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Damascus Redemption

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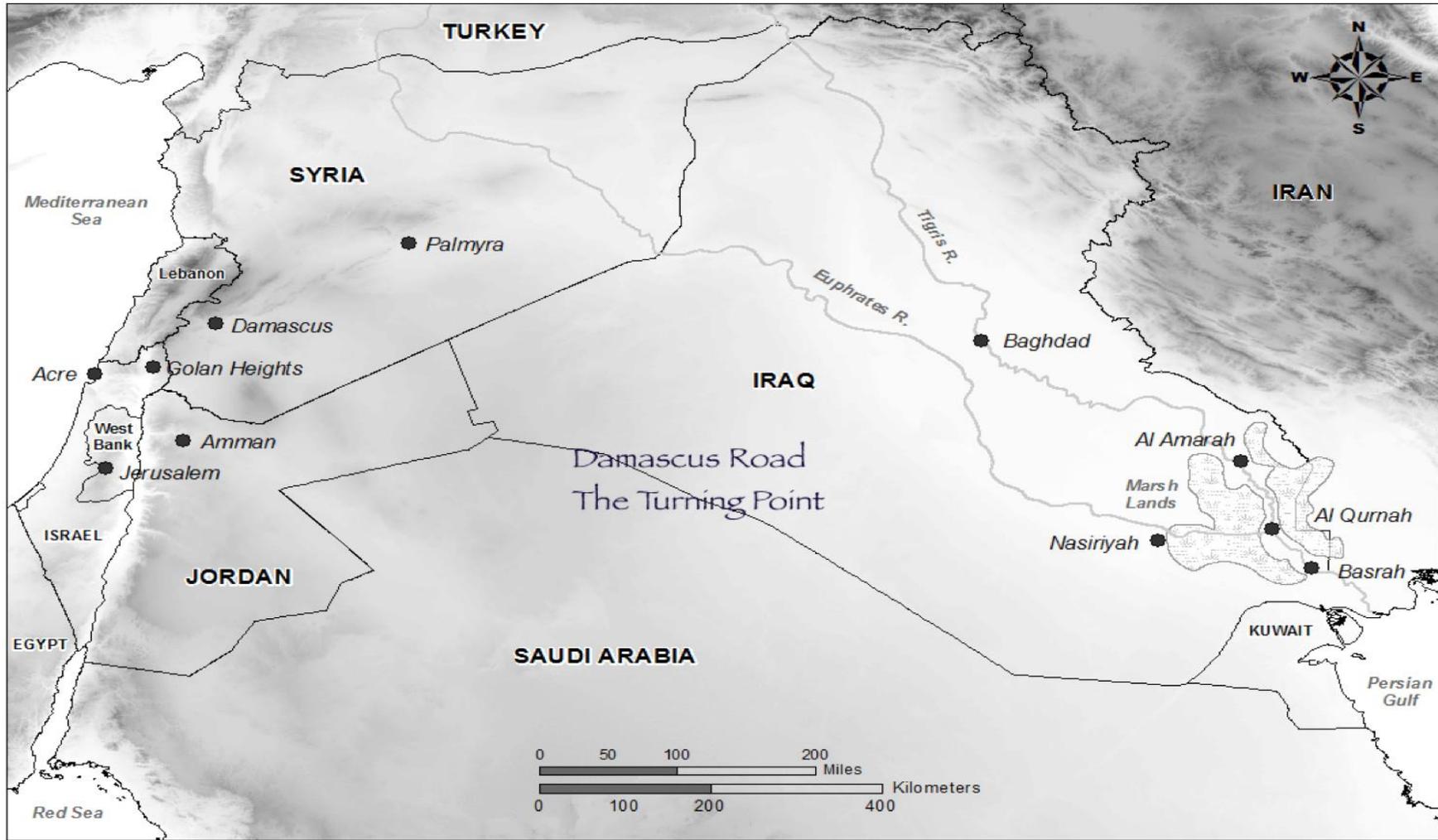
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ISBN to follow.....

For my father



Prologue

The two children stood at the entrance of the temple, their silhouettes lost against the backdrop of the large wooden door that the youngest now closed behind them. ‘Sssshhhh,’ the girl whispered in annoyance with her brother as the *click* of the lock engaged, breaking the silence.

Determined now not to utter another sound, they both stood perfectly still, trying to control their breathing, their small chests heaving from the boisterous play. They watched as the robed figure at the other end of the temple conducted the ceremony. Despite their youth, they had seen this performed many times.

The sword was held aloft in praise. The sun’s rays, finding their way through the building’s reed walls, glinted on its highly polished surface, as the robed figure - uttering words that neither child understood - offered the ancient weapon to the stone box set in the centre of the small, crimson-dressed altar.

As the silence settled once more, the girl grabbed her brother’s shoulder. She pushed an index finger to her lips in an attempt to control his bubbling energy. The boy, annoyed at the interruption, brushed her hand aside and continued to watch. He replicated the actions of the priest with his own wooden, toy sword, observing, enthralled, as the ceremony drew to a close. The priest placed the sword on a bed of lambskin, the soft leather sheet covering the cold steel as more unknown words filled the silent void.

The robed figure turned, his face agitated at having been disturbed. But, at the moment he recognised the two intruders, their innocence framed so perfectly against the heavy wooden door at the end of the nave, his scowl vanished, replaced by a loving smile. ‘Come,’ he said, as he

dropped to one knee and stretched out his arms, 'Come, Rachel. Come, John. Come to Papa.'

John, now exempted from the usual protocol of the Holy place, needed no second invitation. He rushed forward, the noise of his bare feet slapping on the cool stone slabs. His footfall was amplified by the vaulted ceiling which was held in place by a row of woven reed columns, their thickness supporting the arched ceiling many metres above his head. Rachel took a little longer to reach her father, her progress more dignified, the extra two years conferring on her a consciousness yet to appear in her younger brother.

'How are my two special people?' he said as he embraced them both. 'What have you been up to today?'

'We went out into the Marshes,' John answered, unable to curb his excitement. 'In Uncle Peter's boat. I caught a fish, didn't I, Rachel?'

'Yes, Papa, he caught a fish,' replied Rachel. 'And he wants Mama to cook it for supper.'

'Can we, Papa? Can we have it for supper?' asked John.

'We will have to check with your mother first. But.... I can't see why not,' he said, as he stood up, taking their small hands in his. 'Come, let's go and ask her.'

The three stepped out into the late afternoon sunlight, the midday heat waning, dissipated by the cooling breeze that blew in from the Marshes, making the abundant reeds bend and their baggy clothes billow. 'When will I start to do the ceremonies?' John asked as he skipped alongside his father, wooden sword in hand.

'When you're bigger,' replied his father.

'How much bigger?' John continued. 'Will I know the words by then?'

'I didn't know the words at your age either. But don't worry; I will teach you, like my father taught me.'

The village was coming to life as the Iraqi sun ebbed, the more strenuous chores of the day easier to accomplish at this enabling time. The animals knew what was to come, now becoming restless, their calls more frequent as their expectations grew, signalled by the fading light. This was the time of the day that John loved. His work done, he could return home, spend time with the children and help his wife as she prepared the evening meal. He loved the village; it was his world, and as its Elder, he was in charge of it. He had no additional privileges for being their leader; his house was of the same ancient design, with the same adobe walls and thatched roof as all the rest; it was no bigger. There were no trinkets on display, for these were simple people. There was however a reward, a prize that he never mentioned, but which he was reminded of every time he looked at his two children. They were his bloodline, the direct decedents of the knight that had come from the West over 800 years previously. They were the future of the Masahuin.

‘So, was *your* father called John?’ asked the child as he looked up with large, inquisitive blue eyes.

‘Yes, he was. And he named me John. And you will name your son John also. It is our tradition. The eldest boy in our family is always named after Sir John, the knight that came and delivered our people, the Masahuin, to Jesus.’

The boy nodded in answer, his six-year-old brain absorbing the information as best it could.

Rachel stopped dead in her tracks and pointed at a dark speck which, although low on the horizon, was clearly visible. Its shape struck against the clear blue sky as it skimmed across the reeds in the foreground. ‘What is it, Papa?’

He knew what it was. There had been more and more of them, their presence increasing above the sea of marshes that surrounded the Masahuin village. They had been there since Saddam had begun his fight with the Americans, after the invasion of Kuwait. Some of the young Masahuin had gone to fight in the uprising in Basrah, their youthful enthusiasm uncurbed even by their pleading mothers, who now waited in anguish for their offspring’s homecoming. Some had already returned among the flotsam of men who had dared to stand up against the Iraqi

President. He knew that no good would come of it. He knew that the ancient tradition of letting the marshes protect them was diminishing. He acknowledged that the outsiders they'd already sheltered would now tell of the mysterious people living deep in the marshes, and of their strange customs. But what could he do? The code of chivalry given to them by the knight said that they must comfort those who are in need and protect them until they are able to protect themselves. They had fulfilled this instruction, but he knew that his community was made vulnerable by it; these aircraft that could hover like birds of prey over locations to which formerly only the skilled Masahuin had been able to navigate.

'RUN,' he shouted as the solitary speck turned into a swarm, the low drone of engines clearly audible, as several aircraft headed directly for them. 'RUN. Run to the house. Tell your mother to stay there until I return.'

'Where are you going, Papa?' Rachel cried, looking back at her father.

'I must go to the temple. I have to protect the Secret. You'll be safe. Now, GO!'

He watched as the two figures disappeared into the house, then turned, and ran. Horrified, as the ground all around him began to erupt with plumes of dust, as bullets struck the loose surface, he stumbled, his legs unable to keep up with the adrenalin being pumped through his body, his mass skidding to an ungainly halt as the dark belly of the helicopter passed over him. He watched as what appeared to be an oil drum was jettisoned from the fuselage. The cylinder tumbled through an awkward trajectory, hanging in the air for what seemed like minutes before it gave in to gravity and smashed into a house fifty metres ahead of him. For a second, there was nothing except the stink of petrol. The explosion was huge.

I am in hell, he thought, as he watched the fireball devour everything in its path, the power of the inferno even sucking the air out of his lungs. *Lord, what have we done to deserve this?* he mouthed as he fell unconscious.

Chapter One

09.30hrs, May 5, 2007, Belgrave Square, London

The call on his mobile phone the previous evening had come up as ‘number withheld.’ He hadn’t answered - he didn’t like surprises - and had let it ring out. Minutes later, his phone had registered a message. The caller hadn’t left his name. There was no need; although this was a voice he hadn’t heard in over six years, there was no mistaking the thick Glaswegian accent. ‘Mason,’ it said, ‘I need to see you tomorrow. Come to my office first thing. Fifty-One Belgrave Square. It’s urgent.’

His finger had hovered above the *delete* button. And, on any other night, annoyed at the intrusion, he would have pressed it. But, for some reason – maybe only curiosity - he didn’t delete it. He’d known this man all his adult life, but couldn’t guess what ‘urgent’ might mean. *He’s up to something.*

Mason had been on his own for years - got used to his own company. Was he feeling lonely now? Craving his past life? What was it about this message that intrigued him? It would have been so easy to let it go – as easy as sleeping in when you could hear the rain lashing against the window – as easy as dodging the early morning run you’d promised yourself. In the end, he decided to leave it to fate. ‘*First thing?*’ Well, *if I wake up in time, that’s the sign*, he said, as he pulled the covers over.

Mason counted off the numbers of the plush stuccoed houses that fronted onto the affluent West London street. Recognising the number in front of him as the one in the message, he climbed the small flight of marbled steps and paused, staring at his faceless reflection in the highly

polished black Georgian panelled door that stood between two ornate pillars.

He took the note from his pocket and checked its details with those of the brass plaque to the right of the door, its well-attended finish gleaming in the early morning sunshine. He let out a long sigh. The black enamelled letters on the plaque were clearly visible: 'Target Security, 51 Belgrave Square'. *This is the place*, he said to himself, looking around, taking in the location. On either side of the Target building were other grand Georgian structures, their ornate balconies draped with flags that fluttered in the light morning breeze. He recognised one of the flags straight away: the pale blue and white stripes of Argentina. The dark green flag on the building to the right taking longer to identify, a gust of wind finally revealing the white crescent moon and star of Pakistan.

This is about as respectable you can get. So JJ O'Hare is rubbing shoulders with ambassadors in one of the most prestigious areas in London. This property must be costing him a fortune. I knew he'd gone out on his own. I heard he's doing well. But this is...unbelievable.

He was rooted to the spot as the anger grew inside him. He felt like he was back in school, summoned by the headmaster. *Who the hell does he think he is?* he said to himself. He made a fist with his right hand, crushing the note into a ball, throwing it at the door before storming off.

At the road junction he was still consumed with his feelings. He walked straight out into the busy morning traffic, only coming to his senses when a cab was forced to swerve, giving him a long piercing blast of its horn.

Mason jumped back onto the pavement, his anger now directed at the cab driver, who he could see driving off into the distance, his arm out of the window, right middle finger pointing skyward.

He stood at the kerb and watched the surge of black cabs, red buses and four-by-fours pass in front of him, looking for a gap to dash into. There was none. As he waited, he was engulfed by diesel fumes, the acrid smell from the countless exhausts bringing him to his senses, his anger subsiding.

So where are you going in such a hurry anyway? Okay, you haven't seen him for ages. Sure, you didn't like him then, and it's doubtful you will like him now. But you're not exactly spoilt for options at

the moment, are you? Why don't you see what he has to say; there's no harm in that. Calmed, he retraced his steps.

He walked back up the marble steps and onto the portico and pressed the intercom. 'Target Security,' answered a metallic voice, 'How can I help you?'

'I have a meeting with JJ O'Hare.'

'And your name, please...?'

'Mason'.

'Ah yes, Mr Mason. Mr O'Hare is expecting you. Please come in.'

The buzzer sounded. Mason pushed the door, stepped over the crushed note, and entered JJ's world.

As the door closed behind him, he realised that he could go no further, his way blocked by a Perspex screen. A polite but authoritative voice spoke: 'Mr Mason, please empty your pockets and place the contents in the tray to your right. Then step forward into the cubicle.' As he entered the transparent chamber, the door closed behind him with a click. The nozzles that lined the confined area began to hiss as they analysed the air within.

Checking for explosive residue. This is advanced. I bet even MI5 doesn't have this yet.

'Okay, Mr Mason. You can step through now. Collect your belongings and make your way over to the receptionist,' the guard continued, pointing to Mason's left, where three ladies wearing headsets were chatting away with polished accents.

One of the receptionists looked up at him. 'Hello, Mr Mason,' she said, with a smile, as he approached.

'It's just Mason, thanks,' he said, returning her pleasantry.

'Yes... Mr O'Hare will see you shortly. Please take a seat.'

The waiting area was to the left of the reception desk. It had three black leather chrome legged sofas laid out in a hollow square. In the middle was a coffee table, adorned with the obligatory waiting room magazines. On the sofas sat five men so busy filling out forms that they were unaware of Mason as he sat down.

He reached over and picked up the nearest magazine from the glass-topped table, checking out his waiting companions as he did so. They were all wearing badges, the black felt-tip scrawl displaying their

first names. Four of them had shaved heads and were dressed in badly fitting suits, each man unknowingly tugging at his shirt collar in an attempt to gain comfort. *Bought in a hurry, especially for the today, I bet... These are no businessmen.*

He continued to scan the room, his eyes resting on the man who sat on the end of the sofa to his left. It was difficult to gauge his height, but he was big: over six feet tall, with dark skin - the type that came from sun beds - and wore his blonde hair long, over the collar, with an earring in his right lobe. Mason estimated he was in his late twenties. He was dressed casually - the only one of the five not in a suit - and his clothing seemed to have been bought a size too small. His jeans and T shirt struggled to cover an expanse of muscle he seemed eager to flex at every opportunity. His jaw, large and over pronounced, tensed as he pondered over the form. *Steroids... has to be. The other guys are ex-military, but this one... I don't know.*

Mason's bemusement was turning to intrigue. He threw the magazine hard onto the table and waited, ready to gauge the men's reaction. Only one of them looked up. The rest were so engrossed in their clerical task that they remained oblivious to his test. One of the men was in his forties, with 'Steve' written neatly in capitals on the white patch of his lapel. His skin was pink and heavy, telling of a life of over-indulgence, the coloured stripes on his tie alluding to a military past. He looked at Mason, the two men exchanging a nod before his concentration returned to his form.

Mason's eyes shifted to the young suntanned man. As he studied him further the man looked up and caught his eye. 'Rob, mate,' the man said, offering his hand, 'but everyone calls me Thor.' As they shook, Mason noticed that he had a Viking's helmet tattoo on his right bicep, with the name 'THOR' above it.

'You Scandinavian, then?' asked Mason.

'No, mate. I'm from Watford'.

Mason nodded, as he let go of the powerful grip. 'Yes... yes... of course,' he said, turning away in an attempt to end the conversation.

None of the other men in the waiting area had given Thor much attention. He had tried to be polite, but each one had given him the cold shoulder. Mason's brief acknowledgment of him had been welcome. Thor

was the type who needed to talk when he was nervous, and boy was he nervous.

‘You here for a job in Iraq then?’ asked Thor, desperately trying to keep the conversation alive.

‘Maybe.’

‘I saw the advert in a body guard magazine,’ he continued. ‘Didn’t realise that people would be taking it so seriously, you know, suits and all,’ he said, nodding towards the four men who were still writing away.

‘Iraq is a serious place’ replied Mason.

‘Yeah...yeah, I know that. My mate is out there now, he tells me everything. The bombs, the shootings, everything. He’s a good guy. We were doormen together.’

Mason held up his hand in a sign to stop the conversation. ‘Did you just say doormen?’

‘Yeah, we both are. Work the clubs in Watford.’

‘So, not military?’

‘Naaah... nearest I’ve been to a gun is the army cadets when I was fourteen.’

Mason sat back. He could see it now. It made sense. ‘You look like a doorman,’ he said.

‘Thanks,’ replied Thor, tensing a bicep in gratitude.

‘So, let me get this straight,’ Mason said as he sat forward. ‘You’re here because you answered an ad in a magazine. And if you pass the interview, you’re going to join your doorman friend in Iraq?’

‘Yeah. That’s it.’

Mason sat back into the leather sofa, looked at the ceiling and exhaled. He looked again at the men who were still grappling with the written forms. He was out of practice; he knew that. While constantly on operations, the men of the SAS developed an additional sense: instinct, intuition: call it what you will. The outcome was the same; Mason and the men he worked with could *read* a room, or any other environment for that matter. Situational awareness, they called it. It was the ability to pick up on things virtually hidden from the untrained eye.

He looked again at the four men still struggling away with the biro pens. They were ex-military. That was a given. But they were well into their forties. And, from the way the buttons were straining on their newly bought suits, it was apparent they hadn’t seen the inside of a gym in a

decade. *These guys are well past their sell by date*, he mused, as his eyes came back to rest on the prize of the bunch: Thor. *What the hell is JJ playing at?*

‘Are you okay, mate?’ asked Thor, noticing that Mason had put his hands over his face.

Thor’s question broke the spell. Curiosity had led him here. But it wasn’t doing very much for him now. *Fuck this, I’m off*, he thought, as he got up and headed for the exit.

The receptionists gave a puzzled look as he strode by their desk. But he didn’t even give them a second look; he wasn’t playing their game anymore. Stopping at the exit, he motioned to the guard to open the door, the curved Perspex sheet taking what seemed like an age before producing enough gap to allow his departure.

As he neared the heavy polished external doors, a booming voice from behind stopped him in his tracks. ‘Hey, Mason, where you going?’ The words hung in the air, as the whole office paused at their labour and looked at the two men.

JJ closed on Mason with measured steps. He could read the body language and sense the tension. He noted Mason’s stance: his left shoulder pointed directly at the *threat*, a telltale sign of his annoyance, of his willingness to fight. As he got closer, he held up both his hands, a disarming gesture that humans have used since primordial times. It worked. They shook hands, the tension eased.

‘Where you off to? I was looking forward to a chat,’ said JJ as he took in the appearance of the man he hadn’t seen for over six years. He noted how Mason’s sandy-blond hair was going grey at the edges. And he was now carrying a few more pounds over his six-foot frame. But the nose was still crooked - broken in a long forgotten fight - and the steel blue eyes were still as intense as the first time he had seen them when they had looked up at him from beneath a layer of blood and dirt, on a god forsaken hill in the South Atlantic.

‘You know me, JJ. Can’t sit still for a minute.’

‘Hey...now you’ve got here, why don’t we have a wee chat... Come on... for old time’s sake. What ya say?’ JJ had stopped his prey from bolting, but he wasn’t home yet. ‘Not here, of course,’ JJ said as he slipped his left arm around Mason’s back and ushered him forward. ‘Upstairs in my office. Ya fancy a coffee?’

Mason took a step forward, allowing JJ the impression that he had successfully placated him. They were playing a game; he knew that; he wasn't stupid. Why not let JJ think that he had won.

The first floor office was large, its width spanning the whole of the front of the building. In front of the glass panelled French doors that opened onto a balcony, with a magnificent view of Belgrave Square, stood an antique desk, its red leather top and gold-inlay, a perfect match for the heavy red carpet and the thick velvet curtains whose swags and tails cascaded down the Georgian frescoed walls.

'What do you think of my office, then? I've just had it refurbished,' JJ said as he closed the oak panelled doors behind them, 'and the desk is an antique. Some French King used to sit behind it,' he continued in his thick Glaswegian accent.

JJ was five years older than Mason. But, unlike the other SAS soldier, he had never been known for his good looks. His DNA - and too many street brawls as a kid - had scuppered any chance of him growing handsome, the long scar on his forehead an obvious testament to his harsh upbringing. He was not a vain man, but he was justifiably proud of his shock of fiery red hair, which matched his temper. His legendary fury had been unleashed on many occasions in the quiet agricultural city of Hereford, the SAS's home. He was shorter than Mason - five-foot-eight, to Mason's six-foot - and his barrel chest gave him a disproportioned appearance. But it allowed him a strength that few men possessed - a strength Mason was reminded of with his vice-like grip.

Mason put his hands on his hips and took in the surroundings. 'Yes, very nice, JJ. A tad austere for my liking, but I can see where you're coming from,' Mason said, aiming to dent the Glaswegian's bravado.

The comment had the desired effect; the wind slightly blown out of his sails, JJ offered 'I've been rude... Sorry'. Eager to change the subject, he continued. 'Let me introduce you guys. Mason, this is James.'

James stood behind the desk, looking out onto Belgrave Square, a ring binder in his hands, his back towards the two men. Mason had noticed him as he had walked in, and found it odd that he had not turned around. *Deep in thought? No. More likely a superiority complex with a large helping of arrogance,* Mason mused, as he analysed the man, who

even now only half turned his body in acknowledgment. *Tall, six foot, pin stripe suit – pressed to perfection. Black brogues; you could see your face in. Well ordered hair and moustache. Holds himself well. Ex-officer.* He had come across this type on many an occasion, the choice of cap badge known before he had even seen the red and blue diagonal stripes on his tie.

‘Guards?’ Mason asked.

‘1st Foot Guards... Grenadiers,’ James replied.

‘James is my overseas advisor. He knows everyone. Isn’t that right, Jimmy boy?’ added JJ.

‘I try, John,’ James replied with a detached tone, shifting his gaze from Mason and back to his paperwork.

Mason had been his own man since leaving the military, discovering that he could cope pretty well without the orders that had dictated his life for over twenty years. Only now, he found himself being lorded over by a man with whom he’d had a tense relationship for most of his military career. He was uncomfortable, and just wanted to get the meeting over with. ‘It’s good to see you, JJ, but I’m pretty sure you didn’t get me here to talk about interior design. You mentioned last night that it was urgent?’

‘Don’t you just love this guy?’ JJ motioned to James as he sat down behind his regal desk. ‘Straight down to business. That’s always been one of the things I’ve liked that about you, Mason. Okay, let’s cut to the chase: I need a *Blade* in Basra. I heard that you weren’t working, and I thought you might want to help out? It’s good money: a thousand bucks per day.’

‘What? Working with guys like those downstairs?’

‘Look... we’re expanding. I know that Target’s no SAS Squadron. But, with guys like you on board, we can take it in the right direction... yeah? Come on. Sit down. Let’s discuss it.’

‘The one guy downstairs is a fucking doorman, JJ. How can you justify that?’

JJ sat back in his chair, his anger growing. He had built up Target from nothing into a multi million pound company. He’d done it his way, and he didn’t have to justify anything - not to anyone. ‘You’re right,’ he answered, using all his willpower to control the Celtic rage now building

within him. 'That's exactly why I want you onboard. You'd be the head of training. By passing on your knowledge and experience, you'd actually be helping them survive.'

Mason knew that JJ wanted something different from him; that was the whole idea behind this meeting. He'd always been the same. Whenever he spoke to guys in the Regiment, they all knew he was after something; there was always an agenda. There was no way that Mason would consider going out on the ground with a bunch of wannabes. That was out of the question. But training? He hadn't seen this one coming; it was a curveball.

'Look, pal... I know it's a big ask. But, in the end, you might end up saving lives,' JJ said as he sat back in his chair, his rage replaced by the poise of a man about to win the hand.

'When do you need to know by?' asked Mason.

I've got him, JJ thought, as he picked up an expensive fountain pen from the leather desktop, and slowly unscrewed the top. 'Today... in fact...' he paused, glancing at his wristwatch. 'I need to know now... The plane leaves this afty.'

'I need to make a few phone calls,' Mason lied. 'Can you give me an hour?'

'Aye. No problem... but can you do me a favour: let the wee girls downstairs know. James and I have a ton of stuff to go through.'

'That's very magnanimous of you, John,' James said as he dropped the file on top of the desk. 'For a second there, I thought you were going to lose it. There are plenty of ex-SAS guys out there. Why bend over for this one?'

'He's different,' JJ answered, screwing the top back onto the fountain pen. 'We called him 'Lucky'... Did over twenty years in 22 SAS. All of those: dodgy operations.' He hesitated, his mind wandering. 'Do you know there is a clock up in 'H' with a load of names carved on it for guys that never made it back?' He didn't wait for the answer; his ramble intended mostly for himself anyway. 'The guys that came back 'beat the clock'. But Lucky? He never got a bloody scratch. There was a pipe bomb in Armagh: Crossmaglen, I think it was. Landed right in the middle of a group of the lads. Thing went off, killed one, seriously injured two.'

Mason had a chunk out of his Kevlar helmet. That was it. Unbelievable, like some sort of divine bloody intervention.'

'So, what's he been up to lately, then?'

'Ah well... that's a sad story. He had some bad luck a few years ago... lost his family. Word is that he held himself responsible. Wheels fell off. Climbed into a bottle to try to forget.'

'Is that wise, JJ?' James asked as he sat on the corner of the desk. 'Do you want to risk getting a drunk involved when you're so close to selling Target? You've done really well so far. MI6 are mightily impressed. As you well know, there were serious doubts at first. But you're proving them all wrong; Target's services have been a good investment for everyone involved.'

'We need to find that bloody wellhead before any sale. That's the deal, remember? And, with our friend Lucky on board, that has just become a lot more likely.'

'But I thought he was just doing the training?'

'Jimmy... Jimmy... Jimmy, you need to trust me. I'm good at reading people: finding out what motivates them, makes them tick. I've known Mason for ages; I know exactly what buttons to press. Today, he thinks he's in charge of training. But give him a couple of weeks... And he'll be end up running the whole show. He won't be able to stop himself.'

JJ nodded at the photograph that stood proudly on the desk: a black and white picture of a bunch of dishevelled soldiers, all with beaming smiles, 'Mount Longdon. That morning, after the battle, we were all just glad to be alive,' he said, picking up the picture. 'It was Mason's first action. He got the Military Medal,' JJ said, in grudging admiration, his voice tailing off to a whisper. 'Christ, it should have been a Victoria Cross'.

Mason gripped the handrail, taking the steps one at a time, allowing his brain to mull over the last twenty minutes of his life. *I can stay here and drink myself slowly to death... probably end up a drunk, stinking of piss in some gutter somewhere, or... I can go to Iraq. And if I die, at least I can do it with some dignity... die like a soldier after all. What have I got left anyway?... Nothing.*

By the time he reached the bottom step, he had his answer ready.

He walked towards the front desk, the receptionist again looking up, giving the same rehearsed smile.

‘Can I help you?’

He took a deep breath. ‘Tell JJ I’ll take the job,’ he answered.

‘Yes... Mr O’Hare said you would. Here are your tickets,’ she said, handing him a sealed brown envelope. ‘There is a cash advance in there also. Mr O’Hare said you would need it. The bus for the airport leaves from this office at seventeen-hundred hours... sharp.’

Mason walked towards the exit and he was soon outside in the morning sun. He slid a finger under the flap of the envelope and revealed the contents: a one-way ticket to Amman, Jordan and a thousand pounds in crisp fifty pound notes. His head was spinning. *I need to gather my thoughts. Where’s the nearest pub?*

He didn’t have to go far; the doors of the Rose and Crown had just opened, the staff busy arranging the outside furniture, ready for a new day’s trade. He sat down at the end of the bar, facing the door. *Controlling the room as always. Old habits* he thought as he scanned the shelves of the heavy dark wooden bar, its mirrored alcoves crammed with every type of spirit imaginable. ‘What can I get you?’ asked the barman as he closed on his first customer of the day.

‘I’ll have the Oban,’ he said, pointing at the bottle of single malt whisky, ‘make it a double.’ He picked up the tumbler and knocked back the straw colour liquid. ‘Another’ he asked, before the barman could replace the bottle. ‘Best leave it out, eh’ he said, placing a handful of fifties on the bar.

With the shot of alcohol satisfying his initial craving, he paused, cupped both his hands around the tumbler and brought it slowly up to his lips, savouring the bouquet of smoky peat and heather, his mind beginning to wander.

08.04hrs, June 12, 1982, Mount Longdon, Falkland Islands, Twenty-Five Years Earlier.

‘That’s the best brew I have ever had, Taff,’ Mason said as he took another sip of the brown liquid from the thin, steel mug. The heat which radiated into his fingers offered a small but welcome relief from the numbing cold that gripped his exhausted body.

‘Thanks, Mace. Any time for you, butt. My pleasure.’

Mason smiled and huddled closer to the Welshman. Both paras, desperate to shield themselves from the biting wind, had pushed their bodies into the small hollow at the base of a heavy rock outcrop, the aperture worn away by generations of sheep attempting the same practice against the unforgiving South Atlantic wind.

‘That was a bloody hard night, mate. I thought I was never going to get through it,’ Taff said, as Mason passed the mug back to him.

‘Well, you did - which is more than I can say for those poor sods,’ Mason said, as he gestured towards the bodies that lay in a neat row thirty metres or so to their left. Their lifelessness starkly cast by the sun as it climbed into the bitterly cold morning sky.

‘How many are ours?’ asked Taff, pulling up the collar of his para smock.

‘Three. The ones on the right. The stiffs on the left are Argies,’ replied Mason, watching two Argentinian prisoners place another of their fallen comrades in the growing line. The gaping wounds of each cadaver covered with a camouflaged shroud - the final use for the men’s waterproof ponchos, held in place against the buffeting wind with heavy rocks.

‘What the fuck is going on here?’ the figure shouted, his outline obscuring the macabre scene as he squared up to the two young paras.

‘We’re havin’ a brew,’ answered Taff.

‘I can see that, you fucking idiot. I’m on about over there,’ the man gestured with his thumb towards the prisoners. ‘And it’s fucking sergeant to you.’

‘They’re sorting out the dead,’ Mason answered, staring into the mug in an effort to escape the gory picture.

‘Are some of those our dead?’ the Sergeant asked.

‘Yeah. Three,’ replied Taff. ‘All got the good news from a machine gun that was in that trench over there. That’s right, innit, Mace,’ he said, pointing at the fighting position that had once commanded the approach to the summit, but which now lay torn apart, its interior smouldering from the blasts of high explosive and white phosphorus grenades used to breach its defences.

‘Did you two take the trench out?’ the Sergeant asked.

‘No. I’m A Company, Sarge,’ replied the Welshman, ‘I got lost. This was a B Company show: Mason’s lot. I got here about an hour ago.’

The Sergeant turned and gestured to the two figures in the distance. They were picking their way through the jagged rocks and stunted grass that made up the steep slope in front of the trench. The Sergeant's outstretched hand, placed on top of his helmet – the signal for 'on me' – offered them a far better means of communication on this windswept hillside.

'What's happening, Sarge?' one of them panted, as they closed in.

'Payback,' answered the Sergeant, through clenched teeth. 'Follow me.'

The three paras closed on the burial party, the butt of the Sergeant's rifle smashing into the prisoner's head as he knelt placing rocks on the poncho of his fallen comrade, the blow sending him forward, the blood pouring from the gaping wound.

'Get him!' shouted the Sergeant as the second prisoner bolted, his escape thwarted by another bone-cracking blow.

'He's going to waste them,' said Taff, watching the prisoners being made to kneel with their hands behind their heads. 'He fucking is... Look, Mace... The crazy Jock bastard.'

Mason was watching in disbelief as the execution party organised itself. The Sergeant was standing behind the two cowering prisoners, rifle cocked and ready, while the other two paras stood protection on either flank.

'What the hell are you doin'?' Mason shouted as he ran towards the group.

'None of your business, boy. Just sit down and enjoy your brew,' the Sergeant snapped.

'You're wrong, Sarge; this *is* my business,' Mason said as he drew the heavy Argentinian .45 Colt pistol from his belt. 'These prisoners surrendered to me. So that makes me responsible for them.'

'Surrendered to you... you little shit,' said the Sergeant, placing the butt of the rifle into his shoulder. 'You'll be telling me next that it was you that took the position and killed all these.'

Mason raised the pistol, his right thumb pulling back the thick hammer as the gun drew level with the Sergeant's face. 'That's right, Sarge. It was me. The machine gun took my section out with one burst. I was the only one left.'

'Put that gun down. I'm a fucking Sergeant.'

‘The guy I took this pistol off is over there,’ Mason gestured to the line of bodies. ‘I think he was a Captain or maybe a Major...’ said Mason, lining the sights up with the Sergeant’s face. ‘I guess rank doesn’t count for much up here on this fucking hill.’

The Sergeant looked directly at the young paratrooper, measuring up the man who had dared to stand in his way. His uniform was caked in mud from weeks on the march, his hair matted, his face obscured by the blood and grime of battle. But he held himself with a bearing beyond his youth, the conduit for his confidence a pair of steel blue eyes that drilled deep into the Sergeant’s skull.

‘They’re not worth a bullet,’ the Sergeant said as he kicked over the prisoner in front of him. ‘Come on. Let’s go,’ he said, turning to his henchmen.

Mason watched the three men disappear behind the rocky outcrop, gesturing to the prisoners to carry on as he walked back to his shelter. ‘Let’s have another brew, Taff,’ he said as he sat back down.

‘Who the hell were they?’ Mason asked as he watched Taff pour the chocolate powder into the boiling water.

‘Mortar Platoon, I think. Crazy bunch, if you ask me. I saw the Sergeant on the way down - on the Canberra. I’ll remember his name now in a minute...’

Mason was taking the first sip when he heard a spine-chilling scream carried on the icy wind. The cry - in Spanish – was muffled, but unmistakable. He had heard it for the first time in his life the night before. It made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. It was the cry of someone about to die. As he jumped up to find out the source, the tell-tale crack of a 7.62 round echoed around the rocks.

‘I remember now,’ said Taff, taking a big gulp of hot chocolate. ‘JJ O’Hare, that’s him.’

Belgrave Square, London

Mason’s daydream was interrupted by the barman, whose attention was drawn to the expanding pool of blood on his freshly polished oak surface. ‘Are you okay, sir?’ he asked as he collected the remains of the glass tumbler from between Mason’s hands. ‘Must have been a crack in it,’ he said as he handed over a napkin to his bleeding customer. ‘It’s

virtually impossible to break one of these otherwise,' he continued, mopping up the remnants of the spillage. 'They're toughened.'

'Nothing's impossible', Mason mumbled, as he wrapped the napkin around the gash in his hand just at the base of his thumb. 'Just remember that. Nothing.'

The coach was already in front of the office when he got there, a fifty two-seater more than adequate for the six passengers. He recognised the occupants from the form-filling session earlier that day. They had swapped their suits for sand-coloured trousers and short-sleeved check shirts, but their awkwardness still hung on them, as obvious as the sweat stains on their new shirts. He nodded to them as he walked up the aisle, while looking for the emergency exit. Old habits dying hard, his training compelling him to ensure that he always had an alternative escape route - even in the most innocent of settings.

The traffic was surprisingly light for the time of day, and they were soon on the M4, heading west for Heathrow Airport. Ahead of them lay some ominous-looking clouds, heralding a storm. Sure enough, it was just minutes before the rain began to fall. As the bus drove further into the dark clouds, Mason put his forehead against the cool glass, watching as the rivulets of rainwater streaked across the window. Lulled by the rhythm of the bus and the bottle of Oban, he was soon asleep.

Hereford, Six Years Earlier

Katie opened the bottle of wine while Mason was upstairs enjoying his first bath in over a month. Isabella had been carefully put to bed. She had finally dozed off in her daddy's arms after a marathon reading of her favourite story: Cinderella.

He had arrived earlier that day, unannounced, after an equally unannounced mission. Katie didn't ask him where he had been, but from his deep sun tan she knew it must have been somewhere hot. She used to quiz him when they were first married, trying to draw from him even the smallest clue. But she had given up when the answers weren't forthcoming. Only after talking to the other wives did she find any comfort on this score; she realised that none of the SAS men were ever

talkative about their clandestine work. Now, she was just grateful that he was home and safe.

As the cork popped out of the bottle, Katie tried to control the butterflies in her tummy. She hated him going away, but she loved the homecomings. The candles were on the dining table and the glasses were ready. When she heard the footsteps coming down the stairs, she started to pour the wine. She was so happy; her man was back.

‘What’s for dinner?’ he asked as Katie handed him a glass of wine.

‘Your favourite: fillet steak - just the way you like it.’

‘... and for dessert?’ he said, as he grabbed her, his excitement getting the better of him. ‘God, I’ve missed you,’ he said as their lips met in a passionate embrace. He pulled her onto the sofa.

‘What’s that?’ she said as the cushion beneath them began to vibrate.

‘It’s the bloody work phone,’ he answered.

‘Ignore it, baby. Please,’ she whispered. He picked the phone up with two fingers - as if it was contaminated.

‘But... it’s the work phone. You know I have to.’

Katie watched as the happiness drained from his weathered face, replaced by a look of disbelief, ‘What are they playing at?’ he rasped as he read the message. ‘I don’t fucking believe it? It’s a squadron scramble!’

‘But you’ve just got back. Isn’t there anyone else in the bloody SAS besides you?’ Katie shouted. Mason put his arms around her and pulled her close. She buried her head in his chest as her eyes hazed with emotion, the full consequences of the phone call hitting home, her self-control vanishing in a flood of tears. ‘Please don’t go. I miss you so much. Isabella will be devastated if you’re not here in the morning.’

She’s right. It is me. Always me. I’ve been flat out for the last six months. I’ve only seen Katie and Isabella for a handful of days. I’ll ignore it. To hell with them. Someone else can lead the mission.

‘Please don’t cry,’ he whispered as he stroked her long auburn hair in an attempt to stop the tears that he could feel soaking through his shirt.

‘If you don’t acknowledge the message, they’ll send someone to the house,’ she said, looking up at him. ‘I don’t want Izzy woken. If you’re going to go, you’d better do it now.’

22 Special Air Service had the worst divorce rate of any unit in the British Army. The time that the Special Forces soldiers spent away from home had a dire effect on their relationships. Nearly everyone within the unit was on their second or third marriage. Mason and Katie were the exception

They had met on a night out in Hereford. Katie had reluctantly agreed to accompany a girlfriend who was on the lookout for a new *blade*. It was August - selection time - and the town was full of untested, wannabe SAS recruits. It had become a phenomenon - almost a mating ritual - as hundreds of young females flocked into the cathedral city during those weekends, looking to snag a Special Forces guy.

Katie's friend soon achieved her aim, leaving Katie to fend for herself in the pheromone-filled atmosphere of a nightclub. Mason spotted her from across the bar. He revelled in the way she dismissed the men drawn to her good looks.

He was smitten at first sight, watching her every move with delight, thinking that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Katie soon became aware of the man with rugged good looks looking at her, and flirted with him from a distance, giving him an occasional glance, a smile and a flick of her long flowing hair. When he moved closer, he could see how amazingly pretty she was, and was totally taken by the sparkle in her dark brown eyes. She made him feel like a schoolboy. He was hooked.

They courted for the rest of the year, and he proposed on New Year's Eve. She refused. She knew that being a military wife was tough; her father had served in the RAF, and she was only too aware of how lonely her mother had been. But Mason was determined, and it took another six months before the woman of his dreams finally succumbed to his charm. They were married the following autumn.

Isabella was born a year later and was the image of her mother. His 'two girls', filled the hole that had previously existed in his life. His own mother had died when he was eight. His father, a successful barrister, had reacted to the loss in the only way he knew how: by throwing himself headlong into his work. And in an attempt to rid himself of the anguish - for the memories of his beloved wife rekindled every time he looked at his son, the remarkable resemblance to his mother simply too painful - he took the selfish option, and packed his son off to boarding school.

Mason's father had tried to make things as normal as possible during the school holidays. But things were never the same. Mason's innocence had died with his mother. Immediately, he knew that he was no longer a child; he realised that he was out on his own, and that nobody was going to look after him. He excelled at school and learned to love it. The masters liked him and the other boys looked up to him. But he would have given it all up in a heartbeat to get his mother back.

None of that mattered anymore; he had his own family now, and there was no way he was going to let anyone take them away from him.

When he arrived at the camp, the MOD policeman quickly checked his ID and instructed him to go straight to the operations room. The whole place was throbbing with activity, men running from building to building, their arms full of weapons and other heavy paraphernalia of war, the air thick with diesel fumes as engines revved with excitement. 'Get a move on, Mason, or you're going to miss this one,' shouted an anonymous voice over the noise of a revving Land Rover. The remark didn't land well. Mason's sense of humour - his 'ha ha tank' - had run empty. He wasn't in the mood for smart comments.

'Evening, Sergeant Major,' said the OC of B Squadron, as Mason entered the operations room. The rest of the squadron were already assembled, and were standing around casually, waiting for his arrival. As soon as the men saw him enter, the banter started.

'Glad you could make it.'

'About time, wanker!'

It had taken all Mason's will to pull himself from his family, and he hated himself for doing it, but that was behind him. *Best get my soldier's head on*, he said to himself as he looked around the room. He had served for the last twenty years with these guys. They truly were his brothers-in-arms, each one prepared to follow him anywhere and obey his orders no matter what. He knew everything about them, as they did about him. They were a unit forged on the anvil of war, tried and tested in every environment and on every continent. They were without a doubt the most professional, meanest, most heroic and ugliest bunch of reprobates ever to don camouflaged suits. 'Good evening, gentlemen,' Mason said, walking amongst them with his legendary smile. The guy to his left gave him a bear hug, while those close by ruffled his hair and jostled him.

‘If you’re all done with the male bonding thing, we’ll start,’ barked the RSM as he called the men to order.

Mason sat in the middle of the front row, the other noise in the room diminishing. When they were all seated, the OC began. ‘The British Embassy in Sierra Leone has come under fire from rebel forces, and is in danger of being overrun. B Squadron’s mission is to deny the embassy compound to the enemy, and ensure extraction of all embassy personnel,’ said the Major with a calm, measured tone.

The briefing continued for a further two hours, and covered every contingency that the men could expect. The long and short of it was that, directly after the meeting, they would be flown by helicopter directly to RAF Lyenham, where they would pick up the Special Forces C130 that would take them onwards to Sierra Leone. In-flight refuelling would take place over Algeria. The first boots would be on the ground in seven hours and thirty-four minutes’ time. Everything they needed for the op was already on the Herc. The briefing concluded and the men were dismissed. They filed out of the room, the sound of rotor blades clearly audible as the door was opened.

‘Sergeant Major, a quick word,’ said the OC, as Mason walked past. ‘Look... this isn’t my idea,’ he said, with his usual calmness, ‘I tried to get you off this one, but I was overruled. You were asked for by Downing Street, no less. My hands were tied. I know you only got back this morning, and you were expecting a month off. And I know that Katie is going to be pissed. Who can blame her? But you have my word: set this up and I will have you back in ‘H’ by this time next week. Okay?’

Mason looked at the man who had been his direct superior for over two years. He knew that if he said it, he meant it. ‘I appreciate that, boss. Thanks,’ he replied.

The plan went like clockwork; they had the embassy secure within thirteen hours of receiving the brief. It turned out that the intelligence they had received from local sources was highly inaccurate, the capability of the rebel forces greatly exaggerated.

Having accomplished their mission, B Squadron, for their remaining time in-country, sat around the embassy pool and topped up their tans in the West African sunshine until a company of paras arrived to relieve them. The OC was as good as his word; a week after their

deployment, B SQN were back on the C 130, on their way home. Morale was good, and the banter was fierce.

Danny, a good looking lad from 9 Squadron Royal Engineers, was the most junior member of the squadron and, as the new guy, was the current target for much of the ridicule. He had been caught chatting up a very young looking Thai woman while on an exercise in South East Asia a few months earlier, and had been given the nickname 'Paedo Danny'. The name fitted really well into the chorus of the Queen Song, *Living on My Own*, and whenever he entered the room, the guys would mercilessly launch into an enthusiastic rendition. Danny was the last to get on the Herc, and as he walked up the ramp of the aircraft, the whole of B SQN 22 SAS erupted with a rousing chorus of 'Paedo Danny, Paedo Danny.' Danny just took it. He had to. Any sign of weakness or anger would mean that he would receive even more abuse. He just had to suck it up and play along until someone else did something to attract the mockery of the group and become the next target. He smiled and shrugged his shoulders at the bewildered RAF Loadmaster.

'It is pretty catchy though, don't you think?' said the Loadmaster as he hummed away.

Mason was happy; he was on his way home to his girls, and had a month off to look forward to. But his joyful reveries were interrupted as one of his Sergeants sat down next to him. 'I bet there's no choppers at the other end to take us back to 'H',' chuntered the Sergeant.

'You know the score. They only love us on the way out. With all the defence cuts, I wouldn't be surprised if they make us TAB back to 'H'. But stop moaning; you're getting paid, aren't you?' said Mason with a grin.

When they arrived in Hereford, Mason was met off the coach by a grave-looking RSM. 'You need to come with me. The boss wants to see you,' he said, turning and walking off in the direction of the OC's office. Mason shouldered his kit bag and followed, his mind frantically trying to grasp what this break with protocol could mean.

This is strange, he thought, as the pair approached the office block. It's never happened this way before. The debrief has already been completed in-country with MI6, and the report has been approved. A thought occurred to him and his stomach sank. I hope he's not going to mess with my leave again.

The OC was busy watering his plants on the windowsill when they entered. He looked distracted. ‘Come in, Mason. Take a seat,’ he said, putting down the watering can.

‘Is there a problem, boss?’

‘Look Mason, there is no easy way to say this,’ the OC began. ‘Katie and Isabella were at her parents while you were away. When they were coming back this morning, they were involved in a crash with an articulated lorry. I’m sorry, Mason. They are both dead.’

18.37hrs, May 5, 2007, Heathrow Airport, London

The bus lurched to a stop. ‘Terminal Three. Everyone off,’ shouted the driver.

‘Next stop: Iraq,’ laughed one of the guys at the front.

Glossary

5.11 Shirt: tactical shirt used by security operators

Actions On: a set of predetermined steps taken when an identified occurrence takes place.

AK: Kalashnikov Assault Rifle, model number AK47.

AO: area of operation.

B6 armour: most of the armoured vehicles used in hostile areas are Toyota Land Cruisers. These armoured cars, or B6s as they are commonly called, have been fitted with the necessary protection to rate them as B6 III. This means they can stop small arms that use conventional ammunition (with a calibre of up to 7.62mm).

Beaten the Clock: an SAS Trooper who has returned from a mission alive.

Beretta: Italian manufacturer of the M9 9mm semi-automatic pistol, in service with the US military since 2006.

Binos: binoculars.

Blade: the nickname that SAS troopers use to describe themselves, derived from the winged dagger cap badge.

Braai: South African BBQ.

Brit Mil: British Military forces.

C 130: Hercules Transport Aircraft, also known as a HERC.

The Circuit: the name given to ex-military personnel who provide close protection security within a limited geographical area. The oldest and most well known is the London Circuit, but there are now circuits in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and any location in which close protection is required.

CO: commanding Officer of a British military regiment or battalion, usually the rank of a Lieutenant Colonel.

Comms: all types of communication device - ranging from phones through to elaborate radio sets.

Connex: easily transportable accommodation. It usually takes the form of shipping containers or other prefabricated dwellings configured to provide office or living accommodation.

CPA: Coalition Provisional Authority, the government set up to run Iraq directly after the invasion in 2003.

Dhow / Badan: a small boat used throughout the Persian Gulf. It may be motorized, propelled by sails or oars.

DFAC: military dining facility

ECM: electric Counter Measures, devices that block electronic signals used to initiate IEDs.

EFP: explosively formed penetrator, also known as an explosively formed projectile, also known as a roadside bomb or IED. It is a shaped-charge designed to penetrate armour effectively from a distance. This deadly bomb uses high explosives to melt a copper or brass slug, and to project it at high speed towards an unsuspecting target.

FCO: Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the British governments overseas directorate.

FNG: fucking new guy.

Full Screw: army slang for a full corporal, a junior NCO.

'H': Hereford.

Helo: abbreviation for helicopter.

IED: improvised explosive device often called a roadside bomb.

IDF: indirect fire, mortar or rocket fire that is aimed indiscriminately, as opposed to **direct fire**, which is aimed accurately at a specific target.

IPS: Iraqi Police Service, the organisation set up by the Coalition to police Iraq.

KIA: killed in action.

LA85: standard issue Brit Mil rifle.

LS: landing site.

Ma'dan: name given to those that live in the Marshes

MIA: missing in action.

MI: military intelligence.

Military Medal: military decoration (known as 'the MM') awarded for acts of bravery among those below the rank of commissioned offer.

Minimi: a Belgian machine gun developed by Fabrique Nationale that fires 5.56mm ammunition. Also called a 'section attack weapon' (or SAW) by the US military.

MP: Military Police.

NAAFI: Navy, Army and Air Force Institute which provides welfare for military personnel.

NATO Coffee: coffee with and two sugars.

OC: officer commanding a Brit Mil unit up to the size of a squadron or company, usually the rank of a Major.

OP: operation.

Para: serving or ex-member of The Parachute Regiment

Presel Switch: switch device on a radio that when pressed allows the operator to send a message.

PSC: Private Security Company.

RAMC: Royal Army Medical Corps.

RAR: Royal Australian Regiment.

Recce: reconnaissance.

RMP: Royal Military Police

RPG: Rocket Propelled Grenade.

RQMS: Regimental Quarter Master Sergeant.

RSM: Regimental Sergeant Major, appointment held by a Warrant Officer First Class, the senior enlisted man in a Brit Mil formation.

RUF: Revolutionary United Front, the rebel group in Sierra Leone that tried to overthrow the government during the civil war (1991-2002.)

SAS: 22 Special Air Service Regiment, based at Hereford, part of the British Army's Special Forces Group.

Scoff: Para slang for food.

SF Club: Special Forces Club.

Snatch Land Rover: A vehicle based on a Land Rover chassis, initially used in Northern Ireland. The vehicle is armoured with a fibreglass composite.

SNCO: Senior Non Commissioned Officer.

SOPs: standing operational procedures.

Sunray: the callsign used by the commander of a Brit Mil formation.

TAB: tactical advance to battle, speed marching.

Vauxhall: Vauxhall Cross – the building located on the south bank of the River Thames in London. It houses the Secret Intelligence Service / MI6.

Wellhead: engineering component at the surface of an oil or gas well that provides the necessary structural and pressure-containing interface for the drilling and production equipment to operate.

Zero: the base/HQ location within the communication network.