FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *BRAVO TWO ZERO*

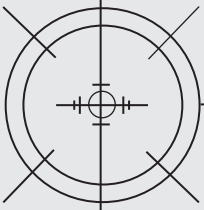
ANDY McNAB



S.A.S.

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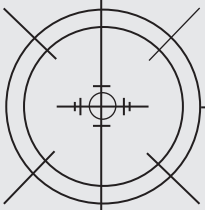
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Sunday Times

'Proceeds with a testosterone surge'

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Mail on Sunday

'Nick Stone is emerging as one of the great all-action characters of recent times'

Daily Mirror

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Daily Express

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ANDY McNAB

◢ **In 1984** he was 'badged' as a member of 22 SAS Regiment.

◢ **Over the course** of the next nine years he was at the centre of covert operations on five continents.

◢ **During the first** Gulf War he commanded Bravo Two Zero, a patrol that, in the words of his commanding officer, 'will remain in regimental history for ever'.

◢ **Awarded both** the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM) and Military Medal (MM) during his military career.

◢ **McNab** was the British Army's most highly decorated serving soldier when he finally left the SAS in February 1993.

◢ **He is a patron** of the *Help for Heroes* campaign.

◢ **He is now** the author of over twenty bestselling thrillers, as well as four Quick Read novels. Following the success of the perennial bestseller *Bravo Two Zero*, McNab continues to write non-fiction too. Most recently, he joined forces with Professor Kevin Dutton on *The Good Psychopath's Guide to Success* and *Sorted! The Good Psychopath's Guide to Bossing Your Life*.

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In 1991, Sergeant Andy McNab led eight members of the SAS regiment on a top-secret mission in Iraq that would send them deep behind enemy lines. Their call sign: Bravo Two Zero.

IMMEDIATE ACTION

The no-holds-barred account of an extraordinary life, from the day McNab was found on the steps of Guy's Hospital as a baby to the day he went to fight in the Gulf War.

SEVEN TROOP

The gripping true story of serving in the company of a remarkable band of brothers. But he who dares doesn't always win. Every man is pushed to breaking point, some beyond it.

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As diagnosed by Professor Kevin Dutton, McNab is what they call a 'Good Psychopath' – he's a psychopath but he's also a high-functioning member of society. Learn how to be successful the McNab way.

SORTED! THE GOOD PSYCHOPATH'S GUIDE TO BOSSING YOUR LIFE

Together, Andy McNab and Professor Kevin Dutton are here to show you how to dial up your inner 'Good Psychopath' to get more out of life.

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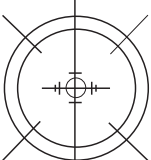
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Ex-SAS trooper, now gun-for-hire working for the British government, Nick Stone is the perfect man for the dirtiest of jobs, doing whatever it takes by whatever means necessary…

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◢ **Washington DC, USA**

Stone is on the run with precious cargo, the only person who can identify a vicious killer – a seven-year-old girl.



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A beautiful young woman holds the key to a chilling conspiracy that will threaten the world as we know it.

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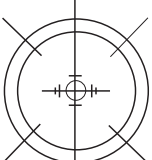
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◢ **The Congo, Africa**

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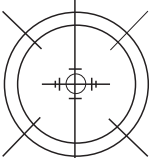
The search for a kidnapped reporter takes Stone to Afghanistan – the modern-day Wild West.

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An undercover operation is about to have deadly long-term consequences.



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This one's personal: Stone is out to track down the killer of two ex-SAS comrades.

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◢ **Amsterdam, Netherlands**

A terrorist organization is within reach of immeasurable power – but not for long.

DEAD CENTRE

◢ **Somalia**

When his son is kidnapped by pirates, a Russian oligarch calls the only man he can think of, Nick Stone.

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Stone must return to a world he thought he had left behind in order to protect his family.

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◢ **Hereford, UK**

Called to investigate a death at the SAS base, Stone finds himself in the killer's telescopic sights.

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When someone Stone loves is murdered, he can no longer take the pain. He wants vengeance at any cost.

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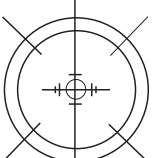
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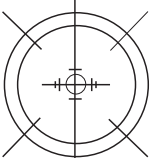
James Mercer will do anything to right the wrongs against his family. Even if it means breaking the law…

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Deep beneath the English Channel, Russian terrorists have seized control of the Eurostar to Paris and are holding four hundred hostages at gunpoint. But one man stands in their way. An off-duty SAS soldier is on the train; his name is Tom Buckingham.



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Undercover inside a frighteningly real right-wing organization, Buckingham uncovers a plan to kill the party leader. But beneath that lies a far more devastating plot to change the political landscape of Europe for ever.

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Andy McNab and Kym Jordan's novels trace the interwoven stories of one platoon's experience of warfare in the twenty-first century. Packed with the searing danger and high-octane excitement of modern combat, they also explore the impact of its aftershocks upon the soldiers themselves, and upon those who love them.

WAR TORN

Two tours of Iraq have shown Sergeant Dave Henley how modern battles are fought. But nothing could have prepared him for his posting to Afghanistan. This is a war zone like he's never seen before.

BATTLE LINES

Sergeant Dave Henley returns from Afghanistan to find that home can be an equally searing battlefield. The promise of another posting to Helmand is almost a relief for the soldiers but, for their families, it is another opportunity for their lives to be ripped apart.

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Prologue

Borjomi, Georgia

25 September 1996
05.17 hrs

Dawn had begun to streak the eastern sky as the two mud-spattered trucks inched their way up the road in the faint glow from their sidelights. They jolted over rain-filled potholes and scree and came to a halt just short of the crest of the hill.

Their movements measured and cautious, a dozen armed men climbed down from the rear of each vehicle. Their breath billowed around them in the freezing air. Checking their safety catches, they stamped their feet to restore circulation and eased the stiffness from their legs. Some placed a last cigarette in the middle of their week-old beards and lit up.

They checked their equipment, ensuring pouches were still secure. If it had a button or a Velcro strip, it was there to be fastened. Two of the team struggled

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to hoist heavy weapons systems onto their shoulders.

Their commander stood a short distance apart from his men. Laszlo had an aversion to the smell of nicotine. He wore the same stained camouflage fatigues as his troops and had a similarly Slavic cast to his features, complete with coarse, almost black beard, but carried himself with an arrogance they didn't share. He was just short of six feet in height, but his sinuous limbs and slim frame made him look taller. His mouth was down-turned and his eyes were the washed-out grey-blue of a winter sky; his skin was so pale he looked as if he'd lived his life in permanent shadow.

Another man exited the cab of the nearest truck. Laszlo's cool gaze missed nothing as he approached. The newcomer's civilian clothes were of a cut and quality that were neither cheap nor local. He wasn't a Slav, he was from the West. Europe? The USA? It was hard to tell. They all looked the same. His brown hair was starting to grow out from its short back and sides, and he, too, had a good week's growth on his chiselled jaw.

The man might not have been one of Laszlo's team, but the comfortable way he held his AK, the folding butt closed down in his hand as if it were a natural extension of his body, showed that he was no stranger to shot and shell. The weapon – all of his equipment – was also of Soviet origin. In Yeltsin's Russia, there was no shortage of underworld gangs willing to steal and trade such things, or of corrupt officers happy to empty their armouries in return for cold, hard cash.

The man had no fear of repercussion from what he was about to do. There would be nothing to suggest this had been anything but a purely local affair. He was

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sterile of ID and personal documentation. Like the rest of the team, it was as if he didn't exist. He had a name – Marcus – but Laszlo knew it wasn't his own. The team commander had taken steps to discover his companion's real identity. Information was a commodity to be traded, like drugs, weapons and women, and Laszlo always liked to bargain from a position of strength.

He stood for a couple more minutes, watching the new day creep across the landscape. To his right, a steep, boulder-strewn slope tumbled to a fast-flowing river. Water the colour of chocolate surged downstream. The force of the current had carved out the soil for a ten-metre stretch along the far bank, exposing a latticework of tree-roots that gleamed white against the mud, like the ribs of a putrefying corpse.

On the other side of the road, a dense pine forest cloaked the lower slopes of the mountains that filled the northern horizon. It seemed to float in a sea of mist. The treetops swayed each time there was a gust of wind. As he watched, the sun's first rays painted the snow-capped peaks with gold. In the west, just visible now in the strengthening light, a black gash as straight as a Roman road showed the course of the pipeline being driven through this remote valley. Directly in its path, just over the hill from where they now stood, a huddle of buildings lay surrounded by a patchwork of fields.

As soon as the man reached him, Laszlo turned. The wind whipped up a shower of pine needles as the two of them moved through the edge of the forest. As they neared the crest of the hill, they flattened themselves to the earth and wormed their way to a point from which they could study the approach to Borjomi.

On the slope below, the trees gave way to fields of

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yellowing grass, dusted with frost and punctuated by mounds of autumn hay secured beneath tarpaulins. Beyond them, houses were clustered around a dusty square. A rusting iron water pump and a long stone horse-trough stood at its centre, half shaded by a large, stag-headed oak tree.

The buildings at the heart of the village were of wood and stone, with sun-faded shutters and roofs of patched tiles or corrugated iron, steeply pitched to shed the winter snows. The gables of some had once been richly carved but were now so weathered, cracked and split with age that the embellishments were barely visible.

While those houses looked almost as ancient as the oak tree they faced, the buildings around them were drab, Soviet-era constructions, their crumbling concrete façades pockmarked by bullet holes. A huge barn, built of unmilled wood with gaps between the planks, boasted a roof of heavily patched corrugated-iron sheets.

The whole place was mired in mud and poverty. Tangles of scrap metal and rotting timbers decorated the yards. A solitary motor vehicle, a battered Lada with rust-streaked bodywork, was parked next to a pair of horse-drawn farm carts. Apart from a handful of chickens scuttling about and a few cows mooching in the fields, the place seemed to be deserted.

At the side of the road just outside the village, an old door had been nailed to two fence posts driven into the ground. Daubed on it, in crude hand-lettering, was an inscription in Russian, Georgian and Ossetic: 'Protect our village.'

The two men worked their way back from the brow and conferred in low tones. Although his companion

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was now issuing orders to him, Laszlo's stance and attitude showed that he did not regard him as his superior in any way.

'Ready?' The man's Russian was halting but understandable. And now his accent gave him away.

Laszlo nodded. 'Ready, Englishman.' He signalled to his men and led them down the hill, moving tactically, one foot always on the ground. Half the team stayed where they were to cover the advance of the rest. Using the haystacks to mask their approach, they too went static and returned the favour.

A cock crowed inside a barn and wisps of grey smoke began to rise from a chimney as some unseen inhabitant coaxed his fire into life. Laszlo was wary. It wasn't always like this. An attack could be initiated at any moment. He'd taken incoming from sleepy backwaters like this and lost men. That was why he favoured a rolling start-line. If his team took fire as they approached they'd just roll into the attack and fight their way forward.

They reached the shadows of a tumbledown wall on the edge of the settlement and waited there, all eyes focused on the Englishman as he took one last look at the target to confirm that nothing had changed since he issued his last set of orders the day before.

He'd led them into a field for a run-through in slow time, letting the whole team see what each of the component groups would be doing during the attack. They'd rehearsed the what-ifs: what if the team had a man down? What if a group got separated from the main force? What if the team took heavy fire from an RPG?

Now that the Englishman had seen in real time what he'd told them to call the battle space, he knew there

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was nothing to add. His voice was calm as he spoke to Laszlo.

The South Ossetian checked that his men were in place and ready, raised his hand, paused a moment, and let it fall.

The team burst from cover. With the Englishman leading one group and Laszlo the other, they advanced along both sides of the main street. Dogs set up a chorus of barks and howls and a few villagers began stumbling from their houses, some clutching hunting rifles and shotguns, one or two with AKs, but the attacking force, better armed and better trained, cut them down before they fired a single round.

Laszlo led his men from house to house. The crump of HE grenades and the crash of splintering wood were interspersed with cries and screams. Half dressed and rubbing sleep from their eyes, the remaining occupants were dragged from their homes, herded into the open, kicked and punched face down into the mud, then immobilized with plastic zip-ties.

While the Englishman stayed with his group and controlled their captives, Laszlo led his team further along the line of buildings. He paused for a couple of seconds, dropped into cover and looked back towards the others. A young villager, perhaps no more than a teenager, was sprinting towards the forest.

Two of the insurgents fired at him and missed. The Englishman dropped to one knee, took careful aim and brought him down with a single shot into the centre of his body mass, then moved forward and finished him with a second to the head.

Laszlo smiled to himself and turned his attention back to the last of the houses. Once it, too, had been

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searched and cleared, and the occupants secured, the looting began. Food and alcohol were gathered up with as much enthusiasm as the modest treasures the villagers possessed.

Laszlo took a gulp of a fiery local spirit, then passed the bottle among his men. One carried off a fading sepia photograph of a couple dressed for their wedding against a gaudily painted backdrop of a castle. Wanting the ornate frame but not the image it contained, he stamped down with his boot, smashing the glass and ripping the photograph to shreds. He picked out the last shards and propped the frame carefully against the trunk of the oak tree.

Another emerged from an outbuilding clutching a pair of live chickens in each hand. He wrung their necks with practised ease and added them to the growing pile of booty.

On Laszlo's order, the attackers began to separate their male captives from the women, who wailed and keened as husbands and sons were marched and kicked towards the barn at the far edge of the village. Those who resisted were shot where they stood. The rest were herded inside and watched helplessly as its double doors were shut and barred.

Laszlo listened for a moment to the terrified shouts and cries of those trapped within, then nodded to the two men carrying the heavier weapons systems.

They staggered forwards, smashed the windows and directed searing blasts of flame into the barn's interior. Laszlo had selected these weapons with purpose – for the physical pain endured by the dying, and the legacy of mental terror suffered by those unfortunate enough to survive.

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In seconds, fuelled by the dry timbers, the hay and straw stored there, the barn was ablaze from end to end. His men stood watch as it burned, and when two villagers somehow succeeded in smashing their way through the disintegrating wall, Laszlo raised his weapon to his shoulder and dropped both targets instantly.

The terrible screams of the remaining victims were soon drowned by the roar of the flames and the crash of falling beams. As the barn collapsed in on itself, the massacre extended even to the villagers' hounds and livestock. The cattle were burned alive with their owners or mown down by gunfire; the dogs were dispatched with a knife thrust or 7.62mm short round.

The flamethrowers now moved among the houses, pausing at each to direct a jet of blazing fluid through the doorway or a shattered window. As they moved on to the next, the one behind them became an inferno. More cries from the women captives were brutally silenced by rifle butts. The attackers showed as little mercy as the Nazis had done in this part of the world just over half a century before.

The SS's *Flammenwerfer*, designed as an infantry weapon to clear out trenches and buildings, had become an instrument of terror when used against civilian populations. It held twelve litres of petrol mixed with tar to make it heavier and increase its range to twenty-five metres. The flaming oil was ignited by a hydrogen torch.

Flammenwerfer operators had been so hated that the trigger and muzzle section of their weapon soon had had to be disguised to look like a standard infantry rifle in an attempt to keep them from being singled out by

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enemy snipers. Whole villages had been annihilated in its path. Maybe the men here today had had relatives who'd perished in their flames and the pain and fear had been passed down the generations.

Sambor, the more imposing of the operators, was Laszlo's 'little' brother by just thirteen months. He had the same almost lifeless eyes and pallid complexion, but that was where the similarity ended. He had inherited the rest of his physique from his father's family. His massive hands were twice the size of Laszlo's, his fingers like sausages and his hulking frame topped by a riot of dark brown hair, greasy after weeks in the field, which fell to his shoulders.

A child who had somehow escaped detection stumbled out of a nearby building, coughing and choking, smoke streaming from his smouldering hair and clothes. Sambor swung the barrel of his flamethrower back towards the boy and turned him into a human torch. With an unearthly shriek, the blazing figure blundered into a wall before sliding to the ground.

As the dense black column of smoke rose high above the village, Laszlo and two of his men turned their attention to the makeshift sign. Using a piece of scrap iron as a crowbar, they prised the old door away from the posts and pitched it through the window of a blazing house. Within seconds the flames were licking at the painted inscription. The last trace of defiance had now been obliterated, and the centuries-old village erased from the map.

As the ashes swirled around them, the insurgents gathered in the village square, surrounding the captive women. The Englishman had taken as many lives as

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any, but his expression betrayed nothing of his current thoughts.

Laszlo turned to him. 'You should leave now. Unless . . .' He gestured to the women and gave him a questioning glance. One sat silent, rocking slowly backwards and forwards as her tears carved white streaks through the dirt on her cheeks; others sobbed or pleaded with their stone-faced captors, who were already loosening their belts.

The Englishman shook his head and walked back up the hill towards the waiting trucks. Behind him he could hear a fresh chorus of wavering cries, rising and falling like sirens as the fighters began to take their reward.

Laszlo wouldn't be taking part in what followed. It was a gift from him to his men. Or that was what he had told them. In truth, for Laszlo and the Englishman, this was the final flourish. Just as the flamethrowers spread fear among their potential victims, so did the prospect of rape; and fear, eventually, would bring compliance.

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1

London
Friday, 9 September 2011
14.40 hrs

Pale sunshine bathed the Heath, lighting up the autumn colours of the trees. Nannies clustered on benches, gossiping about their employers while their charges dozed in nearby buggies. A pair of Labradors chased each other in the meadows, deaf to the pleas of their owners, and in the distance a handful of hardy swimmers could be glimpsed braving the bathing pond's frigid waters. Beyond the grand Victorian and Edwardian houses fringing the grassland, the sunlight glinted on the steel and glass towers of the City.

A young couple strolled along a path near the edge of the Heath, arms intertwined, oblivious to everything but each other. Without warning, four black-clad figures burst from the bushes and bundled them swiftly out of sight. Thrown headlong to the ground, the girl arched her back and tried to turn her head as a gloved hand was clamped over her mouth and her wrists were

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bound with zip-ties. Her eyes widened at the glimpse of matt-black weaponry and the respirator-covered faces of their captors.

The sergeant in command of the fully bombed-up assault team leaned in close. 'Sssh. Stop flapping, hen. You'll not be harmed.' Known as Jockey to his mates, because of his size, and Nasty Bastard to his enemies, he knew his heavy-duty Gorbals accent and the rasp of the respirator's filter were about as comforting as Darth Vader reading a bedtime story, so he tightened his grip and gave it to them straight. 'Both of you – just lie fucking still and keep quiet. Understand?'

They both gave a hesitant nod.

He knelt back on his haunches, hit his pressel switch and spoke quietly into his mic. 'Blue One. Third party secure.'

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2

Half a mile away, near the centre of what the locals liked to call the Village, the door of one of Hampstead's more characterful pubs bore a sign announcing that it was 'Closed due to illness'. Anyone peering through the leaded windows, between the immaculately sculpted flower baskets, might therefore have been surprised to find that the chairs and high-backed settles in its panelled bar were packed with people.

The landlord was perched on a stool at one end, staring wistfully through the half-drawn curtains at the procession of potential customers moving down the street.

His paintings, horse brasses and *faux*-rustic ornaments had all been taken down and stacked in a corner. In their place were massed ranks of portable flat-screens displaying live CCTV and satellite feeds, local news reports and classified video-conferences. A series of grainy A4 prints was clamped to a magnetic whiteboard, which now held pride of place. Closer inspection would reveal that they were all at least a decade out of date, and of just one man, clean-shaven and with a mop of

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shoulder-length dark hair, against the backdrop of a busy Moscow street.

The landlord gave an ostentatious sigh. 'How much longer is this going to take?'

Clustered around laptops or hunched over communications equipment, his current clientele – some in street clothes, some in police uniform, others still in black Special Forces party gear – didn't reward him with a second glance.

'Come on, lads, I'm losing money hand over fist here.'

One of the soldiers finally raised his head. 'It'll take as long as it takes, mate. Maybe an hour, maybe all day. Perhaps even all fucking night. You'll be well compensated for loss of income, so do yourself a favour, will you? Stop bumping your gums and get us another brew. Oh, and a few sandwiches and biscuits wouldn't hurt either.'

At the table in the centre of the room, flanked by two lower-ranking officers, James Woolf of MI5 – or, as he always insisted it was called, the Security Service – sat like stone, listening to the mobile phone pressed to his ear.

Seated next to Major Ashton was a stocky West Country-born sergeant with a shock of wiry black hair. With eight years' service in the Regiment, Gavin Marks, the 3i/c, was the same age as the boss, but hadn't had the privilege of the same education. He'd started out as a Royal Marine, but soon seen the light. At least, that was what everyone who hadn't joined the Regiment from the Navy kept telling him.

He spoke into his throat mic. 'Blue One, roger that. When we get the "Go" the police will come and collect them.'

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The ‘team’ consisted of two sub-teams, Red and Blue, each with an assault group and a sniper group, which meant that they could cover two incidents at once.

‘All call-signs, this is Alpha. Radio check. Blue Two?’

The speakers crackled into life.

‘Blue Two.’

‘Blue Three?’

‘Blue Three.’

‘Blue Four?’

The response this time was a double click as Blue Four squelched his radio button. As he did so, the listeners could hear the faint background noise of yapping dogs and a jet on its final descent into Heathrow.

‘Blue Five?’

Gavin glanced at the notepad in front of him. ‘Blue Five. Confirm the sizes on those charges.’

‘Blue Five. Two by one metres.’

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3

Up on the Heath, the captive couple had hardly drawn breath, unable to tear their eyes away from the four-man SAS assault team and their welter of weapons and equipment.

Screened by the bushes, Blue One peered through their weapon optics at the target house. The Heath was lined with mansions like this. Wealthy Victorian industrialists had built them, not just to live in but to make the kind of statement about their position in the world that their current owners – the new aristocracy of film stars, footballers and foreign multimillionaires – were happy to broadcast.

A nondescript Transit van was parked up on the higher ground at the edge of the Heath. Behind its darkened rear window, Keenan Marshall, a tanned Cornishman, whose newly disciplined hair did nothing to camouflage the surf-dude he used to be, trained the optic sight of his AWSM (Arctic Warfare Super Magnum) sniper rifle with suppressed barrel on the front elevation of the target house.

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Keenan caught a flicker of movement from the upper floor and called in. 'Stand by, stand by. Sierra One has a possible X-ray [target] on white three-six. Green on blue.'

Green on blue signalled the colour of the potential hostile's clothing.

Gavin's response was immediate: 'Armed or unarmed?'

'Can't confirm. Wooden shutters obscuring.'

'Roger that. Give us what you've got.'

'Sash windows. Double-glazed. Wooden frames. Recommend medium ladders. Can't confirm downstairs windows.'

'Roger that. Blue One, acknowledge.'

The Scotsman came back. 'Blue One. Roger that. Possible X-ray now unsighted. Downstairs: no signs of life. No condensation. No shutters. White curtains. Front-door security gates are locked.' They might have been no more than seconds from launching the assault, but his voice betrayed less emotion than that of a Scandinavian newsreader.

A fresh voice broke in: 'Stand by. Stand by. Sierra Four has a possible Yankee [hostage]. Female, coming out of Green . . . wait . . . wait . . .' Sierra Four was telling them he had more to say: everyone else should stay off the net. 'She looks pregnant.'

A woman who looked like she was in her twenties, with blonde hair and a maternity dress so short that it showed almost every inch of her endless legs, had appeared at the side of the house and was walking down the garden. One hand cradled her bump, the other held a plastic spray with which she was squirting the flowers as she strolled along.

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Jockey sparked back into life: 'Blue One. Confirm she's pregnant.'

Gavin's voice, still controlled but now with a note of urgency: 'All stations, cancel gas. Do – not – use – gas. Out.'

The jury was out about chemicals affecting a foetus's development. But no one was here to kill or deform unborn children.

'Stand by, stand by. Blue One has Posh Lad in the cordon approaching the female.'

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Tom 'Posh Lad' Buckingham adjusted his earpiece and stepped out from behind the tree he'd been using as cover. He saw the blonde's face register surprise as he began walking across the garden towards her. He reckoned she was in her early thirties, roughly his age, though the clothes he was wearing – tweed jacket, Viyella shirt and cavalry-twill trousers – made him look much older.

He'd chosen the sort of outfit some upper-crust Englishmen wear when they're trying – unsuccessfully – for a casual look, topped off on this occasion with an expensive leather satchel slung over the shoulder. Gavin had given it the serious thumbs-up as Tom had changed for the op that morning. 'To the manor born, mate. You look like Prince Charles getting ready to head down to Highgrove for a chat with his plants.'

'It's just a matter of having the right gear for the occasion, Gav, you know that. Like when you slip into the velvet hot pants, nipple clamps and Spandex thong combo for a big night out.'

As he approached the blonde now, he brushed an

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imaginary speck of fluff from the sleeve of his tweed jacket and called, 'Hello there!' in his best Etonian drawl. He gave her a disarming smile. 'You have *such* a lovely garden.'

The blonde smiled back. 'Thank you, but—'

'Did you design this yourself?' He half turned away from her to admire one of the flowerbeds.

She gave a hesitant nod.

'I thought so,' he said. 'And aren't these daffodils magnificent?' He gestured towards the display of red roses tumbling over the pergola beside her, still flowering in early autumn. 'Absolutely stunning.' He pulled out his iPhone and took a picture of them.

'Excuse . . . please . . .' The blonde looked nervous now. Her Eastern European accent was evident, and her hand pressed more tightly against her bump, as if shielding her unborn child from this stranger.

He continued talking, blithely failing to register her unease: 'I'm a volunteer for the Garden History Society. We list one new garden every year in our official register . . . and I'd say yours would be a really strong candidate. Would you mind if I put it forward for selection?'

'Is just hobby. Not for public . . .' She searched for the right word. 'Not for other people . . .'

Without a pause, he began speaking in Russian. 'Would it be easier if we spoke in your mother tongue? I wrote my thesis on the Aptekarsky Ogorod Botanical Garden in Moscow. Have you ever been there?'

'No.' She showed real concern now, her eyes darting from side to side, scanning the garden behind him.

'Where are you from?' he said, once more affecting not to notice her discomfort.

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She gestured towards her bump. 'I'm sorry, you must . . . Excuse, please, I . . . I very tired. Perhaps one other day . . .'

He treated her to an even more disarming smile. 'How wonderful! Many congratulations! You know what? My wife's just given birth to our first – a little girl. Small world, eh? How many months pregnant are you?'

'Seven . . .'

'A boy or a girl?'

She hesitated. 'I . . . I do not know. They can't tell yet.'

The smile still lighting up his face, Tom shot out a hand, seized her wrist and twisted it back viciously, forcing her to the ground. She cursed and struggled as he whipped an autojet syringe from his satchel with his free hand and plunged the needle deep into her thigh. Screened from the house by the pergola, he kept his grip on her wrist as the sedative took effect.

'You fucked up, I'm afraid.' His tone was still calm and matter-of-fact. 'They can tell the sex of a baby at three months. Oh, and daffodils are spring flowers, and yellow, not red.'

She slumped, unconscious. He zip-tied her hands, then pulled up her maternity dress, exposing her stomach. The pregnancy bump was an 'empathy bulge' that a certain sort of man might wear in a pathetic attempt to share his wife's experience of pregnancy. Except that this one wasn't warm and fuzzy. A light green substance the consistency of Play-Doh was jammed into the pouch.

Tom could smell the distinctive linseed aroma of the eastern-manufactured, low-quality plastic explosive. The precise make didn't matter to him. He was more concerned about the thin steel detonator wires coming

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out of the PE and twisted around a red and blue two-flex. They disappeared into her clothing, *en route* to a battery pack. All she had to do was complete the circuit by pressing a button in her coat pocket. The killing area would extend about twenty metres. And Tom was smack in the middle of it.

Swiftly but carefully, he pulled the aluminium tube from the explosive and separated it from the two-flex, then twisted the two steel wires together to prevent an accidental detonation. Radio transmissions could arc across the two wires and complete the circuit. He pushed the tube down into the soft soil of the rose bed. He rolled the blonde on to her front, turning her head to keep her airway open.

Still crouching beside the pergola, he spoke into his lapel. 'That's the female contained.'

Gavin's response was instantaneous. 'And the baby?'

'No baby. Just a belly-rig full of PE. Looks like the gas is back on.'

As Gavin called it to the others – 'All stations, this is Alpha, the gas is back on. Out' – Tom took a respirator from his satchel, fitted it to his face, then pulled out a fat-barrelled ARWEN 37 launcher. 'Alpha. Come on.' His words echoed across the net. 'We're compromised. We've got to go. We've got to go *now*.'

From a distance, the ARWEN's bulbous 37mm barrel and revolving five-round cylinder had the look of a kid's Super Soaker – but delivered a whole lot more than a water jet. Its kinetic energy baton rounds were powerful enough to drop a small horse. Its 'value' impact rounds could not only drop the horse but envelop it in its own gas cloud. And its pure gas rounds – CN (chloroacetophenone) was the irritant of choice –

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could fuck up anyone's day. Finally, if required, the weapon could fire pure smoke to cover the movement of assault teams.

Tom had pre-loaded five Barricade Penetrating Irritant Rounds intended for use against car windscreens, interior doors and plywood up to 13mm thick.

A disc of CN within the round ruptured as it penetrated the barricade, whereupon its combination of rapid deceleration and rotational spin dispersed a cloud of fine powder inside the target area. The spec described it as 'non-lethal' or – as Tom preferred – 'compliance'. There was no CN 'gas' being used on this job, but everyone found it easier to call it that.

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5

'Alpha. Wait out. Wait out. I do not have control. All stations wait out.' Gavin gave Woolf a quizzical look. He wanted to crack on as much as the rest of the team. 'Well?'

The MI5 man, still with his mobile phone glued to his ear, avoided his gaze. 'I've no decision from COBRA yet.'

Gavin gave a weary shake of his head and, not for the first time that day, exchanged a 'What the fuck?' look with Major Ashton. He shot a quick glance at the rolling news bulletin, hoping that the stock-market update wasn't about to give way to hysteria in Hampstead. Ever since the Iranian Embassy siege fiasco, when the world had watched the SAS assault teams storm the building on live TV, the media had been kept well out of the way of Regiment operations. Had any of the terrorists been watching the TV coverage during the build-up to the assault, the hostages might all have been killed before the troopers could reach them. And these days, when every Tom, Dick and Harry had a camera phone, it was only a matter of time

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before an operation got prematurely exposed or totally fucked up.

Ashton saw Woolf's free hand tug more vigorously at a strand of his thinning hair as he barked into his secure mobile. Old habits died hard under pressure. 'The situation is now *critical*. I need COBRA's authorization at once. Not in five minutes, but *now*.'

The Civil Contingencies Committee – incorrectly but universally known as 'COBRA' after the acronym for Cabinet Office Briefing Room 'A' in which it had once met – was tasked to deal with every emergency from fuel-transporter strikes to terrorist attacks. An excellent set-up in theory, as it brought together the supreme commanders and most highly qualified specialists to manage any crisis situation, but in practice, as he and Woolf already knew, and Gavin was discovering, the sheer weight of expertise often stood in the way of a speedy and coherent response.

Woolf was fuming, and with good reason. Ashton could picture the chaotic scenes that would be playing themselves out in the corridors beneath Whitehall.

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The screens covering the end wall of the conference chamber carried the same CCTV and satellite feeds as the command centre in Hampstead. The room was windowless; the 'skylight' in its ceiling merely concealed a bank of SAD illumination units.

A huge rectangular table filled most of the available floor space, the leather seats surrounding it occupied by ministers and civil servants from the Home and Foreign Offices and the MoD, together with the DSF (director of UKSF, United Kingdom Special Forces), and an assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, who was in constant telephone contact with Woolf.

Many of them had just walked to the fortified cellar beneath Whitehall. Sited between the Houses of Parliament and Trafalgar Square, COBRA was linked by corridor to Downing Street, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Cabinet Office.

The murmur of conversation was barely audible above the hum of the air-conditioning as they waited for the home secretary, chairing the meeting as usual, to finish consulting with the senior civil servant at

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her elbow and call them back to order. Her grey hair testified to her long experience, but her porcelain features and impeccable diction still led some people to make the mistake of underrating her. They were the same people who also mistook her kindness for weakness. It was a serious error. She was as tough as an old squaddie's boot, with the language to match, and could be as ruthless with her subordinates as she was with her political adversaries. She was used to junior ministers jockeying for position and squabbling over their places at the table.

'Shall we stop pissing about, then?' she said at last, and, though her voice was low, it cut through every other conversation and focused attention on her. 'Control will be handed over to the SAS for a hard arrest of Laszlo Antonov.'

There was a series of nods and murmurs of assent. But Edward Clements, a career FCO man in his mid-fifties, wearing the civil servant's uniform of pinstriped suit, crisp white shirt and tie – no hot colours or strong patterns, of course – raised his hand. 'Let's just take a deep breath here, shall we, Minister?' His voice was as smooth and mellow as the malt whisky he liked to drink in his London club. 'That suicide vest won't be the only weapon Antonov has procured.'

The home secretary gave him one of her steeliest glares. 'Do I take it, then, that the Foreign Office has specific intelligence on that front?'

Clements gave a brisk nod. 'Yes, Home Secretary.'

'So we should proceed with extreme caution.'

He shook his head. 'I couldn't disagree more. There's all the more reason to authorize immediate military action rather than a non-lethal arrest.'

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'If you want to achieve a bloodbath, perhaps,' she said acidly. 'The military and the police always tell us, "We can do it" – but why wouldn't they? It's money on their budgets, and a poke in the eye for their rivals in the Security Service and the SIS. But we can – and should – be rather more objective and measured in our response.

'It's very easy to be an armchair warrior, but which of you . . .' she glanced around the room, making sure she still had everyone's full attention '. . . is prepared to take responsibility for that decision? Which of you would be willing to shoulder the blame if it all goes pear-shaped?' She gave the DSF a look that left him in no doubt that she spoke his language. There would be no bullshit getting past *her*.

She glanced around the table once more. Most of the assembled officials and all of the politicians avoided her eye. 'Precisely,' she said. 'Nobody. I'll be the one in the firing line.'

Clements leaned forward. 'Be that as it may, Home Secretary . . .' He cleared his throat and waited until everyone was listening. 'Make no mistake. If he's cornered, Antonov has the commitment – and the full intention – to use his weapons.'

'Which is precisely why there's a Red Notice on this animal.' The home secretary gave him another glare. She had no time for civil-service theatrics.

Laszlo Antonov had been officially charged with war crimes at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, and a Red Notice had been issued by Interpol. Interpol did not have the authority to issue arrest warrants in the formal sense – that was the domain of the sovereign member states – but a Red Notice was

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the closest thing there was to an international arrest warrant.

Antonov was a South Ossetian, and had known war all his life. North Ossetia was part of Russia, but South Ossetia had always been the subject of dispute between Georgia and Russia. Most South Ossetians carried Russian passports and wanted to break away from Tbilisi. They had declared it a republic in 1990 and the Georgian government had sent in tanks. A series of conflicts followed.

Laszlo, by then a well-seasoned fighter and nationalist, had turned to the Russians for support. The Georgians were preparing to slaughter his people again, and he needed to defend himself. Happy to have a vicious and well-trained proxy, the Russians gave him the funding and the weaponry to raise a clandestine paramilitary unit from men he had fought with for years. Officially it was called the 22nd Black Bear Brigade, but the locals referred to them simply as the Black Bears. Laszlo was the unquestioned leader and his brother, Sambor, was second-in-command.

The Black Bears fought like a Special Forces unit: they lived covertly in the field for weeks, attacking Georgians in small numbers before fading into the night; destroying their line of supply and communication and killing as many high-ranking officers as they could until their army was incapable of making tactical decisions on the ground. Laszlo conducted his war with speed, aggression and surprise, in a way that even the SAS would have admired.

When Georgia launched an offensive in 2008 to retake the breakaway republic, about fourteen hundred locals had been slaughtered. In retaliation, Laszlo had led a

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massacre of more than six hundred innocent ethnic Georgian men, women and children in one night of carnage. He had then provided the Russians with vital information that helped Moscow make the decision to send troops and tanks over the border to 'protect Russia's citizens'.

The home secretary had been informed the moment the Security Service had discovered Laszlo was in the UK, and James Woolf, section chief, Branch G, had become the senior case officer.

'And this government will honour all its commitments and agreements with the ICC.'

Clements rolled his eyes. He never quite understood how the government decided on their cabinet appointments. This latest home secretary had come from the Department for Work and Pensions, where she'd been responsible for work rights and benefits for the disabled, not protecting a country. 'Spare us the synthetic moral outrage, Sarah.'

He ignored the horrified looks from those around the table. Even in these informal times, few civil servants, no matter how senior, would have been quite so forthright when speaking to one of their political masters. 'If we went round arresting every tyrant and warlord with blood on his hands, we'd have to build another fifty jails to house them all, and we'd lose so much export business that our economy would collapse even more quickly than it already is. The death of a few hundred civilians in South Ossetia now and then didn't even rouse the indignation of the *Guardian*'s bleeding-hearts brigade, let alone the rest of the press. I'll tell you how interested any of us was: the only imagery we have of him dates back to 2001.'

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He paused long enough for that fact to sink in.

'Can you imagine the media storm that would break if even one British citizen out for a gentle stroll on Hampstead Heath is shot by a foreign gunman because the government insisted on a kid-gloves arrest rather than sending in the SAS to do what they do best? Do I really have to remind you about the Libyan Embassy and the shooting of WPC Yvonne Fletcher?'

'That's scarcely relevant in this case,' she said. 'Legally we have no choice but to arrest him or risk worldwide embarrassment. This isn't the backwoods of Afghanistan, Clements. This is the UK, and our security forces have to operate here in the full glare of media attention, and within the law.'

'You're right, of course, Home Secretary.' Clements's voice now dripped sarcasm. 'A firefight on Hampstead Heath would be so much easier to defend to the media if it resulted in the death of a ruthless and notorious terrorist during an operation to arrest him.' He glanced at the DSF. 'If that regrettable event were to occur, I am correct in assuming, am I not, that it would be revealed that Antonov was known to be armed and extremely dangerous?'

The UKSF commander's face immediately betrayed his dislike of Clements. 'You would be correct in assuming that my men would meet force with force, Mr Clements. But if you're implying—'

Clements held up his hand. 'I'm implying nothing,' he said. 'I'm merely trying to ensure that your men are free to take all necessary measures to halt this appalling terrorist and not be placed in jeopardy by needless restrictions on their freedom of action.'

COBRA meetings weren't minuted. The politicians

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