

Everything to Nothing

Part 2

A novel by Mark Henthorne.

Sequel coming soon!

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Chapter 70

After the Chantelle incident I made the wise choice to not go into Harrogate again for a while. The last thing I needed was to meet her again or even worse to meet Big Kirk. That night I actually got back to the barracks before my friends so they did not see that I had changed my shirt.

In the morning I told them that we had gone back to her place, had sex and then I returned back to the barracks. I made the decision to not mention anything about Big Kirk and indeed Chantelle's friends had not hung around after I had left so it seemed to make sense to me to forget about the whole thing and put it all down to an experience not to be repeated!

The rest of the week was spent on the barracks and it was quickly realised that we were all bored. We were eager to get home and see our families however we had not yet been given our leave dates. Indeed, there was talk around the barracks that we may only get a few more days leave then be sent straight back out to Iraq.

With my S.A.S. recruitment test in a few days I made it my goal to get as fit as possible and rest as much as possible so when I was not going for long runs I was resting in my room, listening to music or playing computer games with my friends.

The Sergeant asked us to help out with training on a few days, mainly to explain to the new recruits what the front line.

The week dragged after the excitement of the front line and slowly but surely Monday morning came around. I of course had followed the Sergeant's instructions and not told anybody where I was really going on that Monday, I merely reinforced my previous lie that I was being considered for officer training and that I had to leave the barracks early on Monday morning to go to some training event.

I woke up at five that Monday morning and had a long shower not knowing when the next time I would be able to enjoy a proper shower would be. Not knowing what to expect, the previous evening I had thrown some essentials into my bag which I picked up as I left the room and walked over to the cafeteria for an early breakfast. I did not eat much though, I was so nervous.

It would be a lot easier if I knew what to expect however I literally had no idea. Of course I could Google the S.A.S. yet all that brought up was information about the full training. I was due to complete the 'baby training' so I had no idea what this would entail. I managed to finish my cereal and a banana then I walked through the barracks and arrived at the entrance at five fifty-five.

There was already a car parked there, a basic Ford Mondeo, with a man sat on the bonnet wearing civilian clothes, jeans, a polo shirt and sunglasses even though the sun was barely up. As I approached I stopped and saluted and told him my name, all of which were greeted with stony silence and no flicker of emotion on his face. He simply got into the driver's seat without saying a word so I got into the passenger seat and we set off straight away.

We drove for a few miles and when I asked him how far we were going I was met with more silence. I tried again by asking where we were going and again

nothing was said in return. I gave up and instead looked out of the window at the passing Yorkshire scenery.

For about ten miles we drove east, towards the rising sun, until we reached the A1 which we turned onto and proceeded in a southerly direction. We drove down the A1 for around two hundred miles (I kept an eye on the odometer) without a break and without being asked whether I wanted a break until we reached the Luton area. We turned off the A1 at junction eleven and then headed in a westerly direction towards the now setting sun and Dunstable.

A short distance past the hospital we turned right at a roundabout onto Poynters Road and then left a short distance later onto Porz Avenue where we made our way through a large industrial estate. At the first roundabout we turned left onto Lovett Way and then a quick left onto Humphrys Road.

Straight away after turning onto Humphrys Road we turned into a car park in front of a large warehouse which had a large 'TO LET' sign on its front wall. Built into this wall was a garage door and my driver opened the door by pressing a button on a fob which was on his key ring. Slowly the garage door opened and we drove into the warehouse.

The warehouse was murky. There were no lights on and the only illumination came from dirty windows high in the walls. In the middle of the warehouse there was a van parked with its rear doors open and outside the van were two men and one woman. We drove slowly over to them and only when my driver started to get out of the car did I follow suit.

As soon as I stepped out one of the men walked over to me and took hold of my arm and dragged me to the back of the van where I was confronted by the other man and the female who was actually quite pretty.

The car I had arrived in had in the meantime reversed back out of the warehouse and when he was clear the door started to drop back into place.

The man who had dragged me from the car was younger than the other man, maybe early thirties, yet it was the older man who seemed to be the most intimidating. He was old, then again at the age of eighteen everybody seemed old, maybe late forties, early fifties, and he had a chiselled look about him.

He was slim, stood ramrod straight and he was dressed all in black, black jeans, t-shirt and leather gloves even though it was not cold. When I was stood in front of him I saluted to all three of them.

'Put your hand down you idiot. Do you think we want people to know we are soldiers?! If we wanted people to know we are soldiers we would be dressed as soldiers, correct?' I swallowed and nodded. 'Put this on your head.' He offered me a black bag.

'I'm reluctant to do that, sir.'

'You what?!'

'I'm reluctant to that, sir.'

He laughed and shook his head. 'I'll only tell you one more time. Put the bag on your head.'

'With all due respect, sir, I don't know who you are. My driver did not say a word to me. There is no way I am putting that on my head and getting into that van without some confirmation of who you are.'

The pretty female officer placed a light hand on my arm and said, 'Trust is a large part of our regiment, Jacob.'

Now the man took over again. 'Look, you were picked up at six as per prior instructions from your Sergeant, correct? We know your name, correct? So what is there to doubt? I won't ask you again. Put the bag on your head and get in the fucking van or you can walk straight back to Harrogate. Your choice, boy.'

'It's for our safety as well as your safety, Jacob.'

I swallowed hard, took a deep breath and put the bag on my head. The bag hung loosely onto my shoulders and one of them put what I thought was a cable tie around my neck and pulled it tight so the bag was now sealed tightly closed around my neck. I was now completely in the dark.

I felt a gentle hand on my arm and they pulled me up into the van and then guided me to a seat on a metallic bench which seemed to run the length of the van. The rest of them got into the van and we quickly drove out of the warehouse.

'Who is here with me?'

'Just me. The other two are up front.'

The female. 'Who are you?'

'I'm Susie.'

'Where are we going, Susie?'

'I'm sorry, I can't answer that question.'

'How long will it take to get there?'

'I'm sorry, I can't answer that question.'

I knew from my reading that during S.A.S. selection a recruit is only allowed to give certain information regardless of the questions. The information was name, number and date of birth.

So I tried one of those. 'What's your date of birth?'

She laughed and patted my arm. 'You're not interrogating me, Jacob. I'm Susie, I'm a Leo and that's all you need to know right now. How do you feel under the hood?'

'Tense.'

'You'll be fine. We're going to a location that is not so much secret as we don't want too many people to know where it is.'

'What's the difference?'

She laughed again. 'Not much I suppose. You're young to be here with us. You come well recommended though by one of our ex-members of the regiment.'

This was news to me. 'The Sergeant was a member?!'

'Oh, did you not know? Yes, he was for years. A well-respected member, too. He operated in all the nasty places in the world as one of our leaders, too.'

'Never once did he mention that to me.'

'He must have wanted to keep it to himself.'

'Clearly.'

She patted my arm again and said, 'Relax, Jacob, nothing bad is going to happen.'

So I tried to take her advice and relax which was hard to do with a black hood over my head and when I had no idea where I was going or who I was with.

Thankfully though we did not drive for much longer than an hour. When we stopped the rear doors of the van were opened and Susie led me out of the van.

By now it was dark and we seemed to have stopped in the driveway of a large old Tudor farmhouse with a thatched roof and white walls with black beams running through the walls. It looked like something straight off the front of a chocolate box.

‘Very pretty.’ I said once the hood had been removed from my head by the younger man.

‘Shut up,’ said the older man. ‘Here’s a bottle of water. Go out the gate, turn left, start running. You’ve got ten minutes until we start chasing you. We will have night vision goggles and a few other bits and pieces to help us. You’ve got a bottle of water.’ I glanced down at the night vision goggles in the man’s hand and the irony was not lost on me that they were made by one of my grandfather’s many companies. ‘Go.’

‘Yes sir.’

As instructed I ran out of the gate, turned left and started to sprint along the road until I turned a corner. Once I was out of sight of the farmhouse I leapt over a gate into a field and double backed the way I had come, around the back of the farmhouse then back onto the road past the farmhouse so in theory I had just turned right out of the farmhouse gate instead of the instructed left. That should have given me more time to evade them however it turned out to be not as easy as that.

When I was not much further away from the farmhouse I heard a dog start to bark and I realised the barking was indeed coming from the farmhouse. The bastards did not tell me they had a dog!

Then I thought that they do not have anything with my scent on it and then my next thought stopped me in my tracks.

The hood, the black hood.

Very clever!

I started to run.

*

Once he was gone the younger man, Campbell, went to the old stables of the farmhouse and got Benjie our German Shepherd. He was very excited to see us having been cooped up all day and he got even more excited once we offered him the hood to sniff.

After a few moments of sniffing he started to pull eagerly on his lead and once Dylan was ready we all ran out of the farm gate. Once we had cleared the gate Campbell released Benjie’s lead who immediately turned right out of the gatehouse and started to run down the road.

‘Campbell, has that dog of yours taken a knock to the head?! He’s going the wrong way! Unless...’

‘Looks like he doubled back Dylan!’

‘Very clever for a young pup! Let’s get him!’

We all started to jog down the road following Benjie who was enthusiastically running ahead of us with his nose pressed to the ground, stopping occasionally to look round at us to make sure we were following.

As a female I was of course not a fully-fledged member of the S.A.S. I had served on the front line in combat roles but not for the S.A.S. I was more responsible for the human resources side of things.

Ever since the deaths in training on the Brecon Beacons not so long ago, it was deemed to be more responsible if the regiment had a friendly face for people to turn to, that friendly face being me.

Despite not being a full member of the S.A.S., I could certainly hold my own with Dylan and Campbell when it came to running and hunting through the night.

Not much further along the road there was a bridge over the stream and a narrow muddy path down to the stream bank. Benjie was down the path in a flash to the stream bank and it was there that he got confused.

‘I thought this dog of yours could track through water, Campbell?!’

‘It can, sir. Give him a minute.’

It was clear that Jacob kind of knew what he was doing to evade people. Heading into water is a good way to hide your tracks and also to throw a dog off your scent although for some dogs water will not stop them. Benjie was supposed to be one of those dogs. Right now though he was still confused and Dylan was getting pissed off.

‘Campbell! Your frickin’ mutt is pissing me off!’

I rolled my eyes and placed my night vision goggles on my head and switched them on. Using the infra-red setting, there, not much further along the stream, was a cold patch on some rocks where it looked like water had been splashed. I ran down the stream to the rocks and I could clearly see a footprint heading away from the bridge downstream.

‘This way!’ I shouted.

Once Benjie got to where Jacob had exited the stream his tail went back up and he shot off along the bank of the stream seemingly hot on Jacob’s trail.

‘Error number one, he should have stayed in the water longer,’ stated Dylan.

I nodded my agreement and we all carried on with the chase.

*

I cursed myself as from farther along the stream I heard Susie shout ‘This way!’ I really should have stayed in the water longer and my trick of doubling back clearly had not worked and instead had eaten into my ten-minute lead which had already been eroded. At the start though I did not know they had the dog. I had to get rid of that dog yet I could not afford to slow myself down by wading through the stream.

It was then that I saw the field of cows. I had no idea whether this would work but I had to try something! I leapt over a fence and ran towards the nearest cow which was sitting down, chewing the cud.

If a cow could look surprised this cow looked surprised. It leapt onto its feet and started to run away from me. When it was gone I dove onto the grass where it had been lying down and rolled around trying to merge my scent with its scent.

I ran further into the field and managed to get close enough to a cow to throw my arms around its neck and rub myself against it much to its surprise. If anybody had encountered me then I may have been arrested for bestiality I was pressing myself against it so firmly.

I then grabbed another nearby cow and rubbed myself against it and this one was so surprised it started to urinate.

It was then I lowered myself to as low as I had ever been before. I reached under the cow and cupped my hands in its stream and poured its urine over me, coughing and spluttering as it went into my eyes and even a drop or two dribbled into my mouth.

Then, when I thought I could not stoop any lower, I surprised myself by diving into some cow dung and covered myself in cow shit!

Once I was done I ran across the rest of field and dove over a hedge then ran deeper into that field and dropped to my belly.

I made the decision that if my actions with the cows did not shake them off then there was no point carrying on. I could not outrun or lose that dog so I should save my energy for whatever else they had in store for me.

I waited.

*

‘This way! Through the cows!’

Dylan and I leapt over the fence and Campbell lifted Benjie over to me and I placed Benjie back on the floor. With his usual enthusiasm the dog ran into the field, scaring away the cows, to an area of flattened grass where it looked like a cow had been recently resting. He sniffed around this area for a short time then went forward, backwards to the flattened area, forwards a few feet then he lay down and gave a solitary bark.

‘Your dog, Campbell, appears to have stopped!’

‘Erm, he must have lost the scent, sir.’

‘Lost the scent?! In a field full of cows?!’

‘Well it’s the cows that are the problem, sir. Too many scents are all confusing Benjie.’

‘I’ll give you confused, Campbell!’

‘Sorry, sir. Not much I can do.’

I had gone a little further into the field and noticed something odd. ‘There are cow pats here which have been flattened and squashed. It almost looks like something has been rolling in them... Oh! Gross!’

‘Well all I can say is that he must *really* want to join us!’

We all laughed. ‘What now, Dylan?’

‘Tie Benjie up. We’ll come back for him later. Looks like we’re doing this the old-fashioned way. We saw the tread of his boots when he stepped out of the stream so we know what we are looking for. Fan out, find his trail.’

We did exactly that, starting of course with the side of the field furthest away from the stream. It did not take us long to find his footprints ending next to a hedge which he had clearly pushed through or jumped over. I looked over the hedge and

switched on my night vision goggles. ‘There! In the field! About two hundred yards away! He’s up and running!’

‘After him!’

Jacob’s scent had now changed to cow dung so there would be no way Benjie could track him so we all jumped the hedge leaving Benjie tied up in the cow’s field.

I knew Dylan used to be super fit. Most of the long-distance running records in the regiments were held by him. Now he was near the end of his fourth decade he had noticeably slowed down however Campbell was the real deal and was well on his way to breaking most of Dylan’s records. Now it was just a foot race and I felt certain we would win quickly.

We all maintained the same pace for about a mile or so, jumping over gates or over hedges, but it did not take long for Campbell to pull away from us both. Dylan soon started to drop behind even me much to his disgust and after another few miles of blistering pace he stopped leaving Campbell and me to keep up the chase although Campbell was ahead in the distance from me.

At the start of a large open field I stopped and lifted my goggles to my eyes. Campbell was now far ahead but I could clearly make him out, however Gallagher was merely a speck in the distance. He seemed in fact to be pulling away from Campbell! How was that possible?! Campbell had to be one of the fittest men in the regiment and here he was getting burned by an eighteen-year-old whippersnapper. I could not believe what I was seeing!

A few moments later Dylan joined me in the field. ‘Has he caught him?’

‘No sir. In fact, Gallagher seems to be pulling away from him!’

‘What?! Rubbish! He’s a baby!’

‘A baby who can clearly run, sir.’

‘We had better come up with a plan pretty sharpish otherwise this evade and interrogation exercise is going to fail!’

*

I glanced over my shoulder when I reached halfway across a large open field and I was surprised to see that I was pulling away from Campbell and to be perfectly honest I had not hit top gear yet. I was saving that gear for if Campbell got within one hundred yards of me. It turned out though that my own speed would be my undoing.

At the end of the large open field was another hedge which I intended to leap over as I had all the other ones on the presumption that same as all the other fields the next field would carry on at the same level. Unfortunately this was not to be the case.

I leapt the hedge and braced myself for the short drop to the field on the other side of the hedge but the drop turned out to be a long drop, a very long drop.

On the other side of the hedge the field dropped away steeply for around thirty feet. After jumping the hedge I landed on the incline about ten feet down it, lost my footing and tumbled all the way down to the bottom.

Thankfully I did not break anything. What the fall did do though was completely knock the wind out of me. I lay on my back staring up at the stars, trying to suck oxygen into my lungs. I lay there for a few moments and managed to get to my knees. I started to crawl and then from behind me I heard a shout and I looked around to see Campbell come sliding down the hill on his bottom until he reached the end of the hill where he leapt to his feet and took the few steps to where I was desperately trying to get to my feet.

‘Down, Gallagher! Get down on the ground with your hands behind your head! Do it!’

I cursed my misfortune and had no option but to follow his orders and put my hands behind my head. When I had done this he knelt, pressing his knee into my left kidney and tied my hands together with a cable tie. Then he placed a black hood over my head and called up the hill to Dylan and Susie who had just arrived.

‘Well done, Campbell! Get him to the road and I’ll go for the car.’

‘Yes sir.’

Campbell hauled me to my feet and dragged me through the field to a nearby road. I cursed my misfortune. I had made this too easy for them.

*

‘Fuck me, Gallagher. You stink. Did you really need to cover yourself in cow excrement?!’

‘I’m sorry, I can’t answer that question.’

We had arrived back at the farmhouse a few minutes ago and on arrival Campbell and Dylan had dragged me to a room in one of the barns where I was told to kneel with my hands behind my head.

‘Stand up Gallagher. Take off your clothes.’ I reluctantly obeyed. ‘Kneel back down. Campbell, get the hose.’

I was still wearing the hood so I heard some noise behind me and then something seemingly was dragged along the floor then the squeaking of a tap being turned on.

‘Don’t move a millimetre, Gallagher.’

From behind me I was hit by a strong gush of ice-cold water which took my breath away and nearly knocked me off my knees. I managed to control my balance though and toughed it out until my back was clean.

When they moved round to the front of me I coughed and spluttered when they held the flow of water against my face and when the flow did not stop I found it hard to breathe. I think it was Dylan who laughed and told Campbell to stop as he was ‘waterboarding me’ and thankfully Campbell turned the hose to the lower half of my body.

When they were done Dylan told me to stand again and he passed me what I found out later to be an orange boiler suit, similar to what a prisoner might wear. Once I had put it on he told me to get back down on my knees.

‘Stay here Gallagher, don’t move a millimetre.’

I heard them both walk out of the barn leaving me kneeling on the cobbled floor with my hands behind my back still wearing the hood. It was already a cold

night and there I was, kneeling on the cold floor completely soaked with freezing water.

Before anything else happened, they left me there for around fifteen minutes I estimated but to be truthful I had no idea whether it was fifteen minutes or fifteen seconds. Then after the supposed fifteen minutes, long after I had started to involuntarily shiver due to the cold, directly in front of me a large spotlight was turned on. It must have been turned on remotely as I did not hear anybody come into the barn.

Despite the hood the light was blinding and even when I closed my eyes I could still sense the light. The light was only for a few moments before it turned off, then it switched back on, then off, then on again. Soon it was switching on and off so quickly it was a like strobe was going off in front of my eyes, then another light switched on in front of me, this time a red light, then a blue light and they all started to strobe.

This went on for who knows how long. I was feeling very disorientated due to being in such an uncomfortable position, cold, hungry, thirsty and the lights were making me dizzy. Then from somewhere I heard a buzzing noise start which was quiet at first then it got louder and louder and louder until it seemed like my eardrums would split. As quickly as it started though it stopped.

There were a few moments of peace, the lights stopped and no sound, and then the lights started again along with a sound although this time the sound was screaming, the most inhumane godforsaken screaming I had ever heard. It went on and on and on, screaming and screaming and screaming with the lights flashing on and off so brightly they seemed to be burning my retinas.

Then it all stopped again until weirdly a bell started to toll and on the count of five I heard a mechanism release above me and torrent of ice-cold water cascaded onto me.

Coughing and spluttering I heard the mechanism reset and then the spotlight switched on again which was followed by the same sequence of lights and sounds. When the bell toll had reached five I braced myself for another drenching however this time the soaking came on seven tolls, the next time it would be two tolls, the time after that there would be twelve tolls and no soaking then the spotlight would turn on again.

I had no idea how long I knelt in that hell hole of a barn for. Minutes. Hours. Days. Weeks. Months. I had no idea.

On and on it went and yet somehow I remained on my knees with my hands firmly behind my head.

I had no idea how I did it, how I managed to stay there and be subjected to what I could only describe as psychological torture for such a long time. I was only eighteen; I had never been subjected to anything like this before. The only kind of psychological torture I had ever been subject to was listening to Adkins masturbate again and again from dusk to dawn.

Eventually the lights and sounds stopped along with the drenchings so I was left knelt on the floor of the barn, my head banging, my ears ringing, until Dylan and Campbell came into the barn. Both were carrying cups of coffee, I could smell

them, and one of them was eating what seemed to be fresh toast. I could smell that, too.

‘How did you sleep, Dylan?’

‘Oh like a log thank you, Campbell. And you?’

‘The same my friend. I love it out here in the countryside, it’s so peaceful. How’s your coffee?’

‘Real nice. And your toast?’

‘Delicious.’

I felt one of them next to me and then one of their mouths was pressed against my right ear. ‘And how did you sleep, Gallagher?!’ he shouted.

‘I’m... I’m...’

‘Spit it out you fucking weasel.’

‘I can’t answer that question, sir.’

‘We’ll fucking see about that. On your feet!’

My knees were aching. My back was aching. Everywhere was aching, however I managed to slowly stand up and I even managed to keep my hands behind my head.

From my right I heard a door open and Dylan instructed me to turn to my right and walk forwards. The bastard did not tell me I was not lined up with the door though so I walked headfirst into a wall. I did not curse and instead I shuffled left then right until I found the doorway which I carefully walked through. From behind me I heard the door close and then a new female voice in the room started to speak. I did not recognise this voice at all.

‘Take a seat.’

It was not a question so I presumed that I could ask a question instead. ‘Where’s the seat?’

‘Directly in front of you. About five steps away.’

I carefully took five steps and found the back of the chair. It was a cold, hard metal chair which was exactly what I needed to sit on after spending who knows how many hours knelt on a cold, hard cobbled floor. I sat down on it.

‘Take your hood off.’

I did as instructed and as I did all the lights in the room simultaneously switched on leading me to be momentarily blinded as the light reflected off the walls and floor of the room all of which had been painted an immaculate white. Slowly the lights thankfully dimmed and I was able to focus on the woman in front of me.

She was sat behind a desk with a file in front of her. It did not escape my notice that her chair was a large luxurious white leather executive chair and in front of her on the desk was a cup of something steaming and a plate of what looked like freshly cooked danishes and pastries. She looked to be in her thirties, with long brown curly hair, brown eyes which were behind her black framed glasses. I could not see if she was wearing a skirt or trousers but her white blouse was tight against her breasts and the top few buttons were undone.

You could certainly say she was attractive and no doubt that was the intention, to try and distract me with a good looking woman showing a bit of tit. Really,

what did they think I was, a horny eighteen-year-old young man?! Ha ha. God I needed some food and a glass of water.

‘So, Jacob Gallagher. Eighteen years old. Son of Sally Gallagher. Brother to Sophia Gallagher. Grandson to Jacob Gallagher, multi-billionaire, founder of the Gallatronics Empire which you and Sophia will be heir to. Would you like a croissant?’

‘I... I can’t answer that question, ma’am.’

‘Why are you here?’

‘I can’t answer that question.’

‘You don’t need to be here. You could live off your granddaddy’s trust fund for the rest of your life. So why are you here?’

I was really frustrated. I really wanted to answer that question, yet they *knew* I wanted to really answer that question. I bet the Sergeant had told them how frustrated I was that everybody judged me by my grandfather rather than judging me by *me*. I took a deep breath and said, ‘I can’t answer that question.’

I had no idea where they came from. In a flash there were two masked men next to me.

‘You won’t answer her fucking questions?!’ one of them screamed at me.

‘You’ll fucking answer her questions or you’ll get another two hours in the barn!’ the other shouted at me.

And just like that they were gone.

‘Sorry about that. Now, where were me. Oh yes, your family. Shame what happened to your mother, the acid attack. I hear she was an attractive woman before the attack. Wasn’t it your father who threw the acid in her face? What a monster. Are you a monster, Jacob?’

I clutched the arms of the chair, my hands going white as I gripped harder and harder. From somewhere I managed to control myself and mutter, ‘I can’t answer that question.’

The men reappeared. This time I used my peripheral vision and I saw that two doors on each side of the room silently slid open and they ran across the room to me, shouting obscenities into my ears. This shouting part of the interrogation was already getting quite tedious. Once the men were done she moved on.

‘Now Sophia. Eighteen years old. Stunningly beautiful and already quite the girl about town in Mayfair and Knightsbridge. Apparently a party is not a party if Sophia Gallagher is not invited. Hmmm, let me just check the file. Hmmm, only eighteen and already she has been photographed in some quite compromising situations.

Then behind her, projected on the wall, pictures of Sophia appeared. One showing her stumbling out of a club, a young man on each arm, the next picture she was sat in the back of a car, wearing a very short skirt and clearly she had had way too much to drink.

Her head was thrown back and her mouth was wide open and so were her legs. She was barely conscious and whoever had taken the picture had made sure they had focussed on her crotch which was naked and completely shaved.

The last picture left me feeling completely numb. Although clearly taken from a distance it clearly showed Sophia in bed with four men. One of the men was

behind her, clearly having sex with her. As well as the penis in her vagina she had a penis in each hand and another in her mouth.

My interrogator turned in her chair to look at the picture and she shook her head a few times as she turned back to me.

‘Hmmm, well, it seems like she is quite a passionate creature. Apparently the video also makes quite interesting viewing. How do all these pictures make you feel, Jacob?’

I was completely shell shocked. I had no idea that Sophia had been behaving in this manner. I presumed my grandad and my mum knew so why did they let these pictures get to press?! Why did my grandad not use his power and stop them being published?!

She repeated the question. ‘How do all these pictures make you feel, Jacob?’

‘I can’t answer that question.’ I was expecting the men to appear but this time they did not.

‘You must feel something?’

‘I can’t answer that question.’

‘Shall we watch the video then? Maybe that will make you feel more emotional and then we can talk some more.’

On the screen behind her again the video started to play from the moment the photo had been taken. The man behind Sophia was pounding my sister, I could actually see his hips slapping into her buttocks, and when she did not have the other man’s penis in her mouth, she was flinging her head around in throes of ecstasy and she would occasionally release a penis from one of her hands and hold onto the headboard, pushing her body back hard onto the man’s penis.

As I looked at her face again I blinked, rubbed my eyes, and looked harder. There was something not right with the video. Something not right at all. It almost seemed like her face and actions were on repeat.

Every few seconds her face would make the same expression and she would fling her head around in a certain way. The men around her all did different things, however that face kept on repeating. I was so exhausted I rubbed my eyes again and looked even harder then it all clicked into place.

That was not Sophia. I’ve heard of people being photoshopped but this was the first time I had ever seen somebody being videoshopped. The video stopped and I stared hard at my interviewer.

‘So now you’ve seen your sister, your sibling, your twin, having such vigorous sexual activity, and yes this has been published all over the internet. You must have missed it when you were away overseas. Now you’ve watched your sister having sex, having an orgy no less with four men, how does it make you feel?’

It made me feel like jumping onto the desk and kicking her in the face, that’s how it made me feel. They were trying to get me to react and after the cheap trick of using my sister against me I was going to make sure they failed. ‘I can’t answer that question.’

‘One more look at the pictures then.’

Again the pictures appeared and this time I concentrated on the picture of her in the car, peering up between my apparent sister’s legs.

Many years ago, Sophia and I had been playing in the woods in the mansion's grounds and Sophia decided to climb a tree which ended in a nasty fall and a badly cut leg. The cut needed stitches and to this day there was a scar on the inside of Sophia's left leg. Although it had faded over the years it was still quite visible. This trollop in the back of this car was missing that scar. And indeed, as I looked harder at her face, although this woman was one hell of a likeness for Sophia it was not Sophia. I knew my twin's face as well as I knew my own and this slag was also missing the little scar on her face where a little drop of the acid my father had used on my mother splashed onto Sophia's face. I was disappointed that at first I had fallen for their ruse however I could safely put that down to exhaustion.

Now though I had the upper hand. They had failed to rile me.

'Now come on, Jacob, there is your sister with her pussy on view to the whole world. That must make you mad? Does it not infuriate you?'

'I can't answer that question.'

Now the men returned. They screamed and shouted at me and then one of them bent over the arm of the chair I was sat on and the other pretended to fuck him while he shouted, 'Oh Sophia! You're so tight! Your pussy is so tight!' The other one then begged him to, 'Fuck me even harder!' and then to be, 'Fucked in the arse.'

Once they were through with their charade the masked men laughed hysterically and leaned on each other for support as their mirth threatened to overwhelm them as they exited the room.

'Sorry about that. Anything to add before we move on?'

'I can't answer that question.'

She was now done with my family so she moved to my friends, Tony, Adkins and Jock were all talked about and I was asked numerous questions about all of them to which I gave them my standard response.

She then talked about my past in school for a while, how I was such a troublemaker at a young age then my amazing academic achievements. I was starting to get bored and even the shouting men had gone beyond irritating to just plain boring now.

After she had finished questioning me about my education she stood up from the desk and excused herself for five minutes. I did not know what to do so I just sat there, staring into space, trying to gather my thoughts and prepare myself for the next round of questions however nothing could have prepared me for the next question.

She returned to the room and asked me the question that rocked me to my core.

'Who is Katherine?'

'I... I...'

'Who is Katherine?'

'I...'

'You're mumbling. Who is Katherine Kaye Jones van Faber?'

'I...'

My head slumped forward so my chin was touching my chest. From somewhere I managed to find some steel, some resolve, and I managed to mutter, 'I can't answer that question.'

'Rubbish. You know who she is.'

I said to myself, I do, but how the hell do you know about us?!

‘Katherine Kaye Jones van Faber. She’s twenty-seven now, I believe she was twenty-five when you knew her. You do know her.’

Once again a photo appeared behind my interrogator and this one showed Katherine, my darling Katherine, in a wedding dress with her family around her.

‘She recently got married. Quite the social event of summer I’m led to believe. I’m sure you feel no sense of irony that your grandfather attended the wedding.’

Now another picture appeared of my grandad shaking hands with a man in full military uniform with the rank of Brigadier clearly visible on his shoulders with Katherine stood next to the Brigadier with her arm linked through the Brigadier’s arm. It was obviously Katherine’s father. I was fairly certain that these photographs had not been photoshopped.

‘Any thoughts? Comments? You look upset? More upset than when we showed you the pictures of your sister? Well this picture is probably going to upset even more.’

This time a picture appeared of Katherine next to a good-looking man who had his arm protectively around her and her baby bump.

‘Apparently she is about seven months gone and they’re thrilled with the pregnancy. Are you thrilled for her Jacob? You must be really pleased to see the girl you loved pregnant with another man’s baby? Our questions are at an end now so feel free to let me know how you feel.’

Despite my best efforts I could not help myself. I was so exhausted that the tears came and there was nothing I could do about it.

‘Awww, you’re crying. You must have really loved her. What happened, Jacob? What happened to you both?’

I let the tears run despite me desperately wanting to wipe them away. With a slight movement of my hand I raised my middle finger at her and said, ‘No fucking comment.’

Chapter 71

When the picture of a pregnant Katherine had disappeared from the wall, my interrogator stood up without another word, without acknowledging my raised middle finger, and left the room.

I sat there for a while, waiting for her to come back, and after the clock on the wall had ticked through half an hour I stood up and walked around the room, looking for cameras and microphones. I could not see any so I walked around to the other side of the desk and opened the drawers of the desk only to find that they were all empty. Instead of returning to my hard metal chair I slumped down into the comfortable leather executive chair and put my feet up on the desk.

I knew I had blown it. That last show of emotion had blown it for me. I would not have cried if I was not so exhausted but I could not help myself. I was so disappointed with myself.

All I had to do was not raise my middle finger, give the usual answer and other than crying I feel I would have handled the situation quite well. I had blown it.

After another fifteen minutes one of the doors opened and Susie was stood there. 'Follow me, Jacob.'

I did as instructed and followed her out of the barn, across the courtyard and into the farmhouse. She led me through to the living room where an open fire was burning and on the coffee table there was a cup of tea, some sandwiches and a small slice of cake.

Susie turned to look at me and said, 'It's over Jacob. This isn't a test. We're all finished. Take a seat, have something to eat and drink, Campbell will be with you soon.'

'Thank you, Susie.'

'No probs.'

'How did I do?'

'I'm sorry, I can't answer that question.'

'Ha ha.'

She laughed. 'Take a seat. Campbell will be here in a minute.'

'Okay.'

I sat down on an old rocking chair next to the fire and the table. I lifted the cup of tea and took a sip of it and then a nibble of one of the sandwiches which quickly turned into me quickly devouring it I was so hungry. As promised, Campbell arrived after a few minutes.

'Jake!' He walked over and shook my hand. 'How are you feeling?'

'Tired!'

'I bet. Food okay?'

'Yes, very nice.'

'On the run I can't believe you were pulling away from me. You're a fit and fast guy to be pulling away from me.'

'To be honest, sir, I hadn't even hit top gear yet.'

'Really?! Jeez, you're going to steal all my running records!' He took a mouthful from his cup of tea and asked, 'So you know the pictures of your sister are fake?'

‘What makes you think that I know?’

‘Nobody who looks at a picture of their supposed sister’s pussy stares at it like you stared. What the hell were you looking at?’

‘My sister has a scar on the inside of her left leg. A childhood injury. That trollop in the back of the car did not have that scar.’

‘Well spotted! We didn’t know about the scar. See, even the S.A.S. don’t know everything!’

‘And the video?’

‘Downloaded off some porn site by our tech guys.’

‘Videoshopped. A new one on me.’

Campbell laughed. ‘You’ve done really well Jake. You should be proud of yourself.’

‘Despite my show of emotion at the end?’

‘You’re eighteen, you were exhausted and hungry. I think you handled the situation as well as anybody could have expected. Apologies for letting you know about Katherine like that. We had to see how you would react.’

‘I didn’t expect to start crying I know that much.’

‘When we’re so tired sometimes our bodies and minds betray us. You’ll learn more when you join us.’

‘When or if?’

‘Sorry, if. Not my call. Dylan will decide if you can do the full recruitment process. You’re an extraordinary young man, Jacob. When I was eighteen I would have burst into tears after five minutes in the barn.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Here’s Dylan now. Good luck.’

‘Thank you.’

Dylan came into the lounge and sat down on the sofa opposite me. ‘How do you feel?’

‘Tired. I was very hungry, now after the food, slightly less so.’

‘It’s ten in the morning. You were picked up from your barracks twenty-eight hours ago. I presume you had breakfast before you left so that’s your first food in over a day.’

‘Christ. It feels like a lifetime ago, it feels like two seconds ago.’

‘The barn does that to you.’

‘Yeah, thanks for that. How did I do?’

‘Well. You did well. For your age.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Apart from your show of emotion at the end. Talk to me about that.’

‘I don’t know why I started to cry...’

‘I’m not bothered about you crying. That was involuntarily. What I’m concerned about was the raised middle finger and your final words.’

I paused for a moment to gather my exhausted thoughts. I knew that what I said next would decide whether I would be accepted to the full recruitment process. ‘I think it was a combination of being angry about the way you had tried to trick me about my sister and then the news about Katherine. Probably more anger about my sister.’

‘You must *not* do that during the full recruitment. One show of childish emotion like that and you will be kicked out. Name. Number. Rank. I can’t answer that question. That’s it. That’s the four things you say. I don’t think the physical side of things will be a problem for you. The way you were running away from Campbell, well, he’s well on his way to breaking every physical endurance record the Regiment has. It’s in here.’ He tapped his head. ‘It’s in here where your problems are. Are you mature enough? I don’t know. Do you know how long you were in the barn for?’

‘About ten hours.’

‘Hmmm, well done. Near enough spot on. How did you know that?’

‘I know what time we started the escape and evade. I know what time I was caught. I know what time it was when I entered the white room. Escape and evade lasted about an hour.’

‘Good. Well done. Shows me that despite the stress of the situation you were still paying attention. You’ll be expected to escape and evade for a much longer time, three days, however, your chasers won’t have dogs. Nice move with the cows by the way. Completely threw Benjie off the trail.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘The first time the bell tolled, how many times did it toll before the water dropped?’

‘Five, sir.’

‘Next and next.’

‘Seven and two.’

‘Next.’

‘Twelve, but no water.’

‘Good. What colour was your interrogator’s bra?’

‘Pink, sir.’

‘Her eyes?’

‘Brown.’

‘Her pen?’

‘Oh. Good question. Not too sure. Blue, I think.’

‘Correct. How many *different* men visited you?’

‘I think there were four.’

‘Five. Close enough. How would you feel about being in an equivalent of the barn for days, not hours?’

‘It would be hell on earth. I would cope with it though.’

He laughed. ‘I like your answer. Realism followed by confidence. Right, I’m going to recommend you for the full recruitment process. Do not raise your middle finger and do not say ‘No fucking comment!’’

I sighed a long sigh. ‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Go back to Harrogate. Get some rest. Recruitment starts in two weeks. You’ve actually got a little bit of advantage over the other potential recruits now you’ve done this. You know more of what to expect.’

‘Thank you for the opportunity, sir.’

‘My pleasure and it is well deserved.’

Dylan stood up and saluted to which I returned a salute of my own. As he was leaving the room I suddenly asked him one more question. 'Dylan? Sir?'

He stopped in the doorway and turned to look at me. 'Yes, Jake?'

I had a feeling he knew what I was about to ask. 'How did you... How did you know about...'

'Katherine?'

I nodded.

'Your Sergeant.'

'The Sergeant? But how did he...'

Dylan did not reply and just exited the room. I was exhausted and beyond confused. How did the Sergeant know about us? If he did know about us why did he not stop us? We were breaking every rule the barracks has.

I had no idea and I was too tired to think about it now. What I did know was that I was one step closer to the 22nd Special Air Service Regiment so I jumped out of the rocking chair, did a fist pump and a little jig of joy.

Chapter 72

The formal recruitment process for the S.A.S. made a mockery of the 'baby recruitment' I had undertaken with Dylan and Campbell. They were without doubt the most difficult and demanding months of my life. Even the service after the training was not as tough as those months I spent during recruitment.

The recruitment process is well documented on the internet so I will not dwell on it here however I will give an overview. The first phase, referred to as Endurance, Fitness and Navigation, although tough, was certainly the easiest part for me. It astonished me how many of my fellow recruits withdrew at this stage. Some of them did not even complete the first day. They were so unprepared and unfit that they soon fell by the wayside and in fact embarrassed themselves by even turning up.

The first thing I noticed during the Endurance stage was that there was nobody screaming and shouting at us which strongly contrasted our time during training at Harrogate. We were given our task and then expected to complete it without any further guidance.

Self-motivation is key and certainly the hours I had spent studying on my own helped me during this stage. I just got on with it and completed the tasks without too much bother.

There were only two other recruits who could match me during this stage: recruits Blake and Kingsley. Whenever we reached a checkpoint one of us was always first and the other two were always just slightly behind. There was not much talking during the recruitment process, most recruits just kept themselves to themselves, lost in their own pain, however Blake, Kingsley and I did create a little rapport simply because we were always neck and neck at the checkpoints.

Did it go as far as banter? No, not really. It was all a little bit too exhausting for banter, but there was certainly mutual respect present and the occasional 'well done' was passed between us at the checkpoints.

The final stage was a forty-mile trek, carrying a bergen which had a weight of fifty-five pounds. The so-called 'Long Drag' had to be completed in twenty hours or under which was only an average speed of two miles per hour however this was done in the Brecon Beacons and incorporated so many steep hills that every mile of it was agony. Still I did it in a respectable eighteen hours with Blake a little ahead of me and Kingsley not too far behind.

Needless to say all three of us were accepted onto the next stage which saw us head out to the jungles of Belize. Here we learned the basics of surviving and patrolling in very harsh conditions that are meant to mimic real life patrols. I would be lying if I did not say this was tough.

We spent weeks in that godforsaken jungle, living on rations or when rations ran out (and they did frequently) finding our own food and water. It was not just the physical aspect, it was the mental, too.

Far away from home, living in extreme conditions, having to constantly maintain ourselves and our kits. I saw a few recruits sent home due to not having a working gun, I saw more than a few sent home due to medical problems, insect bites that festered and turned into ulcers or fever and extreme diarrhoea.

This was them being more unlucky than failing however some of the recruits were sent home for simply not looking after themselves. Making sure they kept their boots dry, making sure they always had water with them. This all showed lack of discipline and behind enemy lines there will be no friendly soldier to tap you on the shoulder, whisper in your ear that your time was up and escort you to the nearest evac point with a caring arm around your shoulder.

It was tough in Belize but I survived and then we moved onto the part I was dreading the most, Escape and Evasion followed by Interrogation.

The Escape and Evasion I found quite easy. We were given old World War Two vintage greatcoats (no idea why!) and told to evade capture for three days. Simple enough. Blake, Kingsley and I simply started running in a straight line and did not stop. Across busy roads, through fields, streams, brooks and rivers, we just kept on going.

Halfway through the third day we decided to stop and get some rest. By now we had reached some moorland with lots of limestone outcrops so we found an almost cave like structure, flung our coats down on the floor and got some sleep, our rationale being that we had evaded capture for two and a half days so we were fine to be put through to the next round, the next round of course being Interrogation and we knew we would need our rest for that.

Those few hours' sleep in that cave probably saved me. I knew that the Interrogation would be the hardest part for me and I needed those few hours to unwind, relax, and prepare myself mentally.

It did feel like we were cheating a little though. There would be fellow recruits who had been captured straight away and would have been taken straight into interrogation however as Blake rationalised it, if they had evaded for longer then they could also get a few hours' sleep, it was not our problem that they were not as good as us. It was a fair point!

After a few hours' sleep we walked down off the moor and it did not take long for us to be seen and captured. We were stripped of our greatcoats, hoods were put on our heads, and we were thrown into the back of truck and shipped to where the interrogation would take place.

To say the interrogation was harder than before would be a massive understatement. Like Dylan said, we were not in stress positions having white noise and light bombarded at us for hours, it was *days*.

We were all held in the same room, all being held in the same stress positions for hours and hours, then a handful of us would be taken away into separate rooms where we would be bombarded for hours with question after question.

Sometimes it would be masked men shouting and screaming at us with our hoods on, other times it would be scantily clad females who had curves in all the right places, trying to seduce us with subtle questioning with our hoods off.

Through all this I somehow managed to only answer with name, rank, number or 'I'm sorry, I can't answer that question.' I suppose they had to make it fair for all recruits so this time I was not subject to questions about Katherine, thankfully.

Throughout all this time it was impossible to sleep and we were only given a light snack, an energy bar, at some point during the second day, and an occasional

sip of water. There is no other word that can be used to describe it other than torture.

Although in the holding room we all had our hoods on, I could just sense that every time I left the room and came back I was returning to a room that held less people. I had no idea whether Kingsley and Blake had survived. We were under strict orders not to talk in the holding room and nobody wanted to break that order and nobody did apart from a few recruits, one who broke down in tears after only a few hours and another who begged to be sent home. Other than that and the endless white noise, it was silent.

We never did find out how long the Interrogation section lasted. Blake insisted it was four days, I thought it was more like three and Kingsley had no idea, the whole process left him traumatised for days.

None of us wanted to ask our recruiters how long we had actually been in the room for so when we were told it was finished we left in silence and went to a mess room where there was food and drink waiting for us, medics, hot showers and bunks.

Despite my exhaustion I only slept for a few hours yet when I woke I still felt refreshed. My belongings had been put near my bed so I put on my running kit and went outside for a run leaving my fellow recruits to their sleep.

As I looked around the bunkroom I could not believe how few of us were left. When we started there were seventy-seven of us. Now there were eleven and I was the youngest by a few years, the next youngest being twenty-two. Sixty-six of us had fallen by the wayside and the weird thing was I had no idea when or where they left.

It was totally bewildering so I let out a long sigh, left the bunkroom and started on my run. Little did I know that going for that simple run would cement my reputation for me in the Regiment.

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That morning I ran for around ten miles in just over an hour which for me was a little strenuous but not too much. Unknown to me though I was being watched and unknown to me as I was certainly the first person in the Regiment's history who had finished the recruitment process, only slept for a few hours, then gone out for a ten-mile jog.

When I returned most of my fellow recruits were up, a few more of them were awake, and a few more were still lying in bed, groaning and moaning about how sore they were. Certainly nobody else had gone out for a run.

After I had showered and I was putting my clothes on, one of the soldiers came into the dormitory. We all stood to attention and it made me feel proud to see that he was wearing the beige beret of the S.A.S. He did not shout at us and call us all worms or other such diatribe, he simply quietly informed us to be on the parade ground in ten minutes. All except Gallagher who was to report to the Commander as soon as he was dressed.

There was no whooping, hollering or ribaldry from my fellow recruits like there would have been in a 'normal' dormitory if somebody was summoned to the

commanding officer. Instead there was dignified silence as they got dressed and maybe even a look or two of sympathy as they thought I was just about to get kicked out after coming so far and to be honest, that was the thought that was going through my head as well.

I nervously left the dormitory in black t-shirt, black combat trousers and black boots, and walked the short distance to the Commander's office. We were still in the Brecon's so this was a temporary building for the officers as the building was only used during recruitment so the rooms were spartan.

If we have been successful we would find out on the parade ground and then be shipped to the S.A.S. barracks in Credenhill, Herefordshire, where we would commence post-selection training and where no doubt some more recruits would fail and be sent home.

I had only seen the Commander a couple of times during the recruitment process, only from afar and usually with a set of binoculars pressed to his eyes as he kept track of the movement of recruits through the Brecons. His reputation though was legendary and formidable so it was with some trepidation that I knocked on the door.

'Enter.'

I stood to attention in front of his desk and said, 'Corporal Gallagher reporting as requested, sir.'

'At ease, Gallagher. Gallagher, what are you doing here?'

For crying out loud! How many more times was I going to hear that fucking question?!

'I want join the S.A.S., sir.'

'But why, Gallagher? It is clear from your file that you don't need to be here. You don't need to be in the army and...'

'There is a difference between 'need' and 'want', sir.'

There was silence and our eyes met. His whole demeanour changed in an instant. He looked furious and I seriously thought he was going to throw me out.

'I'm not used to being interrupted, Gallagher, especially by a Corporal who has not even been given his beret and badge yet.'

'My apologies, sir.'

'Do not do that again. Ever.'

'Yes, sir.'

He stared at me for a few moments longer then he glanced down at his iPad which was on the desk.

'I've got a note from one of my officers that you were seen leaving the base at some stupid hour this morning in full running kit and you were gone for an hour. The officer had you followed and apparently you ran around ten miles.'

'The report is correct, sir.'

'Are you fucking nuts, Gallagher?! I've been doing this for a long, long time. Do you know how many people I have seen go out for any kind of run never mind a ten-mile run after E and E and Interrogation?! Zero, Gallagher, zero. You hadn't slept for days!'

'I slept enough sir, then I woke, wasn't tired, and I decided to go for a run. I've always found running helps clear my mind and eases sore muscles, sir.'

‘I’m sure it does, Gallagher, I’m sure it does. I’ve had my officers keep a close eye on you, mainly due to your age, also due to who you are. I needed to know that you’re serious. The only reports I’ve received are exemplary reports. You, Blake and Kingsley all vying for number one spot in every activity.’ I almost laughed. Activity made it sound like a kindergarten playgroup! ‘To be honest Gallagher, if it wasn’t for your age I would have no hesitation putting you on officer training.’

‘Thank you, sir, although I agree with you, I am not ready for such a large step.’ I had read all about S.A.S. officer training. It makes the normal recruitment process look like, well, a day out in kindergarten!

‘I wasn’t asking for your agreement, Gallagher.’ I maintained my silence. He paused for a few moments and stared at me. ‘You’ve passed and you will be joining the S.A.S. however I will be keeping my eye on you. One foot out of place and I’ll send you back to Harrogate faster than your grandad can buy a new plane!’

I snapped to attention and saluted. ‘Thank you, sir! I will not let you down!’

‘Good. Oh, one last thing, before that chest puffs out anymore, you’re not the youngest. You’re second youngest by two weeks. Dismissed.’

I saluted again and left his office. After I had closed his door behind me I let loose with a few fist pumps and a quick dance of joy then I quickly regained my composure as I saw a secretary sat behind another desk staring at me with mouth agape in astonishment.

I smiled at her, saluted, and walked briskly out of the building.

I had made it!

Chapter 73

I lay in the one of the many deserts of Afghanistan, peering through my binoculars at the mountain range ahead of me. I was on my own, the rest of my squad killed or captured by a patrol of fighters.

I was in north eastern Afghanistan, the narrow stretch of land sandwiched between Tajikistan and Pakistan, the narrow stretch of land that never made the news reports.

We had been stationed in the Badakhshan Province for two months now, our mission to engage local fighters, obtain as much intelligence as possible about them, and try to locate their leaders.

Also, our secondary objective was to impact the drugs trade as much as possible however the two objectives went hand in hand. Money that financed local fighters was gained from the drugs trade in this region.

Not only did the drugs trade fuel the fighters' international ambitions, it also fuelled internal tribal conflicts within Afghanistan which increased the difficulty of our job here. This region of Afghanistan was a tinder box waiting to explode and that was one of the many reasons we were sent here.

Afghanistan was still where many of their leaders were based, conducting their organisations and drug empires from the safety of the Afghan mountains. British and American politicians had bowed to public pressure for *visible* troops to be pulled out of Afghanistan yet there were still many *invisible* troops engaged in this country.

And I was one of those invisible troops. After becoming a member of the S.A.S. and spending many months at Credenhill in intense training, I spent six months in Syria working behind enemy lines, trying to fight an enemy that knew no rules and did not respond to any government.

I am not sure what difference we actually made without the backing of a full army with boots on the ground but we did have some successes, namely the capture or killing of various leaders.

Of course, all of this was covert operations. As far as the British public knew there were no British troops on the ground in Syria.

After those six months I spent time in London and around the world on close protection duty for senior political figures and members of the Royal Family.

Could you say that I met all senior members of the Royal household including the Queen? I was certainly frequently in her presence and once she did speak to me although that was only to pass her a glass of water.

Other than that we were the silent guards, never speaking to the people we were protecting unless spoken to. I suppose you could say that we were like the equivalent of America's President's Secret Service, always present but never actually there.

I found it quite interesting at first, especially with the Royal Family. Some members of that family were quite relaxed about who they shared their bed with, including the women, even in front of their security detail.

Then it got boring. Tedious. Irritating. The way those people lived. Not wanting for anything, all paid for by the taxpayer. I know, I know. Pot and kettle

given my background but at least my grandad *worked* and still worked to earn his life.

After six months of not having to draw a weapon in anger and seeing more sleaze than danger, after a very senior politician got caught with his trousers around his ankles by his wife on my watch, (unfortunately for the politician there was another woman in the hotel bedroom. I saw his wife walk along the hotel corridor and I knew he was in the bedroom with another woman yet I was completely unable to stop her opening that bedroom door. It is not our job to interfere in people's lives, only to protect them. That poor woman's scream though when she opened that bedroom door would stay with me for a long time...) I near enough knocked down my commanding officer's door and demanded to be put back on active duty.

'But Gallagher, you are on active duty?!'

'I mean properly active, sir. I'm not protecting these, these idiots any longer!'

'You forget yourself, Gallagher!'

'Sorry, sir.'

'Those idiots are some of the most important people in this country, Gallagher!'

'They act like children, sir. I'm done with protecting them and seeing people's lives ruined due to non-stop marriage infidelity! It is like continually watching back-to-back episodes of *Eastenders*!'

He at least laughed at that one. 'It is part of your role as a member of the S.A.S.'

'I'm aware of that, sir. However I am sure the normal police can handle this. I have no idea why the S.A.S. are involved in this?'

'Because we're the best, Gallagher.'

'Yes, I know, sir. But...'

'One more month. Two weeks leave. See your family. Visit your mansion. Go to your island in the Caribbean. Then we'll post you overseas.'

He always had to make a sly comment about my family's wealth knowing it wound me up. 'Thank you, sir. Where?'

'Classified. For now.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Dismissed.'

Well all I could think when I left his office was thank God for that.

Another month of watching *Eastenders* and then I could actually do something worthwhile with my time!

*

It turned out that 'classified' meant Afghanistan.

Some of the leaders, fed up with being relentlessly pursued and bombed in Syria, had retreated across Central Asia to north east Afghanistan where they controlled their empires from the safety of the Hindu Kush Mountains and the old fortresses deep in the mountains.

They had made allegiances and alliances with the old leaders and were now exerting their power on the rest of Afghanistan, northern Pakistan and the other Central Asian nations, while still controlling their fighters on the ground in Syria and Iraq.

No government would announce they were going to put visible boots on the ground back in Afghanistan though. No Prime Minister wanted to commit career suicide by making that announcement, so it was down to the invisible troops to fight a war that we could not possibly win.

We had been instructed to proceed from our main base of operations in Fayzabad, south east to the remote region of Ziak where we had received reports that there was a large presence of fighters.

It was nigh on impossible to keep track of all movements of the enemy in the vast expanses of the Afghan deserts and mountains. These were some of the remotest places on the planet and on days like today they felt exactly that, a million miles away from the safety of England.

We encountered the fighters as we made our way through a narrow valley between two low barren hills. We made our way along the valley in a defensive formation knowing that this was the perfect place to launch an ambush.

As usual, I was at the rear. Being regarded as the fittest man in the Regiment and best shot in the Regiment, I generally excelled at being able to get myself out of tough situations.

We usually worked in squads of four, however for this patrol we were in an eight. We had teamed up with another patrol as we were both moving to different locations in the same area so the officers decided to move us together.

Only two of us were killed during the opening salvo. I did not even see where the grenade was thrown from. I saw them get blown to pieces though. Just like that. A flash. A bang. An explosion. And they were gone.

The explosion blew me off my feet but I was just out of range of the main blast so other than feeling winded and a ringing in my ears I was fine. I started to fire my weapon up at the surrounding hillsides. I had no idea where the enemy was located, I just had to lay down covering fire and hope that I managed to keep their heads down enough for us to reach cover.

After a few moments I saw flashes of gunfire coming from the hillside to my right so I leapt onto my feet, kept my head down and sprinted as fast I could, zig-zagging my way to a large boulder which I leapt behind. I was not even out of breath and felt completely composed as I reloaded my assault rifle.

I quickly looked from around my rock up at the hillside from where I saw the gunfire come from. Without even reaching for my binoculars I could see a large group of fighters gathered in the opening to a cave. They were so brazen and bold they were not taking any cover at all.

I tried to see how many of my comrades were down but the dust and smoke from the grenade restricted my vision along the path.

I now reached for my binoculars and peered up at the fighters. There was around ten to fifteen of them, all dressed in the traditional tribal clothes for the region. What was not traditional about them were the AK-47s all of them held, the belts of ammunition and grenades around the waists and across their chests,

and hell, one of them even had a rocket launcher. Some might say though that nowadays the weapons were unfortunately as traditional as their tribal clothes.

The dust and smoke had now cleared from the path yet I still had no visibility of my fellow S.A.S. troops. I was totally confused as to what was going on. Why was nobody shooting? Why was the enemy not shooting down at us? They could have a bloodbath if they wanted to.

What should have been happening is that my fellow soldiers should have all been firing up at the hillside while they retreated to cover. Instead nobody was firing at anybody and I had no idea why not. Surely one grenade had not just wiped out two S.A.S. patrols?!

I looked up at them again through my binoculars and saw two of the men in a clear heated exchange while the others looked on. One of the men, the younger of the two, was gesturing at the rocket launcher and pointing down the hillside. He took a grenade from his belt and made a throwing motion however the older man shook his head and tried to calm the other. The younger man stormed off into the cave, waving his arms around in clear disgust at what the older fighter had decided to do.

The older fighter spoke to the remaining men and pointed down the hillside. All of them set off down the hill, slipping and sliding down the loose scree, not once losing their footing though.

It did not take them long to disappear from my view so I had to move. Silently I moved around the big rock which had been sheltering me and while they were distracted I made my way quickly up the hillside until I had a full view of the path.

One grenade had indeed wiped out two S.A.S. patrols. How the hell had that happened?! There was no way they should have been moving so close together that one grenade would get them all!

The enemy fighters were approaching my comrades very cautiously however it was clear enough that my fellow soldiers were all out of commission. I could make out the remains of the two soldiers who were right next to the grenade when it went off. There was not much left of them at all. Just a few body parts strewn across the path.

A little further along was another one of my soldiers and as the fighters reached him the older fighter looked down at him and then clearly instructed another of his fighters to kill him. Instinctively I reached for my rifle.

There was no way I was going to let them kill one of my patrol like this, then I looked harder and realised that my fellow soldier's legs had been blown off and if he had not bled out already was probably well on his way to bleeding out. I still winced though when the fighter put a bullet in his head.

Now they cautiously moved further along the path and this was where I started to get confused. Four highly trained, lethal S.A.S. soldiers were all out for the count, flat on their backs or flat on their fronts, completely helpless. As far as I could see there was not a scratch on them! What the hell was going on?!

If they even raised a gun in their direction I would have no choice but to start shooting. There was no way they were going to kill four of my men without giving them a chance to defend themselves!

They did not though. Instead they quickly disarmed them and then tied them up with rope, hands and feet. When they were all tied up the older man pointed at my men then up the hill back towards the entrance to the cave.

By now I could see and hear that some of my men were starting to come round from whatever affliction had knocked them all out. They sounded very groggy at first yet they quickly started to recover and tried to fight their restraints.

The fighters made sure that they could see that they were in a no-win situation by parading my soldiers' weapons in front of them. They were all lifted up, two fighters to each of my men, one carrying them by their arms, the other by their legs, and carried them back up the hill where they all disappeared into the cave.

I had never felt so helpless. Sure I could have started firing and I might have killed a few of the fighters however it was more likely that I would kill my own men and no doubt as soon as the fighters realised they were under attack they would start to kill my men.

At the cave entrance two of the fighters paused for a moment. One of them was the older man from earlier who was clearly the leader. The other was younger yet the family resemblance was clear. Father and son stopped and looked down into the valley. I grabbed my binoculars again and focussed in on them.

The younger man was looking down at the valley floor and talking to his father. I could clearly see his hands and he was counting on his fingers. He gestured with eight fingers, then three pointing down to the valley floor with them, then four fingers into the cave. Then he held one finger out in front of his father's face.

Shit. They knew I was missing. The younger one knew there had been eight, three had been killed yet they had only captured four.

His father shook his head. He talked to his son, and while he talked he held up four fingers and pointed down to the valley floor. He then indicated with three fingers and then made an expression and used his hand to symbolise an explosion and he actually mouthed the word 'boom'.

Then he made a gun gesture with his hand and fired the trigger with his thumb while the 'gun' was pointing at his temple. Finally he gestured four to the valley floor then four into the cave. Without another word or gesture the older fighter turned and walked into the cave leaving his son behind.

He stared down at the valley floor as dusk descended on the Hindu Kush. He certainly did not look convinced that his father's counting was correct. He stepped to the edge of the cliff below the edge of the cave and looked along the valley floor. He took another tentative step towards the edge and I thought he was going to come down and start to search the valley floor.

Sunset comes quickly in the mountains. The sun sets early behind the mountains and almost in a heartbeat the dusk quickly darkened and the shadows lengthened.

For one moment it seemed that our eyes met. He seemed to look down from the cliff edge; he seemed to be staring at me right in the eyes.

Then with a flourish of his tribal clothes and a shake of his head he was gone.

I had no idea how this had happened. How had two S.A.S. patrols been captured so easily without us having fired a shot? I took my backpack off, rolled onto my back, placed my gun across my chest and stared up at the sky which was darkening so quickly. I leaned against the boulder and thought so deeply about all that had happened so quickly.

One of the many things that separated members of the S.A.S. from normal people was our ability to remain calm in even the most stressful of situations. The regiment's psychologists refer to it as an ability to seemingly slow down time, to see things that others would miss during times of immense pressure.

Now I closed my eyes and played everything back. I was at the rear; the nearest member of my patrol was ten yards ahead of me. Then he was twenty yards. I had dropped back briefly to adjust the laces of my new boots. I moved quickly to catch them up then the explosion. I hit the ground and started to fire up at the mountainsides. Then I retreated to the boulder. Think man, think.

The grenade had hit at the rear. Shit. If I had not dropped back it would be my body parts strewn across the Afghan desert. Even then the explosion had knocked me off my feet. The explosion. The explosion. My ears were ringing. I was blinded by the dust and smoke from the first explosion. The explosion. There was something not right about the explosion. Think man, think.

I stared up at the stars which had already appeared then I looked down at the watch my grandad had given me. That seemed like a lifetime ago. It was at moments of loneliness and helplessness like this that I missed them the most. I knew that if I pressed the buttons on the watch in a certain way then a distress signal would go off in one of my grandad's many security offices around the world. I could press it now then I would see how good my grandad's security really is...

I stroked the face of the watch lightly thinking of my family. I thought my mum was going to explode when I told them I was joining the S.A.S.

She had no idea how I qualified for the Regiment at such a young age and my grandad got a lot of abuse that evening as she thought he had organised it for me despite his protestations of innocence.

She relaxed a bit when I returned safely from my first S.A.S. tour of duty in Syria (I didn't and couldn't tell them where I had been stationed) and then she was delighted when I told her I would be on personal protection duty. Then she exploded again, went bright red, when I told her that I had requested to be taken off personal protection and sent back to the front line.

My hand fell away from the watch. The explosion. The bright red burning. The explosion. Fuck. Me. There was not one explosion, there were three explosions!

The other explosions were much smaller than the first; in comparison it was more like a little firecracker going off than an explosion. And then after that, two patches of bright red burning, like flares were being held in the middle of the smoke and dust caused by the grenade. Had the first explosion set off flares that we were carrying? As far as I knew none of us were carrying flares. So what the hell caused that bright red burning?!

Darkness had now completely fallen so I rolled out from behind the boulder and with my gun strapped across my back I belly crawled back onto the valley floor to where the explosion or explosions happened. I was still not convinced I had heard three.

It was easy enough to see where the grenade had exploded. There was a small crater in the ground and my fellow soldiers' body parts and equipment were still strewn across the path. I carried on crawling towards the front of the patrol, scanning left and right until there, towards the edge of the path on the right-hand side I saw a canister sticking up from the ground. I grabbed it and then went a little further along the path until I found another canister on the left of the path. I took that one too then crawled back to my boulder.

When I got back there I created a little shelter with my bag and black jacket, so I could look at the canisters using my torch yet the light from the torch would not be visible to anybody looking down onto the valley floor. I huddled down underneath my jacket and turned on the torch.

The canisters were the same, maybe a little larger than a standard food tin can. From the top of the canister there was a small funnel and on the funnel were the remnants of a red powder. On the side of the canister was a small black box with what looked like an antenna or aerial protruding from it.

First of all I read the writing on the side of the canister which was written in Arabic and English. I read the Arabic first and I could just about muddle together the meaning of the writing however I could not believe what I thought I had read so I turned it around and read the English. I was genuinely in shock. I had no idea that these fighters had access to such advanced weaponry.

The canisters held a nerve agent, not that powerful that it would kill somebody, but powerful enough to render them inactive for a short period of time which was exactly what I saw happen to my fellow soldiers.

We had just been subjected to an advanced biological attack. Where the hell had some desert tribe got access to this nerve gas?!

Now the antenna needed investigating. It appeared to be crudely glued to the canister and I managed to peel it off and study it with the torchlight.

The first thing that caught my eye was the word Gallatronics. My men, two S.A.S. patrols, had just been wiped out or captured with a weapon that involved my grandad's company!!! Well, the irony of that was not lost on me!

I composed myself and studied the structure of the antenna and canister some more. It was clear that the antenna was attached to the canister as some sort of triggering mechanism, but how and why? I reached for my backpack and pulled out my penknife and gloves. I put my gloves on then wrapped my cotton scarf around my face.

With the penknife I then started to cut into the canister. It clearly was not that strong an agent as nobody had died from it, just been incapacitated by it, so I was hoping that my gloves and scarf would protect me from the remnants of the agent.

Once I had removed the side of the canister I could clearly see how it worked. The antenna was not an antenna it was a remote detonator. The detonator fired the small explosive at the top of the canister. Once the small explosion took place the

gas would then start to pour out of the canister through the funnel. The other canister was the same structure.

My troops, if the initial larger explosion had not knocked them off their feet, would have instinctively hit the ground after the first explosion right into the path of the nerve agent. There was one canister at the front and one at the rear to make sure all men in the patrol regardless of their position in the patrol were struck down by the gas.

And that got me thinking about the grenade. I don't think it was a grenade. There was no way they would go to this much trouble with nerve gas and detonators to risk it all on a badly thrown grenade!

I turned the torch off, lifted my jacket off and put it on. I had never known an environment like Afghanistan. Of course we had done desert training but this was something else. The dust. The heat. The cold. The incessant dust. Now the sun had set the temperature had dropped so quickly I could already see my breath.

I then slumped back against the boulder and stared up at the stars again and thought through what must have happened.

They had clearly seen us coming. The grenade was not a grenade. It was some kind of remote controlled improvised explosive device. They had let most of the patrol get past the I.E.D., then detonated it and blew up three of my men. The rest had either been knocked down or hit the ground straight into the path of the nerve agent. The gas had taken affect straight away, knocking them all out.

Bloody hell. This was a messed-up situation. Standard protocol would be for me to hot foot it back to base and give a full report to my senior officers and let them decide what to do. I did not even have a radio. Our patrol had two radios and one satellite phone. One of the radios and the satellite phone had been blown up and the other radio had been in the pack of one of the captives.

There was no way I could return to base and leave them. There was no way I could leave my men to suffer in those caves without me trying to do something. I had to try something.

Shielding the torchlight with my hand I went through my backpack and took what I thought I might need. As much ammunition as I could carry, including grenades, stun grenades and some razor-sharp combat knives.

Then I moved as stealthily as I could through the boulders, from shadow to shadow, until I reached the foot of the mountainside the fighters had so easily descended and ascended.

From the base of the cliff I had no idea how they had so easily climbed down and then climbed back up and on their ascent they were carrying men between them. No doubt if I had lived my whole life in these mountains such a cliff like this would seem like child's play. To me though, it seemed like a near vertical wall of loose rock and scree.

I started up the mountainside and only got about five feet off the ground before I lost my footing and slid back down causing a small avalanche of small rocks to cascade down behind me. The noise those few rocks made as they fell seemed to reverberate and echo around the valley so loudly I was sure that somebody would hear it. I was expecting a shout or something from the cave entrance however after a few minutes of pressing myself hard against the cliff face there was nothing but

silence. I presumed they did not set a guard. With a cliff face like this below the entrance to the cave, nature was guard enough.

With more care and a slower pace than the first time, I started again. I remembered I went away with my school on an activity weekend and one of the activities was rock climbing. I remembered then the instructor's golden rule, before moving make sure at least one hand is hold of something solid.

I followed his guidance and it saved me more than once. I lost count of the number of times I had hold of a solid rock then to try and grab the rock above it only to have it come away in my hand. I had to backtrack twice when I ran out of handholds ahead of me and going down in that darkness was more difficult than going up.

I was on that cliff face for about one hour. At times even I ran out of my own phenomenal fitness and all I could do was cling to a rock like a limpet and get my breath back.

Slowly but surely though I reached the top of the cliff and I peered cautiously over the lip of the cliff, staring into the cave. I could see no sign of anybody. There was certainly nobody on watch here. I had made enough noise and caused enough noisy rock falls that I would have been discovered after only ten feet of climbing. I pulled myself over the cliff edge and lay on my back for a few moments, catching my breath. I had no idea how the fighters had climbed the cliff so easily *and* while carrying men!

After taking a mouthful of water I walked the short distance across the rocky ledge to the cave opening. There was nothing to see other than much deeper into the cave there was a clear lighter patch within the pitch-black cave. The cave sloped downwards so the light would not be visible from the valley floor.

Carefully I walked into the cave, which was long and deep then it narrowed at the rear to a large passageway. There were other smaller caves or passages leading off this main cave however I ignored them and walked towards the light.

I tread very carefully, knowing that it was highly likely that the entrance was booby trapped either with tripwires or some kind of I.E.D. I could see no trace of those though so I continued onwards, ignoring more of the side caves and passages that I passed.

The light got brighter as I approached and then I realised it was merely one solitary light. It surprised me to see it was an electric light so I guessed that somewhere in these caverns there would be generators.

Cautiously I went past it on the far side of the passage, trying to remain in the shadows as much as possible. Once I had passed the first light there were lights positioned every twenty yards or so which made trying to keep to the shadows pointless.

After another two hundred yards or so the passageway reached a crossroads. There were now four passages leading off the junction including the one I had walked along and there was even a signpost.

The way I had come was labelled with the Arabic word for 'cliff' or something similar, to the right it was signed 'restaurant' or 'café', something along those lines. To the left I could not really make it out, maybe something like 'guns' or 'weapons' then it came to me, it must be where they kept their weapons, an

ammunition dump. I made a mental note that to label the way to their weapons was a bit stupid however clearly they never expected the enemy to be present amongst them.

The last sign was labelled 'main hall' and also Mosque so I decided to make my way to the Mosque and main hall. I had all the weaponry and ammunition I could carry anyway so to visit their arms dump would be pointless. I made sure that I knew which way it was though.

The passageway towards the Mosque was narrower than the passage to the cliff, just large enough for three men to walk side by side. Considering the size of this cave system I was astonished that I did not meet anybody however I was to find out why I did not meet anybody very soon.

I was even more astonished when I reached another crossroads. At first I panicked as I thought I had somehow managed to backtrack however three of the signs were different and I took the passageway that continued to lead to the main hall and the Mosque.

Along this passageway I started to see bedrooms carved into the rock. They were all sumptuously decorated, large beds, with thick rugs, elaborately carved tables and chairs, delicately lit with candles or electric lights, yet they were mostly all empty. A couple of the bedrooms had naked women asleep on the beds but thankfully they did not wake as I quietly made my way past them.

As I got closer to the main hall I faintly heard noise ahead of me which as I approached became clear it was chanting, the same rhythmic chanting which swelled in volume and then stopped, then swelled again then stopped.

Then a single voice shouted out in Arabic but I could not tell what he said. His words were still muffled plus they echoed around the caves and passageways making his voice incomprehensible at first.

As the voices got louder and clearer I could hear that there was some kind of ceremony going on. What I expected to see was a normal prayer session in a mosque. What I actually saw left me horrified.

I approached cautiously, scanning every room I walked past, flicking my torch on down every passageway, until I reached a T-junction. Here the passageway split into two and circled around a huge, cavernous cave, cathedral like in its size. Carved into the rock were holes so it was possible to view the cavern from the passage.

Very carefully I crouched down and ducked below these holes and walked along the passage, around the cavern a short distance, until I found a good vantage point. Slowly I popped my head above the rock wall, glanced then dropped back down again. From that glance I could see there was still nobody around so I slowly raised myself and looked down into the cavern.

There was clearly a ceremony going on down in the cavern. Across the cavern a mosque had been carved into the rock however it was not possible to get that many people into the mosque so the ceremony was being conducted in the main hall. There were hundreds of men prostrate in the hall and that was clearly the reason why I had not met anybody on my journey through the cave system. All of the men were facing away from me towards a raised area where five men were

standing behind what I can only describe as an altar, although I appreciate the word altar is probably not the correct description for the Islamic faith.

Four of the men were dressed in the same elaborate costumes and they were wearing masks. The last man was even more elaborately dressed but he was not wearing a mask and as I peered down at him I took a sharp intake of breath. I recognised that man as he was right at the very top of the British Government's and United States Government's most wanted list. Mohammed Bakr al-Anbari.

I instinctively reached for my rifle. If I put a bullet in that man's head I would be a hero. He was the most wanted terrorist in the world. He was leading terrorist organisations when they carried out the worst terrorist atrocities of recent times and now he was right there, not more than one hundred yards away from me. And it would not surprise me to find out that the men in the masks were also highly wanted terrorists.

I had to take the shot. That would mean that I would not get out of here alive and that my men would also die. But that was Mohammed Bakr al-Anbari. I had to take the shot.

Resting my assault rifle on the wall I looked through the viewfinder and noticed that the golden cloth which I thought was flat against the top of the altar was actually raised and indeed it was moving. There was something or someone under that cloth. With an elaborate flourish one of the four men pulled off the cloth which revealed what was under it.

Securely fastened to the altar with golden clasps around his wrists and ankles was Alexander. You never really made friends in the S.A.S. but I suppose you could say that Alex was the closest I had.

He was a huge man, six feet six inches tall and eighteen stone of pure muscle. He was highly trained in numerous martial arts and I had never seen him defeated in one-on-one combat. That nerve agent must have been pretty potent stuff to knock Alex off his feet.

Now though he was completely helpless as Anbari approached the altar. Another one of the four men offered him a jewelled sword and I tensed up. My finger was hovering over the trigger yet I hesitated. There was nothing I could do to save Alex now, but what about the others?!

I had to stand there and watch through the gunsight as Anbari took the glittering sword and used it to slice open Alex's abdomen. His abdomen split open like a ripe peach revealing his bowels. Alex's scream cut through me yet when he screamed it sent the watching worshippers into a frenzy.

They briefly calmed until Anbari stepped down from the raised area and walked through the crowd of prostrate worshippers, touching the bloody sword lightly against some of their heads. When he did this the worshipper descended into an even greater frenzy, rolling around on the floor, frothing at the mouth, almost like they were having a seizure.

Alex, one of the toughest, strongest men I had ever met, was now reduced to screaming for his mummy.

Anbari slowly made his way back through the crowd of men, back to the altar, and a silence descended on the cavern. Alex was still alive and conscious when

Anbari removed a jewelled dagger from his belt and inserted it into Alex's abdominal cavity.

The scream he made when Anbari removed part of his liver was nothing like I had ever heard before. It was primeval in its ferocity and it lasted for what seemed like an eternity. What made it worse was that there was total silence in the cavern; just Alex's scream which went on and on.

When Anbari dug into his cavity again and removed another piece of liver, Alex finally passed out and it was only when Alex's screaming finished that Anbari threw the two pieces of liver into the crowd of worshippers.

As the pieces were thrown, the worshippers all leapt like basketball stars, reaching into the air to make a grab for the organ. When a piece landed in somebody's hand, the body part was so slippery it squelched out of their fingers and actually landed on another person's forehead. That person was then mobbed by everybody else nearby and they fought over the body parts like slaving wild dogs.

When the treasures had finally been claimed all the worshippers prostrated themselves again and Anbari dug into Alex's body again and carved out another piece of his liver. While his knife was in his body, Alex's whole body twitched and strained at the restraints. Even though he was unconscious his body was still responding to the cuts Anbari was making.

I had seen enough. I could take a shot at Anbari and then hot foot it out of the caves and I might, I *might* get out of here alive, but there was no way I could leave my other men to become human sacrifices like Alex, I had to at least *try* and rescue them.

Thinking quickly I retraced my steps through the caves in my mind. I could not remember seeing anything that looked like cells or any signposts which indicated caves so I decided to try a different way. I returned to the T-junction and followed the passage around the cavern, keeping low so nobody could see me through the holes in the wall.

The passage quickly curved away from the cavern and descended, at first with a slope then steep steps. After thirty seconds of descent I encountered another T-junction and quickly found out that even the cells were brazenly signposted. I followed the sign and walked quickly along the passage until I heard faint voices coming from up ahead.

Up ahead there was a line of secure cell doors, actually the first doors I had seen since entering the cave complex, and outside the cells were a table and two chairs, both of the chairs were occupied with what looked like two young men, boys really, who were engrossed in a game of chess.

Without hesitating I drew both of my combat knives and quietly moved along the corridor.

They did not even see me coming.

Before they knew it the knife in my left hand was slammed into the back of the nearest boy and the knife in my right hand was drilled into the chest of the boy facing me. They both slumped to the floor without a sound.

When I looked down at their bodies and realised they were indeed boys, probably not much older than fourteen, for a brief moment I felt guilty then I thought about Alex and my guilt disappeared in a flash.

The days of me not being able to handle myself in a one-on-one fight were long gone after months of intensive training in various martial arts, mainly led by Alex. I now prided myself on being pretty much lethal in hand to hand or knife combat. I knew my weaknesses when I joined the Regiment and went about fixing them.

On a hook screwed into the wall was a set of keys which I lifted off the hook and walked the few steps to the first cell. I peered through the bars set into the top of the solid wooden door and in this cell was our Lieutenant, the leader of our patrol. The cell was bare other than a bucket in one corner. No bed or mattress or sink or toilet other than the bucket. Yet still my Lieutenant had made a pillow for himself from his jacket and was sound asleep.

‘Sir!’ I fumbled around for the correct key while I tried to wake him up. ‘Sir! Wake up!’

With a groan he lifted his head off his jacket and peered through the gloom of the cell. ‘Jake?! Is that you?! Fuck me Jake! What the hell are you doing here? You should have returned back to base!’

‘You can reprimand me later, sir!’ I finally managed to find the correct key and unlocked the door. While the Lieutenant put on his jacket then exited the cell I made my way along the other cells unlocking and opening them.

When I returned to Lieutenant he was standing over the dead bodies of the guards. ‘Good work, Jake. I thought you had been blown up.’

‘No such luck, sir.’

‘Where’s Alex?’

I quickly told them all I had seen. There was no emotion on any of their faces; sometimes I did wonder whether the Regiment was full of emotionless zombies. That was the training kicking in though. If everybody went off to exact revenge there would be a bloodbath and it would not be the terrorists’ blood which would be spilled.

‘Right, Alex is gone and this place is full of hundreds of terrorists. Sounds like we need to get the hell out of here. Let’s go. Jake, lead us out.’

‘No, wait. There’s more. Anbari is here, sir.’

‘Mohammed Bakr al-Anbari?’ I nodded. ‘Did you get him?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Could you have got him?’ I hesitated. ‘Shit, Jake! You know the rules. Mission first. You should have got him and left us behind.’

‘No way, sir. To become human sacrifices like Alex?! Never. I’ve got a plan though.’

I quickly outlined it to them and the Lieutenant nodded his approval. ‘Mitch? Austin?’ They both nodded. ‘Let’s do this.’

At pace I led them back through the passageways until we reached a crossroads which showed us the way to the ammunition dump. The Lieutenant paused for a moment and asked, ‘Wait, it’s all signposted?! Restaurant? Mosque? Ammunition dump?’

‘It’s like a town down here, sir! I don’t think they ever expected to have the S.A.S. amongst them!’

‘Clearly. Onwards.’

The ammunition dump was only a hundred yards along a wide passage from the junction and it was only guarded by two young men again. These two were slightly more alert than the two outside the cells but Mitch and Austin quickly disposed of them. They did not even need my knives or my gun. They literally saw them, elbowed me out of the way, and before the guards could even raise their AK-47s they were disarmed and had their necks broken in a flash.

‘Nice. Keys on the wall, Jake.’ stated the Lieutenant.

I grabbed them and threw them to Mitch who was closest to the door which he opened. The cavern was huge and it was full, roof to ceiling with practically all known weaponry and even some radios.

There were racks upon racks of AK-47s, grenades and grenade launchers, rocket launchers, mines and knives and swords. There were high calibre sniper rifles and there were racks and racks of British and U.S. made assault rifles, not to mention the tons of ammunition in crates stacked to the ceiling.

For four highly trained S.A.S. soldiers we had just entered heaven. For thirty seconds we walked amongst the racks, mesmerised about the selection in front of us.

Mitch whistled through his teeth. ‘There’s enough ammo here to start a third world war!’

Even the Lieutenant was briefly awestruck. ‘Jeeee-ssus. Right, Jake, grab a sniper rifle, Mitch, Austin, get the explosives.’

Towards the back of the dump was a cage which was locked with a flimsy padlock which Austin quickly smashed off and they both entered the cage. We were all highly trained in explosives although Austin was the true specialist. He quickly made his way through the cage taking a large amount of explosives and some remote-controlled detonators, as much as he and Mitch could carry and still move at a reasonable pace. Mitch and Austin then spent some moments at the back and front of the store as per our plan.

From the rear of the dump I heard an exclamation from the Lieutenant. ‘Well I’ll be damned! An XZ918! I had no idea these were ever put into production... How on God’s earth did one of these end up here?!’

‘Everything okay back there, Lieutenant?’ I asked.

He walked back towards us while I was quickly loading my new sniper rifle and reloading my assault rifle, reverently holding what looked like to me a fairly normal assault rifle.

‘This, gentleman, is quite possibly the greatest gun ever manufactured. It never really got much past experimental stage by the U.S. military but a few of them were issued, mainly to America’s Green Berets or S.E.A.L. I had no idea... How did one end up here?’

The Lieutenant now stared down at the weapon like he was holding some treasured lost artefact that people had been hunting for thousands of years, something like the Holy Grail. The three of us looked at each other with smiles on our faces and slightly quizzical looks.

‘Erm, Lieutenant, sir, we really need to get going,’ said Mitch.

‘Yes, quite, we do. An XZ918... Well I never... Right, come on!’ He was back with us! ‘Mitch, Austin, lay the explosives on the pillars of rock that Jake points out to us. Keep your heads down! We need to make sure we get Anbari though so we only detonate once we have a confirmed kill! Did somebody grab a radio?!’ I nodded. ‘Jake, on point, lead us to the main hall!’

I led them out of the ammunition store and back towards the main hall. As we approached we could clearly hear that the ceremony was still continuing. I led them to the viewing point I was positioned at before and Anbari was still there and still carving up parts of Alex’s body and throwing them to the crowd of worshippers.

None of us said a word as we watched our fellow brother in arms being carved up. His blood had now cascaded down over the altar and was dripping on the floor. I could feel the tension in all of us. I knew that we all wanted to run down there and kill as many of them as possible.

The Lieutenant calmed us all. ‘Jake, Mitch, Austin, eyes on me. Let’s do this. For Alex and all the others these bastards have sacrificed. Mitch, Austin, go. I want you back here in three minutes. Jake, prepare for the shot.’

Mitch and Austin moved in opposite directions around the main hall to three huge rock pillars which looked to me to be structurally important to the integrity of the cavern. We were hoping that once those pillars were destroyed the whole roof would collapse onto them.

I knelt behind the wall and rested the sniper rifle on the wall and looked through the powerful gunsight. The first thing I noticed was that the other four men had removed their masks and I recognised them all. I focussed in on their faces using the viewfinder and then whispered to the Lieutenant to take a look.

‘Holy crap, Jake. That’s near enough their whole God-damn leadership in one place!’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You’ve only got one shot though. Make sure you get, Anbari.’

‘Yes, sir.’

I was very familiar with the AWM 338, after all it is a British made sniper rifle. It was probably a little over the top to use such a powerful sniper rifle for such a short-range shot. From this position he was only maximum two hundred yards away and using this rifle on the range on Salisbury plain I had been known to hit targets over a thousand metres away. Still, it was better to be safe than sorry.

After only two and a half minutes Mitch and Austin returned to us and nodded in the direction of the Lieutenant. They then passed one of the detonators to me and another to the Lieutenant. If one of us held all the detonators and was killed then our plan would fail.

Now it all fell on me. I was now tasked with putting a bullet in the head of Mohammed Bakr al-Anbari. I waited until he was leaning over Alex’s body again, removing another one of his organs, this time a kidney. As usual he lifted up the organ above his head for all to see although this time I did not give him chance to throw the offering into the crowd.

When he leaned back with the kidney above his head, through the view finder I could see Alex's blood dripping onto his upturned face, I pulled the trigger.

The bullet flew at over a thousand metres per second and struck Anbari plum in the forehead. It travelled into his brain and then out of the back of his head, shattering his brain stem, sending his brains out of the back of his head, with the bullet ending its journey in the rock wall behind him.

For a moment he remained standing, then he slumped to the floor, his hands still clutching the kidney, his body twitching.

There was total silence in the cavern; it was almost like they thought it was a trick, part of the show so to speak. Then when one of the other men around the altar screamed in disbelief there was a roar of outrage as all the worshippers stood up as one and tried to see where the shot came from.

I had quickly reloaded in the meantime and I quickly took aim at Abu Mossab al-Abdelmalek, Ambani's second in command. The shot was rushed, the Lieutenant whispering firmly in my ear to get the hell up however I still managed to shoot him through the throat. The power of the bullet at such a short range near enough decapitated him.

It did not take long for the closest to our position to spot us after the second shot but we were already up and away. I dropped the sniper rifle knowing it would be of no use for our retreat, arming myself instead with my assault rifle.

We retreated in a classic centre peel formation, one man at the front, the others ran past him while he lay down covering fire, then he would retreat while we lay down covering fire. We did this for a few hundred yards into the tunnel then we charged forward together as one. We encountered no resistance and as we ran the Lieutenant shouted, 'Detonate one to three!'

We could not get too far away from the explosives as we had no idea if the signals would travel through so much rock so the three of us stopped in our tracks while the Lieutenant lay down covering fire.

I pressed the button on my detonator almost simultaneously with the other two and we heard three huge explosions and then the whole mountain seemed to shake. Even around us dust and small rocks cascaded onto us and from back along the tunnel we heard and felt an almighty rumble as the walls and roof of the main hall collapsed, hopefully crushing a few hundred fighters under tons of rock.

We had imagined that the first few fighters who were able to get out of the main hall before we detonated would make their way to the ammunition store. We carried on running, giving them chance to reach the dump before the Lieutenant shouted, 'Detonating four!'

That was his detonator so the three of lay down covering fire while he pressed the trigger of his detonator. From deep in the cave system we heard a loud explosion followed a few moments later by the biggest explosion of all as the rest of the explosives and ammunition in the store all exploded.

The whole mountain seemed to shake and the walls and roof around us cracked with even bigger rocks falling around us. I seriously hoped we had not just killed all four of us by using too much explosive and bringing the whole mountain down on top of us.

We carried on running, further away from the hall, every fifty yards or two of us would stop and fire back the way we had come, the Lieutenant shouting after every time he fired it that the XZ918 was the best God-damn gun he had ever used! He was like a kid on Christmas Day who had just been given the toy he had always wanted!

I led them through the passages, my fantastic memory was on form as usual and I easily remembered the route out and back to the cliff. We barely stopped when we reached the cliff edge. We all just took one look, turned, and near enough leapt over the edge, more slipping and sliding down the mountain than climbing. When we reached the bottom, we did not stop. A quick word around to check we were all in one piece, and then we started running.

Without our bergens weighing us down we made good progress out of valley until we reached the small village of Ziak. We had used a chopper to get to our patrol zone but here, much to the tribal elders' surprise, we commandeered the village's only car, and drove for the rest of that night and much of the next day, taking turns to drive, until we arrived back at our small base of operations in the small town of Fayzabad.

*

'And where the hell have you lot been?!'

We all gave the Major, leader of Special Operations in this area of Afghanistan, a sloppy, exhausted salute as we all collapsed out of the car. We had driven through the town to our large house which was sealed off from the street by a high wall and large gates.

Within the town we masqueraded as engineers, here to plan construction of a new bridge. I am pretty sure the locals did not believe that for one second however they pretty much left us alone to go about our business without any interference.

'And where the hell are the rest of you?!'

The Lieutenant, still clutching the XZ918 like a new-born baby, said, 'Permission to freshen up, sir, then we can debrief?'

Freshen up was code in the Regiment for, 'We've all reached our limits here, sir, if we don't get at least an hour's sleep we're likely to totally lose it and kill you.'

'Permission granted. It's eight in the a.m. now. Shall we say midday? On the terrace?'

'Thank you, sir. Yes, sir.'

By the time we undressed and showered that would mean three hours sleep tops yet I knew that we would all be fresh and ready to go even after only having limited sleep to recover from the ordeals we had just been through. In the S.A.S. you learn to survive on minimal sleep. My record so far was around sixty hours and even then I only managed an hour and had to keep on going for another twenty-four.

I have always hated sleep, I find it a complete waste of time, but the body and the mind need it. It is hard to explain what it feels like to go days without sleep

and still have to function as a Special Forces soldier who should always be at the top of his game.

I showered, a long hot shower, the water at my feet turning black as all the filth was washed off my body. It is again hard to explain what it feels like when you are winding down from an operation during which every muscle and nerve in your body is tense, when you are continually on edge for hours and days at a time. The physical and mental stress that puts on your body cannot be described.

Imagine the most pressurised, stressful situation you have ever been in. How long did that last? A few minutes? I bet an hour maximum? Now imagine living one hundred percent of that pressure and stress for days, weeks at a time. It is no wonder the S.A.S. only recruits the strongest minds.

After showering I walked into the bunkroom naked and collapsed onto my bunk naked and fell straight asleep. It takes a long time to train your mind to instantly forget about all the traumas and horrors you have seen and be able to switch off and fall asleep like a light being turned off.

I slept straight through until eleven forty-five when I was woken up by Second Lieutenant Imogen Carter who had to be the cutest female in the whole army. She did not see front line action and was really the personal assistant for the Major and general administrator of our special operations unit in this area of Afghanistan. Whatever you needed or wanted Imogen was the lady to turn to.

I am pretty sure the only reason they made her a Lieutenant was so she could tell all us lower ranked soldiers where to go when we all tried to hit on her and *everybody* tried their luck with Imogen Carter.

Yet as far as I was aware her panties had never been removed over those amazing buttocks and down those long legs by any special operations soldier in Afghanistan which of course meant she was a lesbian, a rumour which quickly circulated when many men failed in their conquest.

‘Fifteen minutes sergeant.’ She walked across my small room and opened the blind and did not seem at all bothered that I was naked. ‘Up, please. The Major still wants to see you at midday on the terrace.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

I leapt out of bed and walked across the room still naked. I know I looked good. The Afghan summer had been hot and I was tanned, very tanned, which meant my gorgeous blue eyes seemed to sparkle and shine even more. My body was perfect too. Every muscle was perfectly honed after months of hard campaigning and training, there was not an inch of fat anywhere on my body, and my six-pack rippled as I reached up into my locker for some clean clothes.

Yet Imogen did not seem bothered by me at all. I knew from many experiences that when I stood naked in front of a woman it would usually send them into rapture. At least that was one thing Katherine had taught me, to believe in my looks and body more which I took great pleasure in doing. Was I a womaniser? Yes. Did I now use my good looks to manipulate and use women? Yes. A promiscuous and multi-partnered sex life was one of my only vices.

But here was Imogen, completely ignoring the fact I was naked, twittering on about the weather while tidying away some papers on my desk and tut-tutting

when she saw a half-completed report on my desk that should have been with the Major two weeks ago. I sighed. Ah well, Jake, you cannot win them all!

I pulled on some underwear, trousers, and t-shirt, quickly brushed my teeth, then followed Imogen to the terrace. The house we were stationed in Fayzabad was on the river so the view from the terrace was quite pleasant with the river running fast below us and the mountains surrounding the town, the highest of which were permanently snow-capped.

The Lieutenant, Mitch and Austin were already there and as I arrived the Major was just taking a seat. I took the seat next to the Lieutenant and Imogen took the last remaining seat, a notepad and pen in her hand.

For a few minutes we talked small talk while we sipped the freshly made lemonade, one of Imogen's many specialties. Then the Major turned the conversation onto the serious matters.

'Right, first of all,' he looked at the Lieutenant, 'where are the rest of you? I sent eight men out I expect eight men to return.'

The Lieutenant then had the task of explaining all that had happened to the Major whose eyes grew larger and larger in shock and surprise as the story unfolded. When he reached the part where I raided the cave system the Major interrupted him.

'You did *what*, Jake?!'

'I went into the caves, sir.'

'That's very brave but also very stupid. You should have returned to base.'

'And leave them for dead?! No way.'

The Major shook his head and told the Lieutenant to carry on. As the story had reached the part where the three of them were in the cells the Lieutenant asked me to continue the story of what I saw and did on my way through the caves. When I reached the part when I saw Anbari he interrupted again.

'Anbari?! Are you absolutely sure it was Anbari?!'

'Yes, sir. One hundred percent.'

'Please, please, please tell me you killed him?!'

'I'm coming to that.'

I continued the story and when I told him that I left the ceremony to find the remaining men he slammed his glass down on the table which caused Imogen to jump a little.

'No, no, no! You should have taken the shot!'

'I'm aware of that, sir, but I believe there was a sufficient window of opportunity...'

'But what if the ceremony had finished and they all left the main cavern?! You would have been trapped and more importantly Anbari would have escaped!'

'I was aware of that, sir. I made the decision that the ceremony still had a long way to go. Anbari still had a high number of organs to remove from Alex, sir.'

He did not know how to respond to that so he nodded for me to continue. So I did and then the Lieutenant picked up the story when I had rescued them from the cells and the Major's eyes grew even bigger when he outlined what we then did. He did not interrupt though and let the Lieutenant finish.

When he was done the Major took a sip of his lemonade and looked us all in the eye one by one.

‘Let me get this straight. You killed Anbari with a shot to the head, Jake?’

‘Yes, sir. He couldn’t be deader.’

‘And we’re all absolutely one hundred percent sure it was Anbari?’

We all nodded and Mitch said, ‘Saw him with my own eyes, sir. Definitely him.’

‘Then Jake quickly shot Abdelmalek?’

‘Yes, sir. Confirmed kill.’

‘Then you blew up the main hall or cavern or whatever you want to call it, collapsing the roof?’

‘We of course did not have eyes on the main cavern so we can’t completely one hundred percent guarantee the roof collapsed, sir, but it certainly felt and sounded like it did.’

‘If it did, then you wiped out another three senior members of their leadership along with hundreds of others?’

‘Correct, sir.’

The Major paused and looked out over the river to the distant mountains. ‘If this story is true and accurate and I have no reason to believe it’s not, you’re all good men, then this is momentous. This is one of the greatest successes in Special Forces history. I need to speak to the Ministry of Defence about this.....’

Without another word he stood up from the table and made his way through the house to his office where we saw him close the door behind him.

Mitch let out a long whistling sigh. ‘Oh dear, what have we done?!’

We all laughed. The Lieutenant turned to look at me. ‘You’re going to be a hero, Jake. Just a shame that nobody will ever know about it!’

‘Ah well,’ I replied, ‘the pros and cons of being in the Special Forces!’

We laughed again and it did not take long for the Major to return to us. ‘They want you to debrief back in London and explain exactly what happened direct to Ministry of Defence. You’ve apparently caused quite a storm in Whitehall, a good storm for us though. Nobody can actually believe what you’re saying by the sound of it so they want to hear it first-hand. Flight departs at eighteen hundred hours.’

‘Yes, sir.’

We stood and saluted and made our way back to our own rooms where I decided to grab some more sleep. Another thing you quickly learn in the S.A.S., if you get an opportunity to sleep, take it!

*

None of us had much with us when we left for the small airfield. We would be flown in a small plane five hundred kilometres south-west to Kabul where we would connect with a military transport which would fly us directly back to R.A.F. Brize Norton, just west of Oxford. From there, a helicopter would fly us to London and we were expected to be at the M.O.D. at nine a.m. the next morning.

The flights were straight forward enough. Fayzabad has its own small airfield to the northwest of the town and we only had to wait an hour in Kabul for the next

plane to depart. That flight also passed smoothly and after seven hours we touched down at Brize Norton where a helicopter was waiting for us. That took us straight into London and then a car from the heliport to Whitehall where the Ministry had booked us hotel rooms.

When we had checked-in I went up to my room and everything had been provided for me. Toiletries, a change of casual clothes and a suit, shirt and tie for the meeting in the morning. They were all the correct size. The military and Ministry could be a large cumbersome machine, slow and unresponsive, but when it needed to be it could move quickly and efficiently as evidenced by our quick and efficient extraction for Afghanistan to a plush hotel room in Whitehall with all services slickly provided.

I slept well that night after another long, hot shower (another thing you take and be thankful for when you are in the Special Forces – hot showers!) and I was up and awake at five a.m. Somebody had also kindly provided running gear for me, shorts, t-shirt, thin jacket and a nice pair of Asics trainers all of which fitted perfectly. Whoever had planned this knew me well.

I put the kit on and exited the hotel, turned left down Whitehall then left again over Westminster Bridge. I then ran north along the Southbank, following the river, which then slowly turns due east. I ran quickly until Millennium Bridge and stopped on the bridge to soak in the view of St. Paul's and the City. I continued over the Bridge past St. Paul's itself, into the heart of the City, past the Guild Hall and along Gresham Street and in fact I actually went past the Gallatronics building on London Wall. Then I turned and ran on a south west course until I reached the river again and I followed it this time on the Northbank, past Somerset House, The Savoy, Embankment, all the way back to the hotel. It was good to be back in London. It had been too long.

We all met in the lobby of the hotel at eight forty-five and to say I was surprised to see Imogen stood in reception in full immaculate uniform would be an understatement.

'Where the hell did you come from, erm, ma'am?!'

'Your flight was at eighteen hundred hours, mine was at fifteen hundred hours. Somebody had to organise things for you.'

'Right, yes. Quite. Thank you, ma'am.'

The other three then joined us and we walked the short distance to the Ministry. It did not surprise me when we arrived that we were split up and led to different rooms. They wanted to question us separately to make sure we all gave the same story. A bit silly really because if we were lying we were S.A.S. soldiers, we would have got our story straight on the way over here, and we could certainly handle some simple questions given to us by some Whitehall pen pushers.

After spending the next few hours in the same room being asked the same questions by various civil servants I started to get bored and then irritated. It was difficult to relax after being on edge for weeks and being stuck in the same room with various people who had never seen a frontline in their lives was starting to grate on me.

Eventually the questions stopped and I was led into another room where I met the other three and Imogen and where lunch was laid out for us. We ate but did

not talk much other than to complain to each other about the tedium of the repetitive process.

When an hour had passed in this room a man entered and at least he was in uniform with the rank of Colonel on his epaulettes. ‘Gentlemen, if you would please follow me. Please bring any personal items with you as you will not be returning to the Ministry.’

I shrugged my shoulders having brought nothing with me and Mitch and Austin sighed and Austin asked, ‘Where to now, sir? I’m pretty bored of having the same questions asked of me over and over again.’ The Lieutenant did not say anything. I think he was missing his XZ918!

‘Please follow me gentlemen and lady.’

Mitch and Austin sighed again however we all reluctantly stood up from the table and followed the Colonel out of the Ministry onto Richmond Terrace. I was expecting him to take us to a car so he surprised me when he turned right and started to walk along Richmond Terrace back towards Whitehall. We crossed Whitehall and proceeded to the black gates of Downing Street.

With a flourish of identification by the Colonel, the armed policeman allowed us to enter Downing Street through one of the pedestrian gates and we made our way quickly along the street and stopped outside Number Ten where another policeman checked the Colonel’s identification then allowed us to enter. All four of us gave each other a look with a few raised eyebrows between us. We followed the Colonel into Number Ten.

The Colonel did not stop as he entered the hallway and walked up the main staircase which wound its way past the pictures of the former Prime Ministers which were hung on the walls. When we reached the first landing the Colonel opened a door which led us into a large room which was sumptuously decorated and reminded me of many of the rooms in my family’s mansion. On the floor was a large Persian carpet and on the wall above the large marble fireplace was a painting of Elizabeth the First. The Colonel instructed us to take a seat and wait which we duly did. Imogen had remained downstairs.

We were only kept waiting for ten minutes when the doors at the far end of the room opened and the Prime Minister walked in. We all gave each other another quick look of surprise; I expected to meet some high-ranking government official not the Prime Minister himself, then we all stood and saluted.

‘Gentlemen, a pleasure to meet you. Please, at ease.’ He walked across the thick carpet and shook each of us by the hand. ‘Please, be seated.’ He paused briefly and looked each of us in the eyes. ‘Gentlemen, you have caused me some problems today!’

Shit, I thought. Not the best start!

‘I had my day fully planned out then I received a phone call from the Minister of Defence saying that I had to urgently read a report that he had just emailed to me about Afghanistan. I refused saying I had no time however he insisted and boy, am I glad I did! I of course know that our Special Forces operate in Afghanistan, I sign the orders after all! What I did not know was the monumental success our Special Forces are having over there! When I read the report of what you accomplished in the last few days my mouth was agape. Which was of you is

Sergeant Gallagher?’ I hesitantly raised my hand. ‘What you did was the craziest, bravest, insanest thing I think I’ve ever read! When I read the report and I heard you were already in London being debriefed well I decided that I just had to meet you all! What an amazing, amazing success! We and the Americans have been after Anbari for years, and the other four leaders for that matter. To get them in one fell swoop is, well, amazing!’

‘Thank you, sir. It means a lot to us to receive acknowledgement of our work,’ said the Lieutenant, ‘especially when what we do is always top secret.’

‘Not this time soldier! We’re going to make this public! Of course, keeping your names secret. How does that sound? Such a momentous success deserves to be made public and will show the public the ongoing importance of our Special Forces. Of course, it will be amazing for public relations and really show the great British taxpayer how their taxes are contributing to the ongoing success of our armed forces!’

Great. He is politicising the death of four of our fellow soldiers.

‘Of course, we will make direct reference to the sacrifice made by the four soldiers who unfortunately did not return however that should not detract from your success!’

He went on for another ten minutes or so along the same lines of how amazing our success will be for the general public to be made aware of, which translated as the Prime Minister will be getting more votes for our work and sacrifice, and then dropped the bombshell. He looked at me and said, ‘Jacob, I’m going to recommend that you be awarded the Victoria Cross for your actions.’

I was shocked. ‘But sir, I thought the Victoria Cross could only be awarded posthumously?’

‘No, no. Plenty of men have been awarded them without dying. A few have even been awarded two! You can’t get two if you died the first time!’

‘But sir, I’m very honoured, but I wasn’t even wounded. I came away without a scratch and...’

‘Which just shows how brave and skilful you were in your extreme devotion to duty in presence of the enemy. Now, we are going to do a full media release in time for tomorrow’s papers. We would like to take a picture of you ideally in military uniform. Of course, of course, we will blank out your faces. Nancy? Nancy?’ Through one of the side doors in the room a woman entered who was around fifty years old. ‘Ah, here you are. Now please show these men to the rooms where they can change. The photographer will take our pictures in the garden.’

The Lieutenant tried to speak up for us. ‘Sir, erm, with all due respect, I don’t think this is a good idea. My men are still feeling quite upset about the whole experience and...’

‘Yes, yes. Quite. Totally understandable. We will convene in five in the garden then.’

With that the Prime Minister left the room and left us with Nancy. Austin spoke for us all.

‘This is fucked up, sir.’ He leapt out of his chair. ‘Alex is still fucking warm buried under tons of rock in Afghanistan!’

‘I know, I know. What can we do? That’s the Prime Minister, our ultimate boss. We do what he says.’

‘Fuck THIS!’

Austin kicked his chair which went tumbling backwards across the Persian rug much to Nancy’s surprise.

‘Erm, right. Shall we go to the room where you can change? The Prime Minister does not like to be kept waiting,’ she said.

Austin walked over and righted the chair. ‘I want you to know that I am following this order against my will and under severe duress.’

‘We all are, Austin,’ I whispered. ‘We all are.’

‘He’s doing this for votes and votes only. He doesn’t give two shits about Alex or the others!’

‘I agree but we have no choice. Let’s just do this and then we can get the hell out of here,’ said the Lieutenant.

‘This is proper, proper fucked UP!’

Austin then walked over to a door and flung it open and was in the process of walking through the doorway when, calm as you like, Nancy said, ‘This way please,’ and led us out of another door.

Austin sighed and cursed again and followed us into another corridor and then into another room where military fatigues were laid out for us.

Austin continued to mutter and curse however he reluctantly got changed along with the rest of us and when we were ready we left the room and followed Nancy back down through Number Ten to the gardens at the rear.

I was surprised to see the Prime Minister’s wife was there too, it was clear that she had just come out to gawk at us. The photographer was making some final checks to his equipment and after a few moments he lined us all up, the Prime Minister in the middle with two of us on each side of him.

When the photographer had taken only a few shots he announced he was done and that he would send this directly to his studio where our faces would be blanked out and they would be ready in an hour for inclusion within the full press release. The Prime Minister nodded his approval and then turned to look at us all.

‘I really do respect the sacrifice and bravery you have all shown. My thoughts are with the families of those who did not make it and I will be speaking to their families personally over the next few days.’

He shook all our hands again and then said, ‘Unfortunately I have to dash, due in Parliament in fifteen minutes. It was an absolute pleasure to meet you all. I will leave you in the capable hands of Nancy again.’

And with that he walked across the garden with an arm around his wife’s shoulders and then he was gone.

‘This is proper, proper fucked up. Get me the hell out of here.’

We all nodded our agreement to Austin’s statement and followed Nancy back through the house.

Needless to say, that night we all got very, very drunk. Even Imogen had a few drinks with us and yet again I failed in my conquest of her.

Chapter 74

And that is all I am allowed to tell you about my time in the S.A.S. and I am only allowed to tell you this because true to the Prime Minister's word the story was all over the papers and television the next day.

It was the first and only S.A.S. mission I was able to tell my family about and they attended the award ceremony where the four of us were awarded the Conspicuous Gallantry Cross, the second highest combat gallantry award.

As none of us were actually injured in the operation we were not deemed worthy of receiving the Victoria Cross however Alex was awarded it posthumously which laid to rest some of our demons about the whole publicity situation.

The irony was not lost on me that it was Brigadier Kaye Faber-Jones who presented us with our Crosses in a lavish ceremony at the Ministry of Defence. Thankfully, Katherine wasn't there.

After the ceremony I was assigned to personal protection again much to my disgust however it did mean spending time in London which meant I could spend time with my family. My first duty was the Queen again as she travelled around the United Kingdom which was as interesting as usual.

For a more elderly lady old that woman has some stamina! Then it was protection of some Ministers which is always very tedious and boring however the workload was light so I decided to move back into the mansion for a few months and commute into Westminster from home.

It was good to be home for a few weeks after being away living in extreme conditions. It was nice to get up in the morning from a proper bed, have a hot shower then wander downstairs and have breakfast with my mum and grandad. Even Sophia put in the occasional appearance when she was not away on some modelling assignment in some exotic location.

She had just got back from the Seychelles where she pranced along a beach for a day having her picture taken for *Chanel* and she got paid for a day of prancing what I earn in a year. Still, like she said to me one morning when I rolled my eyes at her when she described her hard-working day, with my looks I could also be prancing along beaches and getting paid a fortune to prance. It was my choice to spend my days getting shot at. I suppose she had a point.

It was on one of these mornings that I noticed that my mum seemed more subdued than usual and indeed look visibly upset. Sophia as usual wittered away about something or other over breakfast and my grandad as usual just looked at her all starry eyed, hanging onto her every word. She was still and always would be his princess. Neither of them seemed to notice that Sally looked like she was about to burst into tears at any moment.

After all that had happened to my mum she had never seemed visibly upset about Sophia's tales of modelling and her successes. In fact, completely the opposite. She doted on her daughter and pushed her into taking as many modelling assignments as possible, always with the tag line that Sophia's looks would not last forever and that she should milk them for every penny she could get.

Now though she was clearly upset and when Sophia started to go on about whether she should take an acting job she had been offered my mum abruptly pushed herself away from the table, stood up and excused herself.

The two of them did not seem to notice she had left the table never mind that she had left the table upset, and indeed my grandad took Sophia's hand as she continued to witter on about something. I gave it a few minutes and then also excused myself and went to find my mum.

I wandered through the house to her bedroom and knocked lightly on her door. There was no answer so I carefully opened it and stepped into her room. The room was dark, the curtains drawn over all windows so I paused for a moment to let my eyes adjust to the gloom. I quietly said, 'Mum, are you here?' and there was no answer. I looked in her bathroom and also in her huge walk-in wardrobe but there was no sign of her.

It was when I returned to the room that I noticed the curtains over the French windows which led to her balcony were fluttering in the breeze so I walked over and stepped between them hoping to find her on the balcony. She was not there so I leaned on the wall of the balcony and looked out over the gardens.

It was then that I saw her walking slowly towards the far side of the gardens and to the outside wall of the mansion. I glanced down at my watch and saw the date and it was then I realised where she was going and why she was so upset.

It was the anniversary and none of us had remembered or comforted her.

What a kind and caring family we are.....

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I leapt down from the balcony and landed on the grass then followed her through the gardens to the outer wall of the estate. I remembered the code to the gate and jogged along the path to catch-up her up. I remembered many years ago that I had made the same journey and this time I did not want to be accused of spying.

I walked up the hill and was about to crest the hill when I heard her crying and sobbing. It broke my heart to hear that. I paused for a moment to compose myself then walked the rest of the hill into the clearing and saw my mum sat on the same log as before, crying her eyes out while looking down at the garage. Without saying a word I sat down next to her on the log and took her in my arms, letting her bury her head in my chest as her violent sobs racked her body.

She cried for what seemed like an eternity. I did my best to console her with soothing words but I knew I was rubbish at things like this. Slowly though she stopped sobbing and pushed herself away from me slightly and stared deeply into my eyes from only a few inches away.

'You remind me so much of him. You could be his twin.'

'That is surely not a good thing.'

'It is a good thing because you're not him, you're my son and I love you. I knew you would come to me. I know Sophia loves me but she is so... I couldn't deal with listening to her this morning.'

'I'm not surprised.'

She leaned away from me and stared down at the garage. ‘We loved each other so much. Everything was going so well and then everything to nothing in a heartbeat. I wish so much that I could go back in time and stop David driving that day. If only I had driven, or Simon, or that bitch Sarah had spiked somebody else’s drink instead of David’s drink...’

‘I know mum but look how things have turned out now. You have two wonderful children; your relationship with grandad has never been stronger. Everything is going well.’

‘No, not everything. There is something not right.’

‘Tell me and I’ll make sure it is put right.’

‘It has been twenty years you know. I suppose that is why I am extra upset this morning. Twenty years he has been out there, living his life as a free man. He has never been caught or punished for what he has done to me and others.’ She paused, hesitated for a moment, but I knew what was coming. ‘Can you find him, Jacob? Can you find him for us, for the family, and put an end to this? Your training, right, in the S.A.S., you can survive in the wilderness and find him?’

‘I can survive out there mum, yes, but there is no guarantee he is still there, there is no guarantee he’s still alive. It has been nearly twenty years, hasn’t it, since any trace of him was found?’

‘I know he’s still there, I know he’s still out there, somewhere. I can feel it, I just know, and it kills me to know he’s still alive and living his life in freedom.’

‘I’ve been thinking about requesting a six-month sabbatical from the S.A.S. and who knows maybe a permanent sabbatical...’ I paused for a moment and looked at her. I was sat on her right-hand side so I could not see her scars and even now at forty-eight she was still stunningly beautiful. It broke my heart to know what that monster had done to her and all the others, how he tore our family apart.

I knew in my heart that what she was asking me to do was futile. He had been gone for so long and despite my grandad using his immense resources nothing had ever been found of him. What could I do out there? What could one man do? I had to try though, for the family, for my mum.

‘I’ll do it, mum. I’ll go out there and I will do my best to find him or at least confirm he’s dead. We all need closure, we all finally need closure.’

She took my hand and kissed me on the cheek. ‘Find him. For me. For us. For the family.’

I wanted to be all dramatic and say something along the lines of, ‘I will not stop until I find him. I will hunt night and day through the deserts until I find him and kill him and bring you his head on a plate!’

I could not say that though. I knew the challenge that faced me and I knew that most likely it would be an impossible challenge. So rather limply all I came up with to say was, ‘All I can promise is that I will do my best.’

She nodded and turned away from me and looked down at the garage. ‘You’ll find him, I know you will. And you will kill him for us. That will be the way this ends. It has to be. It will be the perfect ending to this horrible story for all of us.’