

'We do?' Johnno queried.

'Yes, we own a majority stake in Northgate. They send many men there, especially the Kurdish regions where the oil is.'

'Nothing else in that text message?' Beesely nudged.

Johnno shook his head. 'Just a subtle hint.'

Helen put in, 'So we investigate, and see where it leads. He must think we'll notice whatever the problem is, or he would not have worded it like that.'

Otto said, 'There is rumour of Iraqi oil being sold by the Kurds with the cooperation of the Americans.'

'And the profits not going to the Iraqi people!' Beesely grumbled.

'Stanton can't be worried about that!' Johnno scoffed. 'He probably had a frigging hand in it!'

‘Then there’s something else going on,’ Helen suggested. ‘We can assemble half a dozen ex-troopers, from here, and send them over. They can get a feel for the oil movements.’

‘Sounds like a plan,’ Johno enthused. He stood. ‘Managers meeting, so let’s just ... increase our presence in Kurdish Iraq for now and not panic – till we need to panic.’ He pushed Beesely back into the castle.

At the managers meeting, Helen did as suggested, apologising for dragging them in on a Saturday but hinting that there was more going on than she could reveal. They were thanked and dismissed, but notified of the alert status.

Beesely dialled Duncan from his room.

‘Duncan here.’

‘It’s Beesely. Listen, you and your analyst – go back through all stories about Iraqi oil ... then read between the lines. Yanks are up to no good in Kurdish northern Iraq, I want a good hint as to what, but be *very* discreet.’

‘No problem, sir. Have a good weekend.’

‘I thought I might try ski jumping!’

Johno was already sat in his bedroom as Helen stepped in after the meeting. Whilst glancing out of the window at the grey sky he said, ‘Thomas is nagging for a dive trip ... somewhere warm.’

She drew level with him. ‘And what, exactly, did you have in mind,’ she sarcastically asked. ‘You and him trashing a hotel someplace?’

He looked up and made firm eye contact, clearly annoyed. ‘No! I thought maybe you and me on a deserted island, the brat off diving.’

She hesitated, Johno still glaring upwards. ‘Oh. Well ... where did you have in mind?’ she asked in a softer tone.

He glanced out of the window again. ‘Bahamas, or Bimini somewhere.’

She took a moment. ‘Well, that ... sounds nice. But what about ... *the problem?*’

‘It’ll take days for the boys to get into place, weeks for them to investigate.’ He shrugged. ‘Nothing going to be happening for at least ten days, and we can fly back if it does. Besides, Otto and the old fucker can run this place ... they did well enough at it before now.’

Thomas knocked and shouted, ‘Are you in?’

‘Come in,’ Helen called.

Thomas bound up to Johno. ‘Well?’ he hesitantly nudged.

‘You’d best ask the boss woman of the family,’ Johno replied, still staring again out of the window at the slowly falling snow.

Helen smiled down at Thomas, a hand on the lad’s shoulder. ‘I think we could all use a break.’

‘I will pack my scuba gear,’ Thomas shouted as he ran out. ‘My new inflationary jacket.’

‘Buoyancy jacket! An inflationary jacket is what the British Prime Minister wears.’ Johno lifted his satellite phone. ‘Ready a Gulfstream for late tonight; me, Helen and Thomas are going to the Bahamas for a few days. Ta, love.’

Otto knocked and stepped in five minutes later, handing over a one-page document to Helen. She read it before handing it to a curious Johno.

Johno smiled and looked up from his seat. ‘It’s good to be based in Switzerland, isn’t it boys and girls. It’s the kind of place where dodgy *money* from dodgy *oil sales* gets routed.’

‘I will have a complete picture for when you return,’ Otto offered. He stiffened, his hands clasped behind his back. ‘Unless, of course, Helen wishes to stay here ... and I go with you, Johnno.’

Johnno laughed loudly.

Helen inched closer to Otto. ‘Since I went through childbirth twice ... I’m sympathising with Marie, not you. You men have *no idea* what we go through. Go and be a good husband.’

Looking glum, Otto turned and stepped out.

Helen returned to Johnno. ‘Why fly tonight?’

‘Ten hour flight, sleep on the plane and wake-up refreshed in the sunshine,’ he enthused, rubbing his hands.

Kidnap

1

At 10am the next day, the jet-lagged group arrived at the same Bahamian villa they had stayed at previously, a set of spare keys handed over. Despite trying to sleep on the plane, they all flopped onto their beds whilst the guards checked the villa for bugs and bombs.

Two hours later, dressed in a t-shirt and shorts, Johnno jumped into the pool, finding the water cool and refreshing. Unpacked, Helen grabbed a magazine, an ice-tea from the live-in maid, and sat by the pool under a large straw hat.

Thomas appeared half an hour later, dragging a huge kitbag. On the grass next to the pool he laid out several towels and unloaded his diving gear. Everything was diligently checked, washed in the pool, tested, and then assembled. The guards had brought in several small steel air tanks from a local dive centre, and now handed one over.

‘It’s Jacques Cousteau,’ Johno loudly stated as Thomas approached the pool, awkwardly walking sideways with his flippers on.

Thomas manoeuvred himself to the side of the pool, held his mask and regulator and fell backwards. He surfaced with a diver’s ‘OK’ hand signal, his mask just above the water, and let the air out of his buoyancy jacket.

‘Will he be alright?’ Helen asked.

‘Sure,’ Johno said, but stood anyway a moment later and stepped to the edge of the pool, observing his charge and the bubbles produced.

After ten minutes, Thomas surfaced, holding onto the side of the pool and spitting out his regulator. ‘It’s boring, there are no fish!’ he said, sounding nasal.

‘Tomorrow morning we’ll hire a boat and crew. Now, practise clearing your mask, and swimming without it. You remember how to check your buoyancy?’

‘Yes.’ Thomas disappeared beneath the water.

By 3pm, Johno was snoring under a large umbrella, Thomas on the nearby beach with a few of the guards, and Helen had moved inside to the cooler interior, brass ceiling fans whirring away.

2

All hungry at 7pm, after a snack earlier, they headed for a local seafood restaurant, the chosen establishment built on stilts and jutting out into in the water. Shown to a table, the guard detail allocated their own table, Helen, Johno and Thomas settled with their backs to the open windows, the sound of gentle waves adding to the ambience.

An hour into the meal, Johno and Thomas cracking open lobster claws, Johno became irritated by a man at the bar. The man seemed to be a local; red faced, portly and dressed

in a Hawaiian shirt. And he was getting louder by the minute.

‘American, probably retired down here,’ Helen said when she noticed Johno staring at the man.

‘Shoot him,’ Thomas suggested, getting a look and a pointed fork from Helen.

They continued with their meal, but Johno was distracted. When Helen returned from the toilets, the man said, ‘Hey there, lady.’ He said nothing more, but Johno was boiling.

With their deserts placed down, the trio trying to chat about diving, and the history or pirates around the Caribbean, the loudmouth finally focused on them.

‘Hey, you lot English or something?’

Helen glanced over her shoulder, offering the man a dangerous look. Turning back, she said, ‘Ignore him.’

When the waiter brought Johno another beer, Johno asked, ‘Why do you tolerate that guy?’

‘He part-owns the restaurant, sir.’

With the waiter gone, Helen commented, ‘That’s a poor show, putting off your own guests.’

‘He’s a Bahamas rummy,’ Johno said. ‘Plenty of those around here.’

‘We’re always helping out you Brits,’ the man added, not talking to anyone in particular. ‘Where the hell were you during the Iraq war?’

Helen sighed. ‘Thomas, you see that cricket bat on the wall over my left shoulder.’

Thomas looked. ‘Yes?’

‘Go and take it down, and play with it till the man is very annoyed, and then do whatever comes to mind.’

Thomas scraped back his chair and stood, walking towards the wall where various ornaments and curiosities hung.

‘Eh ... excuse me, Miss Eddington-Small,’ Johno began.
‘But are we trying to set a bad example for the kid?’

‘He’s a kid, he can ... do things that we couldn’t, and he’ll not be arrested.’

‘Hey, kid, don’t touch that!’ broke their conversation.

Thomas ignored the man, pretending to play cricket with the bat. The man put down his drink, wobbled a little, then stepped over.

‘Hey, son!’

Thomas stepped sideways towards the man, as if dancing down the crease, and swung the bat, hitting the man in the groin. The sound let out by the man caused everyone to stop and stare, the large man slowly crumpling.

‘I’m terribly sorry, sir,’ Thomas offered, appearing to the restaurant’s patrons to be a polite boy after a simple accident. But Thomas ignored the man’s pain and took up his stance again, tapping the cricket bat against his right foot. With a side step, again dancing down the crease, Thomas swung the bat and hit the man fully in the face, knocking him backwards. ‘I’m terribly sorry, sir,’ he repeated.

Returning to their table, Thomas tossed the cricket bat through one of the open windows, into the surf, and sat back down. ‘The bat’s a bit too big for me.’

The patrons were still staring wide-eyed at the owner as waiters offered napkins for the man’s bleeding nose. The waiters helped him out.

Johno focused on Helen. ‘And this by you is a good example for the lad?’

‘He insulted the British armed services,’ Helen stated, as if shocked that Johno did not understand or appreciate that.

Johno shook his head. ‘You should have just let me hit him.’

‘Should we leave before the police get here?’ Thomas asked, but not sounding concerned.

‘No,’ Johno said. ‘When the police get here we’ll tell them you have a learning disability. Won’t be difficult for them to accept.’

Thirty minutes later, a group of four men appeared, two locals and two white men, all well built. They entered at the opposite side of the restaurant to where the guards sat, Johno and Helen now on the local rum and more relaxed.

‘Oh oh,’ Thomas said, nodding towards the men.

Johno looked up. ‘You caused the problem, you fix it.’

‘Easy,’ Thomas said as he stood. He walked to the opposite door to the men. ‘Bet you fat lumps can’t catch me.’

The men glanced at each other, then towards Helen and Johno, before advancing on Thomas. Thomas ran out, the men following.

‘Should we do something?’ Helen asked, now concerned.

‘Nope, it’s his problem. We could always adopt a girl.’

Thomas returned five minutes later, shaking his fist. ‘That hurt. Those men were big.’ He reclaimed his seat as many of patrons stared across at him.

‘So,’ Johno began. ‘You led them to the guards in the jeep, who worked the men over, yeah?’

Thomas nodded with a grin.

Back at the villa, Johno grabbed the senior guard without Helen noticing. ‘I want that restaurant in pieces, in the water, by dawn.’

With a dangerous grin, the man stepped out.

* * *

Driving to the dive boat in the morning, Helen noticed the restaurant as they passed, what was left of it, and the police cars nearby. She gave Johno a look, shaking her head.

‘You drew up the battle lines, love, not me,’ Johno told her. ‘I would have just hit him. You declared war.’

3

After a good days diving, the gang sat around the pool at 3pm and enjoyed a sandwich.

A guard stepped out to them. ‘There is a man here, from a local association. Something about a residents party at a local house, a fundraiser.’

‘Send him in,’ Helen said.

The man resembled the drunk from the restaurant; pink face, colourful shirt, shorts and sandals. ‘My German is not very good, I’m afraid.’

‘We’re English,’ Helen said.

‘Oh, splendid, splendid; they said you were Swiss at the rental agency.’ He extended a hand. ‘I run the local residents charitable round table, and I’d just like to invite you to the next ball and fundraiser, it’s ... oh, hang on.’ He checked the card. ‘Yes, Tuesday, two days time.’

‘Tuesday is tomorrow,’ Helen pointed out, a quick glance at Johno.

‘Is it? Well, er, we’d love you come along. It’s at the historic society’s old plantation house.’

‘Sounds nice,’ Helen enthused. She accepted the invite. ‘We’ll be there.’

‘Splendid, splendid. It’s formal wear, black tie, valet parking. There’s a little map on the back; I’m always taking the wrong turn. Anyway, look forward to seeing you there. Oh, bugger, almost forgot.’ He took back the invite. ‘I

printed the damn thing wrong, been meaning to alter it for ages. It's Thomas Lane, not Grove.'

Helen altered the map and street name. That done, the guards showed the man out.

'Does that drunken twat even know what island he's on?' Johno asked, picking up the invite.

'Ex-pats in the sun do tend to drink a bit,' Helen admitted. 'He reminds me of an uncle who retired out here.'

'We'll need to hire monkey suits,' Johno grumbled.

'Is it fancy dress?' Thomas asked, getting a look from Johno.

'Yes,' Johno told him. 'You'll be going dressed as a banana.'

* * *

The following evening they tugged on cuffs, checked bowties, and jumped into their Limo as the sun set. Half an hour later their limo slowed, two local police officers illuminated by the car's headlights. Stood at the gate to the mansion, the officers now waved the limo inside.

'Looks a bit dilapidated,' Johno commented, taking in what he could of mansion's high stone walls.

'It's two hundred years old,' Helen countered.

They eased through the gates and onto a poorly maintained track.

'Should have come by bloody jeep,' Johno grumbled as they bumped along a tree-lined road.

'It's beautiful,' Helen let out as they got their first glimpse of the mansion, its lights burning brightly. 'Looks like an old plantation house, well maintained.'

Another local police officer stood on the steps to the large house, a valet in a red jacket stood waiting. Red carpet

crept up the centre of the steps, lined by red ropes running through brass poles.

‘We early or late?’ Johnno asked when he could see no other cars.

‘Probably parked around the back,’ Helen suggested.

Their limo’s door was duly opened by the valet, the man offering a hand to Helen. Thomas followed, then Johnno, their two Swiss guards exiting the other side. The valet was excused, the limo pulling off and planning on returning later. Tugging again on his jacket and his shirt cuffs, Johnno headed up the steps and to the main door. Oddly, no one was there to greet them. He turned the handle, and stepped in to find an ornate and dated hallway, the distant sound of music coming from the rear of the large house.

The door clicked shut behind them as four silenced shots registered, the reports echoing around the room. Johnno spun around in time to see their two Swiss guards crumple. He looked up as Helen yelped, finding six men with weapons on a balcony at the top of the stairs.

‘Welcome to the party,’ a man said in a distinct Irish accent. Johnno recognised the lilt: Belfast. The man casually stepped down, adding, ‘You’re punctual. Now, keep your hands where we can see them.’

The remaining gunmen came down the stairs as the punctual visitors stood rooted to the spot.

A second Caucasian pointed towards the rear. ‘You can understand English?’

Johnno made eye contact with Helen, a quizzical look exchanged, before nodding.

‘Out the back, Swiss family,’ the man commanded, again in a Belfast accent. The visitors were herded towards the rear, nudged along with pistol muzzles in their backs.

As the group progressed through the house, the gunmen reached into the captives pockets and grabbed their phones,

leaving them on a table. Helen's bag was also snatched and left, their captors making no effort to search it. The trio were frisked as they walked, being pushed quickly towards the rear of the house, onto its dark lawn and toward a waiting speedboat.

The boat was cramped with them all aboard, the captors taking no chances and cuffing all three of their charges. With a roar of three large outboard engines, they pulled away, soon heading straight out to sea at forty miles per hour.

Johno turned his head and watched the shoreline fade through the dark. The lights of the distant coast remained in his left field of view for half an hour before disappearing. Fifteen minutes later and they were still going at full pelt, the captives closing their eyes to keep the salty spray out.

* * *

Hans, the evening's detail commander, sat waiting in his jeep beyond the bend in the mansion road. Fifteen minutes after they had dropped off the partygoers, he called the second vehicle, parked observing the front of the mansion from two hundred yards away. 'Have you seen any other vehicles?'

'No, nothing,' came back.

'It's a party, there must be some vehicles besides ours.'

'We cannot see the police on the gate anymore. I'm sending someone around the back to have a look. Standby.'

Five minutes later came, 'Hans, this is Milo. I can see over the wall at the rear. Three policemen and one valet just got into a boat and headed off. There is no one else visible, but I can hear music. Lights on in the house.'

'Move in closer,' Hans ordered. 'Move to the front gate.'

When the men arrived at the front gate they noted the large chain and padlock immediately.

‘Ram through!’ Hans ordered. ‘Someone call Johno.’

Their heavy jeep easily took the dated gates off its hinges, driving over them and speeding along the rough track towards the mansion.

‘No response from Johno’s phone!’ came from the rear.

They skidded to a halt on the dusty track and jumped down, weapons in hand. The front door was locked, kicked in. Once inside they spread out, soon finding the three satellite phones and Helen’s bag.

‘Search every room!’ Hans ordered. Lifting his phone he shouted, ‘Alarm. Johno, Helen and Thomas have been kidnapped!’

4

Adrienne, Beesely’s favourite telephonist, was working a Tuesday nightshift when the message arrived. She was the senior telephonist on duty, her three assistants sat nearby. Taking the call, she glanced at her shocked colleagues, the first of which was touch-typing the message as it came in.

‘I’m waking Herr Beesely,’ Adrienne insisted as she stood. Detaching her headset, the computers immediately diverted her calls to the second in seniority as she headed along the companionway, the opposite side of the command centre to Beesely’s office, and towards the foyer.

At the door to the third floor she collected two troopers, asking them to follow. She banged on Beesely’s door. ‘Sir? Herr Beesely?’ Without waiting she punched a four-digit number into the new electronic door lock and entered, flicking on the lights.

‘Wha ... what is it?’ Beesely croaked as he eased up in bed.

Adrienne closed in on the bed. ‘Sir, sorry to disturb you, but we have an emergency – I thought you would want to know.’ Beesely looked up and waited expectantly. ‘Sir, Johno, Helen and Thomas ... they have been kidnapped in the Bahamas.’

Beesely forced a big breath as his side door opened, his nurse stepping in wearing a dressing gown. ‘Give me two minutes, I’ll be straight down.’

Five minutes later, Beesely motored himself into the command centre, two troopers in tow. Once in his office he tapped the phone and said, ‘Is that you, Adrienne?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Order some tea then come over.’ He turned his head to the first trooper. ‘Get Kev and Mavo.’ The man lifted his radio as he stepped to the corridor.

Adrienne stepped straight in.

‘Sit here,’ he told her, offering Helen’s chair. ‘And fire up the computer for me.’

She sat and called up the operational software routine, a red box flashing on the screen and denoting the kidnap. Henri, the only manager on duty stepped in and waited.

‘Grab your colleagues,’ Beesely ordered Henri.

‘I am afraid, sir, that I am the only one here tonight.’

‘The only one? Oh, that big bank function in Zurich.’

‘Yes, sir. They are all staying in the hotel.’

‘And Otto?’

‘At the hotel, sir, but the roads are terrible at the moment.’

‘They are?’ Beesely puzzled.

‘A blizzard, sir. The worst weather for twenty years.’

‘Crikey!’

‘The authorities have the snowploughs out now, sir. Should be clear by morning.’

‘You best stay out there then – Adrienne can liase from here.’

‘Very good, sir.’ He stepped out as Kev and Mavo stepped in.

‘Were you on duty?’ Beesely asked them.

‘No, sir, but kipping down below; weather’s a bitch tonight.’

‘I heard. Grab yourselves a coffee and then check our hostage rescue teams, here and South America; someone has grabbed Johno and Helen in the Bahamas!’

‘Grabbed them?’ Kev repeated, Mavo stood wide-eyed at the suggestion.

‘Kidnapped the three of them -’

‘How’s that possible?’ Mavo challenged.

‘Whoever grabbed them -’ Beesely began.

‘Knew exactly what they were doing!’ Kev finished off with a knowing look.

Beesely nodded. ‘An inside job, I’m thinking. Possibly CIA.’

‘Shit,’ Mavo let out.

The blast wave from the explosion could be felt by all of them, a reverberation echoing around the command centre. Everyone looked up at the ceiling as an alarm sounded.

The desk phone burst to life, ‘Explosion in Herr Beesely’s bedroom!’

Kev and Mavo checked their weapons, getting ready. Kev called, ‘What the fuck yis say about an inside job?’

‘You two, guard that door!’ Beesely ordered. ‘Any member of staff acting funny ... you know what to do.’ He turned to Adrienne. ‘Alert all staff and branches.’

She typed away furiously for several seconds, the screen confirming that the alert had been sent. Messages were coming back in, acknowledgments and staff positions, most of the senior staff being at the Zurich hotel function.

Simon appeared in the doorway. ‘Anything I can do, sir? I understand we are short staffed.’

Beesely pointed to his right, opposite Adrienne. ‘Sit there, grab a pen and paper, and fire up the computer.’ Simon got to ready, Beesely asking, ‘How many guards on duty?’

‘Normal compliment of compound guards, sir, but tonight many junior staff. The senior staff -’

‘Are in Zurich,’ Beesely finished off. ‘And whoever blew up my room probably knows it.’ He turned to Adrienne and put a hand on her arm, offering a warm smile. ‘You saved my life, my dear.’

‘An honour, sir.’

‘Was it a missile?’ Beesely asked Simon.

‘Not in this weather,’ Simon insisted. ‘There is a one hundred kilometre wind out there - a blizzard that people cannot stand up in, zero visibility.’

Beesely eased back. ‘Which is probably why someone would attack now; we’re blind!’

Simon added, ‘The infra red cameras don’t work, or the motion sensors or underground pressure pads – not unless someone is very close.’

‘So we *are* blind,’ Beesely thought out loud. ‘Very blind. And all this happens when Johno is kidnapped. Coincidence?’

‘No, sir,’ Adrienne firmly suggested as she monitored the screen.

Beesely forced a breath. ‘Contact that hotel in Zurich, tell them to expect a bomb attack imminently.’

Adrienne grabbed the desk phone and got through to the senior guard in charge of security at the hotel, relaying the message. Fresh tea and coffee arrived, Beesely taking a sip.

A guard appeared in the doorway. ‘Sir?’ Beesely waved him in. ‘The bomb in your room, sir, it was placed on your window sill.’

‘Placed?’ Beesely challenged. ‘In this weather?’

‘Yes, sir, we can see the scorch marks.’

‘And my room, what condition?’

‘Completely destroyed sir, your nurse dead.’ Beesely took a moment, heaving a sigh. The guard added, ‘We’ve blocked up the windows, and there is no fire, sir.’

‘OK, look for forensics,’ Beesely softly requested, running a hand over his bald pate as the guard withdrew.

‘You were the target,’ Simon noted. ‘Not the castle.’

Beesely turned and nodded. ‘And I’m beginning to wonder if we missed someone at Basel.’

Adrienne put in, ‘The Basel members had many friends - powerful and rich people - who were not members of the Basel lodge.’

‘And one them wants some payback,’ Beesely surmised, staring towards the open door. ‘Someone who doesn’t fear us ... *and* has the ability to attack us.’

‘Whoever placed that bomb is a special forces man with expert climbing skills,’ Simon suggested. ‘To climb the castle walls in this weather, and without being detected...’

‘Yes,’ Beesely said with an absent nod. ‘Top of the range. Question is ... is he alone, and did he bring just the one bomb?’ He took in their expectant faces.

‘There is a protocol for this weather and kind of attack, sir,’ Adrienne informed him.

‘There is?’ Beesely puzzled.

‘Yes, sir. Protocol: Blizzard Alpha. Herr Johno set it up.’ She called up the protocol and then clicked ACTIVATE. Up came a series of questions: the weather, the visibility, depth of the snow on the ground and the staff available. Then

came the ACTION section, where she entered INTRUDERS and then clicked HAND CARRIED EXPLOSIVES.

‘OK,’ she said as Simon called it up on his screen. ‘First, get all staff inside except gate staff.’

‘Our guards are Swiss, my dear, and they know their way around snow and blizzards. Why should we not be sending them out to kill the attackers?’

‘Our guards will be dressed in white, so too the attackers, the visibility very poor. They will end up shooting each other in the cross-fire.’

Beesely nodded. ‘Johno *has* done his homework.’

She lifted the desk phone and hit the tannoy. ‘All staff, all staff, Protocol Blizzard Alpha.’

‘What will that do?’ Beesely asked.

‘Each guard section manager will organise their staff accordingly, clearing anyone outside, and preventing anyone else moving around the compound.’

‘OK, good. What else?’

‘Question,’ she read. ‘Do we think they have more explosives?’

‘Yes,’ Beesely unhappily sighed.

She clicked a box. Up came a sub-protocol: SAND BAG.

‘Sand bag?’ Beesely puzzled.

Simon put in, ‘In this weather, the attackers can get close to a door or wall of a key area and blow a hole, injuring people inside and gaining access to inner areas. If sandbags are placed in a certain way they will absorb a lot of the blast and direct it back outwards.’

‘Good idea,’ Beesely enthused. ‘Johno came up with this?’

‘Yes,’ Simon answered. ‘He created thirty protocols, most in great detail.’

‘Hasn’t just been sitting on his arse then,’ Beesely commented, turning back to the screen. ‘What next?’

Adrienne hit the tannoy button again. ‘All staff, all staff: sand bag, sand bag.’

5

In the Great Hall, guards threw back sets of tall plastic curtains and revealed a pre-stacked mountain of sandbags. With weapons slung, the junior guards got to work, soon an ant-like chain of men placing sandbags against the main door, building up a pyramid shape. As they toiled, the troopers got to work opening up slots drilled into the thick walls, several clambering up ladders at the side of the room to a balcony that gave access to the courtyard roof.

On the balcony, which faced inwards and viewed the Great Hall, they opened up slits plugged with heavy metal covers. Peering down gave them a view of the courtyard, now empty of staff, but crammed with four range rovers. One of the men raised his radio.

Simon’s radio came to life. ‘Simon, we are above the courtyard, but our field of fire is blocked by the Range Rovers.’

Simon turned to Beesely, who had been listening in.

Beesely said, ‘We may need them to ferry wounded away.’

The lights went out. After a second of darkness they came back up, but not as bright as before, everyone glancing upwards.

‘What the hell was that?’ Beesely demanded.

‘Main power has been cut,’ Adrienne informed him. ‘We are on generator power.’

‘Generator? How long will that last?’

‘I believe we have four hours, sir.’

‘Less,’ Simon suggested. ‘We have a lot more electrical equipment than before, and the new guard barracks inside.’

Beesely ordered, ‘Shut down all unnecessary electrical equipment, all computers not being worked on. And all outside lights, they’re pretty bloody useless at the moment anyway.’

Adrienne gave the message over the tannoy.

‘Sir,’ Simon called. ‘They would only cut the power if they meant to enter the castle.’

‘Or maybe,’ Adrienne put in, ‘they do not want us to coordinate the search for Johnno.’

‘Good point,’ Beesely conceded. ‘And you may both be right. If the weather conditions were anything other than a blizzard I’d say you were correct, Adrienne. But tonight, well, this is happening now for a reason. Fix bayonets!’

Simon checked his pistol and Beesely retrieved one from a desk drawer.

Adrienne hit the tannoy. ‘Lock down, lock down! Fix bayonets, fix bayonets – this is not a drill!’ A shrill alarm sounded briefly.

Bilbo and Blinkey appeared in the doorway a minute later, wandering in and sitting on the cabinet.

When Adrienne noticed Beesely’s look, she said, ‘Part of the Fix Bayonets protocol, sir. Four troopers for each senior figure.’ Beesely absently nodded.

Five minutes later, Simon raised his radio. ‘Report sand bag readiness. Great hall?’

‘Eighty percent done.’

‘Command centre?’

‘Half way.’

Beesely faced the troopers. ‘Help with those sandbags.’ They rushed out.

Simon radioed, ‘Lower bunker access?’

‘Ready.’

‘East tunnel entrance?’

‘Ready.’

‘West tunnel entrance?’

‘Ready?’

‘Barracks?’

‘Nearly ready.’

* * *

Bilbo re-appeared five minutes later, out of breath. ‘Been a while since I lugged bleeding sandbags.’

Blinky said, ‘Carpets will need a Hoover after, boss.’ They resumed their prior positions on the cabinet.

Beesely asked Adrienne, ‘Is everyone inside and locked down?’

She checked the screen; twelve boxes in a vertical line had small green ticks displayed. ‘Yes, sir. All managers report their sections ready. Next item in the protocol is counter measures.’

‘Counter measures?’

‘To keep the attackers away and to disrupt their plans.’

‘Sounds good. What’s first?’

‘Fifty Calibre Snow Flakes, sir.’

‘What?’ Beesely challenged.

Simon explained, ‘The cliff top will fire at random into the compound, might get lucky and hit someone moving around.’

‘Someone ... who believes they are invisible because of the blizzard.’

‘But are not bullet proof,’ Simon pointed out.

Beesely hit a button on the desk phone. ‘Cliff top, Fifty Calibre Snow Flakes.’ He listened. ‘Would we hear them?’

‘No, sir,’ Simon informed him. ‘The people outside will not hear them either, they will have no idea where the firing is are coming from.’

‘Excellent. What else can we do?’

Adrienne said, ‘GPMG Hail Storm.’

‘GPMG ... hail storm?’ Beesely repeated. ‘Fire outwards with GPMGs?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Simon informed him. He lifted his radio. ‘Cliff Mid-Section, GPMG Hail Storm. Commence.’

‘Ah, the firing position in the middle of the cliff,’ Beesely realised, raising a finger. ‘But won’t they hit the restaurant and other buildings?’

‘No, sir. They have fixed metal plates that do not allow the weapons to fire toward sensitive areas.’

‘Johno ... set this up?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Beesely gave an approving nod. Then the lights went out again, now just a dim grey glow from emergency battery power.

‘The generator has gone,’ Adrienne suggested.

‘Gone?’ Beesely challenged. ‘Out of fuel ... or been destroyed?’ He turned to Simon. ‘Send someone to check.’ Simon stepped out. Beesely asked Adrienne, ‘How come the computers are still working?’

‘APUs, sir. One hour battery power.’

‘Kev!’ Beesely called. Kev stepped in. ‘I want a system of runners set up, ten fit young men out there ready, people ready at every door to pass messages on.’

‘Right, boss.’

‘It’s like the bleeding First World War,’ Beesely grumbled. ‘Not two thousand and seven. We’ll be using cups with bits of string next.’

‘Radios and satellite phones will work outside, sir. Also from the restaurant,’ Adrienne suggested.

‘Good, good.’

‘There is also the problem of the temperature, sir.’

The temperature?’

‘We now have no heaters working in the command centre – they are electric, sir.’

‘Crikey! Going to get very chilly down here, very damn quickly!’

She nodded in the gloomy grey light. ‘Dark and cold, sir.’ Standing, she retrieved two battery-powered lamps, placing them on the desk. The office was soon bright again. Opening another cabinet she retrieved two shiny brass paraffin lamps that appeared to be a hundred years old.

‘When I said ... like the First World war...’

She smiled. ‘Thomas asked for them, just in case.’

‘Thomas?’

‘Yes, sir,’ she said with a smile. ‘He insisted they would be useful.’ She lit the first lamp. ‘Each will last two or three hours. We have a hundred, paraffin to last several days.’

Kev stepped in. ‘Fanny by gaslight?’

‘I believe, Kev, it was Fanny by candlelight.’

‘Like bleeding Christmas out there,’ Kev added. ‘They’ve all got them paraffin lamps going.’

‘Runners ready?’

‘Aye, all ready. Most of the doors stay shut, so they shout through to the next man.’

‘First job, tell someone in the restaurant to call the Swiss Government and to let them know about our situation.’ Kev stepped out as Simon re-entered, carrying a paraffin lamp of his own.

‘Generator was blown up, sir. Three men wounded.’

‘How many doctors do we have in here tonight?’

‘Two doctors and a great many medics. There are four field medics that Johnno recruited, a triage station set up in the guard barracks. I have opened up the door in the kitchen

storeroom and sent another twenty men through to the castle.’

He sat, his computer screen as he left it. ‘Sir, I think we should move the cars out of the courtyard, they will help people approach unseen.’

‘Kev!’ Beesely called.

‘Aye, sir?’

‘How many men down in your grotto under the courtyard?’

‘Twenty odd, sir. Ready squads waiting there ready to charge out.’

‘Send someone out of the Great Hall. Tell them to go to the edge of the drawbridge and to fire at random into the dark, then to drive the Range Rovers down to the east camp, or at least away from the courtyard.’

‘Will do, sir.’

‘Ah, we can’t do that yet, sir,’ Simon said. ‘The cliff top may still be firing.’

‘Crickey, yes! Kev, just nudge them one at a time out of the drawbridge, so long as they are not close to the Great Hall door.’ Kev disappeared into the gloom.

* * *

From above the courtyard, several troopers watched through the grey half-light as a guard ran forwards, knocking on the door to the Templar Vault. His shadowy movements were illustrated by several paraffin lamps now placed outside. The man jumped back as several weapons emerged from the dark, then relayed the message, pointing at the Range Rovers. When done he ran back to the Great Hall.

A trooper appeared from the Templar Vault with a GPMG, heading towards the swirling snow of the drawbridge as the others jumped into vehicles. Stood as

close as he could get to the start of the drifting snow, the trooper fired outwards till he had no ammunition left in the belt. Turning, he gave a thumbs-up.

The first Range Rover sped quickly into the snowdrift, the driver jumping clear and landing in the soft snow. His vehicle did not get far, halting in view, its red rear lights visible through the falling snow.

As the man scrambled back through the snowdrift, the second vehicle edged slowly along, the driver halting and exiting before the snow began, waving the third vehicle forward. It moved in close and then nudged the vehicle in front, pushing it forwards till they were both in the snow. The driver jumped out and returned, the fourth vehicle now attempting to nudge the line of cars further out. The rear of his vehicle disappeared from view, the man returning a few seconds later. He and his colleagues ducked back into the vault, closing the door, the courtyard now clear.

* * *

Kev stepped back into the Beesely's office. 'Done, sir, courtyard clear, vehicles on the tarmac outside.'

The dull echo of a bang could be heard.

'What the hell was that?' Beesely asked, Kev running out, and to the main command centre door.

Returning, Kev informed them, 'RPG fired at the Vault door. Three men injured.'

'Can they get out the back way?'

'Yes, sir, but a hell'ov a bloody hike for an injured man.'

'Are there medics in there?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then let's hope their injuries are not serious. Send runners to find out.'

‘Use the hole in Johnno’s old room!’ Simon suggested. ‘It will be quicker.’

Kev disappeared out the door.

6

Old Matt the armourer had heard the blast, working now in lamplight. ‘Someone needs a wee change of attitude, aye.’ He unlocked a metal box and retrieved ten large napalm grenades. Carrying them on a small tray, he stepped into the trooper’s room, past the injured men being tended and up the cold and dark stairs.

‘Matt, what you doing here?’ a man asked above the roar of the wind.

‘People out there need a wee wake-up call.’ He faced the three men as they covered the drawbridge entrance from behind sandbags, the wooden door to the Vault now gone. ‘Take two each, pull and throw together – left, right and down the bloody centre.’

The men glanced at each other, grabbed two grenades each, then jumped over the sandbag wall and out into the courtyard. They ran to sheltered corners just inside the drawbridge, covered from outside view.

The first man said, ‘One in the entrance first.’ He pulled the pin and threw into the grey snow, ducking back against the wall. They did not feel or hear the blast over the roar of the blizzard, but the dark courtyard lit up briefly.

In a synchronised movement, they turned and ran four steps, the area outside the drawbridge still brightly lit with numerous points of brilliant white burning napalm. The heat and light from the Napalm now illustrated the position of the previously unseen Range Rovers, a tyre appearing to be on fire. Pins pulled, grenades thrown, they rushed back inside.

The courtyard briefly lit up again as the men ducked back into the Vault, nestling behind the sandbags and breathing heavily, their breath clearly visible in the cold air. Matt appeared with a lamp.

‘Good one, Matt,’ they commended. ‘Roasted the fuckers.’

He handed up a Claymore with a wire remote detonator. ‘Stick that in the letterbox, the wire back here. If they fire again, set it off.’ He handed over a night sight.

They got to work as Matt descended the steps, mumbling to himself.

* * *

‘Napalm?’ Beesely repeated as Kev relayed the story. ‘That should cause them to think twice.’

‘Claymore there as well now,’ Kev added.

‘Good. But I don’t think whoever is out there will be leaving just yet. They knew to hit the vault door -’

‘Could have seen the boys moving the cars, sir,’ Kev suggested.

‘Maybe,’ Beesely conceded. ‘Is the cliff top still firing?’

‘Aye, sir. Restaurant boys say they can see the odd tracer.’

‘Those restaurant boys are vulnerable. Tell them to move away from the glass, and any direct blast area. In fact, tell everyone up there to move away from the glass.’ As Kev stepped out, Beesely eased back and sighed, rubbing his hands as the room cooled down.

‘Time for a jacket, sir,’ Simon suggested, stepping out and returning with two fur-lined snow jackets, one each for Beesely and Adrienne. Handing Adrienne hers, he said, ‘About ten sizes too big for you.’ She rolled up the sleeves.

Beesely pointed to the metal corkscrew stairs at the rear of the office. 'Pop up there and grab some blankets,' he asked Simon.

When Simon returned, struggling down the narrow steps with the large bundle, he dumped them onto the chairs, folding one and placing on Beesely's legs.

The manager, Henri, stepped in, struggling with a large gas heater. 'It's gas, sir,' he said, out of breath as he placed it down. He turned on the gas and hit the igniters, three panels glowing. 'This should help.'

'Do your lot have some?'

'A few, sir.'

'Guess there's not a lot your staff can do at the moment.'

'No, sir,' Henri conceded. 'We could evacuate via the east tunnel, but the road conditions are terrible.'

'Probably safer in here,' Beesely offered, Henri bowing his head and stepping out.

A long cold night

1

From the vault sandbags, trooper Dano observed the grey square of dim light that was drawbridge entrance, the view of his own breath a distraction. He raised the night sight and peered through. The castle's walls appeared a dark blue, as did the flecks of snow, the background a lighter blue-grey. The napalm had burnt itself out, but the rear parking lights of a Range Rover were still visible, tiny red pinpricks in the centre of the screen.

Movement. Someone put their head around the wall for a second. 'Movement!' he whispered.

The man next to him lifted a pen torch and sent a Morse code message towards the Great Hall. 'Contact!'

Dano lifted the Claymore detonator, concentrating on the thermal image. 'RPG!' he whispered. He could see the end of it, but from where the Claymore rested the RPG firer would not be hit. The image grew, now the end of the RPG and half a face. 'When I say, charge out and fire immediately left of the entrance, round the wall, in tight and close.' They got ready.

The RPG disappeared around the wall, but a clanking sound suggested a grenade on the courtyard floor. He ducked behind the sandbag wall. 'Grenade!'

Nothing went bang, but he could see the cloud of smoke when he lifted up. And smell it: CS gas. 'Gas! Gas! Gas!' he shouted.

The troopers did not have their gas masks with them and ran down the steps. Three more gas canisters rolled into the courtyard, followed by four smoke canisters.

As the troopers reached the bottom of the stairs, the blast coming from behind them suggested another RPG hit. Matt stood throwing gas masks at the men, the same three troopers soon back to the sandbags, which were worse for wear from another hit, the steps now slippery with sand.

Dano focused the night sight and peered through his gas mask as best he could. The swirls of gas caught his attention. ‘Thermal smoke!’ he whispered. ‘Can’t see a bloody thing!’ He lifted the Claymore detonator. ‘Fuck it,’ he let out as he set it off, the blast reverberating around the courtyard.

The men lifted their heads, but were unable to see anything. They certainly did not see the RPG streaking towards them.

2

‘One killed, one badly hurt in the vault,’ Kev sombrely relayed. ‘We’s sitting ducks in this weather.’

‘They’ll hit the Great Hall doors next,’ Beesely suggested.

‘Aye,’ Kev agreed. ‘Using some sort a thermal smoke, can’a see through it with night sights.’

Beesely turned to Simon. ‘How much test nerve gas do we have?’

‘Ten grenades.’

‘Get it to the Great Hall,’ Beesely ordered, Simon stepping out.

Kev stepped closer. ‘Sir, we make a mistake with that stuff and our boys will be ones getting it!’

‘The wind around the courtyard will disperse it. Hopefully. But warn everyone.’

* * *

In the Great Hall, the senior guard commander ordered, 'Anyone without a gas mask - withdraw! Everyone else, make sure your collars are done up, hoods, no gaps at the sleeve. Test nerve gas *will* be used.'

Gas masks were handed out, clothing adjusted. The viewing slits above the courtyard had been closed due to the CS gas, a faint whiff of it now in the Great Hall. Fortunately, the high ceiling of the large room was collecting most of it, the resident pigeons suffering.

The Great Hall's main door opened both ways, now partially blocked inside by a pyramid of sandbags up to two metres. Sandbag positions were also ready in front of the foyer door, either side, men positioned inside with weapons pointed outwards. A runway style set of lights now lit the main walkway; twenty flickering paraffin lamps spread out.

As the last few men without gas masks stepped into the foyer, the Great Hall door erupted.

'Christ! I felt that!' Beesely said.

'Great Hall door was hit!' a trooper shouted from outside.

'We need to get you to the lower bunker,' Simon firmly suggested.

'No!' Beesely insisted. 'We stay and fight. I refuse to believe that we can be beaten, and I'm not having someone destroy my command centre,' he growled.

Kev stepped in. 'They also hit the glass on the stairway up the castle with RPGs.'

'Be a bit cold in the castle then,' Beesely softly stated.

'They were aiming for the troopers,' Simon suggested.

‘What?’ Beesely puzzled.

‘You moved the men away from the glass, otherwise there would have been two troopers at each turn of the stairs, near the windows,’

‘And they knew that,’ Beesely surmised. ‘Lucky.’

‘Restaurant glass must be next,’ Kev warned.

Beesely faced Simon. ‘I want your best climbers kitted out and on the roof. Find a bomb if there is one, and kill anyone they don’t like the look of.’

Simon stepped out.

‘Have we checked the lake, sir?’ Kev asked.

‘Lake? In this weather?’

‘They could still cross in a boat. Probably their escape plan.’

Beesely nodded. ‘Send a runner to the restaurant – well wrapped up – and get a message out to search the lake.’

The door to the Great Hall had held, the sandbags taking most of the blast, sand now strewn across the room and slowly falling off the walls and ceiling. Men near the door had been knocked over, and everyone suffered a mild concussion, but none were badly injured. As the men started to clamber to their feet, their colleagues above opened the slits and fired out at random, towards the drawbridge.

The senior guard lifted himself up and approached the door. The top of the door hung off its hinges and a section in the middle had been bent out of shape.

‘Re-build the sandbags!’ he shouted several times, pushing men towards the door. He ordered men out of the foyer, and they hurriedly tackled the remaining sandbags.

The gas lamps were mostly still working, and were righted as the echoes of outgoing fire reverberated around

the cavernous room, a loud tinkle of spent cases hitting the floor below the balcony.

A guard appeared from the foyer. ‘Grenades,’ he said through his respirator as he approached the senior guard.

‘Up to the balcony,’ the senior guard ordered.

The man with the grenade bag slung it over his shoulder and started to climb. He checked the men on the balcony as he progressed along it – all of them now feeling concussed – then set the bag down in the centre. He opened a slit, immediately getting a blast of freezing air, and did not waste any time. He pulled a pin, leant to one side and threw through the slit. ‘Grenade in courtyard!’ His words were so distorted that no one heard except those stood close by.

He moved beyond the slit just before the dull echo of the grenade reached him. Back at the slit, he thrust his face close to the opening, just making out the grey lines of the drawbridge entrance. He waited.

3

The test nerve gas finally arrived, the guard commander quickly taking charge of it. Fearing another bomb attack on the Great Hall door, he strode purposefully to a slit in the wall, nudging the trooper there out of the way. He ripped off his respirator. ‘Close all view ports and firing positions!’ he shouted, the order repeated. ‘Evacuate all non-essential men! Gas! Gas! Gas!’

He put his respirator back on, secured it, pulled his jacket hood up and over then lifted a test nerve gas grenade. Glancing around, and taking in the dimly lit hall, he waited for the foyer door to be closed. Pulling the pin he pushed his arm through the firing slit and released the grenade, closing the flap.

The few remaining men waited expectantly, the wind howling through gaps at the top of the door. Ten minutes passed without incident. The guard commander readied another grenade, pulled the pin and opened the slit, shoving it through. Closing the latch, he thought he could hear weapons fire.

A trooper from the balcony slid down the ladders, gloved hands allowing a fast descent. 'I got some of that shit on me!' he shouted as he ran towards the foyer. The door opened quickly and swallowed his image, slammed shut again. A few men suggested that they could hear screaming, certain it was coming from the courtyard.

The guard commander issued hand signals. They were about to open the main door and attack outwards. 'I want him alive!'

With the motion of a chopping hand, the door was pushed open, just enough room for men to squeeze through. The first trooper dropped to his knees, noting a shadowy movement ahead. He aimed at the cobblestone floor – not the person – and fired a long burst, more screams preceding the sound of something metallic hitting the cobblestones, metal equipment clattering. He ran forwards, his fellow troopers following with the guard commander. Stumbling over the intruder, the trooper reached down and grabbed the man's weapon, a short burst discharged harmlessly into the wall.

'Drag him back!' the guard commander shouted, stepping past the prisoner and firing into the dark towards the indistinct grey square that was the drawbridge entrance, now mostly clouded with acrid thermal smoke.

Back inside the Great Hall, men brought lamps close, tearing off the captive's snow mask. He was in his forties,

blonde, and offered his captors a hard, weather-worn face. And a defiant look.

The guard commander shouted, 'Take him to the tunnels and make him talk quickly. Go!' As the man was dragged off the guard commander shouted, 'Four men outside, random fire, clear the courtyard!'

* * *

'We caught one!' Kev shouted from the doorway. 'Taking 'im to the tunnels, gunna make him talk!'

'Then maybe we're turning the tide,' Beesely suggested. 'They must be taking casualties, all those rounds fired from above. Kev?'

'Yes, Boss,' Kev answered as he poked his head back in.

'Get a message to the restaurant: tell them to phone the cliff top and have the fire concentrated around the castle, but not fifty calibre. And tell them to cease all fire in ten minutes.'

'Aye, sir.'

'You have a plan, sir?' Adrienne asked, sat rubbing her hands, the computer now off. She could see her breath in the lamplight.

'Yes, I do. Casualties or not, I'm going to end this.' He turned to Simon. 'Which way is the wind blowing?'

'East to west, sir.'

'Right. I want fifty men in snow gear at the east tunnel exit, tied to each other in groups of four. On my signal they walk out and form a line right across the compound, down to the lakeshore. On the second signal they advance, only firing if they find something worth firing at. I want them to sweep right down to the west gate.'

Simon got up and ran out.

Kev ducked back in. ‘Boys in the courtyard say they found blood. At least two trails, sir.’

‘Kev, warn everyone that in fifteen minutes the guards are going to advance through the compound from east to west in a line.’

‘Right, sir.’

Henri stepped in. ‘Sir, we have just had some news. The local electricity sub-station in Zug was blown-up, most of the town has no power. And Minister Blaum says that the Army are on their way, armoured personnel carriers. The problem will be that a small bridge was blown up between here and the town, and large concrete blocks have been placed on several roads.’

‘Trying to cut us off,’ Beesely scoffed.

‘Many of our people have made it to the east tunnel. They came by ski from the town.’

‘Of course – they are Swiss!’

Henri smiled and withdrew as the catering ladies brought in fresh tea.

‘Still got some power, ladies?’ Beesely puzzled.

‘A gas heater, sir; maybe an hour left,’ they explained before leaving.

Beesely eased back, cradling his tea as it warmed his hands. He exchanged worried looks with Adrienne. ‘We were hit by experts, and only managed to wound or capture one of them. The men attacking were well trained, well motivated ... and their plan was excellent.’

‘We shall have to get Johnno to make up another t-shirt: success is measured by the *quality* of the people trying to kill you!’

Beesely smiled widely. ‘Thank you, my dear. You do have a knack ... for lifting my spirits. And we shall have to

finish that book we started at some point, before I forget it all.'

'We have a traditional Christmas at my parents house each year, plenty of room. It would be nice for you to come, sir.'

'I'd like that, my dear, I'd like that a lot. Open fireplace?'

'Of course.'

'Large tree with decorations.'

'Of course.'

'And a lot of things to eat that my doctors here would object about.'

'You would put on ten pounds, sir.'

'That sounds excellent. I haven't had a Christmas like that since ... we'll, it's been a long time. When I was friendly with Jane's mother we spent a few Christmas' together, when Jane was a toddler. And before the war, Christmas was a great time of year, it always is for children.'

'You are never too old for Christmas, sir.'

Sins of the father

1

The sound of hurried footsteps echoed along the hall. A click, and Gunter Heisel's assistant, Rom, stepped in. He took a moment to scan the dark room, a huge roaring fire throwing shadows about the bare stone walls. He ran an eye along the long table, finding his employer sat at the end. 'Sir.'

'Yes?' came after a moment.

Rom stepped quickly around the long table, offering two flat palms to the roaring open fire as he progressed. Stopping in front of his employer, he reported, 'They have kidnapped John, Helen and Thomas – on schedule.'

Gunter checked his watch. 'As timely ... as the Swiss,' he said with a glint in his eye.

Rom allowed himself a brief grin. 'Yes, sir. But since you are, indeed, half Swiss...'

'I know where I get my diligence and timeliness from.' He eased forwards, swirling his brandy, and moved into the amber light of the fire.

His grey hair had been dyed jet black and combed straight back, a trim black goatee beard cut square around his chin. Numerous deep lines scribed his forehead, ageing his fifty-five year old face and contradicting his youthful black hair.

He eased up and placed down his drink. 'Shall we ... deal with my late father's glorious creation, otherwise known as K2?'

Rom stepped back and waited, Gunter placing down his drink and stepping towards the door.

In the next room, a control centre had been set up ready; several TV screens, numerous computer monitors, advanced satellite communications. Despite all the gadgetry, only a single man sat behind the screens.

‘Are you ready?’ Gunter casually enquired as he sat in a comfortable leather chair.

‘Yes, sir. The men are in position, ready when you say go,’ the operator announced.

‘And the weather?’

‘Blizzard conditions, sir. At least twenty centimetres of snow on the ground, drifts as high as two metres, wind is eighty to one hundred kilometres per hour.’

‘And the forecast?’

‘These conditions should last eight hours, easing off tomorrow before getting worse.’

‘Excellent. You may begin.’

‘Some food, sir?’ Rom asked his employer, stood hovering.

Gunter nodded, before picking up a satellite photograph of the K2 compound. As Rom stepped out, Gunter said, ‘All their guards, all their equipment, and they’re still blind.’

‘And no outside help,’ the operator added.

‘No. No British soldiers, no Apache helicopters.’

The operator lifted a handset. With his other hand on a dial he said, ‘Mobile One, go.’ He turned the dial. ‘Mobile Two, go.’ And so on to Mobile Ten.

Twenty minutes later a voice crackled, ‘Mobile One at the castle, beginning to climb.’

Gunter checked his watch as Rom brought in a tray of food, placing it on a desk.

‘Mobile Two in position,’ crackled from a speaker, filling the room with distorted and hissing words. ‘Charge set. Withdrawing.’

‘That’s the power sub-station, sir.’

Five minutes later, Mobile Three reported, ‘Mobile Three in position. Charge set. Withdrawing.’

Gunter stood sampling the food with Rom, glancing occasionally at Sky News, Euro News and the Swiss TV channels.

Five minutes later came, ‘Mobile One, charge set, withdrawing,’ the words sounding laboured to get out and even more distorted.

‘Three minute timer,’ the operator offered without looking up. At ten seconds he counted down, then checked a screen. ‘Sudden increase in K2 radio chatter and satellite phone use.’

‘Mobile One to control, I felt the explosion, moving to secondary position.’

‘Bye bye Mister Beesely,’ Rom let out.

‘Not so hasty,’ Gunter cautioned, sitting down again. ‘First, we cannot be sure of the bedroom. And Second, he does, apparently, often get up in the night.’

‘Mobile Three to control. Radio chatter confirms explosion in Beesely’s room. Standby.’ A minute later came. ‘Radio chatter places Beesely in command centre at time of explosion.’

Gunter smiled towards Rom. ‘You see, he likes to wander at night.’

Rom tipped his head, conceding the point, stood ready to assist his boss with his hands clasped behind his back.

‘Mobile Four, bridge blown. Moving to secondary position.’

The operator explained, ‘That’s the small bridge on the road from Zug to the castle, near the airfield.’

‘Mobile Six. No movement at drawbridge.’

‘That’s odd,’ the operator mumbled.

‘Why?’ Gunter nudged.

‘Explosion in Beesely’s room was ... seven minutes ago, and no guards checking the grounds, no vehicle patrols.’

‘Perhaps,’ Rom dryly put in, ‘they are afraid of the snow.’

The operator glanced up at him, offering a disapproving frown, then glanced at Gunter. Turning back to his console he said, ‘These guys climb the Eiger for kicks on a Sunday!’

‘And yet...’ Gunter said as he stood. ‘Check the mobiles monitoring the other entrances.’

‘No need, sir, they have orders to report any movement.’

‘Perhaps the guards are ... just waking up,’ Gunter joked. He stepped out, returning ten minutes later. ‘Anything?’

‘No change, sir. No movement, all outside lights switched off, all castle lights switched off. They are ... hiding.’ He shrugged as he glanced over his shoulder.

‘Mobile Five, taking fire!’

Gunter stepped casually forwards. ‘Where is he?’

‘Between the pillboxes and the tarmac.’

‘So he could not have been hit by someone in the pillboxes,’ Gunter mused. ‘They ... fire outwards, towards the lake.’

‘Perhaps someone from the pillboxes exited and noticed him,’ the operator suggested.

‘Mobile Five, I’m hit!’ came a strained voice. ‘Withdrawing to boat.’

They glanced at each other, Gunter seemingly none too concerned.

The speaker crackled into life, ‘Mobile Six, movement on the drawbridge - single vehicle leaving. Standby.’ They waited. ‘Vehicle has been abandoned outside drawbridge.’

Standby, second vehicle leaving. Vehicle abandoned behind previous.'

Gunter and Rom exchanged puzzled looks.

'Third vehicle is emerging, fourth vehicle behind it shunting the previous vehicles. Driver abandoning his vehicle, withdrawing inside.'

'Could they be out of fuel?' Rom speculated.

'Then why move them?' the operator thought out loud.

'Are they blocking access to the drawbridge by other vehicles?' Rom pondered.

'Or giving people in the Great Hall a clean field of fire,' Gunter suggested.

'A killing zone!' the operator stated.

'Let's not write them off just yet,' Gunter playfully suggested, sipping a coffee and nibbling on a biscuit.

'Mobile Six. Guard's room hit by RPG. They have wounded.'

'Mobile Nine, taking fire.'

'Mobile Eight, taking fire. Seems random.'

The operator suggested, 'They are firing outwards blindly.'

'And they might just hit someone,' Rom suggested.

'Mobile Nine,' burst from the speaker, then nothing.

'Spoke too soon,' Gunter whispered towards Rom.

'Mobile Nine, come in.' The speaker crackled with static, but no response came back. 'Mobile Nine, come in.'

'Mobile Three, taking fire.'

A minute later came, 'Mobile Four, taking fire.'

'Not a bad strategy, if you have the ammunition ... and the time,' Gunter remarked. He tapped the operator on the shoulder. 'Tell Mobile Six to advance the timetable.'

'Mobile Six, advance timetable, attack when ready.'

'Mobile Six, roger.'

‘Mobile Five; napalm grenades being used at the drawbridge. I’m wounded, but OK to proceed. Changing position.’

‘Mobile Six; napalm grenades going off at drawbridge. Standby.’

‘Never knew they had napalm,’ Gunter softly pointed out to Rom. He held his gaze on his assistant.

‘No, sir,’ Rom conceded after being stared at.

‘Mobile Six. CS gas in courtyard, plus thermal smoke. Standby. Explosion at drawbridge, I have shrapnel in the leg, still operating.’

‘A grenade maybe?’ the operator idly suggested.

‘Mobile Six. RPG into guard quarters, they have casualties. Heading for door. Standby. Bomb on door, withdrawing.’

Gunter checked his watch.

‘Standby to detonate.’

Gunter and Rom exchanged looks.

‘Detonated.’

‘Boom,’ Gunter let out before sipping wine. ‘The Great Hall will need a little re-decorating. They will have to polish the armour.’

Rom giggled. ‘Good one, sir.’

Gunter stared. ‘What?’

‘The joke, sir. *Polish the armour* – a double meaning. Clever.’

‘It would have been, had I meant it like that.’

‘Sorry, sir,’ Rom offered, lowering his head.

‘Mobile Six. Grenades going off in courtyard, random fire outwards.’

‘Mobile Six. Door is still in place. Standby. There is ... something, something burning me...’

They waited and listened, but mobile six did not add anything further to his report.

‘Mobile Six, respond.’ Static crackled around the room. ‘Mobile Six, respond.’

‘Mobile Seven, I’m hit, withdrawing to boat,’ burst from the speaker.

‘Mobile Five, respond.’ Nothing. ‘Mobile Five, respond.’

‘Mobile Two, respond.’ They waited.

‘Mobile One, respond.’

‘Mobile One, at the boat, two wounded here, one dead on the shore.’

‘Mobile One, remove dead to boat.’ The operator changed dial. ‘Mobile Four, respond.’

‘Someone put another coin in the slot,’ Gunter let out as he sat.

Rom was worried. ‘They failed.’

Gunter stared back his assistant for several seconds. ‘They ... two million Euro ... failed.’ He let out a heavy sigh. ‘But, if at first you don’t destroy K2,’ he softly let out. Then louder, ‘You try the fuck again!’ He faced the operator. Forcing himself calmer he ordered, ‘Ready team two. Let’s see what three million Euro can achieve.’

‘We have Johno and Helen,’ Rom cheerfully reminded his boss.

‘Yes,’ Gunter sighed. ‘Not a complete loss.’ He stepped to the door. ‘I am off to bed. Do not ... disturb me.’

In the hallway, two Great Dane dogs bound up, each stood over four feet tall, blue-grey in colour. They fell into line with Gunter, a hand on each of the dog’s necks. ‘So, how was your day, boys? Had some food, a bit of run, some sleep.’ He sighed. ‘How simple your lives are.’

Dress for dinner

1

The kidnapper's speedboat pulled alongside a large cruiser, an eighty-foot cruiser that had seen better days, now flying a Panamanian flag. With the speedboat bobbing up and down, the captives awkwardly clambered across to the lowered gangplank, nudged up it one at a time.

Without any words exchanged or orders given, they were led below, down a flight of stairs and into a large storeroom packed with dusty and little-used equipment, three old jetskis stood on their ends to make space.

'Make yourselves comfortable,' came a Belfast accent, the man stood in the corridor and behind the Colombians. 'And in case you were thinking of trying to escape, we're fifty miles off shore. Long swim!' A Colombian closed and locked the door, leaving the captives in the grey moonlight creeping in through a porthole.

Johno put a finger to his lips. Whispering, he said to Helen, 'They think we're Swiss!' He shrugged.

'They don't know who we are,' Helen suggested in a whisper.

'But they took our phones and your bag, they knew about the trackers!'

'So they know that we're K2, but not *who* within K2,' Helen whispered.

Thomas clambered across junk to the porthole and peered out, Helen and Johno still exchanging puzzled looks through the dark.

‘So who were they after?’ Johno wondered. ‘If they know K2 well enough to know about the phones, how come they don’t know *us*?’

The engine started with a rumble, the boat soon pitching in the swell as it progressed. They had to grab hold and sit down before they fell down.

‘Thomas?’ Johno called. ‘Where’s the moon?’

‘This side,’ the boy responded, pointing.

‘Then we’re heading south.’

‘South?’ Helen repeated. ‘Cuba?’

‘No, fuck all organised crime on Cuba thanks to good old Castro.’

Johno made his way to the porthole, pressing against the hull with the cuffed hands. Peering through the portal he said, ‘Southeast. Dominican Republic or Haiti, maybe through the straits to South America. That speedboat we were on hugged the coast southeast. We’re twenty or thirty miles beyond the main island.’

He clambered back to Helen. ‘At least a couple of days to get anywhere other than the Turks and Caicos Islands.’

The sounds of footsteps on the wooden stairs was followed by the door opening, a blast of yellow light illuminating them. Several large packets of crisps were thrown in, six large water bottles and bag of fruit.

The dark-skinned man who had delivered the food then beckoned them forwards, Johno approaching him. The man produced a key and un-cuffed them in turn, his colleague in the corridor stood ready with a pistol. The man retreated, the door locked again, leaving them again in the grey half-light. Thomas started on the crisps.

‘Food and water,’ Johno whispered. ‘So they expect a journey of a few days at least.’ He took a swig of water and then handed the bottle to Helen. ‘Still, they want us

ransomed, not dead, or they would have shot us at the house.'

'Those two men were Irish,' Helen noted.

'That's a worry.'

'Why?'

'Former IRA bomb makers have been earning a living with the FARC Guerrillas in Colombia, teaching them how to blow up school buses. Those two guys are old enough to have seen action in the eighties, so the South American crew are either fucking Colombians or FARC. Either way, it's a two year hostage wait up the jungle.'

Helen was mortified.

'Don't worry,' he offered. 'Beesely will have the fleet out. It's a long way to Colombia, so unless they have a plane standing by we'll be found.'

'They could take us to an island with an airstrip,' she posed.

'If it comes to that we'll make a break for it,' he coldly stated. 'I'd rather die fighting than sit in the jungle for a few years.'

She stared back through the gloom, not commenting, as Thomas munched noisily on the crisps.

Johno said, 'Have some food and drink, and get comfy. Going to be a long night, followed by a few long days.'

Helen and Johno made themselves comfortable, their backs to the curved hull. After a minute, they both turned their heads to Thomas as he noisily munched on the crisps.

'Eat quietly,' Helen quipped.

'Why?' Thomas protested. 'It's just us.'

The stork is early

1

Otto had been attending the bank function in Zurich, meeting the senior bankers from other companies, when Marie had called from home, feeling unwell. He had hurried the short distance to their apartment, battling through the snow. Now in their apartment, Otto hurriedly removed his many layers and closed in on his wife.

‘I think it’s coming early,’ Marie told him.

‘I will call for an ambulance,’ Otto offered, a guard hovering inside the door. Otto had just lifted his phone when an explosion shook the building.

The guard opened the apartment door, and peered down the stairwell through the smoke. Echoing gunfire could now be heard. ‘Lock yourself in, sir!’ the guard shouted as he slammed the door from the outside.

Otto ran along his apartment’s hallway and bolted the reinforced door, just as Marie let out a scream. He ran back even faster.

‘Now I’m certain it’s coming,’ Marie forced out in a strained whisper.

Otto knelt. ‘I never thought I would hear myself say this, darling, but *hold it in!* Now is not a good time.’

Marie looked down. ‘My water has broken.’

‘And there are men outside trying to kill us,’ Otto informed his wife. ‘Come, the panic room.’

‘It’s too small!’ Marie complained as Otto helped her up.

‘If we have to, we’ll deliver it standing up!’

Marie made a face. ‘Some say that’s not a bad position, some say kneeling –’

‘Now is not the time to be worrying about the damn position!’

Otto’s study doubled as the panic room; no windows, reinforced walls and door, food and water, emergency lighting. He placed Marie in his chair and closed the door just as the lights went out.

It took a moment to find the switch for the battery lighting, soon a dull yellow glow illuminating the two of them.

‘There are no cushions,’ Mare complained.

‘Make do, please.’ Otto turned on a small black and white TV screen, little more than three inches square, and studied the apartment. He checked that the study door was bolted, and opened the weapons cabinet.

Marie screamed as the room shook, the blast and pressure wave felt. With one hand holding Marie’s hand, Otto focused on the small grey image of his apartment. And what was left of it.

When the smoke cleared, he could make out two shadowy figures moving forwards. They tossed grenades into side rooms.

‘Darling, we’ll need to redecorate. That was our bedroom.’

Marie let out a long scream, starting to pant. Turning back to the TV screen, Otto could now see the men closing in on the study.

‘Keep coming,’ he said. Still holding Marie’s hand, he lifted up and opened a panel above the door, turning a key to activate it. When both shadowy figures were stood looking at the door, he flicked a switch.

Both attackers died instantly, hit in the face with a type of claymore mine. Otto hit a second switch, an extractor fan activated, and after a minute he could again discern the

outline detail of his apartment, but with the addition of two new shadowy figures in the doorway.

Otto let go of Marie's hand, opened the weapons locker and pulled out an M4 assault rifle, slapping in a magazine. He cocked it, checked the setting, and approached the door. Working slowly, and as quietly as he could, he opened a small hatch, just room enough for the weapon's muzzle to fit through. Stood directly behind the door, he closed his eyes and tried to work out exactly the layout of his apartment, and the position of the men in relation to the hallway.

'Put your hands over your ears,' he whispered. Figuring he just about had the angle and elevation correct, he fired, emptying the magazine whilst moving the weapon side to side.

Dropping the assault rifle with a clatter, into a pool of spent cartridges, he rushed to the TV screen, clearly seeing two figures slumped against the wall. Being Swiss, Otto wished to be sure that he had succeeded, and so reloaded the rifle and fired again, emptying the magazine, but aiming now at a lower angle.

When done, Marie took her hands off her ears and let out a loud scream of exasperation, a glare for Otto. 'Have you finished?'

'Sorry, darling. And yes, I believe I got them all.'

Two minutes later, a knock came on the door, muffled words. Otto put his ear close to the muzzle hatch.

'Herr Otto, sir. Are you in there?'

Otto recognised the voice and opened the door. 'Is the building secure?'

'Yes, sir, many guards here now,' the man said, a junior manager who lived down stairs.

‘Help me,’ Otto urged the man, the two of them easing Marie out, her arms over their shoulders, the apartment furniture shredded, the air thick with the smell of cordite and smoke.

‘My apartment,’ Marie howled.

‘That’s the least of our problems,’ Otto told her as he led her to a couch.

‘My wife is midwife, sir, as you know,’ the junior manager mentioned.

‘Fetch her. Quickly!’

The man ran out, stepping over the bodies, and passing two guards running in.

‘Orders, sir?’

‘Move those bodies outside, check for anything burning in here.’

The guards slung weapons and dragged the bodies to the stairway landing, checking each room in turn.

With towels being grabbed by the guards to mop up slippery blood, the midwife appeared with her medical bag. She stepped forwards, avoiding the blood. ‘It’s OK, Marie, I’m here.’ She made ready for a home birth.

‘Doctors and ambulance on their way, sir,’ the junior manager reported. ‘But much snow, and bombs in other locations have tied up resources. They don’t know when they can get here.’

‘In the next apartment block is a doctor, two of them, husband and wife. Go find them.’

The junior manager ran out.

The midwife pointed at a guard. ‘Kitchen. Boil water, get towels!’

Otto grabbed the underside of a sofa and yanked, pulling it out into ready-made bed. ‘Here, lift Marie over.’

They could all now hear gunfire.

‘What’s that?’ Otto asked, a guard heading for the door.

‘I don’t care what it is!’ Marie shouted.

‘It’s coming,’ the midwife announced. ‘I can see the head.’ She placed on rubber gloves. ‘Push when you feel the contractions, Marie.’

Two minutes later, as Marie woke up the apartment block with her shrill expletives, a middle-aged couple arrived, bags in hand.

‘You are the doctors?’ Otto asked.

‘Yes, yes,’ the man said, kneeling straight way. He paused. ‘You are having a baby!’

‘Your medical training has not been wasted, doctor!’ Marie shouted into the man’s face at close range.

‘I thought maybe the bomb, or the shooting,’ the startled man explained.

‘No, doctor,’ Otto told him. ‘Those things we are fine with at K2. Babies are a different matter.’

The doctor gave Otto a look before repositioning the midwife. Otto paced up and down, straightening pictures moved by the blasts, despite the fact that they were now ruined.

‘What will you call it?’ the junior managed asked, nervously trying to make conversation.

Otto stopped pacing, and cocked an eyebrow. ‘Perhaps ... Snow Storm. Or Blizzard, if it’s a girl. But, given the circumstances, Firefight might suit.’

A baby’s cry could be heard, and Otto turned slowly, staring down at his new daughter, the doctor attending the umbilical. Marie took receipt of the girl, smiling, Otto sat on the edge of the sofa-bed, closing in.

A clatter in the hallway preceded a wheeled stretcher and two ambulance staff, a doctor following behind.

‘Help has arrived,’ Otto softly told his wife.

‘Your mother would be happy, Otto,’ Marie said as she studied the baby.

Otto slowly nodded.

Survived another night

1

Claus appeared in the doorway of Beesely's office at 3am, well wrapped up in several layers of snow gear. 'Good to see are well, sir.'

'You too,' Beesely offered. 'How did you get in?'

'Walked, sir.'

'Walked!' Where from?'

'I did not stay at the hotel function in Zurich. From my house I drove the long way around on the autobahn, they are always cleared first with the snowploughs. From the autobahn junction southwest of here it is a three-kilometre walk to the rear cave entrance. Three others came with me.'

'Well, unless you can magic up some electricity from somewhere, there'll be very little for you to do I'm afraid.'

Claus nodded. 'The main electricity sub-station was blown up. It could take a week to replace, but we have requested another one. If we get a break in the weather, then there is a large crane and lorry ready.'

'Best estimate?'

'Two days,' Claus unhappily reported.

Beesely eased back, glancing at Adrienne. 'What about a generator?'

Claus explained, 'We are waiting to hear back, sir. If the one I ordered is compatible, it will be here in the morning. Electricians will come in with it.'

'Can it be stuck in a tunnel?'

'The tunnels do not have sufficient ventilation, sir.'

'Best make sure this one is well protected, then.'

Claus stiffened. ‘Are you, sir, suggesting that this attack is not finished?’

‘The men swept the compound and found five bodies.’

‘Two were alive,’ Adrienne reminded him.

Beesely nodded as Claus eased off his heavy padded jacket. Beesely said, ‘A few hours ago ... I thought we were being hit by the expert commandos from hell. But it turns out that we shot up most of them pretty quickly. Some escaped to the lake, only to have their boat shot out from under them. They all drowned.’

Claus warmed his hands on the gas fire. ‘Any idea, sir, who was behind it?’

‘Nothing so far,’ Beesely reluctantly admitted.

Kev appeared in the doorway. ‘One of the wounded is talking, boss. He’s a Norwegian fucker.’

‘Norwegian!’ Beesely repeated, Claus just as shocked.

‘Some kinda army survival instructor; teaches at a snow survival school.’ Kev stepped back out.

Beesely and Claus exchanged puzzled looks. Beesely asked, ‘Has K2 ever had any dealings with Norway?’

‘None that I recall, sir.’

‘Then this fella was recruited for fact that he’s not averse to climbing up old castles in the snow. And probably short of a few quid to boot.’

‘Sir, you seem cold,’ Claus mentioned. ‘I suggest we move to the restaurant – which has gas heaters – and run operations from there. The satellite phones and radios work from there.’

‘We’ll be vulnerable,’ Beesely suggested. ‘They’re checking the roof for bombs and booby traps – we’ve already had one on my bedroom window!’

‘Yes, sir,’ Claus conceded.

‘Still, set up a command centre there, get the managers set-up and working, use the bedrooms if the sat’ phones work.’

‘Yes, sir. And I will arrange another heater for this room.’

‘They are keeping the tea coming,’ Beesely offered up with a broad smile. Claus turned and stepped out.

Ten minutes later, the dimly lit restaurant was crammed with warm bodies and the boisterous overlapping of dozens of conversations. K2 management was back in action.

2

Simon stepped back into Beesely’s office, easing off his outer layer.

‘How’s the ammunition situation?’ Beesely enquired.

‘Ammunition, sir?’ Simon puzzled.

‘Did we use a lot? Are stocks low?’ Beesely pressed.

‘No, sir. Close to a million rounds remaining.’

‘Did you say ... a million rounds?’

‘Yes, sir. We buy our weapons and ammunition once a year, to get the best price, several suppliers competing for the business. We stock them, and use them over the year. Last purchase was two month’s ago.’

‘So, we’re fully stocked up,’ Beesely thought out loud. Facing Simon again he said, ‘How long could we have maintained our outward random fire?’

Simon shrugged, making a face in the dim light. ‘Three or four days – at least, sir.’

‘Double the number of weapons in the cliff, and their ammo!’

‘I just did, sir.’

‘You’re not bleeding Swiss, are you?’ Beesely loudly asked, a glint in his eye.

‘Yes, sir,’ Simon said with a grin.

Beesely took a breath. ‘OK, casualties?’

‘One dead trooper, four wounded troopers from the vault, two guards injured by the test nerve gas, eight minor wounds. That’s it.’

Henri stepped in. ‘Sir, I have the latest on the kidnapping.’

Beesely stared up at Henri for several seconds. ‘With everything going on here, I had quite forgotten about them,’ he softly admitted.

‘Maybe that was the point, sir,’ Adrienne snarled.

Beesely regarded her, slowly nodding his head. ‘Yes, my dear, they wanted us ... otherwise engaged.’ He lifted his face to Henri, an invitation to explain, Henri relaying the events at the mansion in the Bahamas.

Beesely finally said, ‘A brilliant move. And organised quickly.’ He sighed. ‘What we are dealing with here ... is a big fish. And I suspect some CIA involvement; The Bahamas are their backyard, only they could have organised the move that quickly.’

‘Have we a problem with the CIA, sir?’ Henri questioned.

‘Before Johno set off for the Bahamas we had an odd message from Oliver Stanton, who mysteriously fell ill. It was related to ... American matters.’

Henri puzzled that. ‘But both the Lodge and the CIA are launching large-scale investigations into the kidnapping, promises of American Navy and coastguard assistance?’

Beesely nodded. ‘They ... are not behind this, it’s some splinter group.’

Matt the armourer stepped in as Henri withdrew. 'Ha's ya doon, sir?'

'Coping. How are you, Matt?'

'Wanting to kick some arse, sir, of some folk who should know better.'

'Sorry?'

'Your Swiss fuckers wrecked two fifty cal' barrels, two GPMGs and three Minimi's.'

'Well, I dare say they were stressed under fire,' Beesely offered. 'We were attacked.'

'And tha's the time to keep a cool head and look after ya fucking weapon. Ya look after ya weapon - it'll look after yee.'

'True, very true,' Beesely conceded. 'Did they not swap barrels?'

'Like fuck, sir.'

Beesely nodded. 'Simon, go with Matt and educate the men; we may need those barrels. And get plenty of spares sorted.'

'Thank yis, sir,' Matt offered, leaving with Simon.

Adrienne said, 'Sir, the rest area in the lower bunker is warm, you should take a rest.'

'Yes, you may be right. Only thing keeping me awake is the damn cold. C'mon then, let's take a break.'

Dress for dinner

2

The sound of the door unlocking caused Johno to turn away from the porthole at dawn, the two Irish stepping in.

‘Top o’ the morning to ya,’ the first man joked. ‘Sleep well?’

The room had smelt stale before, but now also smelt sweaty, with the odour of urine adding to the pungent aroma. The captives had not been allowed out to use the toilet during the night and so had improvised with empty water bottles till the bottles had become full.

Johno stared at Helen as she roused. She noticed his look before glancing at the two Irish. ‘Which side of the bog were you two bastards born in?’ he asked.

The Irish glanced at each other, clearly surprised.

‘You’re a Brit?’ the first man puzzled.

‘Bodyguard to this good lady. Ex-Para, and I spent time with 14 Detachment in Armagh, fuck face.’

The second man drew level with his colleague. ‘You’re body-guarding the Swiss?’

‘We’re English,’ Helen informed them. ‘You’ve kidnapped the wrong people.’

‘Wankers,’ Thomas added with almost perfect pronunciation, and in an English accent. He did, after all, have a lot of practise at using that word around the castle.

The two Irish now looked very worried, as well as very confused.

The first asked, ‘You work for the International Bank of Zurich?’

‘We were guests of the boss of the bank,’ Johno lied. ‘We arrived a week early because the nipper here wanted to go scuba diving. Boss man arrives next week, dumb fuck.’

‘Shit,’ the second man cursed.

Johno asked, in his attempt at a Belfast accent, ‘Will the boys upstairs not be happy with you all?’ The Irish withdrew, slamming the door.

Helen eased closer to Johno. ‘Will that help?’ she whispered.

‘If they think they’ve got the wrong people – then no time up the jungle; they’ll kill us now and feed us to the sharks. Or ... they may hold us as they think about what to do next.’

‘Why don’t they know who we are?’ Helen puzzled.

‘This was put together in a hurry,’ Johno suggested. ‘We left at the last minute, no planning ahead. We only decided to come four days ago’

‘We need a strategy for when they come back, something to tell the Colombians.’

Johno nodded his agreement. ‘We should probably tell them you’re very valuable. That way ... no shark feeding.’

‘And stop talking about bloody sharks. I’m terrified of sharks!’

He inched closer and hugged her. ‘Sorry, love.’ A sharp hiss of compressed air caused them to turn.

Thomas lifted his head from where he knelt at the far end of the room and smiled. ‘Air tanks.’

‘Search everywhere,’ Johno told him. ‘Anything we can use.’ The lad got to work. Facing Helen, Johno said, ‘I’ve got an idea, but we’ll need to convince the Colombians that you’re really you.’

‘Why?’ she queried.

‘Your picture is on the internet. If they can check your ID then you’re valuable to them, they’ll keep you alive longer.’

‘What about you?’

‘I’ve already convinced the Provos that I’m just a bodyguard,’ he said with a shrug.

‘Those two men may not tell the others, especially if they think they screwed up.’

‘Maybe. The Provos didn’t organise this, it must have been the Colombians acting on a tip-off.’

‘From who?’

‘That ... is down to Beesely to find out.’

* * *

The two IRA men returned an hour later, this time more confident, smiling as they opened the door.

‘We checked with the paymaster. You *are* the ones he wants,’ the first man announced. ‘Lady Helen, face fungus, and a teenage boy. So you’ll still be on the cruise, folks, no need to change for dinner – your dressed fine as you are.’

‘I’m Dame Helen Eddington-Small,’ Helen announced.

‘Aye, that’s the lass we’re after.’

‘Former director of MI6.’ That caught their attention. ‘Right now every western intelligence agency is looking for you, and will be for many years after we’re dead.’ The Irish gave her a sceptical look. ‘My picture is on the internet, Google for me and prove it to yourselves.’

‘If you two screw-ups were still on the IRA payroll, she’d be quite the catch, eh boys?’ Johnno teased. ‘And here you are, having to hand her over to the FARC.’

‘Not the FARC,’ the second man said with a sadistic grin. ‘This wee job’s bit more profitable.’

‘Colombians?’ Johno nudged.

‘You’ll see soon enough.’

‘Check my face on the internet,’ Helen pressed.

The Irish glanced at each other and left.

‘I’ve got an idea,’ Johno suggested with a grin. ‘But first, we need a fall back plan. Let’s all search for anything that might go bang.’

* * *

An hour later, a Colombian brought down some fruitcake and a few more apples.

Johno did not waste any time. ‘We are English,’ he informed the man. ‘Not Swiss. English! London!’

‘London?’ the man repeated, his colleague beyond the door closing in.

Johno added, ‘The Irish men – they lie to you – it is a trick!’ he carefully pronounced.

The Colombian stared back for two seconds, but then left without further comment. He soon returned with an older man.

‘Who are you?’ the older man enquired in reasonable English.

‘We’re all English,’ Johno quickly explained. ‘I’m a driver and bodyguard for this lady. She was the boss of British Intelligence - she worked in Northern Ireland. These Irish men, they have lied to you, there is no reward for us – they want her dead because she was working for British Intelligence in Ireland, against the IRA. These men were IRA.’

Helen put in, ‘If you check my face on the internet you will see. The Irish, they know my name.’

‘We will see when we get to the boss,’ the elder man said with a shrug, not buying into the story.

‘The American Navy will be looking for her,’ Johno suggested. ‘This boat will be stopped, then you’re in an American prison for life.’

The elder man considered those words, shrugged again and turned away.

‘Look out for many American ships!’ Johno shouted as the visitor stepped out. Johno and Helen exchanged looks as the door was locked. ‘That dumb fuck is just following orders. He’ll let his boss sort it out. Worth a go.’

They sat.

The hold warmed up as the day progressed, the smell getting worse. There was no ventilation, and the fumes from some very old paint tins were making them all feel a little sick. With little else to do they ended up sleeping, the gentle movement of the boat and the hum of the engine helping to relax them.

Survived another night

2

At five o'clock, Adrienne woke Beesely with a gentle shake.

'How long ... was I asleep?' he croaked out as she helped him upright.

'Two hours, sir. It is five o'clock.'

'Any ... any problems?'

'None, sir. And the weather is clearing as they forecast. The men have swept the grounds twice, and there are Swiss Army armoured personnel carriers here.'

Beesely eased across and into his wheelchair. 'What about the blocked roads?'

'The concrete blocks were dragged away by the personnel carriers. The damaged bridge in Zug has been spanned by the Army; a temporary bridge.'

Beesely motored himself out of the rest lounge and into the lower bunker, the darkened room now devoid of most of its staff since there was little they could do with no electricity. Two troopers eased up and stretched as Beesely asked Adrienne, 'What about re-supply?'

'Supplies are coming in now, sir. Gas fires and heaters, more paraffin lamps.'

Motoring along the companionway, Beesely could see just a dozen people in the command centre, many paraffin lamps offering up localised areas of yellow light and reminding him of a dimly lit library.

At the door to his office, Adrienne said, 'I'll get some breakfast,' and popped back to the small canteen.

Fifteen minutes later, they and the troopers were tucking into egg and bacon on toast, steaming hot tea still available

because the gas cookers were still working. Beesely's gas heater did, however, die slowly on them, its flame crackling as it struggled for life. A trooper fetched a new gas tank from the courtyard and swapped out the old one, having to clamber past the sandbags in the command centre doorway en route.

Kev stuck his head in. 'All wounded out, sir. Shit, what can I smell?'

'Breakfast,' a trooper let out as he munched.

'Plenty o' hot grub up the restaurant, sir.'

'We're OK for now,' Beesely told him. 'Any more news?'

'Yanks got the entire frigging fleet out looking; Delta force landed in Nassau, US Marines at the ready. We's offered up a fifty million dollar reward, so someone'll talk.'

Beesely considered that as he chewed. 'Best bet will be our prisoners here, they may lead us to the decision makers.'

'Norwegian, Finn and a Danish fella, sir.'

'All ... Scandinavian?' Beesely said with a heavy frown. 'Not our patch at all, and very little Basel influence up there.'

Kev suggested, 'They was recruited fa' the fact they was born in the snow up a mountain.'

'Denmark is flat,' Beesely thought out loud. Making eye contact with Kev he asked, 'Have we tracked back to where they lived and worked?'

'Working on it now, sir. No police records, no known associates, but they all had twenty-five thousand pounds paid up front. Contact man was the same guy for all of them, no identity on him, but he was a German fella. And, sir, they was recruited a good six months ago.'

‘Before ... the move on Basel,’ Beesely puzzled. ‘Ask Claus to send someone to visit Pepi in prison. Give him the facts and see if he knows who may be behind it.’

Kev nodded and stepped out.

* * *

Former Basel Freemason chief, Guido Pepi, was already awake when the visitors arrived, his breakfast delayed. They explained the situation before firmly suggesting it would be in his best interests to co-operate.

‘Scandinavia?’ Pepi repeated. ‘And you say the men were recruited six months ago?’ He eased back on a hard wooden chair, his arms resting on a plain wooden table, prisoner Pepi dressed now in a blue overall. ‘There were very few members from Scandinavia, some from Denmark, one Swedish many years ago. No Finnish or Norwegians, ever, as far as I recall.’

He gave it some thought. ‘There was a rumour, back in the seventies, that Gunter had a few illegitimate children. Most were believed to have been killed...’ He lifted his gaze to the ceiling. ‘One ... one was rumoured to be the child of a rich Scandinavian woman.’

The K2 men glanced at each other.

Pepi continued, ‘He was rumoured to be an oil trader, and that Gunter stayed in touch for a few years.’ He offered a large, apologetic shrug. ‘But it was just a rumour, and there were many of those regarding Gunter. I’ll think on it, gentlemen, and contact you if I remember more. But be assured, this attack is not an ex-Basel member. But, bring me any further facts as you get them.’ The K2 men departed, updating Claus.

* * *

Claus stepped into Beesely's office a few minutes later, having indignantly scrambled past the sandbags. He asked the troopers and Adrienne to step outside. With the door closed he began, 'A ... rumour from Pepi, sir.'

'Oh, yes? Something?'

'A rumour that ... Gunter ... had a son.'

'A son? Someone with a claim on this place?'

Claus lifted his eyebrows and nodded. 'The boy was rumoured to have been the offspring of a rich Scandinavian woman, and ended up as an oil trader. Nothing more is known.'

'If he was an oil trader, then he has more than just the one pot to piss in!'

'Indeed, sir. Shall we investigate this rumour?'

'When it comes to Gunter ... yes we damn well will. Top priority! Start with rich Scandinavians who made their money in oil. Then look for links to the CIA, but do so without the Americans getting a whiff of this man. If he is in league with some element of the CIA then we have to be discreet, very discreet.'

'Otto is wanting to talk with you, sir.'

'A bit hard at the moment, unless I go for a walk outside. I'll pop up to the restaurant later.'

3

In Zurich's main hospital, Otto told Marie that he must go, and suggested she get some rest. He kissed her on the forehead and set out for the bank HQ.

Knowing the damage done to the communications at the castle, Otto rallied the senior bank staff and set-up a command post in the bank headquarters.

‘I want to know everything that has happened, then everything in the Bahamas, then I want a puzzle board created.’

* * *

At 5pm, the attendant K2 managers were assembled in Beesely’s office, many others now working from offices in Zurich or from one of the bank’s numerous buildings scattered throughout the city.

Beesely glanced at his watch, then at Claus. ‘Getting dark?’

‘Yes, sir. And the forecast is for three days of blizzard, the worst recorded for twenty years. So much for global warming!’

‘Three days ... of weather as bad as last night?’ Beesely thought out loud.

‘Worse,’ Claus suggested. ‘And the snow will get deeper. Keeping the road to Zug open will be ... a challenge.’

‘The generator?’

‘Arriving as we speak.’

‘OK,’ Beesely let out, taking in the faces in the dim light. ‘There’s no sign of further activity, but we should not be complacent. We have little choice but to go on lockdown till the weather improves, till we get the electricity back ... or we get the people behind it all.’

Simon burst in, a little out of breath. ‘Sir, the new generator was sabotaged, before it got to us.’ The managers glanced at each other. Simon added, ‘I spoke to the factory

and all their spares of the components needed have been stolen.’

‘Question is,’ Beesely began, ‘was this done yesterday to affect us last night, or today to affect us tonight?’

‘The factory manager believes the spares were taken this morning around 6am, sir, when a lorry left. That lorry driver has disappeared.’

‘So, this is round two,’ Beesely loudly informed the managers. ‘Three days of blizzard at *their* disposal.’

Claus put in, ‘Sir, the supplies we brought in, they ... may just stretch three days. But we have a lot more staff in here tonight.’

‘More empty mouths to feed ... and to keep warm,’ Beesely stated. He pointed at Simon. ‘Stand to – all men. Fix bayonets!’ Simon rushed out, managers retrieving pistols from within many layers and checking them.

Beesely took a deep breath of damp air. ‘Right, ladies and gentlemen, we know they are coming. And *they* ... are not worried about that fact. Last time, the outwards fire worked well, but maybe they have learnt from that.

‘OK, I want ten of our best men in snow gear and with supplies, up the mountain and protecting the cliff top outpost. I want them dug into snow holes at the rear of the outpost, waiting for a sneak attack. Question: how long can they survive out there without frostbite?’

‘We have some Everest climbers here, sir,’ Claus proudly pointed out. ‘They can survive indefinitely in small tents or snow holes with rations.’

‘Fine, put them on forty-eight hour rotation. The camp, we’ll leave clear as before for Fifty Calibre Snow Flakes.’ The managers smiled. ‘And GPMG ... er -’

‘Hail Stones,’ Adrienne finished off.

‘Yes, it will keep their heads down.’

‘We can hide men in the grounds, sir,’ a manager suggested.

‘And these men, would they be resistant to fifty calibre rounds?’ Beesely testily enquired.

‘They can stay by the mountain, sir,’ the same man offered.

‘And risk shooting each other in the blizzard,’ Beesely scoffed. ‘It’s just as Johnno predicted; it’s a blizzard, so normal rules will not apply here. What we need is what NATO had in the seventies and eighties: flexibility in response. In reality, what that meant for NATO was that we are outnumbered and didn’t have a clue what to do.’

‘Right, the men all know how we were attacked last time, so they will be ready ... to some degree. OK, the roof; did we find anything up there?’

‘No, sir. Just the ropes and pitons used by the man who placed the bomb on your window.’

‘Then let’s deny them a second chance, eh? I want a rotation of men up on the roof, tucked away so that the GPMG Hail Stones don’t get them.’

The managers took notes, sat wrapped-up in their padded jackets.

Claus offered, ‘Sir, the ex-SAS have taken it upon themselves to build barricades and set traps.’

‘Good, it’s their area. And I think any further attackers will feel their wrath!’

‘We have organised a rota system,’ Claus informed him. ‘To pace everyone.’

Beesely nodded. ‘Three days, ladies and gentlemen; three cold, long days under fire.’

‘What about the Swiss Army, sir?’ a manager asked.

‘Send them off, they’ll be in the cross-fire here.’

Claus said, 'We have a large warehouse in Zug where they can billet, ready to assist.'

'Fine. Let's lock down, get ready, check everything, then back here in one hour.'

Dress for dinner

3

The guards to the Bahamas villa observed with keen interest as a convoy of three jeeps headed towards them. The first vehicle had its windows wound down, and as it neared a man stuck his head out, offering his face for recognition. Mr. Grey.

‘Mr. Grey,’ the guard offered by way of a formal greeting.

‘Lodge wants to use your villa as HQ for search operations. Get you head man on the blower.’

‘We expected you.’

‘You did?’ Grey responded, pretending to be surprised.

‘Yes,’ the guard dryly responded as he opened the gate.

‘Any beer with ice cubes in?’ Grey asked as his vehicle eased inside the gates, soon heading up the dusty track to the villa. His convoy was greeted at the villa by K2’s senior man in the Caribbean, a junior manager by the name of Arno, who dressed now in a typically Swiss suit. They shook.

‘Come inside,’ Arno offered. ‘We can get you a beer – with or without the ice cubes.’ Still smiling, they settled around a large table covered with a map of the Caribbean and edged by numerous files. Arno introduced many of the men, most of whom had met Grey several times.

‘Start at the beginning,’ Grey suggested.

Arno took a breath. ‘First, the trip here was kept secret, false passports used at the airports – here and Zurich. Johno arranged this trip on Saturday and he left on Saturday night.’

‘An inside job,’ Grey surmised.

Arno did not look pleased at the suggestion. 'It is ... a possibility. You are aware of the attack at the castle?'

Grey stiffened. 'No, I've been on a plane. What attack?'

'Someone made use of a snow storm in Zug, extreme conditions, and used it to infiltrate the compound, to climb the castle walls and plant a bomb on the window sill of Herr Beesely's -'

'He's OK?'

'He was in the command centre when the bomb went off, alerted by the kidnap of Johnno. He missed the bomb by five minutes.'

'Shit... ' Grey slowly let out. 'So the same puppies are responsible for both incidents. So why kidnap Johnno's party, why not just kill them?'

'It is believed that the attack on Zug was to distract us ... and to stop us co-ordinating a search for Johnno and Helen. So far, they are doing a good job of that; power at the castle has been cut, the computers are down, and communications are extremely poor.'

Grey frowned his lack acceptance of that. 'Why the hell a kidnapping?' he thought out loud, a glance at his men. 'They're bound to know it would bring us down on their backs.'

'No,' Arno said. He waited.

'They don't know about K2's friends and resources?' Grey asked with a sceptical expression. 'These boys are good enough to get the flight plan, good enough to infiltrate Zug ... and they know jack shit else?'

'It is ... a work in progress,' Arno said with a sigh. 'But there is some ... information.' He beckoned Grey to the veranda and whispered in his ear the detail of Gunter's illegitimate son.

Grey straightened, following Arno back to the table. He studied the map for a second before letting out a long breath. ‘Shit...’

‘Quite.’

‘OK, what do we know of the kidnap?’ Mr. Grey asked.

‘We received an invitation, hand delivered by an old English resident, detailing a charity gala on the evening in question – Helen was keen to go. The only fingerprints relate to the old man, who died of a heart attack yesterday. A sum of cash was found in his house, the money out of character with the man’s position and lack of income.’

‘We checked the organisation on the day of the gala; it was the correct organisation and we called their number to clarify the location. Whoever answered the phone was one of the enemy; we have since found out that the offices of the organisation are only manned on a Saturday morning.’

‘Their address for regular galas is listed as Thompson Grove, Hollyville Town. Our invitation was listed as Thompson Lane, Hollyville Town – a distance of only one kilometre separating them. The detail on the card took us to the Lane, not the Grove, and to a plantation house that had two local police officers on the front gate.’

‘Actors?’ Grey asked.

‘Yes. Two chase vehicles waited outside, either end of the only access road. Johnno’s limousine went in with two armed guards inside -’

‘Was Johnno armed?’

‘No, he did not wish to ... spoil the cut of his suit,’ Arno explained, Grey smiling. ‘When our men could see no other vehicles attending this party they became suspicious and accessed the rear of the property, where they witnessed a boat leave with four local men. When our chase vehicles

returned to the gate the police had gone and the gate was padlocked.

‘They rammed through the gate and to the house, inside of which they found Helen’s bag, and the phones of John and Thomas.’

‘They knew to leave the phones behind, so they knew about the tracking,’ Grey thought out loud.

Arno nodded his agreement. ‘In the cellar we found our two men, shot dead, no other evidence. We leased the property immediately and have forensic teams there.’

‘Good. What about the local police?’

‘We have not informed them, since false passports were used and ... we do not wish them to investigate the matter.’

Grey slowly nodded to himself. ‘All done in a few minutes or less. Not bad, these boys knew what they were doing.’

‘No shell cases left, no blood,’ Arno added. ‘A high power speedboat was heard leaving the plantation house. It was tracked by the coastguard out to five miles because it moved quickly at night.’

‘Be long gone by now,’ Grey let out. ‘Transferred to another ship or to a plane. OK, I want to see the house.’ His phone went, causing him to step to the veranda. Returning he said. ‘Local police visited a house in an isolated area, four local men burnt beyond recognition, shot first.’

‘Four men ... were on the boat that was seen leaving,’ Arno pointedly remarked.

‘They used locals and then killed them, so we’re up against some very well organised puppies, gentlemen.’

He made eye contact with Arno then glanced at the rest of the K2 men. ‘I did some digging before my flight. There are *eighty-two* retired CIA agents on this island.’ The men glanced at each other. ‘Twenty retired MI6 agents, and fuck

knows who else – so plenty of local talent that could do with a few dollars to clear their bar tab.’

He faced one of his men. ‘Get the list, set-up a laptop, drop-off those over sixty-five, start on the rest.’ Turning to Arno he said, ‘Let’s go see where we can hire a fast boat, eh.’

* * *

In the car, Hans, the senior guard, informed Grey of the reward Otto had offered up, and of the assets flying in; ten men from Panama, the hostage rescue team from Brazil, ten men from Barbados, plus another twenty-two from around the Caribbean.

Mr. Grey’s first port of call was the nearest boat yard. ‘Hire or buy,’ said the sign they parked next to. Exiting the vehicle’s cool interior, they stepped across the dusty concrete harbour-side and to a boat shop. It’s small sign also said ‘Hire or buy.’

‘Morning, gentlemen,’ the owner loudly offered. ‘Hire or buy?’

Hans pulled his pistol from his jacket, closed the door and then stood against it.

‘Ah,’ the shop owner sighed.

Grey sat on the man’s desk. ‘There’s a large reward for information about a ... speedboat. Long boat, room for ten, extra fuel, not locals. Bought Sunday or Monday.’

‘How ... *large* a reward are we talking here?’

‘Would keep you in cold drinks all year.’

The shop owner eyed Hans carefully. ‘And there’d be booby prize for a ... lack of co-operation, I’m guessing.’

‘You’d be shark food by sunset.’

The shop owner stared across at Mr. Grey from his swivel chair. 'I didn't sell it, but I heard about someone who did; he got plastered Sunday night.'

Hans put his pistol away and produced a thick wad of dollars.

Whilst staring at the wad, the man pointed out of the window. 'Down the coast five miles, Jackson's Creek, Randy's Boat Yard. Talk to Randy - *if* he's sobered up yet.'

Hans counted out ten thousand dollars and handed it over with a card. 'Call that number if you think of anything else. We *will* be back.'

'Yeah, no problem fellas.'

The drive down the coast took twenty minutes along poor roads, some of Grey's team joining them in convoy, now three vehicles.

Randy's boat yard looked like it could do with more business, numerous rusted hulks sat rotting in the sun. They pulled up in the shade of a large workshop, the speedboat inside it on blocks.

'Randy needed the money,' Grey said as they stepped out. 'And they needed someone out of the loop, no questions asked.' He stepped forwards, taking in the rundown boatyard, a tethered dog barking at the visitors.

At the rear of the workshop they found a beaten-up old trailer, also on blocks. Grey knocked. When no answer came he opened the door and stuck his head in, finding Randy snoring happily in the midday heat. A second later Randy landed face down into the dry and sandy soil.

From the workshop, an elderly coloured man appeared, sweating profusely and rubbing his oily hands in a rag. Squinting in the bright sunlight, he took in Randy as he struggled to get up. 'Ain't my business,' he said as he turned away, back into the cool dark interior of the boatshed.

With a little help, Randy made it to his feet. He was a Caucasian local, plump, with a pink bald plate and a few days growth of grey stubble. He put a hand over his eyes and slowly turned, taking in the faces. Finally he came back around to Mr. Grey. ‘Who the hell are you?’

‘You sold a speedboat...’

‘Hey, she was seaworthy, guys,’ he said, his hands raised as if in surrender. With tightly pinched shoulder muscles, he shrugged. ‘She was a good boat.’

‘Who did you sell it to?’ Grey pressed, slowly circling around the man.

‘Who ... who are you guys?’

Hans retrieved his pistol and cocked it. That got Randy’s attention.

‘Who ... did you sell it to?’ Grey pressed.

‘They ... they didn’t give their names, paid in cash. I figured they were drug smugglers heading for Florida. Take it easy, guys.’

‘Who?’ Grey shouted.

‘They was English men, from that place near Britain, some island somewhere -’

Grey stopped dead. ‘They were Irish?’

‘Yeah, yeah, like U2 and Bono like Irish. They came in a boat, paid cash – way too much – left in both boats. All done in five minutes. They bought extra fuel tanks and took some bottled water.’

‘And the name of this fine speedboat?’ Grey enquired.

‘Got Bluebird painted on the side, least she did. I got a picture.’

‘Get it!’ Grey ordered.

With the photograph and the boat’s technical log retrieved, they left Randy with enough money to drink himself to death.

In the car, Grey said, 'The Irish men he mentioned, they're probably former IRA, now working with the FARC Guerrillas in Colombia, so we'll need to block any boat getting to the north coast of Colombia. These boys would have come in by boat, lived on the boat - not using local hotels - done the job and out. But someone recruited the locals.'

'The old English man?' Hans puzzled.

'No, he was just a stooge. Someone else, probably a contact of the Colombians. Let's get to the morgue in Nassau. Order up a chopper.'

'Morgue?' Hans queried.

'See who else died recently, then we can cross match.'

Along a dusty road, the convoy progressed back towards the villa.

* * *

An hour later, Grey emerged from the morgue. Getting back into the hired jeep he said, 'One good lead, a local man killed last night, throat slit. I called it in.' They set off for the heli-pad.

Grey's phone went almost immediately. 'Yeah?' He listened. 'Fax it to the villa as well. Thanks.' Closing the flip-phone he announced, 'Our stiff in the morgue is ex-CIA, fifty-six, divorced recently, short of money. Known contacts with a Colombian drug lord, Pedro Salvo.'

'K2 has rescued people in Colombia,' Hans posed.

Grey considered it. 'Revenge? Maybe here, but no way a Colombian is going after the castle. What the fuck do Colombians now about ice-climbers?'

'They could have paid someone,' Hans suggested.

‘Other way around, I reckon. Someone paid the Colombians to organise the snatch, since they probably had people in the area and, more importantly, boats. It’s a short flight from Colombia, and that ties in the IRA guys. The *boys* are not averse to a bit of freelance work.’

‘So we go after Salvo?’

‘You don’t, we do; it’s our patch. I’ll direct some assets from Bogotá. Our dear friend Salvo lives on a small island just off the coast.’

‘Easy access by boat,’ Hans thought out loud as they progressed through the traffic.

Survived another night

3

‘What’s the time?’ Beesely asked, the dull light and his poor eyesight making it hard for him to read his watch face.

‘Almost seven o’clock, sir,’ Adrienne reported. ‘Dark now outside.’

‘And still no attack?’

‘No, sir.’

Claus stepped in, his harassed features visible in even this dull light.

‘Spoke too soon, did we?’ Beesely asked.

‘A bomb has gone off in a pipe under a road toward the town. It has blocked the road, but also cut our water supply *and* our gas.’

‘Are the heaters down here mains gas?’ Beesely puzzled.

‘No, sir, only in the castle.’

‘So, the toilets...’

‘Will not flush,’ Claus unhappily reported.

Beesely turned to Adrienne. ‘Could you let everyone know.’

She sent off runners.

‘Three days,’ Beesely let out. ‘Going to get a bit ripe in here.’

‘Which, I guess, is what they had planned,’ Claus noted. ‘And since they have not attacked here yet...’

‘They will give it a day or so, let us get cold and run down.’

‘There is the underground stream,’ Adrienne put in when she returned.

‘Yes,’ Claus admitted. ‘But its level is too low for the castle. Besides, how would we pump it around?’

‘Well, the least we can do is to get buckets organised so that we have drinking water,’ Beesely ordered.

‘I will arrange it,’ Claus offered.

‘How are we on food?’

Claus explained, ‘There is food in the lower bunker for the command staff to survive three days, something that was set-up by Gunter.’

‘He anticipated an attack by Basel,’ Beesely thought out loud.

‘And *others*,’ Claus pointedly suggested. ‘We are benefiting from his ... well earned paranoia.’

Despite the cold, Beesely chuckled. ‘What about the men?’

‘The barracks has plenty of food, including a good store of those American MRE packs. The men use them on exercise.’

‘Any immediate problems?’ Beesely asked.

‘The cold *will* get worse. We have gas canisters, but not sufficient for all men for three or more days. We have issued mountain clothing to all the men ... and all admin staff brought their own cold weather clothing when they reported for work – so no problem there, sir.’

‘But three days of this and they *will* get worn down,’ Beesely thought out loud. ‘Our friends out there did their homework.’

Adrienne began, ‘There is ... one possibility, sir.’ They focused on her as she sat huddled in an oversized parka, her hands between her thighs. ‘The large pipes from the electric water heater go through the dungeon, on the right next to the steam room – that’s where Otto got the idea from. And if the dungeon doors were opened - now that the windows on the

stairs have been blown out - a fire lit next to those pipes would warm them. Since it is the lowest point, the warm water would rise and ... convection would start.'

'I think Thomas would have something to say,' Claus playfully cautioned.

'We'll worry about the little monster when he returns.' Beesely took a moment. 'And knowing Johnno, I'm sure that they will return to us. Claus, go light a fire.' Claus stepped out. Facing Adrienne, Beesely said, 'You are one hell of a tactical thinker, young lady.'

She blushed. 'Thank you, sir.'

'So I'm promoting you. From now on you are my personal assistant, with a suitable pay raise.'

'Thank you, sir. It's an honour.'

* * *

Matt the armourer stepped through the Swiss guard commander's quarters, next to his armoury, and into the next room – Bomb Disposal. Big Dave and his crew were ready, body amour on, their helmets resting on the desk.

'Hey, Matt,' Big Dave offered. He lifted an open packet of cigarettes and offered one to Matt.

'Ta.'

'All quiet so far?' Big Dave enquired.

'So far. Ya all heard about the water, so nay ya be taking a big dump.'

'Used to shitting in plastic bags and taking it with us,' an ex-trooper joked.

'The Swiss pen pushers say this wee blizzard be with us three days,' Matt mumbled as he tried to light his cigarette.

'Be like a three day exercise,' a man suggested, sat with his feet up, not much else to do.

Matt glanced at the metal detectors led against the wall, six of them. He pointed at them, but said nothing.

‘They find booby-traps in the snow,’ Big Dave explained.

‘Ha’ much snow can they see thra’?’

‘As much as you like, it’s good kit,’ Big Dave suggested.

‘Show me,’ Matt said, waving up Big Dave.

Big Dave turned a detector on and explained the controls to Matt.

Matt pointed at a man without body armour and beckoned him with a hooked finger. ‘Stick a wee MP5 around ya chest, laddy.’

The man did so, everyone now curious. Matt stood four feet back and swung the detector, a high-pitched squeal registering in the headset as the ring passed by the man. He stepped back and repeated the exercise, now at six feet away and still getting a slight squeal.

‘Wa ya say is the visibility out there?’

‘Two foot max,’ Big Dave answered.

‘So, nay ya got a four foot advantage,’ Matt said as he sat.

The men glanced at each other.

‘I got some white tape we could camouflage them up with,’ a man enthusiastically offered.

‘Do it,’ Big Dave ordered.

‘Metal detectors?’ Beesely queried, Kev stood smiling in front of the desk.

‘Aye, sir. The boys swing around the detector jobby and they go squeak if someone wee a gun is six foot away. Frigging visibility is twelve bloody inches, sir.’

‘We would see them first!’ Beesely enthused. ‘Excellent. Set up a rota, watch the batteries.’

‘Big Dave has a re-charger, a wee bike that you peddle on.’

‘Excellent,’ Beesely enthused. ‘Go find some coins on the beach!’ With Kev gone Beesely turned his head to Adrienne. ‘You see, despite the adversity, the men come up with great ideas like that.’

Dress for dinner

4

At noon, Johno stood up and stretched. ‘OK, time we got the fuck out of here,’ he whispered towards Thomas. The lad nodded.

‘Get out of here?’ Helen whispered, glancing at the door.

Johno edged closer to her, pulling Thomas in with a hand on the boy’s shoulder. ‘These amateurs ... screwed up big time,’ he said with a dangerous grin.

‘What do you mean?’ Helen quietly pressed.

‘We’re not bound up for one,’ Johno replied. ‘Two, the lad’s knife.’ Thomas lifted his trouser leg, revealing his flat throwing knife. ‘And three ... we’re at sea, so they don’t expect us to try anything. Nowhere to go!’

‘And they’re right!’ Helen softly insisted. ‘There is nowhere to go.’

‘Listen, they’ll kill us the minute we dock and they confirm who they ... or we ... made them think we are. It bought us time and confused the dumb fucks, but it’s also a death sentence. Besides, no way they would believe I’m the world’s richest man, and your picture is on the fucking internet.’

Helen stared back for several seconds. ‘What’ll you do?’

‘What I’m good at,’ he coldly stated. ‘The lad I don’t need to worry about, he’s seen me in action. You, on the other hand, need to listen the fuck up and do exactly what I say ... when I say it. Or we’ll all be shark meat. Understand?’

She simply stared back.

Thomas put a hand on her arm. 'We'll be OK. But when Johno shouts, please do what he says quickly.'

'Christ!' Helen let out with an angered sigh.

Johno took a big breath. 'OK, I've got a plan. You won't like, and you're going to think I'm crazy -'

'I already think you're crazy!' she angrily whispered.

Johno smiled. 'Step one. We need to barricade the door, give me time to do what I need to do. Problem is -'

'If they hear noises they'll come in,' Helen put in.

'Yep. So I need the gun off the guard outside first.'

'How the hell -'

'Shhhh.' He put a finger across her lips, turning to face Thomas. 'Sit near the door, on the right, close enough to jump up and stab him. Aim for the middle here.' He illustrated where he wanted the boy to stab, and faced Helen. Lifting a rusted wrench he handed it to her. 'This is small enough for you, heavy enough for the job.'

'Why are we doing this?' she challenged.

'Because I'll be sat at the back, up to no good and making a noise, distracting our guest. I'm the only one he's worried about; he won't be expecting you two to jump him.'

Johno positioned a terrified but resolute Helen where he wanted her, then stepped over the junk and to the rear of the hold. Sitting, Helen held the wrench between her thighs, under her skirt, and forced a big breath. With a nod to each co-conspirator, Johno started to ease a damaged old jetski out from its rack, loud enough to attract attention.

A few seconds later the door handle turned. A pistol came slowly through, a hand, an arm, finally the face of one of the Colombians. The man immediately fixed Johno with a dangerous stare, the pistol aimed. He glanced quickly at Thomas, the boy sat looking dejected and fearful, then the

other way to Helen – sat with her head lowered – and finally took a step in. ‘Hey!’ he growled.

‘Just making some room to lie down and sleep,’ Johno explained. ‘We’re tired.’

‘Stop!’ the man growled.

Johno stood square to the man and, although he was eight foot away, he adopted a threatening stance. The man took another step. Thomas lunged, a good stab to the chest delivered just as the man snapped his head around. The Colombian closed his eyes and grimaced in agony, a shot released from his pistol as he was hit over the head by Helen.

Helen had shrieked at the shot fired, glancing toward Johno. Bent double now, the Colombia received a stab to the neck from Thomas. Johno jumped across the equipment littering the floor, and to the Colombian as the man gurgled and rasped. The man’s gaze was firmly fixed on Thomas, one hand to his neck in a vain attempt to stem the flow of blood. Johno grabbed the pistol, which should have been Helen’s job, a second round discharged as he snatched it. Shouts could be heard from outside the hold.

Johno shoulder butted the Colombian hard, straight out the doorway as footsteps could be heard on the wooden stairs. He took charge of the pistol, crouched down and aimed up, hitting the first man in the groin and the second in the legs, four shots fired. A burst of automatic fire was returned, harmlessly hitting the floor. Johno slammed the door shut.

Grabbing a wooden locker, he pulled it forward as Helen got out of his way. Working frantically, and with the help of Thomas, he positioned it across the door. ‘Behind the jetskis!’ he shouted.

As Helen and Thomas scrambled across the room, Johno straightened, took a breath and then put two rounds through the hull, a third through the porthole, water starting to spurt into the room.

‘What are you doing?’ Helen screamed.

‘Sinking the boat,’ Johno said with a grin.

‘You’re what!’ she screamed.

‘Thomas,’ he called. ‘Scuba tanks, regulators.’ The boy got to work. ‘Helen, grab a bit of tube and siphon out what petrol’s left from the jetskis. Now!’ He grabbed a second locker and rested it against the door.

As Helen straightened out a thin tube she said, ‘We’re blocked in here ... and we’re filling with water! How the hell are we going to get out?’

‘When there’s water on the other side of that door, there won’t be any people there.’

‘And we’ll be under water!’ she countered.

‘Nope. Bell shaped space above us, stairs above the door. Water will stop with a few inches to spare in here. Besides, I’m going to blow a large hole in the side.’

‘You’re what!’

‘Then we’ll swim out. Got ten, fifteen minutes of stale old air in the old tanks.’

Two shots came through the thin door, stopped by the lockers. Even so, they all ducked. Shouts could then be heard; someone stopping the men from firing into the room, lest they penetrate the hull. Johno allowed himself a brief grin, water pouring in from the porthole as the boat undulated above and below the water line.

Helping Helen, Johno grabbed a jetski and let it fall with a clatter. Opening the tank cover, he grabbed a filthy piece of tubing. He blew through it before shoving it in. Dropping to the lying position, he sucked till he could taste petrol,

spitting it out as he put a thumb over the end. Grabbing one of their water bottles, he emptied its last mouthful before filling it with petrol. Helen had also managed to get a bottle full of petrol, emptying the urine first.

With the help of Thomas, all three of them now working together, they got the final jetski down and emptied its remaining petrol, and all of them now stood in an inch of water. At least it smelt better with the petrol fumes and the open porthole. Every time the ship rolled up and down a few gallons of seawater poured in. The waterspouts created from the holes in the hull were also alternating in height as the ship rose and sank with the swell.

More shouting could be heard the other side of the door, but this time it was the Irish. Ignoring it, the captives grabbed the metal locker and manoeuvred it around until it lay like an open coffin.

Johno carefully checked the inside. ‘Good.’ He closed its door to see how it fitted, and just how airtight it was. ‘It’ll do, it’s just about airtight, strong enough to build up a force and make a big bang.’

They grabbed musty old towels and threw them into the locker; they would absorb the petrol and allow it to evaporate slowly. Working together, they manoeuvred the heavy metal cabinet against the doorframe and wedged it in flush with the curvature of the hull, lifting it so that it was now around chest height. Firmly wedged in, Johno banged down on the edges with the wrench, causing more shouting from their captors.

He stood back, heaving a big breath. ‘Now we wait.’

‘Wait?’ Helen repeated.

‘Water level has to come up a bit.’

Thomas took the wrench and smashed what was left of the porthole glass, water now entering at a faster rate.

‘Good lad. Now check the scuba gear and get it ready.’

‘Only one mask,’ he mentioned, seeming none too concerned.

‘I’ll wear it, you two hang onto me,’ Johnno suggested. He turned his head a notch to Helen. ‘There’re two mouth pieces. Me and Thomas will buddy-breathe, you have the other.’

Helen studied the water pooling around her legs. ‘We can’t just swim away from the boat – we’re miles from land!’

‘Very true; we need to stay with the boat as it sinks.’

She held her gaze on him.

He explained, ‘When it sinks, they’ll be in little rubber life rafts, and there’ll be lots of stuff floating. Besides, they probably called the coastguard. They’re miles from anywhere as well.’

‘Do you think they know we’re sinking?’ she asked.

Johnno casually lifted the pistol, released the magazine and checked the remaining rounds, before making another hole. ‘They will do soon enough. And, they’ll be happy to leave us locked in here.’

‘They might abandon the ship early,’ Helen suggested.

Johnno nodded. ‘If I can get up to the radio we can call for help.’ He gave Thomas a re-assuring smile. ‘You holding up?’

‘This is great!’ the lad enthused.

‘Christ,’ Helen muttered. ‘I’m shackled up with Rambo and son.’

* * *

Ten minutes later, the boat’s captain noted the sluggish handling of his boat, and Johnno noted that the water was

escaping to other parts of the hull just as the engine stalled. All was now quiet.

‘They’ve stopped,’ Helen whispered.

Johno peered out of the porthole. ‘No land,’ he whispered. He turned. ‘So the engine is flooded.’ They were now stood in water up to their waists, but not chilled at all in this warm Caribbean surface water. ‘An hour or so before they think about abandoning ship.’

He studied the porthole. ‘Not enough water coming in through here.’

‘What else could we do?’ Helen asked whilst sounding clearly concerned.

‘Try and blow a hole now.’ Johno reached behind a deflated old yellow dinghy and lifted out the green oxygen canister he had noted previously. He gave it a quick, loud squirt. ‘Not much, but enough. This will double the blast, at least.’ Facing them he said, ‘Get the scuba gear going, duck behind the jetskis at the far end and slip under the water.’

Helen and Thomas got to work as Johno clambered over the wooden lockers to access the top of the metal locker, wedged now between the doorframe and the wooden hull. He evened out the positions of the towels before pouring in the petrol, their small prison filling with petrol fumes in an instant – as planned.

Leaning away from the cabinet, he turned on the oxygen, a low setting so that he would have time to withdraw, and placed the canister inside. Closing the metal locker lid carefully, he forced it down as best he could and closed its latch, dropping into the water a second later.

Scrambling awkwardly over the submerged equipment, Johno pulled out his pistol and settled next to Thomas, his body on top of the lad’s. Most of Johno’s body was now submerged, Helen and Thomas already blowing bubbles a

good twelve inches under the water. With the pistol aimed at the locker, Johno took a quick breath, exhaled and then lowered his head, just his arm resting out of the water on a jetski.

* * *

The Irish were not happy about leaving Johno to drown. With the crew focused on the flooded engine, and the prospect of abandoning ship, the Irish slipped away, machine pistols in hand.

They crept like stalking cats down the bloodstained wooden steps, each movement measured. On the fourth rung, the first man levelled his weapon against the top of the door, at the angle which he figured would cover where the captives would most likely be. 'This is for the boys,' he whispered before opening up.

Johno had not fired, but noted the flash and the explosion, the burning on his hand soothed by the cool water as he yanked his hand lower.

As the Colombian crew watched, flames and smoke erupted up the stairwell. Any hesitation they had about abandoning the ship was gone. As was any belief that their captives were still alive.

* * *

Johno looked up through the water. Not seeing any flame, he thrust his head up, taking a breath of warm, smoke filled air. Thomas and Helen lifted up, ready for the mad dash out of the hole.

But there was no hole, the hull had held. The thin wooden door, however, had gone, and the water level was falling as it flooded into the other compartments. Johno took off his mask, Thomas and Helen both spitting out their regulators.

‘What happened?’ Helen asked, all three still cowering behind the old jetskis. They wiped salt water out of their eyes and coughed in the remaining smoke.

‘Hull was too strong. And someone shot up the door, I didn’t fire.’

‘What now?’ Helen coughed out.

‘We’re still sinking, and the engine’s gone, so they’ll fuck off and leave us. I got a few rounds left if they come down.’

‘We’re at angle,’ Thomas pointed out. They all studied the porthole.

‘Yeah, listing a bit.’ He took a breath. ‘We wait.’

* * *

‘Look!’ Thomas gasped five minutes later. ‘A body.’

They peered through the doorway. Clearly visible was a partly submerged body.

‘It’s whoever fired on the door,’ Johno whispered, now edging forwards, crouching down and with the pistol ready. He pulled what was left of the wooden lockers out of the way. He eased under the shredded metal cabinet, slogged through the doorway on his knees and peered up the stairs. A leg hung from the top step, someone on the landing above. With the pistol in his right hand, aimed up the stairs, he dropped to his knees and felt with his left hand. A few seconds later he lifted a machine pistol. ‘Thomas.’

The lad came sloshing forwards. Johno handed him the weapon. ‘Make safe, get the water out.’

Turning away from the door, Thomas placed the machine pistol on a dry jetski surface and released the magazine. He cocked it, losing the expelled 9mm round in the water. Releasing the locking pin, he let the mechanism slide forwards and off, blowing frantically at each exposed component.

Johno edged past the stairs and tried the door opposite. A toilet. ‘How convenient,’ he muttered.

‘What?’ Helen whispered after him.

‘Nothing.’

Wading through water up to his waist now, Johno pressed on, trying another door. It was locked, so he shoulder butted it open, finding a similar storeroom – and nothing useful to hand.

The final door was unlocked. Opening it, Johno was caught by a flash of daylight and the shadows of people moving. It was the engine room.

Two men were frantically working on the engine, one on the deck, one inside. He aimed and fired at the outline of the first man, knocking him backwards. Closing the door he ducked to one side as a flurry of pistol rounds came through the door’s thin wood.

‘Ready!’ Thomas shouted, Johno sloshing quickly back to him.

At the foot of the stairs, Johno tucked into a corner and aimed up. ‘Set it on single shot and test it.’

Thomas made the setting adjustment, cocked the weapon and fired a single round into the hull, just above the water line. ‘It’s OK!’

‘Come here,’ Johno whispered. ‘And take out four rounds.’ When Thomas eased through the doorway, Johno

said, 'Swap.' He handed the lad the pistol, Thomas loading the 9mm rounds. 'Crouch down and aim up the stairs.' Holding the machine pistol, Johno asked, 'How many rounds in this?'

'About twenty, but I took four,' Thomas whispered.

Johno sloshed quickly back to the engine compartment. Putting his eye to a bullet hole, he could detect the outlines of two men working on the engine. Without bothering to open the door, he aimed where he knew the men were, took a breath and then fired four rounds. Ducking against the wall, he opened the door with his foot, hard to move it against the water now on both sides. Peeking around the doorframe, he could not see any movement. He aimed up toward the open deck hatch, the sun in his eyes.

Movement. He fired twice. A scream.

He took a moment to think. Two Irish, four Colombians on the speedboat, three more on deck, must have been someone in the wheelhouse – maybe two. That's at least nine Colombians; three dead or wounded, six to go. As he waited, the engine hissed, issuing steam from somewhere.

A shot rang out behind him. In German, he asked Thomas what happened, the lad replying in German that he shot one man in the chest. Five Colombians to go, he considered. And right now they think that I'm at the stairs. He eased into the engine compartment and around the cylinder heads until he was aiming towards the front of the boat. Two men came to the open hatch without fear and peered in. He hit them both mid-section with a single rounds.

A hand came out of the water from his right, desperately grasping at him. Johno spun around to find a half submerged Colombian offering him an expression of sheer terror. Johno reached across and pushed the man's face under,

manoeuvring around him and feeling with his feet for a weapon on the floor. As he held the man's head under, not much of fight left in the wounded Colombian, he kept his aim on the deck.

Johno stood on something. Lifting the half drowned man, Johno cracked the machine pistol down onto the back of the man's head. Pushing away the body, he reached down with his left hand and brought up an AK47. With a wide grin, he edged back around the cylinder heads and struggled through the waist-high water back to Thomas.

'Cover me,' he whispered to the lad as he passed him. Stood next to Helen, he handed her the machine pistol. 'Don't put your finger on the trigger till you're ready to kill someone.'

'How many did you get?'

'Seven down, maybe another five or so.'

'Could you have done that without sinking the bloody boat?' she scolded.

'Impossible to tell. Without the water they wouldn't have been pre-occupied on the engine, giving me the chance to shoot them and get this.' He released the magazine from the AK47 and shook out water. Cocking it, he blew once down the barrel.

'Will it work?'

'Oh, yeah. This little baby don't mind a bit of water – world's most reliable weapon.' He blew water out of the breach and re-loaded.

A burst of fire tore up the engine compartment, following by the blast of a grenade dampened by water.

'Oh-oh,' he let out, heading to the door. 'Thomas, get back in here.' He grabbed the boy and dragged him back behind the jetskis. They all crouched down, up to their

shoulders in water, weapons at head height and aimed toward the shredded doorframe.

A ‘plop’ sound was followed by a muffled explosion, water splashing around their uncomfortable quarters.

‘Don’t worry,’ Johno reassured them. ‘Grenades are crap under water.’

Two more grenades ‘plopped’ into the water, two more waves of water raining down on them. Then nothing. Johno eased up and headed towards the doorframe, submerging himself when he got there, just his head and shoulders above the water level, the AK47 aimed up the stairs.

Whispered sounds preceded a face peering down. He shot the man. A burst came through the decking from above him.

‘Two or three left,’ he muttered. Turning his head, he signalled Thomas and Helen forwards. Once they had drawn level he instructed, ‘Aim up the stairs. Fire at anything you see ... or hear.’

Slowly, he moved crab-like through the water, standing up beyond the stairwell and struggling to both walk through the waist high as the water level rose, the water depth increasing at the stern. Once more he edged around the cylinder heads, the engine now just about submerged, and aimed forward. Not seeing any movement for a minute he clambered up onto the warm cylinder heads.

Still no movement. Had they abandoned ship?

Standing up fully now, he popped his head up and looked around. Nothing. With one foot on the cylinder heads, one on a ladder, an elbow on the deck, he eased out whilst staying low.

Peeking down the left gangway he saw no one, but noted a good amount of blood spatter. Standing, he rushed to the

first wall and put his back to it, checking the ocean beyond the stern. There were no life rafts visible.

Ducking below a porthole, he checked the starboard gangway. More blood was evident, but again no movement. Moving back to the left he shouted in German: ‘Thomas. Fire a single shot every thirty seconds.’

He could hear muffled shot, and moved quickly to the door of the first room, bringing the AK47 to bear. Empty. With his back to the wall, he focused on the area further forwards.

The next door was the one that they had been initially taken through, stairs down on the left as you stepped inside. He approached it cautiously, counting down in his head. After the next shot from Thomas he stuck his head in briefly, noting three bodies. He jumped past the doorway, his shadow causing Thomas to fire upwards. He grinned.

The next porthole revealed no movement, and he was almost to the front of the boat. Popping his head around the front bulkhead, he noticed a yellow dinghy in the distance, some hundred yards away and with three men in it, their weapons aimed back towards the boat. He turned and stepped quickly to the doorway at the top of the stairs.

‘It’s OK, they’ve left the ship. Come on up, but be careful. Try not to shoot me! And stay on this side of the boat. They’re in a dinghy, but armed, so stay down.’

He jumped past the doorway, just in case, and ran to the rear, quickly climbing the rear steps. With the AK47 levelled forwards he checked the rear quarterdeck, before advancing cautiously into the wheelhouse bent double. The radio was smashed, as was the rest of any useful electronic equipment. Even the compass had been dealt with.

He moved to the internal stairway. ‘Up here,’ he called. Helen appeared beneath him. ‘They’ve smashed the radio,

and everything else, but the Irish contacted their paymaster somehow.'

'Maybe a satellite phone,' Helen suggested, Thomas now at her side and peering up.

'Search every room. Quickly.'

'They may have it!' Helen shouted up.

'In which case, I'll try and shoot them.'

'You'll hit the dinghy!'

'Got no choice, love, because it don't look like any other life rafts of any kind.' Bent double, he crawled across to the quarterdeck and knelt down. Adjusting his rifle's rear sights for the correct distance, he took careful aim, sighing when he noted the movement of the boat. He aimed, took a half breath, and then fired.

The head of the first man snapped quickly to the side. One down. A burst of fire came straight back, tearing up the wheelhouse. The Colombians were, however, subject to just the same unstable platform as he was, and most of the rounds that they fired were well past the mark.

Johno took many seconds to aim again, successfully hitting a second man. Long and sustained bursts came back, the remaining man making use of his dead colleague's weapons and ammunition. Johno aimed a final time, the dinghy now some one hundred and fifty yards away and bobbing up and down in the swell.

With a silent prayer, he aimed high and fired. Miss. He aimed immediately again and fired high, not wishing to puncture the only functioning dinghy. The final Colombian fell over the side. Observed for several seconds, the body was not moving.

Johno stood. He checked again the wheelhouse and the quarterdeck for any phone or radio, before clambering down

the steps and checking the rear deck. Nothing. He ran around to the stairwell. ‘Anything?’ he cried out.

Thomas appeared from a room. ‘Nothing.’

Helen appeared from the opposite side. ‘No sat’ phone.’

The boat lurched a few degrees to the left.

‘Time to go,’ Johno urged. ‘We’re swimming.’ He put the AK’s safety on and slung it over his head, leading them to the front starboard side, the dinghy still in view in the distance. Noticing Helen’s shocked look he asked, ‘Can you swim that far?’

‘Yes,’ she reluctantly admitted. ‘I was a junior champion, swam most everyday back in London.’

‘Thomas?’

‘No problem,’ came confidently back.

‘Keep your shoes and clothes, we’ll need them,’ Johno suggested as he threw a leg over the side.

Helen grabbed his arm. ‘What about supplies, there’ll be food and water here?’

‘And that little dinghy is in the wind, getting further away!’ Johno snapped.

‘I’ll swim for the dinghy, you get some supplies,’ she offered. ‘I’m a better swimmer.’

She took off her shoes and put them in Johno’s tuxedo jacket pocket. Clambering over the wooden railing with Johno’s help, she stood for a moment in her black cocktail dress before diving gracefully in.

Once she had surfaced, and started swimming, Johno and Thomas turned. They found the ship’s small galley on the same deck, grabbing water bottles and fruit, and placing them into a large sack they found. Listing badly to one side now, they placed the sack on the starboard side, the highest part of the angled deck. With their hands over their eyes

they could see Helen intermittently as she appeared atop a wave, still swimming strongly.

The cool water had refreshed her after the previous night's uncomfortable sleep, but she was now feeling the fatigue as she neared the dinghy, a two hundred yard dash.

Covering the last few yards, she could see a man lying over the side as if being sick. She grabbed the rope that circled the outside of the dinghy and took a minute to get her breath. Pulling the rope down and towards her waist, she eased up in one quick movement, ending up across two dead men covered in blood, gasping as she ending up sitting on one.

Closing her eyes for a second, she forced a big breath before easing the legs of the first body over the side. He went with a splash. She sat to one side and grabbed the legs of the second man, easing them over her head and off the side of the dinghy. Lifting the bodies limp arm, she waited till the waves tipped the dinghy and pushed the man over. Now she was alone on the dinghy. She could see the paddles the men had been using, but no radio or satellite phone. And the boat was getting further away.

Realising that she could not paddle the dinghy back alone, she closed her eyes and cursed, raising two clenched fists to her forehead. With no other option, she dropped over the side, grabbed the rope and started slowly back towards the boat. From the roof of the wheelhouse they observed her progress with great concern.

'She's struggling,' Johno said. 'Leave the food here, we can paddle back for it.' He slipped off his shoes, the movement copied by Thomas. Stuffing his shoes into his inside jacket pockets, tearing them, Johno jumped over the side.

Thomas put his shoes into his trouser pockets, discarding the machine pistol, and jumped. He surfaced in a burst of bubbles and swam after Johno.

Johno said, 'Take your time, pace yourself, stay close.'

Now out of sight of Helen, Johno used the boat's position and the sun as navigational references; she was in a direct line from the boat toward the sun.