

# **Kidnap**

## **K2 Book 7**

**Geoff Wolak, © 2010**

**[www.geoffwolak-writing.com](http://www.geoffwolak-writing.com)**

This book/work is copyrighted in the United Kingdom and other countries. This book is a work of fiction and the author accepts no responsibility for any false conclusions or impressions drawn from it.

No part of this book/eMedia/eBook may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author and publisher(s).

This book/eMedia/eBook is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the author's and publisher's prior consent in any form or in any binding or cover other than that in which it is normally sold and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser(s).

© Copyright Geoff Wolak, 2007. Great Britain. All rights reserved

This work has not been professionally produced through a publisher or agent, it is self-published. If you find any typos - apologies, no professional copy-editor has checked or enhanced it. All agent/publisher enquiries welcome.

#### Format

These books are printed in lulu.com format 6x9 'novel' .

#### Contact

Email: [gwresearchb@aol.com](mailto:gwresearchb@aol.com)

This book is dedicated to my young niece ***Hannah***, who asked, and who is banned from reading it for at least ten years after 2007.

Thanks to

Alan Drew, Carol Thomas, Vince the taxi driver, Simon Race (for all the vodka red-bulls, which I paid for!), the Koh-I-Noor Indian Restaurant (Newport) for all the curries, Spice Merchant (Cardiff Bay) for all the curries, Stephen Wolak.

Big thank you to John Tompkins (Sin Eater book, lulu.com) and dear lady wife, Maja.

Thanks to Pete at Black Dog Square Design for the cover designs.

Editing thanks to Gus on Samoa.

About the series of books

K2 is a series of 6 books (plus this one). If you have picked up book two, three, four or more - without reading book one - then please put it back down; the story will not make much sense without reading the books in series. They all follow-on closely and previous plots are not re-capped. Later books build on earlier events/characters.

This is a work of fiction, but based on real, current and historic scenarios. All characters are fictitious.

**The K2 series available, available from**  
**[www.geoffwolak-writing.com](http://www.geoffwolak-writing.com)**

**Inheritance**

**Assault**

**Revenge**

**Nazi Gold**

**Endurance**

**Crucifix**

**Kidnap**

## 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'.

Reported to intercept 'all' the world's text messages and emails.

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

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

Johnno 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.'

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

'Haven't you fixed that yet?' Johnno 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.'

Johnno 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.' Johnno 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.

Johnno 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 Johnno and down the metal stairs.

'Just wandering.'

The man rolled his eyes. 'Another row?'

Johnno 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 Johnno 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,’ Johno 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.

Johno 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, Johno 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.’

Johno 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 Johno Syndrome.’

‘They named a Syndrome after me?’

‘Yah, and Johno 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, Johnno 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,' Johnno 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?'

Johnno 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?' Johnno 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. 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,’ Johnno 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.’

Johnno 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.’

Johnno 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,’ Johnno sighed, pulling a beer. ‘Same old row.’

Now Thomas looked up. ‘Johnno, 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?’ Johnno snapped.

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

Johnno 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.’ Johno 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,’ Johno 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 Johno.

Johno 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, Johno 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.’

Johno 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 Johnno, 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, Johno.’

Johno 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 Johno. ‘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, Johno 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, Johnno 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 the water. Shown to a table, the guard detail allocated their own table, Helen, Johnno and Thomas settled with their backs to the open windows, the sound of gentle waves adding to the ambience.

An hour into the meal, Johnno and Thomas cracking open lobster claws, Johnno 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 Johnno staring at the man.

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

They continued with their meal, but Johnno was distracted. When Helen returned from the toilets, the man said, ‘Hey there, lady.’ He said nothing more, but Johnno 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 Johnno, 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,’ Johnno 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, Johnno 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 Johnno a look, shaking her head.

‘You drew up the battle lines, love, not me,’ Johnno 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 Johnno.

'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?' Johnno 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,' Johnno grumbled.

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

'Yes,' Johnno 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,' Johnno 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,' Johnno 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 yelled, 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.

Johnno 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 Johnno.'

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 Johnno'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. Johnno, Helen and Thomas have been kidnapped!'

Adrianne, 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,' Adrianne 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.

Adrianne 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, John, 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, Adrianne?'

'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.

Adrianne 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 Johnno 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 Johnno is kidnapped. Coincidence?'

'No, sir,' Adrianne firmly suggested as she monitored the screen.

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

Adrianne 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.'

Adrianne 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?’

Adrianne 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,' Adrianne 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.'

Adrianne gave the message over the tannoy.

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

'Or maybe,' Adrianne put in, 'they do not want us to co-ordinate 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, Adrianne. But tonight, well, this is happening now for a reason. Fix bayonets!'

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

Adrianne 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 Adrianne 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.'

Blinkey said, 'Carpets will need a hoover after, boss.' They resumed their prior positions on the cabinet.

Beesely asked Adrianne, '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?'

Adrianne 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.'

'Johnno ... 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,’ Adrianne suggested.

‘Gone?’ Beesely challenged. ‘Out of fuel ... or been destroyed?’ He turned to Simon. ‘Send someone to check.’ Simon stepped out. Beesely asked Adrianne, ‘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,’ Adrianne 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 ordered 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 Johno 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,' Adrianne 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 Johnno 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.

Adrianne 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 Johnno 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.

Johnno 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,’ Johnno 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.

Johnno 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 Johnno. ‘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,’ Johnno 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.’

Johnno 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,’ Johnno told him. ‘Anything we can use.’ The lad got to work. Facing Helen, Johnno 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 – you’re 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 Adrianne 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. Johnno 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 Johno. He missed the bomb by five minutes.'

'Shit... ' Grey slowly let out. 'So the same puppies are responsible for both incidents. So why kidnap Johno'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 Johno 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,’ Adrianne 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 Adrianne. ‘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,’ Adrianne 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.’

Adrianne 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 Adrianne, 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, Johnno 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.

Johnno 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,' Johnno 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 Johnno shouts, please do what he says quickly.'

'Christ!' Helen let out with an angered sigh.

Johnno 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.

Johnno 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.'

Johnno 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, Johnno 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 Johnno 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,’ Johnno explained. ‘We’re tired.’

‘Stop!’ the man growled.

Johnno 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 Johnno. Bent double now, the Colombia received a stab to the neck from Thomas. Johnno 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. Johnno 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.

Johnno 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. Johnno 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. Johnno 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,’ Johnno 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, sloshed 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.

Johnno stood on something. Lifting the half drowned man, Johnno 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,’ Johnno 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. Johnno 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,' Johnno 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, Johnno 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 Johnno.

Johnno said, 'Take your time, pace yourself, stay close.'

Now out of sight of Helen, Johnno used the boat's position and the sun as navigational references; she was in a direct line from the boat toward the sun.



## **Are you with our cruise?**

### **1**

A long six minutes later they noticed the bright yellow dinghy.

‘Helen!’ Johnno called.

Startled, Helen peered towards the sinking boat, her vision impaired by the irritating seawater.

‘Over here!’ she called, Johnno and Thomas changing direction slightly and quickening their strokes. Thomas shot off, soon reaching her, Johnno there a minute later. Helen was still desperately trying to get the dinghy back to the boat, and to the much needed supplies.

‘Get in,’ Johnno shouted. ‘You’re tired, and your eyes are red. We’ll drag it.’

‘I’m OK,’ she offered.

‘Get the fuck in!’ Johnno roared.

With the help of them both she eased inside, grabbing a paddle and trying to row. As they watched, the boat rolled onto its side. Wherever the supplies had been, they were now heading to the bottom.

‘Ease up,’ Johnno called. ‘The fucking supplies have gone.’

The boat was still fifty yards away and now mostly overturned.

He eased up onto the side of the dinghy. Noticing the blood he said, ‘Gotta get that blood out. Jump out for a second, babes.’

With a heavy sigh, Helen nervously eased out of the dinghy. Johnno reached across to the rope on the opposite side and pulled the dinghy over, the blood flowing out. He

splashed his hand under the dinghy, washing the inside with water. With a kick of his feet he reached across the small dinghy to the far side, grabbed the rope and pulled it back upright.

‘Get in.’

The men folk helped Helen back in. She lifted Thomas in, both helping Johno, the dinghy now snug and with just enough room for the three of them if their legs crossed each other. For a silent minute they observed the barnacled hull of their former prison bob up and down, the bow rising and the stern sinking further.

\* \* \*

‘Are we all sitting comfortably?’ Johno asked, lifting an oar. Helen sat ready with hers. ‘OK, let’s begin.’

‘What direction?’ Helen asked.

‘With the wind, babes.’

‘Why?’ she challenged.

‘Thomas, pay attention: survival at sea, lesson one. First, you can’t row against the wind. Even when you think you’re making progress, the surface current is generally going with the wind, you just don’t notice it.’

The two grown-ups started to paddle.

‘Second. Going with the wind covers a greater distance, so more chance of spotting land. Go with the flow, lady and boy, go with the flow. And don’t forget, Thomas, when lost at sea – always dress for the occasion. Black tie is preferred!’

They paddled away from the debris for five minutes, in their expensive outfits, heading north with the wind.

‘Should we not stay near the boat?’ Helen challenged, her eyes almost closed. ‘There are things floating near it, it could be spotted.’

‘Normally, yes. But the junk will float away and disperse with the wind for one. And two, we don’t know if the Colombians were meeting another boat out here. So if we stay out here we may well just run into them.’

They continued to paddle, Thomas at the front and peering down into the water for sharks.

‘Besides, we might hit an island after a few days,’ Johnno suggested.

‘A few days?’ Helen let out in a whisper.

Johnno faced her and nodded. ‘Thomas?’ he called, the lad turning. ‘How long can the average person survive without food?’

‘Four to five weeks.’

‘Correct. And water?’

‘Four to five days.’

‘Good lad.’ Thomas went back to scanning the ocean as Johnno addressed Helen. ‘It’s the Caribbean, and it’s just beyond the end of the rainy season. Once a day we should get a squall, so fresh water once a day on average. Thomas,’ he called, the lad looking over his shoulder. ‘How do we supplement the water loss?’

‘Raw fish.’

‘Correct, you win a cookie.’

‘Have you got a bloody cookie?’ Thomas cheekily asked, making Johnno laugh.

‘This isn’t funny!’ Helen snapped.

Johnno held his gaze on her for several seconds as they paddled, the dinghy rising and falling with the gentle swell. Softly, he said, ‘The easiest decisions to make in life ... are the ones where you have no choice. And right now we’ve

got only two choices. Stay here and bob up and down, or paddle and hope.'

She did not look hopeful. 'I haven't eaten much in two days, my stomach is already hurting.'

'We'll be OK,' Thomas offered, trying to sound as reassuring as he could.

'And you two are just loving this,' she growled.

'It's what I am,' Johnno softly stated, turning away from her and paddling. 'Thomas, keep an eye out for something to eat, Helen is hungry.'

'OK,' came cheerfully back.

An hour later, Helen had to stop, her place enthusiastically taken by Thomas.

'Will they be looking for us?' Helen asked as she rubbed her aching shoulder.

'You can bet Otto will have everyone bribed to the hilt around the Caribbean, and the Yanks will have every tub out looking.' He hesitated. 'Problem is ... we changed course sharply last night, I reckon because there's a flotilla of US coastguard ships out there. They saw it on radar and turned back to shallow water.'

'Shallow?' Helen queried.

'You can tell by the colour of the water and the length of the waves.'

'Length of the waves?'

'Look out twenty yards. You'll see the surface waves, but squint and you'll see the rollers underneath. Each roller has less than three smaller waves, so we're shallow. Won't be any naval cruisers close by, there'll be miles away.'

Helen looked over the side and down for several seconds. 'Christ, I can see the bottom.'

'That's ... good and bad,' he cautiously offered.

She turned back to face him. 'Why?'

He stopped paddling. 'Thomas, stand up on my legs. Carefully.' They both helped the lad stand upright, each holding a hand as he balanced against the swell. 'Look in the direction we're going, with the wind. See white water?'

'Yes, the water's funny over there, at eleven o'clock.'

'How far does it go?'

'It goes left for maybe ... two hundred metres, right for maybe four hundred metres.'

'A reef?' Helen asked.

'Yep,' Johno answered. 'The kind that'll tear this dingy to shreds, and us with it.' Helen was mortified. 'Thomas, can you see dark water in the white water?'

'Yes, one o'clock, twenty yards wide.' The boy eased down.

'OK, boys and girls, we need our wits about us. And we need to paddle like hell.'

Thomas grabbed the paddle, and between them they turned the dinghy ninety degrees to the right. After five minutes they again lifted Thomas up.

His assessment was that they were slowly drifting towards the darker water. Not wanting to take any chances, Johno had Thomas remain stood on his legs until he could see the outline of the reef himself. Helen grabbed a paddle as Thomas knelt at the front of the dinghy, making small course corrections.

As they approached the reef mouth the swell increased, Thomas falling forwards and dunking his head into the water twice – which he found very funny. As they entered the channel, the wind pushing them slowly through, Thomas shouted and pointed. 'Shark!'

Helen gasped.

‘It’s OK,’ Johno reassured her. ‘He’s more afraid of us than we need be about him. This is a reef channel, the one place you’re bound to find sharks.’

‘It’s two or three metres!’ Thomas exclaimed, sounding none too worried.

‘Shut up!’ Helen snapped.

‘Thomas?’ Johno called. ‘Helen is afraid of sharks. Don’t mention there’s one near unless it nudges the boat, OK?’

‘I’m sorry,’ the boy offered Helen, but she was now staring intently at the water’s surface.

They were soon in calmer water.

‘I can see the bottom!’ Helen let out.

‘And there’s a sand bar ahead,’ Johno informed her.

‘A sand bar? You mean land?’

‘Not quite land, but we can stretch our legs.’

‘Stretch our legs?’ she challenged.

‘You’ll see. Paddle, Dame Helen, paddle.’

Through the calm turquoise water they slowly progressed, the swell dropping away to almost nothing. Then Johno suddenly jumped out, rocking the dinghy, soon stood in two foot of water. Thomas jumped out, and between then they dragged Helen along, stopping when they got to just three inches of warm water.

‘This’ll do for tonight,’ Johno informed them. ‘Thomas, undo the rope around the dinghy, put your shoes back on.’ Johno helped Helen out.

Turning fully around, she said, ‘It’s a sunken island.’

‘Well, depending on the tide, we might see the water level drop. Around the Caribbean it only does up and down about nine inches odd, but we may get some dry sand for a few hours.’

She put a hand over her eyes and continued scanning the horizon. ‘Why stay here? Shouldn’t we keep moving?’

‘You want to go through a reef at night?’ he posed. Her expression, the look of sheer terror, suggested that she did not.

Thomas held up the rope he had loosened. ‘What shall I do with this?’

Johno pointed. ‘See that rock? Tie one end around it tightly, the other end around the dinghy.’ The lad got to work.

Helen folded her arms tightly, Johno taking off his black jacket and wrapping it around her. He softly suggested, ‘We’ll dry most of the clothes, they won’t take long.’ He lifted out the AK47 as Thomas secured their transport. ‘Ain’t got time for proper fishing, so we’ll have to try Crocodile Dundee style fishing.’ He checked the weapon and stepped away, calling Thomas over.

They waded up to their waists, standing still for ten minutes. Many small fish came and went, one large dark shadow moving through the channel. Finally Johno noted a large shoal coming in, chasing smaller fish. He took aim at the bottom of the shoal, casually informing Thomas of the fifteen degree refractive bend of light through water, then fired a six round burst.

Thomas dived forwards and swam, popping his head under the water. A few seconds later he emerged with a large silver Tuna, struggling with it. Whilst he dragged it to shore, Johno found a second tuna floating nearby.

‘Grub’s up!’ Johno shouted. ‘Get the kettle on, love.’

On the sand bar, Thomas proudly displayed the fish for Helen. ‘We have soupshi!’

‘Sushi,’ she corrected the lad as Johno sloshed towards them, the second fish dumped into the dinghy.

‘Enough here for two days or more,’ he enthusiastically announced. ‘You like sushi?’

‘Yes,’ she replied. ‘Got any dips or Japanese beer?’

Johno addressed the proud boy fisherman. ‘Remember what I taught you about gutting a fish?’

‘Spines, tail, head ... and remove stomach,’ came confidently back.

‘Normally, yes, no need with these big buggers. Just cut slices out of them.’

Thomas got to work, levelling the large tuna on the side of the dinghy as it bobbed in the gentle swell.

‘You’ll soon feel better,’ Johno informed her. ‘Looks like a squall coming as well, so food *and* water.’

‘And a survival expert in the team,’ she quietly conceded. ‘Sorry for snapping earlier.’

‘Hey, it’s OK,’ he softly reassured her, putting his arms around her as they stood ankle deep. ‘You’ve been through a lot.’

‘In case you hadn’t noticed, the three of us have been through a lot,’ she softly stated as they both watched Thomas keenly cut the tuna.

‘This is nothing for me,’ he responded. ‘This is a fun day out. And for the lad, shit ... wait till his friends at school hear about it.’

‘You two are a match made in heaven,’

‘And *we’re* not.’ She glanced up, but said nothing, Johno adding, ‘If we left K2 we wouldn’t even stay in touch.’

She heaved a big breath. ‘That’s not completely true. I ... have a lot of respect for what you’ve done, and your abilities. And you have a heart of gold...’

‘But on a rainy Monday night in suburban England we’d soon be fighting.’



She considered his words, glancing at the dark clouds on the horizon and the streaks of sunlight edging them. ‘Otto was correct; you’re defined by your work, so am I. Outside of K2 we’d both be pretty miserable pretty quickly. Me as much as you.’

Thomas offered up a piece of Tuna.

She tasted it then swallowed. ‘Nice,’ she commended.

‘Eat till you’re full,’ Johnno suggested to them. ‘Don’t know how long we’ll be out here.’

The water level eventually dropped, and the dinghy provided a stable platform for three hours of uninterrupted and comfortable sleep. When the ocean roused them it also started to rain. Johnno had hoped it would, cleaning out the bottom of the dinghy before sundown. Now he pressed down with his shoes, making a well from which water could be scooped up. It tasted a little salty, but was very welcome. With their bed for the night swaying and bobbing gently at its tether, they got an interrupted night’s sleep, but no one was complaining at dawn.

‘Beautiful,’ Johnno remarked, studying the patterns the rising sun was making behind distant dark rain clouds. He knelt in the water and lifted Thomas onto his shoulders, straightening up with the aid of Helen. Thomas scanned the horizon.

‘See any land?’ Helen asked.

‘No, but white water.’

‘Keep the image in your mind of where the white water is,’ Johnno instructed him. ‘Can you see a way through?’

‘Yes, dark water over there.’

Johnno made a mental note of the direction in relation to the sun and the wind as Thomas clambered down. ‘Have a pee, boys and girls, *before* you get into the car; long journey, no service stations.’

Thomas and Johno peed at one end of the small sand pit, Helen crouching down at the other. They untied the dinghy, dragged it across the sand bar and jumped in. Helen and Johno paddled, Thomas up front and looking for rocks.

‘Are we nearly there yet?’ Johno asked, Helen giggling. ‘Are we nearly there yet?’

‘Shut up,’ Thomas shouted from up ahead. ‘I am con-cen-tray-tering.’

‘Con-cen-tray-ting,’ Helen corrected.

‘Are we nearly there yet?’ Johno asked.

Helen started laughing, soon followed by the studious navigator up front. ‘Are we nearly there yet?’ she loudly asked as she paddled.

## Siege mentality

### 1

Beesely finished off his late evening meal, sat now with Adrienne and feeling a little warmer thanks to the hot food. The castle's heating pipe system was benefiting from a raging fire in the dungeon, the smoke escaping through the windows of the stairs above.

‘Much better,’ Beesely let out.

‘Should you not go to the hotel spa maybe?’ Adrienne asked.

‘And leave the troops? Never.’ He eased back. ‘I was officer, my dear, but I had the notion of: *don't ask your men to do anything that you wouldn't*. It got me into trouble a few times, with the CO demanding that I try not to kill myself so often.

‘But my cousin, Derek, he was an officer, and he was killed by his own men in the Far East.’

‘His own men?’ Adrienne puzzled.

‘It happened in British ranks, as it did elsewhere. Some young hotshot of an officer would order a platoon to run at a machine emplacement, but getting himself shot in the process. I would have led such an attack and, hopefully, would not have led a suicidal attack. I cared about my men, and although I went looking for trouble, I tried hard not to waste the lives of my men.

‘So, here I am, and here I'll stay till this is over, setting an example and leading from the front. Otherwise, the staff may think me an old fool who needs a warm bed.’

‘We worry about you, sir. You have nothing to prove.’

‘Ah, but I do. We all have something to prove, each day. That feeling never goes away, not even in old age.’

\* \* \*

‘Mobile Three to control.’

Rom glanced at Gunter as the operator hit a switch. ‘Go ahead, Mobile Three.’

‘Castle is on fire.’

‘Did we set the castle on fire?’ Gunter testily asked.

‘No, sir,’ Rom answered.

‘Did they set their own castle on fire?’

‘Unlikely, sir,’ Rom offered.

The operator depressed a switch. ‘Mobile Three, confirm castle on fire.’

‘Mobile Three to control, I’m on the hill above the castle and the air is full of smoke.’

Gunter stood. ‘The first group we sent failed, and this second group succeeds before they even arrive. Not bad going, it kind of averages itself out.’ He took in their faces. ‘Proceed as planned.’

\* \* \*

Beesely cradled a warm tea in both hands, the liquid steaming in the cool air. ‘I hate just waiting around.’

‘Sir,’ Kev said, bursting in. ‘Explosion near the entrance to the tank room, nay anyone hurt though.’

‘A rocket, or was the bomb placed?’ Beesely asked.

‘In this weather, it was placed.’ Kev withdrew.

Beesely faced Adrienne. ‘Send a runner. GPMG Hail Storm, close to the castle and tank room entrance.’

Adrianne grabbed a trooper outside and sent the message. Sitting, she said, 'Will they simply try the same approach?'

'Unlikely. They've targeted our supplies, so they want to wear us down. So, how, exactly, could they do that?'

'Make us cold, or wet, or hungry.'

'They ... are mostly a function of time, and time is on our side more than theirs, because no matter how good they are, they'll be living outdoors when we are in here, warm and snug to a degree.'

'If the restaurant is hit, it will make communications difficult.'

'Yes, my dear, it would. So, send a runner and have the restaurant evacuated. Ask the managers to use the rooms beneath it.'

Big Simon stepped back in.

'I hadn't noticed that you had gone,' Beesely noted.

'I managed five hours sleep, ready for tonight,' Simon responded, sitting next to Beesely.

'I just ordered the restaurant evacuated – because it's a nice target, and someone just placed a charge at the entrance to the tank room.'

'They won't penetrate the tank room,' Simon insisted.

'Then maybe they just wished the occupants to be cold,' Beesely considered.

\* \* \*

Curiously observed by his colleagues, trooper Dano retrieved his fishing tackle and opened his tackle box. Selecting the strongest line, he attached six hooks. 'Wait, you'll see, this'll work,' he encouraged his perplexed colleagues.

Old Matt stepped into the Vault, stopping to observe Dano. 'Is nay the weather for it, sonny,' Matt dryly stated.

'Right, got the line and hooks, now just need a few grenades.'

The other troopers glanced at each other.

Dano grabbed his cold weather gear, his MP5 and a handful of grenades, placing his fishing line and hook assemblage into a plastic sandwich box. The other men were still staring. 'I'll be in the tower over the drawbridge, the one with the arrow slots.'

He walked out and up the stairs, clambering over the sandbags and into the cold and swirling wind of the courtyard. Across the cobblestones, he climbed a metal ladder and squeezed into a round tower, the floor covered with a light sprinkling of fresh snow, two vertical arrow slits creating a hell of a draft, and a hell of a howl.

Placing down the sandwich box, he fetched out the fishing line and hooks, being careful to make sure that they did not tangle. With a lead weight attached to the end, he reached through the arrow slit that was closest to the side of the drawbridge, and let the line fall. Taking up the tension, he sat back and held the line. Now he would wait.

Just over an hour later, the line tugged. It had been tugging all along with the wind, but this felt like a big fish. Man sized.

Letting go of the line, he grabbed a grenade and pulled the pin, thrusting his hand out of the arrow slit. He let go of the grenade and eased back, a dull thud registering three seconds later. Just to be sure, he dropped a grenade out of the second slit and readied his weapon. Pointing down through the arrow slit, he emptied a whole magazine into the blizzard, not seeing the ground below.

Back in the vault, the men stood laughing, Dano stood holding the fishing line, a piece of someone's white snow smock attached to a hook.

'I've got another idea,' he told them.

He wrapped up warm, white snow trousers and snow smock, hood and facemask, and checked his weapon.

'I'll be just next to the drawbridge, so don't fucking shoot,' he said through his mask, his words distorted.

Dano again climbed the stairs and scrambled over the sandbags, entering the courtyard. He turned and waved at the Great Hall, knowing that they had their weapons trained on the cobblestones, and stepped into the grey light of the drawbridge. Scrambling through deep snow, Dano turned right and leant against the driving wind, soon unable able to make out much apart from the darker castle walls on his right.

After six steps he stopped, figuring he would now be at the edge of the drawbridge towers. Sitting down with his back to the castle wall, he used his gloved hands to cover his legs with deep snow, digging his shoulders in. Soon, he was buried under two inches of snow, just a gap where his mask was, he weapon by his side.

'This is fun,' he said to himself, but soon found that he warmed up a little under the snow. He relaxed, and waited.

A full two hours later he felt something, a slight compacting of the snow nearby. He wiggled the fingers of his right hand and reassured himself where his weapon was. He placed his finger onto the trigger.

Crunch. Someone stood on his leg, but he could see nothing, his mask now covered in snow.

Suddenly, the dark grey light of his world lightened, a hand scraping the snow in front of his mask. The hand scraped away the snow, revealing his mask, and a pair of goggles peered at him, less than two inches away.

A burst of fire from his weapon removed the view of the goggles. He struggled out and scrambled forwards, patting the snow and finding boots. Raising his weapon, he fired again, a long burst left to right, certain now that he had hit the man. Grabbing the man's ankle, he began the trek back, dragging the body as he went.

From the sandbags, the other troopers could see an arse first, a man, finally the body being dragged. Dano stopped in the middle of the courtyard and pulled down his hood, taking off his mask as others came out. Kneeling, the troopers took off the man's goggles and pulled back his hood.

'Not one of ours,' a trooper said.

They unzipped the man's jacket, finding a second waterproof layer and then a patterned cardigan.

'Definitely not one of ours.'

## 2

Mobile Three fought against the wind, crunching through deep snow, the tether to his companions alternately tugging and releasing. Each step was measured, each advance made as if moving through treacle. His brow was covered in sweat inside his facemask, his armpits moist, his wrists chilled where the gloves exposed them.

Thirty minutes of hard work brought Mobile Three and his team to their target location, thirty minutes after the smoke had been reported. The trees ahead thinned out, and a



dark shadow loomed, intermittently visible behind the driving snow.

He turned and tugged the rope three times; they had arrived. The last man in the line tied himself off to a tree, two tugs given when ready. Mobile Three loosened the tether and edged forwards, soon glimpsing the top of the castle from the side of the cliff. After a long trek across the mountain, they had arrived at the desired position, just a few feet above the top of the castle, but away from the cliff-top bunker.

Easing off his facemask, Mobile Three could hear intermittent gunfire on the breeze. That was not his problem; he had his mission, and he would be paid a great deal for a successful outcome. Lifting off his backpack, he detached a satchel. Kneeling, and bent double, he used his body as a roof and a windbreak, opening the satchel and peering in. Two large buttons presented themselves. He clicked ARM on, and waited a few seconds. The second switch started to flash. He clicked it on and it stopped flashing.

Lifting up and turning, he wrapped his wrist around the rope to the others, leant over the side and judged the wind. He found it as expected, blowing from his position and towards the castle. He tightened his grip on the satchel canvas, took a final guess, and threw the satchel with the wind. It landed in a snowdrift between the roof and the cliff, but was unseen by Mobile Three.

Mobile Three turned, stepped towards his team and tapped each man on the arm in turn. They pulled a large white sheet from a backpack and tied it off to nearby trees, soon underneath and out of the driving snow. They settled down for a sleep.

\* \* \*

Beesely lifted his head as the blast registered. 'Where was that?'

Simon stepped out. Returning, he said, 'It was at the back of the restaurant, next to the cliff, the glass gone.'

'How much damage?' Beesely pressed.

'Not so much, no one hurt; it was evacuated.'

'That is good timing, but what use is a small explosive up there?'

'Could it have been put there before?' Adrienne asked.

'Before?' Beesely asked. 'The first team? Well, they had the opportunity.'

'Why a long timer?' Simon asked. 'They would not have just left it there, and they would not have thought that they'd fail.'

'Maybe to make us cold, sir,' Adrienne suggested. 'As with the bomb at the tank room, and no one attacked the tank room afterwards.'

'The restaurant would not make that much difference to the temperature down here,' Beesely suggested.

'It will fill with snow, and that will turn to water and seep down,' Simon said.

'Perhaps,' Beesely agreed. 'But I can't see that they would just be risking lives to make us uncomfortable.'

'Cold and wet is no good for the computers, sir. A few days likes this and we may not be able to use them.'

'Is there something in our computers that they want removed, or is it our use of those computers?' Beesely thought out loud. He faced Simon, 'Plug up the hole in the restaurant as best as you can.'

Simon stepped out.

\* \* \*

Three hours later, Mobile Three checked his watch with a torch. He tapped each man in turn. Squeezing out under the flysheet, the roar increased, the visibility very poor.

Pulling a rope-bag from a backpack, he tossed it over the side, the rope feeding-out from within. Attaching a karabiner, he walked backwards and over the side, all the while battling the driving snow as he abseiled down. At a height that he judged to be correct, he locked off his karabiner, and pushed himself to the left. Reaching the dark castle walls, he swung hard with his ice axe, finding purchase in the roof. Tugging on it, he pulled himself onto the slopping roof, a second axe thrust into the tiles.

Releasing the lock on his karabiner, and letting out rope, he pulled himself into the hollow created by the roof merging into the cliff face. He stood, and walked forwards, soon to the hole made by his satchel explosives. Grabbing the rope, he tugged four times, holding on tightly as his first team member slid down at a controlled speed. Once on the roof, the team member slammed an ice axe into the roof and held on.

Five members of the team were soon on the roof, down through the hole a few minutes later. They found themselves in the storeroom, drifts of snow covering stainless steel upright fridges. At the door, Mobile Three pulled off his hood and listened for a whole minute. All was quiet. Relying weapons, the team took up position, and Mobile Three pulled the door handle. It would not budge, locked from the other side.

Mobile Three shook his head, pointing at the hole in the roof, and up-and-over signal given. They retraced their steps, soon back on the roof and battling the wind. A hole just big enough for a man allowed them access to the

kitchens, each man in turn squeezing down, packs passed down.

The kitchens were nothing but shades of grey, no lights, no sounds other the howl of the wind coming from above them. Mobile Three pulled down his hood, and stepped slowly forwards. At the serving hatch he peered through, finding the restaurant dark and empty. Turning, he gave the thumbs-up signal, the team beginning to remove outer layers and to lower backpacks and ice axes.

A minute later they were ready, black fatigues and MP5s, webbing with grenades. Mobile Three opened the kitchen doors and held it wide for his team. Crouched, they stepped slowly through, weapons ready, soon having checked the entire restaurant and toilets.

At the main door they stopped and listened, long and hard. Getting ready, two men grabbed the handles, the remainder raising weapons. With a nod, the doors were pulled, but did not budge. Locked by Simon.

Mobile Three nudged his men back. He sighed. In Finnish, he said, 'We can blow the doors, but they'll know we are here. We'll have to then use grenades to clear the stairs.'

'Are there other ways down?' a man asked. 'Down the outside?'

'We can try and climb down, past these doors,' Mobile Three suggested. 'But maybe they have blocked the windows.'

'They will know we are here soon enough,' a man said. 'Blow the doors, and the throw grenades as we go.' The team were in agreement.

Beesely sat facing the managers in his office, the office a bit crammed, but at least the hot breath was warming the room.

‘What we are witnessing, is a systematic attack on our support systems; water, electricity, and gas. That has been supplemented with a strange desire to blow the doors and windows so that we’re all nice and cold, yet they don’t seem to know about the underground facilities, which could stay warm without the windows upstairs. So, it’s all a bit odd.’

‘This weather could last seven days, sir,’ a manager said.

‘In which case, large parts of the castle would be cold and damp, but repairable,’ Beesely suggested. ‘But their aim must be more than just that. Their aim, must be to see us evacuate those sections, which may then make their penetration of the facility easier.’

A distant blast registered. ‘Where was that?’ Beesely asked.

Big Simon, who had been stood in the door, stepped out. When he returned, he said, ‘They’re coming in the restaurant!’

‘All of you, move to the lower bunker. And somebody get me the test nerve gas.’ The managers filed out. ‘Simon, get guards in gas masks to block up the broken windows on the stairs, fast as you can.’

‘What’ll you do, sir?’ Adrianne asked.

‘Convection.’

‘Convection?’ Adrianne repeated.

‘An idea that you gave me: warm air rises! If we put test nerve gas in the stairwell, the smoke will push it up with the warm air currents.’

The first window was duly blocked, the smoke filling the stairwell as the sounds of grenades grew. The second window was blocked before the guards figured that the grenades were getting too close. They withdrew.

Meanwhile, on the floors beneath the restaurant, managers and guards locked themselves in rooms or took cover, ready to fire.

Beesely ordered that rubber be added to the fire in the dungeon, the guards left in corridors to move behind doors and close them. Either that or choke.

One floor down from the restaurant, Mobile Three threw a grenade down the corridor and ducked against the wall. Sniffing, he coughed a little. Moving down a level, throwing grenades as he went, the smoke thickened. He was soon retreating, nudging his men back up.

Behind the doors of the restaurants, the men said, 'It's on fire, we should leave.'

'We don't get paid for leaving,' Mobile Three reminded them, bent double and coughing.

'We've seen no one, met no resistance,' another man said. 'If we abseil down the outside, we can attack from the ground floor where it's not on fire!'

Others agreed.

They put their white smocks back on, facemasks and backpacks, ice axes readied, and exited the way they came.

\* \* \*

'Empty?' Beesely asked, an hour later.

'No one there, but signs they came in the hole in the roof,' Simon reported.

'They just came ... and then went?' Beesely puzzled. 'Search it for bombs!'

'We have, and we still have six men searching everywhere. We have men on the roof, nothing found there.'

Beesely eased back. 'If the test nerve gas had reached them, they would have been disabled. So they left before that, when we stoked the fire.'

'They came without respirators,' Simon said with a shrug.

Beesely made a face. 'Superb climbers, and no gas masks! Any other incidents?'

'No, sir.'

'Very odd. OK, carry on searching.'

\* \* \*

Outside the castle walls, Mobile Three lay dead, his team nearby, lifeless and frozen. They had walked straight into the path of the GPMGs.

\* \* \*

Gunter eased up and walked out of his control room, followed by Rom.

'Mobile Three, come in please,' the operator tried again. 'Mobile Three, respond.'





## Are you with our cruise?

### 2

The sea was rougher than the day before thanks to the previous night's squall, the waves through the channel lifting the dinghy and dropping it some four feet, making the occupants a little seasick. When clear of the channel the waves eased, the wind behind them assisting their progress since they were going with the waves, not against them.

'Take a break,' Johno suggested after ten minutes. 'Wind will take us.'

Without anyone paddling, the front observer soon became the rear observer, his shoes off now, sitting on the edge as he diligently checked the water ahead.

Helen lay back and lifted her face to the sun when the clouds parted. 'At least it's warm,' she quietly let out.

'That it is, *Sea Wife*.'

'Sea ... wife?' she repeated without opening her eyes.

'Richard Burton film with Jackie Collins, in the sixties; they were stuck in a raft.'

'I think I remember it. How did it end?'

'They found a very small island that had all mod cons, including a waterfall. They built a raft and sailed away, rescued eventually. He loved her, but she was a nun.'

'Wasn't that a Robert Mitchum –'

'*Heaven knows, Mister Allison?* Deborah Kerr? No, different film.'

'You know your war movies.'

'Grew up on them, that's why I became a soldier. Favourite is *Kelly's Heroes* -'

‘Stealing Nazi gold,’ Helen put in. ‘If only you knew - as a kid - how you would end up.’

Johno laughed as they bobbed with the waves, the dinghy slowly spinning, Helen adjusting her position to catch some sun and warm up.

An hour later, Thomas said. ‘Shall we have some fish?’

‘Hungry?’ Johno asked without opening his eyes.

‘A little bit,’ Thomas admitted.

‘Cut a slice off, some for us.’

Thomas got to work, offering out tuna steaks to the grown-ups just as a plane flew overhead. Helen put a hand over her eyes and peered up.

‘Too high,’ Johno suggested.

They finished their tuna, licking their fingers before washing them in the surf.

Johno scanned the horizon. ‘Might not rain till tonight, so take it easy, cover up if you can - to stay cooler, not too much exercise. And if you want a pee – hold it in.’ He faced Thomas. ‘You know why you should hold in your pee?’

‘Yes. If you are very thirsty the body will ... absorb back some water.’

‘Good lad.’

\* \* \*

At three o’clock they were all huddled under Johno’s jacket, intermittently splashing water around their necks as the day warmed up and the wind eased off. Their thirst was exacerbated by the oily fish, which was starting to dry out and smell.

Johno nudged Thomas. ‘Stand up and check.’

Thomas eased out from under the jacket, squinting against the bright sunlight, and clambered to his feet, stood on Johnno's legs. 'Land!'

Helen and Johnno eased up and peered in the direction Thomas was pointing, a hand over their eyes as they squinted into the distance.

'Looks like a big sand bar or a raised coral bed,' Johnno suggested, not much enthusiasm in his voice.

'Is that good or bad?' Helen asked as they studied it, the 'land' some five hundred yards ahead.

'Bad. No water or food, lots of sharp edges. Grab a paddle.'

Thomas announced, 'There is no white water like before.'

'Nope, just a great big fucking rock-ledge to negotiate. OK, Thomas, get back on the clock. Helen – paddle.'

They earnestly began to paddle towards the raised coral they could see in the distance.

Twenty yards from the coral, Johnno slipped over the side, stood now up to his chest. 'OK folks, abandon ship.' Helen and Thomas eased over the side, Thomas swimming to the coral and clambering up. As his guardians gently approached the coral, fearful of puncturing their only means of transport, Thomas walked off exploring.

Johnno firmly told Helen, 'Watch your hands and legs, don't get cut!' He clambered up first then lifted her up in one movement.

Between them, they lifted the light dinghy clear and across the white coral to an enclosed patch of sand. Dumping it down they scanned the horizon, hands over their eyes as Thomas threw something toward them. The faded yellow tennis ball bounced off the coral, coming to a halt on the sand. Next he threw a blue plastic detergent bottle.

‘If you find any plastic bottles,’ Johnno shouted to the lad. ‘Bring them!’

‘Do you think it will rain tonight?’ Helen casually enquired.

‘Probably get an hour.’ He lifted the plastic bottle, examining it before handing it to her. ‘Clean that, then stay with our yacht. I’ll search with the nipper, our shoes are better than yours.’

She lifted an old piece of rope from the sand. ‘Any good.’

‘Yep. Keep anything like that,’ he said as he went after Thomas.

Ten minutes later a shot rang out, Thomas and Johnno spinning around and rushing back across the small flat island, a two hundred yard dash. They got there out of breath, Helen stood with the AK47.

She pointed. ‘Thomas, can you swim and get that bird.’

Johnno laughed, stood with his hands on his hips. Thomas plunged straight in, retrieving the large pelican.

‘It is a big bird!’ Thomas shouted as he struggled toward shore, swimming with one hand. They lifted him and the bird out.

Johnno inspected it. ‘If we can make a fire it’ll be great. Probably tastes like chicken.’

Thomas took his wet shirt and trousers off, now down to his underpants, but put his shoes back on. ‘I’ll get the things we found,’ he said as he plodded off.

Johnno inspected the pelican. ‘Good shot, babes.’

Helen put the AK47 back into the boat. ‘We still need water.’

Johnno took in the sky, facing into the wind. ‘Look’s like it’s clearing up. Might not get any rain till tomorrow.’

Helen offered him a cautious and worried look.

‘Thirsty?’ he asked.

She reluctantly nodded.

‘Duck into the boat, my jacket over you, keep your head out the sun,’ he suggested.

‘First I’ll help you search the island and make lunch.’

Thomas brought back three footballs of varying sizes and colours, two small plastic bottles and plenty of mangled old rope. Johnno carried back an armful of wood, most of it bone dry, and more rope. His enigmatic smile caught their attention.

‘Found something?’ she probed.

He dropped his pile of wood, eased the rope off his shoulder and then pulled a glass bottle from his pocket. ‘Message in a bottle. Sent by Sting himself!’ As they keenly observed, he placed the bottle into the coral, lifted a stone and carefully smashed it, retrieving one large piece of rounded glass.

‘I know what to do!’ Thomas shouted, grabbing the piece off Johnno. In the shelter of the dinghy he made a hollow in the sand, placing the end of a dried and flayed bit of old rope into it. Lying down, he held the bottle fragment like a magnifying glass and focused its beam on the rope filaments.

After ten minutes of earnest effort the lad had not succeeded in lighting the rope ends. Johnno produced a plastic lighter from his pocket, a smile for Helen. ‘Kid’s gotta learn the hard way.’

Thomas cleaned the glass and started again, finally getting a tiny thread to light. With gentle care, and even more gentle breath, he coaxed the rope alight.

‘Well done,’ Helen offered. ‘We would have been stuck without you doing that.’

Thomas proudly lifted the burning rope and moved away from the dinghy, placing the rope in a natural hole in the coral. He added additional rope threads, thin wood placed on top and allowed to catch, followed by thicker wood and more rope, soon a roaring fire going.

Johnno dumped the bird on top. 'We ain't got anything to cook it in, so its own juices will have to do.' He turned. 'Helen, can you watch the birdie. Thomas, cut open those footballs, in half, and then clean them.'

Helen sat cooking, or rather sat setting fire to the bird's feathers, as Thomas produced four reasonable rubber dishes. With Johnno instructing, Thomas grabbed what was left of the Tuna and cut it up, large portions of the smelly fish placed into the dishes. They sat on the dinghy sides and watched as the fire burnt strongly, the bird now only recognisable by its long beak and a few un-burnt feathers. Thomas added more wood when required, the fire burning for some forty minutes before Johnno said it would be ready.

Dragging the bird off by its beak, still in just his underpants and shoes, Thomas did not hesitate to cut-up their unlucky avian visitor. When he found areas of what looked like chicken he cut them into slices and handed them over.

'It does taste like chicken,' Helen commented as she ravenously tucked in. 'And dry!'

'Yep. Gunna be thirsty afterwards.'

They both took in the horizon, some hopeful black clouds visible in the distance. The breeze was, however, cool and welcoming.

'I'm full,' John let out as he lay down in the sand.

'Me too,' Helen added, easing down next to him.

'There is more bird left,' Thomas informed them.

‘Christmas leftovers, eh?’ Johno joked, his eyes now closed.

‘I will check the rest of the island,’ Thomas offered.

‘Be careful!’ Johno cautioned.

With Thomas beachcombing, his guardians got some after-dinner nap time, the fatigue of the past four days starting to catch up with them.





## Siege mentality

### 2

Armoured personnel carriers at the drawbridge signalled the arrival of supplies; food, blankets, heaters. The personnel carriers had followed a snowplough that had to battle through from Zug, the road temporarily repaired and open. A search of the grounds was still just about impossible, but no further attacks had materialised overnight.

A few staff left via the personnel carrier, and the remaining staff enjoyed a good meal. The restaurant storeroom had been raided, and everything that could be salvaged had been salvaged. Supplies were sufficient.

‘What are we missing?’ Beesely asked Adrienne. ‘What is this really about?’

She considered her answer. ‘They are well organised and well funded, determined and skilled men, but not good enough to destroy us.’

‘Exactly, and that’s what’s been bothering me. So either their information about us is wrong, or we are missing something. But they knew exactly where to hit us to cut our power, but failed to know how to get inside. And the rag-bag group they sent the first time, they were great climbers, but poor soldiers.’ He raised a pointed finger. ‘They were good enough to plant bombs outside, at sub-stations and road junctions, but not skilled enough to get in here. It’s almost as if that part was well planned, the rest an afterthought.’

‘Unless the paymasters considered the men good enough, and miscalculated,’ Adrienne suggested.

‘That’s not making a lot of sense to me, because a great deal of thought went into this attack. It’s as if ... as if they managed to get good information, but not the kind of information that would allow them to succeed. It’s as if ... they were attacking Gunter, and not us.’

‘Ah,’ Adrienne let out. ‘An old enemy of Gunter.’

‘Who, my dear, did not expect the SAS troopers, or myself, to be here.’

‘Or the extra defences. Yes, that makes sense. But who would not know that Gunter is gone?’

‘Another puzzle; it’s as if ... as if a plan to attack Gunter last winter was dusted off and used.’

‘We’re checking the backgrounds of the men we have identified, so we should soon have the paymaster,’ Adrienne suggested.

## **Are you with our cruise?**

### **3**

Helen stood facing the sunset in her black cocktail dress, Johno at her shoulder. 'What I wouldn't give for a cold beer right now,' she said.

'It'll be cooler now,' he offered. 'Less water loss, and we might be lucky and get some rain.' He turned his head. 'Thomas, it's bedtime. Clean your teeth!'

With nothing to do, absolutely nothing to do, they lay down in the dinghy and snuggled up. Their clothes were now dry, so they had that to be thankful for. But the day's heat, and the food they had eaten, had taken its toll; they all had dull headaches and dry mouths. Closing their eyes and breathing through their noses helped, but not much.

And cooler it got. After two days of being exposed to the sun, they all had varying degrees of sunburn, and now shivered as they huddled, parts of their skin alternating between flushing red hot or cold.

'Are we sick?' Helen asked without opening her eyes.

'Mild heatstroke, sun burn,' Johno said. 'It'll pass, but not for a day or so. Going to be a long night.'

It did rain, but just enough to moisten the lips and dampen their clothes. Several minutes were spent unashamedly licking the dinghy's yellow plastic.

At dawn they were sluggish. Johno lifted Thomas onto his shoulders, more of an effort than before. The boy thought he saw something in the distance, but could not be sure. For ten minutes they debated staying put and hoping for rain, and more seabirds.

Since the rain could stay away for a week, their luck would be the same at sea as here on the coral. But at sea they had a chance of being spotted by a boat, or reaching a larger island. They reached a consensus.

Between them they carefully carried the dinghy across the coral and into the water on the leeward side, setting off once more. With no white water in sight, and the ocean seemingly deeper, a rich blue colour, they elected to drift – taking turns on watch.

The surf picked up, lifting and dropping them in rhythm. Helen felt sick after an hour, but nothing came out when she wretched. By the end of the day her lips were dry and cracked, Thomas complaining of severe headaches. A light mist of rain cooled their faces several times, but was never enough to quench their thirst, and dusk came down without sight of land.

‘We’re gunna be out here all night,’ Johno croaked, his throat dry. ‘You two get some rest, I’ll stay awake.’

He got no argument, both Helen and Thomas suffering badly. The cool night air helped, the splash of water on his face a welcome relief every few minutes. At 2am he could not keep his eyes open any longer. Now their fate was in the hands of the gods.

With the dawn sun coming up, Johno opened an eye, the roar of waves filling him with dread. He shot upright with what energy remained, the sight of large white rollers breaking across rocks filling his field of view. ‘Wake up!’ he rasped, coughing. He splashed water onto them.

Helen roused, gasping when she saw the waves they were heading towards, and the rocks beyond. Thomas stirred.

Johno looked over his shoulder. A small island! And they had gone right past it and towards a reef. 'Turn around,' he shouted as best he could. 'Paddle.'

Helen summoned what energy she could and helped turn the boat, but it was no use; they were not making any progress.

Johno pointed, 'That way, leeward side of the island.'

They changed tack and paddled with what energy they had left, now side on to the waves and the wind. With Thomas helping, using his hands as paddles, they made slow progress, but reached the inside of the reef before the start of a channel. With the rocks looming, Johno slipped over the side.

Holding onto the side of the dinghy, he swam toward the rocks, getting a foothold and standing up, the choppy water to his knees. Being now able to look down through the clear water, he stepped cautiously along, dragging the boat along the inside of the reef. Sometimes he would be up to his chest, sometimes to his waist. But with his shoes preventing injury from the sharp coral, and leaning forwards to counterbalance the pull of the dinghy, he made reasonable progress.

The reef curved around in a large horseshoe, eventually joining a sand bar. Helen and Thomas clambered out, the water up to their knees, and all three dragged the dinghy two hundred yards across the sand bar and to the island's shore. They collapsed in a heap under palm trees, the dinghy safely high and dry.

Breathing heavily, Johno forced himself upright and plodded through the trees. He stepped over dried palm fronds on a sandy base, pushing past small bushes till he came to the opposite shore. Stopping and glancing around, he figured the island to be four hundred yards long and fifty

yards wide. He plodded back. Collapsing next to Helen he said, 'No waterfall. No nuns.'

'Uninhabited?' she coughed out.

'Yep.' He rolled onto his side, the well being of Thomas and Helen uppermost in his thoughts. A coconut stared back at him. On all fours he scrambled slowly toward it, lifting and shaking it, noting the liquid inside. He carried it back. Between Helen and Thomas he made a suitably sized hole in the sand, placing the coconut inside. He padded the sides of the coconut with sand walls and grabbed Thomas' knife.

Gently stabbing down, he managed to make a small hole, now keenly being observed by two thirsty seafarers. Lifting the coconut above his head he let some of the liquid dribble into his mouth. He took a few seconds to assess the palatability of the coconut's milk, being stared at intensely, before holding it over Thomas' mouth.

The lad swallowed and coughed as Johnno let the milk dribble slowly into Helen's expectant mouth. By time the dribbles had ceased they were all feeling a little better.

'Stay here,' he said. 'Rest and get your strength back.'

Four coconuts later they were all feeling much better.

Johnno explained, 'It takes thirty minutes for the liquid to get around your system. Maybe more. So take it easy till you feel better. A dull headache can either be sun stroke or dehydration.'

'Can we eat these?' Helen croaked.

'Yep. They don't quite taste like a Bounty chocolate bar, but nice anyway, and good for you unless eaten in excess. Anyway, we're safe enough here for a couple of weeks, and we'll be found before then, not least because some fucker's put a sign up on the other side. It says: Private Island.'

'They can take us to court,' Helen quipped.

An hour later they felt much better, the three of them ambling around the island together. They found another sign, this one threatening the penalties of stealing the coconuts, and discovered a disused barbeque and some wooden seats made from logs.

The whole meandering stroll had taken just ten minutes, soon back at the dinghy. Johnno cracked open several coconuts with the rusted barbeque tongs and Thomas' knife, the three of them sitting cross-legged and chewing moist coconut flesh.

When full, Johnno said, 'Thomas, grab as many of these big green leaves as you can find, and any branches. Helen, there's plenty of old rope around here, grab what you can.' They stood. 'And everyone, please, be careful not to get lost!'

Johnno collected fallen coconuts as Thomas threw down numerous large green leaves, soon quite a collection of each. Helen re-appeared with an armful of old rope, an assortment of colours. Johnno had found several glass bottles and some plastic shampoo holders, dropping them down next to the dinghy. 'World's richest man, and here I am sifting through the garbage!'

Clearing away dried old leaves from between two palm trees, Johnno used the largest green leaf as a brush. With the help of Helen, he tied together three bits of old rope and fixed them between two trees, three feet off the ground. The taut rope went from red to blue to brown.

Several lengths of dried and parched wooden slats were fixed to the rope, angled down to begin the frame of a shelter. The remaining rope strands were duly tied between the branches, making a multi-coloured latticework. Finally, the green palm fronds were placed over the lattice and tied on with small threads of unwound rope.

‘Will it hold up?’ Helen asked.

‘To a storm? Not a chance,’ Johno replied. ‘To a squall? Sure. Keep the sun off as well.’

They lay the remaining fronds onto the sand, making a bed, the dinghy brought in to make a wall on the seaward side, Thomas now chasing crabs across the fine white sand.

‘Right, from now on,’ Johno instructed, ‘one of us walks around the island looking out for boats every thirty minutes during daylight hours.’

‘I’ll go first,’ Helen offered. ‘Need a tinkle anyway.’

\* \* \*

An hour later, Johno was lying on the sand, his head on a tree root as he watched Thomas trying to catch fish with his hands in the shallows. Helen rustled through the bushes, smiled at Thomas’ antics for a moment then lay down beside Johno, her head on his chest.

After a moment, Johno softly said, ‘We only agreed to make this trip ... what, Saturday, flew out Saturday night. But to organise that mansion, the local people, the boat ... that should have taken weeks.’

‘No one could have known we would come *here*.’

‘That’s the puzzler,’ he sighed. ‘I remember, at the airport when we landed, the pilot went off with three fake passports – so no fucker even knew it was us.’

‘A mole inside K2?’

‘That’s been worrying me.’

‘They would have figured that by now,’ she quietly insisted. ‘Beesely and Otto will have gone over the mansion, and that invitation we received. They’ve had days at it, so they’ve probably caught the people behind it.’



‘Yeah,’ he sighed. ‘Probably get back to find they’re given the fuckers the chair already.’ He watched the growing vapour trail of a jet high overhead.

Thomas plodded up the sand and plonked down onto his knees, shaking his wet hair over them.

‘Thank you,’ Helen chided.

‘Catch anything?’ Johnno asked, still focused on the vapour trail.

‘No, they are to quick.’

‘Make a spear from that long bit of wood we found,’ Johnno suggested. Thomas ran off and got to work. ‘Keep the bugger busy for hours, keep his mind off things.’

‘He has no fear or stress – at all,’ she whispered.

‘He still sees the good in life, the beauty of the moment. Must be nice to be exploring the world from the beginning again.’

‘Not sure I would want to start again,’ she softly let out. ‘Thought I had it all figured out till a few months ago: career, family, retirement plan. Yes,’ she sighed ‘I had it all worked out, down to the year of retirement and what I would do.’

‘What *would* you have done?’

She took in the beautiful scene; the brilliant white sand, the clear shallow water, the rich blue ocean beyond the reef. ‘Mike and myself, we always liked the Italian Rivera. We had the same interest in horses and restaurants.’

‘A horse restaurant?’

She elbowed him. ‘No. We would buy a restaurant in the countryside, something close to a stables. Our girls would have been grown up and gone by then, and we’d run it like a business. Stables in the daytime – tourists in the summer – and restaurant in the evenings, serving the guests as the sun went down.’

‘Sounds nice. I wanted to be an airline pilot.’

‘Is that why you learnt to fly?’

‘Probably; I always liked looking down at the ground from above. As a kid I loved looking at maps, that bird’s eye view of things. And I loved free-fall parachuting, looking down at the patchwork of fields and houses.’ He picked seeds and small twigs from her hair. ‘Need some shampoo, love.’

‘Given up on the hair. Not looking forward to when they rescue us.’

Johno laughed loudly, his rising chest buffeting her head. ‘Kidnapped, stuck on a desert island ... and you’re worried about how your frigging hair will look when rescued.’

‘It’s a woman thing.’

He tapped the top of her head, the parting in her hair. ‘Need your roots done badly.’ She elbowed him again as he laughed. ‘Don’t think the salt water is helping there, love.’

‘You can talk, your face fungus is going white and grey with the salt and the sun.’

‘Call me Santa Claus, then.’

\* \* \*

An hour later, Thomas speared a fish, starting a fire as the grown-ups sat lazily observing.

Johno checked his tuxedo jacket, and the concentric white rings of salt. ‘Thomas,’ he called, the lad running over. ‘You’re a smart lad. You reckon you could get these salt stains out?’

Thomas lifted the jacket. ‘Yes.’ He ran to the water.

‘You’re a cruel bugger, you know that,’ Helen said.

‘What? Kid’s got to learn,’ Johno insisted.

Thomas returned with a black jacket, no salt stains visible.

‘Excellent work. Hang it up to dry.’

Johno pointed Thomas to the tuxedo twenty minutes later. ‘I thought you washed that?’

Thomas puzzled the white salt marks. ‘It’s the salt from the water,’ he realised.

‘Shouldn’t have washed it in salt water then, should you!’ Johno told the lad.

Thomas issued a few choice words in German and wandered off.

‘It’s beautiful here,’ Helen let out. ‘I’m not afraid any more, I quite like it here.’

‘Paradise island. Wouldn’t like it in a hurricane much, but we may be lucky; a few nice days here and then a nice rescue. Beesely will be fussing.’

‘I wonder how Marie is?’ Helen thought out loud.

‘She’s not due yet.’

‘Otto should be a good father,’ Helen softly stated.

‘Swiss, all done by the book,’ Johno said. ‘But I bet he comes in tired in the mornings. Bit odd, not having my phone or being able to chat to anyone. And I’m dying for a cigarette. Been thinking about sniffing the fire.’

‘Maybe this break will be good for you. Have you ever given up?’

‘Dozens of times, but it never worked, because I was kind of hoping I would die. The warning on the packet was not much of a deterrent for me, more of an invite.’

Mr. Grey gently broke the water's dark surface. In the distance he could see the lights of a villa on the shore, nestling between large rocks that resembled bookends keeping the villa stable. He slipped below the surface, back to the dark world where the only sound was his own breathing. Small points of green light relayed the position of his team of Navy Seals. Using their underwater scooters, they advanced towards the surf.

Mr. Grey tied his scooter off to six others, a few kilograms of lead weight attached, a small anchor dug into the sandy bottom. He pulled out a sensitive underwater shaker and attached it to the anchor line, the shaker giving off a delicate sound, reminiscent of wind chimes on a porch. The men would be able to find their transport in the dark.

Lifting a proper diver's shaker, he shook it three times. Each team member in turn responded. They turned towards the shore, the gentle swell fixing the direction for them.

In three feet of water, rising and falling with the swell, Grey took off his fins and clipped them to his left side. From his right side he unclipped his rifle and knocked the safety off. Digging his rubber boots into the soft sand, he found some purchase and lifted up; head, weapon, shoulders. After scanning the horizon he turned his head, six dark objects also looking for movement. He eased forwards with the waves.

Once on the beach he stopped and knelt, his team spreading out. Water needed to drain from ears, senses needed to adjust, hoods removed and the gentle breeze tested on cheeks. Grey lifted up and walked forwards, soon to the tree line and inside. Re-breathers and fins were dropped, weight belts and masks. Pointing, he sent three

men off counter-clockwise around the small island, leading his own team clockwise.

At the edge of the target villa, a guard stood smoking, his inhalations being very dangerous for him, the bright red end of his cigarette accurately fixing his position. Grey aimed mid torso and fired twice, his discharging rounds issuing dull thuds. The guard slumped. Grey was suddenly all eyes and ears, swinging his weapon around.

A full two minutes later he moved forwards and to concrete steps that led from the villas patio down to the sand. Climbing steadily, each foothold tested, his weapon in line with his eye, his elbow high, he reached the top step and the dead guard. He turned his head and nodded. The first SEAL moved right, the second left, as Mr. Grey approached a fountain, cover available from the villa.

Sounds came from within, indistinct sounds, maybe a TV or a radio. With the first floor balcony covered by his men, Grey inched around the fountain.

A dog barked. Grey quickly moved his weapon thirty degrees right, and down, two rounds fired, the dog silenced. He quickly returned his aim to house.

‘Cookie, Cookie,’ came a woman’s voice. She appeared on the first floor balcony, a round hitting her in the windpipe. Holding her throat, she slumped forwards onto the balustrade.

‘Go!’ Grey let out in a strong whisper. He rushed to a set of glass windows and fired a burst, the glass shattering as he jumped through. In his damp rubber boots, he navigated through a darkened room, around sofas and coffee tables, and to a crack in a door that revealed light.

Voices, shouts, questions.

He put his back to the wall and eased open the door. Three men were heading towards the main door, AK47’s in

hand. He waited till they had opened the door, one man shot in the face straight away, and fired at the remaining two.

He kicked the door open fully and swung his rifle around the doorframe, finding a startled looking woman in his forties. 'Sit down against the wall,' he told her in Spanish. She complied.

A burst of fire came from the rear of the villa, a moist SEAL in his rubbers appeared at the main door, his weapon focused on the stairs. Grey moved into the kitchen, finding it empty. Backing up, he swung his weapon into the lounge. A man stood with his back to the wall, making ready to fire out of an open glass door. Salvo.

Grey aimed at Salvo's right shoulder and fired. Salvo spun around, dropping his AK47 and grasping his shoulder, his face contorted. Kicking open the door, Grey ran in, scanning the room but finding just Salvo. He kicked Salvo's weapon away.

'Count off!' he shouted.

'Number One, clear!'

'Number Two, clear!'

All men reported in, none offering live targets yet to be dealt with.

'Search everywhere!' Grey shouted. He lowered his weapon and regarded Salvo. 'You might bleed to death, or I might help you. Who hired you to kidnap the Swiss people?'

Salvo took a moment, looking up defiantly and panting. He nodded to the coffee table. With his weapon covering Salvo, Grey sat on a very nice sofa in his wet rubbers. On the coffee table rested a newspaper, an article about oil exploration cooperation between Colombia and a company called Den-Col Oil Exploration, headed by Gunter Heisel of Copenhagen, Denmark.

‘Gunter, eh?’ He faced Salvo. ‘And do you know anything about why they were to be kidnapped?’

Salvo shook his head. ‘We grab them and deliver them to him, ten million dollars. Some oil deal gone wrong, some partners arguing.’

‘Oil deal ... gone wrong?’

‘Villa’s clear,’ came a voice.

Grey stood, and put two rounds into Salvo’s chest. ‘Nice sofa by the way.’ He turned. ‘Everyone out!’





## Siege mentality

### 3

Otto took the call at the bank headquarters, and wrote down the detail. He took a big breath and closed his eyes for a moment.

Lifting the pad, he handed it to a manager. 'I want to know everything about that man in an hour. And send agents to Copenhagen to observe him, and to ready an attack.'

The bank's CEO, Mathius, closed in. 'Problem?'

Otto took a moment. 'It was rumoured that Gunter had a few illegitimate children, one in particular in Denmark. That man ... he is the one behind the attack on us. He is, apparently, a wealthy oil trader.'

'Do you think he wished to dispute the inheritance?' Mathius posed.

Otto nodded. 'But was wise enough not to show his face and make such a claim.'

\* \* \*

Beesely listened to Claus' report in the cold and gloom of his office, then eased back in his chair, wrapped up warm in a snow smock. 'He wanted the inheritance,' he finally stated.

'Maybe it was promised to him,' Claus suggested. 'We will never know.'

'Well, he'll not be able to do much of a job attacking us if he's all tied up ... to a chair.'

‘Men are on their way, but movement from here is difficult, as you can imagine. Our people from Berlin are heading that way.’

‘Question is, are there any more bombs on walls, or people running around out there?’

## Paradise lost

### 1

‘There’s a boat coming!’ Helen shouted from the other side of the small island.

Thomas kicked Johnno as he lay snoring in the afternoon heat. ‘Wake up!’

The rustle of leaves announced the hurried return of Helen, her cocktail dress now grey with dried salt. ‘It’s a sail boat, not very big,’ she got out as Johnno eased up.

Scratching the side of his head and squinting against the bright sun, he said, ‘Time to go, eh?’ He lifted the AK47 and checked it, handing it to an expectant Thomas. ‘Stay in the bushes, and if you see us run off or lay down, shoot the fuckers.’

‘They’re probably just tourists,’ Helen suggested.

‘Let’s hope so,’ Johnno cautioned. ‘But even when they take us off this island we’re still vulnerable till we get to civilization.’

‘You think the Colombians could still be out there?’ Helen asked as she grabbed her shoes, also grey with salt stains. Thomas put his crumpled clothes on.

Johnno shrugged, lifting and shaking his jacket. ‘Chances are they’ve fucked off – if there ever was a second boat. Lodge will have the Navy out looking for me, so there’s probably loads a tubs out there.’

They stepped through the bushes and plodded towards the opposite beach, Thomas picking out a hiding place and lying down in the prone position. Johnno and Helen walked across the narrow strip of beach and to the right, towards the sailboat – which seemed intent on visiting the island judging

by its present course. It was, in Johnno's estimation, a forty-footer, and displayed white sails with blue numbers. He could see someone moving about on the deck.

'Hey!' Johnno shouted towards the boat, waving his arms. The boat crew waved back, without any concern or any urgency.

It took fifteen minutes for the sail boat to find a suitable anchorage, for the crew to lower their anchor and then make ready their dinghy. Helen and Johnno observed with keen interest as the boat crew, seeming to comprise of an elder man and woman and a younger man, laboured to fit a small outboard engine to the dinghy. Finally, their would-be rescuers headed for shore.

As they neared the shoreline, Johnno waded out to help them in. He must have looked very odd to the visitors, a black tuxedo with a white shirt. It was hardly desert island clothing.

'Nice day for it,' Johnno offered them.

'We didn't see your boat?' the elder man asked, appearing to Johnno to be in his sixties. He had a weatherworn and round face and a bald plate, heavily tanned.

The younger man was controlling the outboard engine. 'Are you on the leeward side?' he asked, eyeing Johnno, and his tuxedo, suspiciously.

'No, we ... were kidnapped by Colombian drug smugglers a few days back,' Johnno explained as he dragged the dinghy to the sand. 'We ... er ... we escaped, and we've been here a few days.'

'Crikey!' the elder man let out. 'Are you OK?'

'Fine, loads a grub around,' Johnno told them. He gestured towards Helen. 'This is Helen, and our lad is back there. You got a radio?'

‘Yes,’ the younger man said, looking over the odd couple in eveningwear. ‘Normal yacht’s radio, limited range. We sailed out of Nassau two days ago.’

‘Well, if you don’t mind we need to let the world know we’re safe,’ Johnno suggested.

‘Of course,’ the elder man agreed. ‘We’ve got food and water, and a first aid kit.’ He gestured towards the younger man. Proudly he stated, ‘My son is a Royal Navy medic.’

‘That’s useful,’ Johnno said, shaking his hand. He reached across and now shook the elder man’s hand. ‘Were *you* Navy as well?’

‘Yes, a Captain; destroyers.’

Johnno made eye contact with Helen.

She announced, ‘My father is Rear Admiral Roger Small. Retired.’

‘Admiral Small?’ the elder man repeated, clearly surprised. ‘Then you must be –’

‘Dame Helen Eddington-Small,’ Johnno finished off. ‘Formerly the director of MI6.’

Their visitors were staggered as they stood at the water’s edge holding onto their dinghy.

‘That’s why they kidnapped you?’ the young man enquired.

‘Not quite,’ Johnno said. He turned and waved Thomas forwards. The visitors observed with some interest as a young lad in a tuxedo ran down the sand carrying an AK47.

‘Hello,’ Thomas politely offered as he neared, a pleasant smile offered to the new arrivals.

‘Don’t worry,’ Johnno offered the rescuers when he caught their looks. ‘He’s always armed. The rifle was pinched off the Colombians.’ He gestured firmly back towards the dinghy. ‘Shall we?’

Thomas jumped straight in, Johno helping Helen in as their hosts nervously observed.

‘We’ll have to make two trips,’ the elder man realised, and elected to stay on shore with Johno.

With three in the dinghy it was a tight fit, the dinghy low in the water. The younger man pushed off, the engine started and put in reverse.

The dinghy laboured against the swell as it navigated back to the yacht, the Argos, the elder woman now stood watching. At the rear of the yacht, Helen grabbed the stainless steel steps, but allowed Thomas up first – causing the elder woman to stare at the Ak47. The dinghy returned for Johno.

‘How you doing, love,’ Johno offered the concerned mother. ‘Need to use your radio.’

He eased past her and into the galley, the radio found straight away. Johno switched it on and selected the international maritime distress channel.

‘Mayday, mayday, mayday. This is sailboat Argos, Johno from the International Bank of Zurich on board. We were kidnapped by Colombian drug smugglers ... but escaped.’ He could see the GPS read-out displayed, the device housed next to the radio. He gave their position, and repeated it. With the elder woman sat staring up at him, clearly concerned, Johno repeated the broadcast.

‘Sail boat Argos, this is Hawkeye overhead. Receiving, over?’ crackled from the radio, startling the woman.

‘Go ahead, Hawkeye.’

Thomas and Helen ducked into the galley at the sound of radio traffic, the medic offering bottled water. He introduced his mother to Helen, and explained just who Helen was as he grabbed his first aid kit.

‘Sail boat Argos, this is Hawkeye, we have you on screen, overhead in five. What is composition and condition of your party, over?’

‘Argos to Hawkeye: party is Johnno, Helen and Thomas, all well, no medical needs other than sunburn. Over.’

‘Hawkeye to Argos, company approaching from the east, low and fast. Helo has been dispatched, ETA ten minutes. Over.’

‘Argos to Hawkeye, contact CIA, Langley, immediately, and update them. Argos out.’ Johnno grabbed the half drunk water bottle and finished it in one go. He focused on the medic. ‘Tell me you have some beer and packet of fags.’

‘Beer, yes. Cigarettes, no.’ He produced a can of beer from a cooler, but Helen grabbed it before Johnno.

‘Ladies first,’ she said before taking several gulps. She finally handed it over.

The radio burst to life. ‘Johnno, this is K2 Gulfstream. Overhead in five minutes.’

Johnno lifted the handset. ‘K2 Gulfstream, do you have satellite phone?’

‘K2 Gulfstream to Johnno. Affirmative.’

‘Johnno to Gulstream. Tell everyone we’re fine, we’ll meet at Nassau. Out.’

A dull roar became a thunderous scream as two US Navy F18s streaked by.

‘Yanks are here,’ Johnno told Thomas, the boy smiling and heading on deck to view the planes, still cradling the Ak47. The F18s climbed and circled.

Another roar signalled the arrival of the Gulfstream, which had been part of today’s search pattern. It circled at five hundred feet.

The father secured the dinghy and then came below. ‘Those jets must be looking for you.’

‘They know that we’re here,’ Helen informed him. ‘And I think you’ll be well rewarded for your assistance. Thank you for your help.’

‘Don’t mention it,’ the elder man insisted. ‘Anything for you, Ma’am.’

Helen glanced at Johno. ‘I’m ... not a Ma’am any more, I left the service,’ she explained, seeming uncomfortable to be reminded of it.

‘Yes, I know,’ the elder man grumbled. ‘Wretched business.’

‘But they kidnapped you because they thought you were still the director of MI6?’ the medic puzzled.

‘No,’ Helen flatly stated. She turned her head to Johno and waited. Everyone focused on him.

He sipped his beer. ‘Can you guys keep a secret?’

‘I’m Navy,’ the medic explained, as if insulted.

‘And so was I,’ the father proudly reminded Johno. ‘We both signed the Official Secrets Act.’

Johno took another sip. ‘We run a counter intelligence outfit in Switzerland, but work closely with the British and American authorities.’

The family stared at Johno in silence as the boat bobbed in the swell, tugging at its anchor.

Helen added, ‘You must have read about all the attacks going on at a place called Zug, in Switzerland, attacks by the Russian – Luchenkov. Well, we ... live in Zug.’

The medic focussed on Johno. ‘The ex-SAS man,’ he softly stated, Johno nodding. He faced his father, ‘He’s the one – the one who flew the nuke out of London.’

‘Dear God,’ the elder man let out. ‘Is there ... is there anything we can do for you?’



Johno eased forwards. 'Is there anything *we* can do for you?' He put his hand on the man's leg. 'We ... are in the business of helping people.'

Helen covered her eyes as she began to cry.

'Are you OK, my dear?' the mother enquired, a hand on Helen's shoulder.

'Post Traumatic Stress,' Johno softly stated. 'The realisation that you're safe. She'll be fine once we're back home at the castle.'

The medic put some cream on Helen's cracked lips and onto her face, offering the tube to Johno. 'I'll make up some Hydrolyte, get the salts back in your bodies.'

'Good idea,' Johno commended as Helen wiped her eyes.

'Helicopter!' Thomas shouted. 'Two of them.'

Johno told the family, 'Sail yourselves back to Nassau, we'll find you later. You'll be questioned by the coastguard, usual stuff, but nothing to worry about. Oh, can I ask a favour?'

'Anything,' the medic answered.

'Got a camera?'

'Yes, a digital camera.'

'Then take loads of snaps of us, dressed as we are now, then pop back to the island and snap it, especially the little camp we made. You can email them to us. Thanks. Besides, in Nassau you'll find your new yacht waiting.'

'Our new yacht?' the elder man queried.

Johno smiled and winked as he stood. He shook their hands. 'Pleasure to meet you, but now we have to go face the world again.' He turned and faced Helen. 'Back to work now, love. Thomas, throw the AK over the side!'

\* \* \*

The castle's tannoy came to life, power now restored, Beesely sat with Adrianne in his office and going through paperwork. 'All staff, all staff – Johnno, Helen and Thomas have been rescued, they are unharmed.'

Adrianne reached across and hugged Beesely. He forced a big breath, staring through the open door as he patted her on the arm.

'I was going to adopt you, my dear. So much nicer to look at than Johnno.'

## 2

Winched aboard the US Navy S61, the three escapees sat on a bench wearing headsets, a US Navy doctor knelt ready to assist.

'You guys OK?' asked a Marine Major, shouting to be heard.

'Fine,' Johnno replied.

'How did you escape?' the Major enquired.

'Overpowered some of the Colombians holding us, and shot some holes in the hull so that the boat we were on would sink.'

'You what?' the man asked over the roar of the engines, the door open and Thomas peering out.

'It was the best way to make sure that they got into dinghies; that way we could fight them on equal terms. Bit of a gun battle, killed them all. Lad got three of them.'

Wide-eyed, the Major focused on Thomas as the lad smiled proudly.

Johnno continued, 'We jumped in a dinghy and paddled away from the wreckage –'

‘We found that two days ago. Thought you were goners!’

‘Yeah, I can imagine. We were in the water for three days before landing up on that island.’

‘You look well enough.’

‘Trapped rainwater, caught fish, loads of coconuts.’

‘Every private tub in the Caribbean has been looking for you, a fifty million dollar reward.’

Johno and Helen exchanged a look. Johno said, ‘We were heading south, probably towards Venezuela or Colombia – but they changed course on the first night, headed north then east.’

‘They could see our patrols,’ the Major suggested, Johno nodding. ‘First thing we did was throw a net across that area.’

‘What tub is this helo from?’

‘The Reagan.’

‘New tub then.’

The Major confirmed with a nod and a smile.

Johno suddenly tapped his pockets as if he had mislaid the ring at a wedding. Reaching inside his jacket, he pulled out a crumpled bowtie and shook sand off it. Stretching it, he lifted his collars and tried to tie the knot, Thomas patting himself down to find his own. Thomas found the ready-made elastic bowtie and quickly placed it over his head.

With Johno struggling, the Major smiling and shaking his head, the Major attempted to help Johno. Helen swivelled, gently slapped the Major’s hand and fixed Johno’s bowtie. Johno smirked at the Major and tipped his head, Thomas now adjusting own bowtie and proud of his final result.

Aboard the aircraft carrier, the trio stepped down in their salt-stained eveningwear, curiously observed by the ratings. After a detailed medical, a good meal and a drink, they were allocated cabins and allowed to sleep.

In the morning, Thomas was allowed to sit in an F18 as Johno chatted with the captain and crew, group photographs taken, Johno still in his tuxedo and refusing other clothes. Their ride, a Hawkeye, lifted off half an hour later, a short flight to Nassau.

\* \* \*

At Nassau airport, a convoy sat waiting on the apron, the trio jumping into the jeeps. They were soon back at the villa, and soon filled in on everything that had happened back at the castle. It took the smiles off their faces. They showered, changed into fresh clothing and sank a few colds drinks before Johno called Otto.

‘How’s the baby?’ Johno asked.

‘She is well, and Marie. The baby was born in a blizzard, in the middle of an attack. She is truly part of the K2 family.’

‘She’s off to a good start, getting used to K2 family life already,’ Johno suggested. ‘How’s the old man?’

‘Holding up well, but a little cold. He is moving out today by armoured personnel carrier to the health spa.’

‘He should have done that when the heating went off,’ Johno complained. ‘Have you sorted all the attackers?’

‘Hard to know, since the conditions are still very poor; movement across the mountain is hazardous at best. The castle has two metres of snow in many places.’

‘Sounds quite pretty, but we’ll need some better weather or we’ll be finding frozen bodies in the spring!’ Johnno joked.

‘We are preparing an assault on Gunter Hiesel, who also lives in a castle. But some odd news: Turkish gunmen have been linked to an attack on our bank, here in Zurich, and on my apartment.’

‘Turkish? What the fuck we done to upset them? Oh, hang on, that makes sense.’

‘It does?’ Otto queried.

‘Remember what Oliver Stanton wanted us to investigate?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well the Kurds are making money by selling Iraqi oil, and the Kurds support the PKK in Turkey.’

‘And ... the link to us?’

‘Who routed the oil sales money, and who supplies the mercenaries who guard the tankers?’ Johnno posed.

‘Ah, we do. They think we are ... in favour of the Kurds making money?’ Otto puzzled.

‘What would it look like to an outsider? It would look like we had a hand in it. And if the Kurds in the north of Iraq become truly independent, and rich from oil, Turkey will invade. They’ve already threatened to do just that.’

‘So they blame us,’ Otto realised. ‘I will speak with the Turkish ambassador today and make myself *very* clear. I will also be cancelling loans to Turkey and to Turkish companies.’

‘Give ‘em hell!’

‘Say hello to Helen for me.’

‘Say hello to Marie for me. Chow!’

Johnno went and found Helen. ‘Turks figured us to be helping to shift the oil out of Northern Iraq, helping the Kurds, and they had a hand in the attack on the castle.’

‘Turkey has threatened to invade Kurdish Iraq if it becomes independent,’ she stated.

‘Exactly. And they think we’ll fund the damn region.’

‘Is that what Stanton was warning us about? Why not just say so?’

‘Rumour has it that the CIA get extra funding from the odd oil shipment, as well as certain US mercenary groups.’

‘And if we discovered that ... then we might expose it,’ Helen realised.

‘Especially since we have boys on the ground, and we’re the ones routing the money.’

‘Unaccountable money,’ Helen noted. ‘But the CIA would never be daft enough to consider an attack on us; the Lodge would see what they were up to soon enough.’

‘Lodge missed the last round of attacks, so don’t put too much faith in them.’

‘It still doesn’t make a lot of sense. Unless something else is going on.’

‘Otto is on the case, as well as being up late with the sprog no doubt.’

‘How are Marie and the baby?’

‘The baby ... was born in the middle of a gun battle.’

Helen rolled her eyes. ‘Welcome to K2.’

## Second wind

### 1

Gunter heard a noise, thinking it one of his dogs, and walked across his spacious bedroom, the magnolia walls adorned with armour and swords, a roaring fire warming the room. He opened the door and looked down, two of his Great Danes lying in a pool of blood. He slammed the door and locked it.

Turning, he hurriedly put on over-boots and snow gear, grabbed a bag and ran into his bathroom. Yanking forwards his toilet with force, the toilet fell forwards on hidden hinges, the bowl water sloshing over his boots and the bathroom floor.

Beneath the toilet, a dark tunnel opened up. He threw his bag down, grabbed a silver handle on the tiled wall, and eased into the tunnel, squeezing down through the tight opening, his snow smock scraping the edges. Inside the dark crawl space, he pulled the toilet and its base back over the tunnel, soon in complete blackness.

He knew the layout of the tunnel, and gripped a metal rail after running his hands over the walls, following it along on his knees, cursing through the dark as his head and elbows impacted sharp rocks.

\* \* \*

Rom's eyes were moist, the radio operator already dead, slumped over his keyboard.

‘Where is he?’ the K2 agent asked again.

Rom sat tied to a high-back antique chair from the sixteenth century, his feet bare, a flame already having been employed. 'He was in his bedroom,' he forced out between breaths.

'We shot the lock, but found nothing.'

'He had a secret passage made up, but he wouldn't tell me where, or how to open it. There's a tunnel.'

The K2 agent lifted his phone. 'He's outside, through a tunnel! Widen the net, all ports and airports!'

'I'll tell you ... everything you need ... to know,' Rom whimpered. 'I ... I never liked the man.'

The K2 agent glanced at his collage. To Rom, he asked, 'How many men on the second attack in Zug?'

'Ten men at the castle, and Turks in Zurich. We don't know how many Turks, it was their deal.'

## 2

'Ten?' Beesely repeated. 'Then where the hell are they?'

'Maybe they are dead like before,' Big Simon suggested. 'Now maybe under the snow. Be spring before we find the bodies.'

'Those men were good in the snow, so I have a hard time believing we got them all. And what happened to the damn group from the roof? They came across the mountain - a brilliant feat, they scaled the cliff, entered the roof and attacked down and -'

'And they brought no gas masks,' Simon suggested.

'No gas masks?' Beesely scoffed.

'I spoke to the man we captured. Expert climber, two weeks weapons training.'



Beesely eased back, staring across his office. 'So they stacked the deck in favour off getting here, instead of fighting skills?'

'I am certain of it,' Simon pressed. 'I spoke to the man and identified his team. All the best climbers, but men who were short of money, only some military training in their youth.'

'If they brought no gas masks, then a little smoke was all we needed to send them packing.' Beesely shook his head. 'But I guess we should be used to strange attacks in this damned place!'

Kev stepped in. 'Ya very uncomfortable transport's arrived, boss.'

'I'm ready. And I could murder for a long hot bath.'

Adrianne stepped in and helped Beesely out of his office, along the darkened companionway and through to the Great Hall. The stone floor was still covered in sand, which crunched under foot, but the blast of cold air from the courtyard hardly registered with Beesely. He was used to it now.

Aboard the Swiss Army armoured personnel carrier, Beesely, Adrianne, and the bodyguards set off, a snowplough ahead of them.

Thirty minutes later, the back of the personnel carrier clunked open, the entrance to the spa hotel visible through the falling snow. Four guards carried Beesely, whilst still in his chair, placing him down in the foyer.

'Thank you, gentlemen. Now find out what time the dancing lessons start.'

With two nurses in tow, Adrianne led Beesely to his room, booking herself in next door.

Johnno sipped the last of his beer, and eased up to fetch another, his feet a little sore with sunburn. With a fresh beer, he reclaimed his lounge, Mr. Grey walking over.

‘Grey Boy! How you doing, mate?’

Mr. Grey sat under a shade. ‘Ice cubes in that?’

‘Did you want one?’ Johnno teased.

‘Duh! What do you think?’

Johnno fetched Grey a beer. ‘So, I hear you had a word with our Colombian friend, Salvo something.’

‘He gave up Gunter quick enough. They weren’t best buddies, and I think Gunter was just using Salvo. Gunter didn’t care if Salvo handed you over or lost you at sea; you don’t organise a last minute kidnap if you want someone in one piece. And you don’t use Colombian drug dealers.’

‘Maybe,’ Johnno let out. ‘They were rank amateurs. Didn’t even know my background.’

‘Or about Thomas! I’d not take my eyes off that little trouble maker if I’d kidnapped him.’

They laughed.

‘Where is the little trouble maker?’ Grey asked.

‘He’s diving off the beach, trying to do his PADI Open Water, and hopefully without knifing the nice lady instructor.’

‘You had quite an adventure. A real Swiss family Robinson!’

They laughed.

‘Deserted island, scrabbling around for food and water,’ Johnno said. ‘It was an adventure, and the nipper loved it. Helen is not quite the outdoors type though, she’s more worried about her hair most of the time.’

‘How are things with you and her ladyship?’ Grey asked.

Johnno blew out. ‘I’m a beaten up old soldier who just happened to have the right father, who landed the plumb job, and the plumb-in-mouth lady snuggled up because I gave her a job, some power, and some money.’

‘And how long will that last?’

‘It’ll last longer *because* I have the money and position, than otherwise,’ Johnno remarked. ‘I go day to day. And, given what just happened, that’s probably wise.’

‘You do seem to make friends easily,’ Mr. Grey quipped.

‘How’s Stanton?’

‘Out of danger, clot on his lung. Be up and about in a few days. But he may retire now.’

Johnno hid his grin. ‘So, when he retires, do you ... you know, have to take your own life or something – now that you have no master.’

Grey stared across at Johnno. ‘Out of you and Thomas, which one reads the comics?’

‘We both do. You can learn a lot from comics.’

Grey shook his head then sipped his beer. ‘We found three dead former CIA agents on the island, all men who knew each other and worked together, all of whom worked in Colombia. Chances are they were dirty, knew Salvo, or Salvo knew them. They got a call on the Saturday.’

‘On the Saturday? Then we have an unhappy camper back in the castle,’ Johnno stated.

‘Someone not afraid of the chair,’ Grey noted.

Johnno nodded absently to himself as he thought.



## A fork in the road

### 1

Beesely lowered his newspaper and glanced up at the window. The sky was still a dark grey, a wedge of fresh snow trying to cling to a corner of the window; the weather was not letting up.

His phone trilled. ‘Yes?’

‘How are you, old fart?’ Otto asked in monotones.

‘If you’re going to call me that, then you’ve got to get the English accent right. How’re Marie and the baby?’

‘Doing well. I am looking forward to introducing my daughter to her grandfather.’

‘Grandfather! Dear God, Otto, you know how to hurt a man. I’m just getting used to being called a father.’

‘Did you have a long hot bath?’

‘I did, but I had to wait for the water to cool first. Damn body has cooled down a lot in the last few days.’

‘No sickness from the cold and damp conditions?’

‘None so far, and the doctors are fussing. I’ll be in the damned armoured personnel carrier tomorrow, up to your hospital for a bank of tests – just in case.’

‘I will meet you at the hospital. Grandfather.’

‘Cut that out, you’re a father now yourself. So give some thought to the little lady’s first boyfriend. Bye.’

Adrianne knocked and entered. ‘Anything you need?’

‘Sit, sit.’

Adrianne stepped across the room and eased down opposite Beesely.

Beesely began, ‘I’ve been trying to figure out the attack. Now, using the blizzard was a very good idea. But these

men were recruited six months ago, in the summer, so why not use them back then?’

‘All the publicity, the pictures of soldiers here.’

‘Yes,’ Beesely agreed. ‘That would deter the most determined of assassins. But deep snow is another matter; it favours the attacker and makes us blind.’

‘So a good strategy to wait,’ Adrienne pointed out.

‘I’m not quite buying ... that this Gunter fella, *spawn from hell*, is that good with strategies. He chose skilled mountain climbers, but chose them in the summer. So he either has a lot of patience, or he had something else in mind.’

Beesely took a breath. ‘So, he arranges the best climbers in the world, men not afraid of a bit of snow, but chooses men with limited military abilities. It was almost as if he wanted them to reach the castle and fail, and that’s been worrying me. If he can afford such an attack, if he’s smart enough to arrange such an attack - and the kidnapping in the Bahamas, then why the hell would he expect these climbers to fair well against our guards. And they had no gas masks!’

‘It is a puzzle, but only if you give him the credit of the knowledge, and if he knew about our guards.’

‘He knew exactly where to hit us, so he knew all about our guards. It was almost as if creating the cold and damp conditions was his aim, rather than penetrating the inner areas and doing some real damage.’

‘Could Johnno have been the real target. I mean, if this man is Gunter’s son, maybe he wanted to kill Johnno more than he wanted the castle, and the castle attack was a distraction.’

Beesely shook his head. ‘If our computers had been working they would have made very little difference.

Rescuing Johnno would have come down to the Americans, not us. Knocking our computers off made no sense.'

'They made a good attempt to kill Otto.'

Beesely raised a finger. 'The Turks did, not Gunter. Coordinated, yes, but not the same people. Which is why the attack almost succeeded. And I'm still not sure how the hell Gunter persuaded the Turk's to attack us. The Turks entered into a damned foolhardy operation, and they'll pay a price for it.'

'Well, it depends on what the Turks thought was the cost to them.'

'Cost to them?'

'Of whatever Gunter persuaded them we were up to,' Adrienne explained.

Beesely nodded to himself. 'Gunter convinced them of something, something worthy of such a brazen attack.'

'The Turkish men, they were government men?'

'No, but from their backgrounds they were definitely on the government payroll for this job. Plausible deniability! Still, the Turks risked upsetting Europe at a time when they're talking about entering Europe.'

'Then maybe these Turks had another paymaster, and maybe only believed they were working for the Turkish Government.'

Beesely smiled. 'You were wasted as a telephonist, my dear, you know that.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'So, who else might have hired them?'

'Gunter?'

'That would seem like the obvious answer, but those Turks would only accept a job like this from a senior Turkish intelligence officer, retired or otherwise.'

'Gunter may have paid that man.'

‘That man, would not risk Turkey’s entry to the EU.’

‘Maybe he does not want Turkey in the EU, many don’t,’ Adrienne suggested.

‘A few don’t, hardcore Islamic fundamentalists. So who wants a rift between Turkey and Europe, and also wants Otto dead?’

Adrienne took out her phone. ‘If I may call your son.’

‘I think Johnno may be drunk, or asleep. Or both!’

Adrienne smiled. ‘Herr Otto, Adrienne. Sorry to disturb you, but might I ask if our bank has been involved with any loans to companies that in any way touch Turkey, or oil in the region.’

‘I do not believe we lend much to Turkish companies, or their government,’ Otto informed her. ‘We are involved in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, and we help to fund Nordstream in Germany and the Baltic States.’

‘Nordstream? The gas pipeline?’

‘Yes. I think that is all, but I will check.’

‘Thank you, sir.’ Adrienne hung up. ‘We are funding part of the Russian gas pipeline, but I know the Turks are talking about a pipe across their country.’

‘The plot thickens,’ Beesely said.

‘And we are involved with funding in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, who will pipe their gas across Turkey if the pipeline is built.’

‘OK, so somewhere in all this is Gunter, and his thirst for revenge, or lost inheritance.’ Beesely shook his head. ‘No, his lost inheritance makes no sense. He’s never been to the castle; he laid low, possibly out of fear of old man Gunter. The original Gunter had a way of removing the offspring with claims. No, I’m thinking that young Gunter is smarter than all that, that it’s about money. And if he was



faced with the prospect of losing money, and to us of all people, it pushed him over the edge.'

'But he recruited the men when we were still being attacked?'

'Much of that was not known,' Beesely dismissed. 'He had no way of knowing if waiting would assist him.'

'His assistant, Rom, said it was all motivated by losing the inheritance.'

'His assistant ... didn't know about the secret passage. So I think that maybe the man was kept in the dark about a few other things. If young Gunter is anything like his father, he'll keep it tight to his chest.'

'We'll need to unravel Gunter's business interests to find a cross-match to our interests.'

Beesely nodded. 'Kurdish oil seems to be at the heart of it. But how? I appreciate the money came through us, but we don't encourage the PKK, and we don't encourage Kurdish separatists.'

'But maybe Gunter convinced someone that we do,' Adrienne pointed out.

'Killing Otto may have given Gunter some solace, but I still think he's a bit more practical than that. And even if he destroyed the castle and killed us all, the bank is a separate arm and would go on. And soon to be gobbled up by the Swiss Government!'

'And this all started in July,' Adrienne thought out loud.

'In July ... we bought into Northgate, the mercenary company, and they are heavily involved in Northern Iraq. By God, that may be a clue. If Northgate, or some element of it is up to no good in the Kurdish region – and they are mostly Americans – then there's a link to Oliver Stanton, who warned us.'

‘And somehow, Gunter saw our involvement with Northgate as a threat,’ Adrienne considered.

‘If we ask the question of Northgate, we’ll tip them off.’

‘We have the men we sent to Iraq, they are there now. Mavo and others are there.’

Beesely lifted his phone. ‘Get me Mavo in Iraq if you can. I’ll wait.’

A minute later, Mavo came on. ‘You after me, boss?’

‘Mavo, think about the American mercenaries in Northgate, then think about anything they may be doing that they would like kept from the wider world.’

‘Only thing I can think of, besides covering up a few shootings, is the training camp.’

‘Training ... camp?’

‘They’re supposed to teach the Iraqi Army lads, and get paid for it by the States, but they teach the Kurds Special Forces Group.’

‘The Kurds ... have a Special Forces Group?’

‘It’s all done on the quiet, boss.’

‘And could that group have links to the PKK in Turkey?’

‘Definitely.’

‘Thanks, Mavo. Beesely out.’ Beesely lowered his phone and stared across at Adrienne. ‘We part own Northgate, and it seems that some of their lads are being funded by the CIA to teach the PKK how to fight. Well, teach the Iraqi Kurds how to fight, but to the Turks it’s all the same thing.’

‘That would greatly disturb the Turks, sir.’

‘So what’s Gunter’s connection?’

‘He’s involved with oil, so maybe he has oil interests in the region, and learnt about the training.’

‘And sees a great opportunity appear before his eyes,’ Beesely stated, lifting his hands and raising his head. He nodded. ‘An opportunity, that was too good to pass up when

he was already planning an attack on us here. But, my dear, that only makes sense if young Gunter is more about feelings and revenge, than he is about making money.'

'Perhaps you give him too much credit, sir,' Adrienne offered.

Beesely lifted his eyebrows and nodded. 'Perhaps I do.'

## 2

Four guards carried Beesely and his chair down the main steps of the hotel, and into the personnel carrier. Adrienne jumped in with the four guards, and they set off with a roar of diesel engine, the driver following the flashing lights of the snowplough ahead.

'This could take an hour or more,' Beesely told everyone. 'So get comfortable.'

They had gone only a hundred yards when they lurched to a halt, Beesely almost falling from his wheelchair. The driver opened a hatch. 'There is a car that's stuck. The police are trying to move it.'

After five minutes, Beesely said to two guards. 'Go see if you can help, please.'

The guards clanked open the hatch and risked the blizzard, another guard closing it from the inside.

'Maybe we should go back to the hotel and wait,' Adrienne suggested.

'If it's much longer, we may well do that,' Beesely agreed.

The carrier revved, and moved off.

After a moment, Beesely asked, 'Where are the two other guards?'

A guard lifted his phone, but got no signal. 'No signal in here, sir.'

‘Ask the driver,’ Beesely ordered.

A guard banged on the driver’s hatch.

‘Yah?’ the driver shouted over the noise of the engine.

‘Where are our two men?’

‘They climbing into the snowplough!’ The hatch closed.

‘Sir, they must want to be ready to clear other cars from the snow,’ a guard suggested.

Beesely nodded absently.

Thirty minutes later they juddered to a halt. A minute passed.

‘More blockages,’ Adrienne suggested.

An almighty bang preceded the carrier turning onto its side. Beesely fell against the wall, hitting his head, Adrienne shrieking. Then nothing. The engines had stopped, the only sound being the muffled howl of the wind.

Adrienne helped Beesely up. ‘That was no accident. We were rammed by something.’

Beesely rubbed his aching nose, finding blood. ‘And now we’re a turtle on its back. We don’t even have slots in the right place to fire out of.’ He eased up. ‘Try and open a slot and use a phone or radio,’ Beesely told a guard.

The man scrambled upright, standing on the bench to unlock a slot and open it. That done, the howl of the wind now distinct, snowflakes entering the cabin, he readied his phone.

A shot rang out, the man hit in the face and collapsing back. Adrienne screamed, pulling Beesely away from the slot. The second guard reached up and closed it, locking it.

‘We’re prisoners,’ Beesely realised. ‘On a lonely road with little chance of help, and someone out there timed it well.’

‘It will start to get cold in here,’ Adrienne said. ‘Engine and heaters are off.’

‘We were on a main route,’ Beesely began. ‘Well, I think we were on a main route, but that snow plough driver was probably in on this.’

‘The other two guards,’ Adrienne realised. ‘They are probably dead.’

‘We’re in a pickle, my dear. Myself, I don’t care about, but I do care about you and the men. So, here’s the plan. We open the door, I crawl out, and you close it.’

‘No, sir!’ Adrienne protested.

Beesely held Adrienne by the arms. ‘My dear, we’re on a side road, in a snowdrift, with little chance of rescue for a long time. And, it will get very cold very quickly. We’re in a tin box!’

‘I can try and shoot outward,’ the guard said.

‘We ... are blind, they ... are not,’ Beesely said. He heaved a big breath. ‘Listen, if we all go, we’ll all be killed. If I go, you two and the drivers might survive.’

‘If I stay and you go, the men will kill me,’ the guard reflected. ‘If I go they will kill me.’ He made strong eye contact with Beesely. ‘I was dead the minute they turned us over. You know that, I know that. So, better to die fighting, sir.’

The man was between Beesely and the door, and moved quickly to the handle, yanking it open. He pushed it up, the heavy door now hanging down, and squeezed out. Four shots rang out, Adrienne shrieking.

A minute later, with the door swaying in the wind and clanking loudly, a small crack letting in a grey light, a knocking sound came. ‘Hello, Beesely. Are you in there?’

‘We’re busy,’ Beesely shouted. ‘Can you come back tomorrow?’

‘I have all the time in the world, Mister Beesely. But you might catch cold, old man. Come out.’

‘Will you let the girl go?’ Beesely shouted.

‘She is of no interest to me, Mister Beesely,’ came a distorted voice.

‘I’m coming out.’

‘No problem, Mister Beesely, we can come to you.’

The heavy door lifted up, two dark shadows either side, a burst of wind and snow swirling around the cabin.

Beesely crawled forwards on his stomach, over the dead guard, and into the freezing wind. Two men grabbed him by the armpits and dragged him out.

‘And bring the girl,’ a distorted voice ordered.

The last thing Beesely remembered was a spray in his face, and an odd taste.

\* \* \*

Johno took the call, listening with his eyes closed and head lowered, ordering the Gulfstream made ready. Lowering the phone, Johno shouted across the pool, ‘Helen, Thomas! Get to your rooms and pack, we’re leaving in ten fucking minutes! Move it.’

As the Gulfstream climbed away from the Bahamas, Johno stared out of the window, down at the inviting ocean and a million small islands. Sat opposite, Helen carefully observed him, but said nothing.

### 3

Beesely woke to an image of Adrianne cupping the side of his face.

‘Take it easy, sir. They hit you,’ she whispered.

Beesely eased up, the pain in his nose now registering as a dull throbbing. He could hear, and now glimpse, a roaring log fire across the dark room he found himself in, its flickering amber light detailing a room of bare stone walls adorned with armour. Sitting up, aided by Adrianne, Beesely could now make out a huge wooden table dominating the centre of the room, its wood almost black, the walls just as dark. Putting his hand down, the stone floor was cold to the touch.

Slowly getting his bearings, Beesely could now make out a man with a pistol sat in the corner, just a dark outline of a man in a chair being periodically illuminated by the flickering yellow flames. Beesely tried to get his bearings, his right cheek warmed by the fire, his left cheek detecting a cold breeze coming from somewhere. Easing up, he could now feel just how cold his legs were.

‘Where are we?’ he asked Adrianne, coughing the words out, whilst taking in the ceiling.

‘A small castle, maybe an hour or two from where they grabbed us. I could not see much, but I think we are in Austria, maybe Bavaria. I think we went northeast.’

‘Phones?’ Beesely mouthed.

Adrianne shook her head. She faced the guard. Loudly, she told the dark shadow of a man, ‘If you want him alive, get some warm food and drink.’

The guard took a few seconds to react before stepping out, a brief blast of welcome light and unwelcome cold air caused by the door opening.

‘If you get the chance, try and escape,’ Beesely told her.

Adrianne shook her head. ‘In this weather I would not get a mile without proper clothes and equipment.’

‘That damned storm is still dogging us,’ Beesely said with a sigh, still trying to take in the room and get his

bearings. He moved his good leg, trying to get the circulation going.

The guard returned with a glass of water and a hard bread roll, placing them on the wooden table whilst sneering down at the captives.

‘Bread and water,’ Beesely noted. ‘Someone has a sense of humour.’

‘That would be me,’ Gunter said from the doorway, his English heavily accented. He stepped closer, his image darkened by the bright backlight of the corridor, the flickering flames of the fire giving his face a sinister appearance.

‘If you’re not going to look after me, then don’t expect any good conversation,’ Beesely told his captor.

‘I don’t expect much from you, Mister Beesely, other than the pleasure of your death.’ He stepped closer, his features alternatively clear and dark in the fire’s light. ‘You know, I had considered giving you the chair, but I doubt that you would last very long. Instead, this fine young lady’s concern for you will amuse me as much, as you both slowly starve to death.’

‘Of course, I reserve the right – if I say it correctly – I reserve the right to just shoot you, set fire to you, or let you freeze to death.’

‘Do you have a pit with a pendulum, rats eating the rope as the blade swings?’ Beesely asked. ‘You need to get an imagination, and a life. And you’re just as ugly as your father.’

Gunter lowered his head and slowly shook it. ‘You do not know the rules of this game yet. Let me explain it.’ He lunged across and knelt, hitting Adrienne in the ribs and knocking her over from where she had been kneeling.



Beesely tried desperately to reach out for her as she curled up into the foetal position, gasping for breath.

‘Do you see, Mister Director Beesely? Do you see ... that your pain in caring for her is most ... well, most painful for you.’ He moved in quickly and kicked Beesely in the leg, causing Beesely to wince. ‘I hope that was not the bad leg. And at your age it will take a long, long time to heal. Especially with no hot food or expensive spa treatment.

‘And in case you are wondering, Director Beesely, about my very detailed plan of attack: it was to set you back, sure, but most of all it was to get your old body ... to your health spa, where my people were waiting ready. No heat, no food, no water at the castle; I had expected you to visit the spa much earlier. You disappointed me, Director Beesely; it took a long time for you to make the move.’

Gunter collected the guard and headed to the door.

‘You didn’t get Johno, and you missed Otto you screw up!’ Beesely shouted.

Gunter paused at the door, his image darkened by the bright backlight. ‘If at first you don’t succeed, Director Beesely...’ He stepped out, the door disappearing into the dark wall once closed, the armour on the walls shimmering with amber light from the fire.

Adrianne lifted up, winded from the blow. Contorted in pain, she sat next to Beesely.

He extended a hand. Breathing heavily, and in pain himself, he forced out, ‘I have never felt ... more determined, or as useless as ... I do now.’

‘They will kill us,’ Adrianne whispered, her head low.

Beesely took a moment, catching his breath. ‘My ... amusing him is a mistake. It gives Otto time to react. Adrianne, have faith; we have a few days.’

When fully recovered, Adrianne offered Beesely the water. He took a sip, breaking the bread and dunking it in.

‘I was prisoner for a while, in 1945. But I escaped after just a day.’ He took in the room. ‘1945. My God, it’s been a long time coming.’

‘Coming?’

‘My death, my dear; something that has occupied my thoughts since I was seventeen.’

Adrianne wiped her eyes with the back of a hand. ‘I have not done much.’

‘The measure of your worth, my dear, is more in your potential, than the deeds of the past. Some live a long time and achieve very little, and some young men have a gift for being visionaries. I was such a young man; at least I think I was. I was full of ideas, full of passion, wanting to put the world right after the war.’

Adrianne half turned her head. ‘What was it like during, the war? The fear?’

‘Fear?’ Beesely took a moment, focused on the welcoming fire, and made himself comfortable against a table leg. ‘Well, most of the time your were so busy trying to be a hero you didn’t give much thought to it.’

He took a breath. ‘You know, I had twelve men in my platoon, and ten would-be heroes, myself included. But two of the lads, they were a little more level headed; Yorkshiremen if I recall. Anyway, at the first parachute drop near Arnhem we lost them, so it was just eight of us in the platoon, the Company CO dead, myself in charge as the Second Lieutenant.

‘We pressed on, got caught by machinegun fire and had to withdraw in a right disorderly fashion. At the rear base we found the two men, and rudely enquired as to where they had gotten to. Well, turns out they had dropped with the

other part of the platoon. They'd fought off a German patrol, picked up two of our platoon who had been wounded, and lugged them back some seven miles or more.'

Beesely took a moment, staring into the flickering flames, the only sound being the crackle of the burning wood. 'You see, my dear, when there's a war, and a common threat, you get to see some remarkable feats from some very unremarkable people. The one man, Smitty, I looked him up after the war; he was running a butchers shop. And out of all of us, he was the best at everything, and proved to be the best soldier.'

'Soldiers today, the volunteers, I sometimes wonder if they have something to prove, either to themselves or those around them. During the war, some very unlikely people were conscripted into the army, and when you took the butchers apron off there was one hell of hero underneath. But very reluctant heroes.'

'I like to hear the stories,' Adrianne softly stated. 'It is like reading a book. We Swiss, we do not grow up on war stories.'

'Yes, well us Brits didn't win much, but by heck we'll never let anyone forget about it!'

Adrianne forced a smile.

'Now, if you're feeling better, check this room for windows, trap doors, and holes. And see if you can't pull one of those damn swords off the wall.'

Adrianne got to work, checking every inch of the walls, but she found nothing. She even held a burning log to the walls to illuminate them high and low. The swords, she found, were welded to the shields.

Beesely pointed at kind of brass doorstop hanging next to the fire. Adrianne fetched it over. 'Try and jam that under the door, and hit it with something.'

Adrianne's tapping caught the attention of the guard, who then struggled for thirty minutes to open the door, eventually scraping the wedge back.

'Problem?' Beesely loudly asked. 'Door sticking with the cold, is it?'

The man picked up the doorstop and inspected it, taking it with him when he left.

'Thank you,' Beesely loudly offered. 'Pop in any time!'

With the door closed, Beesely focused on the massive table. 'Adrianne, tables like these used to have secret spaces. I know, we had one, and as a kid I would delight in hiding underneath during dinner. Drove my mother to insanity. Be a dear, and crawl underneath and look up.'

Adrianne dropped to her knees, onto the cold and hard stone floor, and scrambled underneath. 'It is hollow, a small ledge.'

'Could you fit in it?' Beesely whispered.

Adrianne scrambled out and nodded through the dim light.

'Right, let's play rabbit and fox, shall we?'

'Sir?'

'I have an idea. First, pull all of the logs off the fire and stack them up over there, then use a small log to drag the hot embers out.'

Adrianne stared back for a moment, then turned. Ten minutes later and she was sweating from the work, and from the heat of the fire, the logs now filling the top half of the high-ceiling room with smoke. The fireplace was now fire free.

'Look up the chimney, can you see out?'

She grabbed a burning log. 'No, but it curves to the left.'

'Then it joins another room. Perfect. Adrianne, hand me something to make a noise, then get up in the table and be

very, very quiet. If you need to use the toilet, do now - in the corner.'

Adrianne shot Beesely an apologetic look before tinkling in the corner. When done, she scrambled under the table and up into the gap, getting comfortable.

Beesely waited a moment, then made a noise.

The door opened, the shaft of light again illuminating the room, the guard just an outline. Smoke escaped out of the open door.

'Yes, can I help you?' Beesely loudly asked. 'You know, we'll get no sleep with you opening the door all night.'

Sniffing, the guard peered in, noticing now the logs and the smoke. He called for help, a second man appearing with a bucket of water. The two guards stepped in together, searching the room for Adrianne, even under the table. One man dosed the logs whilst the other ran off down the corridor.

Gunter appeared five minutes later. He stood with his hands on his hips at the fireplace, but then bent down and peered up, clicking a lighter on.

'The next room! Go!' He stood and faced Beesely as a guard ran out. 'I think, maybe, she will get stuck and die. And if she is stuck, we will be sure to light a nice big fire to keep her warm tonight, Director Beesely.'

'I wonder what went through Otto's mind when he suffocated your father.'

Gunter stared back for several seconds. 'I will ask Otto when I see him, since I also wished to suffocate my father.'

A guard appeared in the doorway, blocking the shaft of light. 'Nothing in that room. I have locked the door.'

'Look on the higher floors. Find her!' Gunter barked.

'One small victory a day,' Beesely commented. 'You know, that's what we used to say during the war.'

‘Enjoy your cold room tonight, Herr Director.’ He pointed at the glass of water. ‘It will be ice by morning.’

The door slammed shut, the light taken away. It was now pitch black, and starting to get chilly.

‘Adrianne,’ Beesely whispered. ‘Stay there for a while.’

He eased up onto his good leg, allowing himself to fall forwards onto the table. On his elbows, he slowly edged around the large table, and to the fireplace. Something had caught his attention.

Dropping to the cold stone floor in a heap and cursing, he threw several of the logs that he had landed on back into the fireplace, finding the one with red embers he had noticed. He carefully blew on the embers, the red signs of life turning orange and yellow.

Reaching out and grabbing the leg of a wooden chair that he knew sat next to the fireplace, he pulled it closer and lifted up. Using the chair like a Zimmer frame, he stumbled through the dark to the wall and yanked down a tapestry he had glimpsed earlier. Back at the fireplace, he eased down to the floor and into the ash, searching blindly with his hand to locate the edges of the fireplace.

Coughing in the lingering smoke, he folded the damp old tapestry and placed it in the grate as best he could, heaping logs on top. Fixing on the all-important point of orange light, he lifted the glowing embers and blew delicately. Placing the embers next to the frayed edge of the dated and musty tapestry, he blew, finally lighting a few threads. With the threads glowing, he blew gently, coaxing them till they burnt.

Ten minutes later the fire was raging, Beesely sat on the wooden chair and warming his hands against the flames, some of the damp logs issuing steam as they dried out.

Beesely checked his watch in the poor light, leaning towards the fireplace. 9pm. Sat staring at the flicker flames, time passed slowly, but the flames brought back many memories. At midnight, he figured that Gunter would be asleep, the guard outside the door probably a little bored by now.

‘Adrianne?’ he whispered towards the table. ‘Come out.’

He could hear her more than see her, a dark shadow soon appearing.

‘I think I fell asleep for a bit,’ she admitted.

‘Good, it will keep you fresh. Right, I need you to find a sword that will break off or detach. Rip down that other tapestry and put it on the floor to muffle the sound.’

Adrianne stretched like a cat before approaching the tapestry, pulling it down. She coughed in the dust cloud created, trying to hide her coughing in an elbow. With some difficulty, and using Beesely’s wooden chair to stand on, she managed to take a sword and shield arrangement down, placing it onto the tapestry. On her knees, she studied how it was held together in the dim light.

Folding a corner of tapestry, she placed the thick cloth over the old metal joins, a knee on top, and lifted a sword handle for all that she was worth. It clicked. They froze, listening intently for any signs of movement in the corridor. A minute passed, just the sounds of the crackling wood for company.

Pulling out the sword, she walked across, inspecting it in the light of the fire. It had broken off halfway along its length, but offered a jagged edge.

‘Good,’ Beesely approved. ‘Now comes the hard part.’

‘I can use it,’ Adrianne insisted. ‘On these men for sure.’

‘Hold it like a billiards cue, aim for the neck, and use a lot of force.’ Adrienne nodded. Beesely added, ‘Stand behind the door. Fortunately for us, they’ve given us a nice dark cell.’

Beesely dropped to the floor and crawled to the fire, lifting a log and banging it against the grate. Thirty seconds later the door opened, the shaft of light making it hard to discern who it was.

‘I got the fire going, old chap. I’m nice and warm now, and I’ll still be alive in the morning. Could you wake me eight, breakfast at nine?’

The guard took a step in, holding the door.

‘Close the door, there’s a draft!’ Beesely shouted as he lay on his side in the ash.

The guard took another step, jabbed in the neck a second later. Holding his throat in abject terror, he backed into the doorframe. Adrienne lifted the broken sword high and swung down, catching the man on the top of the head. He slid down the wall, blood spurting from his neck.

A shot rang out, Adrienne bent in two and gasping. The broken sword fell, clattering on the stone floor. A foot caught her in the face, knocking her into the room.

‘Adrienne!’ Beesely screamed, crawling forwards on his elbows across the stone floor.

As Beesely reached her, Gunter blocked the light of the doorway. ‘A nice trick, Director Beesely, but you got your secretary killed.’ Gunter pushed the dead guard further into the room with a foot. ‘Enjoy the rest of your evening, Herr Director. Will you ... be going out, or staying in with good company?’

The light disappeared, the door locked.

Adrienne could be heard gasping for breath. Beesely crawled closer, a hand on her abdomen. Too much blood; he



knew that straight away. Rolling onto his side, he used his remaining strength to pull her towards him, her head on his shoulder.

‘I’m sorry, my dear,’ he whispered through the dark. No response came back. The breath sounds quickened, became broken, and ended a minute later.

On his back, and still holding her, Beesely stared up at the high ceiling, and the shadows and patterns created by the flickering flames. The patterns reminded him of a battlefield, of explosions and flashes of light.

‘You’ve been at war too long, old man,’ he told himself. ‘But I get the feeling the sand is almost out of the hourglass.’

An hour later, feeling chilled, he crawled on his sore elbows towards the fire, seeking the warmth. Propped against a table leg, and now covered in soot and ash, he stared out of focus towards the fire, the warmth of the fire oddly reassuring.

Memories flooded back, many of them wartime memories. ‘So, this is the end. Well, Smitty, you would never believe where I ended up - or what I made of my life. Wonder what you did after all. Ran your father’s butchers shop probably, raised a family, had grandchildren. Grandchildren.’ He shook his head. ‘I’ve not even seen her.’

He fought away a tear. ‘Hope you have a quiet life, child; no wars, no cold, no hunger. Modern gadgets, tin-openers, easy living, nightclubs. And loving parents, which I’m certain about.’

His eyes welled up. ‘They’ll show you a picture when you’re older, of the silly old git that was your grandfather, of a fool who ended up like this. But you will have good

schooling, the best of everything. When I was a lad they were still sending children up chimneys.'

Beesely froze. 'My young dear, you may have just given your grandfather an idea. You see, little one, when they built places like this they needed the chimneys cleaned and repaired – from the inside. And if I remember right, they all had footholds and hand holds.'

Beesely fell to the side and crawled to the fireplace, pulling logs off and tossing them aside. Ten minutes of hard work, plus the heat from the fire, had warmed him through. He started to glisten under the covering of soot.

With the stone fireplace again emptied of burning logs, embers and ash scrapped out, Beesely figured that the smoke would be gone from the chimney. With his hands in the warm ash, he pulled himself into the large fireplace till his bottom was warming on the ash. He reached up into the pitch blackness, his eyes closed, finding a ledge.

Turning side on, he lifted up and jammed his bad leg against the side of the wide fireplace. Reaching up further, he found a brick missing.

'Foothold.'

Digging his fingers into warm soot, he lifted up, soon upright on his good leg.

'Was a time when this would have been easy. Come on, Beesely, think.'

Crouching down, he reached out and grabbed the wooden chair, pulling it into the fireplace. Feeling with his fingers, the room now dark apart from a few glowing logs, he found the ledge again, and immediately felt a broken brick opposite.

Pushing down with the sides of his hands, locking his elbows, he lifted his good leg onto the seat of the chair and pushed up. Finding two higher handholds, he placed the

sides of his hands in and took his weight, his good leg bent and lifted to the top of the chair back.

Another push, and his good leg was in the first broken brick. Another push, and his foot found purchase in a dedicated foot hold. He coughed heavily in the soot that he was displacing, but a cool downdraft was helping his breathing.

‘So, how did they do this?’

Feeling with his fingers across the warm bricks, he soon determined that the footholds alternated, some six inches in height difference. He lifted his face to the cool air descending, but kept his eyes firmly closed; the breeze was refreshing in the warm soot and lingering smoke.

‘Hand, elbow, good leg. Hand, elbow, good leg.’ He made slow progress, six inches at a time, but steady progress, stopping to catch his breath after every move.

After little more than twelve feet he could feel a ridge. It dropped away the other side. Rising up another foothold level, he put his face across the ridge, feeling no warm air rising, sniffing no smoke.

‘Down, or up?’ he asked of himself. ‘Well, bedrooms are normally on the higher floors. So it’s down.’

Hand, elbow, good leg. A minute later he reached the point where he could nudge his bad leg across to the ridge and to the second chimney. He locked his elbows, and slowly lowered himself, finding easy footholds with his good leg.

After thirty minutes of hard work, his shoe touched something below, something metallic. He tested it with the sole of his shoe. Standing on it caused it to bend in the middle, but it held firm at the sides. It was some sort of thin metal cover.

To cover the chimney? To keep out cold drafts, he considered.

He lowered his weight onto the grill whilst gripping the handholds. It buckled and broke. He froze, and waited in the pitch black, a good minute. Nothing, just a slight howl of wind from somewhere unseen high above.

Using the handholds, he lowered himself another six inches, then a second time, now finding something else to touch with his foot. The sound of a log rolling echoed up the chimney; there were logs in the fireplace. 'Of course there are logs, it's a fireplace,' he whispered to himself. He nudged them away with the edge of his shoe.

Five minutes later, he slid legs-first out of the fireplace and crumpled in a heap on his back, but could not see a damn thing. Sitting still for a moment and locking his elbows, he wondered if his night vision would improve. It didn't.

On his elbows again, he crawled forwards, finding another wooden table. Lifting up onto his good knee, and then the good leg, he ran his hands across the table, finding a jacket. He patted the pockets, finding cigarettes and lighter.

He heaved a breath, and clicked the lighter. Its delicate flame threw a dull blue-grey hue about the room, very little detailing becoming distinct, a few bits of metal and glass reflecting the flame.

Reaching for a high-back chair, he used it like a crutch, taking a minute to cross the darkened room. Moving as quietly as he could, he alternatively lifted the chair and placed it down carefully in turn.

Colliding with something, Beesely stopped and listened. Nothing. He moved around the chair back, hopping on his good leg, and swung his hand blindly ahead of him. It made

contact with the cold wooden top of a cabinet. He reached into his pocket and retrieved the lighter, clicking it on for just a second. The cabinet outline presented itself.

With the lighter off, its precious fuel being conserved, he moved around the chair and eased down onto it, reaching forwards blindly till he found the metal handles of the cabinet doors. Tugging, he opened the first cabinet door, easing it past his knee, and cautiously moved his hand inside.

Bottles. He smiled, unseen in the dark; it was a drinks cabinet. Pulling out a bottle, he tested the top with his fingers, finding a screw top. He unscrewed the top and lifted the bottle to his nose. 'Schnapps.' He took a swig, coughed, and took a second swig. 'That'll help.'

With great care, he put the screw top back on and placed the bottle back into the cabinet, closing the door. Lifting up and pressing down on the chair back, he hobbled away from the cabinet, again colliding with something. The lighter was retrieved and clicked on, the outline of a tall cabinet revealed, dozens of decorated plates stacked up behind dusty glass doors. He lowered the lighter, finding two drawers at waist height.

Knocking off the lighter, and placing it carefully in his pocket, he reached across and fumbled for the drawer handles, finding dated and ornate metal rings. He pulled, the drawer sliding out. Reaching inside with a delicate touch, he patted down on something familiar; candles. He took one out and inspected its texture with his fingers.

With the chair back under his elbow, he retrieved the lighter and clicked it on, lighting the candle, soon a dim yellow light revealing this corner of the room. Turning, he reached across to the large central table and fell onto it. Hanging on by an elbow, he tipped up the candle, the flame

melting the wax onto the table. He placed the base of the candle into the wax, and this new room finally gave up its dimension and features.

With three candles lit, the dark corners of the large room were penetrated by flickering light. Sitting on the chair, Beesely held his hands over the candle flames and wondered how long he could keep going; he already felt near to collapse. He expended another two minutes of energy and retrieved the Schnapps, plus a dusty glass. Cleaning the glass in his shirttails, he poured a drink, sat staring at the yellow candle flames.

‘Candles, Schnapps, freezing old castles; now I am back in 1945, back to the start point.’

He sipped the drink, the alcohol warming him. The minutes passed, and he caught his breath, focused on the welcoming flames. Turning his head to left, he could see a tall cabinet, bigger than the others.

Heaving a lungful of cold and damp air, he eased up and moved the chair, the chair back under his sore armpit once more. He stumbled across to the cabinet, examining the door handles for a moment before turning a handle and pulling. A bad smell enveloped him; musty old clothes. But the musty old clothes offered warmth. Reaching in, Beesely tugged down a white snow smock that had seen better days. Placing it on, he warmed immediately.

Searching the jacket’s pockets, he found a broken compass, but also a rusted Swiss Army knife, a utility knife. After a minute’s effort, he coaxed the main blade out one end, its screwdriver out the other end. Turning his head, he focused on the room’s door, a thought entering his mind.

A minute’s valuable energy was used up hobbling to the door, Beesely now trying to be as quiet as he could, the guard probably positioned outside the door to his original

room. He placed an ear against the door join and listened, a cold breeze tickling his ear. Nothing. It could just mean that the guard was sat reading a book, or asleep against the door.

Sitting on his chair-crutch, Beesely took several minutes to weigh up the options. Going back up the chimney was out, he'd never make it, he was sure of that. And if he did make it to the roof, then what? No, those days were long gone. And if he opened the door, just how far would he get with his chair-crutch, and how fast? And once outside, how the hell would he get anywhere through the snow?

The sand was running out of the hourglass, and he was certain they would kill him the next day. 'These are your final hours, old man.'

In his damp and smelly snow smock, he sat staring across at the Schnapps, the bottle glistening in the candlelight. Minutes passed.

Heaving a big breath, he lifted up and hobbled back to the table, pouring himself another drink. 'Only one thing for it: kill as many of them as I can, maybe even Gunter.'

He lifted the Schnapps bottle. 'A Molotov cocktail may do it. Unless they've left a few machineguns lying around here someplace.'

Hobbling back to the drinks cabinet, he sat on the chair edge and pulled out each bottle in turn, opening those he could and sniffing the contents. There was no brandy. Or petrol!

With the floor around the cabinet now littered with bottles, he hobbled to a dated chest of draws. The chest's main door was locked, not willing to budge with the penknife blade wedged in. Its draws contained papers. He did, however, find a reasonable set of binoculars. Given his current circumstances, they were not much use.

Turning away from the fireplace, he hobbled across to a metal cabinet, finding it locked. ‘So, is this where they keep the machineguns?’ He ran a hand across the cabinet’s cold metal surface, finding the door’s hinge pins. There were eight sets of them, and they were flush to the pins.

‘Where’s Thomas when you need him? He’d have this open, especially if you asked him not to.’

Clicking the lighter on, Beesely inspected the door lock close up, certain he’d not open it. Knocking off the lighter, he turned to the next cabinet, shuffling sideways across to it. The doors were not locked, the tall cabinet revealing skis and boots.

Beesely laughed, but then placed the back of his wrist to his mouth. He took a moment to compose himself, shaking his head. ‘If I was younger, I’d get out of here.’ He breathed loudly, seeing his breath in the candlelight. ‘Think your way out, Beesely. Think.’

Turning, he took in the bottles on the floor, certain that some of the spirits would burn. But what could he do with them? Could he attract the guard, or Gunter, and set fire to them? It was a possibility.

Glancing back over his shoulder, he considered the skis. Sitting on the chair, he rummaged around the boots and satchels, finding what he had hoped for: an ice axe. Shuffling slowly sideways to the door, he put an ear to the door join again, finding only a cold breeze. They had locked him in, so did they believe he could get out?

‘Damn it! Is there a guard or not?’ he cursed. If all else failed, he would hit the guard with the ice axe. He placed it onto the edge of the wooden table, its handle facing the door and ready to be grabbed.

Leaning against the table, he faced again the metal cabinet. ‘Hunting rifles?’



The temptation was too much. The room had housed snow smocks, skis, so why not hunting rifles. Lifting the ice axe, ready to hit the guard, Beesely again used the chair as a crutch and hopped to the metal cabinet. Jamming the end of the ice axe into the keyhole, he pressed and levered at the same time. It would not budge. Breathing heavily, and suppressing his coughing, he tried again. Nothing, it was too strong, built to resist casual thieves.

Moving back to the table, Beesely helped himself to a tot of Schnapps, the drink warming him. He even considered lighting the fire for a little extra warmth. From a cabinet drawer he retrieved three more candles and lit them, setting them out across the table and increasing the illumination available to him, but just a little.

He sat. ‘Think, Beesely. Think.’

Lifting his gaze, he noticed beams running across the room, four of them. Each beam sat at around eight feet high, the room probably twelve feet high in total. All displayed diagonal beams reaching up to the ceiling – but they did appear to be supporting beams. One sat right above the metal cabinet. Beesely rubbed his chin.

Easing up, he shuffled to the ski locker, but did not find what he was looking for. Moving to the cabinet housing jackets, he sat and reached in, rifling through bags and jackets at the base of the cabinet. His hand touched what he was looking for. Pulling out a rucksack, he found a reel of rope.

He shook his head. ‘Damn it all; if I was younger I’d be out of here.’ He sighed, lifting up and making his way over to the metal cabinet. Stood in front of it, an idea solidified. Sitting on the chair, he pulled out the rope and discarded the rucksack. Making a wide noose, Beesely lifted up and threw it around the top of the cabinet. It got stuck behind the

cabinet, jammed against the wall, but fitted well around the front, neatly tightening around a ridge at the top of the cabinet.

Lifting his gaze, Beesely took the end of the rope, wound it around his elbow a few times, and threw it over the beam. Tugging down the loose rope end, he hopped across to the heavy wooden table and wrapped the rope around a sturdy leg, a knot that would hold the cabinet, but allow him to release rope through the knot.

‘Always knew my sailing skills would come in useful at some point.’

Holding the loose end of the rope with his left hand, the slack taken, Beesely steadied himself and reached up for the rope at the front of the metal cabinet. Grabbing hold, he let it take his weight, and leant backwards. The metal cabinet had not been fixed to the wall and teetered. Beesely pulled harder, towards himself. The tall cabinet moved, starting to fall forwards, but soon supported by the rope.

Beesely let go with his right hand and fell into the chair, tightening the grip of his left hand. Forcing a few breaths, he eased his grip and let out rope. ‘The right knot for the right occasion,’ he said to himself as he lowered the cabinet.

A minute later the cabinet lay on the floor, face down, metal objects moving around inside. He let go the rope and moved onto the cabinet, sitting on its cold and dusty metal, feeling the back of it with his hands. No significant joins were exposed, but the lower right corner felt rusted.

Fetching the ice axe, Beesely placed the point into the rusted corner and lifted his weight over the axe. It slid in, stopping after an inch. He gripped the handle and lifted, trying to open the cabinet like a tin can. Nothing broke free, but the hole had been made bigger, more of the axe fitting inside. He lifted the axe handle again. Standing, he used all

of his remaining strength to lever the ice axe, causing a shrill tearing sound. He froze, and listened.

Nothing.

Reversing the ice axe, he forced the wide end in, pulling back and lifting the back of the cabinet an inch or so. The hole was now almost big enough to get a hand in.

‘Give me a lever big enough, and I’ll move the world,’ Beesely whispered. He made the hole as large as he could before the ice axe could no longer get any purchase. Shuffling to the left, he retrieved a ski. Jamming in the ski, he turned it edge-on to the thin metal he wished to peel away. Standing behind the ski, he gripped the top – almost six foot – and pulled back.

The metal backing to the cabinet peeled away from its joins. Stopping, and pushing the ski deeper, he made the hole bigger, now a triangle of metal sticking up. Reversing his strategy, he stopped levering on the ski and started pushing it up and over, cracking the sides of the cabinet and enlarging the hole.

Pulling out the ski and placing it down, he eased down onto the floor and eased a hand inside the cabinet. Smiling, he pulled out a double barrel shotgun. Clicking the barrels open, he found the barrels empty of cartridges, not really expecting to find it loaded. He placed it on the table.

Reaching inside again, he could feel several other shotguns, and what felt like a rifle. But trying to remove them resulting in the sound of a chain echoing out of the cabinet. They were chained together, probably through the trigger guards. Feeling around inside, as far as his arm would reach, he found no shells or cartridges.

Sitting at the table, exhausted by the activity, Beesely poured himself a small drink and sipped, catching his breath. When rested, he again levered the ski, but the hole

was now too big to get purchase. He sighed, glancing at the rope. It was time to employ the right knot again, plus a different kind of lever.

Releasing the rope took five minutes, but it remained conveniently placed over the beam above. Beesely tied the noose off around the peeled back metal and secured it. Releasing the rope from the table leg, he made his way to the second beam and threw it over, securing it now to a second leg of the table and taking the tension.

Leaning against the table, Beesely considered his grand design. He grabbed the satchel and attached its straps to the ring at the end of the ice axe handle, swinging the ice axe up till it caught the horizontal rope between the beams. Dragging the chair over, he loosened a satchel strap. Lifting the chair, whilst being steadied by the satchel strap, he hooked the satchel strap under the ornate carving of the chair back. The chair was now swinging twelve inches off the floor.

‘All aboard, please.’ He gripped the satchel and sat on the seat, the metal cabinet letting out a squeak of protest. With little more happening, Beesely rocked the chair up and down, each movement eliciting a squeak from the cabinet.

After ten minutes, the chair touched the floor. Beesely eased off, standing on his good leg, and adjusted the satchel straps. It gained him an extra six inches, and he rocked up and down till he again hit the floor.

Crawling back to the cabinet, whilst leaving the chair hanging in place, he manoeuvred himself around to the base. Retrieving the lighter from his pocket, he clicked it on and thrust it inside. The rifles were visible in the dim light, but no cartridges could be seen in the cabinet. If they were held in a drawer or safe within the cabinet, he could not see it.

Dejected, he returned to the table. With his hands flat down on the table's cold surface, he locked his elbows and moved across to the dangling chair, unclipping it. Back at the head of the table he made himself a drink.

‘Not much time or energy left, old man.’

Sipping his drink, he took in his dark cell and, probably, the place he would die, certain that his body would never be found.

He knocked back the last of his drink. ‘Soon be done, old man. Nearly there.’

Lifting up, he again used the chair as a prop, determined to check the opposite side of the room before he gave up to die.

## 5

Moving the lighter flame about a cabinet, whilst hoping desperately that it's fuel would not run out, a familiar shape came into focus. A phone.

He coughed out a small laugh, and stood shaking his head. ‘If I lift it, do they hear? Do I get an internal exchange?’ He heaved a big breath. ‘To hell with it.’ He lifted the receiver, finding a tone.

‘Damn it! Area code or national code?’ He took a moment to think, not remembering any K2 numbers, then punched in his old home phone number, preceded by ‘0044’, the international dialling code for Great Britain.

‘Hello?’ came after a few rings, an accented voice.

‘It's Director Beesely,’ he quietly announced. ‘Trace this number. I'm being held in a castle, maybe northeast of Zug, maybe Austria. I'm going to leave this line open and off the hook, do what you can to trace it.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Beesely placed the receiver on the table. Noticing a cloth, he covered the phone. Turning, he used his high-back chair as a crutch again and hobbled across the room. Clambering onto the tabletop, he made a pillow of the jacket, and closed his eyes, asleep a second later, but with a smug grin.

\* \* \*

A nudge, and Beesely woke to a bright light. He held a hand over to his eyes and turned his head, finding Gunter stood with two guards.

‘I must say ... I am most impressed, Director Beesely. You are, if nothing else, a resourceful man. And, you seem to have something of a party, all by yourself. Did you ... drink away the memories of the girl you got killed, perhaps? Or were you going to hang yourself with this rope, the cowards way out?’

‘What time is it?’ Beesely croaked, coughing.

‘It’s morning, Herr Director. Do you have a hangover, perhaps?’

Beesely tried to focus his eyes on his watch. ‘10am.’

‘Did we not let you sleep late enough?’

Beesely took a moment. ‘You gave me far too much time. A fatal mistake.’ He eased up onto his elbows, and took several deep breaths. ‘Are you a gambling man, Gunter?’

‘What did you wish to wager?’

‘A quick death for your men, or the chair.’ Beesely pushed himself up and let his legs drop, facing the two guards. ‘You can cooperate, or face the chair.’

‘And why would they fear such a thing?’ Gunter asked. ‘From a stupid old man covered in soot.’

‘Oh, I would say ... because my son is stood behind you.’

The first guard glanced over his shoulder, then spun around, stepping back. The second guard jumped to the side as if probed with something sharp. Gunter turned. And froze.

Johno’s facial expression was a mixture of fatigue and anger, death in his eyes. He stepped slowly in and to the first guard. In a husky whisper, he said, ‘There are two hundred K2 agents around this place, many already inside. Make a choice. It may be your last.’

The man stepped back.

With his chin on his chest, Johno turned to Gunter, who was still frozen to the spot. He stepped closer, close enough to almost touch cheeks. Eye to eye, Johno said, ‘If you beg, and beg well, I’ll kill you right now, because I’m tired and I want a drink.’

Gunter stared back as Johno tipped his head side to side. Gunter regained some of his composure. ‘Draw your weapons!’ he told his men, the fear evident in his voice.

Johno turned to the two guards, and waited. They glanced at each other. The first man took out his pistol, glanced at it, and placed it on the table. The second guard followed that movement.

‘We don’t shoot the foot soldiers,’ Johno told them. Whilst still focused on the guards, Johno struck out at Gunter, knocking him onto the table. He turned his head to Beesely. ‘You OK, apart from the dirt? And the smell.’

Beesely ran a hand over his face, not realising how he must have appeared. ‘I’ll live.’ Leaning to the side, he reached across and grabbed one the guard’s pistols. Checking it, he turned the other way as Gunter eased up. Beesely aimed, pointed, and put a round in Gunter’s knee.

The shot caused four guards to spin into the room, MP5s ready. Johnno raised a hand to stop the men as Gunter cried out.

Beesely aimed again, hitting the second knee, a third round into Gunter's groin at close range, eliciting a horrible noise. 'I would have given you the chair, but I'm tired and I want a drink.'

Johnno waved Gunter's guards out, placing Beesely's arm around his shoulders and easing him up. 'Need a drink huh?'

Beesely pointed the pistol at Gunter once more, a shot to the stomach. To a K2 guard, he said, 'Let him die right there. It's where I would have died.'

In the corridor, a collapsible wheelchair was made ready. Beesely sat, and pointed. 'In that room is Adrienne's body.'

'She didn't make it?' Johnno asked in a husky whisper.

'She died ... trying to help me escape.'

Johnno nodded as he pushed Beesely forwards. 'She was a good girl. What the hell happened in that room, all that stuff on the floor, and the rope?'

'Long story, which I won't be telling without a stiff drink in my hand.'



## Aftermath

### 1

Two day's later, the command staff met at the bank, the castle still being checked for bombs, a few bodies dug out of the snow.

Subdued, and seeming tired, Beesely asked, 'What do we know?'

Claus said, 'We have found seven bodies in the snow so far, all look like they were hit from the cliff top machineguns.'

'GPMG Hail Stones,' Helen stated, a look exchanged with Johnno.

Claus continued, 'They were caught by random fire. We have found no devices, but are continuing to search. The roof is being repaired, and we have searched everything five times, inside and out. No devices so far. The metal detectors that the mine clearing team use are working very well in the grounds to find bodies and weapons. And, the SAS men have made a very great mess of the grounds.'

'What?' Beesely quietly asked with a frown.

'They have obtained a large amount of soot, and use a leaf-blower to cover the snow in the grounds, which is now grey, not white. It is so that they can see people move around.'

'A little soot never harmed anyone,' Beesely said without looking up.

Claus added, 'We have spoken to the Turks, who were most put out by the attacks here. They are investigating, and promise full cooperation.'

'And Iraq?' Johnno asked.

‘We have sold our stake in Northgate and created a second division for ourselves,’ Claus explained. ‘Our men have returned, and we have given the Turkish Government the details of the Special Forces training at the camp in Northern Iraq. No details of that camp have been released to the press, but the White House was sent a file - anonymously.’

‘And the attacks?’ Helen asked.

Claus said, ‘It is clear that Gunter wished Beesely, and others, moved to the hotel spa when the power was cut to the castle. There, he believed we would be most vulnerable in bad weather. The attack on Otto was down to the Turks, an opportunity that arose from Gunter’s oil dealing in Northern Iraq.’

‘And us?’ Helen asked.

‘Gunter hoped that you would all move to the spa hotel, to be attacked there. A ... junior manager at the spa is missing. He is not a K2 man, and he began working at the spa when you first arrived in Switzerland.’

‘Could he have known we would fly out?’ Johnno puzzled.

‘Your pilots stay the night at the spa often, they were there the day you left for the Bahamas. A detailed interrogation of Gunter’s staff has revealed no one else ... so far.’

‘And Gunter’s detailed knowledge of the castle grounds?’ Helen asked.

Claus answered her, ‘He was in possession of detailed satellite photographs from before your arrival, the detail annotated to the pictures by the CIA. Power lines, gas, bridges, roads.’

‘An old problem revisited,’ Beesely mentioned, his face still bruised.

‘And Gunter’s motivation?’ Helen asked.

Claus shrugged. ‘Simply anger at the loss of inheritance would seem to be at the heart of it. But he did confess to his staff, many years ago, that he wished to harm his father, and K2. He anger was as much towards his father as anything else, even after his father was dead.’

Helen put in, ‘He could not strike back at old man Gunter, but he could strike back at what old man Gunter had built.’

Otto stepped in with Marie, and the baby wrapped in a white blanket. Faces lifted towards them, and the faces could not help but smile. Otto placed the baby girl on Beesely’s lap, Helen closing in.

‘Hello little one,’ Beesely offered, the girl staring up at the strange faces.

‘We have decided to call her Anna,’ Marie informed Beesely. ‘It was the middle name of both Marianne, and Adrienne.’

‘If she takes after either, she’ll be a beauty,’ Beesely softly stated.

Johno announced, ‘I’m going to be away for a few days.’ Everyone focused on him. ‘I ... have an appointment with a few plastic surgeons.’

Helen stared at him.

Johno added, ‘To save pissing about, they’ll try and do everything at once. Including loads a botox. I’ll still be just as ugly, but the body will look a bit better.’

\* \* \*

In his room as the spa hotel, Beesely met with Adrienne’s parents. With the couple sat opposite, Beesely began, ‘You have no idea ... how much your daughter touched me, or

how her death has affected me. But I would like to take this opportunity to apologise for the loss of your daughter.'

The father said, 'She knew the work had some dangers, but was proud of the work, and looked to you like the grandfather she never knew.'

'She loved working with you on the book,' the mother stated. 'It was all she would talk about when she came over, she even told us some of your stories from the war. It was ... as if I knew you.'

'I'm not sure how much time I have left, but I would like to stay in touch on a regular basis,' Beesely told them.

'It would be an honour, sir,' the father replied.

'You may as well know now, that I have commissioned a statue of Adrienne, for the grounds. I've also arranged for a street in the town to be renamed as Adrienne Platz. It's the street that leads down to the park and river, a beautiful walk in the summer.'

'Thank you, sir. I'm sure she would be happy.'

'The loss of a life, of someone so young, is the loss of the potential of what they may have become. I am certain that Adrienne would have ended up as a manager, and would have done well. She worked with a dedication and professionalism, and showed a stubborn streak when faced with adversity, not backing down.

'You'll be pleased to know that she killed one of the men holding us, and died fighting; she did not give in, and was brave till the end, as brave and resourceful as any man.'

'And the man who killed her, he was the son of Gunter?' the father asked.

Beesely nodded. 'He was, but he had very little contact with his biological father. His aim ... in attacking us, seems to have been nothing but spite; he would not have profited in any way that I can see. And the Swiss Government would

never have allowed him to inherit the bank. He ... was just an unhappy pretender to the throne.'

## 2

Ten days later, Johnno lay on a towel next to Helen, t-shirt and shorts. A cooler lay beside them. Johnno eased up and retrieved a can, cracking it open. Sat drinking, he observed Mr. Grey giving Thomas diving lessons in the shallows of their desert island, a large yacht anchored offshore.

'It's not the same, is it?' he said to Helen.

She eased up. 'The first time here, we were hungry and thirsty. It was the joy of finding it.' She took in the bleached white sand, the turquoise water, breathing in the warm air. 'I wanted to apologise, for being such a grump when we were kidnapped.'

'You're not a foot soldier, love, you're a lady, a proper lady; clean nails and washing your hands after having a pee.'

She shot him a look. 'And ... I wanted to apologise for nagging about the scars.'

'All done now; I look ten years younger. I'll be having a facelift next. I'm using the gym, I trimmed the moustache, even going to see the dentist when we get back, get a few teeth straightened out.'

'Don't go overboard, you'll end up with a pipe and slippers. You might even read a book now and then.'

Johnno reflected on the scene. 'I did worry about you, when we were grabbed. And the kid. I may not show it, but when things like that happen I just kind of ... become more me.'

'I know. I also know that I looked like death during that time. Did it put you off, seeing me with no make-up?'

‘It’s not your face that turns me on, it’s the posh voice,’ he joked, getting an elbow. He threw his can’s ring-pull at a crab, and took a breath. ‘I don’t think I could raise a baby, you know, a fresh one.’

‘Fresh ... one?’

‘Well, you know, fresh out and in the world. Thomas, he’s more like a mate a lot of the time, maybe ... like a younger brother. Seeing Otto’s baby, I don’t think I could handle it. I worried myself to death just holding the damn thing.’

‘Beesely looked to Adrianne like a daughter, he’s been badly shaken by it, more than he admits to.’

Johno nodded. ‘We had a drink the other night, and he started talking about the war, but this time I listened. He should have died fifty times over before the war even ended, and here he is, still at it. He is so ... on borrowed time. I’ve kind of started spending more time with him, and that book he dictated to Adrianne – his lifetime experiences – I nudged him to keep at it.’

‘That’ll never see the light of day,’ Helen scoffed.

‘No, not for a long time. But much of the really controversial stuff is not in there.’

‘Where do we go from here?’ Helen asked.

‘Bimini.’

She shot him a look.

‘Dunno, babes, I try and take it a day at a time. But it’s no so much the choices we make, as the ones that are made for us. You should now that more than most.’