

Inheritance

K2
Book 1

Geoff Wolak

www.geoffwolak-writing.com

Glossary of abbreviations

P-26/P-27 - Swiss secret sleeper armies

UNA - Swiss Military Intelligence

MI6 - British Intelligence, aka, SIS - Secret Intelligence Service, for overseas operations (non-domestic), aka, 'Circus'.

MI5 - British Intelligence (domestic)

CIA - Central Intelligence Agency, USA, overseas intelligence service

SAS - Special Air Service, British Special Forces

SBS - Special Boat Squadron, British, similar to US Navy Seals

DOD - Department of Defense - USA

MOD - Ministry of Defence - UK

NSA - National Security Agency, USA, aka 'No such agency'.

SOE - Special Operations Executive, British WWII covert operations OSS - USA, like SOE, WWII, overseas

DGSE - French Secret Service/counter terrorism - domestic and foreign

IRA - Irish Republican Army, terrorist movement

ETA - Spanish/Basque separatist/terrorist movement

Red Brigade - Italian communist/terrorist/crime gang

KGB - Soviet Intelligence, prior to 1990s.

NAAFI - Navy Army Air Force Institute - shops on British military bases.

SIB - British Military Police

BKA - Federal German Police, similar to FBI

SVR - Russian Intelligence, formerly KGB

Special Branch - British Police, anti-terrorism/organized crime

Wehrmacht - general term, German armed services WWII

COBRA - Cabinet Office Briefing Room 'A', used by British Prime Minister for meetings with security staff.

FARC - Colombian guerrillas/communist

British military slang

Oppo - opposite number/close working buddy

Pongo - soldier - derisive

Ponce/poncey - upper class/educated/effeminate - derisive

Regiment - he was 'Regiment' - he was SAS

Rock Apes - RAF Regiment - defensive unit of airfields

Rupert - officer/upper-class - derisive

Beast - punish soldier

Stripy - Air Force Officer, derisive term for ranking stripes

Billets - accommodation/food

Civvy - civilian

Badged - qualified entry to SAS, receipt of cap badge

Best bib and tucker - best suit/outfit/military dinner suit

QT - on the QT, on the quiet

Stag – on guard duty

Valetta, Malta. 1963

‘Try and rest,’ the priest softly encouraged, dabbing his father’s brow with a damp cloth, the temperature high for an autumn day in Malta. He idly swiped away another fly, the apartment’s cracked windows letting in the shouts of children playing in the street below, an unseen cat crying out for some attention.

His elderly father struggled to sit up, unable to complete that small movement; the energy had left his frail body. ‘The list!’

‘Rest,’ the priest softly encouraged, now kneeling at the side of the bed.

Easing up, he took in the rundown apartment with a puzzled frown; the bottles littering the floor, the cockroaches attracted to rancid cat food placed on old newspapers, empty food tins, and a large pile of handwritten pages. Fetching water from a rusted tap, he wondered how his father - a very rich man, had come to end up in this squalor.

The priest had spoken little to his father in the past ten years, since his vows. Before that his father had always been distant, but at least approachable when his mother had been alive, fond memories of a pleasant childhood in Basel, Switzerland. The priest had grown up in a large house, always full of interesting people, always the best of everything. Unlike many families struggling through the lean post-war years, they had enjoyed holidays abroad, especially here in Malta. They had been better off than most, but for reasons that the priest could never have guessed.

His mother had died after a short illness whilst he had been in seminary, the detail of that illness coming as a shock, and only being revealed to him after she had passed away. Returning to their home in Basel for the funeral, he had found it stripped of everything, his father offering a single ‘goodbye’

as they passed at the cemetery. Now, little more than a year later, his father had summoned him here, to a cheap apartment on the island of Malta, his father now living in squalor, an old revolver visible under the pillow.

The old man tried to speak, lifting a shaky hand. 'Buried in Zug ... buried the treasure ... Nazi treasure.'

The priest stared hard at his father, not sure he had heard the words correctly, a chill running through him. 'Nazi ... treasure?'

'Buried ... next to the treasure ... the files ... files of great value. The list!' The words were repeated many times, the old man using his remaining energy to desperately force them out before he slipped into unconsciousness.

Unable to rouse his father, the priest lifted up the pile of hand-written notes, scanning the first page whilst he considered fetching a local doctor, and debating how he might go about finding such a person at this late hour. He took several measured steps toward the door as a cat cried out again, enough time to read the first paragraph. He stopped dead. The written words caused him to turn, and to stare open-mouthed, at the seemingly lifeless form of his father.

By dawn, the priest had re-read the numerous pages four times, catching only an hour's sleep during the night, the tear-tracks down his face distinct in the amber light of dawn. Setting light to each page in turn, he let the burning paper float down into apartment's chipped and rusted bathtub, staring at the pages as they slowly changed colour and folded in on themselves, their hideous story lost forever.

Gathering up the brittle ashes, he flushed them down a yellow-stained toilet, another cat crying forlornly at him through a cracked bathroom window. Returning to the bedroom, he snatched the pillow out from under his father's head, placed it over the old man's face, and pushed down with force and anger in his arms.

‘Forgive me, Lord,’ he said in a strained whisper as he pressed down.

Leaving the apartment, and trying not to trip over the dozen hungry cats littering the stairway, the priest considered the final line his father had written, and what it might mean: ‘Find the Englishman, Beesely.’

Dallas, Texas. That sunny day.

The police officer released the safety catch on his sniper rifle and waited; calm, confident, resolute in his beliefs and his purpose. A moment later, cheering signalled the approach of President Kennedy's motorcade, the procession visible through a crack in the wooden fence the office now stood behind. The officer had just a few seconds to make a choice that might change history, his grip on the rifle tightening.

As he observed his intended target, three shots rang out, distorted echoes bouncing off nearby buildings, an overlapping chorus of screams and shouts rising up. He felt oddly relieved, and heaved an involuntary breath. Lowering his rifle, he peered over the wooden fence at the chaos. In his black and white police motorcyclist's helmet, he studied the scene through his sunglasses: the President was slumped forwards, not a visible target, not that it mattered now, it seemed the job had been done.

The rifle's barrel and stock were unclipped in haste, the weapon soon a third of its original length. His motorcycle's pannier hung open ready and the rifle parts fitted well, covered in a moment as the pouch clipped shut. Throwing a leg across, he pushed the bike for ten yards, free wheeling before starting it. Pulling off quietly, he gently accelerated, the bike's radio buzzing with shouted orders or requests for clarification. A quick glance over his shoulder confirmed an empty parking lot.

With the sun beating down on deserted streets, he drove four blocks, the only thought on his mind being what a pleasant day it was for such a cold act. He pulled into the next alley. Turning hard and then braking, he passed under a shutter door being held open for him, halting with a squeak in the dark interior of a large workshop, the shutter immediately dropping down with a clatter. The officer dismounted, kicking out the bike's stand before calmly taking off his helmet. A punctured

oil barrel enclosed and funnelled a roaring fire just outside an open rear door, the police helmet tossed in, his sunglasses and gloves inside it.

‘Any problems?’ came a familiar voice from the shadows.

The officer took a moment to adjust to the darkness. ‘None at all,’ he replied in a nasal and clipped English accent, calm and casual as he continued to strip down. ‘Our *friends* loosed off three rounds, so one fired twice. Poor old Oswald, he was in the wrong place at the right time.’

‘Did you ... need to, you know?’ echoed from the shadows.

‘No,’ the Englishman answered as he undressed, amused by the other man’s discomfort.

‘And ... would you have?’ the second man asked after a moment, standing and moving into the light.

‘Without hesitation,’ the Englishman firmly stated as he grabbed fresh clothes, as if proud to issue the words. ‘I manage to see these things ... quite clearly.’

The second man nodded, putting his cigarette back on his lip. ‘Listen, old chap,’ he mocked with an English accent, stepping closer and checking over his shoulder. ‘Family would prefer if you didn’t get too friendly with my kid sister given who, *and what*, you are.’

The Englishman attended his clothes. ‘Oliver, let’s be clear about this; she ... was the one making all the moves. And dare I remind you that it was *you* who introduced us. A surprise given just who, *and what*, I am.’ He tipped his head and formed a thin smile as he buttoned his shirt. ‘And the good lady is not quite the kid sister. She’s twenty-six, divorced with two kids, and could probably drink us both under the table!’

Oliver shrugged a reluctant agreement with that last statement. ‘C’mon, old chap, the new Chairman of The Lodge is waiting. He hasn’t yet had the pleasure that is Morris Beesely from Englandshire.’

England. June, 2007. The Joke.

Sir Morris Beesely woke from a daydream, certain that he could hear gunfire. Sitting up and letting down his legs, fogged for a moment, he observed as delicate beams of sunlight illustrated dust mites rising and falling, his mind still in Dallas on that sunny day. Easing up and stretching, he peered through a crack in the curtains, noting his bodyguard below with a resigned sigh. ‘Oh ... gawd.’

Sweat rolled down the bodyguard’s face, today being a particularly warm day for stalking prey. He now wished that he had not worn his silk ‘Simpsons Family’ shorts, they were stuck to his skin.

He stood motionless, pistol ready, breathing steadily. Ignoring any distractions, he waited for the right moment. Nine years in the SAS, ten years working as a freelancer for various mercenary and intelligence groups, he had seen better days. He now had something to prove. He had missed this quarry fifteen times already, but this time it would be different, he told himself. With his weapon held on-target, he wiped sweat away from his eyes with the sleeve of his suit jacket, his sponsor observing unseen from a high window.

Movement. The gunman’s quarry foolishly gave away its position.

This one would be different, they would see, he could do it. He pulled his sweaty shorts out of the crack of his backside, and fired. Quickly adjusting his aim a fraction, he let off six rounds, bracketing the target, spent 9mm cartridges flying high and wide. He closed the gap and fired again at point blank range with anger and determination, willing the bullet into his intended victim.

Nothing. No movement.

He readied his trowel, determined that they were not getting away. Digging quickly, he opened up the mole's latest mound, right down to the small two-way tunnel.

Nothing.

'Bollocks!'

With a sigh, he holstered his weapon, his sponsor turning away from the window.

'Any luck?' his sponsor's housekeeper enquired from the edge of the lawn, the lady now stood with a tea towel in her hand.

The gunman lit up as his sponsor came into view. Since leaving active service, and retiring to work as a simple bodyguard and driver, his sponsor and mentor had been very tolerant. So far.

'Well?' the old man asked, no hint of emotion evident.

The gunman lowered his head and dropped his shoulders. Two hours of shooting up his sponsor's lawn with a 9mm pistol had produced no visible results; no deaths, not even a wounding. The garden moles had won.

The housekeeper was sympathetic. 'Maybe if you wore your old camouflage clothing.'

Slowly, his sponsor's features distorted. He bent double, clutching his chest. Laughing hard, but silently, he crumpled and fell over. Bemused, the housekeeper did not understand the cause of the hysterics, rushing to the aid of her elderly employer; she had not meant to be cruel about the gunman's efforts.

The gunman walked inside, his head lowered, checking his watch. The Simpsons were on in five minutes, time for a cuppa.

Not a pleasant way to die

1

With his shoes squeaking on the recently polished floor, George Willis, assistant to the new director of MI6, approached an isolated office in the basement of the MOD, Central London. He knocked on the glass door and entered without waiting.

‘Willis?’

The sole occupant of this small office squinted over the rims of his glasses in unwelcome recognition of the younger visitor, the occupier half-buried in files. The disgruntled employee, fifty-four at his last birthday, sat wearing new red braces over an off-white shirt hiding a slight frame. His grey hair grew thin, his cheeks thinner. After a moment’s thought he jabbed towards the kettle with his pen, a firm hint. ‘Kettle has boiled.’

Willis sniffed. ‘What’s in the kettle, Toby? Scotch?’ he asked with a knowing grin as he took a seat.

Toby stared back for several seconds. ‘It’s the cleaning liquid they use for the lino on the floor, it smells terrible,’ he stated. He threw down his pen, eased back and took a big breath. ‘So, what brings you down to purgatory?’

‘Well, you’re really, really old, *and* rumoured to be a really sneaky shit.’

Toby forced up his eyebrows in theatrical surprise. ‘Compliments already, you must be after something.’ He folded his arms.

Willis eased back and crossed his legs. ‘Sir Morris Beesely.’

Toby allowed himself a thin smile, an old memory surfacing. ‘That name takes me back to the good old days; long lunches, fiddling your expenses, being politically incorrect,

genuine enemies to spy on. He was *old school*, proper spy. He knew Ian Fleming, they said.'

'What's he like?'

Toby frowned in surprise. 'Beesely? God, is he still alive?' he asked as he poured out two small drinks.

'Yes, apparently. Someone lifted his old personnel files, so Madam *will not* be pleased. That is, of course, if I tell her.'

'Ah yes, the new lady of the manor: Dame Helen Eddington-Small. How long now, three weeks in the hot seat?'

Willis nodded. 'She's not one of the boys, but better at her job than –'

'Certain *age-ed* gentlemen,' Toby finished off without looking up.

'So what about this Beesely character?' Willis pressed.

Toby curled a lip as he thought back to his early career. 'He was quite the lad. Excellent at his job, don't get me wrong, but he always managed to get himself into trouble and, strangely enough, he always managed to get away with it.' He lifted his head, staring out of focus. 'Bit of a ladies man if I recall, even in later life.' He focused on Willis. 'Anyway, they never managed to make anything stick. Not even that Kosovo thing.'

'Kosovo?' Willis challenged. 'That would have been well after he retired.'

'AGN Security,' Toby whispered, glancing around the small office, despite the fact that they were the only occupants.

'I know the outfit. What about them?'

'They're heaped full of ex-SAS muddy-boot-wearing types. An unofficial recruiting ground for your more energetic field agents ... *when* the lads are short of money, of course.'

'So what's the connection?' Willis asked, hiding a smile.

Again, Toby curled his lip, giving a slight shrug. 'Beesely used to own it, he may still do. Madam's illustrious predecessors used to sub-contract the odd job to AGN - *plausible deniability*. But I had heard he retired from all that long ago.'

‘Got a photo?’

‘Why, lost his file?’ Toby pointedly enquired.

Willis heaved a sigh. ‘Photo?’ he pressed.

‘Only in my mind,’ Toby mouthed in an exaggerated fashion. ‘Five ten, thin, bit of a stoop, walks quickly.’ He shrugged, grimacing. ‘Bald, thin face. Looks like someone of his age, I suppose. Saw him last year - well, maybe five years ago - at a reunion bash somewhere. I can’t remember where, so it must have been a good one. Still sharp as a tack, mind you. He remembered me, and all my ... *misdemeanours*.’

‘Didn’t catch you drinking on the job, did he?’ Willis took a sip and winced. ‘So what’s this Kosovo thing you mentioned?’ he coughed out.

Toby grinned at his visitor’s discomfort. ‘It happened during the early days of the conflict, when I had a desk with a window; Beesely sent recon’ teams in under the radar. Some got themselves caught, but the *powers that be* wouldn’t send a rescue after them, so *he* funded one himself. He rescued some ex-SAS trooper by sending in some other ex-SAS trooper. It’s quite *the* after-dinner story in some circles.’

Willis’s expression suggested they had the time.

Toby reluctantly continued, ‘Well, this one ex-SAS guy, a freelancer for Madam’s predecessors - Ricky something if I recall, he went in after Johnno. That’s Beesely’s driver now, by the way, I saw him at the reunion.’

Willis eased his face forward. ‘His driver?’

‘Back then this Johnno fellow was a freelancer for your lot. He went into Bosnia a few times, apparently successfully blowing things up. Whatever. Anyway, he went into Kosovo to blow up some ammo’ dump. He parachuted in, walked twenty miles, and made a nice big bang.’

Willis offered a look of mock surprise.

‘I told you, it’s quite the after-dinner story. Anyway, on the way out he ran into a battalion of Serb regulars. They put five,

ten, or twenty rounds into him - depends on how drunk you are by this point in the story – and left him for dead.’

‘What happened?’

Toby studied the inside of his glass. ‘He performed first aid on himself apparently, stitches and everything, radioed-in his position. Powers that be decided against a rescue.’ He sighed. ‘Bravo Two Zero all over again.’

Willis hid a grin. ‘So how did he get out?’

Toby raised a finger and smiled coyly. ‘Beesely organized the rescue, that guy Ricky plus some Kosovan Albanian resistance fighters. Not only did your lot refuse to help, they threatened Beesely. He sent a rescue anyway, all organised in just a day apparently. This Ricky was some big deal agent; he walked across the border, found Johno, and carried him out.’

‘Carried him?’

‘On his back, apparently, so the story goes; thirty miles to the border, dodging the Serbs. Some say Ricky carried him for three days without sleep. Who knows? Anyway, they had to shoot their way out, American helicopter picking them up on the Macedonian border.’

‘Why on earth would the Americans pick them up, especially if AGN sent them in, a civilian outfit? And a British firm at that!’

‘Big ... mystery.’ Toby mouthed the words carefully, again glancing around the room. ‘Another rumour about Beesely – he was always very friendly with the Americans. Anyway, rest is sketchy, rumours of this pair landing on a Yank aircraft carrier, Johno being stitched up and flown to Italy and to a Yank military hospital before turning up back here. His driver, this man Johno, he spent a year in rehab.’

‘What does this ... Johno look like?’

Toby ran a forefinger and thumb from below his nose, edging his mouth, and squarely down to his chin. ‘Old school trooper moustache – Mexican bandit - long sideburns, crew cut on top. Stocky, five eleven. Wouldn’t want to nudge his elbow

in a bar; dangerous eyes. Spoke to him at that function, or the one before.’ Toby curled a lip. ‘He drinks a lot, very sarcastic and negative.’

Willis raised an eyebrow and suppressed a smile as Toby poured himself another drink.

Toby continued, ‘Big enquiry by your lot as to how that pair got out. Anyway, they arrested him, Beesely that is. Next thing we know - all charges dropped. I told you, he always got away with it. Maybe the Queen helped.’

Willis uncrossed his legs and straightened. ‘The Queen?’

‘Strange trivia fact; she and Beesely met up once or twice a year, every year, for sixty years. They have, apparently, known each other since 1944.’

‘Well,’ he said as he stood. ‘I’ll be leaving with more questions than I came in with.’

‘Enlightenment is what I’m here for.’

‘That guy Ricky, he was working for Beesely’s firm at the time, AGN?’

Toby formed a thin, humourless smile. ‘Nope, he was on your books. He and Beesely knew each other through Trooper Snoopers.’

Willis tipped his head. ‘Trooper ... Snoopers?’

Toby glanced around the empty room. ‘It’s a unit that isn’t supposed to exist. They draw officers and men from all services, just for a year or two.’

‘To do what?’

‘Check up on ex-servicemen after retirement, former officers from delicate positions, to see that they’re not writing their memoirs or married to a Russian ballerina named Olga. They also spy on ex-SAS troopers, see what they are up to. Mostly SIB flatfoots, and some of your lot.’

‘I don’t think I’ve ever heard of it.’

‘Like I said, it isn’t supposed to exist,’ he said with a smirk, ‘but I see the funding!’ He tapped the files in front of him.

‘Beesely was involved on and off for twenty years, so I’ve heard, even after he left regular work.’

‘Ah ... the fog is lifting a bit.’ Willis stepped to the door, turned and shrugged one shoulder. ‘See you at Christmas then, I suppose?’

Toby stared. ‘How many uncles do you have?’

2

‘What’s up, Doc?’ Johnno asked.

The grey-haired psychiatrist rolled his eyes, gesturing John ‘Johnno’ Williams towards a seat, the roar of London traffic a dull drone in the background. This was Johnno’s regular monthly session, the psychiatrist’s offices on the second floor of a drab building off the Tottenham Court Road, central London.

Johnno picked up a pink squeeze-ball and slouched down. ‘It all started when I was a schoolboy,’ he said with mock seriousness. ‘Teacher touched me up.’

‘Did he?’ Doctor Manning probed as he settled himself, finally facing his patient.

‘Hah! That would give you something to scribble down.’ Johnno sat upright. ‘Anyway, why don’t you scribble down stuff any more? You used to.’ He ran a hand down his bushy moustache.

‘I gave up on you long ago, you know that,’ Manning dryly stated.

‘Broke you, I did.’

‘You certainly gave me a run for *your* money.’

‘Beesely’s money, waste that it is,’ Johnno retorted as he glanced out of the window.

‘Do you think your time here has been wasted?’ Manning posed, easing back and now holding his pen between both hands.

‘Ah, the *serious pen* stance,’ Johno teased. Suddenly self-conscious, Manning put the pen down. Johno tossed him the squeeze-ball. ‘Try that, you look stressed. I have that effect on people.’

‘I must admit, Johno, you are a ... perplexing character.’ Manning placed down the ball, interlacing his fingers.

‘Me? Nah, two dimensional me,’ Johno mocked.

‘Hardly, you’re far more complicated than most give you credit for.’

Johno squinted. ‘Most?’

‘I assist a lot of soldiers, some know you.’

‘And you discuss *me*?’

‘Not directly, but some are former SAS, and they recall experiences ... and people. You crop up a lot actually. And I use your ... *experience* as an example.’

‘Do I get a commission?’

Dr. Manning could not hold in the smile. ‘So, Johno, how have you been?’

‘Up and down, not enough side to side, the usual. Still drinking too much, bad dreams, leg hurts. Can I go now?’

Manning lifted his hands, offering two open palms. ‘No one is forcing you to come here –’

‘Not quite true, Doc. Beesely gives me money for the hotel and ... *expenses*, so I go lap dancing, burn up a few weeks pay. I’d come here every frigging week if he paid.’

Manning let out a breath. ‘Well, it’s nice to know there’s no ulterior motive for you attending these sessions.’

‘So, what did you want to discuss this month, Doc?’ Johno asked with a wry smile.

‘What would *you* like to discuss?’

Johno sighed. ‘How many times have you asked that?’ He waited. ‘And how many times have you got a straight answer?’

‘It’s a requirement. It’s what they teach us shrinks on day one at shrink school.’

Johno laughed. ‘See, isn’t this more fun when we take the piss out of each other?’

‘Well, I would actually like to earn my pay.’

Johno adopted his best attempt at a serious expression, resting an elbow on the chair arm. ‘I feel cured. Just tell me where to sign and I’ll let you off the hook. Is there a standard form? Patient self-cert’ of sanity?’

‘If only it was that simple. So, how *have* you been, Johno?’ Manning pressed.

‘Fine.’ Johno took a big breath, becoming genuinely serious. ‘I’m forty-six in a few months, I can’t run too well because of the knee, I shag prostitutes because I don’t want any nice girls to see the scars, and I can’t spend the night with anyone because of the shouting nightmares. So I get hammered quickly, just before bedtime. Bad for my health I know, but simple.’

Manning studied him. ‘And you seem to accept it.’

Johno gave it some thought, shrugging. ‘What else should I do? Make you happy and get all morbid and moody, fit neatly into one of your psycho-models? Look, Doc, my head isn’t injured, my body is. If someone loses a leg they get a plastic one. I got some scars, so no swimming in the public pool. Simple. I dream fucked-up scary stuff, so I drink. Simple ... and practical.’

‘Quite practical. You seem to see all your problems as just that, problems to be solved in the real world.’

Johno offered Manning a teasing grin. ‘As opposed to the Twilight Zone that some of your patients visit?’

Dr. Manning sighed. ‘No, the real world out here, not in the sub-conscious mind, which is where I spend most of my time.’

‘Is it dark? Do you, like, take a torch?’

Manning sighed again, long and hard. ‘Where did I put that “cured” rubber stamp?’

‘With the rubber mallet for difficult patients?’

‘So,’ Manning started again, a big breath taken in and let out, ‘how’s Beesely these days?’

‘He’s doing better than me. He’s still sharp as a tack, and in better health. Eighty now –’

‘Seventy-nine. Eighty in three months,’ Manning corrected.

Johno stared at the floor. ‘Remind me closer to the time, always forgetting his bloody birthday.’

‘Did he ... *appreciate* the lap-dancers you got him last year?’

‘Nah, he let me enjoy myself. But you and I both know he lives his life through my eyes.’

‘Quite an insightful observation,’ Manning said, his eyes narrowing as he focused on Johno.

‘Why else would he keep me on? He doesn’t need a bodyguard, and he can still drive himself just about.’ Johno shrugged again, glancing out of the window at the bustling London thoroughfare below.

‘Maybe he’s just gotten used to you, and all your annoying habits.’

‘Maybe he’s just afraid of burglars,’ Johno quickly retorted.

‘I don’t think Mr. Beesely is afraid of anything.’

Johno squinted, focusing on the psychiatrist. ‘You and he go way back.’

‘A long time, yes: thirty years. I was retained by MI6, sorry ... SIS these days, working with agents returning from imprisonment abroad.’

Johno winced. ‘That must be tough, twenty years in a fucking Siberian Gulag.’

Manning nodded, alone with his thoughts for moment. ‘Some had great difficulty adjusting.’

‘So I’m lucky, still functioning up top, all right as rain.’

Manning again hid a smile. ‘How’s Beesely’s housekeeper, Jane, these days?’

Johno tipped his head and studied the psychiatrist. ‘As far as I remember ... that’s the first time you’ve ever asked.’

‘You all live together, so she must play a part in your life. You admitted before about treating her like a younger sister.’

‘And see where that got me; you talking about family for a whole year, twelve sessions in a bleeding row.’

‘So, how is she?’ Manning pressed.

Johno glanced out the window. ‘Same as ever, and just as fucked up as me. She’s anorexic, she cries in her sleep, and she doesn’t leave the house or Beesely’s side. Like a ten year old.’

‘You sound ... *harsh*, and yet you were almost jailed two or three times for looking out for her?’

Johno made a face. ‘When I first started working for old man Beesely he ordered me to protect her, you know, part of the job. He also told me not to show any interest in her. Fat chance of that, no pun intended, she’s a walking skeleton.’ He turned away again.

‘There is a difference between protecting someone, and chasing a bag snatcher then beating him to a pulp.’

Johno focused on Dr. Manning. ‘That’s my anger issue, as we labelled up years ago, not about ... her.’

‘Are you sure? Are you sure that you don’t actually feel better about yourself ... when you look out for others, especially a frail and anorexic woman?’

‘I’ve never wanted a puppy, Doc, so no,’ Johno stated in dismissive tones.

Manning sighed. ‘I must be keeping you from some young lady with large breasts and colourful tattoos.’

Johno stood, beaming a false smile. ‘It’s been a pleasure, Doc, as always.’ On the street, he lifted his mobile and dialled. ‘Hello?’

‘Hello?’ came a woman’s voice.

‘Who’s that?’ Johno asked.

‘Who am I? This is the Alzheimer’s Association. How may I help you?’

‘Why are you ringing me?’ Johno enquired, a smile creased into one cheek.

‘Uh ... you rang us, sir.’

‘Did I? Why did I do that?’

‘Are you OK, sir? Is there someone else there we could talk with?’

‘Yes.’ He waited. ‘Who’s that?’

A sigh could be heard from the other end. Johno’s path was suddenly blocked by a man in a suit stood with his hands on his hips.

‘Still ringing the Alzheimer’s Association?’ a familiar voice asked.

Startled in his recognition of the man, Johno stared, his mouth opening. ‘General Sir Christopher Rose. Well I’ll be buggered.’

‘Need a word, a private word, so get in the car.’ A car door was opened from within by a passenger, a smile for Johno.

‘Sir?’ Johno said, bent double and facing the passenger, lost for other words as he recognised the second man. A firm nudge on the shoulder, and Johno eased in. ‘My mum told me never to get in cars with strange men.’

The General eased into the front passenger seat, the car immediately pulling off. ‘I think, Johno, that mothers tell their daughters that with you in mind.’

‘You may be right. It’s been a long time, General. Were you, you know, old, wrinkly and bald the last time we met?’

The passenger tried to suppress his smile. General Rose glanced over his shoulder, a hard glare offered, but said nothing.

An hour later, and Johno was sat staring at the wall of a cheap hotel room, several empty beer cans littering the small window table. With pursed lips he blew out, long and slow. ‘Bloody hell.’

‘We both know you’re a good actor,’ General Rose reminded his unwilling guest. ‘Good undercover. And, in the short term, all we need you to do is to be your annoying self;

keep your eyes open and your ear to the ground. If, and when, over the next few months you happen to hear the name, try and get *the list* – lookout for the treasure. We're not asking you ... to betray Beesely.'

Johno turned his head, making strong eye contact. 'And I wouldn't,' he snarled. 'Her Majesty's Government, bless 'em, left me in Kosovo. *He* got me out!'

General Rose sighed and straightened. 'Let's not go back over old ground. This is about the safety of the UK—'

'Yeah, yeah, we did the patriotic speech bit. I stood to attention, remember.'

'In effect, we're not asking you to do anything. We've given you the details and the clues, so that if *and when* the time comes you'll know what to do.'

Johno faced the wall again. 'Bloody ... hell,' he let out. 'And what's these Swiss boys interest in Beesely again?'

'You tell us ... when you find out,' General Rose stated.

'We'll drop you around at the lap-dancers,' the second man offered.

Johno faced his old boss, offering a hard glare. 'Like I could get it up *now!*' He finished the last beer can. 'Any backup on this deal?'

'None,' came quickly back, the reply sounding final.

'Contact routes?'

'The usual.'

Johno stood. 'Love to say that it's been a pleasure, but all things considered, I really wish I hadn't got out of bed this morning, fuckers.' He tipped his head at the second officer and left.

With the door slammed shut the second officer stood. 'Can we rely on him?' he complained.

General Rose eased up. 'All our psych' evaluations say he's certifiable; if he were still in the service he'd be sectioned. If he were a horse or a dog – he'd be put down! But I know Doc' Manning, and he has faith in Johno, although God knows why.

We even bugged some of his sessions. He has acute Post Traumatic Stress Disorder; regressive childhood behaviour, shouting nightmares, chronic drinking, hand tremors, the works. He wears t-shirts with little messages on them, phones people at random and takes the piss. About the only adult thing he partakes of is the prostitutes, and even that's weird.'

'Weird how?' the second office asked, dreading the answer.

'Never takes his clothes off, just gets the old todger out, keeping the scars hidden.'

'Why are we even using him?' the second officer complained. 'On something this important!'

General Rose sighed. 'Beggars can't be choosers. And right now he's in the right place ... at the right time.'

Five minutes after the officers had vacated the room an elderly cleaner let herself in, an unlit cigarette balanced on her lip. She reached under the bed, fiddled around and removed a listening device, pocketing it. She took another from behind the mirror, a third from the bathroom before leaving, the beer cans still littering the room.

3

'Not a pleasant way to die.' Willis uttered the words as much to himself as his superior, stepping now across the spacious office of the new director of Britain's overseas intelligence service, SIS.

At forty-five she remained attractive, if a little thin in the face for his liking. In her subordinates opinion she had earned the post, despite being noticeably younger than her predecessors; he regarded her as being more politically astute. He placed the report that he had been reading onto her desk then, as an afterthought, rotated it the right way up for her to study.

She shot him a look. ‘I doubt there are too many *pleasant* ways to die,’ she commented, a dry and husky voice out of character with her trim and pleasant appearance.

Willis slipped down into one of two large leather chairs arranged in front of her noticeably uncluttered desk; the desk supported just two flat-screen computer displays, a neatly recessed keyboard and a multi-buttoned desk phone. ‘Not something you’re going to want to read before bedtime,’ he pointed out as she started to scan the front page. She raised her eyes toward him without moving her head, then focused again on the report as he pointedly added, ‘Or any other time, come to that.’

She hesitated as she held the document, issuing a sigh. ‘Give me the highlights.’

‘This poor guy was tortured at length. And expertly, might I add. They made sure he stayed awake and understood the full weight and magnitude of what he had done, *whom* he had upset. They administered adrenalin injections, supplemented with cocaine on the gums – finger toothbrush!’

‘Cocaine?’ she puzzled.

‘Apparently it makes the tactile senses stronger, and it stops the attendant party from falling asleep, or inconveniently fainting *too* often during torture.’ She eased further back into her chair, her expression blank. ‘They took to him with a blowtorch, all captured on high quality video, this guy surviving for some six hours. Towards the end of the tape they, well, got rather nasty with him.’

‘Nasty with him?’ she repeated with a pained expression.

‘Yes,’ he grimaced, remembering some of the video images. ‘As best we can figure, the victim was *our* Mafia hit man, the guy on our watch list. Not an easy task, getting reliable intel’, since these guys play their cards very close to their chests.’

‘And our man’s connection?’ she asked, rising and walking to the window.

‘Our man had been tailing the deceased from Italy to Switzerland. Just at the point that our luckless Mafia man was being bundled into a van, *our man* became aware of five other men, agents of some sort, suddenly surrounding him.’ She glanced over her shoulder briefly with a questioning look. ‘Anyway, they politely escorted him back to the Swiss-Italian border, gave him some local wine and cheese, and bade him a fond farewell.’

At that Dame Helen turned around, her eyes widening. ‘Bade him a fond farewell?’

‘With a gift basket of wine and cheese for his troubles; good quality stuff, apparently.’ She lowered her head, thinking hard as she returned to her desk. Willis added, ‘The local police or intelligence services seemed to be in on it, they waved them through an impromptu checkpoint.’

‘The Swiss Intelligence Services abilities rank just above those of Luxembourg, and slightly lower down the scale than those of my local boy scouts,’ she illustrated. ‘We should know, we used to train them until they went all political in the 1990s. Now the Germans and French train and equip them.’ She took a breath, staring out of focus. ‘So just what, exactly, is going on over there?’ she thought out loud, tapping a foot.

‘All we know is that the Mafia hit man, *alleged* hit-man, was linked to those on our watch list, hence our interest. And it’s definitely the same Mafia guy in the video.’

She eased forward. ‘Which was sent to the supposed Mafia man’s boss, found its way into the hands of the Italian *not-so-Secret* Service, and to us some four weeks later.’

‘In a nutshell. It doesn’t make a lot of sense I know –’

‘It doesn’t make any damn sense!’ she pointed out. He sank further into his seat. ‘This unknown group is well connected - enough to influence or corrupt Swiss police - ruthless beyond Russian standards in what they do to this poor man, but send our man off with a packed-lunch and his tail between his legs.’

She pulled a file out of a drawer. ‘I’ve been doing some digging.’

Willis was immediately concerned. ‘Oh?’

‘I can tie this group in to five other murders with the same taste in snuff videos. Apparently, it’s called *getting the chair*. They were all video taped, all of the victims sitting naked in a chair as they were tortured. One lasted fourteen hours.’

Willis pursed his lips. ‘Ouch!’

She regarded her assistant for a moment. ‘Yes, *ouch*.’ Focusing back on the report, she said, ‘All of the victims were male, well built. Two more were Mafia hit men, several were Russians, one of those being rumoured to be a particularly nasty Russian hit man with Chechen links. Another was former Serbian special op’s, rumoured to have raped and killed the children of a German industrialist before attempting to ransom the father, and one was later identified as a Slovakian planning an attack on the Pope. All in all, a very oddly-mixed bag.’

He raised his hands, palms upturned. ‘All bad boys, no tears shed.’

His boss shot him a disapproving look. ‘Perhaps. It’s almost as if there is a ... vigilante element to these killings. It’s definitely the same group, cheekily confident in their ability to evade the authorities, and cheekily sending in a video each time, usually to the employer of the victim ... or associates of the victim.’

‘Quite a deterrent,’ he emphasised. ‘Any details from the local police in these countries?’

‘Nothing beyond the obvious; this group displayed a great professionalism each time, not so much as a fingerprint or witness in any of the cases. There’s suspiciously little evidence, as if the police themselves were colluding across four countries.’

‘That hardly seems likely.’

She glanced up at nothing in particular. ‘Then we have a mystery on our hands.’

Willis stood. ‘Not to worry,’ he offered. She had put her glasses back on, and now frowned at him over the rims. ‘Whoever this group is, they’re only killing the scum of Europe.’

He stepped towards the door as she returned to her previous file. Stopping and turning, he said, ‘Oh, one more thing, *completely* unrelated. Some old files have gone missing.’

‘What?’ she barked.

With a pained expression, he informed her, ‘Yes ... seems that someone has removed all files that we had on an old boy, well before your time, former section head in the seventies and eighties, a Sir Morris Beesely.’

‘Beesely!’ She jumped up, slamming her hands onto the desk. ‘Oh, God,’ she added, her shoulders dropping.

Willis took a step closer, surprised by her reaction. ‘This... gentleman is almost eighty years old.’

She forced herself calmer. ‘He was rumoured to have stolen Prime Minister Harold Wilson’s private journals, from Number Ten, back in the seventies. We’ve been searching for those journals for a long time. Besides...’

He waited. ‘Besides ... what?’

‘Never mind. Thank you, that’s all.’

4

On a small sailboat in a Washington D.C. marina, senior CIA analyst James Kirkpatrick studied the report that had just been placed down for him on the polished galley table. As he read and absorbed each line his face inched closer to the paper, his features hardening, his eyes widening. Finally he raised his head and stared at the elderly, white-haired man sitting opposite.

‘You see the problem?’ the white-haired man enquired, although it had clearly not been meant as a question. He glanced at the yacht’s brass barometer, gently tapping it as the

boat moved, a familiar creaking sound issued by the boat's rope moorings.

'I do, Henry.' Kirkpatrick eased back, taking off his glasses. 'How do you wish to proceed?'

'Simply observe for now. We have to be very, very careful with this. When he was active, Beesely knew about our ... *activities* in this area. If he reappears with a connection to this Swiss group just as we are finalising *activities* then, well ...' He upturned his hands.

'A serious impediment,' Kirkpatrick finished off. 'What's Beesely's link to our Swiss cousins?'

'We don't know yet, but I have taken steps to find out. Pity is, there's a prize greatly valued in Switzerland, at least in the short term, if that's what Beesely and his people are up to ... to get at it.'

'Do you think Beesely knows what's hidden in Switzerland? Or what's hidden within the K2 organisation for that matter?'

'All we have at the moment are a great deal of K2 intercepts, all concerning Beesely.'

Kirkpatrick glanced again at the report. 'Do you think they aim to kidnap him, to get information?'

'Beesely hasn't attended a meeting for ten years, hasn't worked on any sensitive projects for twenty. What would be his value to K2?'

'Well, they're interested in him for some reason,' Kirkpatrick pressed.

Henry took a breath. 'Worst case scenario ... they've found something, something old that they think he can shed some light on, something from the sixties or seventies - either MI6 business, or possibly us. But as far as I know, the K2 organisation has never shown any interest in *anything* this side of the pond.'

‘What kind of man *is* Beesely?’ the front seat passenger asked in a mildly accented voice. The driver turned his head, but the question had been meant for the passenger in the rear.

The three men now sat in a darkened Range Rover, the inside even darker than the rain-swept dusk outside due to the vehicle’s tinted and bullet-proof glass. Those rain clouds had brought on dusk an hour early on this otherwise mild June day in the English countryside. From their raised positions, the men could see out over hedgerows on either side of the country lane they had stopped in. In the distance, they could just make out a large house with its lights on, the house nestled between a wood and a small lake.

The rear passenger began, ‘He’s a unique man, and he was a good officer back in the day – a good leader of men. He coined the phrase *leading from the front*. He’s also an old-school gentleman, a proper gentleman, not like some of the public school twats that run the intelligence services these days. You could image Beesely on a hunt in Africa with a line of slave bearers behind him.

‘I’ve known him almost twenty-five years, right from my first days in SAS. He wasn’t there then, he was working for Army Intelligence, but I heard the stories and met people who knew him. When I did finally meet him I took to him straight away. He’s simple in his attitude, no messing about. If he’s wrong he’ll admit it, not like most of the Ruperts I worked for... who’d do anything to advance their own fucking careers.

‘He takes care of his boys, those he sends out. It breaks his fucking heart if one gets hurt. What he did for Johnno in Kosovo was no isolated case, he would have done it for anyone working for him if he could. He’s eighty now, but still sharp and still going strong. I haven’t seen him for two years, but I don’t reckon he’s changed much.’

The front seat passenger sighed.

‘You’ll be fine, boss. It’s going to be like frigging Christmas in there when they see me. Smartest move you made - bringing me along.’

The front seat passenger announced, ‘I would rather ... climb Everest again than be here. I hate things that are not ... *controllable*, not black and white.’ He spoke with a clipped accent, even-toned, and with no hint of emotion.

‘Well that’s because you’re a tight-arsed Swiss banker. No offence. You can control the figures on a balance sheet, but you can’t control people, especially not the ones in *that* house.’

‘Sir?’ the driver asked in English, but clearly not his first language. ‘Why is Lower Church Fenton called *lower*, and Upper Church Fenton called *upper*, when the signs are there ... and this land is flat?’

The ‘sir’ in the front seat turned his head towards the rear. ‘I have wondered this myself. The land here is flat, no hills, yet many place names are ‘lower’ or ‘upper’?’

‘Streams, Boss. The villages are roughly at the same height above sea level, but a stream flows from one to the other, and in the old days a stream was a valuable commodity for all your frigging cows and crops and the like. Downstream was ‘lower’ and upstream is ‘upper’. In those days, if you widened or dammed-up the stream, your neighbours downstream cut your bollocks off.’

The two men in the front nodded their understanding, less so for the quality of the explanation.

‘Great,’ the rear passenger complained. ‘Now I’m frigging hungry. Shall we roll, Boss?’

The ‘tight-arsed Swiss banker’ picked up his mobile phone.

Unknown to the three men, their Range Rover came into view through a night-sight, the central feature of a bright green-grey image. With a gloved finger, a button was selected, doubling the magnification, the sight’s built-in software taking a moment to adjust and settle. The vehicle’s occupants were not

clearly visible, their general outlines appearing as distorted pale green blobs through the tempered and tinted windows.

The observer focused on the shapes, a wry smile forming. ‘Two, this is One,’ he whispered in an American accent. ‘That vehicle has bullet-proof glass.’

The observer swept left then right, the thermal image adjusting itself. The car’s bonnet displayed as bright orange, indicating heat, the car’s headlights a rich red colour that was being toned down automatically by the system software. He turned on Video Record, a red flashing square of writing appearing in the bottom left of the image, its letters too small to be legible. The laser-rangefinder, now displaying in the top right hand corner, showed ‘60m’; sixty metres.

An audible beep in the man’s earpiece caused him to suddenly hold his breath. He lowered his stance quickly, and put solid ground between himself and whoever else might be around, a large tree and small ditch offering him protection from being viewed with another night sight.

‘Two, this is One. You have movement?’ he whispered.

‘Standby,’ came the confident response.

The first man listened, unwilling to elevate himself to a position where he could see, or risking being seen.

‘We have two stealthy unknowns across the lake, kitted with night-sights. Two more rear of house.’

‘Am I clear, egress route one?’

‘Affirmative, you’re shielded from both parties. Haul it, buddy, got us some professional company for a change, not just irate Limey farmers.’

Sex and the sixties

1

Sir Morris Beesely placed down the house phone, a 1940s antique that had been specially adapted for modern exchanges. 'How very odd,' he commented.

He now stood at the edge of a large oak table that had been the focal point of family gatherings his entire life. It remained one of the few things that reminded him of the war, and of his parents and his brother - all now long dead. He remained by the phone, his thumbs in the waistcoat pockets of his tweed suit.

'Very odd,' he repeated.

Johno wandered in, slapping a newspaper onto the table. 'What's odd, Boss?' He stood dressed as usual in an old black suit with a clean white shirt.

Beesely stared down at the phone as Johno drew near. 'That was the auction house up in town,' he stated without looking up.

'Sold this old place then?'

Without making eye contact, Beesely quietly stated, 'Oh, yes, my boy, well and truly sold.' He shook his head slightly. 'In fact, it's been sold several times over.'

Johno flicked through the newspaper's TV section. Without looking up, he quietly commented, 'That auction house *idiot* screwed up and sold it to two people at the same time?'

Beesely raised his head without making eye contact. 'Nothing quite so simple, my grammatically challenged little helper.'

Johno glanced across. 'Uh?'

Now Beesely turned to face Johno squarely. 'They did not sell it twice, young man, they sold it once ... and for *seven million pounds*.'

Johno's cheek creased into a huge smile. He faced Beesely squarely. 'Result! I feel a fact finding trip to Bar-bloody-

Bados-in-the-frigging-sun coming on.’ Then he checked himself and frowned. ‘Thought you said that all the work it needed for the listed building status shit ... would make it only worth a million?’

Beesely issued a reluctant nod. ‘Correct. It *is* only worth a million.’ He straightened, staring ahead. ‘And yet, here we stand like a pair of prize tarts on the opening night of a New Delhi whore house.’ Focusing on Johnno for a few seconds, he asked, ‘Would you be happy ... to retire to Barbados, never to return?’

‘In an instant.’

Beesely carefully studied his driver.

Johnno stepped closer. ‘Have they ... you know, received the money?’ he asked, almost whispering.

Beesely leant towards him, whispering conspiratorially. ‘It was wired immediately.’

Johnno folded his arms. ‘Can they ask for it back?’

‘Nope,’ Beesely shot back. ‘Auctions ... have rules, my boy.’

Johnno let his arms drop, and turned back to the TV section of the newspaper. ‘It’s their problem then. Someone with that kind of money knows what he’s doing. Maybe there’s oil under the lake.’

‘It’s a puzzler.’ Beesely breathed out. ‘I’d hate to find out that this old place is being pulled down to build the next McDonalds or ... or what am I babbling on about. We’re miles from anywhere, the roads are terrible, we sit on the edge of a National Heritage site and the grounds are too small for a weird little theme park of sorts.’

Johnno glanced up briefly. ‘Know who bought it?’

Beesely tipped his head from side to side, stretching his neck muscles. ‘It was anonymous; paid with a Swiss bank transfer.’

Johnno controlled his reaction. ‘Swiss?’

Beesely took a moment, making eye contact. ‘Just because the buyer uses a Swiss bank ... does not mean that he *is* Swiss.’

Johno shrugged, looking resigned to the fact, stuffing his hands in his pockets. ‘They must know what they’re doing, not our problem. Let’s just pack a bag and fuck off, eh.’

As Beesely held his gaze on Johno, his long serving housekeeper entered the room with a silver tea set. It held a mug for Johno that pronounced ‘Passing forty!’, its side adorned with a picture of Homer Simpson, belly hanging out.

‘You’re back early. So what’s not our problem?’ Jane enquired as she prepared the tea. The two men walked over to where she had placed the tray.

The housekeeper, and occasional secretary, wore a pained expression on a forty-one year old face that typically showed no joy. She often complained about the temperature in the old house, even in the summer, her cold hands the butt of many jokes from Johno. Even when they were abroad together, in the Caribbean or the tropics, she complained of the cold.

‘Some silly sod just paid seven million quid for this old dump,’ Johno blurted out.

She turned to Beesely for confirmation, her aged employer smiling and nodding. ‘Wow, that’s great,’ she commented in a quiet West Country accent. ‘What with all the stuff you’ve sold off and the shares you sold ... you’re set for life now. Good for you.’ She poured out two teas.

‘Set for life,’ Beesely loudly repeated, lifting his gaze to the ceiling. ‘I wonder what I’ll do when I finally retire.’ He lowered his gaze to Johno, who rolled his eyes at Jane’s statement. ‘I can just about pay your salaries now,’ he risked.

It was an old joke. Johno and Jane exchanged glances, as they had done a hundred times before.

Beesely’s mobile came to life, Johno hiding a smile; he had downloaded another ring-tone to it without anyone noticing. A mechanised voice began, ‘Ring ... ring! Won’t somebody answer the damn phone? Ring! Hello!’

Beesely focused on Jane as he took it out. 'Death can come as such a sweet release.'

She gently slapped his arm and scowled, as Johno laughed.

'Beesely here,' their employer answered in a high-toned and nasal voice.

'My name is Otto Schessel, and I am calling from The International Bank of Zurich,' came an accented voice.

'Ah, I had been expecting someone to call.' He glanced at Johno as he lowered the phone. 'Swiss bank,' he whispered.

Johno's shoulders dropped. 'Bollocks,' he muttered. 'I knew it was a cock-up. So much for Barbados.'

'Go on,' Beesely keenly requested of the voice. 'You are calling about the sale of Broadlands –'

'No, sir.'

'No?' Beesely puzzled.

'No, sir. I wish to talk with you regarding your late brother-in-law from Switzerland, Herr Gunter Schappaust.'

Beesely suddenly looked pale, Johno noticing and jumping to his feet. 'My late brother-in-law,' Beesely repeated for the benefit of Johno and Jane. 'Would that be the Swiss Nazi bastard, Gunter, that particular brother-in-law?' He carefully observed Johno's sudden lack of interest in the call it.

The caller paused. 'I cannot comment upon that, sir.'

'No, of course you can't, you're a polite and efficient Swiss banker. Well then, why *exactly*, are you calling my good self at this hour on a damp Thursday night?'

'Apologies for the hour, sir, but this is an important matter. You are the last surviving heir, a distant relative, and your brother-in-law left no will. Therefore, we must speak with you urgently given the large sum of money you will be inheriting.'

'Large sum of money I'll be inheriting,' Beesely repeated with a sceptical look, Johno now taking an interest. He added flatly, 'It *is* my lucky day.'

'Sir?' came from the caller.

‘Never mind,’ Beesely intimated. ‘What did you wish to discuss, and how - pray tell, would we communicate about this matter? Do I need to fly to Switzerland?’

‘No, sir, I am outside your gate.’

Startled, Beesely clicked his fingers at Johnno. ‘You’re outside my gate.’ Johnno stepped to the window. After a second he turned and nodded, looking all business. ‘Then I suppose we should get to the bottom of this. My man will come out and open the gate; not electric I’m afraid, bit of a chore to open it.’ He clipped the phone shut. ‘Tool up,’ he instructed Johnno, his features hardening. ‘We have company ... and I smell a rat.’ He held up his mobile. ‘And just how the hell did they get my mobile number? This darn thing is an unregistered pre-pay thingy.’

2

As Johnno walked out to the gate, he could feel the Browning 9mm pistol digging into his lower back, cocked ready and stuffed down his belt for the most discreet profile. Stepping slowly, and glancing around, each step was loudly advertised as his shoes crunched gravel, a fine misty rain cooling his face. He manhandled the large gate, the old iron squeaking loudly in protest as it was pulled open on dated hinges, gravel being crunched and displaced. He stood to one side and waited, his face and hair now moist.

The Range Rover drew level, and he strained to see inside, the passenger’s window already down. Once the headlights were beyond him he could see two men in suits, dressed like ... well... dressed like pin-head Swiss bankers, he considered. The passenger looked like a nervous Boris Becker with a tidy haircut, Johnno considered. He offered tired eyes sunken into a youthful, pale face.

Johnno’s concerns ebbed away. ‘Evening,’ he flatly offered. ‘Nice night for it.’

The passenger glanced up at the dark sky and the rain with a puzzled look. ‘Nice night for what?’ he genuinely enquired, missing the sarcasm.

‘For things ... that you might want to do a night like this, like ... slug spotting.’ He raised an arm towards the house. ‘Park anywhere, but not on the flowerbeds, the boss gets pissy when visitors do that.’

Confused, the two visitors glanced at each other as they watched out for non-existent flowerbeds, pulling forwards onto the large gravel driveway, Johno having failed to notice the diplomatic number plates. And the rear of the vehicle was now empty. The passenger stepped down from the car, briefcase in hand, and waited. The driver came around the front of the vehicle; no briefcase, just a bulging chest visible under his jacket.

‘Please,’ Johno said, gesturing towards the house, ‘go on in.’ He slowed his progress, keeping his distance behind them. The two visitors stepped into the illuminated porch. Johno had just stepped inside when he felt the press of cold metal to his right temple.

‘Keep walking,’ a voice whispered, a hand now on Johno’s left shoulder.

‘Bollocks,’ Johno let out, louder than he’d meant to.

The two visitors had turned, smiling oddly at him before proceeding calmly inside. They walked into the dining room, to be greeted by Beesely and Jane rudely sat waiting – not standing. As Johno trailed them inside, he carefully considered his options. Beesely and Jane were now both sitting behind the oak table, Johno noted as he entered the dining room, the big bullet-proof table with several under-table drawers, great places to conceal a gun. The tables were about to be turned.

The passenger politely introduced himself to Beesely as Otto Schessel, placing his briefcase onto the table before standing off to one side, the driver walking a similar distance the other way. Johno now stepped slowly towards the sitting

Beesely, gun still to his head. His employer's hands had been below the table, but as Johno crossed the room Beesely raised them onto the table, as did Jane. Johno felt as though he might explode; he stared so hard at Beesely he thought his eyes were going to pop out. But Beesely smiled widely, soon copied by Jane. The press of metal against his temple ended, the hand came off his shoulder.

'Getting frigging old, slow, *and* fat,' came a voice that Johno recognised immediately. He spun around. There stood former SAS sergeant Richard 'Ricky' Davies, beaming. The 'gunman' put his weapon into his shoulder holster. Ricky stood almost six foot tall, a wiry frame with shortly cropped grey hair, and a face that made even close friends believe he was contemplating killing them then eating their body parts. Beesely had always remarked: a face that only a mother could love.

Johno worked hard to control his reaction; this was one man in the world he could not get angry with, no matter what he did. And this was a dirty rotten... 'Dirty rotten bunch of bastards,' Johno began, addressing them all. 'Bleeding sons of putrid dogs bollocks ...' They were all in on it, he was sure. It was elaborate enough for Beesely to have had a hand in, but it wasn't his birthday or April the first, no major anniversary, not that he could remember those anyway.

'You looked shit scared, sonny,' Ricky teased as he stepped closer. 'You need a drink?'

Johno stayed firmly rooted to the spot, muttering every bad word he could think of; a long list. He had been humiliated, scared, the butt of a joke, yet stood utterly delighted to see the man now in front of him.

Jane was the first to Ricky. She flung her arms around him and he lifted her up, her eyes already full of tears of joy. He let her down gently and kissed her on the forehead, Johno having hurt people for far less.

‘Hey, skinny,’ Ricky whispered. ‘How’re the hands?’ He felt her hands, exaggerating a sharp jerk at how cold they were. She slapped his arm, hard. ‘I told you before, if you want to play with my balls you’ve got to warm up them hands.’ She slapped him again.

Beesely drew level with Johnno, who was still swearing under his breath. ‘Beaten by a better man,’ he whispered as he passed, Johnno relaxing a few degrees. Ricky put out a hand to shake, but was surprised to find Beesely giving him a hug. ‘Good to see you again, Richard.’

The visitor, who had introduced himself as Otto, stood watching, his face betraying no emotion as he studied them all carefully.

Ricky hugged Beesely, careful to note that he was hugging an eighty-year-old man, even if fit and healthy for his age. ‘Good to see you again, sir.’

Beesely eased back, but held onto Ricky, suddenly becoming serious. ‘Last I heard you were supposed to be banged up somewhere, but no one could find out anything. I would have come for you –’

‘I know,’ Ricky cut in, also now serious, ‘but I have a new guardian angel, thanks to you in no small part.’ He tipped his head towards Otto.

Beesely followed Ricky’s gaze, sizing up Otto. ‘I thought these goons were with you, part of the ... joke?’

Ricky shook his head. ‘He’s the real deal Swiss banker, no joke. I’ve been working for him for the past few months.’ Beesely studied Otto, many things racing through his mind. Ricky added, ‘I was in a Chinese jail for life, till Otto here bribed half the officials in chicken-chow-mein province and got me out. They faked my death so that Peking-duck and Ho Chi Min wouldn’t be asking too many questions. Hell, MI6 were not about to swap me –’

Beesely straightened, shocked. ‘MI6 sent you into China?’ Without waiting for an answer, he shook his head, walking

back to the table. ‘Jane, could you please prepare something for our guests.’ She turned towards the kitchen. Loudly, he said, ‘And if someone would be so kind as to shut the bleeding front door we will all stay warm and toasty.’ Quieter, he added, ‘Except Jane, of course.’

‘I heard that!’ she complained as she disappeared through a side door.

Now Ricky stepped up to a more relaxed Johnno, although Johnno still appeared as if he might clobber someone. ‘How you been then, runt?’

‘I’m an inch shorter, that’s all. And I *can* cook field rations.’

‘You call that cooking?’ Ricky challenged. ‘You ungrateful little shit stain.’

‘Hey, old man, I didn’t alert the enemy by farting too loud!’

‘Listen, sonny, if you weren’t so damn fat we could have got out of that scrape days earlier, maybe weeks, you little whinge bag.’

‘Arsehole!’

‘Toe rag!’

‘Whore house toilet washer!’

Beesely stepped up to Otto. ‘This could go on for a while. Cup of Tea?’

Otto gave a slight head bow. ‘Thank you, that would be very nice,’ he said with an accent that Beesely picked up on straight away: German-speaking Swiss. Otto shot a glance at the other man, who immediately sat in the farthest corner, tucked out of the way.

Beesely had followed Otto’s signal around to the second man. ‘Your ... driver?’

‘Driver and bodyguard,’ Otto replied. ‘One of many.’

‘I see,’ Beesely muttered, frowning slightly as he pulled out several chairs around the large table, as if a board meeting was about to be convened.

Jane soon reappeared holding two large coffee flasks, mugs precariously gripped on each little finger. She fetched several best china cups from an old wooden sideboard and a large stack of coasters. Ricky and Johnno were now gently punching each other on the shoulder, talking about an arm wrestle or a race around the house.

‘Ricky, Johnno, front and centre!’ Beesely firmly commanded, noting Otto’s mild surprise. ‘Sit down! And somebody close that bloody door!’

Johnno attended to the door as Ricky sat. Otto sat where his briefcase had been left, and Jane stood at the far end of the table, soon busy taking whispered orders for tea and coffee. She had also brought out a pen and pad, an old habit.

When Johnno returned, still mumbling to himself, Beesely seated himself deliberately opposite Otto. ‘So, Richard,’ Beesely asked whilst staring directly across at Otto. ‘Just what, in exact and precise terms, not withholding any relevant detail, is going on?’

‘Long story, Boss.’

‘Good job then that we have biscuits,’ Beesely cut in with, still focused on Otto.

‘Sir Morris, may I introduce to you Otto Schessel, head of The International Bank of Zurich. And, at forty-two years old, quite likely one of the world’s richest men.’

Beesely appeared as if he was about to say something, but checked himself and turned to Ricky, a ridge creasing his brow. ‘Really?’

‘Yep,’ Ricky replied. ‘This guy has more money than God.’

Johnno eased forwards, resting his elbows on the table. ‘Bought any nice old English country houses lately, Blotto?’

Otto frowned slightly at the deliberate mispronunciation of his name. Before he had a chance to answer, Beesely had turned to Johnno.

‘Good question,’ Beesely approved, surprised by Johnno’s insight. ‘Not quite as stupid as you look.’

Johno gritted his teeth as Ricky laughed.

‘Yes,’ Otto answered. ‘I bought this property today, as you have guessed it correctly.’

‘For seven times what it’s worth,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘Not a very smart move. Generous, and gratefully received, but not very smart. And from the same man who is handling my ... *inheritance*. How intriguing.’ He glanced again at Ricky.

Otto studied Beesely for a second, then opened his case and took a large brown envelope from the middle of a pile of envelopes and files.

‘I was expecting to see your sandwiches in there,’ Johno quipped, Ricky controlling a small, stifled laugh. ‘Does your mum know you’re out this late?’

Otto did not react as he retrieved a set of house deeds from the envelope. ‘This signs the house back over to you, to use as you wish until death,’ he stated.

Beesely shot a look at Ricky, noting his coy grin, then just stared across at Otto, his expression blank. There came a long, awkward silence.

‘Nice gesture,’ Ricky finally encouraged, Beesely not responding.

Otto glanced at Ricky before taking another file from his case. ‘Your late brother-in-law left a detailed will that stated ... that in the event of his death, his money was to be used for supporting several political groups across Europe.’

Beesely eased his head forwards. ‘On the phone you said that he left *no* will.’

Otto stared back for a moment, and then seemed to read the documents in front of him. ‘If that version of his will had been allowed to be executed, then many right-wing political groups would have benefited from Gunter’s money.’

‘You mean ... neo-Nazi groups?’ Beesely prompted with a concerned look.

Otto paused. ‘Yes.’

‘Oh.’ Beesely gave it some thought. ‘So you, Mister Otto Swiss banker, are here because you do not agree with my late brother-in-law’s will, and would rather ... *I* get to choose how the money is used?’

‘It is complicated, but in simple terms, yes.’

Beesely sat back in his chair and turned to Ricky, who was now munching on a large shortbread biscuit. ‘What’s wrong with this picture?’ Ricky tried to swallow. ‘I mean, call me old fashioned, but I have always believed that Swiss bankers do not go around changing wills, that they take their work very seriously, that they act diligently in the interests of their clients. And yet here we sit, expected to believe that this Swiss banker - generous to a fault in throwing away money on decrepit old houses - has *changed* someone’s will so that I benefit. *Little old me.*’ He turned to Otto and stared directly at him. ‘Were you, perhaps, hoping I might split the proceeds with you in this grand international conspiracy?’

‘No,’ Otto replied as he pulled out another brown envelope, the top one. ‘The money is yours, to do with as you please.’

Beesely started to get louder. ‘And just why the hell would *you* be arranging this ... *for me?*’ He checked Ricky, finding him still smiling.

Otto opened the envelope and slid an A4 black and white photo across the desk, not dissimilar to someone laying down four aces in a poker game. Beesely suddenly appeared tired, the colour draining from his face. He reached down with his right hand and placed a Beretta 9mm pistol onto the table.

‘Boss?’ Johno asked, straightening.

‘It’s OK!’ Ricky assured them all. ‘Everyone relax!’

Beesely stared down at the photo of a woman. He ran a finger over the glossy paper, as if running it over the imagined contours of her face. ‘You’d better have a very good reason for having this photo, mister.’

His hand remained on the pistol as their eyes met.

‘She was my mother,’ Otto stated.

* * *

Guido Pepi cut the end off a cigar, taking many seconds to light it. He shook the match, reaching across and tossing it into an ashtray on his grand desk before assessing the men ranged in front of him. He eased back into his chair, running a hand through his long silver hair, a glance toward the windows. The moonlight was fighting its way in through the curtains on this warm night in the Tivoli hills, east of Rome. ‘So,’ he said in Italian. ‘K2 has a new owner.’

‘It’s a trick!’ a man complained. ‘Gunter’s will was altered, or destroyed.’

Pepi nodded; a slow, almost unnoticed movement. ‘Of course it was. The original will left his fortune to the Swiss Government, some money to political groups; that was the deal he struck for them to allow his continued existence. This new owner –’

‘Is British!’ another man spat out, disgusted at the idea.

‘The K2 staff will not welcome this man, nor the Swiss people or Government,’ the first man suggested.

‘We will see, as it unfolds. But gentlemen, it is no coincidence that our two biggest problems have just joined forces, not unless you believe in fate.’

A Roman Catholic cardinal stepped in, fully robed and splendid in his regalia.

‘Ah, Cardinal. What news?’ Pepi asked, no one making any effort to stand or greet the newcomer.

‘The inheritance appears genuine.’ Pepi blinked. The cleric added, ‘This man, Beesely, was a very distant relative of Gunter, through his sister –’

‘Ah, yes,’ Pepi let out, tapping the end of his cigar over the ashtray. ‘She went to live in England before the war. It would be easy enough for British Intelligence to alter some old records.’

‘There’s something else,’ the Cardinal added, his hands clasped as he made his report. ‘This man Beesely was a maverick, not trusted by his own people. There is suggestion that he was a CIA plant.’

Pepi eased up, his concerned look noticed by the gathered men.

‘Something?’ a man delicately enquired.

Without taking his studious gaze off the windows, Pepi responded, ‘Any CIA interest in K2 must be seen as a priority. I have no doubt they would love to get hold of the files, and *the list*. Even more so than the British.’ He turned back to the Cardinal. ‘Kindly make contact with your people in the CIA. Re-acquaint yourself, without explaining just what our concerns are. Do not ... trust them.’

The cleric bowed his head and left, leaving Pepi staring at the windows, a puzzled frown forming.

‘Sir, that bomb is still in place, counting down. They have not spotted it.’

Pepi shrugged. ‘It still suits its original purpose. Let it run.’

3

If Beesely had looked ill before, he looked like death now. Inch by inch he lowered his head, his eyes misting over.

Otto continued, ‘If I may explain, it is a difficult situation, a long story. My grandmother was Jewish, a German Jew –’

Beesely lifted his gaze, tapping the photo of his former lover with a finger. ‘Marianne ... was Jewish?’

‘My mother, the woman you met in 1963, was the daughter of a German-Jewish refugee. She adopted the name Schessel. I am, technically, part Jewish.’

‘Which is very odd, considering the position you’re in ... in a Swiss bank,’ Beesely delicately, but firmly, pointed out.

Otto nodded slightly. ‘Yes, it is correct. If this information was known I would not be employed where I am. But I did not

apply for any position, I was given the work by Gunter, your brother-in-law. He knew, but hid the fact; he did not wish anyone to know that I was the son of a Jew.'

Beesely rubbed his forehead. 'Sorry, you were saying something.'

'My grandmother, she travelled to Switzerland just before the war. During the war she was detained by the Swiss authorities, in a camp near Lugano, being released with the help of her Swiss lover. He disappeared towards the end of the war and she raised my mother in Bern. My grandmother died when my mother was eighteen years old, leaving little money.' He took a breath. 'That was when my mother met *and married* Gunter.'

'Gunter!' Beesely exploded. '*She* ... was his wife?'

Johno glanced from face to face, not understanding.

Otto stared back for a moment, before lowering his gaze. 'He treated her well enough at the beginning, so I have heard, but spent less and less time with her in the short time after they were married.'

Beesely's eyes widened, clearly stung by the words.

Otto continued, 'He never let on about his past, his time with the Wehrmacht. In 1963 he found out that a distant relative, you Sir Morris, were working for British Intelligence and he wanted to corrupt you, to bribe you perhaps. I do not know all the details. He sent my mother to try and get you to Switzerland for some reason. She ... was an attractive woman.'

'The best,' Beesely muttered.

Otto offered, 'Naturally, if you wish to have a DNA test carried out...'

Beesely turned his head to Ricky.

Ricky offered him back a confident smile. 'I wouldn't bother, I've seen the evidence, did some of my own checking; Herr Otto here showed me around the outfit thoroughly. He knew you'd ask the question.'

Beesely focused on Ricky with a hard stare. 'Would you bet your life on it?'

'Without hesitation.'

Beesely nodded his reluctant acceptance.

Johno eased up, reached across and had a peek at the photo. 'Shit, she's a babe! Know who she looks reminds me of-'

'Alexandra Bastedo,' Beesely informed them without looking up, pronouncing the name carefully. 'Actress in that 1960s TV show: The Champions. People often mistook her for that actress when we went out. Something I *may not* ... have denied as strongly as I should have.'

Jane had a look at the photo. 'My God, she's beautiful.' She put a hand on Beesely's arm. 'What happened between you?'

'She told me everything,' Beesely informed them, still staring at the photo, a pain growing in his chest. 'Not about Gunter, just that she was sent to spy on me. I offered her asylum here, in this country, thinking she was working for the East Germans, but she insisted that she had to go back. She said the two weeks here with me was the best ... *holiday* she had ever had.'

'Hang on... ' Johno's brain had now caught up. 'She came over to, you know, Mata Hari ... you knocked her up ... and Blotto here -'

'Is, most likely, my biological son.'

Johno took a bite. With a mouthful of sandwich he said, 'Shit, he's got a lot more hair than you!'

With Beesely focused on Johno, Jane approached Otto and placed a hand on his arm. 'That's great. Where are you staying? You should stay in the guest room here, get to know everyone,' she rapidly got out.

Otto did not quite know what to say, but smiled back politely.

'Ricky said it was a long story,' Beesely firmly interrupted. He motioned for Jane to sit back down.

Otto collected his thoughts. 'I was raised by Gunter, as his son. I never knew my mother, she died a year after I was born. A man I spoke to one year ago suggested that my ... *father* had killed her in a drunken rage.'

Beesely breathed in hard enough to worry Johno and Jane. 'He ... killed her?'

'Definitely. I have confirmed it since.'

'And *that's* why you changed his will?' Beesely asked, now appearing unwell.

Otto suddenly seemed saddened, or disappointed, his expression drifting through many slight changes that Beesely was having a hard time following. He glanced at the faces in the room for several seconds. 'I changed his will the day I killed him.' Jane's enthusiasm for their guest had been swept away. Johno did not quite know what to make of that, and Ricky shifted uneasily in his seat. Otto added, 'As he lay sick in the bed I poured water into his mouth and held his mouth and nose closed, looking him in the eye. I told him ... this is for Marianne.'

Silence gripped the table.

Johno spoke first, still with half a mouthful of sandwich. 'Nazi bastard deserved everything he got.'

'Quite,' Beesely agreed.

Otto turned to Jane. 'Perhaps some fresh drinks would be nice.' He spoke with the confidence of a man used to giving orders and managing people. She glanced to Beesely for confirmation, and her boss nodded. They waited until she had left before resuming.

'Some details are, perhaps, not for her ears,' Otto suggested to Beesely, who agreed with a nod.

'So how much was the old bastard worth then?' Johno loudly asked.

Beesely scowled at him, but seemed keen to know that as well.

‘Perhaps if I start at the beginning,’ Otto offered. ‘Gunter was an officer in the Wehrmacht towards the end of the war. Not an SS officer or camp guard, or anything of that nature, he was a coward and avoided the Russian front by working as an undercover agent in Switzerland, spying on Allied embassies, and depositing money and works of art for Nazi party members and high ranking officers into Swiss banks.’

‘So he wasn’t a Nazi then?’ Johno puzzled.

‘Not technically,’ Beesely admitted. ‘But back then any German soldier was called a ‘Nazi’, and Gunter had a Swiss passport as well, so he could have sat out the war instead of volunteering to join up.’

Otto continued, ‘He was from a rich family to start with, inheriting a thirty-five percent share in a Swiss munitions factory when he was just fifteen, bequeathed by his uncle whom he helped each summer. He did not need to work ... or fight. He was already rich towards the end of the war, when his activities depositing money and works of art for Nazi officials flourished. It was not lost on him that many of these officers might not survive the war, so he kept copies of numbered Swiss accounts, branches, and details of what was deposited. It is also certain that in 1945, even though he was only twenty, he helped many of his contacts escape to Switzerland, only to murder them in his safe houses. Their riches fell into his hands.

‘It is fair to say that he *cleaned up*, as you English say it. He may well have killed upwards of fifty people, taking over their bank accounts. Since he opened the accounts, no one at the banks would question him. And he held a genuine Swiss passport.’

‘How’s this Grunter wanker related to you, Boss?’ Johno queried.

Otto answered the question, ignoring Johno’s deliberate mispronunciation, ‘Gunter’s older sister travelled to England in 1937. The sister, Guette – a Danish name - changed her first

name to Gillian and married Sir Morris's brother, Robert. They were both killed in a car crash in 1965.'

'Tenuous bleeding link,' Johno pointed out.

Otto turned to address Johno directly. 'In the eyes of the law it is still the only link to a living relative.' Turning back to Beesely, he added, 'Gunter seems to have had a series of mistresses, and possibly some illegitimate children, who were rumoured to have been killed.'

Beesely ran a hand over his bald scalp. 'All that money in 1945, it must be worth a great deal by now.'

'I told you,' Ricky emphasised as he walked around the table to pour himself another cup of tea. 'He's the world's richest man, and he's here to give it all to you.'

Beesely studied Otto. 'Is there more?'

'A great deal.'

Jane re-appeared with food, fresh tea and coffee. She attended each of them in turn as this 'board meeting' seemed to pause. She even diligently gave Otto's driver tea and biscuits, before making her excuses and leaving the room.

Otto continued, 'Just after the end of the war, Gunter made several trips into Germany and Austria to recover gold, currency, and other valuables. He recovered a great deal of gold and was the keen - how you say - *cave explorer man*. And he was no fool, not keen to spend his money. He invested wisely, trained himself in the stock markets and currency markets, employed researchers to help him pick growth stocks, and he soon hit upon the idea of industrial espionage - he had the contacts and the skills, and he was not afraid to break the law or kill people.

'The company that he created, an investment bank, soon started to make a great deal of money around the world. As soon as anyone started asking questions, they would be told that this Swiss trading group was acting on behalf of third parties, not themselves, and Swiss banking laws did the rest. Secrecy was assured.

‘He put spies into many companies, large companies; IBM, Ford, the petrol companies. And these sleeper agents were there for thirty to forty years. He used their intelligence data well, but never became greedy. He was always as discreet as a Swiss banker, as we say. Eventually, he came to own several large banks and handled the investments of a great many happy foreign investors. He grew three distinct businesses: the banks, the investment house and an intelligence gathering and security agency.’

‘What happened to the intelligence agency?’ Johno keenly enquired.

Otto creased one cheek, a sly smile forming.

‘Oh ... shit,’ Beesely let out, his eyes narrowing. Johno straightened, Ricky grinning to himself with his head lowered.

Otto proudly explained, ‘They are all still running, and going from strength to strength. They have been under my direct control for the past six months, under my indirect control with Gunter for the past twenty years. I was formerly head of the banking group, but then moved five years ago to help organize the other branches.’

‘Oh ... hell,’ Beesely let out.

‘Boss?’ Johno asked, now concerned.

Beesely asked, ‘This Swiss espionage company ... does it have a name just two characters long?’

Otto smiled. ‘There are not many people outside of Switzerland who know that, and most of them are ... well ... not sure what it is, or what it does.’

‘Is industrial espionage still its main concern?’ Beesely asked, standing and stretching.

‘It was, but we have branched out in recent years to private security work in Europe, transporting clients and their valuables discreetly, offering security advice and assistance to companies, to casinos, and some third world governments. As well as keeping Switzerland as the politicians in Switzerland

desire to keep it; quiet, discreet, and free of terrorists and criminals.'

'Unless they can pay,' Beesely suggested.

'Paying criminal clients are not treated in the same way as non-paying criminals,' Otto admitted.

Johno finished his biscuit. 'So what's it called?' he asked no one in particular.

'K2,' Otto informed him. 'An unofficial name I gave it after climbing the mountain, K2.'

Johno perked up, himself a former climber in the Army. 'You climb at that standard?'

Ricky shot in, 'Otto climbed Everest in 1991!'

Johno now saw the 'pinhead Swiss banker type' in a new light, and now with a great deal of respect.

Beesely stepped up to him, Johno raising his head. 'You remember me mentioning a secret organization in Switzerland, one that the Yanks and the Brits could never find anything about, a group that ties naked people to chairs and then sets fire to them?'

Johno snapped upright, glancing at Otto before turning back to Beesely. 'Them?'

Beesely raised his eyebrows for emphasis and nodded. '*Them*. Sitting having tea and biscuits in our home.'

'Shit,' Johno slowly let out. He glanced over his shoulder at Otto's driver. 'Hey, Swiss fuck.' The man blinked. 'If you're gunna kill me, stick a banana up my arse; it'll give the mortician something to laugh about!'

Ricky chuckled.

'So,' Beesely asked his visitor as he finally sat back down. 'Why bother to involve me at all? You seem to have things under control?'

Otto ran a finger right around the four sides of the envelope in front of him. 'I grew up thinking my father was a Nazi who murdered dozens of people; men, women and children. Then to discover that my grandmother and mother were Jewish, that my

supposed father killed my mother ... it was not a good time for me. And then, to discover that my biological father was a real life hero of epic proportions - a decorated Guards officer, hero officer of the SAS, twenty years in British Intelligence and still going strong at eighty. And the more research I conducted, the better I felt about myself. Meeting Richard convinced me that contacting you was the right thing to do. After the story of Kosovo I was convinced, convinced that *you* should head K2, and not me.'

* * *

'Henry, it's Kirkpatrick.'

'You sound ... flustered?'

'Our English friend and our Swiss friends.'

'Oh?'

'We just received an intercept from Bern, Switzerland, an email intercept with all the right keywords. Thank God for the advent of the Internet, and the far-sightedness of the NSA!'

'And?' Henry quietly nudged.

Kirkpatrick paused. 'A Bern solicitor being retained to help validate an inheritance.'

Another pause preceded, 'Impossible.'

'Apparently not,' Kirkpatrick insisted.

'Dear God, if *he* got together with *them*!'

'We need to take steps ... and quickly.'

Henry's laboured breathing could be heard down the phone. 'Do so, cover all the bases, and prepare to withdraw our exposed assets.'

4

Beesely's eyes widened. 'Head up K2? Me!'

Otto shrugged slightly. 'Yes, why not. You are the best qualified, and it needs a re-structuring. It needs -'

‘It needs direction,’ Beesely cut in with, now staring out of focus and thinking. ‘It needs... a purpose.’

Otto formed a thin smile. ‘Yes, it needs direction and purpose. Why have power and money if it does not do anything... *constructive?*’

‘MI6 would have kittens,’ Beesely stated, glancing at Ricky.

Ricky grinned and lifted his eyebrows in emphasis. ‘Wait till they discover the size of K2!’

‘Oh?’ Beesely asked, a question in his look.

Ricky added, ‘Two thousand staff in twenty countries, plus contracted staff. About four hundred front line agents.’

‘Jesus,’ Beesely let out. ‘They won’t just be pissed off at me, they’ll be... *somewhat concerned!*’

‘Screw ‘em, Boss. They tried to screw you over, and they left Johno up the creek in Kosovo.’

‘We knew the risks,’ Johno stated.

‘Yeah,’ Ricky agreed. ‘But there’s a *shit load* you don’t know.’ Ricky turned to Beesely for permission to continue. Beesely sighed, and sat back. A wave of his hand told Ricky to go ahead. ‘Sir Morris spent close to a million squids of his own money to get you out. He offered me money, which I *did not* take. Before Kosovo I didn’t know who you were, Johno, I just knew that Sir Morris was turning hell inside out to organize a rescue.

‘He was *officially* ordered not to, on threat of prison. Or worse. So he got a crew together. They helped me to the border, I had a guide to your last known position - poor fellow getting blown away just as we reached you - then Sir Morris offered the Yanks top secret info about MI6 activities in Saudi Arms deals, stuff they wanted to know. The Yanks only then agreed to fly you out. If he got caught he could have faced life in prison, or the death penalty for treason.

‘He paid for that plane out of Italy, and your hospital bills. He even put a gun to the head of an Army communications

officer to get your last known position. And I mean, gun to the head, literally - scared the *Rupert* to death. There was an enquiry an all afterwards. Fortunately, Sir Morris knew where the bodies were buried. He told head boy cock-sucker in the Foreign Office that he would talk if he got charged.'

Johno took it in, thinking, before addressing Beesely. 'You felt guilty about sending me into Kosovo?'

'Not quite,' Ricky suggested with a sigh. 'Perhaps someone should tell the poor fool. Now ... seems like a good time.'

Johno turned his head. 'Tell me what, pineapple face?'

'Shall I?' Otto offered.

'Did Richard tell you?' Beesely angrily demanded.

'No. K2 is ... very efficient,' Otto smugly replied.

'Tell me what?' Johno repeated, being ignored.

Beesely breathed in slowly as he considered the face of his newfound son. 'This is going to be a turning point, for many things, and for many people.' He lowered his head and sighed. 'Today will be the last day as we were.' He faced Otto. 'Go ahead then, let's see what you think you know,' he prompted without any hint of malice.

Otto turned squarely to Johno. 'Sir Morris went to so much trouble to get you out of Kosovo ... because you are his illegitimate son, my half-brother.' It took a while to sink in, Ricky and Otto watching Johno's reaction. Or lack of it.

Johno focused on Beesely, his brow slowly creasing. 'You ... you're my ... real father?' Beesely nodded, appearing tired. Johno looked almost studious as he continued to think. 'Well,' he sighed with a resigned look, 'that explains a hell of lot. I used to think I had a guardian angel, back in the early days in the Army. I should have been court-martialled twice -'

'*Three ... times,*' Beesely slipped in.

Johno thought back. 'Three times? So that was *you* ... getting me off?' Beesely gave him a quick nod. 'And that strange NAAFI raffle I won?' Johno probed. Again his

employer nodded. Johno took a big breath. ‘Always wondered why you kept me on, all the hassle I gave you.’

‘*Give ... me. Hassle you give me,*’ Beesely quietly, but firmly corrected.

Johno rubbed his moustache. ‘Thirty grand a year to be your driver when you hardly go out, I should have figured that one.’ He stared out of focus for a moment. ‘Well ... if it’s not a stupid question, why didn’t you say anything before?’ He focused on his father. ‘I’m not a frigging kid.’

Beesely turned to Otto, for Otto to answer. Johno’s new half-brother began, ‘Because you would have been a target, had anyone known your connection to a senior manager in MI6.’ He turned back to Beesely for confirmation, acknowledged by a brief smile.

Johno remained studious. ‘So my mum Barbara and you ... shit!’ He screwed up his face. ‘Yuk! And that wanker of a stepdad I had...’

‘Yuk?’ Beesely repeated.

Otto keenly cut in with, ‘That man used to beat you and your mother, so Sir Morris had him jailed on the made-up charges. When he was out of jail –’

‘Yuk?’ Beesely quietly repeated, being ignored.

‘I decked the wanker,’ Johno finished, focused on no one in particular. ‘I was big enough then.’ He turned to Beesely. ‘And that money my mother got from some dead relative?’

‘Yes,’ Otto confirmed. ‘It was Beesely. He wanted you to go to college, but you joined the Army instead.’

‘College!’ Ricky laughed.

‘Piss off!’ Johno retorted, still deep in thought.

Beesely wasn’t quite sure what he had expected after all these years; tears, big hugs, lots of shouting about ‘lost years’. He should have known better.

Johno addressed Otto, but pointed a finger at Beesely. ‘So, when *he* finally croaks, how much do I get?’

Ricky laughed so loud that Jane came back in. Even Beesely began to laugh, and Otto joined in.

‘What?’ Johno asked, looking from face to face and reaching for a sandwich.

5

Half an hour later, and Johno and Otto were stood talking about climbing, a little awkward in knowing quite how to deal with each other. Johno worked hard on suppressing his natural urge to take the piss out of this ‘suited pin head’, but was starting to develop a great deal of respect for Otto’s climbing achievements. Not to mention the cross-country skiing, the downhill skiing, ski jumping, competition shooting, canoeing...

Beesely stood with Ricky at the other end of the room, teacup and saucer in Beesely’s hands, a mug in Ricky’s hands. Beesely asked, ‘Have you been to command central in Switzerland?’

Ricky’s expression suggested it was an interesting place. ‘Big underground office beneath an old castle on a lake,’ he whispered.

‘Castle?’ Beesely repeated. ‘Is there a cave with a bald fellow stroking a white cat? Goes by the name of Doctor No?’

Ricky laughed. ‘There is a cave; the whole damn command centre is underground.’

‘Is it linked to Swiss Military Intelligence, the UNA?’

Ricky edged closer. ‘I think these boys at K2 *own* the UNA!’

Beesely nodded to himself as he thought. ‘Any mention of P-26?’

‘What’s that?’ Ricky whispered.

‘Never mind.’ He shot a quick glance toward Otto. ‘What else have you seen?’

‘The castle is a hotel type place with about ten, fifteen palatial guest rooms, like a five star retreat in the country. There’re rooms for you, Johnno and Jane ... plus a fleet of Range Rovers just to make you feel at home.’

Beesely raised his eyebrows, tipped his head forwards and asked a silent question.

Ricky grinned. ‘Likes to plan ahead, does our Mister Otto. All the guards use old MP5s and Browning pistols so that Johnno will feel at home.’

‘You trust him?’ Beesely pressed, glancing again at Otto.

‘As much as you and Johnno,’ Ricky answered. ‘The thing to keep in mind ... is that if *you* don’t inherit the bank and K2, Otto is out of a job and the state steps in. Add to the fact that Marianne was Jewish, and poor old Otto is on a knife-edge; don’t know how the fucker sleeps at night. He didn’t need to come here and chat nicely, this guy could snap his fingers and make you lot do whatever he wanted. The power this guy has makes MI6 look like a bunch of frigging girl guides; two thousand staff, offices all over Europe. Frightening, some of the things he can *arrange*.’

Beesely tipped his head. ‘Such as?’

Ricky leant in closer. ‘He lifted all the old MI6 files relating to you. They’re in the fucking car.’

Beesely brightened. ‘Ah, now that would be interesting reading.’

Ricky grinned. ‘Thought so.’

Beesely glanced over at his two boys. Whispering, he enquired, ‘What do you think motivates him?’

‘He wants to be a spymaster. Can’t blame him, we all need a hobby, and it beats being a desk-jockey in some sterile fucking bank. And it seems that this Gunter wanker treated him badly; no hugs at bedtime. Kid grew up needing to prove something, now he’s got the chance. And it’s *you* he wants to prove it to.’

Beesely nodded to himself, facing Otto. He asked, ‘Seen anything of our good friend General Rose lately?’

‘If I did I’d deck the winker. He gave me the cold shoulder ten years ago – only offering me the shitty missions that no one else would touch.’

‘Because you wouldn’t spy on me,’ Beesely put in, sighing.

‘He never did trust you.’

Beesely led Ricky by the arm back to the table. ‘Gentlemen, your seats please. Jane, come sit by me. And Jane, no matter what we discuss from now on, I want you to be a part of things.’ They all sat, and they all deferred leadership to Beesely. Beesely took a breath. ‘To business. Otto, I presume a man of your abilities has a plan he is working to, some ... objectives?’

‘I have, yes,’ Otto answered, glancing from face to face as Jane made ready her pad, ready to take notes. ‘But they are open to debate and to ... guidance. You, sir, are infinitely more experienced than I in ... running intelligence operations. John is more experienced in special operations of a military nature.’

‘John-oh,’ Johno corrected.

Otto glanced at him. ‘Of course, John-oh.’

Beesely took the pad and pen from Jane. ‘Well, let’s hear the main points, and we can kick the ideas around from there.’

Otto cleared his throat, the first sign all night of any nerves in this company. ‘The first objective is to review current structures and operations on a macro scale, and to define some directions. I would suggest that the principal aim is to continue to make money, to facilitate the other operations that we may desire to be involved with.’

‘Yes, of course,’ Beesely commended. ‘Need to oil the wheels. Does K2 make a profit from its own activities?’

‘No, only around twenty five percent of costs are met directly. The rest are met indirectly by the investment arms; stocks and shares, patents, direct dividends.’

‘And the investment arm benefits greatly from intelligence garnered by K2 operatives and sleepers?’ Beesely asked, Otto nodding. Beesely seemed deep in thought for a moment, easing back. ‘Do any of those operations take money away from the needy? Does anyone get hurt?’

‘Not typically, certainly less so in recent years. If you mean to ask - are shareholders adversely affected when we benefit - then only to a small degree. It is mostly institutional size investors that may lose money to us. Naturally, if we deliberately bankrupted a company for some benefit ... then the staff and investors would be hurt.’

‘Would *we* do that?’ Beesely gingerly enquired.

‘Such a move would be high profile, which is not our style. There would have to be a special reason for it,’ Otto explained.

Beesely interlaced his fingers, leaning forwards and resting his weight on his forearms. ‘Such as a factory selling replica guns that they *know* can easily be turned into real ones on British streets?’

Otto seemed a little confused. ‘I am not sure...’

Beesely helped him out. ‘There’s a specific factory in the Czech Republic that I’m thinking about, read about just the other day in The Times, British Government not too happy.’

Otto pulled a large phone from inside his jacket.

Johno snorted, ‘Are those frigging things supposed to be getting smaller? Very nineteen nineties! Got a fucking filofax as well?’

Ricky tapped Johno’s arm. ‘Advanced satellite phone, GPS, homing signal, makes the tea...’

‘Handy,’ Johno offered, deciding to shut up.

Otto pressed a button and began to talk without waiting. ‘Czech company ... makes replica firearms ... has recently been criticized by the British Government.’ He paused, listened, and then held the phone away from his ear. ‘There are three such factories.’ He raised the phone to his ear once more and listened for a minute. ‘One is owned by a Chinese parent

company ... one is struggling financially... the last is the one being criticized, name of GNG, owned by a German businessman.’ He put the phone to his ear again. ‘I see. He also has a stake in the second factory.’ Otto held the phone down. ‘How would *you* ... wish us to proceed?’

Beesely leant forwards slightly. ‘How would *you* normally handle this, if your objective was to stop the flow of these guns around Europe?’

Otto considered the scenario. ‘I would ... buy a majority stake in each company, discreetly through several proxy holdings, then insist that the gun’s design be altered –’

Beesely straightened. ‘Which would all take many months. There’s nothing wrong with your approach, commendably professional, stealthy and measured - as I would expect. But these guns are ending up in Manchester slums every day. A few more months means a few more lives lost.’

‘How would *you* wish us to proceed?’ Otto repeated.

‘The factory owned by the Chinese -’ Beesely began.

‘Burn the frigging thing down!’ Ricky suggested.

‘What I was going to say,’ Beesely explained, a reproachful glance toward Ricky, ‘was to burn down all three at the same time, making them all look like insurance claims. The Chinese we do not like, the struggling factory is a prime case for arson, and this German fella should know better than to dabble in such matters.’

‘So burn them!’ Johnno recommended.

‘I second that,’ Ricky offered with a smirk.

Beesely raised his arm, ‘I vote in favour of the motion put forward by the board.’

Otto lifted the phone back to his ear. ‘Burn all three factories on the same night, making it appear as if deliberate arson, implicating the German businessman owner for his two.’

‘May as well make it all three,’ Beesely suggested with a cheeky grin.

Otto shrugged his shoulders. Into the phone, he ordered, 'Make all three look as if it were the same person. Get back to me tomorrow with a detailed plan, to be executed the day after.'

'Just like that?' Johno asked. 'Sweet.'

'Just like that,' Ricky repeated with a confident smile.

Otto hung up, looking Beesely directly in the eye. 'Are you testing me, or testing K2?'

Beesely leant forwards. 'A bit of both, my lad. How better to get to know you and your outfit's capabilities ... than some practical work, eh?'

Otto considered Beesely's words. 'Are we, then, to define K2 as an instrument of political good in Europe?'

Beesely offered two open palms. 'Can you think of a better use for it? It's not like you need a 'stay behind' army any more, no threat from the Russians these days.'

'Stay behind army?' Johno queried. 'What the fuck's that, an Army that stays in bed all day?'

'Something you should know, my boy. MI6 and the SAS trained them, at least they used to up until the nineties.'

'I had a Swiss guy embedded with my squadron for five weeks in 1981,' Ricky informed the group. 'Not up to much.'

'No, they've never fired a shot in anger,' Beesely pointed out. He explained to Johno, 'Following the Second World War, the Swiss set up a small 'resistance force', based on British SOE operations there during the war. In fact, I recall one British SOE instructor retiring there.'

'To do what?' Johno enquired.

'Create potential resistance fighters,' Beesely explained. 'Pop up after the Russians invade and blow up bridges.'

'Like Gladio in Italy?' Ricky asked.

Beesely smiled. 'Guess *you* actually read a book once in a while.' As the words trailed off he shot a look at Johno, who did not notice. Now he made direct eye contact with Otto. 'Did

K2 evolve from your P-26 unit, underground resistance army on paper?’

‘Let me pronounce this correctly,’ Otto began. ‘You may think that, I cannot comment.’

Beesely smiled and corrected him. ‘*You may think that, I could not possibly comment.*’

Otto gave a small bow. ‘In part. K2 did not evolve directly from these old men. As you say ... army on paper. K2 evolved from Gunter’s ... er ... paranoid?’

‘*Paranoia,*’ Beesely corrected.

Otto considered his father carefully for a moment, seemed to come to a decision, then opened his case. He produced three phones of the same style as his, each having been labelled in advance. He slid one across the table to Beesely. ‘Press the green button and you will be instantly talking with a senior assistant in operations. You can ask questions of a research nature, instigate studies or obtain the information on most any subject, person or business. You can obtain the private phone numbers of any individual, including Presidents and movie stars. You can also order actions of almost any nature. The signal is encoded beyond the reach of any agency, privacy is assured.’

Beesely studied it through his bifocals. ‘This one has bigger buttons than the others.’

‘Yes –’ Otto began.

‘Because ya a blind old git,’ Johno suggested.

‘Thanks for that,’ Beesely replied without detracting from his study of the phone.

Otto handed Johno a phone, but held on to it. ‘Please ... do not abuse this.’

Beesely squinted at Otto over the top of his glasses, and then turned to Johno. ‘Johno, it’s for business use ... or we *will* have a problem.’

‘OK, OK, keep your panties on.’

Otto handed one to Jane, for which she thanked him as if receiving a Christmas present. ‘If you are ever in danger, press the red button and hold for a few seconds. It will send your exact position to operations. We can find you quickly.’

Beesely had been listening to the tone of that last sentence with great interest. ‘Jane, you were not in the room when Otto revealed a few *interesting* details to us.’

‘Oh?’ she said, genuinely interested in everything happening.

‘Otto is my biological son, as you heard earlier, but so is Johnno.’

She seemed shocked, glancing from one face to another. With a puzzled look, she finally asked, ‘So ... how did that happen?’

‘Do you want me to show you some pictures?’ Johnno offered.

‘No, not that ... I mean –’

‘It was the sixties,’ Beesely offered by way of excuse. ‘I was rushing around London playing secret agent, believing that I could do just about anything and everything. Anyway, I was not as careful as I should have been, and sex was a great antidote to stress in the face of imminent death.’

‘Must have been very stressful,’ Johnno quipped without looking up.

Beesely took a deep breath, taking hold of Jane’s hand. ‘Jane, I have an apology to make, and today seems to be the day to make it. Today seems to be the turning point I had always believed I would avoid. I always believed you would all read my Will and ... understand.’ He took in their faces. ‘That might have been cowardly, perhaps, but simpler ... for all your sakes.’ He faced her and announced, ‘Jane, I am also *your* father.’

Johno looked up, and stared across at Jane. ‘For fuck’s sake,’ he muttered. ‘Anyone checked that stray cat? She had a litter last year!’

Otto had not reacted, he already knew. Ricky was perplexed, and Jane sat quietly stunned.

Beesely held her cold hand, ignoring Johno. ‘I’m sorry for not having told you before –’

‘Didn’t apologise to me,’ Johno muttered, loud enough for them to hear.

Beesely ignored him. He continued, in a soft voice, ‘Because it would have made you a target for kidnap and blackmail. If people thought that you were just a secretary then you would have been safe, and Johno just a driver in the same fashion.’

‘I can look after myself!’ Johno angrily pointed out.

‘That’s not the point!’ Beesely rounded on him. ‘It would have made you a target. I was involved in stuff that none of you know about, very dangerous stuff, pissing off just about everyone from the CIA to the KGB.’ He took a breath. ‘Let’s just leave it at that for now.’

He turned back to Jane and stroked her decidedly cold hands. ‘I have always looked after you as if you were my own, so I don’t think things would have been any different between us if you had known.’ He brightened. ‘And besides, who else would give you a job?’

She seemed mildly offended. ‘My typing is not that bad.’

‘It’s legendary in intelligence circles,’ Beesely pointed out with a pained expression. ‘And not for its accuracy.’ She gave him an embarrassed look before lowering her head. Beesely continued, ‘My bosses in the Circus used to mark it with a red pen and send it back, points out of ten. The only benefit came when the KGB were intercepting my mail. They had trouble translating it, thinking the misspellings were some sort of code.’ He fought back a smile. ‘They spent months, apparently, trying to decipher it.’

Ricky used all his strength not to laugh out loud.

Jane forced back a tear, not being the most composed person at the best of times. 'I often wondered why you kept me around. Everyone else was always telling me how useless I was.'

Johno had wandered around to where the sandwiches were. Now he stood behind her and placed a hand on her shoulder. 'You make a great cuppa. And in the summer you can chill my beer just by holding the can.'

Otto placed a hand on her arm. 'I have been looking forward to getting to know my family. I am very glad that you are my half-sister.'

She lifted her head, focusing on Johno. 'See, *he* appreciates me!'

'What?' Johno protested with a mouth full of sandwich. 'I said you make a great cuppa, stropky tart.'

Beesely turned back to Otto. 'The apple fell far from the tree with that one.' They both watched Johno as he crammed more food onto his plate than it had been designed for.

'Yeah, well the tree dropped its seed, pulled up its roots and pissed off to another orchard,' Johno pointed out.

Beesely had to concede, 'Fair point.' He turned back to Jane. 'Will you be alright?'

She sat hunched, almost crying. 'What happens to me now?'

Otto jumped in and answered with, 'Now you will be protected, looked after in every way. You will want for nothing - houses, cars, money, food - just tell me what you need. You will not have to worry again.'

Beesely was quietly taken aback as the authority was temporarily stripped away from him, but also delighted to see that Otto purported to be so protective towards her.

Otto turned to Ricky. 'If you can go outside, I will send for the others.' Ricky, and Otto's driver, stood and stepped outside.

‘Others?’ Beesely nervously enquired.

‘My staff,’ Otto reassured him, a hint of a smile. ‘If you would please step outside for a moment,’ he formally requested. Facing Jane, he said, ‘Please put on a coat, we may be some time.’

Again, Beesely felt odd that someone else was looking out for Jane; for the past forty years that had been his job. Otto made a call, and by time they reached the gate several cars were coming down the lane, followed by the headlights of many other vehicles.

‘Billy Smarts’ Circus?’ Johnno asked. ‘Tent on the lawn?’

The first vehicle arrived, a Range Rover.

‘For you, Johnno.’ Otto gestured him towards it.

‘Not such a bad wanker after all,’ Johnno muttered as he walked over to it, finding it brand new and customised, top of the range.

‘And for Jane,’ Otto said as he gestured. Through the gate trundled a bright yellow Ford KA.

Beesely smiled and turned to her. ‘That must be for you!’ he shouted over the noise building up outside his house.

Jane was delighted; the right colour, small and nippy, and she had always wanted one of these. She gave Otto a big hug from within a padded coat that appeared to be three sizes too big for her, before gingerly sitting in the car.

A Rolls Royce Silver Ghost, 1907, came next, a beautiful antique of a car that Beesely stood admiring. He gestured off to one side, smiling at Otto as the classic car was now parked at the edge of the grass. Otto had followed Beesely to the ‘Roller’, halting the rest of the vehicles with a hand, the drivers of the prior vehicles now stood in a neat line by the main door to the house.

‘Collector’s piece,’ Beesely stated through the open door. ‘It’s been lovingly restored.’

Otto explained, ‘It was imported from a collector in southern France, where it was used for several movies. All the

details are in a ... how you say ... *scrap book*, in the rear with a certificate of provenance.'

Beesely beamed as he clambered out, circling the car. 'You know how to impress, my boy.' He closed the door, and turned to the line of vehicles in the lane. 'And they are?'

'Security and operations,' Otto stated, beckoning them in. 'This house is not secure. When you or the others are in residence, there will be the round-of-the-clock security; cameras, lights, and dogs.'

Beesely watched the procession with some concern; Otto had brought a small army.

'Shall we go back inside, sir?'

Several Range Rovers, and two vans, halted on the gravel as Otto led Beesely back to the house. Back inside, Otto opened his briefcase as Beesely watched the commotion through the dining room window.

'This is for you.' Otto handed Beesely a Swiss diplomatic passport, complete with suitable photograph and signature, a worryingly neat piece of forgery.

'My diplomatic skills are a little rusty,' Beesely joked as he thumbed through the dark red booklet.

'This property is now registered by the Swiss Diplomatic Corps as an official residence,' Otto informed him as Johno wandered back in. 'That means -'

Beesely cut in with, 'That the police and security services could not enter, even with a warrant, if they see me running naked round the house with a surface-air-missile on my shoulder.'

'Who'd want to come in with you naked!' Johno quipped as Otto handed him a passport. 'So what can I do with this?'

'Clobber whomsoever you like. With impunity!' Beesely pointed out.

Johno's eyes widened. 'Sweet.'

'The worst that the police could do would be to deport you to Switzerland,' Beesely added, still thumbing through his.

Johno stuffed the passport inside his jacket pocket as Jane accepted hers.

Otto explained to them, ‘There will be a plaque on the front gate, and several signs around the fences. This house is now off limits to British police and intelligence services. And I hold full Assistant Ambassador status.’

Beesely looked up sharply. ‘You do?’

Otto smiled, barely visible. ‘We work closely with the Swiss Government.’

‘Get out of jail cards all around,’ Johno announced to no one in particular, grabbing another sandwich.

‘May my people use your spare rooms and the cottage?’ Otto asked.

Beesely nodded his agreement. ‘The cottage is a good idea, but it needs work –’

‘Decorators and builders will arrive tomorrow.’

Beesely tipped his head. ‘Why...?’

‘To make the cottage more suitable, to install a fence, to replace the windows in this house, and to install state-of-the-art security systems.’

‘Johno is good with those,’ Beesely pointed out.

‘Yes, I am aware. When we are set up, Johno can inspect and test the systems.’ He took a file from his case and handed it to Johno. It held detailed plans, very detailed plans; drawings, sketches, and technical specifications.

Johno sat down with his sandwiches, another mug of tea, and began to read, occasionally mumbling to himself. Headlights flashed outside, gravel crunched under tyres, doors slammed, and dogs barked as Ricky slipped away on a job for Otto.

* * *

Johno bumped into Beesely coming out of the toilet around 2am. Beesely stood ready to head back to his room, when Johno quietly asked, 'Do you think this is all on the level?'

Beesely turned to him. 'I think ... I think that if we considered this some giant trap then we are deluding ourselves as to our worth to the world, and to our potential enemies. With me at the head of K2 we most certainly are in *clear and present danger*, as they say. Take away K2 and rewind a few hours, and you and I, boy, we are not worth two bent pennies to anyone. No one would go to this much trouble to screw with us, we're yesterdays' news.'

'But, it seems like life has dealt us four aces on our last hand of the night. Anyway, starting tomorrow I'm going to test our new best friend to destruction. And have some fun doing it! First, I'll test his Jewish heritage, something I know a great deal about. If he isn't on the level he'll have a heart attack before noon with what I've got planned.'

Johno nodded his acceptance of that idea, heading off back to bed, Beesely unhappily noting Johno's Simpson's shorts, and a t-shirt that announced: 'Does not play well with other children.'

Fun and games

1

James Kirkpatrick, CIA, could hardly believe what he was hearing. He listened harder to the call, his eyes narrowing. ‘Say again.’

‘Observation is now limited on primary target. The house now has continuous patrols, dogs, motion sensors and laser movement kit. Plus the guards are armed, and they wander outside the fixed perimeter.’

‘Have you been compromised?’

‘Negative.’

‘Withdraw. Stateside.’

‘Affirmative.’

Kirkpatrick eased back, deep into his chair, frowning hard. ‘What the hell is going on over there?’ He raised the phone. ‘I want a fresh assessment made of K2’s defensive and offensive capabilities, staff and equipment. As fast as you can, please.’

* * *

Otto had spent the night in the guest room. The previous evening he had confessed to not needing much sleep, which was just as well, because Johnno’s intermittent snoring in the next room had kept him awake. The toilet had been flushed many times during the night, the old cistern taking ten noisy minutes to fill back up. Dawn saw the arrival of several wood pigeons on the branch outside Otto’s window, cooing away and leaving him looking a little haggard at breakfast. His suit was immaculate, but his eyes betrayed the fatigue.

He said nothing of the fact that he heard Johnno scream out during the night, or Jane sobbing. He would also say nothing of the fact that he thought he heard Johnno sobbing.

Otto and Beesely had chatted conspiratorially next to the fireplace the previous evening, working their way through several glasses of wine and finishing off with the best malt whisky. Johnno had pestered, poked, prodded and generally questioned at length the new security staff, testing most of the equipment and breaking just a few small items. Now he was having a well-deserved lie-in.

Jane now made Otto and Beesely breakfast, having already insisted that the passing guards have a toasted muffin each. Their dogs were grateful.

Otto reached over the small kitchen table and helped himself to more of Jane's 'special' scrambled eggs, with potato wedges and tomatoes in. He noticed Beesely's gaze following his movements. Checking over his shoulder, Otto whispered, 'It is good, no?'

Beesely seemed unconvinced about Jane's cooking and stuck to toast. 'It should be a busy day, plenty of people to impress, and some to upset. If it is not a rude question, just how much *are* we worth?'

Otto produced a wallet and removed from it a neatly folded piece of paper.

'There are way too many zeros on there for me to understand, and it's in European notation.' Beesely grabbed a pen, slicing off groups of three zeros at a time. He swallowed. 'That is a lot of money.'

'More than the British Government spends on its military in a year.'

Beesely seemed concerned. 'A sum ... which would make us a target for those capable of taking it away from us.'

Otto confidently smiled and shook his head. 'First, only a handful of people know this detail. Second, there are triple

redundant safety measures in place ... and the Swiss Government would step in if they suspected foul play. I give you the example: if you or I are killed, automatically many millions are paid to three independent agencies in three separate countries, who will investigate with aggression and vigour. If they suspect foul play, a further sum of money is transferred to deal with those they suspect. The people who work for me know that killing me would achieve nothing for them.'

'As thorough as a Swiss banker,' Beesely commended, accepting more tea from Jane. He told her, 'Wake up Boy Wonder in an hour, we have visitors this afternoon.'

'I have a helicopter at your disposal,' Otto suddenly announced.

'My boy, first rule of negotiation: let them come to you. Keep the high ground, do not go cap-in-hand.' Beesely could see that Otto did not quite understand. 'Watch and learn, my boy. Watch ... and learn.'

2

Mossad, Israel's Secret Intelligence Service, had been surprised by the call; concerned that Beesely had called their UK Section Head directly. The invitation had been cryptic, but urgent: Beesely had some vital intelligence for them, and a helicopter stood waiting at London Docklands Airport.

Mr. Elle Rosen, the forty-eight year old Section Head, quickly investigated Beesely. A call to 'the institute', Tel Aviv, had surprised him: he was to go ahead and meet with Beesely, no further explanation given. Now, the low profile, and generally unknown Section Head – fronting as a mortgage broker, stepped down from a K2 helicopter on Broadlands lawn with his assistant, after a twenty-minute flight from East London. As the helicopter disappeared over the lake, scattering the ducks and swans, Otto greeted Elle in poor, but appreciated Hebrew.

‘German?’ Elle puzzled.

‘Swiss Jew,’ Otto replied. ‘Not practising.’

Elle shrugged his shoulders and made a face.

Beesely shook his hand. ‘Do come in, refreshments await us.’

As Elle followed Beesely towards the house, he carefully noted the guards, the dogs, and the building work, being stopped at the edge of the grass by his assistant pointing out a sensor half buried in the lawn; it was, after all, Israeli manufactured. They exchanged looks as they caught up.

‘You take your security seriously,’ Elle casually commented as they stepped into the house, a London-British accent with a little New York American mixed in.

‘I take many things way too seriously,’ Beesely replied without stopping or looking around.

After five minutes of obligatory pleasantries around the old oak table they finally sat, adjusted seats, and squared up to each other.

‘I’ve been ... working with the CIA quite closely of late,’ Beesely began, stirring his tea.

The Israelis again glanced at each other. ‘Working with them ... or for them?’ Elle enigmatically probed, the faintest hint of a grin evident.

Beesely offered Elle a look of candid, mock surprise. ‘I’m sure I have no idea what you mean.’ Otto was not following. ‘Anyway, as you are probably aware –’ which he knew they weren’t. ‘- I have recently become the head of a private security agency, headquartered in ... Zug, Switzerland.’

Elle appeared as if he might say something before checking himself, a glance at Otto. His assistant stiffened.

Beesely continued, ‘You have probably had your suspicions for some time.’

Elle simply acknowledged with an undetermined nod.

‘Yes ... not much slips past your outfit.’ Beesely stirred his tea. ‘Anyway, I am not as young as I used to be, and I wish to

change the way we do things, become more *pro-active* as the Americans like to say. My organization has roughly two thousand staff –’

‘What?’ Elle questioned.

Beesely made firm eye contact. ‘I guess it’s grown a bit since you last checked up on us.’ Lowering his gaze again to his teaspoon, he continued, ‘But many of those are researchers, not front line agents, as you can imagine.’ The guests stared back. ‘Anyway, I have accumulated a substantial amount of money over the years, stashed it away in Swiss banks, but now ... now I want to do more with it. And that’s where you chaps come in. I feel that I can help you.’

‘Help us? How?’

Beesely turned his head towards Otto, who produced a document without taking his gaze off Elle. He handed it over. Beesely continued, ‘We’ve set up a Swiss bank account for you, untraceable, and one that you can use for operations that your government and legislators - shall we say, *may not* get to know about.’

Elle was puzzled, a heavy crease forming across his forehead. He put a finger on the sum and displayed the detail to his assistant.

Beesely added, ‘It’s more than we made available to the Americans, of course. We did not want them asking too many questions. You gentlemen are far more discreet about stuff like this.’

Elle nodded, still re-reading the page.

‘Now, gentlemen, there are a few little provisos that come with this piece of paper.’ Beesely slid it back. ‘There are a few things that you could do to help little old me. After all, you ... are the professionals, and I am just the keen amateur. First of all, we are based in Switzerland. Any operations by your good selves inside our borders and we would be ... most disappointing.’

Elle appeared as if he was about to object, but Beesely raised a hand.

‘Naturally, if there is some operation that needs to be conducted on Swiss soil then we will do it for you; we have agents in every walk of life inside our borders. I am afraid I must insist, gentlemen. If you want our kind co-operation then you *must not* operate inside our borders. If you want the Iranian Embassy in Switzerland bugged, then we will do it for you. *We ... will not get caught.*’

Elle’s eyes slowly widened at the cheek of that statement.

‘Do it for us?’ his assistant repeated.

Beesely tried to hide his amusement. ‘Yes, do it for you. We are very, very efficient at what we do, especially on our own patch.’ He pushed the paper back across the table. ‘And ... we would have the odd reciprocal favour to ask. Someone followed there, someone killed here –’

‘Killed?’ Elle’s assistant queried.

‘We do not piss about,’ Beesely sternly pointed out. ‘If you gentlemen are tailing an Arab suspect and he ducks across our borders, we’ll deliver him to Tel Aviv for you, dead or alive.’

‘I’m just gunna feed the fucking mutts,’ broke the tension as Johno stepped out of the front door.

Beesely forced a smile. ‘That’s my gardener. Now, you must stay for some food and some fishing.’

‘Fishing?’ Elle puzzled.

‘Yes, in the lake, all set up for you. Chopper won’t be back for almost forty-five minutes, our American friends popping down.’

Elle tilted his head. ‘CIA?’

‘Yes, you probably know them.’

After a few nibbles, some tea and pleasantries, Beesely took Elle for a long one-on-one session, chatting as they strolled around the house grounds, Elle’s assistants sitting by the lake and fishing.

* * *

‘Ah, I wonder if you can help me,’ Beesely said into his mobile. ‘I am trying to reach the director of fundraising for your charity. That’s yourself? Good. I am an anonymous benefactor with ten million pounds about to wing its way to you by electronic transfer from my Swiss bank account ... yes ... you’re welcome.’

‘Well, here’s the thing. My dear lady wife died from breast cancer ... thanks ... and she had this idea before she left us. I want you to organize something for me for tomorrow in central London, and I shall release the funds today on an agreement between us. Fine, OK, this is what I would like you to organize for me...’

Beesely had given Otto a firm directive, one that involved large sums of money, and would stretch over many years. It had been codenamed ‘Operation Clean-up’ and was due to start soon.

He had made numerous phone calls to perplexed individuals; a few senior police officers he knew, a few retired SAS officers, and some ‘unpleasant operators’ as he had described them to Otto. Beesely would be buying guns, illegal street guns.

* * *

In Bern, Switzerland, The Zimbabwean Ambassador stood confused. So did his staff. Their two shiny black limousines had been securely stored overnight in the spacious embassy garage as usual. But today was different. Today they were ... pink, neatly and expertly re-sprayed, pink.

They walked around the vehicles. No paint spots were visible on the glass, the chrome work, or on the garage floor. The paint gleamed, dry and shiny, a perfect gloss finish, diligently tested

by the Ambassador himself. They stood and stared, already late for their meeting.

At Broadlands, Beesely held an A4 colour computer image, freshly printed off, roaring with laughter. Otto did not understand what this use of K2 resources actually proved.

3

The London CIA Deputy Section Chief, Hamilton Burke Junior, followed the flight-plan of his Israeli colleagues to Broadlands, using the same helicopter. He too had checked out Beesely, and he too had been told to attend the meeting. As he landed, he could not have missed the men sat by the side of the lake, fishing.

His assistant tapped his arm and spoke into the headset as they unbuckled. 'That's the new Israeli Section Head for the UK.' They exchanged glances.

'The guy looks pretty fucking relaxed. He a regular visitor?'

Beesely stood waiting on the gravel, a direct path toward him keeping the Americans away from talking to the Israelis. He waved to them as they cleared the rotor blades, the two men finally straightened up. 'So nice of you to pop down.'

Burke wore a casual jacket over a polo t-shirt, covering a barrel chest, a neck the same girth as his head. With crew cut grey hair, he appeared to Beesely to be in his fifties. The Americans glanced at the Israelis as the Israelis watched the Americans walking into the house.

'You do business with the Israelis,' Burke noted, very matter of fact, as they assembled around the table. The used cups had been deliberately left, giving the impression of a long prior meeting.

Jane stepped in, Beesely saying to her, 'Shall we clear this lot away and start afresh?' He gestured firmly for the two Americans to sit down. 'Please, gentlemen, have a seat.' Then, as

an afterthought, he said, 'Sorry, you were saying something about the Israelis? They like the fishing, it gets them away from London.'

'Sure,' Burke agreed, his eyes taking in as much detail of the room as he could find. 'Love to fish myself,' he announced whilst still checking out the room, managing to make it sound his least favourite activity, his accent now getting broader and heading west.

'Excellent!' Beesely boomed with a broad smile. 'You'll have to try the lake after the Israelis head back.'

The helicopter roared past the house.

Beesely turned to Otto with a surprised look. 'Have they gone?'

Otto nodded.

'And left the fishing gear on the lake?'

Otto again nodded.

'Bloody typical! Not the most diplomatic of people.'

'That's for sure,' Burke blurted out, immediately regretting it.

'As friendly as waiters in a Tel Aviv hotel,' Beesely joked. They all laughed, Burke's laughter forced. Beesely continued to avoid eye contact with his guests as Jane brought out tea, plus coffee for the Americans in the exact flavours and measures of milk and sugar as the guests favoured. It was not missed on them, and they exchanged uneasy glances.

Burke sipped his coffee, the exact Colombian blend he had brought with him to the UK. It remained hard to find outside of South America. 'So, how's Dame Helen working out for the Circus? If ... you're still in the loop?'

Otto tapped Beesely's arm, Beesely ignoring the dig from Burke. 'She wants to make an appointment and pop down. Today if possible,' he lied.

'What is this, open house day?' Beesely feigned.

Otto continued lying, 'She wants us to have another crack at that Russian problem.'

Beesely nodded, deep in thought, then edged closer to Burke and whispered, 'We're holding some Russian computer guys.'

Burke nodded his apparent understanding. Of what, remained to be determined.

Johno opened the front door, 'Bastards bit me when I fed them, then one shat on my shoes. I'm gunna get a cattle prod.'

Beesely played back the image in his mind, before realising how the Americans could have interpreted Johno's words. 'So, to business, gentlemen.'

'And what kinda business can you help us with?' Burke asked, folding his arms and easing back.

Otto handed Beesely a bank statement, as with the Israelis, and Beesely slid it forwards. To their surprise, Burke took out a pair of golden, half-moon glasses, holding the page at arm's length. Beesely remained silent, his fingers interlaced and held against his chest as if an earnest monk in prayer. Burke finally gestured with a hand, a conscious plea for explanation.

Beesely eased forwards. 'That money is for your unofficial operations in central Europe. Consider it a gift, of sorts.'

Burke whipped his glasses off. 'Excuse me?'

'Let me explain,' Beesely offered as he stirred his tea loudly. 'I have made a substantial amount of money over the past fifty years, had some shrewd investments at the right time. Now ... now that I'm getting old and ... winding down, I would like to see some of that money put to good use, and by that I do not mean Save The Whale.' He tapped the spoon, deflecting Burke's stare. 'You see, I have spent my entire adult life either in the military or in private security –'

'You sold your interest in those private security companies years ago. You could have made a whack in Iraq!'

Beesely considered that it was obviously a well-used phrase, albeit painfully poor use of Queen's English. 'So it would appear to the wider world,' he stated with menace. 'But you should never believe everything you hear.'

Burke waved the sheet. ‘And who knows about this?’

‘Just us.’ Beesely took the paper back. ‘But there are some provisos that we would like to ... *request* before handing over the money.’

‘Which little country ya want invaded?’ Burke asked with a grin, glancing at his assistant.

Beesely forced an unfriendly smile. ‘Nothing quite so dramatic, young man.’ The put-down could hardly have been missed. Burke stopped smiling. ‘We simply want two things. First, that you do not carry out operations on our turf, and by that I mean Switzerland. And second ... if you have some small operations that we may help you with, that you consider contracting back to our division.’

Burke nodded and cracked a smile. He understood where Beesely had been expertly leading him. ‘Business is business!’

‘And, when *you* are no longer contracted to the CIA...’ Burke’s eyes widened at the illicit employment offer, Beesely adding, ‘Some room for consultancy work, for someone with your skills.’

* * *

Elle Rosen lowered his phone, having spent ten minutes talking with his boss at ‘the institute’, north of Tel Aviv. He sat now in an anonymous mortgage broker’s office in Highgate, London.

‘Problem?’ his assistant enquired after noticing Elle’s look.

‘We’re to stay close to Beesely and K2 where possible. There is an ... *opportunity* here.’

‘Will we get any insider information on Swiss banks?’

‘With Beesely where he is, I should think so. Besides, Beesely is not who he appears to be.’

‘No?’

Elle shook his head, a slight movement. ‘He’s a longstanding, and *very* highly regarded, American asset.’ He frowned slightly.

‘And, considering just who he is, the meeting we had today was ... very odd.’

‘The Swiss man was there,’ his assistant pointed out.

Elle wagged a finger. ‘Which could mean that K2 doesn’t know about Beesely. Amazing. It would seem that Beesely has manoeuvred himself into a Swiss bank, a remarkable feat.’

The assistant lifted the Swiss bank account details they had been given. ‘What about this?’

Elle shrugged. ‘Transfer it all, see what happens.’

Past employment present

1

Beesely lowered his newspaper as Jane served him tea and warm scones. Otto smiled up at her, briefly distracted from a mountain of paperwork created by the activities of the last two days.

Beesely tapped the newspaper. ‘It says here that a council in ... where is it ... Hertfordshire, has banned the local schools from a nest building project, presumably to help save local birds, because they may damage the trees.’

Otto considered it. ‘If a tree is big enough to hold a small wooden nesting box, it is in no danger. I did this when I was a boy.’

‘So did I. In fact, there are still a half dozen around here someplace.’ He eased upright. ‘Right, let us go and annoy some local councils, shall we?’

Otto formed a knowing smile. ‘What did you have in mind?’ he asked as he took out his phone.

‘Let us find someone who makes wooden bird boxes. Better still, self-assembly –’

‘For the children to assemble,’ Otto finished off.

‘Yes, my boy. Let us see if we can get some delivered to every school in Great Britain, and anonymously of course. And an extra large number for Hertfordshire!’

* * *

Willis just stood there, the report in his hand.

‘Well?’ the director asked, getting impatient.

‘You’re not going to like this, not after our chat about one ... Sir Morris Beesely.’ He lifted his face out of the file. ‘Both the London Section Head of Mossad, and the London Deputy Section Chief of the CIA, visited our good friend Sir Morris

today.’ She stared across her desk without comment. He continued, ‘We received an anonymous tip, complete with photos of them getting into a helicopter at Docklands.’

She eased back into her chair, staring incredulously at her assistant’s revelation, her head spinning with a hundred thoughts, the main one being that there were many things going on under her nose that she did not know about. Taking a breath, she composed herself. ‘Fix an appointment with our good friend Mr. Beesely,’ she flatly ordered. ‘It’s about time I finally met the distinguished gentleman, especially given that *someone* is nudging me that way.’

‘Funny you should say that.’ Willis produced a second page. ‘He just faxed us – on your direct fax line. It says that a chopper is ready anytime we are, to take us down to the country.’ Willis passed the fax to her. ‘It says the fishing is lovely this time of year.’ He clasped his hands behind his back. ‘I quite liked the little doodle of the man fishing.’

* * *

‘Henry, it’s me,’ Kirkpatrick said into the phone.

‘Yes?’

‘Beesely met with the Deputy Section Chief, London. Guy called Hamilton Burke Junior.’

Henry could be heard laughing. ‘A rich name for an idiot; I’ve met the guy. What did they discuss?’

‘According to Burke, Beesely offered him a Swiss bank account with a hundred million dollars – in fact pounds, for unofficial operations in Europe.’

‘That’s ... puzzling, to say the least.’

‘It sounds as if he’s on the team. Sure you don’t want me to contact him direct, sound him out?’ Kirkpatrick nudged.

‘No, not yet, let’s see where this goes. Mossad has been checking out Beesely as well.’

‘Did *they* get any money?’

‘Unknown at the moment,’ Henry pointed out.

‘What’s he up to?’

‘Good question.’ Henry hung up.

* * *

As the helicopter carrying Dame Helen touched down, there were no guards or dogs in sight; they had been hidden. No chairs sat near the lake, no fishing rods were set up. Johnno stood washing the Rolls Royce, his jacket off, but a driver’s hat on his head. He had been carefully positioned to be in their direct path to the house, and firmly told not to say anything.

As Dame Helen and Willis approached Johnno, the helicopter’s engines now winding down, Johnno touched his cap. ‘Aft-noon, Ma’am. The old man of the manor ‘sup the big house.’

Willis hid a smile. Dame Helen gave Johnno an unfriendly stare, washing the car less than six feet from the ‘big house’.

Johnno continued, in his best attempts at a ridiculous accent. ‘Appen yud like me to wash ‘em windows of ya flying contraption then?’

She took a step towards him. ‘John *Johnno* Williams. Formerly a freelance agent, formerly 14 Intel’, formerly Sergeant John Williams of the SAS, 1985 to 1994, formerly of 2nd Battalion Parachute Regiment.’

Johnno scratched the side of his face. Returning to washing the car, and continuing with the accent, he retorted, ‘Just cos a fella can’t hold down no job don’t mean mistress dominatrix Helen should be putting on ‘im an all.’

Willis fought the urge to laugh.

Beesely stood with Otto in his old study, viewing a bank of newly installed monitors. Otto handed Beesely a crisp new twenty pound note.

‘Told you,’ Beesely commented as they made their way towards the front door. ‘I knew Johnno wouldn’t be able to resist.’

‘Mrs Eddington-Small. Director. Or may I call you Dame Helen?’

‘I’m sure, Sir Morris, that you will call me whatever you like. And, given your historically documented disdain for authority figures, I am sure that *whatever* you call me, and *howsoever* you do, will seem like a thinly veiled insult.’

‘Wow!’ Beesely let out. He edged a step closer. ‘I shall call you Dame Helen then; a perfect blend of authority plus familiarity.’

The guests were ushered into the main room, the old oak table now offering an oddly wide range of food and drink.

She placed down her bag and sat without waiting to be asked. ‘Well, let’s see.’ She glanced around the assorted goodies ranged in front of her. ‘My favourite, used to be my favourite, like those, love those, my kids love those - I’m not so fussed these days, Willis loves those, drinks - perfect choice.’ She finally raised her head as Beesely and Otto sat. ‘You’ve undertaken some very thorough research, gentlemen. Commendable in fact.’

Beesely clasped his hands together. ‘From the Director herself that is indeed high praise.’

She helped herself to the Earl Grey tea. ‘You’ve been getting a lot of attention lately, Sir Morris. You keep enough milk in the fridge?’

‘Ah, I must apologise for the clandestine photos of your associates from America and Israel, we just wanted to pique your interest. You are, after all, a busy woman; the pulse of the nation’s security at your fingertips. We figured that prising someone of *your calibre* away from her desk would not be easy.

After all, you probably have *numerous* foreign governments to topple with your army of super spies.'

She smiled, threateningly. 'Ah, if only that was true.' She stopped smiling. 'Then I could order certain people shot!'

Beesely cocked an eyebrow. 'Anyone we know?'

The tea proved excellent and she savoured it, taking a moment to study the man she had heard so much about over the years. 'Perhaps you could help shed some light on just how your old personnel files went missing.' She edged closer. 'Because if, and when, I find any direct evidence of your involvement there will be a police car at the gate—'

'Which, under British and international treaties and law, would not be allowed onto this property, I am sad to say,' Beesely stated.

She hesitated. 'What?'

Otto produced his passport and credentials. 'I am Otto Schessel, Deputy Swiss Ambassador to Great Britain.'

Dame Helen checked his details quickly, thumbing through the pages. 'Mister Deputy Ambassador, I ... apologise on behalf of the British Government if I was in any way rude, but this gentleman—'

'Is now residing in an official Ambassador's residence. We have now purchased this property, and we allow Sir Morris and his assistants to remain here.' Beesely took out his Swiss passport and slid it across the table with a coy smile. Otto continued, as Dame Helen carefully examined Beesely's passport, 'Sir Morris has been assisting my government for some time, and has dual nationality.' She glanced up, her surprise evident. 'Furthermore, he is directly engaged by our Foreign Department as a diplomat of Switzerland.'

'My ... apologies, gentlemen,' she loudly offered, sounding less than sincere. 'I didn't know ... and I was not trying to make any insinuations, Mr. Ambassador, about a member of your staff-

,

‘Very diplomatically handled, Dame Helen, a true professional,’ Beesely remarked with a broad smile. ‘But do not worry, we are all friends here, and wish to become better acquainted. I did not invite you down here to make waves, rather to mend bridges. Oh, by the way, we did lift those files and, before you ask, no memoirs. Secrecy ... is the one thing we are good at.’

‘So it would seem,’ she reluctantly admitted, handing back the passports.

‘More tea?’

‘Thanks,’ she muttered, resigned to the fact that there was nothing she could do for the moment.

Johno stepped into the room, jacket still off, shoulder holster put back on. He slumped into a leather chair in the corner.

‘I’d forgotten he still has a current licence for a weapon,’ she commented.

Beesely followed her gaze across to Johno. ‘To business. I’m sure that you are busy, saving us from those terrible hordes at our shores.’

She forced a smile. ‘Never a dull day.’

‘As you are ... not aware, I have been secretly involved with a ... rather aggressive private security agency for a long time, based obviously ... in Switzerland.’

She had been sipping her tea, but now banged down her cup and glanced at Willis. Both were shocked, coming to the same conclusion at the same time.

Beesely continued, ‘I guess you have developed a few ... *concerns* in that area lately.’

‘Are you involved with some grotesque vigilante group?’ She turned her head a notch, and accused Otto with her stare. ‘And what does this have to do with official Swiss policy?’

Otto straightened, running a hand down his tie. ‘My government has always maintained a very effective, yet

ultimately very confidential, security organization for the protection of banks and banking activities –’

‘Not for foreign or domestic terrorism!’ she stated.

‘That is correct,’ Otto admitted. ‘As you can imagine, we deal with some extremely rich people. We also deal with some affluent persons with a ... less than perfect past.’

She tipped her head. ‘That’s why they go to Switzerland.’

Otto seemed mildly offended, quickly composing himself. ‘It is a fact that not all of us agree with, hence some recent unauthorised changes in policy.’

She raised her eyebrows, mocking him. ‘You’ve started operating outside of the law?’

Otto shook his head. ‘We, the Government, are not involved in such activities.’

She turned to Beesely, clearly surprised. ‘I would never have taken you for someone so ... gruesome.’

He fixed her with a firm stare. ‘We fight fire with fire! And some of the things I did for the Circus, young lady, were pretty *gruesome*, as you put it. Good job none of that made it into the papers.’

She shifted uneasily in her seat. ‘Just how big is this organization? And what part do you play in it?’

Beesely straightened, a quick glance at Otto. ‘Around two thousand staff, departments in twenty countries, bigger annual budget than MI6 and MI5 combined.’ Dame Helen was stunned. ‘And my part? Why, young lady, I *personally* own the whole operation. Another biscuit? Lemon bon-bon perhaps?’

After using the bathroom as an excuse to compose herself, Dame Helen returned to the table, not sure where any of this was heading. Beesely was now stood at the far end of the room,

enthusiastically showing Willis a fly-fishing rod. She sat without a word.

Beesely smiled at her as he sat back down. 'You must be wondering why, exactly, I invited you down here today. Well, it was not to tell you about my secret little organization –'

'Well done on that, by the way,' she offered. 'We had no idea.'

'Not to worry, my dear, we're on your side.' Beesely cleared his throat as Otto passed him a Swiss bank statement. 'I am well aware of the restrictions placed upon you, Madam Director, both politically and legally. Not to mention financially. Which is why, in my twilight years, I have decided to use some of the money I have made to help you - specifically you - in your current role.' He slid across the paper. 'That, my dear, is a numbered Swiss bank account, the funds therein available to the head of MI6 for unauthorised overseas operations.'

'It's SIS these days,' she cheekily reminded Beesely. She lowered her gaze and read the paper. 'This is ...' She pushed the paper away. 'I can't accept that, officially or otherwise.'

'Which is why I shall hold on to it for you. And by that, I mean for whomsoever is the head of ... MI6. If you need an operation discreetly funded overseas, you need only pick up the phone and I shall assist you. If there is any comeback, then first they would need to get through Swiss banking laws, then they would need to get through me - a harder task than you may imagine - then they would have to tie you in. And unless the PM's office bugs your office, I do not see how any of that is likely to happen. Do you?'

Five minutes later, Beesely led Dame Helen towards the lake. 'The conversation we are about to have you can never repeat.' She did not react. 'Not with your own people, the Prime Minister - or even my good friend, dear old General Rose.' She glanced around briefly at the mention of the General. Beesely continued, 'There is only one premise to use as a start point to all this: my

loyalties always have been, and always will be, with the security of this nation. In the weeks ahead that premise will be thoroughly tested. Now, we don't have long, so listen well, and read between the lines. Or, indeed, *listen* between the lines.'

Beesely and Dame Helen had wandered around the lake as far as they could before a muddy stream prevented further progress. They turned about and retraced their steps. The warm afternoon air hung still, dragonflies darted about, and the ducks followed - expectantly waiting for the bread that Jane often threw to them, the swans proudly ignoring them.

Dame Helen had not been back in her office more than five minutes when her phone buzzed. She hit a button. 'Yes?'

'General Rose on line one, Ma'am.'

'It never rains...' she quietly let out.

'Ma'am?'

She sat. 'OK. Thank you.'

3

Johno knocked on a door in the village and waited. The door laboriously unlocked with several clicks, and finally opened.

An attractive and buxom lady in her thirties peered out. 'Johno?'

'You alone?'

She stared at him for a moment. 'Why don't you cut the small talk and get to the point.'

'Are ... you ... alone?' he carefully mouthed.

'Yes ... I ... am,' she replied, mocking him.

'Good. Because I've got five hundred quid ... and you've got large breasts and a great arse.' He pushed his way in, sitting on the stairs and taking off his shoes.

She watched him, still holding the door. ‘And who says romance is dead?’

Twenty minutes later he lit up, stood in just a t-shirt and a pair of socks, looking out of his companion’s bedroom window at her overgrown garden.

‘So, you raided the piggy bank or something?’ she asked.

‘Old man Beesely came into some money, and gave me some as a ... work bonus.’ He took a long drag. ‘Didn’t I promise to fix that garden someday?’

‘And *someday* you’ll settle down and raise kids in a small cottage,’ she quietly suggested as she lay on the bed, half covered.

He laughed, facing her. ‘Me, and kids?’ He took a drag and peered out the window. ‘Yeah, right.’

‘Yeah,’ she sighed. ‘Social services would take them off you in a week.’

He turned his head. ‘That bad, am I?’

‘No, actually, you aren’t, you just like to pretend you are.’

He squinted at her. ‘You haven’t been talking with my shrink, have you?’

‘You have a shrink?’

‘I told you before. God, woman, you never listen to me when I’m shagging you!’ He feigned hurt.

‘So, you ... off soon?’ she delicately enquired

‘From here ... or from the country?’ he asked with a grin.

‘I don’t mind you being here, you know that.’ Their eyes met for a brief second, a sudden look of sadness on Johno’s face, many things going through his mind. ‘You said old man Beesely was selling up, heading off somewhere nice and warm.’

‘Change of plans,’ Johno said as he noticed one of her neighbours. ‘Like I said, he came into some money, so who knows what we’ll do.’ He brightened. ‘Anyway, do you think the old bat next door likes my hairy bollocks?’

‘Johno, please. I have to live here.’

He turned, firm signs of arousal.

Her eyes widened. ‘I seriously hope that it was not my neighbour that caused *that*, because I’d be jealous. Not to mention concerned.’

He laughed. ‘No, it’s all this talk of money.’

Her eyes twinkled. ‘You will be gentle with me?’

‘Gentle with you?’ he repeated. ‘Last week you knocked two guys cold in the bar *and* carried them out!’

‘Maybe this time you’ll take your socks off. Still, you are getting better. Time was when the pants didn’t come off. And at least these days we make it to the bedroom!’

As Johno stepped outside, he lifted his mobile and dialled. ‘Hello?’

‘Hello?’ came a woman’s voice.

‘Who’s that?’ Johno asked.

‘This is the Alzheimer’s Association. How may I help you?’

‘Oh. Why are you ringing me?’ Johno enquired, a smile forming.

‘You’re ringing us, sir.’

‘Am I? Why did I do that?’

‘Are you OK, sir? Is there someone else there we could talk with?’

‘Yes.’ He waited. ‘Who’s that?’

A sigh could be heard from the other end.

A street-corner drug dealer offered no challenge for a well trained and highly motivated assassin equipped with an assault rifle, a night sight, a silencer and a laser range finder. From this third floor London window, the sniper would not have been visible to pedestrians in the busy street below, the hum of the

traffic loud enough through Soho to mask the sound of a shot from a silencer. The window was propped open just three inches, assuming that anyone could accurately relate to where the shot may have come from.

A gloved hand gripped the rifle, the first trigger pressure taken and held, the sniper's partner picking a target through a night-vision scope. Their supervisor observed from another window, a uniformed police officer at the foot of the stairs to this deserted floor.

'Baseball cap,' the spotter stated in an accented voice.

The sniper adjusted his aim, a red dot becoming visible, a gentle squeeze and a gentle cough being followed by the sound of a metal-on-metal mechanism reloading.

'Good hit,' his partner stated as the target's knee exploded, the victim crumpling.

'Man with padded coat.'

The shot man dropped to the pavement.

The spotter turned to the supervisor. 'The girls?'

The supervisor shook his head. 'Clean up. We go.'

'How many more tonight?'

'You have twelve, quota is twenty, then home.'

* * *

At a private Virginia golf course, twelve elderly men gathered around a large table, numerous armed guards patrolling outside and visible through the clubhouse windows.

The white-haired chairman of this meeting tapped the table reverently. 'Gentlemen,' he began. They came to order. 'Are we all well?' he enquired, smiling and glancing at faces over the rim of his glasses, members smiling warmly at each other.

He opened a file. 'OK, first.' Reading from the file, he said, 'Our thoughts on just who we support for the next President.'

'Hillary Clinton!' someone joked. They all laughed.

‘With The Terminator as her running mate!’ More laughter followed, the chairman lighting a cigar as the assembled group settled.

‘Does it matter?’ a man finally asked.

The chairman blew out a pall of grey smoke. ‘To a degree, yes; it always helps to have someone ... malleable.’

‘I don’t think Hillary is such a bad idea,’ an English voice suggested.

The chairman tipped his head. ‘Oh? What’s your thinking?’

‘Simple. Put a soft face on the bottle label, while the contents are distilled even stronger.’

Members considered the idea, some nodding.

A man in his forties walked briskly in, something of a ‘whipper-snapper’ in this geriatric gathering. Smartly dressed, he halted at the foot of the table and smiled, shaking his head. ‘Gentlemen, you are going to fall off your seats when you hear this.’ Everyone’s interest was piqued. ‘Beesely is back!’

Heads turned sharply, men glancing at each other. One particular man glanced from face to face, looking out from under his eyebrows. Henry O’Sullivan eased back in his chair, quietly concerned.

The chairman lowered his cigar. ‘When you say he’s back...?’

‘Back in the game!’

‘How so?’

The newcomer smiled broadly. ‘By some *very* strange twist of fate that I’m still trying to come to terms with, one Sir Morris Beesely just inherited control of K2 in Switzerland.’

Henry eased forwards, a puzzled expression. ‘Did you say ... he has *inherited* control of K2? Not just working with them?’

‘Personally inherited it all,’ the newcomer affirmed. ‘Don’t know how he accomplished it, but the documents have been registered and verified. As of - well yesterday actually - Beesely owns K2 and the International Bank of Zurich; got to be worth tens of billions.’

The chairman stared ahead, Henry staring at the table.

‘Our Sir Morris Beesely?’ the Englishman asked.

‘I’m not familiar with this fellow,’ another man called.

The chairman exclaimed, ‘He was one of us. Still is, technically. He stepped down about ten years back, but stayed in touch. His membership dates back to 1949, when he ran assassinations for us. Later he became a full member. Hell, he set up a lot of our institutions and practices. *He* was the second man on the Kennedy assassination.’

‘Then we have nothing to fear?’ a man tentatively asked.

The chairman shook his head. ‘He’s more *us* than we are! Still, we’ll keep an eye on things - bit of a maverick is our Morris.’ He raised his phone. ‘Send Mr. Grey to England, please, to observe Sir Morris Beesely. Thank you.’ He took a long draw on his cigar, staring out of the window, his brow furrowed.

Can I have my job back?

1

Max Hawthorn, current managing director of AGN Security Limited, arrived by car the next morning. At forty-seven, he was just a year older than Johnno, but many years sitting behind a desk had not been kind to him; his stomach hung over his belt, and a second chin was starting to emerge. Counterbalancing a bald scalp, his jaw was covered by uneven silver stubble, creating a permanently joyful Santa Claus expression.

He parked his DB7 near to the Silver Ghost, and jumped out with a huge smile, bounding up to the vintage Rolls Royce.

‘Morning, Boss,’ Johnno offered as he slapped soapy water onto its bonnet. ‘Miss Daisy is up in the big house.’

‘Johnno, that’s the hardest I’ve ever seen you work.’

‘Sod off,’ Johnno muttered as he neared. They hugged affectionately, and then patted each other on the shoulder. ‘Good to see you, Boss.’

Max poked Johnno’s chest. ‘Does it still hurt?’ he asked, suddenly serious.

‘Only hurts when I’m sober.’

Max beamed a huge smile. ‘Well then, where’s the bar?’

‘C’mon. The old man is inside.’

Gravel crunched as they walked, chatting feverishly, their words overlapping.

‘Look what the cat dragged in,’ Beesely announced, thrusting a hand forwards to shake.

Max gripped it with both hands. ‘By God, Beesely, you look better than I feel.’

‘Perhaps then, old chap, you should cut down on the pork pies and beer!’

Max laughed, loud and infectiously. ‘Life would not be worth living! Good to see you again, really good.’

‘And you too. May I introduce my right-hand man, Otto.’

Otto stepped forward and greeted Max, typically businesslike.

‘German?’ Max puzzled.

‘German-speaking Swiss,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘He heads up my operations in Switzerland.’

Max frowned his surprise. ‘Since when have you had any operations in bleeding cuckoo-clock country? Last I heard you were well and truly retired, selling this place and heading off somewhere nice and warm.’

‘There’s been a slight change of plan.’ Beesely suddenly became serious. ‘This is top secret, Max.’

Max stopped smiling. ‘You back in the game?’

‘I never left, I just stepped up a gear. Or ten.’

Max seemed concerned. ‘Pissing in anyone’s pool?’

Beesely inched closer. ‘Crapping in it!’ he whispered.

‘Well that’s more like it! A bit of action.’ He turned to Johnno. ‘What happened to that bloody drink?’

Beesely put an arm around Max’s shoulder, and guided him to the oak table as Johnno opened the drinks cabinet. Five minutes later they were chatting about old times. The leather chairs had been moved around to create a more comfortable environment, and Max sat with his feet up on an old brown leather footstool.

‘So,’ Max began, ‘you said you had something for me, and wanted something from me. You need men? Soldiers or spooks?’

‘What I would like, old friend, is fifty-one percent of AGN Security.’

Max stopped smiling. ‘You want to buy back in?’ He glanced from face to face.

‘I want to buy back in then leave you as managing director. I get the pick of the boys, you run some ... *errands* for me.’

‘Dangerous errands?’

‘Most certainly.’

‘Stealthy errands?’

‘Quite likely.’

Max shifted uneasily in his seat, putting down his feet and leaning forwards. ‘Thing is, I have new partners in AGN; whose shares would you want? I would have to discuss it with them first.’

‘These new partners are not worth your time,’ Beesely firmly pointed out. ‘I’ve been checking. You don’t seem to get along with them, and they are not pedigree. They are not even ex-Regiment or Circus.’

‘Well ...’

Beesely produced a cheque and handed it over. ‘Make them an offer they can’t refuse. And should they be stubborn, we will persuade them.’

‘Wow!’ Max studied the cheque. ‘That’s at least three times what they paid for their shares.’

‘So there should be no problem. Seriously, Max, I want this done and dusted by end of play Monday. Then I want you, not me, to buy control of MSM and Northgate.’

‘Northgate? C’mon now Morris, they’re international, part owned by the Yanks. We’re talking a lot of dosh.’

Beesely produced another cheque and handed it over.

‘Jesus! Just where’re you getting this lot from, you rob a bank?’

‘Yes, a Swiss bank.’ Max glanced at Otto. Beesely continued, ‘What you have never known, was that one branch of my family were Swiss. They have all died now, and left me my own banking group.’

‘Banking group? Shit, what’s it worth?’

‘More than our government spends on our entire armed forces in a year. Plus change.’

Max’s mouth fell open. ‘Blow ... me!’ he let out. ‘Wow, what a windfall.’

‘Yes,’ Beesely affirmed as he leant forwards and held Max’s arm. ‘And I am going to use it to alter the playing field a bit. Are you in?’

‘Damn right I’m in.’ He held up his glass. ‘To screwing over the establishment!’

Beesely raised his glass. ‘Without them even knowing about it!’

* * *

Kirkpatrick arrived five minutes late, his watch showing 7.05am. He quickly stepped down and into the boat’s galley, the rope lines creaking as it rocked gently at its moorings.

‘You look ... harassed,’ Henry quietly noted.

‘And for good reason.’ Kirkpatrick caught his breath after jogging across the huge Pentagon car park. He opened his case and handed his guest a report.

‘What’s this?’

The boat’s owner took off his brown coat, throwing it onto one of the wooden benches that ran parallel to the galley table. ‘It’s an updated appraisal of K2’s offensive and defensive capabilities.’

‘*You* ... authorised this?’ Henry questioned, clearly concerned. ‘It could have tipped them off!’

‘I had close observation on our friend withdrawn,’ Kirkpatrick explained as he sat, still breathing hard.

Henry’s eyes widened. ‘Why?’

‘Their boys turned up with sniper rifles with night sights, dog patrols, Israeli laser motion detectors - twenty five grand a piece!’

Henry leant forwards across the table, staring hard. ‘What does the appraisal say?’

‘That they’re about twelve times bigger than anyone previously thought, and now armed to the teeth with the latest sophisticated equipment.’

Henry stared. ‘And their facility in Switzerland, that secret place?’

‘It would take a battalion of Delta Force guys to crack it; all the interesting stuff is underground! They’ve bought a lot of kit from the Israelis; air filters, water purifiers, gas detectors. That place could withstand a direct nuke attack. Talk about paranoid.’

‘How many men at this ... facility?’ Henry quietly pressed, staring out of focus.

The analyst offered a concern look. ‘Three hundred plus.’

‘Three hundred staff?’

‘No, three hundred guards! Staff estimates are two thousand plus! Two of our assets in Switzerland have gone over to their side, two are missing, and those still in service are terrified of K2.’

Henry straightened. ‘Just when the hell did all this happen?’

‘It seems that K2 has been built up on the quiet over the last few years. Official Swiss description of it is deliberately misleading; Swiss Government seems to be happy for them to grow.’

‘This alters things. I’ll be arranging to remove our project assets and investments in Switzerland - they’re exposed. And I have a bad feeling as to why the Swiss have allowed them to grow.’

‘Which is...?’

‘I can’t say.’

Kirkpatrick blinked. ‘You can’t say ... even to me?’

‘I’ll need to do some research first. And some things... are more dangerous than others.’

He left Kirkpatrick wondering about that as he left.

Colonel Milward, current operational Commanding Officer of the SAS, sounded confused as he sat at his desk, phone in hand. ‘Am I in my office? Of course I’m in my office, because this phone has a piece of wire that goes into the wall of my office, *a landline*, which you have just dialled.’

‘Actually, old chap, I’m using a satellite phone, and this call is being re-directed by my operations staff in Switzerland,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘I would hate for there to be any confusion.’ He waited.

Milward gave it some thought. ‘Of course, my apologies for being brusque. How exactly can I help you, Sir Morris?’

‘I have some gifts for your guys; there will be several large lorries arriving at your main gate in a few minutes time. Be so kind as to let them in and find a practical use for the contents.’

‘Gifts? Who for? And what for?’

‘I’ll call you back tomorrow, have to run, just enjoy the goodies.’ Beesely hung up.

Milward held his phone halfway between ear and desk as it buzzed the confirmation of a dead line. He pressed zero.

‘Sir?’

‘Get me the front gate.’

A moment later came, ‘Guardroom, Sir.’

‘If you see some large lorries –’

‘They’re here now, Sir. What do you want done with them?’

‘Direct them to the parade ground, then get twenty men to help with unloading.’

‘Unloading what, Sir? We need a forklift?’

‘Don’t know, we’ll see when we get there.’

Milward stepped to the window of this new, two-storey building, a commanding view over the rest of the single storey prefabs and metal huts. His view over the uniform collection of buildings led off to gentle green hills in the distance. ‘Old man Beesely. What’s he up to?’

The parade ground appeared after a short walk along concrete paths, squarely navigating around several single storey buildings with green-painted metal roofs. Several senior officers and adjutants trailed along after Milward's cryptic mumblings.

'What the hell?' he protested as an eighteen-wheeler slowed to a crawl across the parade ground. Three smaller trucks followed it in and parked as inquisitive soldiers started to see what was up.

The juggernaut hissed to a stop, and the driver clambered out wearing neat blue overalls. 'Morning,' he offered as he jumped down, stepping immediately to the rear. A powered loading ramp started to descend.

Milward looked to his officers. They looked back expectantly. 'Don't look at me, I just work here.' He marched to where he could view the unloading.

The lorry driver wheeled an off-road motorbike down the ramp, carefully applying the brakes and pushing it toward the first soldier. 'Grab this mate, keys are in it.'

The soldier took the handlebars, threw a leg over, and a few seconds later sped along a track. Twenty bikes came off the back, followed by a dozen quad bikes and fifty mountain bikes. In short order, the buzz of engines filled the air and several near misses were eliciting a lot of shouting. Milward and his officers were puzzled, the parade ground noise now attracting more onlookers. Fifty canoes were unloaded, laid out and inspected as troopers jumped into the trucks en masse.

A hundred and fifty garden barbecue sets were soon laid out on the edge of the grass. As the front of the line grew the back of the line began to disappear, as if a creeping snake.

A Captain stepped up to Milward. 'They're nicking the bloody barbecue sets!' Milward did not reply. 'Do you want one?' the Captain whispered.

'Please.'

The Captain retrieved two as the din grew, bikes and quads flittering about the base.

‘Sir,’ a soldier called. ‘There’re a thousand cans of lager coming on that lorry.’

‘I want a couple of hundred in the Officers Mess, same in the NAAFI, rest split equally. And I want some left for staff on ops!’

‘OK, Boss. What about the spirits?’

‘Same deal.’ He clicked a finger at an officer who had been close enough to hear. ‘Make sure.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘What’s that?’ Milward asked no one in particular, pointing to dozens of long thin boxes being unloaded.

‘Fishing rods!’

‘Fishing rods?’ Milward quietly repeated. Then louder, ‘And those boxes?’

‘Trainers, Boss, hundreds of ‘em, all sizes. I got some for my kids.’

‘Sir,’ an officer called from his left. ‘Combat binoculars. Expensive stuff - good Swiss stuff.’

‘Make sure they all go under lock and key!’ Milward ordered. ‘*Do not* let them out of your sight!’

‘Sir, these boxes have laptops in.’

‘Laptops? God’s sake, laptops?’ They had to be inspected. ‘My office. All of them.’

‘Satellite phones, Boss, couple of hundred.’

‘GPS position finders, Boss.’

‘Gents fleeces, Boss.’

‘Waterproofs here.’

‘Box of a thousand tampons?’ The soldier scratched his head and frowned.

‘Scuba gear coming out.’

‘Lawn mowers, Boss.’

‘Excellent. I want one at my house before end of work today. Start clearing this stuff away.’

‘Ropes, Boss. Helmets.’

‘Frozen barbecue steaks, Boss.’

Milward smiled. ‘Guess they are supposed to be used up today. Staff Sergeant!’

‘Sir.’

‘Dozen barbecue sets over there. Beer and steaks, you’re in charge of the lawn party.’

‘Right, Boss.’

His adjutant laughed to himself as he walked past, carrying way too much of whatever was in the boxes, Milward shaking his head.

3

Otto brought the TV news to Beesely’s attention, Johno told to sit and *observe*.

‘Here’s the news on the hour: breasts, breasts and more breasts. No, not a bar room joke, but the scene today outside the Houses of Parliament as more than a thousand activists and supporters of a breast cancer research charity stripped off and bared their bosoms in protest at the lack of government *support* - pardon the pun - for breast screening issues.

‘There were several minor car accidents as startled motorists caught an eyeful of hundreds of women of all ages, many mothers and daughters, baring themselves. Tourists photographing Big Ben had something more interesting to photograph, and the roads were blocked for almost thirty minutes before vans of policewomen arrived. Apparently, the police did not want men *handling* the arrests and crowd clearance.

‘Downing street later said that the Prime Minister was keeping abreast of things. And, no doubt, he’s keeping an eye on things as well.’

‘We organize that?’ Johno asked, smiling.

Otto nodded.

‘I wonder,’ Beesely began, ‘how Gunter would react if he knew how we were spending his money?’

‘I think, maybe, he would turn in his grave - if he had one,’ Otto replied.

Beesely turned his head. ‘Cremated?’

‘Chopped up and fed to a field of pigs.’

‘Crikey!’ Beesely let out, now making eye contact with a stunned Johno.

* * *

In a London hotel room, an American man, booked in as Mr. Grey, watched the news with a broad smile. He had just stepped out of the shower, and now stood naked as he dried, a tanned and muscular body scribed by numerous white scars.

Lifting his mobile, he selected the number of a Virginia lodge. ‘It’s me. I’m in London, sir, hotel at the airport. I’ll be moving out in an hour, be based here for equipment and messages.’

‘Anything to report?’ Oliver Stanton, chairman of The Lodge, formally requested.

‘I’ve spoken to our people here, and they think that a breast cancer protest rally got ten mil’ from Mister Beesely and associates. They were persuaded to bare their breasts right in front of Parliament, sir.’

‘Well, that’s ... rather odd. What else?’

‘We’ve been intercepting traffic for the last twenty hours. Their SAS Regiment had three truckloads of assorted ... things. Gifts, sir.’

‘Gifts?’ Stanton repeated.

‘Things like quad bikes, clothes, binoculars, fishing rods.’

Stanton paused. ‘Oh.’

‘He’s made contact with Mossad and the local CIA, no mention of The Lodge, they don’t know about him.’

‘I’m starting to wonder if he’s going a bit senile. Ask for a distance psych’ evaluation on the available data, plus history,’ Stanton ordered.

‘Yessir. You know he offered the local CIA money towards unauthorised ops?’

‘Ah, now he’s starting to make some sense; method in his madness, quite clever really.’

‘Sir?’

‘Observe, Mr. Grey, observe. Just remember who he is.’

4

After an hour-long ‘power nap’, Beesely was refreshed, the old grandfather clock in the hall chiming out six o’clock. He had changed his clothes, freshened up, and was ready to start again.

Johno and Max now sat by the lake on fold-down aluminium chairs, several empty beer cans littering the grass, some floating on the lake. Beesely found Otto staring out of the main dining room window towards the lake, his hands clasped behind his back. Otto had heard Beesely’s approach, and half turned his head, but remained where he stood as Beesely joined him.

Otto sighed. ‘He does not take life seriously.’

Beesely peered through the glass, taking a moment to think. ‘Johno had a difficult childhood, finding a purpose and some respect in the Army. The lifestyle, the discipline and the adventure ... it suited him. He excelled ... and it made me proud to observe his progress. It was a little nerve wracking when he landed on the Falklands, and again when he joined the SAS like his old man. But if he knew what his real father was up to then it would have been him doing all of the worrying.

‘He was torn to pieces in Kosovo, shot seven times. They left him for dead, but the stubborn bastard crawled away, plugged up some of the holes and got his radio working, fixing his position

by co-ordinates and the name of the village he was near. The rest you know - how Ricky rescued him.

‘His fitness has never returned ... and he is getting older. Smashed bones, torn ligaments - things of that nature never really heal. He feels a great deal of pain each day, but never mentions it.’

‘Our doctors in Switzerland can probably help, they are very good. When we go I shall arrange examinations for you all, no expense spared,’ Otto enthusiastically offered.

Beesely nodded as he thought, then took a breath. ‘You may help his body, his mind is another thing altogether. He does not take life too seriously because that is the best way for dealing with being shot-up and left to die in the mud. I think they call it Post Traumatic Stress Disorder these days. When I was a lad it was called Shell Shock.’

‘Your father was in the World War One.’

‘Yes, the *First World War*,’ Beesely corrected, carefully pronouncing the words.

‘I am with the Swiss Reserve, *on the books*, as you say. All young men have to do it, six months. After this, two weeks of camp a year in the summer, two weeks winter training. Gunter was keen for me to be involved; he often complained that I was not so strong.’

‘Tell me about these ... executions?’ Beesely delicately nudged.

‘Gunter killed many people. I do not know how many, perhaps fifty, perhaps two hundred. Some were business competitors, some were people he had dealings with in the Wehrmacht. About fifteen years ago he became the owner of a group of factories in Italy, and he had problems with the Mafia. They are very different cultures, the Swiss and the Mafia.’

Beesely’s eyes widened. ‘Very different indeed!’

‘So there were some problems. At first Gunter offered them some money, but they always wanted more.’

Beesely glanced out of the window. ‘People like that always want more.’

‘One year they killed a factory manager, a German man with a family who was known to Gunter. So Gunter killed the local Mafia representative, a union manager. At first the Mafia believed it was a local problem, but after they asked again for money, and two more Mafia men were killed. Then they sent several Mafia men to Switzerland; it was not a good idea. Gunter had them all killed, and then he made a film of their bodies and sent the film to the Mafia and photos to the newspapers in Italy.

‘For six months there was no problem, then a Mafia man became close to Gunter, close enough to shoot a rifle and miss. Gunter found the man and tortured him tied to a chair, the torture taking many days. They kept this man alive and they made a film of his torture and his death. This film Gunter sent to the Mafia.

‘The Mafia were not so intelligent, I think. They sent another two men, one after the other. They both ‘got the chair’ in the same style. After this, the factory was burnt down by the Mafia, but no more Mafia men came from this family.

‘Gunter liked the torture, and used it for business people who he had the problems with. It became very effective. Some groups would not go to Switzerland, some groups were very respectful towards Gunter and K2. Also it was a signal to his staff, that if they betrayed him they would *get the chair*.’

Beesely raised his eyebrows in a look of mock horror. ‘I bet loyalty has not been a problem!’

‘It has not, but not only for this reason. My staff know that they will be treated well for life, but if they betray me they will be found wherever they go in the world. But I do not wish my staff to be afraid of me.’

‘In the game we’re in, there needs to be respect and fear; we deal with killers every day. *We ...* can not afford to be weak.’

Otto nodded as he considered Beesely’s words. ‘For many years, when Gunter started to become unwell, I moved staff into

higher places if they were more loyal to me than to him. All believed I was his son, so I would say to people *'he will not live much longer, then I am boss'* and people would respect this, and do what I said. I also identified twenty people who were of Jewish parents; no one Jewish was allowed in the organization by Gunter.'

'Not that there are many Jews in Switzerland,' Beesely suggested. 'What, fifteen thousand in the whole country, most around the Zurich canton?'

Otto seemed surprised by Beesely's knowledge, his expression and slight head tip suggesting that he agreed with Beesely's estimate. 'The managers I selected hid the fact that one parent or grandparent had been Jewish, which is common in Switzerland. I contacted them and told them the truth about myself. We have a ... secret society, inside K2. Many of the current managers inside K2 are from this group, and loyal to me.'

'And your driver?'

'He has this problem, a Jewish grandmother. If it was known he could not work in bank security.'

'Ever suspected any Mossad infiltration?' Beesely asked.

'No, I think the staff would say, since we all had this secret.'

'And when Gunter died, his Will?' Beesely probed.

'I told the managers that the Will mentioned the fact that I was not his biological son. They were shocked. So we destroyed the Will and started to look for the closest relative; the managers responsible for this task were all from my inner group. One manager seemed uncertain, a man not from my group, so he was sent to run casino security in the south of France. After three months he had a small accident.'

'And what would the Swiss Government do if it knew about the inner Jewish group?' Beesely probed.

'The Federal Swiss Government is trying, on the surface at least, to be less ... anti-Jewish.'

‘Anti-Semitic,’ Beesely corrected. ‘I understand, that before 1874 no Jews were allowed to enter the country.’ Otto agreed. ‘And only thirty thousand allowed in at the start of the war, before they closed the borders and turned them back?’ Again Otto agreed. Beesely was about to walk off, when he stopped and paused, turning back to face Otto. ‘You have said nothing of the noises you must have heard during the night.’

Otto took a moment to think. ‘I ... understand.’

‘With all due respect, Otto, I doubt you fully understand what pain both Johnno and Jane have gone through in their lives. You are joining quite a dysfunctional family. We make Johnno’s favourite cartoon family, those ... Simpsons, look quite normal.’

A car pulled up on the gravel, observed by Beesely and Otto. ‘We will have to check if we have enough milk,’ Beesely muttered as they stepped outside to greet their guest.

The driver jumped out of a Silver Mercedes, glancing at the house before opening the back door. The man clambering awkwardly out of the rear appeared to Otto to be in his late sixties, overweight and tall - well over six foot; getting out of the vehicle had been a struggle. The guest straightened himself, putting on his jacket, taking in the house and grounds for a moment before stepping forwards. The two pairs of men walked towards each other across the gravel, as if cowboys squaring off for a gunfight.

‘Mr. Beesely.’

‘Mr. Short.’

‘I thought you sold this place.’

‘We did, but in a kind of ... equity release deal; I still get to live here.’

The guest seemed mildly disgusted, not impressed at all. Then two guards with dogs came into view near the woods, another two with dogs on the far side of the lake, two more shutting the gate behind them.

‘Expensive security,’ Mr. Short noted.

‘Tax deductible.’

‘Tax deductible?’ Short puzzled.

‘Company men.’

The very tall Mr. Short took a long look around; cameras on the house, infrared. ‘What company are you keeping these days?’

‘We could stand here all day exchanging pleasantries. Why don’t we go in and sit down, have a nice cuppa, or something stronger if you prefer.’

Short stepped forwards. ‘It’s your deal, you called this meeting.’

They walked slowly inside. Two more guards stood next to the stairs, carefully studied by Short as he entered the main room. Johno stood with his jacket off, holster on.

‘Mr. John Williams. Still alive and well?’

Johno shrugged his shoulders. ‘Can’t complain.’

‘That’s not what I’ve heard about you.’

Johno offered the back of Short’s head a quick glare and a curled lip as the visitor passed him.

Short sat down and helped himself to a biscuit. He felt the temperature of the teapot, then helped himself to a cup as the others sat. ‘So, old Mister *Sir* Morris Beesely,’ Short began in patronising tones. ‘What is it that you wished to discuss, exactly? I’m a busy man!’

Otto stood up, as planned, to start the amateur dramatics. But as Beesely listened, he became certain that Otto was not acting at all. ‘I do not know what your business relationship is with Sir Morris, Mr. Short, but I do not appreciate your attitude, neither do I conduct business in this tone and manner.’

Short seemed distinctly unimpressed by the speech. ‘What are you, Dutch?’

‘Swiss. I am a senior official in K2.’

Johno hid a smile.

Mr. Short’s face now betrayed the fact that he had heard of K2, and was aware what they did to people they did not like. He

slowly lowered his tea, missing the saucer and placing it onto the table.

Beesely led Otto by the arm, back into his seat. ‘Gentlemen, no one ever benefits in business from conflict. We are all sensible people, we all have wants and needs and desires. We have things to sell, and things we need to buy. That is the art of negotiation.’

Short sat nodding in agreement with Beesely, clearly terrified. ‘What is it that my company can do for you?’

Beesely smiled inwardly, Short now diverting any implied threats from him personally, and towards his company. ‘You, sir, are well placed in the international secure parcel industry, and our research suggests that you are good at what you do. You run a tight ship, you keep a single-minded stranglehold on your staff - especially your junior directors, and you are... *discreet* in your dealings with many and varied groups. In a nutshell, Mr. Short, you are an aggressive, secretive, criminally minded player who seems to be going places. And we like that. We’d like you on our team.’

Short’s demeanour suddenly took a U-turn in the road and put its foot on the gas. ‘Oh, right.’

Beesely continued, ‘And there are distinct advantages to having friends like us.’

‘Yes, there are,’ Short confirmed, now regaining a lot of his composure. ‘But what are you looking for from me? You want items moved around the world?’

‘My good fellow, everyone wants items moved around the world,’ Beesely explained. ‘Especially us!’

‘Then I’m your man.’

So, it’s back from his company, now all about him, Beesely considered. ‘Before we go any further, Mr. Short, are there any problems or impediments to your current growth ... anything that we might be able to help you with?’

Short gave it some thought, now happy enough to help himself to another biscuit. ‘Well,’ he began, spilling some crumbs onto the table. ‘I’ve been watching one of my junior directors lately; I suspect he’s going to split off and set up in competition against me.’

‘Oh dear, that just won’t do. His name?’

‘Robinson, bit of a fag. Lives in Wimbledon.’

Beesely turned his head to Otto, who produced his phone.

‘This is Otto. British man, name Robinson, junior director of Secure Transit Limited, Holborn, London. Robinson lives in a place called Wimbledon. Arrange for cash to be found at his house and details of multiple bank accounts, Cayman Islands, notify tax authorities. Arrange for documents relating to insider share dealings to be found also. He must become a disqualified director within the next month.’

Mr. Short was mildly stunned. ‘What ... just like that?’

‘Just like that,’ Beesely confirmed, nudging the biscuit tin forwards. ‘Have another biscuit.’

As Mr. Short used the bathroom, Otto produced a thick wad of fifties and handed it to Beesely. After smelling the wad, Beesely banged the table with it before chucking it to Short’s driver.

The man caught it and pocketed it quickly. ‘Always nice doing business with you, Sir Morris.’

‘Stay in touch,’ Beesely quietly ordered. ‘I want to know what that fat slob is up to step by step.’ The man gave a quick affirmative nod.

When Short returned, Otto presented him with a million pound cheque, for just fifteen percent of the shares in his business. After a ten-minute stroll with Beesely, the visitor bounded to his car with vigour and enthusiasm.

‘Now that’s how you do business,’ he told his driver as they set off. ‘You could learn a lot from me.’

‘Aye, sir,’ the driver smiled.

Beesely turned from the window to Otto. ‘That fellow, Robinson: when he gets caught, let him know that it was our friend Mr. Short that stitched him up, and then recruit him for future endeavours.’

Otto approved of the idea.

As Short’s car joined the main road, just beyond the village, a man in a coffee shop noted the number plate and recognised the face. He dialled a number in Virginia, USA, as he stepped out.

5

Otto clinked glasses with Beesely. Otto noted, ‘It has been an interesting few days, very busy. You are well?’

‘Never felt better, got the blood pumping.’

‘Each meeting these past days was staged quite differently,’ Otto commented.

‘Did you learn anything useful?’ Beesely asked.

‘I hope so. I have taken notes and we have the camera footage. I will study it. How you do business, it is very different from us Swiss.’

‘Of course it is, my boy; salesmanship - one size does not fit all!’ Otto seemed puzzled. Beesely explained, ‘When I was ten years old, a shoe salesman came and sat on my friend’s garden wall in the village, not far from here. In those days a door-to-door shoe salesman was not so uncommon. He did not look well and asked me for a glass of water, which I fetched. As he sat there, he said he had something important to tell me. What I did not realise was that he was having a heart attack. Well, you don’t when you’re ten years old.

‘So he started to try and tell me, for reasons best known to himself, how to be a good shoe salesman. He told me all about how to assess the person and their house and garden before attempting to sell the shoes. I remember that his favourite trick

was always to pretend he had an appointment ... and that *this* must be the wrong house, getting the sympathy of the householder. Then he would comment on their garden, or their house, always looking for something unusual before he ever attempted to sell any shoes.

‘Sturdy shoes for the working man, handsome shoes for the teenage daughter, practical shoes for the mother; he had the situation sized up before he ever spoke about the shoes themselves. The longer he talked about gardens, the longer he had to make an assessment of the family - and their needs. If the family had new shoes, he would walk off to find that *wrong house*. If the household’s car looked clean, but their shoes looked old, he would talk about style. It was all about selling to that person what the person needed, and often without them knowing about it.

‘He died on that wall, falling off and into my friend’s vegetable patch. I have often wondered if he knew that he was dying, and why he tried to impart that knowledge to me. You see, it was the only thing of value he had, and at the end I guess it made him feel ... proud of his life in some way. His last words were, *one size does not fit all!*’

‘You know, I remember now, I had a strange notion at ten years old that you had to bury people where they fell. Got it from some old cowboy movie I think, people falling dead off horses in the desert and being buried where they fell. Anyway, when I realised he was dead I went and fetched a shovel, just as the village constable arrived. When asked what the shovel was for, I replied that I was planning on burying him in the vegetable patch before the vultures got him. Still remember the look on the constable’s face.’

* * *

The meeting of African Union members, hosted now in Paris, approached the end of the formal greetings and opening speeches. All African delegates, plus members of the UN and the European Union, adjusted their translation screens, the various speakers words translated to text and the recipient's computer screens adjusted by touch-screen language selection.

As the head of the European Union's Overseas Development Department finished up, the background image on the computer screens changed from a pastel blue to an image of the Zimbabwean Ambassador easing out of a pink limousine.

6

The noise coming from the yard at 3am alerted the desk sergeant. He glanced at the CCTV monitors in time to see a small lorry dumping its load into the middle of the police car park.

'Shit!' he cursed as he jumped up, wishing he had spotted it earlier. He pressed the station's tannoy button. 'All available officers to the rear car park!'

The sergeant knew he could not leave the desk, not least because there were prisoners shouting for attention; lock-up had a recent delivery of drug addicts waiting to be processed, when they became a little more coherent. Officers rushed by, male and female, as he pressed the buzzer for the back door.

'Go on. Quick!'

The shift duty officer appeared. 'What's up?' he asked, expecting a van full of new arrivals 'kicking-off'.

'Some damn lorry driver is dumping his load in our yard!'

'He's what?' the officer barked, now bolting out with others.

The first officer could not believe the sight that greeted him: pistols, rifles, sub-machineguns, shotguns, magazines with ammunition in, loose rounds rolling around, and all in their yard. They checked the cab. Empty. Later they would find that the lorry had been stolen, no prints.

Close to two hundred weapons of all sorts were now lying in a pile as twelve officers stood around, looking confused. The area was hastily taped off – just in case, bomb disposal called, and everyone warned to stand back. The chief constable put in an appearance at 7am, adding to the ‘much scratching of heads’, as the desk sergeant had reported it to his wife at the end of his shift. It’s not every day that someone dumps several hundred illegal weapons on the police’s doorstep. Or in this case, in their back yard.

New beginnings

1

Sunday morning brought some new additions to the household. From his bedroom window, Beesely noted a large pile of building materials outside the old cottage beyond the lake. He put his glasses on. The lakeside grass now offered two benches, each sat facing the lake and bisected by a small pontoon reaching twenty feet into the lake. He stepped across to his second window. A small wooden bridge now spanned the stream feeding the lake, allowing someone to stroll all the way around the lake unimpeded. He smiled. And against the old fence that edged the wood, he noticed reels upon reels of new green metal fencing.

Ten minutes later, Beesely found Otto supervising the erection of a large conservatory on the side of the house that viewed the lake, on ground that was previously a neglected vegetable patch. Now it hosted quick drying cement, one side of the conservatory already up. Stopping and surveying the grounds, he noted many men in yellow plastic waistcoats. ‘Morning,’ he offered Otto, squinting against the bright summer sun. ‘You do realise,’ he pointed out, studying the new conservatory’s foundations, ‘that this is a listed building?’

Otto smiled. ‘Not any more, it was ... de-listed. Have you had breakfast?’ he asked, clipboard in hand.

‘No, not yet. Why don’t you join me.’

Otto handed a builder the clipboard and followed Beesely inside. They found Johno sitting in the kitchen, with a coffee and a headache.

‘What we doing today?’ Johno croaked out.

Beesely sat as Jane served tea and toast for him. ‘Just a few phone calls, then we’re off cuckoo clock hunting.’

‘Good,’ Johno quietly stated. ‘We can go and sit in Otto’s kitchen, let him do the dishes.’

Beesely attended his toast. ‘Just when, pray tell, was the last time *you* did the dishes here?’

Johno thought back. ‘That’s not the point.’

Otto and Beesely exchanged smiles, unseen by Johno.

‘I’ll pack a case this afternoon,’ Jane suggested.

‘You will not need much,’ Otto told them. ‘There are clothes waiting for all of you in Zug.’

‘Zoog?’ Johno repeated without looking up.

‘Z-u-g,’ Otto assisted.

Johno toyed with him. ‘Zugggg, then?’

Otto continued, ignoring Johno’s language deficiencies, ‘It is on a lake, twenty kilometres south west of Zurich. Our headquarters are three kilometres south of the town, on the southern lake shore.’

‘Sounds nice,’ Jane offered.

‘It is very beautiful.’

Johno turned to Otto. ‘Do the barmaids carry those huge pint glasses and have big boobs?’

‘I am sure some of the barmaids have big *boobs*, as you say. And they can all carry the beer glasses with one litre in.’

Beesely held up a finger. ‘Private jet will take us there; just a one hour flight.’

‘Learjet?’ Johno asked, brightening.

‘Yes,’ Otto confirmed. ‘And we make use of Gulfstreams for longer journeys.’

‘Johno can pilot most aircraft types,’ Beesely proudly pointed out to Otto.

Otto informed Johno, ‘There is a Cessna 172 at the airfield outside of Zug. You can fly it through the mountains if you wish.’

‘*With* ... a currently qualified pilot sat next to you!’ Beesely sternly warned.

Johno picked up a copy of today's News of The World newspaper. 'Keep your knickers on.'

2

The Learjet flew north-east up the Zug valley, low and slow, affording the passengers a keen view of their new home.

'Oh, yes!' Johno enthused as he stared out of the window. He turned and kicked Otto's leg. 'Hey, Swiss boy! Tomorrow, you and me, walking boots, some climbing gear, that mountain.'

Otto smiled enthusiastically. 'It sounds good. That is the small mountain that we use for training. It has the firing range on the far side.'

Beesely gently tapped Jane's leg. 'Hey, English girl. Tomorrow, you and me, shopping bag, that small town.'

'Sounds great,' Jane agreed, tipping her nose up at Johno.

Through the aircraft's small round windows they could see two ground controllers as they taxied to a halt, the men wearing fluorescent orange waistcoats and ear-defenders, standing ready with wheel chocks. Lined-up and waiting for them on the airfield's tarmac stood three black Range Rovers, two K2 guards alongside each vehicle.

With the aircraft halted, a smartly dressed woman walked out from a single storey building to open the aircraft's door. Otto stepped out first and exchanged a flurry of German with the woman. Johno caught some of it, understanding half. It seemed to be to do with the making arrangements for guests.

'Watcha, babes,' Johno offered as he emerged into the warm sunshine and straightened. 'No body cavity search?'

She frowned her lack of understanding, turning to Otto for support, who now shook his head quickly. She offered to take Johno's bag.

‘Not in this lifetime, love. Verstehen Sie?’

‘Yes, I understand. Welcome to Switzerland, sir,’ she beamed.

‘And never call me ‘sir’, I work for a living.’ Johno walked to a vehicle, giving the woman a respite.

Beesely greeted her in fluent German, friendly, but formal, his vehicle’s doors being opened by tall and muscular guards.

Johno threw his bag into the back of the second vehicle, promptly throwing the driver out; he would be driving, and that was that. As with the lady, he warned the two men in his vehicle not to call him ‘sir’, demanding a cigarette. Now, with the windows wound down, Johno and his front seat bodyguard lit up.

Beesely tapped Otto’s arm as Otto focused on the driver. ‘Don’t go punishing any of your staff if Johno involves them in something they should not be doing.’

Otto did not look pleased with the driver. ‘This man knows not to smoke in a vehicle.’

‘And Johno is an honoured guest, who probably just ordered your man to join him in smoking.’ They clambered into the back of the next vehicle. Beesely continued, ‘You will have to warn your people about stuff like this where Johno is concerned. He is not *command staff*, and has no desire to give anyone any orders.’

Otto nodded as he thought. ‘I will brief the managers.’

Jane found the drive from the airfield just magical; she wound down the window and breathed in the warm Alpine air. With her driver told to slow down, they enjoyed the tour, Otto rapidly and over-enthusiastically pointing out many things of interest, Johno soon getting fed up with the snail’s pace and shooting past.

A few miles further along the same road, the remaining vehicles passed through a wood. Beesely noticed Johno’s black Range Rover parked in what appeared to be a picnic area for tourists, overlooking the lake, his being the only vehicle. Beesely’s driver slowed and asked Otto what to do.

‘Go on in,’ Beesely suggested.

Johno and his guard stood leaning against their car, Johno peering through a large pair of binoculars as the man pointed to something in the distance, across the lake. As the other vehicles pulled in Johno walked over, calling loudly for Beesely to get out. Beesely soon had the binoculars thrust into his hands.

‘There!’ Johno indicated, holding an arm straight, his finger pointed. ‘There.’

Jane wandered down into a meadow as Beesely focused the binoculars.

‘What exactly am I looking for?’ Beesely asked as he re-focused the glasses, Otto soon passed a similar pair by a driver.

Johno keenly explained, ‘That peak, go directly left, scree slope, bottom left of the scree where it turns to grass.’

‘There are people there,’ Beesely observed.

‘K2 boys on a training hike,’ Johno informed him.

Beesely turned to Otto, who keenly explained, ‘We have a game for new staff who are being trained. First they run seven kilometres along this road, then they get into canoes on the lake side not far from here.’ He pointed. ‘Then they paddle across the water –’

‘How far?’ Johno keenly asked. ‘A mile, two?’

‘It is two point five kilometres. Then they must walk with heavy packs up to stage one, the hut.’ He handed his glasses to Johno as both men found the hut. ‘Then they change to climbing gear and make the short climb to the west. After this there is a two kilometre trail, a difficult trail, and the final ascent of the mountain, some two thousand feet.’

‘I wanna to do it,’ Johno firmly insisted.

Beesely lowered his glasses. ‘Do me a small favour; spend a week getting into shape, get yourself up to speed, and then you can play with the boys. You’re part of the company now -’

‘Not really,’ Johno pointed out. ‘You two are the brains, I’m strictly foot soldier.’

Beesely was left standing as Johnno ordered 'Fritz', not the driver's real name, back into the vehicle. He drove off. Beesely exchanged an uneasy look with Otto, called Jane back, and set off after Johnno.

As they progressed around the lake, each new scene improved upon the last. The sun beat through the trees, the views magnificent out across the lake to the right, flashes of meadows to the left; cows, pastures filled with yellow flowers, glimpses of wooded valleys and ornate wooden cottages. When they reached the K2 compound, Beesely believed that they had arrived at a Swiss army base. A uniformed police officer stood guard outside a large and imposing gate, the gate bracketed uniformly by twin guard huts and a high fence with razor wire. Men in black fatigues stood holding Alsatian dogs on long leads, the dogs panting in today's heat.

Their vehicles were waved straight through, hardly slowing, soon passing rows of small huts, assault courses and isolated buildings, some half sunk into the ground. Beyond the small camp, they followed a wooded road higher for two hundred yards, eventually spotting the castle that they had seen from the air. It nestled into a rocky outcrop, stood at the base of a hundred-metre cliff. To the left of it stretched a row of modern, single story office buildings, and beyond them ran a row of traditional Swiss cottages, half hidden by trees, backed onto the wooded mountain.

Stepping down from their vehicle, they noticed Johnno stood near his Range Rover, again using his binoculars. This time, the binoculars were trained on the cliff behind the castle, Johnno's driver pointing out something of interest.

'Welcome to Schloss Diane,' Otto offered as he stepped around the front of their vehicle.

'Diane?' Beesely questioned as he faced away from the castle. He took in the uninterrupted view of the lake and the

wooded hills beyond, the far shore at least a mile in his estimation.

Otto stepped closer, also now facing the lake. ‘It was Gunter’s favourite ... er ... woman’s name,’ he explained, glancing toward Jane. ‘In the year, maybe, 1976.’

Over his left shoulder, Beesely could see a straight road stretching away down a gentle slope, a large patch of well-tended grass reaching towards the wooded hill. In the middle of the grass stood an isolated three storey modern office block, some sixty yards from the castle. In front of him he could see another neatly mown area of grass stretching down towards the lake, a line of cottages and a road on the lakeside, perhaps two hundred yards away in his estimation.

Jane took in the castle and its ancient stone walls. ‘Gosh, it’s lovely,’ she suggested to no one in particular. ‘Does it ... have central heating?’

Johno could be heard laughing a short distance away, the other side of his vehicle.

‘I should hope so,’ Beesely said as he led her towards the ornate drawbridge.

Otto described all of the buildings in great detail, their historical significance, the age and origins of the castle and the families that had occupied it over the years. Jane put her coat on as they edged slowly closer to the wooden drawbridge and into the shade, tour-guide Otto in full swing.

‘Magnificent,’ Beesely commented, before quietly adding, ‘Not much of a moat?’ Whatever the moat had originally looked like, it was now a three-foot deep grassy footpath.

‘It was filled in many years ago. The drawbridge is functional, but just a symbol.’

Beesely half turned his head, to notice Johno now joining the tour. Otto followed his gaze, but said nothing.

‘What’s the flag?’ Johno asked, looking up. Two large flags blew in the breeze, one the Swiss flag - red with a white cross,

the second a white flag with a horizontal blue line taking up the middle third.

‘The blue-and-white flag is the flag of the town of Zug,’ Otto enthusiastically informed him.

Johno considered it. ‘So, K2 doesn’t have its own flag then? A bit poor.’

Otto smiled, but made no response. Crossing the wooden drawbridge, they entered an original stone-walled courtyard that had been roofed over. Three Mercedes were parked, room for four or five more. They walked slowly across a cobblestone floor, glancing up as if tourists, a pigeon flying out as they approached.

The Great Hall they entered was indeed a great hall, a ceiling some thirty feet high, the room not much smaller than the courtyard. They inspected a ten metre wooden table, an original feature, coats-of-arms on the walls, lances, and several sets of metal body armour, each ghostly Knight holding a large sword.

Otto announced, ‘This entrance is not used by the staff; they are next door or inside the mountain. This is for guests.’

‘I’d love a complete tour,’ Beesely suggested as he admired the shiny armour, ‘But I’m a little tired. Can we see our rooms?’

Otto gave a slight head bow. ‘Of course. This way, please.’

The contrast between the Great Hall and the next room was stark. This room had been laid out in the style of the foyer of a five star hotel, complete with reception desk, phone booths, a waiting lounge, and a boy in a traditional regional costume of shorts and waistcoat standing next to a lift.

‘It’s Pinocchio!’ Johno whispered, Beesely glaring at him.

All of the staff present immediately stopped and nodded their respects to either Otto or Beesely as the group progressed. The boy opened the lift, taking them to the third floor without being prompted, Beesely thanking him warmly and patting him on the shoulder as they exited. They emerged into an internal corridor, still reminiscent of a grand old hotel, the walls covered with

wooden panelling. The ancestral Swiss theme continued to influence the décor with numerous coats-of-arms on the walls, plus an assortment of swords and alpenhorns.

The door Otto opened first was Jane's bedroom. 'Please, make yourself at home, your bags will be here in five minutes. Please use the intercom for service of any kind, and your phone to call myself, or one of the others. We will meet for food when you are ready, the restaurant is on the top floor.'

A little uncertain of herself, Jane glanced at Beesely before stepping in. 'God, it's posh,' could be heard as the door closed.

Next came Beesely's room. It seemed at least twice the size of Jane's room, and offered two large windows facing out over the lake, a panoramic view. Johno stared through one, Beesely the other. The windowsills offered bench seating some two feet deep, the castle walls six foot thick and giving the windows the appearance of small tunnels. Johno leant in and banged on the window frame with the side of his fist.

'They do not open,' Otto informed him.

'Just as well,' Beesely commented, looking down sixty feet to the mown grass that surrounded the castle.

'And the glass is bullet-proof,' Otto added after Johno had punched his window.

Johno stood in the middle of the palatial room at the foot of a giant four-poster bed. He pointed to a door, 'Jane's room.' Then thumbing at another door opposite, he asked, 'My room?'

Otto gave him a nod. 'It is unlocked.'

Johno thrust his hands in his pockets and walked through, opening it with his shoulder, the door slamming shut behind him.

Otto stepped to the window as Beesely continued to take in the scenery, the lake and mountains. 'Will he be OK?'

'That depends,' Beesely sighed, still transfixed by the magnificent view, 'on whether or not he finds something useful to do.'

Through the window, Beesely could see the top of the courtyard roof; numerous small spires tiled with grey slate, triangular flags waving in the breeze. Beyond that he could he could see the top of the drawbridge, two stone towers with slate-tiled spires again.

He turned fully around, examining the window's writing table. 'If you lock up a stallion in a small field it goes mad. Lock up a lion in a small cage and it goes to sleep, gets fat ... then goes mad.' He lifted his gaze to Otto. 'He needs a mountain to climb, and I don't mean one of those outside.' Otto seemed puzzled, Beesely explaining, 'He needs a task to perform; a respectful, challenging, important task.' Otto brightened, nodding his understanding. 'Johno!' Beesely called.

Johno came back through quickly, checking the room as if there might be trouble.

Beesely took Otto's arm. 'I'll call you in an hour or so.' Otto bowed his head and left.

'What's up?' Johno curtly asked.

Beesely took a chair near the window, kicking one out for Johno. 'Small problem.' Johno sat. 'I was talking with Otto when you were snoring on the flight, also read some files last night, and it seems they have some problems with their agents.'

Johno focused on Beesely, making strong eye contact. 'What kind ... of problems?'

Beesely eased back and crossed his legs. 'I believe it's the training. Either that or it's the Swiss culture. You see, they're turning out very fit marksmen who are complete androids, programmed to think a certain way and stumbling at problem solving in the field.'

Johno's eyes widened. 'Not surprising is it. Take a look at those drivers just now: top men here, fit and trained in all the technical stuff, but no balls or independent thought. If a VIP in Hereford told the driver to get out he'd be told to piss off and get

in the back. These ... *wankers* are all wound up and shit scared of authority.'

'Well, they are Swiss,' Beesely emphasised with a pained expression. 'When was the last time you heard of a British or American security firm hiring a Swiss bodyguard?'

'Frigging never,' Johno coughed out.

'Exactly.'

'Our boys go all over the world, best there is. Even the Yanks want Hereford boys.'

'So ... how do we make these obedient little robots *tick-tock* our way?'

Beesely waited.

Johno eased back in his chair, his grey matter starting to fire up as Beesely observed him. 'It's like you said, all culture. They need twelve weeks in Hereford.'

'Or ...'

Johno brightened, a sly grin forming. 'Or twelve weeks here with some Hereford boys.'

'Might work,' Beesely reluctantly admitted. 'We've got the ex-Regiment staff in AGN Security with Max, but not many old training dogs though. No warrant officers.'

Johno straightened. 'I know a few, I could put a team together. We got the space over here, the mountains and the kit. Just need a programme that will stretch their minds when their bodies are under pressure.'

Beesely seemed cautious. 'Well, I don't want to break too many of Otto's people —'

'Sod 'em, this ain't kindergarten! It's for their own good anyway, keep the wankers alive longer.'

'Well, you may be right,' Beesely let out with a sigh. 'Let's grab some of their training plans from Otto - you can go over them. Fly back when you need to, smoke out Hereford, throw some money around and see who we can get?'

Johno nodded enthusiastically. 'I could set up ten different programmes just off the top of my head. Frigging great facilities

here; lake, mountains, probably white water rafting, climbing, shooting ... and not a soul in sight for miles.'

'You'll need to be tip-top secret squirrel back home,' Beesely quietly warned. 'No one comes here we cannot trust two hundred percent.'

'Yeah, yeah, I know the drill. Get me them files.' Johno stood.

Beesely picked up the phone on his bedroom table. 'Can you ask Otto to pop back in? Thanks.'

'Time for a shower, shit and a shave, Boss. Catch you after ya' nap.' The door slammed behind him.

A minute later Otto knocked.

'Come in.'

Beesely motioned Otto towards the seat Johno had vacated. Holding a finger to his lips, he signalled for Otto to talk quietly, glancing at Johno's door. He began, 'I've told Johno that we are not happy with your training programme for agents, although I am sure it is excellent. He will get experienced SAS instructors here to develop additional training programmes, designed to make your guys think a bit. That will give Johno something to do, make him feel wanted, useful and ... *necessary*.'

'But it is not so artificial, this task. Your SAS people are very good, and we want their training. I have considered many times giving work to ex-SAS soldiers, other than Ricky, but I could not trust them. Here, my people are with me for life, I know them. And I do not know if these English people will trust or respect me.'

Beesely put his hand on Otto's arm. 'They will trust me, and they will respect me. And in time, they will do so with you as our reputation grows. And, more importantly, they all know what happened to Johno, his story is one told over and over, given as examples in training lectures. They respect him.'

'It is good,' Otto enthused.

‘Be a good lad, and get Johno some English versions of the outdoor training programmes that you use for your guys.’

‘OK, Boss,’ Otto said with a smile as he stood.

3

An hour later Beesely was awake. After a refreshing cup of tea in his room with Jane, he gave her the task of checking out the kitchens and letting the chefs know what their new visitors liked to eat and drink.

Now Otto led Beesely and Johno back to the lift. ‘Foyer,’ he told the boy.

‘To the bat cave,’ Johno whispered to the boy with a wink. The boy did not understand, so Otto explained in German, making the young lift attendant laugh.

They found themselves back in the foyer, soon walking past the reception desk, turning right and down a long corridor of Spartan décor - magnolia walls and a few bland watercolours, Otto leading them on at a brisk pace.

The double doors they came to were painted metal, Johno noted, and appeared strong enough to withstand a terrorist attack. He could see two cameras, one in each corner and angled down, two spy holes, a slot of some sort that reminded him of a Second World War pill-box, a numeric touch pad and several other buttons. Expecting a laborious entry ceremony, the visitors were relieved to find the doors being opened from the inside by armed guards in black fatigues, holding the heavy doors and nodding their heads. A blast of warm air washed over them, a contrast to the decidedly chilly corridor.

‘Oh my!’ Beesely whispered.

They had heard the stories from Ricky, and had spoken with Otto, but that had not prepared them for what awaited.

‘Doctor No’s cave?’ Johno whispered.

Directly ahead ran a circular walkway skirting around and above the edges of a sunken room as big as the courtyard. The walkway housed numerous small alcove workstations, flickering computer screens in subdued light. Half were occupied, a mixture of men and women in smart business suits.

Below the walkway sat the lower level, a room that could have been taken out of any British bank headquarters; rows of computers sat on ultra-modern looking desks, swivel lamps, flipcharts, white boards, fifty men and women buzzing round. At the end of the lower level nestled several doors, people coming and going. From the ceiling hung a large set of central lights, strongly illuminating the desks.

Beesely stepped forwards for a better view, to the top of the stairs that gave access to the lower level, and accidentally into the edge of the stronger light. Immediately the buzz stopped, staff standing and facing toward him. Even the people in the alcoves around the upper level paused and stood up.

He took a deep breath and turned his head to Otto, who had hung back, and quietly said, 'If I may.' He addressed the entire staff, a greeting in English, German and then French. 'As you are, not doubt, already aware, my name is Sir Morris Beesely, and I will be working with you in the near future. The success of that work will originate in good ideas, will grow from strong teamwork, and will be rewarded with the knowledge of a job well done. And no one need fear making a mistake - we are all human. In the days and weeks ahead I will get to meet many of you individually, and discuss your particular project areas and tasks. Please forgive me if I do not remember all of your names, I'm getting old.

'In the meantime, I do not want anyone to stop work - at any time, because I am in the room or even standing nearby. Your work and your duties are important, not least to your own self-respect. The only time I wish you to deviate from your work is when it is obvious that I wish to speak with you personally.

Please return to your tasks. Thank you all.’ Beesely took a large step backwards.

‘This way,’ Otto led. ‘Your office.’

Overlooking the command centre, Beesely’s new office was on a grand scale. ‘Chairman of the board,’ he commented as he entered the Spartan office.

The desk was an antique, made from a dark red wood. It supported two computer screens, two keyboards and two desk phones. And its chair would have impressed the most ostentatious company director. Behind the desk ran a curved wall, several pleasant watercolours hung along its length, a waist-high fitted cabinet running the full length of the room. One cabinet door hung open, revealing a fridge. Immediately inside the main door, radiating outwards along the internal wall, sat a row of a dozen comfortable chairs.

Beesely ran a hand over the desk’s cool surface. ‘Was this Gunter’s office?’

‘Yes, but I had everything removed and destroyed, and decorated for a second time.’

Beesely turned to face Otto. ‘I was not suggesting that I would have objected to using Gunter’s office.’

‘I did object. That is why I removed everything.’

Beesely nodded. ‘I see.’

‘Where’s my office then?’ Johno joked, taking in the surprisingly plain office.

‘In the dungeon,’ Otto flatly answered, causing Beesely to laugh.

‘Swiss boy Robinson’s got a sense of humour after all!’ Johno pointed out to Beesely.

‘No, it is not a joke. You have an office. Come, this way.’

Otto moved off, Johno stepping up to Beesely. ‘He’d better be fucking joking.’

Beesely beamed a smile as he put an arm around Johno and led him out.

‘The dungeon!’ Otto announced. It was one floor down in the same foyer lift, the lowest level of the castle.

Johno thrust his hands into his pockets. ‘So this is my office,’ he muttered. There was actually a small desk in the corner of this large room, a computer sat atop it, a group of white boards on the wall behind it, and two filing cabinets.

Alongside the desk stood a king size fridge edging a small half-circle bar, complete with beer pumps and rows of bottles. Beside the lift door hung a dartboard with toe-line marked out on the floor. To the right of the lift stood a punch bag, a boxer’s speedball, an assortment of free weights, some Kendo swords on the wall, crash mats on the floor. Directly ahead, a glass wall cut the room in half, two glass doors leading through to a gymnasium on the left and a small firing range on the right. The central feature of the room was a large circular sofa that had been laid out below a ceiling mounted TV screen.

Otto stepped forwards. ‘Through that door on the left is the toilet and rest room with a bed and TV. Through that door on the right there is a sauna, Jacuzzi and steam room, and lockers for clothes and equipment.’

‘You’re not such a bad wanker after all,’ Johno told Otto, maintaining a hostile stare. He wagged an accusing finger at Beesely. ‘This is racial stereotyping, Boss. Not allowed in Barclays Bank!’

‘I cannot claim any of the credit,’ Beesely admitted with a shake of his head.

Johno’s expression highlighted his surprise as he studied Otto’s neutral features. Otto tipped his head up to signify that Johno should look behind. As Johno half turned his head, three buxom ladies in bikinis came out of the sauna area, soaking wet and shimmering.

Otto stepped closer to Johno. Quietly he said, ‘Sir Morris informed me of your lower back problem that persists from an

old injury. These ladies are highly trained physiotherapists. After all, we need you in the best of health.'

Beesely stepped into the lift, Otto there a second later. Johnno was about to say something when the lift door closed with a 'ping'.

'Yep, not such a bad wanker after all,' Johnno repeated, easing off his jacket.

* * *

Dame Helen grew puzzled at what she was reading. It was not her area of interest, domestic policing and firearms, but she was puzzled. So far some three thousand firearms had been dumped at various police stations throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom, officers now standing vigil to see if they were next. And the street price of illegal weapons was soaring, putting them out of the reach of young hoodlums, she considered.

Six gun-dealers had been found dead, along with large stashes of weapons, and Scotland Yard's success rate in finding weapons had suddenly trebled with a ready supply of very accurate tip-offs. Rumour had it, that one of the gun dealers had been found tied to a chair with a sign around his neck which said, 'Gun dealer, please arrest me, cell with a view!'

Worryingly, the number of kneecappings had risen dramatically in the capital, but at the moment it seemed gang related.

* * *

Concerned at the news items he had been viewing, Mr. Grey dialled the Virginia number again. 'Sir, there are some developments.'

'Problems?'

'Can't be a hundred percent sure, sir, but it looks like our friend has started taking out London gangsters and street-corner

hoodlums. We've got some intercepts, not a clear picture. Also, traffic has a definite link to him buying illegal firearms around the UK and then dumping them at police stations late at night.'

'Do you think he risks exposure?'

'No, sir. Brits don't have a clue as to who is behind it. News so far is favourable, British press loving it.'

'Keep an eye on it.'

4

'How is your ... *office*?' Beesely asked Johnno as they all sat down to eat.

The top floor restaurant would have put the best five-star hotel to shame; its panoramic views of the mountains alone guaranteeing a regular and loyal attendance. The imposing cliff-face offered a striking backdrop, now lit with yellow neon beams, its dark crest just visible against the twilight sky. To the west the sun was already behind the hills, but illuminating the distant clouds with a warm amber glow. Along the edge of the lake, lights from the road and from houses flickered, defining the shape of the black lake. A large pleasure-boat headed down the lake's centre, brightly illuminated.

'No windows,' Johnno commented, avoiding eye contact and tucking into his double cheeseburger and chips.

'Never mind,' Jane offered as she picked at her tuna salad. 'Maybe they can find you something on a higher floor.'

Otto smiled at Beesely without her noticing.

'Has my guest arrived?' Beesely asked Otto.

'Ah, what?' Johnno whinged. 'Are we working tonight?'

Beesely touched his arm. 'Just me and Otto, brief meeting, ten minutes.' He turned to Jane. 'And tomorrow, young lady, you and I are going to take a wander in that charming little town.'

She beamed back a huge smile, but clearly seemed tired.

‘Have a long hot bath and early to bed,’ Beesely suggested. ‘Mountain air, it tires you out quickly.’

‘Making me knackered!’ Johno muttered. He looked up and faced Otto. ‘Oh, while I think of it, select twenty of your best guys, send them on an all-night hike, tire them out, and I’ll set a challenge for them at twelve noon tomorrow. But make sure they *don’t* get any sleep. Get me a couple of dozen bottles of beer, some whisky, notepad and paper, an atlas, and a child’s puzzle book, age range 11-13.’

Otto was intrigued, Beesely smiling widely.

* * *

Duncan Masters’ head was spinning. ‘Wow!’ he said for the tenth time as they settled into a corner of the now deserted restaurant, Duncan staring out over the lake. He had been on the grand tour with Otto and Beesely, wide-eyed like a schoolboy visiting the cockpit of an airliner.

Duncan had worked for Beesely in previous years, making use of his position as a senior newspaper reporter by keeping his ear to the ground for any stories about the intelligence services about to break. He was now fifty five, thin and pale.

‘So, how’s the family?’ Beesely asked as he poured tea for the three of them.

‘Kids are alright,’ Duncan affirmed, still glancing out of the window. ‘Both in university, don’t see much of them.’ Turning, his expression betrayed some sadness. ‘Gilly and I don’t talk. Probably divorce, you know.’ He took his tea. ‘I’m in a flat up in town.’

‘Yes, we know.’

Duncan did not seem surprised. ‘Well, in your game you’re supposed to know everything. I couldn’t believe that Learjet, seats that reach out and hug you. And no passport.’ He tapped his

jacket pocket. ‘I still don’t have my passport. And this castle, Doctor No or what?’

Otto turned his head to Beesely, lifted his shoulders and held up his hands, a pained and questioning expression on his face. Beesely shook his head, almost unnoticeable, before placing a thick wad of fifties onto the table next to Duncan. ‘Get yourself a nice place.’

‘Good of you, Sir Morris.’

‘Listen, we need your help, old chap.’

Duncan pocketed the wad. ‘I never let you down before.’

‘But we are not Her Majesty’s Government any more. Granted, I still work closely with them, and we have the same vested interests, but this is private enterprise.’

‘That’s OK, same deal as before.’

Otto shot Beesely a quizzical look.

Beesely began, ‘What we will need you to do ... is to expand your network of contacts and informants. And I mean really expand it. Put a wad like that into the hands of every paparazzi and trench coat you can find. Money, my boy, is no object.’

‘What we looking out for?’

‘Same as before: any story about to break about the intelligence services. Also foreign intelligence services, especially anything about me. Any stories about Switzerland, or general crime and intelligence matters in central Europe. Anyone sniffing around asking questions about me, or this place, and you push the panic button. Buy the story exclusive and bury it. Where you can – of course!’

‘We will give you an email address to send copies of articles to. But this must be subtle, Duncan, secret squirrel - my colleagues here do not piss about. If you get noticed or questioned, best not to upset these boys.’

Duncan glanced at Otto. ‘Never been noticed before, Sir Morris, not going to start now.’

‘Good.’ Beesely handed Duncan an envelope. ‘In here are bank details and a credit card. That card has a ten thousand a day limit, and it will show up here every time you use it. Treat yourself, get a nice pad, some nice young ladies. Relax and enjoy life.’

‘Nice one, Sir Morris. Thanks. I was starting to be a bit down in life –’

‘My dear boy, if you were not ... then I would not be using you; motivation is everything.’

‘I won’t let you down,’ Duncan repeated.

‘One more thing. I want you to find me an analyst, someone who can scan all the papers quickly and read between the lines, alert me if anything is brewing.’

Duncan gave it some careful thought. ‘There’s this one guy I know, Robert something, over at the Observer; sharp as a tack.’

‘Does he have any particular ... hobbies or vices?’

‘He likes young girls.’

‘How young are we talking here?’ Beesely enquired.

‘Oh, not kids, eighteen to twenty.’

‘And he is?’

‘Forty-nine, fifty –’

‘And looks like?’

‘Oh, average. He spends his spare money in tacky London West End clubs.’

‘Perfect. Give him some money to spend when you see him next, see if he wants a new job. He would work from home in the UK, computer in the study, producing daily warnings of anything brewing, plus scanning for anything relating to a given list of topics, people and companies. You would feed him intel’ as well.’

‘No problem. This guy is sharp as hell, well connected too.’

‘Sounds like the makings of a deal.’

An hour later, Otto found Beesely and Johno sitting in the grand bedroom and chatting. Beesely did not get up, his eyelids heavy to the point of closing.

Otto apologised, but Beesely waved him over. ‘The Czech operation was completed last night; I wanted you to see the photographs and the newspaper reports.’ He handed Beesely a brown file. Numerous black and white photographs of burnt-out buildings fell onto Beesely’s leg, grabbed by Johno. They reviewed a few of the images.

‘Nice work,’ Beesely commended. ‘No one hurt?’

‘Not that has been reported so far,’ Otto informed them. ‘The police have issued a warrant for the German owner. He was absent at the time, but they know it was arson and he is the best suspect.’

‘Good enough for ‘im!’ Johno said. Then, grabbing Beesely he said, ‘C’mon, you look like shit.’

Beesely accepted a hand up from Johno, who eased off his jacket, Otto assisting as Beesely wobbled on his feet.

‘Enough wine for you, young man,’ Johno playfully scolded.

‘Too much,’ Beesely agreed. He sat on the edge of the bed as Johno eased his shoes off, helping him lie down.

Johno tipped his head, signalling for Otto to follow him out to the corridor. They left the lights on, closing the door quietly. ‘When you’re that age it hits you quick,’ Johno reported from much experience of Beesely. ‘An hour from now he’ll be wide-awake and pissing. Then he’ll read for about for an hour, then go off to sleep. Old age breaks up your sleep cycle.’ He patted Otto on the shoulder. ‘Nothing to worry about.’

Otto nodded, clearly thinking about many things.

‘C’mon,’ Johno urged. ‘Drink at my place.’ They took the lift down, the young lift attendant now absent. ‘Give my room up here to someone who needs it more,’ Johno suggested as they

entered the dungeon. ‘Bed down here is snug and cosy.’ He threw his jacket onto the central sofa. ‘What’s your poison?’

‘Poison?’ Otto repeated.

‘Your favourite drink,’ Johno carefully mouthed.

‘Ah. Malibu and orange, please.’

Johno turned to stare at Otto, a controlled surprise at his taste in spirits. Then there it was, Malibu. It had not been there earlier. ‘What the hell?’ he muttered. He poured a large measure and threw in some orange. ‘Try that.’

Otto sniffed it and took a sip. ‘It is good.’

‘So long as you’re happy.’ Johno grabbed several bottles of strong German lager and nudged his half-brother to the central sofa. ‘Stick your arse down, bruv.’

‘Bruv? You mean brother? Bruder?’ Otto seemed pleased.

‘Ja, du verstehst!’

They sat, Johno clinking Otto’s glass with his bottle. ‘Your good health.’

‘Prost!’ Otto offered.

Johno peered out from under tired eyelids. ‘Prost!’

After a moment, Otto said, ‘Johno, we have the best doctors in the world here in Switzerland, many private clinics where famous actors come for surgery. I can ... arrange anything you want, I know you still have pain.’

‘Listen, mate, I know you mean well, but me and scalpels don’t get on. When I was on that Yank aircraft carrier I woke up with a hundred tubes going into and out of every damn hole or patch of skin that wasn’t already stitched up. If Ricky hadn’t been sat there ... I would have freaked and lost it. At some point I went in for more surgery ... and I think that wanker of a doctor didn’t put me under right ... ‘cos I could feel them cutting me and poking around.

‘Then back in the UK I spent six months learning to pee and walk again. I shat liquid for three months, I forgot what passing a

turd was like. It took a while to walk, which is not easy on the old head when you are used to being fit. Verstanden?’

Otto nodded, a little saddened.

Johno swigged. ‘So me and scalpels, not so hot.’

‘If you ever change your mind, I will get for you the best doctors money can buy. And you will not feel anything.’

Over the next three hours, Johno and Otto, half-brothers, played catch-up for more than forty years of lost time, Otto eventually dragging Johno to the small cot and putting him to bed.

* * *

Across the lake, a pale and pockmarked Serb checked his telescope. The lights of the castle were clearly visible, cars coming and going. He turned away and started to check his supplies again.

He had already worked out how much he could consume each day to make it last; four days so far, six days to the event itself, then another seven days wait before he could leave. It was odd, he told himself, but he was being paid well enough, enough to just sit and watch TV, to eat and to observe the castle.

Tiring of counting tins and packets, he sat in front of the TV, quickly flicking to the German channel with game show contestants topless. He dropped his trousers.

A hard day at the office

1

Beesely's breakfast guest arrived as punctually as a Swiss Government Minister might be expected to. He proved to be the Interior Minister, responsible for police, the courts and security.

'Good to meet you,' Beesely offered, making a point of standing and walking around his desk as the Minister entered, repeating the greeting in German and French.

Minister Blaum presented as a handsome figure; tall, slim and silver haired, his suit a sombre grey. 'I have heard much about you, Mister Beesely. Do I pronounce it correct?'

'Yes, excellent pronunciation. Please, do have a seat,' Beesely offered, an arm extended towards a chair.

The Minister took a seat, Otto sitting next to him.

'Would you like something? Tea, coffee, water?'

'Coffee would be fine. Thank you.'

'Otto?'

'Same, please.'

Beesely walked back around the large desk and sat, ordering three coffees in German via the intercom.

'You seem settled in, after only one day here,' Blaum noted.

'One day here, Minister, a lifetime in similar positions.'

The Minister nodded his understanding, but clearly seemed to be studying Beesely.

Beesely opened a file. 'Let me start, Minister, by informing you that I have secured provisional agreements from the Israelis, the Americans and the British *not* to carry out any intelligence operations on Swiss soil.'

The Minister turned to Otto for clarification. 'This is wonderful, but why would they agree to such a thing?'

‘Negotiation, Minister. We will help them, they will help us, and we will work together. They know me, and they know that I am a man of my word. I would also expect the French, the Germans and the Italians to make similar offerings within the next week.’ Again the Minister turned to Otto. Beesely added, ‘The one problem area will be the Russians. But I will make some progress there.’

Coffee was served by two ladies in smart suits, interrupting the proceedings.

The Minister took longer than normal to stir his coffee. Finally, he announced, ‘We had many doubts about you, Sir Morris, after Herr Gunter’s death. It was ... strange that you were the last member of the family and also from ... from the *background* you have.’

‘A strange twist of fate indeed,’ Beesely flatly stated, carefully studying the Minister.

Blaum stared back for several seconds, before lowering his gaze to his cup. ‘In all the time I knew Herr Gunter ... he never once stood to greet me, he never offered me coffee, and he certainly never attempted to broker deals with people like the Israelis. You seem to have done more in one day than he did in ten years.’

‘Well, more to the benefit of the Swiss Interior Minister at least.’

The Minister finally smiled. ‘May I ask ... what your aim will be for K2? It is, after all, something we are closely involved with and ... having a *foreign national* here is a concern for some in the Government, the police and military, as you can well imagine.’

‘Yes, I can imagine. But no need to worry, Minister, you can pop down and chat any time you like. As for my aims ... I’m keen to see K2, and its resources, used to help in the fight against crime and terrorism in Europe, as it has already been used to some degree.’

‘And would such actions attract ... newspaper interest?’

‘I should hope not. From what I understand, K2 does not get caught or seen doing what it does. They are as discreet as a Swiss banker!’

The Minister laughed. ‘You are becoming Swiss already.’

Beesely returned the smile. ‘Now, I understand you are rather good at fly fishing.’

‘It is hobby, when I have the time.’

‘And you make all your own flies?’

‘Of course.’

‘Excellent. I’ve cleared it with some of my contacts, and we can get you three days fishing on the Tay near Balmoral Castle in Scotland, when the Royal family is not in residence.’

‘Near Balmoral? You can arrange this?’

‘Already taken care of. Just let me know when you are free, and when it’s the right season, and we’ll fly you up there.’

‘Thank you.’

Ten minutes later, Otto walked Minister Blaum out.

As the Minister reached his car he stopped, glancing back at the courtyard. ‘Do they suspect anything?’

‘No, Minister, nothing.’

The Minister nodded before easing into his car.

With the vehicle pulling away Otto muttered, ‘And neither do you, Minister.’

2

‘Monday morning meetings,’ Beesely thought out loud. ‘I used to both enjoy, and dread, these back at MI6.’ He studied the seating arrangement, slowly walking around his desk. ‘And you were going to sit ... where?’

The seats had been laid out in a half circle around Beesely’s desk, two deep so that the department head would be at the front,

their deputy behind. Otto tapped the back of a chair facing the desk.

Beesely shook his head, stepped over and dragged Otto's chair to the same side of the desk as his. 'You're command staff, *they* are subordinates.'

Otto appeared as if he was about to say something when the first of the department heads and his deputy walked in. Five minutes later they were all assembled, and Beesely had stood in the doorway and greeted them all with a handshake, being last to sit down.

'An auspicious occasion, ladies and gentlemen; the first meeting with my good self at the helm.' He turned to Otto. 'If I fall asleep, nudge me.' The group laughed, quietly and politely. So, first things first. I do not know who you all are, and I have no intention of wasting time today in trying to remember all your names and functions. That will come later.

'Now, K2 is, at the moment, an organization that supports the bank's investment activities, but also stands on its own two feet and earns *some money* directly. That figure, of around twenty-five percent, must grow. I would like to see that figure quantified in the following way. First, those monies that are generated by the bank as a *direct* result of K2 action we must quantify, as a way of proving the value of K2 as a department. We must then look at the direct earnings of security work. That figure I want to improve year-on-year by around ten percent.

'Following talks with Otto, I will also begin to split K2 departments to a scale of risk and payment for service, so that simple security guard work is at the lower end of the scale, bodyguard work for rich clients in the middle, and hostage rescue at the top. K2 actions in support of the bank will be a separate division. And I will cultivate relationships with the security agencies of the world so that we can support the high-risk client activities, such as kidnap and blackmail.

‘Right, my first priority this week will be to quickly cement the relationships I have established with Mossad, the CIA and MI6. Meetings will be held next week with the Germans, the French and the Italians. Later in this meeting we shall address any problems or concerns you have, and then we can make some plans for the future. So, first we need something of interest to the western intelligence agencies.’ He held out his hands. There followed a moment’s silence as the assembled managers glanced at each other.

Finally, a woman held up her pen. ‘We may have al-Qa’eda suspects,’ she offered with a soft French accent.

‘Excellent. What do we know about them?’

‘We intercepted and followed two Pakistani nationals when they took a bus from Rome to Paris a month ago. It took them through Switzerland, so we noticed them. Their passports were real, but not of themselves, they were passports of relatives. On the bus they did not sit next to each other or talk.’

‘Seems suspicious. Good, go on.’

‘We followed them to Paris. One travelled to Amsterdam a day after staying in the same hostel room together. After this they simply attended college studies for one month, so we stopped watching them; resources were best used elsewhere.’

Beesely raised a finger. ‘That’s OK, but from now on I want any such persons - who may be of interest to the CIA, to be brought to my attention, and resources dedicated to their surveillance. Are they still there, in Paris and Amsterdam?’

The woman turned to her deputy, the man trotting quickly out. ‘We will know today, sir.’

‘Were the French and Dutch authorities warned?’

Otto leant forwards, catching Beesely’s attention. ‘In the past, that was not ... *our* policy.’

Beesely nodded his understanding.

The French-speaking manager offered, ‘I can get the files on these two men in one minute.’

Beesely swept a hand towards the door. 'By all means.' The relevant files were quickly retrieved, both opened onto his desk. 'Ah, we have the credit card details of the chap in Paris, photocopied passports.' He studied the passport stamps. 'Crikey, they have Canadian visas!' He handed the page to Otto. 'When do they run out?'

Otto read the tiny, obscure print. 'Three months remaining.'

'Excellent, that gives me an idea. Oh, this credit card, we can hunt down its transactions?'

'Yes, sir, we can call up its use,' the same lady replied.

Beesely's expression suggested she should do so, and she popped back out. He half turned to Otto. 'Here's the plan. We use this chap's credit card to get him booked on a flight to ... Quebec, via London and Toronto, the other guy to join the flight via Amsterdam. Problem is, the minute they make the booking the CIA computer will be all over it.' He rubbed his chin. 'How long would it take you to make those flight bookings using this chap's own credit card?'

'Ten minutes maximum,' Otto informed him with a puzzled look.

'And to courier the tickets to his address?'

'An hour.'

Beesely passed Otto the file. 'OK, buy the tickets now and courier them to their homes. They will probably be out anyway.'

Otto stood, took the file and passed it to the second man sitting in the semi-circle. That man had already eased up as Otto had accepted the file, now he walked briskly out.

'I shall need to make a call.' Beesely pressed CALL and then hit the SPEAKERPHONE button.

'You want us to leave?' Otto asked as several people started to stand.

'No, no,' Beesely waved them down. 'Stay.' Leaning into the phone, he said, 'Could you get me Burke, CIA, London.'

The managers glanced at each other.

After a few moments came, ‘Burke here.’

‘Burke old chap, Beesely here, sorry to disturb you.’

‘No problem, got two minutes before some God damn admin’ meeting. What’s up?’

‘We have just discovered some al-Qa’eda chaps just about to board a flight for Toronto via London.’

‘Toronto? Bet they’re heading for Niagara and the border.’

‘You’d know more about that stuff than me. Seems one of the team is coming from Paris, the other Amsterdam, meeting up at Heathrow and flying on together to Toronto today.’

‘Today!’

‘Well, it’s eight to ten hours to Toronto, so not to worry. Listen, we’ll be faxing the details across to you in the next few minutes.’

Otto pointed towards a man then slid his finger towards the door, the man bolting out.

‘Thanks Beesely. Owe ya one.’

‘My pleasure.’

Beesely made a further call. ‘Could you get me Dame Helen in London, please.’

‘Hello?’ came after just a few seconds.

‘Dame Helen, how good to hear your voice.’

‘Sir Morris, I’m ... kind of in the middle of something.’

‘Yes, piggy in the middle, I’m afraid.’

‘What?’ she snapped.

‘Well, we just got wind of two al-Qa’eda chaps heading for Toronto via London. They’ll be changing flights at Heathrow, having a sandwich and a nice cup of traditional English tea no doubt, served by one of our traditional Polish waitresses.’

‘Why didn’t you alert us –’

‘My dear lady, I just received the information myself. And here I am, *alerting* you to it.’

‘Yes, of course. Sorry. When can we have the details?’

‘Well ... you’ll need to move quickly, their flight takes off in two or three hours. One chap is coming from Paris, the second from Amsterdam, both Pakistani nationals travelling on their cousins passports, changing at Heathrow for Canada. And, presumably, onto the wide open spaces of the US of A.’

‘You have their names? Passport numbers?’

‘I’m afraid the Yanks are not being as co-operative as they might. They ... are happy enough to let them pass through London unnoticed and pick them up in Toronto, then extradite them.’

The managers again glanced at each other.

‘We’ll see about that!’ Dame Helen barked.

‘Just a suggestion, Dame Helen, but if I were you I would just get them on the use of a friend’s passport, then see what happens after that. Let the Americans offer you something for them. Yes?’

‘You’re a crafty old sod, you know that?’

‘Coming from you that is high praise indeed. Call me late tonight with the final score.’ He took a breath and reset the phone. ‘Get me Elle Rosen, Mossad Section Chief, London.’

‘Hello?’ came after thirty seconds.

‘Is that you Elle? Beesely here.’

‘Yes, how are you?’

‘I’m fine ... for my age. Listen, to business. The Yanks and the Brits are in a flap over two Pakistani nationals flying through London today for Toronto, one from Paris and one from Amsterdam. If I were you I’d give this game a miss. Strictly between you and me, I feel that they’re trying to justify their budgets by finding poor Muslims to harass; the chaps they’re focused on are small time. Looks as if they desire to work in the west, not blow it up. Sit back and watch the news.’

‘Good to know. I’ll let you know if something more interesting turns up.’

Elle held the phone above the receiver and stared across at his deputy. He let it fall. With a frown, he said, 'That was Beesely, tipping us off about potential al-Qa'eda suspects passing through London.'

His deputy puzzled the situation. 'He must know ... that we know who he really is.'

'For sure. I guess we play his game, pretending we don't know.'

Elle's deputy pointed towards the phone. 'So that the Swiss people don't know?'

Elle shrugged and nodded at the same time.

Beesely pressed the END button. He took a big breath. 'Right, let's execute plan 'A', then coffee and a walk around the park before we start again.'

'Sir?' a manager called. 'These men will not get on the flights, for sure.'

'I know,' Beesely informed him with a confident grin. 'And the various agencies will blame each other for scaring off this hopeless pair. We do not need them on the flight, we just need the *idea* of them on that flight in the hands of western intelligence. That way we have done our job, not our fault they did not board. And ... with a bit of luck, both the Brits and the Yanks will play hell with the French, who are due here next week for a chat.'

'Le fox,' a man muttered a bit too loud, and an odd mix of English and French.

Beesely smiled. 'A compliment if ever I heard one, in both languages.'

* * *

Johno rested an elbow on the desk, a hand supporting his head, looking hung over.

‘Sir, you had an appointment at 7.15am this morning,’ the Swiss doctor delicately explained.

‘I’m not a morning person,’ Johno replied, looking tired.

‘Not ... a morning person?’ the doctor slowly repeated, glancing at his colleagues with a heavy frown. He put a large cross on a form in front of him, took a breath and presented Johno with a multi-part medical questionnaire. Then, as an afterthought, he placed down a pen when Johno just stared back at him.

Johno tested the pen by scribbling in the top corner of the questionnaire, causing a sharp intake of breath from the medic. He began ticking boxes, keenly observed by three of the bank’s doctors. After ten questions read, Johno had ticked six.

‘Sir?’

Johno lifted his eyes, his head still on his elbow.

The medic delicately asked, ‘Do you understand the questions, sir?’

Johno glanced at the paper, then stared back at the doctor. ‘Yep. It *is* ... in English.’

‘It’s just ... that you seem to have ticked some boxes?’

‘That’s what they’re there for, aren’t they?’ He carried on down the list, managing to tick fourteen of the thirty questions on the first page.

‘Sir?’ the first doctor interrupted, Johno lifting his eyes. ‘It’s just that ... normally no one is allowed to work for the bank if they tick *any* of the boxes.’

‘Really?’ Johno made a face. ‘Must be a healthy bunch of fuckers.’

The second doctor walked around and glanced over Johno’s shoulder. ‘Sir,’ he said, placing a finger next to a box. ‘Have you had ... *that*?’

‘Twice,’ Johno replied.

‘And these others?’ the doctor pressed.

‘Yep.’

‘That seems ... unlikely, sir.’

Johno slowly stood and took off his jacket. ‘I appreciate I’m new here, so I’ll give you *the talk* ... just once.’ As he unbuttoned his shirt, he said, ‘I was a soldier in the British Parachute Regiment, the SAS, then worked undercover for ten years for British Intelligence. I’ve spent time in the desert, the jungle, and the black hole of Calcutta.’

He eased off his shirt. ‘Twenty-eight years ... of doing stuff I probably shouldn’t have.’ The doctors stared at his torso, wide eyed. ‘I’ve been shot seven times, and two are still in there ... somewhere. I’ve been stabbed, burnt, garrotted, beaten, and I’ve shat out some dodgy curries. Chain smoker, chronic alcoholic ... and I sometimes cross the road without looking.’ He waited as they stared. ‘Any ... questions?’ he carefully mouthed.

Next came the psychological examination, Johno on his third coffee, the second ordered at gunpoint.

‘Sir,’ the lead psychologist asked. ‘How do you see yourself ... within K2?’

‘Well, I kind of see myself ... like a male lion.’

‘A “male” lion?’ the second psychiatrist queried.

‘Yeah, a male lion.’

‘But, sir, a lion is ... a male.’

‘Really?’ Johno gave it some thought. ‘So what’s a female lion?’

‘A lioness, sir.’

‘That don’t seem fair.’

‘Fair ... sir?’

‘Yeah. How come a male lion doesn’t have a decent name? A male elephant is a “bull” elephant, yes?’ They nodded. ‘And a male cow is a “bull”, yeah?’

‘Sir, you can’t say ... a male cow. A cow is female, a bull male.’

‘I know that. But when you see lions, you say ... see those lions over there. Yeah?’ The psychiatrists eventually agreed. ‘So

lions is the collective name for ... you know, lions and *lionesses*. Which ain't fair, because the lion is king of the jungle.'

'Not fair?' a psychiatrist repeated.

'Yeah. A male deer is a "stag", a great name for a male deer; it suggests strength and power.' The psychiatrists glanced at each other and took notes. 'But the poor old male lion is just a lion. I mean, who thinks up these names?' He sipped his coffee. 'Fucking Darwin.'

'So, sir ... how do you see yourself ... within K2?' the first psychiatrist pressed.

'Like I said, like a male lion.' They waited. Johno explained, 'Your male lion, he sleeps around all day, eating and shagging -' 'Shagging?' they queried.

'Shagging the lionesses.' They seemed to understand. Johno continued, 'But then once a month or so he's got to fight the lions of the neighbouring turf, and he risks his life. Once he's fought off the neighbours he goes back and shags the lionesses, has a bite to eat and falls asleep till he's needed again.'

The psychiatrists collectively sighed.

'Sir, tell us ... how you view women.'

Johno grinned.

* * *

Johno walked into Beesely's office holding his satellite phone as the managers trailed out, his expression suggesting trouble. 'Got a problem,' he stated. Approaching Beesely and Otto, he waited for the others to leave. 'Max at AGN Security in the UK just called, says he's being followed.'

'Is he sure?' Beesely queried, a sceptical look offered.

'Yep. Professionals.'

They both quizzed Otto with their looks.

'It is not our people,' Otto insisted.

'But we are keeping an eye on Max?' Beesely prompted.

‘Certainly. As soon as we entered into business we set up a camera outside his office and outside his home and a satellite tracker on his car.’

‘You do know he’s on our side?’ Johno sarcastically nudged.

‘Of course. We are there for his protection, and to see who he is doing business with,’ Otto explained.

Beesely rubbed the bridge of his nose. ‘Find out who is following him, please.’

Otto turned and left.

Johno closed in. ‘What d’ya reckon?’

‘Could be MI5, I doubt it’s Dame Helen. I’ve heard that the head of Five is a bit of a handful. I think ... I think I will need to do some digging there.’

Johno turned, about to leave, when Beesely called, ‘Oh, Johno?’ Johno stopped and turned back. ‘We had the results of your medical back,’ Beesely said, trying not to smile.

‘And? Am I still alive?’

‘According to medical science ... no. Did you *enjoy* shocking them?’ Johno grinned, but made no comment. ‘The psychological evaluation was ... *interesting*, in their assessment of you. Did you answer the questions truthfully, or according to that document you have – *How to fuck up a psychiatrist?*’

Johno grinned. ‘From the book. I memorised the answers, the ones that are supposed to make you come across as a psychotic. I dragged the thing about lions out for ages.’

Beesely took a breath. ‘I believe that Otto *deliberately* did not warn them about you.’

‘He has a hidden sense of humour,’ Johno agreed. ‘Hence the dungeon.’

‘What did you say to the psychiatrists about women? Otto said it had them going.’

Johno smiled. ‘Women are like mobile phones. You’ve got your “pre-pay”, and you’ve got your “contract”. With pre-pay you know exactly what it costs you and, more importantly, how

long it will last. With your contract you never really know how much it will cost ... and the money disappears from your account every month whether you like it or not!’

Beesely shook his head. ‘Was that from the book?’

‘No, a mate text’d it to me a few days ago.’

Beesely let out a resigned sigh. ‘Go and play nice with the other children.’

3

The day was glorious, the view of the lake breathtaking. Jane was well wrapped up, and Beesely had kept his jacket on against the cool breeze off the lake.

A hundred yards down from the castle, they had found a park with freshly mown grass, paths made from wood chippings, benches facing the lake. They could see the lakeside road and a dozen traditional wooden cottages dotted along it. The large pleasure boat had sounded its horn five minutes earlier, and now came into view.

‘Another egg?’ Jane asked.

‘Thanks.’ Beesely set about peeling the hardboiled egg.

‘How’s it all going?’ she casually enquired without looking up.

‘Fine, fine,’ he answered. After a moment’s thought, he added, ‘Much of it is in German and French. A bit rusty, but I’m getting by.’

‘I’d be lost. Don’t remember any German from school.’

‘Not to worry, Otto does a lot of translating.’

‘Where’s John?’

‘God knows,’ Beesely grumbled.

‘Haven’t seen him much. Must be like a kid in a toy shop.’

‘Yes, certainly a great deal for him to do here.’ He studied the back of her head. ‘Do you ... miss the old house?’

Now she turned around. 'Oh, no, don't get me wrong, here's lovely and we're used to travelling and all -'

'But?'

'Well ... I just don't know what I'm supposed to be doing. You're busy, and Johnno will be busy.'

'We always eat together.'

'Yes ... I know that.' She let her gaze wander over the lake.

'Do you want a job?' he delicately enquired.

'Well ... I want to do something to help. Don't know what, mind you.'

He studied the back of her head, gently nodding. 'Let me talk with Otto, and we will see what a woman of your talents can help us with. Yes?'

She laughed, noticing Otto and Johnno walking down, chatting together. Johnno sat down and pinched Beesely's freshly peeled egg, gulping it down.

'Strange news,' Otto reported with a smile. 'They are taking the flights.'

'Sorry?' Beesely puzzled.

'The two Pakistani nationals, they are taking the flights,' Otto explained, clearly amused.

Johnno tried to laugh and chew at the same time, Beesely scowling at him.

Otto explained, 'We bought the aeroplane tickets, and they were emailed to the two men by the airline, no need to be sent by courier; we had already intercepted the men's email accounts. Twenty minutes later they got into taxis for the airport. They are at check-in.'

Beesely stared out over the lake, frowning heavily before turning back to Otto. 'They're taking the flights?'

Jane glanced from one face to the other, not a clue as to what was going on.

'They're taking the flights?' Beesely repeated, Johnno struggling with the egg and the humour.

‘They took the damn flights!’ Johno stated, spraying egg over himself.

‘Why the hell would these two poor stupid farm boys get on a flight sent to them in an email?’ Beesely puzzled.

‘Maybe that is what they were waiting for,’ Otto suggested. ‘A secret travel plan sent to them.’

‘Jesus,’ Beesely finally let out. ‘Well, that fact does not change anything, it works in our favour. Poor fools.’ He blew out. ‘If only they knew what lay ahead for them.’

‘They must be terrorists,’ Otto insisted. ‘Who else drops everything and gets on a plane to go half way around the world on a fake passport?’

Johno pointed a finger towards Otto. ‘He’s got a point.’

Beesely sighed. ‘I had best stir the shit then.’ He stood and wandered down the slope, taking out his phone. ‘Dame Helen, please.’

After a moment came, ‘Hello?’

‘Beesely here.’

‘Ah, we found the details of that pair, only two Pakistani nationals flying on to Toronto today. Looks like fake passports, the real passport holders are in prison in Islamabad.’

‘I have some news, my dear ... Condition Black. Canadian Air Force get their tip-off from the Yanks ... in an hour.’

Dame Helen paused. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Can you afford to take the chance? And can you afford me to *know* you took the chance? Might be best to divert the flights, perhaps to RAF Brize Norton, just to be sure.’

‘Christ,’ she quietly cursed. ‘Anything further on them?’

‘When I know, you will know.’ He hung up.

‘Elle, twice in one day. Listen, I think someone has been keeping us in the dark. It now looks as if these two farm boys are not so stupid after all. RAF has planes in the air!’

‘Really?’

‘Worth you digging through their background.’

‘Yes, certainly. Thanks again.’

‘Burke, Beesely here.’

‘Kinda busy right about now –’ came back.

‘Don’t care. Listen well: Brits have fighters in the air.’

‘What?’ Burke puzzled.

‘They are going to intercept those flights, since it seems our little fish are better connected than anyone thought. Bit of a coup for MI6, at least that’s the way the newspapers will see it.’

‘Like hell! I sent an official warning to your government a few hours back, already asked for these two fellas.’

‘Well, you may have a fight on your hands; seems that they are big fish after all. I’ll let you know if I find anything new.’

‘Thanks Beesely, you’re a stand up guy.’ He hung up.

Beesely pressed the red button. ‘Huh,’ he grunted.

Rejoining the picnic, Beesely got taken to one side by Otto. ‘We will have to discuss the Serbian problem.’

‘Serbian ... problem?’

‘Gunter made enemies there. They are trying to get what information they can about K2.’

‘Oh dear.’

‘They mean to make trouble,’ Otto suggested with a concerned look.

‘Are we talking about the Serbian Government, or private enterprise?’

‘They are connected.’

Beesely took in the view. ‘Then what I would like ... is for the Swiss Government to officially invite the head of Serbian Intelligence, plus the principal players on the private side, here for a chat. Around Friday would be good.’

Otto stood surprised, if not mildly stunned. ‘I ... will talk with the Government, but it will not be so easy.’

Beesely made eye contact. 'Worthwhile things never are.' He added, 'The problem with the Serbs, is that half the country wishes to join The West, the rest wish to lynch us for what we did in Bosnia and Kosovo. A delicate balance, love and hate in equal measure; must be a bit like being married.'

They sat and chatted for half an hour, enjoying the view, the sun beating down and warming them, ties loosened.

Johno's phone rang. Otto and Beesely turned, their interest piqued, since Johno did not make or receive many calls on the satellite phone. After much nodding and 'yeah ... sweet ... wankers', he hung up. 'That was the boys from Hereford, well chuffed about the gifts. Seems they're off to RAF Brize Norton to storm a plane.'

Beesely offered him a quizzical look. 'Really? Can't think why.'

* * *

On a random tour of camp buildings, Johno wandered into the guard commander's single-storey building, correctly reading the German title above the door. The senior men, dressed in black fatigues, stood as he entered.

'No need for you fuckers to stand when I walk in; I'm no officer, I work for a living!' He took in the room, the clipboards pinned to walls, the desks and chairs, a paper man-sized target fixed to one wall.

Simon, a very tall guard commander stepped forwards. 'We have orders from Herr Otto, sir. You are to be treated as a senior manager.'

'Really?' Johno unhappily reflected. 'So ... you have to do what I say?'

'Yes, sir.'

'OK. Stand on one foot.'

Simon glanced at his colleagues before standing on one foot.

‘Now flap your arms like a chicken and make clucking noises.’

Some of the men smiled. Simon lowered his leg, not looking pleased. ‘I believe, sir, that you are making a joke at me.’

‘And you’d be right.’ Johno put a cigarette on his lip. He stopped short of lighting it. ‘Is smoking allowed in here?’

‘No, sir,’ Simon informed him.

‘Then I’m changing the rules. You’re now all allowed to smoke in here. And I’ll shoot the next person to call me *sir*. I’m a soldier, a driver and a bodyguard.’ Men glanced at each other. ‘And ... a drunken womaniser,’ he lightly added.

The men smiled.

Johno pointed at a man’s holstered pistol. ‘You know how to use that, sonny?’

‘Yes,’ the man confidently replied. ‘Do you?’

Johno had his pistol in his hand a second later, bringing it level with the man’s head. The man ducked, Johno firing past him at the paper target fixed to the wall. When the shooting stopped, men lifted up in stunned silence and turned to the target. Johno had put a “smiley face” into the target’s chest, ten rounds. Several of the guard commanders stepped towards it, inspecting Johno’s handiwork.

Johno holstered his pistol. ‘How’d I do? Passable by your standards?’ He lit his cigarette.

The men closest to the target stood admiring the speed and accuracy of Johno’s work. The man who had ducked was breathing heavily, looking horrified.

Simon stepped to Johno, but focused on the target. ‘We are not allowed to carry our weapons cocked with the safety off – as you do.’ He shrugged. ‘Safety rules.’

‘And good rules they are,’ Johno agreed. ‘Stop you shooting yourselves in the foot. I once drew my weapon quickly and shot the tire of my own vehicle.’ He kicked out a chair and sat. ‘Sit down, gentlemen, that’s an order.’ He cleared his weapon, re-

loaded, but did not cock the weapon. He set 'safety' on, displayed the weapon's setting for them to see, then holstered it.

'Tell us about Kosovo,' a man called. The remainder closed in, keenly attentive.

An hour later, Johno sat behind a fold-down table in a field of mown grass east of the camp. Two senior administrators sat next to him at similar tables; pens and paper, quiz books and booze ready. The selected twenty guards were running around the field, having been out all night.

Johno blew a whistle, directing the men across and telling them to line up. A dozen other guards observed, a few managers taking notes. Otto had just arrived, walking slowly with his hands clasped behind his back and taking in the scene.

Johno waved the first guard forwards, pouring him a drink of beer in a plastic glass. 'Drink it all.'

The guard hesitated, glanced at the managers present, then at Otto before drinking the beer as requested.

'Back of the queue,' Johno told him, waving him off. He repeated the exercise till the first man was in front of his table again. 'Twenty press-ups.' The man dropped and did twenty press-ups. 'Good.' Johno gave him another beer then repeated the exercise for the next nineteen perplexed guards. Soon the first man presented himself again.

'Capital of Wales?'

'Wales?'

'You've lost a point, twenty press-ups, then a beer. Next!'

The next guard stepped forwards. 'Capital of Scotland?'

'Edinburgh.'

'Good, back of the queue. Next.' Johno worked his way through the entire line, eight guards drinking a beer.

The first man returned as Johno read from the puzzle book. 'How many English pounds in one kilo?'

'Two and a half?'

‘Er ... two point two. Have a mouthful of beer and five press-ups.’ Five minutes later, the same man was back. ‘Capital of Iran?’

‘Baghdad?’

‘No, fuck head! Beer and thirty press-ups!’ Eight minutes later the same man stepped up, looking exhausted.

‘What is ... nine times eight?’ Johno asked the man, his head in the book, a finger over the answer.

The guard had to stop and think. ‘Seventy ... six?’

Johno grinned up at the man. ‘Nope, beer and thirty press-ups.’ Ten minutes passed before the first guard was back again. With a cheeky grin, Johno poured him a large whisky.

‘Mein Gott,’ the man muttered before swigging the whisky, his eyes now showing the strain, the effects of alcohol on a tired body. Ten minutes later he returned, unsteady on his feet.

‘How many rounds maximum in a Browning 9mm pistol?’

The guard squinted at Johno. ‘Thirteen?’

‘Good. Have a beer, then twenty press-ups.’ The press-ups were laboured, several burps issued, but the man got through. By the time he re-appeared he was wobbling. Smirking, Johno lifted an MP5 sub-machinegun onto the table. ‘Make safe. Quickly!’ He threw a stun grenade at the back of the queue. ‘Grenade!’ They dived out of the way. ‘Line up you fuckers!’

The MP5 was made safe.

‘Slow, but OK. Run once around the field.’

Fifteen minutes later the same man presented himself in front of the table, sweating profusely and panting heavily, Otto sat close and keenly taking notes.

‘Take a drink.’ Johno handed the man a whisky. ‘What is ... normal flight time from London to ... the Bahamas?’

‘Flight ... time?’ the man repeated.

‘Too slow, take a sip of beer.’ The man took a sip. ‘Assemble the weapon ready to fire,’ Johno directed, pointing at an MP5 on the next table. The man got to work, struggling to focus.

Johno threw a stun grenade. ‘Grenade!’ A guard angrily kicked it away. ‘Otto! Get that fucker off the field, I want his name.’

The rest of the guards slowly scrambled back onto their feet and lined up as Otto sat back down.

Johno explained, ‘You can tell a lot about how someone will work under pressure through an exercise like this. Aggression is good, but it has to be focused, part of the task. They need to focus the anger on the job in hand, not each other or their bosses.’

‘I understand,’ Otto suggested.

‘We can’t take this lot to war and test them, so we have to do what we can here.’

‘Finished,’ the man assembling the MP5 said, stood to attention.

‘Good. Next!’

Twenty minutes later the men were suffering, one more thrown off the field.

‘Now we see,’ Johno said with a wink as he stood and approached the line of men, Otto following him. ‘Get into groups of three!’

It took a few seconds, but they did so, one odd group of two left over. Johno pointed at a guard and told him to join them. ‘OK, one man is injured, two must carry him around the field. Fresh guard, you are the injured man. Go! Quick!’

Five minutes later one guard punched another, taken off the field, as was the man he hit. Groups reformed.

Johno laughed at them as they struggled along like a bunch of drunks. ‘Otto, those taken off - don’t punish them, just note them down for more pressure training. People react in different ways when they’re drunk, not like when they’re in combat.’

Otto nodded. One team fell and could not be bothered to get back up. They were sent off, their names noted.

Johno threw a stun grenade. ‘Grenade!’

Two groups laid down their injured man quickly, one threw down the injured man and several just collapsed in a heap, several being sent off.

‘Get up!’ They began again. ‘In-coming!’

They ducked down, one group very slowly and getting themselves kicked off the field.

‘Everyone to the tables! C’mon, move it.’

The remaining six stood in front of the tables. Each took a beer.

‘Make safe the weapon in front!’

They grabbed the MP5s laid out for them. Bang! A blank round was accidentally discharged.

‘Idiot! Send him off!’ Now just five remained. ‘Make ready your weapons, safety off.’ They did as they were asked. ‘Lie down. Crawl ten yards.’

Bang!

‘Get that fucker off the field!’ Johno barked, the man being removed.

The last four crawled ten yards, turned and crawled back and stood.

Johno faced Otto. ‘OK, when my arse is in trouble, I want these four stood right next to me. Understand?’

Otto smiled as Johno shook hands with each exhausted man.

‘Made me hungry all this exercise has,’ Johno said, patting his stomach. He and Otto stepped away together.

‘I have ordered a replacement fridge for you,’ Otto reported.

‘The one on the dungeon not working proper?’

‘No, *that one* ... is fine,’ Otto flatly stated. ‘It was the tall fridge in the guard commanders building – the other side of the wall to the target you fired at. The men sat in the room thought they were under attack.’

Johno stopped and faced Otto, offering a mildly concerned look. ‘Sorry, Boss. Am I in trouble now?’

‘No, of course not,’ Otto said with a grin as they continued on their course. ‘You did what Beesely thought you would do. You did, apparently ... scent mark your territory. You peed on your spot.’

Johno laughed as they walked on.

The quarter final of the African League football competition was about to start. Both teams stood lined up with the referee and the two linesmen.

The national anthem of Sierra Leone had already been played, its players stood proudly with their heads held high and their chests out. Now it came the turn of Zimbabwe, playing on home turf, their President in the stand.

‘Stick ... a ... chicken in the air, stick a deckchair up your nose, buy a jumbo jet and then bury all your clothes...’ blasted out of the speakers.

Without realising it, the Zimbabwean President was tapping his foot to the music.

4

In the Tivoli hills, Pepi stared hard at the psychiatrist’s report on Johno. He glanced at the man who had brought it in, then returned to the report. He shrugged and made a face. ‘He’s right, a male lion should have a better name.’

Johno had selected Sky News on his large plasma television, Otto sat next to him with a beer. The lift opened with a ‘ping’.

Otto glanced around as Beesely approached. ‘How was the shopping? Jane is good, yes?’

Beesely nodded as he approached, hands clasped behind his back.

Johno shouted, 'Shut up, here it is.'

Beesely stood behind Johno, who passed up a bottle without taking his gaze off the large screen built into the ceiling.

'Sky news on the hour, this just in. Royal Air Force jets today intercepted two flights from Europe, one from Paris and one from Amsterdam. Both of those country's governments have launched official complaints, as has the head of the European Union -'

'Wankers!' Johno shouted.

'The jets were forced to land at RAF Brize Norton, where they were met by armed police and SAS counter-terrorist teams -'

'Go boys!'

'- who boarded the flights. Passengers were said to be terrified, but grateful that they did not fly across the Atlantic with two potential hijackers on board.'

Beesely sat down.

'The home secretary had this to say a short while ago: the French and Dutch governments are in no position to criticise the British police and intelligence services, nor our glorious armed forces in this action today. These Pakistani nationals were staying in those countries using false passports, having first entered illegally - otherwise we would not be in this situation. We shall be making complaints at the highest levels to these governments. We shall also be asking questions of the Italians as to how, in this day and age of terror, this pair managed to enter Italy on fake passports. If the French Interior Ministry was not half asleep -'

'Oooh, that's going to hurt in the morning,' Johno suggested.

'Well,' Beesely began, 'if you're going to piss-off your European partners, then you may as well do them all at once.'

The news continued, pictures of RAF jets, armed police, political comment. They watched the whole story at least three times over.

Beesely's phone rang, surprising him. He held it up for Otto to see. 'This thing works down here?'

Otto explained, 'There are signal relays inside most of the rooms, but the signal is not one hundred percent.'

Beesely pressed the phone's green button. 'Beesely here.'

'Dame Helen for you, sir,' came a professional female voice.

'Put her through ... Dame Helen? Not still at work I hope. Busy day?'

'Like a mad house. The Europeans going crazy, Americans not happy, two meetings with the Minister.'

'Sounds hectic. I was just relaxing with a beer.'

'That sounds much better than my agenda for the next few hours.'

'Oh dear. Be home late?'

'No, be staying up in town.'

'So, how are things panning out today?'

'They confessed.'

'They confessed?' Beesely kicked Otto's leg, and then tapped Johno with his beer bottle.

'Yes, it seems they changed their minds about martyrdom.'

'What was their plan?' Beesely enquired.

'To meet a contact in Canada, they didn't know who. After that they would be briefed.'

'Sounds about right. They would not be briefed until ready to do the job, al-Qa'eda realises now that phones and emails are not secure.'

'Anyway, thanks. I mentioned you to the Minister.'

'No need, you take the glory. I'm not looking for any merit badges. But there is one thing I might ask for as a favour.'

'What's that?' she nervously enquired.

'The head of MI5, what's he like?'

‘Rawlins? God, don’t get me started on *him*.’

‘Not much of a charmer I hear.’

‘Likes conflict, likes to rub people up the wrong way; not popular amongst his own staff. I’ve always found him difficult, so does the Minister.’

‘You have anyone ... inside?’ Beesely delicately broached.

‘You might think that, I couldn’t possibly comment,’ rolled off her tongue.

‘Well, not to worry for the moment, but I might end up going toe-to-toe with him. Depends on whether or not he upsets some friends of mine.’

‘Rumour has it he has some vices,’ she informed him.

‘Oh dear, they do have a nasty habit of slipping out.’

‘Don’t forget my ring side seat.’

‘Will do. Don’t work too hard now. Bye, bye.’

‘One more thing,’ she called. ‘If you should happen to come across *whomsoever* is dumping illegal weapons at UK police stations, tell that individual that there are some senior figures in the British establishment who are rather delighted with the way things are going. Concerned, but delighted. There are lots of favours being accrued.’

‘I’ll pass it along ... should I come across such a person.’ Beesely pressed Red followed by Green. ‘Beesely here. I want to find out everything we can about the head of MI5, Rawlins his name is, especially his private life. I want your best agents to discreetly monitor his activities outside of work, but they must be very careful. He is, after all, the head of British Intelligence. Thanks.’

‘Do you think he is dirty?’ Otto asked.

Beesely made a face, suggesting he did not know or care either way.

* * *

Mr. Grey selected a recently dialled number. ‘Didn’t wake you, did I, sir?’

‘I was having a pee,’ came the whispered reply from Oliver Stanton, Chairman of The Lodge. ‘It was on silent, but I saw the light.’

‘Thought you might be up playing with the puppies. Bertha had what ... four?’

‘How did you know?’ Stanton whispered.

‘Sally text’d me after the first one popped out. How are they?’

‘She’s asleep in the snug with them.’

‘You’re going to need to find some more homes for them, sir. Third time now?’

‘Going to have her fixed!’ They laughed. ‘What’s new from across the pond?’

‘Beesely tipped off the local CIA about two al-Qa’eda suspects, Brits grabbed them. I think he tipped *them* off as well, playing one against the other,’ Mr. Grey explained.

‘You may not see the pattern, but this spider is spinning an intricate web; I’ll explain it at some point. He’s working undercover. Again.’

‘He’s got me confused, sir,’ Mr. Grey admitted.

‘You need to understand the history. Some pieces of the puzzle you don’t have. So ... you want a puppy?’

‘Not fucking likely, sir.’ They laughed.

‘Night.’

5

Johno ambled into Beesely’s office a few hours later. ‘Got some dirt on Rawlins at MI5.’

Beesely put down his old fountain pen. ‘Really?’

‘Well, not really dirt as such. But it seems he used to frequent late night gambling dens, now does it all on-line.’

‘Debts?’

Johno grimaced. ‘Not really. Spent six grand this year, lost it.’

Beesely considered it. ‘Still, out of his salary it’s a chunk.’

‘I had an idea.’

Beesely eased back, amused. ‘Go on.’

‘Mate I know does the same thing; on-line poker. The people you play poker against are just numbers, like Roger-26, all anonymous. So if we signed up some dodgy foreign terrorist to the on-line site and –’

‘Rawlins won money off him ...’ Beesely finished off.

Johno grinned. ‘It would look bad if the papers found out.’

‘Not as stupid as you look, are you.’ Beesely put his glasses back on. ‘Your project, go supervise. Practise being a sneaky little shit.’

Johno headed from the door. ‘I learnt from the best.’

‘I heard that! Oh, by the way, Johno....’

Johno came back in as Beesely thrust a credit card towards him. Inspecting it, Johno asked coyly, ‘My own little expense account?’

‘According to Otto, that credit card gives you the power of God around here.’ Beesely tipped his head, a slight grin forming. ‘I’d be interested to see how the locals react to it. Field test it as only *you* could.’

‘Talking of testing things,’ Johno began as he took out his satellite phone. He pressed the green button. ‘This is Johno. Put me through to the UK Alzheimer’s Association.’

‘Johno,’ Beesely quietly admonished.

‘Hello?’ came a female voice.

‘Who’s that?’ Johno asked.

‘Who am I? This is the Alzheimer’s Association. How may I direct your call?’

‘Why are you ringing me?’ Johno enquired, a smile creased into one cheek, Beesely shaking his head.

‘I’m sorry? You rang us, sir.’

‘Did I? Why did I do that?’

‘Are you OK, sir?’

‘Yes.’ He waited. ‘Who’s that?’

A sigh could be heard from the other end. ‘This is the Alzheimer’s Association. Are you the gentleman I spoke to before?’

‘Yes. Who’s that?’

* * *

The chairman of the Virginia Lodge read the detail of a file as the others sat waiting. Finally, he raised his head. ‘He’s building up contacts and favours in the world’s intelligence community. But instead of coming directly to us, he’s making it appear that he is *him*, not *him* one of us - if that makes sense. He’s planting a lie within a lie. It’s also a clear message to us.’

‘How so?’ a man asked.

‘He could have come to us and we would have ordered the CIA to assist him. Instead, his actions were bound to draw our attention by doing it this way. Some private joke if I know him.’

‘His actions seem a bit ... eccentric,’ a man ventured.

‘You ever met him?’ the chairman asked, a rhetorical question. ‘He invented eccentric. The naked ladies, the bird nesting boxes - he’s poking fun at various people. He also seems to be playing a part, as if someone else was watching him.’

‘Who might be watching him?’ a man asked.

The chairman smiled. ‘K2 is Swiss, they’re based in Switzerland. Who else, based in Switzerland, might be watching him?’ He waited, opening the palms of his hands.

Several faces creased into smiles. Henry nodded to himself.

The family silver

1

The next morning, a helicopter flew Beesely, Otto and Johno the short distance up to Zurich as Jane accompanied decorators around the castle.

Johno asked a lot of intelligent questions of the pilot, sitting up front and studying the controls of this French-made Squirrel helicopter. Approaching the southern tip of Lake Zurich, the pilot allowed Johno to take control, a seamless transfer. Concerned, Otto leant forwards and glanced over Johno's shoulder, but Beesely reassured him of his half-brother's abilities.

They flew north, skirting the western edge of the lake, the area below densely populated with houses sprawling up the hillside, but cut by an ugly elevated highway running north to south. At the northern edge of the lake they arced slowly over the city centre buildings, the commercial centre of the city in view, before turning south and flying parallel to the eastern lakeshore, the area more urban and with many red roofs poking through the trees. Doubling back around mid-lake, they slowly circled over a ferry for close inspection, heading back up the eastern lakeside and around the eastern edges of the city towards the airport in the north. Otto pointed out many places of interest, and many buildings and businesses that the group owned. Landing at the airport's helipad, they were met by a convoy of three Range Rovers.

Outside of the airport, they joined the highway south for a quick journey to the small city. In no particular hurry, they drove past the park and the university, before heading west and through the shabby end of town, past a large railway marshalling yard. Doubling back, they passed through the shopping district and

back across the river to the east to view several banking group buildings before again meandering yet again across the river to the west side, where the bank's headquarters were located.

The bank's main building was a twelve-storey, glass-fronted office block situated a quarter mile north of the lake, now glimpsed from within the vehicles. They drove into an underground car park, soon getting the lift to the top floor. The whole of the top floor was open plan, the lift and stairs a strong central feature that interrupted a completely panoramic view.

The bank's CEO, Mathius, occupied a corner office with a spectacular view of the lake spreading away into the distance, the snow covered peaks of the Alps just visible to the south. Beesely and Otto chatted with Mathius and his senior managers for five minutes, Johnno peering out of the windows on the north side, getting his bearings.

He had been studying maps of Switzerland since they had arrived, and that morning had scanned a street-map of Zurich in preparation. He could see the split in the river to the east, a large railway marshalling yard a mile north, the bridges over the river, apartment blocks and a few business tower blocks, the gentle hills in the distance dotted with houses. Everything here appeared to be mostly a drab grey, he noted, not like the ornate wooden houses around Zug. Many of the buildings in view housed decorative red spires, and the strange double-spire church reminded him of Liverpool for some reason. He took a long moment studying it.

He could not see many tall buildings in the city, perhaps a dozen at most poking higher than the common grey roofs and treetops. There were more trees than he had imagined, and the long trams snaking around corners reminded him of a computer game. Looking down on three moving at the same time made him feel a little sick; it seemed as if the ground beneath him was not solid.

When it came time to see the vault they were led back down in the lift, down to a sub-level, and they opened into a small room with two security guards sitting at a desk. The guards jumped up, checking everyone in the group carefully. They greeted the CEO and Otto by name, welcoming Beesely and Johno with a professional detachment. The CEO ushered them through a strong door and to a large circular vault segmented into many individual client compartments. Two further security guards stood at the far end, a third sat at a desk.

Each of the vault's compartments stood separated from its neighbour by vertical metal bars, floor to ceiling, shiny stainless steel bars around six inches in diameter. Johno and Beesely peeked through the bars. In each section rested a neatly formed block of either gold or silver, stacked uniformly from around three foot high to about six foot, many small metal trolleys dotted about.

An extremely clean compact forklift truck parked in a corner made Johno smile. 'Baby forklift?' he dryly enquired. He tapped it, as if tapping a child's shoulder. 'What do you want to be when you grow up? A tall crane perhaps?'

Smiling, the CEO led them to one particular cage. 'We have just executed a large transaction, one foreign government paid out on some bonds and debt to another.' He pointed. 'So that stack reduced by around four boxes to that stack over there.'

'How much was transferred?' Beesely asked.

'About two billion dollars.'

'Any souvenirs?' Johno nudged.

The CEO stepped to the desk and fetched a small gold bar, just three inches long. 'That is worth about two hundred Euros,' he explained as he handed it over.

Johno held the small bar, finding it heavier than it appeared. 'I'm feeling inadequate again.'

'We can't all have a big one,' Beesely quipped, making the CEO laugh loudly, an echo caused in the cavernous room.

Otto led them to a cage on the other side. ‘This is yours,’ he quietly, and proudly, pointed out. There, in the middle of the cage, stood numerous six-foot high racks of gold bars, twenty feet long and eight feet wide.

‘Could be awkward taking it to the shops,’ Beesely quietly pointed out, his eyes wide.

Johno stepped up. ‘Hits you when you see it like that, just what you’re worth.’ They stared, mesmerized by the stack of gold bars the size of a small bus.

‘And that’s not all of it,’ Beesely quietly commented.

Johno turned to face Otto. ‘It’s not ... you know, as golden coloured as I thought.’

‘There are slight variations in colour around the world,’ Otto quietly informed him. ‘In the movies you see mostly old, poorly refined gold, a traditional yellow colour.’

Next came currency. They took the lift up one level, and stepped through a similar security screen before opening a much thicker vault door.

‘This vault door has been used in several movies,’ the CEO enthusiastically pointed out.

‘I can see why,’ Beesely commented as they entered, the round metal door four feet thick.

Ducking through, they found similar sized compartments to the gold vaults, but this time with strengthened glass doors and walls separating them. Within each compartment rested blocks of currency in fine mesh baskets, each bundle the size of a house-brick and wrapped in plastic, with a paper band visible inside denoting the various contents. These compartments had not been split by client, but by currency.

‘Around three billion in various currencies,’ Otto pointed out. ‘Mostly dollars.’

‘Not Euros or Swiss Francs?’ Beesely queried.

Otto explained, ‘Most of the world’s transactions are done in gold or dollars still, so there are mostly dollars here. Many

smaller Swiss banks deposit their dollars with us knowing that they would most likely never be drawn to cash, always an electronic transfer somewhere else. In fact, we have just had a deposit from another bank - deposited by a Nigerian politician - ten million in dollars, still wrapped in labels that came from us. The money was a development grant, paid to Nigeria by the European Union.'

Beesely glanced at Otto from under his eyebrows. 'Our taxes at work. I think we should do something about that. If this fella did not need the money any more it could go to a genuine African charity.'

The CEO suddenly seemed ill at ease.

'Any more souvenirs?' Johno asked with a grin.

Otto smiled, walking to the end desk and removing a wad from a cabinet, signing a form for it. He handed the thick wad to Johno. 'There is one note from almost every country in the world. It is only worth around one hundred Euros, but makes an excellent gift, especially for children.'

'Thanks,' Johno replied, inspecting it. 'I'll try not to take that personally.'

2

Otto, Beesely, and several of the bank's senior staff now headed for their pre-arranged lunch. Johno walked around the corner with them, making his excuses when he noticed a car dealership; something was burning a hole in his pocket.

It was a BMW dealership, a vintage racing car sat gleaming in the window. Johno ambled in, admiring the new BMW 7 Series he had seen as they walked past. With hands in pockets, he circumnavigated the shiny monster, noting this model's magnolia leather covers and real wood finish.

'Darf ich Ihnen helfen?'

Johno turned to find an attractive young lady in a white blouse and dark blue pin-stripe skirt, long and flowing ginger hair. He cocked an eyebrow and grinned. 'I should think so.'

If she noticed the inference, she was maintaining a professional detachment. 'You are tourist?'

'No.' He opened the car door, gesturing her towards the other seat. 'Why don't you get in, then you can tell me about this model.' He slipped in and closed the door.

Glancing at the showroom boss, the lady walked around the car and guided a pair of long legs into the passenger seat, trying to be the eternal professional. 'You work here, sir, in Zurich? Maybe in finance?'

Johno ran his hands over the car's interior, lovingly caressing it. She could not help but notice the sensual undertones. '*Gastarbeiter?* Nein,' he answered without making eye contact. Neutral was already selected, the keys were in the ignition, so he started it up. It purred. He smiled, surprised that it was fuelled with the battery connected; UK car showrooms often disallowed that.

'Was it this model you were interested in, sir?'

'Don't call me *sir*,' he softly requested, still smiling. 'I work for a living.'

The sales assistant frowned her lack of understanding, noticing now her boss walking towards them.

Johno checked the mirror. Two middle-aged women were sitting in a Five Series immediately behind him. 'Could you close your door please, I want to check the sound proofing.'

After a moment's consideration she obliged. Whilst focused on his passenger, Johno slipped into reverse and eased back, smashing the car's rear lights on the Five Series and shocking the two women sitting in it. 'Oh dear,' he muttered.

'Sir!'

He selected 'drive', shooting forwards, but catching the brake just in time to smash the showroom's front window without going right through it. Reverse, back to where they started off.

'Mein Gott!'

Amused, Johno said, 'I like it. I'll take one, but not this one, love - it needs a bit of work.'

The sales assistant fled the car as he switched the engine off.

Johno eased out, closing the door at a leisurely pace. He stepped around to her as staff descended upon him; or rather moved like Swiss professionals and walked briskly up to a respectful distance. As they quickly spoke to the sales assistant, Johno took out his wallet and the K2 issue credit card. With an amused grin, he approached the girl. Handing over the card, he said, 'I'll take one, you'll get the commission.'

Still stunned, she took the credit card as the manager squeezed politely by. 'Sir, you have damaged a car and broken our shop window!'

Johno shrugged. 'Still learning to drive. Sorry mate.' He lit up, despite the no smoking signs and looks of horror from the staff.

The sales assistant had been studying the credit card. Now she took her boss firmly by the elbow and whispered in his ear. The man quickly inspected the credit card before turning back to Johno. Bowing slightly, he asked, 'Sir, do you have some other identification on you, please?'

Johno opened his two-part K2 ID for them to see, before opening his jacket to reveal his holstered pistol.

The manager again bowed his head, a polite, if somewhat forced smile. 'Thank you, sir, we will have a vehicle of this type delivered to where you desire and billed to your account. What ... *colour* would you like?'

'Do you stock Passion Red?' Johno asked, straight faced.

'I believe ... not, sir.'

‘Silver will do them. I want it delivered to Schloss Diane in Zug tomorrow. In the meantime, I require this young lady to accompany me to lunch, where she can tell me all about it.’ He turned to her and smiled. ‘Have you ever lunched with the directors of K2?’

Her eyes widened, the manager stiffening.

Across the street, Mr. Grey fought hard to suppress his laughter.

Beesely sat chatting with a group of five on a large table, two additional places being prepared as Johnno and his guest entered the restaurant. Beesely glanced at him from under his eyebrows as he tackled his starter, listening to the bank’s CEO, Mathius.

Johnno pulled out a chair for his lady guest and sat, two waiters attending. ‘I’m sorry, what *is* your name?’ he asked, turning to the girl.

‘Mitzi.’

Johnno pointed around the table. ‘This is Otto, assistant CEO of the group, and this is Sir Morris Beesely, the big boss of everything.’

Beesely smiled politely, greeting her in German, as did the others. Then he turned his attention to Johnno. ‘We shall have to put you in for your driving test soon.’ Johnno stopped and stared, wide eyed. Beesely said to the sales assistant, ‘He does drive, expertly in fact. He drives dignitaries around, and is my personal bodyguard. He has walked past your window many times in recent weeks, unsure about whether or not to ask you out. You are, after all, very young and very beautiful. And Johnno, well, he has been shot many times protecting people like me, leaving him some scars and ... a little nervous now of approaching girls.’

Mitzi smiled at Johnno, clearly flattered, and a little overwhelmed, squeezing his knee under the table.

‘So,’ Johnno whispered. ‘Ginger pubes ... or shaved?’

Her eyebrows shot up.

‘Er ... Johnno?’ Beesely called. ‘The table is not that big. We can ... hear you.’

Johnno faced him with a large, false grin. ‘I was kinda hoping she would slap my face and walk out. That way I could go after her, cock my weapon, and return.’

Beesely’s features turned to stone. He glanced at Otto, who put his hand in his pocket and pressed his phone three times.

Johnno continued, ‘Otto, your people are sat by the door?’ Otto nodded. ‘And you don’t have anyone behind me?’

Otto shook his head, barely noticeable, a concerned look offered.

Johnno maintained his false smile. Quietly, he said, ‘Well, then, boys and girls, when I move suddenly ... you get the fuck under the table.’ He stopped smiling. ‘Or else.’

Beesely glanced at Mathius and his two deputies, nodding. Then Johnno moved.

Spinning to the right, he stood and reached inside his jacket, pistol out, turning, grab the slide, pull back. Just as he came to bear on the first man, now looking directly at him with a steely stare, a near-empty soup dish caught him on the forehead, thrown by the woman at the table, soup splattering across his face. He had no choice but to close his eyes.

The closest man grabbed the end of the pistol, lowering it as he stood, throwing a punch to Johnno’s chin a second later. Johnno had lurched backwards with the impact of the soup dish, and the punch did not make full contact. He landed on his back on a table, a crunch of glass, a sharp pain in his shoulder registering as the women sat at that table yelped. He kicked upwards, catching the man under the chin and snapping his head backwards. Stunned, the man wobbled backwards a step. Sliding forwards off the table to the squat position, Johnno jabbed the man in the stomach with his pistol, the man now bent double.

‘Halt!’ screamed out in tandem as two K2 men drew weapons on the second man and the dish-throwing woman. The woman

raised her hands, her male colleague, now standing, following a second later. Two more armed men ran in, shouting in German for everyone to stay down.

Johno straightened, pistol-whipping the man who had hit him and knocking the man to the floor. He knelt on the man's neck as Otto and Beesely approached, pistol to the man's temple. 'Who are you?' he roared.

'CIA,' the man quickly let out.

Johno raised his head to Beesely, offering an apologetic look. He dragged the man upright by the collar. 'Sorry about that, Boss.'

'Don't be,' Beesely firmly suggested. He faced the man. 'What station do you work out of?' he demanded.

The man took a breath, glancing unhappily from face to face, breathing heavily. 'Berlin,' he answered, a distinct Germanic accent.

The sound of police sirens followed a few seconds later by two police cars screeching to a halt outside.

'Remove them,' Beesely ordered, but with no anger in his voice. Half turning his head to Otto, he said, 'Check carefully who they are, please.' He sat back down and called the manager over to his table as the police and K2 agents removed the three apparent CIA agents, Mathius and his colleagues easing up from under the table.

'Sir?' the manager nervously asked.

'First, I would like to apologise for what just happened.'

'We own this restaurant,' Otto curtly, and firmly, pointed out as he sat.

'Oh,' Beesely let out, a glance toward Otto. He focused on the manager again. 'Still, I want everyone here given a free meal as compensation, a free gift of your best wine or champagne.' The manager bowed and retreated as Johno sat back down. Beesely pointedly remarked, 'Johno, you have soup all over you.'

Johno picked up a napkin and wiped his face and suit. 'Tomato, not bad.'

'Sir?' a concerned young waiter called. Johno lifted head. 'You have a piece of glass in your back, and you are bleeding.'

'You have a small cut on your face as well,' Beesely unhappily pointed out.

Otto raised his phone and called an ambulance.

'So, been here a whole ... two days,' Beesely noted, sighing.

Johno shrugged. 'Didn't like having two *armed* men sat behind me.'

Beesely's eyes narrowed. 'They were armed?' Johno nodded. Beesely faced Otto with a studious look. 'That's not so unusual, but being spotted *is* - risking getting noticed, arrested, a diplomatic incident.'

'I've spent a lifetime looking for bulges under jackets,' Johno pointed out, now rubbing himself down. 'As well as down good cleavages.'

'We must interrogate these people,' Otto quietly suggested, anger in his voice.

'No,' Beesely emphasised. 'They keep an eye on us, we watch them.' He waved a hand. 'There are probably some MI6 assets around here somewhere, sniffing around. We *do not* cause problems for each other.' He left his gaze on Otto, who finally gave a respectful head tip. 'They identified themselves straight away, so they were not being aggressive, just second grade watchers.' Softer, he said, 'It's almost as if we were meant to spot them, and to shoot them full of holes ... in a public place.'

Beesely took in the scene as people continued with their lunch. 'No screams or panic?' he puzzled.

'They are Swiss,' Otto pointed out. 'And most work for you at the bank.'

'Christmas party must be a riot,' Johno muttered. He turned, to find the girl now gone. 'Bugger. Must have been something I said.'

A bigger stick

1

The next day, the Swiss Government came to the castle to discuss the Serbian problem. Herr Blaum was accompanied by the Foreign Secretary, a plump man of forty-five with thick black hair.

‘I would have come up to you in Bern, you know,’ Beesely offered as they shook hands.

‘It is fine,’ Blaum emphatically replied. ‘Here is a short beautiful drive, and we can pretend we are busy out of the office.’

Beesely smiled formally. ‘Of course. Which way do you come normally, north route or south?’

‘South route is quite beautiful - you have the lakes. Longer, for sure, but nicer,’ Blaum explained.

Beesely shook the hand of the Foreign Minister. ‘Mr. Delgarcia. Welcome.’

‘Thank you, Sir Morris. I have heard good things. You are not like Herr Gunter.’

Beesely settled his guests around his desk. ‘*No one* ... was like Herr Gunter, thank God!’ They laughed. ‘Tea, coffee?’

Beesely made sure that they were relaxed, placing some fresh cake in front of them, Otto joining them a minute later and closing the door. Beesely began, ‘Sorry to bring you both down here, but as Otto has already mentioned we have a problem with some elements of the Serbian Government, and industrialists.’

The Foreign Minister suddenly turned serious. ‘It is not surprising; they used to be a large and powerful country, a large economic bloc under Tito. The West deliberately spread dissension in Croatia and Bosnia. They started the war, not the Serbians!’

‘Quite likely, Minister, and I do not disagree with you. But the break-up of the old Yugoslavia *has* strengthened NATO’s southern border and provided some new allies for us in the form of Slovenia and Croatia. Not a bad thing. Gentlemen, I am not here to justify the break-up of the old Yugoslavia. I asked you here today to request your kind assistance in trying to repair any damage done to relations between Switzerland and Serbia by the late Gunter.’

The Ministers glanced at each other.

‘A noble aim,’ Blaum offered.

‘And quite the full circle,’ Delgarcia noted.

‘New management,’ Beesely firmly stated, tapping the desk hard with a finger.

Delgarcia asked, ‘What did you have in mind?’

‘A small summit, an official invitation to their Foreign Minister, along with their intelligence chiefs, and also those elements of the private security companies that Gunter had problems with.’

Otto leant forwards. ‘In fairness to Gunter, he did not start this problem. The Serbians began to kill business rivals in the west, to get involved in drugs and guns in the Czech Republic, and their government seems to have previously ignored these actions. Gunter fought back when directors in some of our companies were threatened and then killed.’

The Ministers nodded their acceptance of that.

‘It’s a fair point,’ Beesely conceded. ‘But the *way* in which he retaliated could have been better handled.’

Blaum offered Beesely a strong glare. ‘Receiving a video of your employees *getting the chair* will always cause a problem, I think.’

‘Most certainly,’ Beesely agreed.

At the drawbridge, the Ministers paused before getting into their cars.

‘Is there any British agenda here?’ Blaum asked Otto.

Otto clasped his hands behind his back. ‘If there is, I do not see what it is ... other than to mend relationships as he suggested.’

‘Could British Intelligence be interested in using us to get access to Serbia?’ Delgarcia probed.

‘Beesely is not trusted by British Intelligence,’ Otto informed them.

The Ministers were surprised.

‘Why not?’ Delgarcia asked.

‘Beesely ran operations for MI6 many years ago, finally into Kosovo. One mission went wrong, the man Johno being injured. The British Government refused a rescue plan, so Beesely funded one himself. Since then they have been at odds, despite the fact that they used his services on many occasions for unauthorised operations.’

The Ministers glanced at each other before getting into their car. As they drove away, Otto watched them with a studious frown. He lowered his head for a minute, thinking, before stepping back inside.

With Johno sat on Beesely’s desk, Beesely remarked, ‘I just discussed Gunter’s methods of disposing of people he didn’t like ... with two Swiss Government Ministers.’

‘And?’

‘They didn’t react in a way a Government Minister should. They knew. Not only that, they seemed to tolerate it.’

Johno cocked an eyebrow. ‘Tail wagging the dog around here?’

Beesely offered Johno a small shrug. ‘Anyway, I’ve got a job for you.’

The Swiss Ministers had agreed to send the invitation, and to try and get the Serbians there for the weekend, Johno having been

sent back to the UK to get some 'kit' and to round up a few instructors. Now, Beesely just had to trick the CIA into lending him some hardware, the Swiss into letting them in, and the Serbians into falling for a bit of smoke and mirrors. It would be a challenge, but great fun trying.

Beesely made a call. 'Burke, Beesely here.'

'Ah, Beesely. How's the weather down in the country?'

'I'm in Switzerland, old chap.'

'Ah, right. Isn't that where your secret headquarters are?'

'Nothing quite so dramatic, this is where our business interests are, research and computers, you know.'

'Sure. How's the weather there then?'

'It's lovely, clear sky, nice view of the lake. Anyway, need a favour.'

'What would that be?'

'Well, it seems that the Serbians are trying to kiss and make-up with a few governments around here; Swiss, Austrians, Germans and Italians.'

'They were supposed to be on our side after that thing in Kosovo and their elections, now they just elected a bunch of right-wing pro-Russian nationalist guys to their parliament. There're going to be more problems there!'

'Quite. Anyway, seems the Swiss have asked me to host some of the talks since we own a lot of land down here, hotels and the like. And, with my connections, I seemed best suited.'

'Anything you can do to ... derail these talks?' Burke softly enquired.

'Well, I should think so, but I could do with a bit of help.'

'What d'ya need, Beesely?' Burke reluctantly asked.

'I could do with a show of force, a bit of hardware to make these Serbs think we are just that bit tougher than we are.'

'Swiss would never let *us* in.'

'Not normally, no, but I had a sneaky idea. You see, in the summer there are various medical rescue exercises here, up in

the mountains, the Germans sending down doctors in helicopters to winch people off mountains.'

'Yeah, yeah.'

'So if there was an American military team here, from Germany, all medical staff wearing combat gear, and who just happened to be parked up on my private runway when the Serbs landed –'

'They'd think the Swiss Government had allowed our military in,' Burke noted, his enthusiasm growing.

'Which the Swiss would emphatically deny –'

'Causing a lot of distrust ... and the talks break down. I like the way you think, Beesely. Still, it won't be easy. I'll have to get back to you.'

'Just let your boss know that the head of Serbian Intelligence should be popping over, same chap who sold your crashed Stealth Fighter to the Russians a few years back.'

'Hell, I might just have to pop down myself,' Burke offered.

'I was counting on it. We'll send a plane for you when we're further along.'

2

'What's up, Doc?'

Dr. Manning looked up from his desk. 'Johno?'

'In the flesh.' Johno slipped into a familiar leather chair.

'I ... wasn't expecting you. Is everything OK with you?' He squinted without his glasses. 'Are you hurt?'

Johno touched the stitches in his forehead. 'Don't start on the psycho-babble, not that kind of visit.' He handed Manning a cheque.

Manning's eyes widened. 'From ... Beesely?'

'Not ... exactly,' Johno said with a pained expression and a slight smile. 'You're not to repeat this, but Beesely has come

into some money. One part of his family were Swiss, all dead now, so he inherited a Swiss bank.'

'A Swiss bank?'

'Worth billions, so I hear,' Johno stated very matter of fact.

'Worth ... *billions!*'

'Like I said, you ain't supposed to know.'

Manning studied the cheque. 'Well ... thank him for me.'

Johno laughed. 'It's not for you, plonker.'

'It's not?'

'No, it was my idea. That's for ex-soldiers with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.' He lifted his gaze and tipped his head, a quizzical frown forming. 'Which I used to think had the initials PMT for some reason. Anyway, I want you to fix 'em all up, as you did for me.'

Manning squinted at Johno, offering a sceptical look. 'I would be very surprised if anything I said had any effect on you.'

'Don't sell yourself short, Doc, coming here kept me sane. Well, it kept me in blowjobs from lap dancers, and *that* kept me sane. So you helped a lot.'

Manning eyes widened. 'You'll forgive me if I don't enter that into your notes.'

'Fair enough.' Johno stood. 'Oh, we're living in Switzerland now, big castle, underground complex, back in the game.'

'Back in the game?' Manning was worried.

'Don't worry, Doc. If I get shot up you get some more business. Anyway, that money - I want you and your band of merry shrinks flat out looking for ex-soldiers going loopy. More when it runs out.' He left.

For a full minute Manning did not move, he just stared at the door, or the cheque.

* * *

As Johno walked into a private function room of a country pub, just outside Hereford, the cacophony of numerous overlapping conversations quickly ebbed away. Smoke filled the upper half of this run-down and poorly decorated room, despite the new 'no-smoking' signs. Numerous half-drunk pints were littered about the table, two men playing darts.

'Johno, you're looking old and fat!'

'What happened to your face?'

'It's your round, sonny!'

Johno tipped his head, stood in his faded black suit. 'My round, you say?' He took a thick wad of fifties out of his jacket pocket and tossed it to the man who had made the suggestion.

'Who'd you rob?' the man asked as he examined it. 'Must be five grand here!'

'That enough to shut up you old wankers for two minutes?' Johno asked, kicking the door shut behind him. He had their attention. Stepping to the edge of the table where the men sat, Johno began, 'Old man Beesely is recruiting, but no one who's still in. And I don't want any short-timer who's contracted to a private agency or pissing about in Baghdad.'

'What's the job?'

'That depends on the individual. If they are young, fit and able, and want to go over the wall ... then they can do so.'

'You don't expect any of *us* to go Rambo, do you?'

Johno glanced around at the ageing faces. Most were now in their fifties, bald or greying. 'No, we need you for some training.'

'What kinda training? And where?'

Johno took a breath. 'It's simple, no risk to life or limb, lots of cash. You'll be in Europe; hot showers, warm food and five star hotels. You'll be training some spooks in field-craft, plus assessing an existing counter-terrorism and hostage rescue team.'

The men glanced at each other.

'What's the catch?' a man asked from the back.

‘First, you’ll be working with me.’

Howls of derision echoed around the room.

‘Yeah, thought that would cheer you up. Second, you’ll be taking direct orders from old man Beesely.’

The men fell silent, a few nods exchanged.

‘Third. The people you’ll be working with are very secretive, paranoid, and if you accidentally tell the newspapers who you’re working with they’ll kill you, your family, your grandchildren, your pet dog, and then follow your family tree so far back that you’ll have never fucking existed!’

‘Sounds dodgy, Johnno.’

‘It doesn’t have to be, you just need to keep your traps shut. They’ll treat you all very well, Beesely will make sure of that.’ He raised a pointed finger. ‘But make no mistake, breach their security deliberately and there’ll be one hell of a penalty. If you’re on board then you can expect your phones to be tapped, especially mobiles, your homes to be bugged and watched, your movements monitored.’

Many shifted uneasily in their seats, looks exchanged.

Johnno added, ‘They’ll send someone around to chit-chat to your family, posing as a milkman or a copper. If the missus knows what she ain’t supposed to you, get the chop with no money. It would be up to Beesely to stop them from hurting you.’

‘Why so much security?’

‘These boys are sharp; they protect a lot of wealthy people, transporting a lot of dosh around the world. They run casino and bank security ... and they take their work seriously. Fine, let them, that’s not your problem. This deal is twelve weeks at a time, train the boys, create some training programmes, take some of their team to Belize, some to the desert, money is no object. You each get two grand a week in cash, that’s a hundred grand a year in used twenties. Plus all costs are met, all billets and food,

any medical bills and transport there and back in a posh fucking Learjet.'

Murmurs of approval bounced around.

'It's not so bad,' a man began. 'Most of us have done stuff for Her Majesty's Government we never discuss. Not so difficult clamming up for a hundred grand a year.'

Grunts of approval were exchanged.

'And if MI5 put you under pressure on your return?' Johno firmly pressed.

'Have to create a good cover story,' the man suggested, laughing. 'The missus has been swallowing those for years!' From the laughter, he was not alone.

'I'm in.' Two men raised their hands.

'Listen, Johno, do you think they could kill my wife anyway?'

Hysterical laughter filled the room; a beer mat flew at Johno, thrown like a Frisbee.

Johno began giving out business cards. 'That's my number for you lot. If you know any boys interested in some wet work they can contact Max at AGN Security. Right, now get some frigging drinks in!'

For the flight back, Johno had three sleepy guests, the remainder would follow. These three 'had no lives, no wives, and just a kit bag of clothes and memories' as one of them had described it. Johno watched them as they slept off the hangover.

These men, now well into their fifties, could train or assess the world's best counter-terrorism teams, yet in Hereford they were claiming the dole, sitting in the garden deckchair and slowly wasting away. Their wives had long since left, kids grown up and gone, leaving them with their memories of glory and a few fading photos on the mantelpiece, plus numerous novels started but never finished.

Two of these men had been on the Falklands when Johnno had landed, the men sneaking about behind enemy lines and killing at will. The other had been on the Argentine-Chilean border before being caught and swapped six months after the end of the conflict. He had been tortured. Now, Johnno had the power and the money to help his old mentors regain their self-respect.

* * *

Standing just outside the castle's courtyard, Otto dialled a number. 'Minister? It is Otto.'

'How goes it?'

'They have begun to recruit ex-SAS instructors.'

'As you predicted. Good, keep me informed please.'

A prize more valued

1

Otto seemed pensive. 'What is it?' Beesely asked as they walked through the grounds, down towards the lake.

'I have a request from ... from the secret Swiss banking organization.'

Beesely turned his head and frowned a question as they walked. 'I thought *we* ... were the secret banking organization?'

'K2 is the security agency within this banking group, but there are many other banking groups. The men who wish to see you are from the original secret banking organization, started a hundred years ago - maybe three hundred.' He coughed out a nervous laugh, unusual for him. 'There is an official banking confederation, this other group sits behind them - the real power.'

Beesely studied Otto carefully. 'This group, they're powerful?'

'In financial terms yes, they are much bigger than our bank, perhaps one hundred times bigger. But they are not as logistically powerful as K2. They sometimes use K2 for their *dirty work*, as you say.'

'So what do they want?' Beesely probed.

'They have heard you are more approachable than Gunter,' Otto explained.

Beesely shot a glance at Otto. 'Not much of a recommendation, my lad!'

'They wish to meet as soon as possible; they have many grievances, not least the success of our bank at their expense.'

‘Is it ... at their expense? I mean, if they are a hundred times bigger?’

‘Not really. But when we find out about company take-overs we do not tell them, so they lose out potential gains. We also get oil trading information which they do not.’

‘Gains they would make if they were in bed with us.’ Beesely clasped his hands behind his back. ‘I see. So, how did Gunter relate to them?’

‘He would meet with them when he was younger, but he wanted to be their leader, and he wanted them to be more aggressive and to kill competitors.’

‘They had no stomach for it?’

‘No. They always wanted to be very discreet,’ Otto pointed out.

‘But they have used K2 for dirty work?’

‘When they needed, but they did not want Gunter to have a hold over them.’

‘I see no reason why we should not patch things up. Arrange a meeting here –’

‘No, they will not come here. This group meets in secret, only at night, a place that is quiet. We own a hotel on a hillside not far away - it has been used before for such meetings. I will arrange the meeting for tonight.’

Beesely stopped. ‘Tonight?’

Otto looked apologetic. ‘They are insistent in their need to see you.’

Beesely breathed out. ‘I guess we best shine our shoes then.’

‘Gunter always said this.’

‘What?’ Beesely snapped.

‘It is common for Swiss to have the shined shoes. When I was a boy, Gunter said this often.’

Beesely made a face. ‘Hope I do not remind you of *him* too often.’ They walked on. ‘How much influence does this group have over the Swiss Government?’

‘The Swiss Government is as much regional, by canton, as it is Federal. And this group ... they are the real power.’

Beesely took in the view. ‘So, around here the tail wags the dog.’

‘I have heard this English saying –’

‘It means, the criminals run the prison.’

‘Ah. We say ... the skiers run the competition, not the judges.’

Beesely cracked a smile. ‘I shall have to remember that one.’

* * *

The short distance to the nominated hillside hotel became noteworthy in the number of Range Rovers Beesely spotted parked on corners. A police checkpoint greeted them at the start of the private road leading to the hotel, IDs shown, two more groups of K2 agents checking the vehicle along that road.

Beesely found the hotel’s car park to be decidedly cosy, and literally bumper-to-bumper with expensive cars, numerous agents with dogs patrolling the narrow spaces between lines of vehicles. All of the members at this meeting were supposed to arrive within ten minutes of each other and leave in a similar manner, part of a strange ritual that Otto had explained earlier.

All day Beesely had considered that Otto was nervous. It had taken some thought as to why, and, in a quiet corner away from everyone, he asked, ‘What would this group say

and do if they knew about Gunter's death, and your secret-within-a-secret Jewish group?'

Otto had taken a long time answering. 'A recent survey put ten percent of Swiss answering 'yes' to being anti-Jewish. That is, of those that answered truthfully.'

'And if people thought that your group was...'

'There would be open warfare, with the Swiss Government on their side. We could not be shut down because we are Jewish, the world's newspapers would make such a big problem. But they would find a reason to give us problems, the Government.'

'And this ... *society*?'

'They would wish us ... gone.'

Beesely nodded to himself. 'And we'd be the ones getting the chair!' He took a breath. 'So ... no pressure.'

The delegates to this secret meeting sat gathered around a large table, the lights turned down low, Beesely and Otto ushered in by non-K2 men wearing sombre black suits with striking white gloves. Beesely stopped and surveyed the scene; old men in smart suits, the suits blackened by the dim lights, the tabletop completely clear. Then he just waited in the doorway. After almost thirty seconds, delegates were starting to glance around at him. As did a nervous Otto.

He tipped his head towards Otto. 'We own this hotel?' Otto nodded. 'Turn the lights up a bit, and then organize some food and drink.'

'That is not customary,' the nearest man pointed out in a heavily accented Germanic voice.

'If you wish to hold onto custom, gentlemen, then we could continue to treat you as Herr Gunter previously did.' He waited, deliberately placing his hands in his pockets, a slight insult within Swiss etiquette.

The delegates glanced at each other for ten seconds. Finally, Beesely firmly ordered the lights up, drinks and food. Only then did he walk around to the only available seat, conspicuously not at the head of the table. He touched the seat back and then pushed it in. By standing, his head remained the highest in the room.

‘I always thought that it was customary for the Swiss to greet a visitor standing, with a handshake and eye contact, and not to sit with one’s hands below the table?’

They glanced at each other. He was, after all, correct.

‘Gentlemen, you hold onto your ... *outfit*’s traditions, nothing wrong with that, and something I understand very well. But I am English, not Swiss, and we are here tonight because of a break in tradition; the loss of Gunter and my arrival here. It has been suggested to me that you were not happy with Gunter. Well, you and the rest of the civilised world.’ He detected a few smiles. ‘If we are to move on, and break with traditional animosity, then now is as good a time to start as any.’

He ambled slowly around the table, noting faces, and searching for any display of emotion he could find. In this group, that was not easy.

‘First, gentlemen, I will state clearly that the banking group that I have ... *inherited*, along with K2, is Swiss, through and through. It is part of Switzerland, loyal to Switzerland, and will always act in the best interests of this country. I do not follow Gunter’s philosophy, and I have already begun to make some sweeping changes. You, gentlemen, need not fear K2, nor our bank’s activities. I am here to join with you, and to help you any way I can, within the rough guidelines that I have set myself.’

A face turned upwards. ‘And what are those?’

Beesely bent towards the man. 'To make it up as I go along!' he whispered, causing many frowns and some smirks. He straightened and continued circling the group.

'In the past, you have lost out when our bank has used information gathered by K2. But I am sure, gentlemen, that there have been times when you have come across information that may have been useful to us, and probably to each other, which you did not disclose.' He could see by their glances that he was correct. 'I know you have your secret meetings once a month, but I doubt very much that you contact each other daily when you get bits of stock trading intelligence landing on your desks.'

Drinks were placed onto the table, causing a natural break in proceedings, followed by the requested food. At first the delegates did little other than sip water, so Beesely helped himself to cake and tea, Otto following his example.

'Gentlemen, I am not saying another word until you relax and take some food and drink,' Beesely loudly stated. 'At the very least, if tonight is a complete failure, I will have sampled some more of your excellent local delicacies.' He munched away ostentatiously.

Encouraged now by Beesely's example, the assembled delegates started to help themselves to nibbles, pouring tea and coffee, as Beesely had hoped for. All except for the elderly man at the head of the table, who continued to simply sip his water.

After a minute, Beesely placed down his cup and continued to pace. 'So, gentlemen, in an ideal world, what do you desire me to do?'

All eyes turned to the head of the table. Still sipping his water, the headman motioned to the subordinate on his left to answer.

‘We want ... we would like ... better access to information gathered by your agents.’

Beesely had been peering out of the window at nothing in particular. Now he turned his head. ‘Why?’ He waited.

The spokesman’s brow knitted. He glanced at the elderly leader. ‘So that we may all benefit.’

‘Do we *all* pay towards K2 agent training, or their salaries?’ Beesely asked, still looking out of the window with his hands in his pockets; in Swiss terms, deliberately insulting body language.

‘No,’ came the uncertain reply.

Another man turned his head towards Beesely. ‘Without the approval of the Swiss Government, K2 would not exist or operate.’

‘Did you say that to Gunter?’ Beesely asked without turning around.

Otto hid a smile. No response came back to the question.

‘We had no effective working relationship with Gunter,’ the same man admitted a few seconds later.

‘So *no* then, you *did not* say that to Gunter.’ Beesely turned. ‘Perhaps you think I am weak?’ The spokesman turned toward the group leader. Beesely added, after a long pause, ‘Or perhaps you think that I am someone you can do business with. Negotiate with?’

‘Yes,’ the man answered with a forced smile.

‘Good, because if you did think I was weak there would have to be a demonstration.’

That got their attention. Even the old man at the head of the table suddenly registered a pulse and put down his water.

‘You see, gentlemen, I have been working very closely with British Intelligence and the CIA for almost fifty years.

I was a senior manager in British Secret Service for decades; I helped train your P-26 unit a long time ago.’ Many men exchanged surprised looks. ‘Even without K2 I could make my enemies disappear. With my pedigree of contacts, and K2’s resources, just think what I could do.’ He circled the table again.

The delegates shifted uneasily in their seats.

‘I’m surprised none of you have suggested that the Swiss Government would come to your aid.’ They offered no response. Beesely halted his pacing. ‘So, to repeat myself, what - in an ideal world - would you gentlemen like me to do?’

The initial spokesman said, ‘We want ... we desire ... closer co-operation with your group. You are the only large banking group that is not part of this society.’

Beesely mulled over the word. *Society*: ancient, secret, steeped in tradition, akin to the Freemasons. It was not an organization, body, company or group. A society.

‘Yes.’ He stared out of the window again.

Their spokesman queried, ‘Yes ... to what?’

Beesely turned and walked slowly towards the society’s leader. ‘Yes, I will work with you and join this organization.’

Now their leader actually raised his head an inch, his expression lightening.

‘But there are conditions, and I have some suggestions.’ Beesely pulled out the chair that had been originally reserved for him, placing it next to their leader at the head of the table, another cultural insult. He sat, and they glanced at each other.

‘I would suggest, gentlemen,’ he began, addressing everyone except their leader, ‘that it would be difficult and impractical for us to send you stock intelligence data on a

day-by-day basis. Sometimes, this information needs to be acted upon quickly. There is also the risk that sending out such information to many people may invite accidental disclosure. So I would suggest this: we create a fund, a common pool of money that is under the direct control of our banking group, and that it is used for all those transactions that are secret, highly profitable, and yet risky in their nature. We will pick up the cost of running such a fund, and we will take twenty-five percent less of the profits that may result from that fund's activities than you would.'

That woke them up. Even the old man shifted in his seat.

Beesely helped himself to sparkling mineral water and some nibbles. 'So, are we done here?' He stood and faced the leader.

The old man slowly rose to his feet. 'You mentioned conditions. This thing is good for us. So, what ... conditions?' His words came slow and heavily accented, his pronunciation difficult to understand.

'That's easy. I believe that there is no point in being rich and powerful unless you can enjoy what you have. At the next scheduled meeting I will arrange for four of the world's top chefs to prepare a meal for us. Thereafter, at each meeting, your members will rotate that responsibility and prepare for us the world's finest food to sample during our discussions. If that is not done to my satisfaction, I will not be attending.'

The old man raised his eyebrows.

Beesely walked around to Otto, then turned and addressed the group. 'Draw up some plans, put down some ideas, and kindly send them to Otto. I am sure that we can come to a good working arrangement. And some gifts for

each other might be nice. At our next meeting I would like some of Switzerland's finest hand-made trout and salmon flies.'

Otto hid a grin as long as he could.

'Enjoy that?' Beesely asked as they drove back.

Otto shook his head. 'I could not believe you asked them for this fund. If they agree to this fund, and it is a good size, we will have bank managers of the world asking us for favours.'

Beesely offered Otto a confident smile. 'We'll use it for our means, like a big stick. Put pressure on those who deserve it.'

'Le fox?' Otto began. 'You are an entire field of foxes, wearing glasses. In *any* language!'

'A compliment if ever I heard one.'

Two wrongs do make a right

1

The following morning, the Nigerian International Development Minister walked into a group bank branch in Zurich, now being accompanied by Otto. The bank's manager and staff recognised Otto immediately, surprised that he now accompanied a client. Otto motioned the Minister towards a cashier at a desk as the branch's manager approached.

The manager smiled, bowed his head, and greeted Otto with a handshake before glancing at the African Minister, the Minister tall and imposing in his colourful traditional robes. 'Is everything in order?' he whispered.

Otto whispered, 'The Nigerian Minister, he seems to think he will be cheated if not accompanied by a senior official.' The manager rolled his eyes, only visible to Otto, Otto whispering, 'So far today he has asked for girls and cocaine.'

Again the manager rolled his eyes. 'The client always comes first,' rolled off his tongue, a well-practised cliché.

After checking the Minister's ID, and receiving his numbered account details, the cashier transferred the balance of \$10m directly to UNICEF, money that had been previously appropriated for the Minister and his family to retire on, generously supplied by the taxpayers of Europe. Finally the Minister stood, adjusting his robes.

'Is everything in order, sir?' the manager asked, smiling warmly.

'With the help of God, all will be well,' the Minister boomed, towering over the two Swiss.

The manager hid a frown as best as he could, said goodbye to Otto, then stood for a moment watching his visitors leave.

In the car, Otto turned to the 'Minister'. 'It was a good accent.'

'Thanks mate, learnt that from my grandfather,' came back in a London accent.

Otto handed over a wad of money. 'You'll be driven to Paris. After that, stay in touch.'

'No problem, Boss. I'll get the train back up to London.'

As they drove through Zurich, the real Minister, plus his wife, sister, mother, mother-in-law and brother were starting to decompose, buried six feet under an isolated field just across the French border. The chemicals they had been buried with would accelerate the process and leave few identifiable remains. Their stolen funds would now go where they were intended.

At first Beesely had just planned to liberate the funds, perhaps have the Nigerians deported or accused of some crime, but when he had discovered that they were in a Cannes hotel, a thousand pounds a night hotel, eating caviar and driving Rolls Royce cars - all with money earmarked for starving Africans, he had lost his temper.

Along with their stolen \$10m, he added another \$10m of his own.

* * *

Johno walked through the mist, kicking the swirls with his foot and studying the strange patterns. Then he was there, The Pearly Gates.

Suddenly there appeared a man at a table, a sofa and some drinks. ‘Your name?’ the man asked. Now he had wings.

‘Johno.’ He lit up.

‘No smoking in here.’

‘Really? Bugger. Can I smoke out here?’

The man nodded. ‘Yes, you’re outside.’

‘Outside of what?’

‘Did you not go to church, study the Bible?’

‘Not really.’

‘Christened?’

‘Dunno.’ A beer appeared. Johno sat, took a drag and tried the beer. ‘Ah ... that’s good.’

‘Guests *outside* may do as they please. But what you do is observed.’

‘Got any girls?’ A girl in a bikini appeared. She sat next to him. ‘Yeah, baby.’

The man with wings began, ‘When you are ready, you may present yourself for judgement.’

‘Oh.’ Johno gave it some thought. ‘How long do I get to prepare?’

‘Time has no meaning here, you may take as long as you like.’

‘Won’t be holding anyone else up, will I?’

The man with wings frowned very hard then shook his head. ‘Holding anyone else up?’

‘In the queue behind me.’

‘No.’

‘Oh ... right. Well, if you don’t mind, mate, could you - you know - piss off for a few hours.’

The man disappeared. The girl was shaking him by the shoulders. ‘Johno! Johno!’

He opened his eyes. ‘Marge’, his favourite ‘lady-friend’ leant over him.

‘Shopping! You said we’d go shopping. Come on, get up.’

* * *

Guido Pepi placed down the phone and surveyed the five men ranged in front of his desk. ‘Interesting.’

‘Something?’

‘This man Beesely has taken The International Bank of Zurich *back* into the Swiss bank society.’

‘The Swiss Government has planned this,’ another man complained. ‘First the inheritance goes to a British Intelligence officer, then they get SAS instructors, now they re-join the bank society. And this man Otto has doubled the number of guards in six months!’

‘Yes,’ Pepi let out. ‘They are building up their defences, and consolidating.’

‘Why now?’ a man asked. ‘They sat quietly by for decades.’

‘A good question,’ Pepi stated. ‘And I would guess that, when we find the answer, we won’t like it.’

‘The bomb is still in place?’ a man asked.

Pepi faced him and nodded. ‘Soon, gentlemen. Soon.’

* * *

The chairman of The Lodge smiled widely and stood up, report in hand. ‘By God, he’s done it!’

‘Done what?’ a man asked, one of just four men at the table.

‘Sweet Jesus!’ the chairman added.

The men glanced at each other, waiting for the revelation.

The chairman placed his hands on the table and rested his weight on them. 'You know that secret Swiss banking group, the one we've been trying to get inside for sixty years. Well, Beesely just joined them.' He detected some shocked looks. 'Not only that, it looks as if he's persuaded them to let him trade their combined funds.'

Henry drummed his fingers on the desk, thinking hard.

2

That afternoon, Johno sat on a chair in a field, a strong blindfold over his eyes, an air-pistol in his hand. He listened intently.

Twenty yards away, agents were watching with interest as the chosen man inched along, trying to sneak up on Johno without getting shot. Money changed hands, bets laid and payoffs made. Jane now sat on a small mound at the edge of the field, with her friend Sarah from the kitchen, who was also English. They were having a picnic whilst observing Johno's training exercise.

Franz, a guard, was doing well so far, the previous three guards nursing bruised body parts, having been hit by the air-pistol. Franz took a slow and measured step.

Johno listened intently, raising the pistol. Franz grinned, Johno's aim a good thirty degrees off. Johno fired with a 'click', no scream caused by a hit. 'Bollocks!'

He reloaded, Franz taking the opportunity to take two large strides before halting. Johno again listened intently, turning his head like a ship's sonar. Franz stepped on a snail with a *crunch*. Johno aimed and fired, catching Franz in the knee, a scream let out. Johno ripped off the blindfold

as a cheer came from the onlookers, Franz within six yards, the closest so far. Money reluctantly changed hands.

‘Best so far, mate. Next!’

Jane offered Sarah some salad.

‘You don’t eat much,’ Sarah noted.

Jane glanced up at her briefly from behind a large pair of sunglasses. ‘I’ve never eaten much,’ she quietly admitted.

‘Ever been married?’ Sarah delicately probed. She knew very little about Jane, their conversations had always tended to be about anything other than private or personal matters.

Jane coughed out a small laugh. ‘No.’

‘Never met the right one?’ Sarah delicately broached.

Jane admitted, ‘Never met any ... *one*.’

‘Bad luck with guys?’ Sarah ventured sympathetically.

‘No luck. I never bothered with any man.’

‘What ... ever?’

Jane shook her head. ‘I had an illness when I was thirteen...’ She shrugged.

‘God, I’m so ... sorry.’

‘Not your fault,’ Jane offered. ‘Just how it is, that’s all.’

Sarah studied the large black pools that were Jane’s sunglass eyes. She sighed. ‘I had an abortion when I was sixteen, before I came over here.’

‘Did your parents know?’ Jane asked.

‘My mum did, she helped arrange it. It was at the time when she was thinking of leaving my dad, so after I was better we came here.’

‘Do you see him?’

‘My father? Sometimes, he’s not so bad now, better than he was. He calls sometimes, cards at Christmas, you know.’

‘My step-dad was murdered,’ Jane revealed.

‘God!’

‘When I was twelve. They never caught who did it.’ She forced a nervous laugh. ‘Pity, I wanted to thank whoever it was.’

Sarah was shocked. Squinting in the bright sunlight, she probed, ‘Not a great dad then?’

Jane glanced at her briefly before turning back to the field’s activities. ‘The worst.’

‘How long have you worked for Mister Beesely?’

‘Almost twenty years,’ Jane said, brightening. ‘My mum was left a house in London, so we moved there when I was eighteen. I went to college for a while, then she got a job for the Ministry of Defence; I did part time work there. Beesely needed a secretary when he was in the country, so a friend of my mum’s got me an interview. I got the job because that guy – the friend of Beesely’s - knew mum. Well, that’s what I thought at the time.’

‘What do you mean?’ Sarah asked as she peeled a boiled egg.

‘Mister Beesely arranged for me to work for him, special like. Fixed it all up.’

‘Because he knew that guy?’

‘No, because he’s my real dad,’ Jane quietly admitted.

‘What?’ Sarah gasped. ‘Mister Beesely is your father?’

Jane nodded. ‘You aren’t supposed to know.’

‘I’ll ... not tell anyone.’ Sarah considered it carefully. ‘So he had you work for him, because he’s your biological father, and you never knew?’

‘No, not till last week.’

‘Last week?’ Sarah asked in a strong whisper.

Jane nodded. ‘He revealed it when Otto came over. Up ‘til then I just worked for him, but always knew he was too nice to me. He always fixed everything like I was his daughter, not like I worked for him.’

‘Why didn’t he tell you before?’

‘He didn’t want people to know in case they might come after me.’

‘Ah. With his type of work that makes some sense. But other people like him, people in Military Intelligence, they must have normal families.’

‘Stuff that Beesely did was never normal; gone for months on end, always a lot of strange looks and rumours. Police came for him twice. The one thing he isn’t... is like other people I saw in the MOD. My mum always said he was into some odd stuff.’ She forced a quick, nervous laugh.

‘So you worked for him all these years and never knew? Wow. Still, he looked after you, stuck by you; that’s more than could be said for my dad. I never got any money after we came here.’

‘Beesely always made sure I never had any problems. And Johnno. He got arrested once; he punched a man who stole my bag.’

‘Beesely?’

‘No, Johnno. He nearly killed the man.’

‘What happened?’

‘The jury all heard about the Falklands War and the SAS and stuff. Ten minutes after they ... you know, went to talk about it, they came back and said not guilty.’

‘Lucky. Did Johnno not marry?’

Jane shot Sarah a look, visible even through the large sunglasses. ‘He’s got more problems than me; he spent a

year getting over being shot in Kosovo. He's afraid to show all them scars to girls, so he likes to go with prostitutes without taking his clothes off. He can't spend the night with a girl because of the nightmares, he has to be drunk to sleep soundly.'

'Don't go telling me too much,' Sarah nervously suggested. 'Get me into trouble.'

Earning your keep

1

The Serbian delegation was due to land soon, on the small private airstrip at Zug. The Serbian Ambassador to Switzerland had already arrived, by helicopter, but the man had been kept deliberately alone on the flight. It had been suggested that the helicopter bring the Swiss Government as well, but Beesely had a plan.

The Swiss Government contingent had arrived by car an hour ago for ‘talks before talks’, Beesely having ordered the training camp cleared of most staff, the guards to be smartly dressed and discreetly in the background. The Swiss Ministers were now being entertained by Beesely in the top floor restaurant, and the restaurant tables had been moved to create a ‘conference’ venue so that everyone would be sat facing each other.

Burke and his CIA team were hidden in a hut, Johno and the SAS crew huddled in another a few yards away. As were close to four hundred men dressed in camouflage clothing and wearing black ski masks. Four Black Hawk helicopters, of the US Rhine Army Medical Corps, waited in a field two miles from the airport, the crew quickly changing clothes and slapping green and black water-based paint onto large red-cross signs.

Otto stood waiting in the small airport lounge, politely talking about nothing much to the Serbian Ambassador. It turned out the man’s grandfather was German.

Beesely’s phone rang, and he excused himself from the company of Ministers Blaum, Delgarcia and others. ‘Beesely here.’

‘Five minutes, sir.’

‘Thank you.’ Holding the phone at arms length, and looking over the rims of his glasses, he pressed the red button followed by the big green button. Bringing the phone to his ear again, he said, ‘All stations, five minutes. Go.’

Johno stepped out and blew his whistle. Three blasts.

Feeling his phone vibrating, Otto informed the Ambassador that his countrymen would be landing in five minutes.

Black Hawk rotors started to turn. Crewmen put on black ski masks and attached ropes to the sides of the helicopters.

Burke pointed a finger at the door. Berets were donned, boots shined on the backs of legs.

It was a perfect day, no clouds and little wind, as Otto stood waiting with the Serbian Ambassador. He held a hand over his eyes and squinted to the east as the Serbian delegate’s plane, a small Russian commuter aircraft – a three engine Yak 42, descended towards the runway. A red carpet had been laid out for the visitors, backed by a row of four black Range Rovers, and an executive minibus that could hold ten passengers.

The small jet touched down smoothly, Otto pressing a button on his phone three times without anyone noticing. The plane slowed, not needing much runway, then taxied around, marshalled for the last hundred yards by a ground controller dressed in bright orange. All was going well, the sun beating down, a few flies buzzing about. Two ground-

handlers waited with large wooden chocks for the aircraft's wheels; they looked warm and uncomfortable inside their overalls and ear defenders.

Then Otto considered that he and the Ambassador were stood a little too close to where the aircraft would halt and said as much, leading the man back a few steps. The door on this aircraft opened on the front left, Otto now watching with Swiss precision interest as the pilot lined up with the end of the red carpet. The aircraft slowed as it advanced towards them, its engines whining, slight adjustments to speed and direction evident.

The plane missed its mark and braked hard, its nose dipping. The red carpet now lay under the wing, crumpled and held down by the aircraft's wheels, small black circles of oil appearing. The Ambassador turned to Otto, who quickly jumped in with, 'No problem, this happens all the time, difficult for the pilot to judge up in the cockpit.' The Ambassador forced a smile.

The dignitaries were formally greeted by Otto before being loaded into the Range Rovers, the final two men to exit the aircraft pointing and laughing at the red carpet. Otto tried to appear as if he had not seen them, pressing his phone four times as they boarded the vehicles.

Where the airfield track joined the main road, pairs of dismounted motorcycle police in bright orange uniforms stood lined up, giving priority to the cavalcade. A mile along the road they neared the lake and, as a matter of strange coincidence, two 'ribs' - black inflatable dinghies - were speeding up the lake, six soldiers in each wearing black ski masks. They could not have been missed, the Foreign Minister glancing at the Intelligence Chief. The dull drone of helicopters grew, soon unmistakable, the passengers glancing out and peering skywards.

Around the next bend, the convoy drove parallel to a large field, four Black Hawks hovering with a roar. Ropes reached down to the ground some sixty feet below, soldiers rappelling down at speed, dropping into the prone position ready for simulated weapons firing.

The Foreign Minister was concerned. ‘American! Delta Force?’

Otto pressed his phone five times, turning to the Ambassador, who had been watching the display with great concern. ‘They are American medics, here for exercises; mountain rescue. They come every year.’

‘They look like commandos.’

‘Really?’ Otto strained to see. ‘I must confess, I do not know the difference from one uniform to another.’

The Ambassador seemed totally unconvinced.

The convoy passed through the woods, soon climbing towards the castle, Otto crossing his fingers and hoping that this day would end well. They finally turned off the main public road and into the camp, the gates now hosting four police motorcycles on either side, the convoy passing through without being stopped.

The Foreign Minister studied the gate, and its security complement, as they passed through. ‘This man Beesely takes his security seriously.’

A squad of a hundred men in black uniforms and ski masks jogged down the side of the road in tight formation, four abreast. On the opposite side of the road, a similar squad of men advanced. Alongside the road stood another hundred doing star jumps, thankfully without their ski masks on this hot day, the guests taking it all in. At the next bend, a block of men were undergoing rifle drill.

Opposite them stood Burke and his team in American uniforms; Green Berets. They were stood in the road, the

drivers having to slow and ease around them, Burke and his men shouting loud orders with distinct American accents.

‘Green Berets!’ The Intelligence Minister stated, noting the distinctive cap badges.

In Otto’s lead vehicle, the Ambassador grew concerned. ‘You have quite the small army here. And more Americans?’

‘We have the main training facility here for our counter-terrorism teams and hostage rescue teams,’ Otto informed the Ambassador. ‘The bank has many rich clients and, should they be held hostage for ransom, we may be tasked with a rescue for them, almost anywhere in the world. We have teams in Belize in South America this week. The Americans offer us assistance in jungle medicine and what they call, let me see, combat medical first aid.’

‘So, more *medical* staff.’

Otto forced a quick, polite smile.

Further up the compound road, and now in sight of the castle, the convoy’s progress slowed, Johno and his gang now stood in the road. All were suitably attired in British camouflage clothing and SAS berets, sporting MP5 sub-machine guns. The vehicles slowed to a crawl, all the drivers lowering their windows.

Johno strolled up. ‘Good day, Mister Otto,’ he offered, checking the faces of each man in the vehicle.

‘You are British?’ the Ambassador politely enquired.

‘We’re not at liberty to say, sir.’ He walked to each vehicle in turn, talking to each driver and checking all the faces, the convoy finally waved on.

‘Serving British SAS,’ the Intelligence Minister noted.

The Ambassador turned to Otto, tipping his head. 'More ... medical staff?'

'No, they are the private security of Herr Beesely. They are British SAS. They also teach at the counter-terrorism school.'

2

Peering down through the restaurant windows, Beesely now noticed the first vehicle of the convoy come to a halt in front of the drawbridge, just a sprinkling of guards to greet them. 'Our guests have arrived,' he announced, turning on his heel. 'They should be up in just a minute or two.'

Otto and the Ambassador stood waiting next to their vehicle, joined a minute later by the rest of the Serbian delegation.

'Your headquarters ... is a castle?' the Intelligence Chief asked with a cheeky grin.

'No, these are the guest quarters and meeting rooms. Just for show,' Otto informed them. He stamped his left foot. 'Our headquarters are six hundred metres under our feet, stretching out into the lake for one kilometre.'

The visitors stopped dead, looking for any signs that Otto might be joking.

Otto explained, 'It was an old copper mine, from the year 1890, I believe. It was converted to a nuclear bomb shelter in 1962, thereafter turned it into a facility. It is more bomb proof than Cheyenne Mountain according to the American engineers who have looked at it.' He wished now that he had a secret camera, wondering what the resolution of the cameras on the drawbridge might be like.

The expressions on their faces were quite extraordinary, he considered.

Female K2 administrative staff, now dressed in traditional Swiss costumes – long grey skirts, white blouses with black waistcoats - lined the drawbridge and ushered the men inside through the courtyard, through the Great Hall and to the lobby area. Four at a time were sent up in the lift, the young lift attendant now replaced by a guard in a suit. Beesely and the Swiss delegation warmly greeted all of the Serbians in turn, ordering them drinks.

After close to ten minutes of greetings - and idle chat standing up, Beesely began nudging delegates towards their allotted chairs. Each delegate's position on the table had been marked with a formal nametag, which included a full job title: Minister, Ambassador, etc. The munitions exporter did not quite understand his title, his tag replaced by John: 'Dodgy Weapons Dealer'.

When everyone had finally seated themselves, Beesely walked around to the top of the table, Otto sitting to his immediate right. Still standing, Beesely called, 'Gentlemen.' The room fell silent. 'Gentlemen, I would like to start by making it clear that my seat here, at the top of the table, does not mean that I am in charge of this meeting.' With that he sat and poured himself some water, adjusting his paper and pen.

'May I welcome you all here to Schloss Diane, a name given to this fine old castle by its late owner. As you have probably gathered, this castle is just symbolic, a hotel with rooms and restaurants. My headquarters are ... elsewhere. Castles were traditionally seen as imposing, and this one is in no way intended to intimidate anyone.'

The Intelligence Chief leant forwards. ‘And what about the military camp outside? Is that not meant to intimidate anyone?’

‘Certainly not. And may I add that it is not a *military* camp, we are a civilian organization with some ties to the Swiss military and police.’

‘And what ties might those be?’ the Intelligence Chief probed.

Before Beesely could comment, the Swiss Interior Minister, Blaum, answered, ‘We are a small nation, with limited resources, so the counter-terrorism and hostage rescue teams run by the International Bank of Zurich are lent to us, should we need them.’

‘And what about foreign military involvement?’ the same man added.

The Minister Blaum frowned his surprise. ‘What do you mean?’

‘We saw American and British soldiers outside, American helicopters!’

Minister Blaum explained, ‘There are a few American medical helicopters here with their medical staff. They come with German and French teams for medical exercises in the mountains.’

The dull drone of rotor blades quickly grew louder.

The Intelligence Chief stood up, a false smile spread from ear to ear. ‘Perhaps these are the American *medical* helicopters now?’

Several of the Serbians joined him at the window, along with all the Swiss Government representatives, leaving Beesely sipping his water and glancing at Otto from under his eyebrows. Four Black Hawks flew South West down the lake, no more than a hundred metres from that particular window, large red crosses on white backgrounds

glistening in the sun. Medics with red-cross tunics sat in the doorways, waving.

‘Yes, that is them,’ Minister Blaum pointed out as he turned and sat back down.

The Serbians did not look pleased, more annoyed, with a hint of confusion thrown in. After all, they could not have been completely sure of what they saw earlier.

‘Gentlemen,’ Beesely called, getting them to settle again.

‘What about the British and American foot soldiers we saw?’ the Intelligence Chief pressed, pointing a finger angrily in a direction that he obviously thought led to the compound, not the toilets he was actually targeting.

Beesely glanced at the toilets with a puzzled expression, wondering who might be inside them. The Swiss Interior Minister looked as if he was about to field this question as well. ‘May I?’ Beesely cut in with, Minister Blaum easing back. ‘Gentlemen, we have both British and American former soldiers here, advising on tropical medicines, and some British counter-terrorism experts. They are private contractors, not sanctioned by their various governments.’

‘That I can confirm,’ Minister Blaum offered.

His Serbian counterpart did not look convinced.

Beesely cleared his throat. ‘Gentlemen, if I may.’ It finally fell quiet. ‘I have *requested* your presence here today, with the kind assistance and co-operation of the Swiss Government, in the hope that we can resolve some issues that are of importance to us all. First, Herr Gunter is dead. This banking group and its associated companies are under new management, I am now the head of the group. And may I be emphatic in stating that I do things quite differently to Herr Gunter, not that I ever met him.’

‘You never met your step-brother?’ The Serbian Ambassador puzzled.

Beesely held up a finger. ‘Brother-in-law. And no, I never met him.’

‘Your takeover here seems very ... quick and seamless,’ their Foreign Minister pointedly remarked.

‘I have good staff. The place runs just fine without me.’

The Intelligence Chief folded his arms. ‘And also strange that you are connected to the British Secret Service.’

‘Connected? Why, my dear chap, I was a senior official with British Intelligence for forty years.’

With that the Intelligence Chief unfolded his arms. ‘So this large Swiss group with direct links to the Swiss Government is now run by anti-Serbian British Intelligence!’

Minister Blaum objected, so too his colleagues, the Serbian Ambassador trying to calm his countrymen.

Chaos ruled for almost a minute, Beesely glancing at his watch. He finally tapped the table with his glass. ‘Gentlemen, please.’ He waited. ‘My Serb friends, you are doing the good people in this banking group a great disservice. They are Swiss, and their loyalty is to Switzerland and its independence. Nothing I may do is going to change that, and you would be foolish to think that I could simply walk into the bank and try and make its staff sit up and follow orders from London. They would not, they are not, nor will they ever be required to. And if we keep to this antagonistic approach we will be here all day and achieve nothing.’

‘Then state what you want!’ the Serb delegate labelled as ‘Dodgy Weapons Dealer’ barked. His words might have been louder if he had noticed the insult.

Beesely took a breath and a sip of water. ‘What I would like, gentlemen, is firstly to apologise for the way in which the late Herr Gunter ... *treated* some of your countrymen.’ He waited for it to sink in. ‘Furthermore, I wish to mend relationships, both for the sake of Swiss neutrality, and for the sake of this banking group.’

The Serbians glanced around at each other.

Finally, their Ambassador delicately broached, ‘Serbian funds, of private companies, appear to have ... disappeared from several Swiss banks, including this bank.’

Minister Blaum straightened, clearly horrified. ‘We have received no such formal complaint!’

Otto leant forwards. ‘They were accounts used by criminals, also by Serbian Intelligence and some pro-Serbian political groups in Europe which have been outlawed. Herr Gunter interfered with them. Since the funds could not have been explained to a Serbian court, there was no challenge to them.’

Minister Blaum nodded his understanding and sat back.

Beesely raised a hand to silence them, then raised his phone. ‘Beesely here. Unlock all the frozen Serbian accounts. Yes, immediately.’ He put the phone away. ‘Gentlemen, consider that a first step. And, by the way, we will be paying interest on that money at the appropriate rate.’

The Serbians did indeed look surprised.

‘Moving along, gentlemen, I would like to point out ... that we have concrete proof of illegal actions by most of the persons relating to those bank accounts; photographs, fingerprints, video taped conversations, signed confessions and witnesses. Should we send that to the world’s press then you, gentlemen, would have a problem. You would even have a problem with your own press and courts.’

‘But I am not going to do that; it would serve no useful purpose other than to harm our new friends interests. Now, the way in which Herr Gunter dealt with the problem was to compound one criminal act with another, which is why we are here; to bring an end to it.’

‘You are serious?’ their Intelligence Chief challenged.

‘Yes, my friend, I am serious. If you are prepared to unwind the problem from your side, then we are more than happy to do it from our side. That is not a sign of weakness on either side, we simply find it prudent to concentrate on our business interests - those that make us money - and not on conflict. Furthermore, we will enter into negotiations to offer venture capital to Serbian projects that may benefit your people. We are also interested in acquiring land in Serbia and developing business partnerships.’

Ten minutes later the Serbians, with their heads spinning, stood up and began talking amongst themselves in small groups, Otto and Beesely making sure everyone had way too much food, and, more importantly, way too much drink.

Otto approached Beesely, and led him subtly away from the crowd. Suitably out of earshot, he said, ‘I confess that I do not understand your strategy here.’

Beesely smiled at his offspring, nodding, then gazed out of the window. ‘You remember the story of the shoe salesman?’

‘Yes, he died in front of you.’

‘And imparted some wisdom that has been with me for quite some time. You see, he did not just talk about shoe sales, or the psychology of people and their footwear buying habits; he also discussed many other things as he

sat there dying. One was how to deal with bullies and enemies, a useful topic in my chosen career.

‘He told me that, when the need arose to make friends with an enemy or a bully, make sure that you carry a big stick - and that your stick is bigger than theirs. Then, once you have either beaten them down, or shown that you could, offer them a truce.’

Otto followed Beesely’s gaze out through the window. ‘Gunter would have just tried to kill them.’

Beesely took a breath and sighed. ‘And lost the opportunity for us to crack open Serb Intelligence and see what these bastards are really up to.’ He faced Otto with a smile.

‘Le Fox,’ Otto whispered. ‘Your new unofficial title.’

3

Negotiations became a friendly chat; people walked around, peered out of the windows, sampled the food, huddled in groups or sat with bits of paper and made notes.

An hour after the meeting started Beesely got his signal, the first joke cracked by a Serbian. Easing away from the warm bodies, he raised his phone. ‘Mission complete.’

* * *

Johno had been at the far end of the camp, sat in a hut with Burke and his men, plus the ex-SAS ‘old dogs’.

‘Should have seen the look on their faces when I checked their vehicles,’ Johno laughed, can of beer in his hand.

‘What’s he got planned?’ Burke asked, sipping a beer.

‘Going to snuggle up to the Serbs, open a bank branch over there. Today he’s going to give them everything they want.’

‘He is?’ Burke queried, his eyes widening.

‘We’re going to open up hotels over there, buy shares in banks and travel agencies and TV and the media, all using Swiss neutrality so that no fucker will suspect anything. We’ll have first hand intel’ on a large chunk of their country; financial transactions, movements on planes, hotels, you name it.’

Burke smiled and nodded. ‘Told me he was going to derail these talks.’

Johno grinned. ‘Got you here, didn’t he? Listen, mate, learn something now: what he says, and what he does, are two different things. And never play poker or chess with Beesely, he’ll clean you out every time. Just when you figure you know what he’s up to, that’s the time to throw your notes out the window and start again. He’s *always* three steps ahead of everyone.’

Johno’s phone chirped. ‘Yeah?’ He stood and tucked away the phone, grabbing his whistle and winking at Burke as he headed for the door, giving four loud blasts when outside.

Burke stood and faced his team. ‘Let’s roll, boys. Or should I say ... pawns.’

Hundreds of men began to run to a side entrance of the camp, through dense woods and away from the lake, following a precisely engineered plan of action. White and orange police BMW motorcycles sped off. In little under five minutes the camp was cleared, just a handful of guards left on the gates, smartly dressed and with no weapons visible.

A promise of a further meeting had been made and agreed to by all sides, to be held in Bern in a month's time. Following that, a Swiss delegation would fly to Serbia and the new Serbian President would be involved. Their Ambassador happily signed a 'statement of intent' with his Swiss counterpart and accepted a lift back to Bern, taking the scenic route. The remaining Serbs were driven back to the airfield through the empty camp.

'He is making a point, I think,' the Serb Foreign Minister began as they drove off. 'That he has the firepower if he needs to use it. And he has the friends in England and America if he needs them.'

'Do you trust him?' the Intelligence Chief asked.

'Yes. I think he is more interested in money than anything political. Also, I think that the Swiss Government has put pressure on him to resolve this. He needs to find a solution, so do we.'

The Intelligence Chief nodded, taking in the beautiful scenery.

* * *

The Serbian spy adjusted his telescope with renewed interest, since the time was drawing near. But unknown to him, his recently discarded semen lay in a laboratory undergoing DNA checks. A bottle with his fingerprints on now sat covered in a fine black powder in a plastic bag, carefully labelled on a laboratory shelf. The contents of his rubbish bag were neatly laid out across a large white table and being sifted through thoroughly.

He sat back down, grabbing his half-empty packet of crisps, not realising that through a crack in the curtains an

eye watched. He lowered his trousers, the game show soon starting.

4

An hour later, Otto and Beesely descended to the basement. All of the ‘commandos’ were present; Burke and three of his men, Johnno and the three ‘old dogs’.

Burke stepped up as Beesely accepted a half drunk bottle of beer off Johnno. ‘All your ... *objectives* achieved?’ he unhappily enquired.

‘An excellent start,’ Beesely commended. ‘And all *you* had to do was stand there and look pretty.’ Burke’s men disagreed with that appraisal, a few rude words fluttering around.

‘Don’t forget the choppers!’ Burke complained.

‘Never.’ Beesely held his arm. ‘Give my thanks to the Rhine Army Commander and ... *your kind government.*’

‘No problem, looking forward to some first hand intel’ on the Serbs. My good buddy the European Chief is gunna be well pissed off at me.’

Beesely raised his eyebrows. ‘Do you care?’

‘Hell no.’

‘Once you’ve changed from your fatigues and scrubbed up, let’s have a bite to eat around 7pm, and we can talk shop.’

Burke nodded, re-joining the party.

Beesely personally thanked everyone in turn, pressing the flesh and leaving a firm imprint on them all. Finally, he turned and addressed the room. ‘If you don’t mind chaps, I’m rather tired after today’s fun and games. Not as young as I was.’

Johnno walked Beesely to the lift, Otto holding the door.

At the lift, Beesely turned to Johno. ‘Tomorrow, if you could find some time to take Jane into town – a little shopping, some lunch, drive through the hills?’

‘OK, Boss,’ Johno quickly answered, already turning back to the celebrations and leaving Beesely unconvinced of the sincerity of the statement.

* * *

Guido Pepi read a detailed report with a studious frown as he sat alone in his study. His twenty-six year old daughter, Maria, wandered in. She glanced at the report, ran a hand through his hair and left him alone, removing a dirty cup. Pepi had hardly noticed, his attention focused, only glancing up after she had left.

Ten minutes later he placed down the report, lifting a cold coffee before he noticed the drink’s temperature, his right hand man stepping in after a knock.

‘Just got back, sir.’

‘Obviously,’ Pepi lightly commented.

‘That the K2 report?’ his assistant enquired, stood at the side of the desk.

Pepi nodded very slowly as he stared down the length of his study. ‘Yes,’ he sighed. ‘And quite ... strange. A former British Intelligence officer, who appears to have inherited all of Gunter’s money, makes an big effort in a show of force to the Serbs, then gives them everything they could want.’

‘That does seem strange, sir.’

Pepi looked up. ‘I’d almost believe that this man did not inherit the money, that he is ... an actor, working for the Swiss Government, or the Bank Society.’

‘He does not seem to be acting like someone who had inherited the money.’

‘When it comes to K2, we should know better than to... apply normal logic.’

‘Our people inside have noticed nothing strange, sir.’

Pepi continued to stare down the length of the room. ‘Apart from the fact that this ... this very rich old man appeases those who might be his enemies. Why? Why did he do it? And why the show of force first? And why is he not sat on a beach somewhere?’

‘As you said, sir, an actor. Or at least in league with the Swiss Government.’

‘All of our people inside say otherwise, especially inside the Bank Society.’ He heaved a big sigh, adopting a puzzled expression. ‘So far I cannot piece this puzzle together. Nothing seems to fit.’

‘The bomb, sir.’

‘Yes. That should show us what is really going on.’

* * *

With a broad smile, the chairman of The Lodge read the report as the assembled group waited. He finally looked up. ‘Beesely just used the Swiss bank leverage at his disposal to open up Serb Intelligence. He even got an invitation to visit them.’

A man eased forwards. ‘That CIA section chief, Burke, was kinda surprised that he got approval for the helicopters. We need to watch him.’

The chairman nodded, chewing on his unlit cigar. ‘Now Beesely knows that we’re on the clock; no-way he could have got those choppers otherwise. He knows, we know,

nobody mentions it. Just like being married and cheating – both sides know, but nobody says anything.’

The end of the beginning

1

Johno was still in bed and snoring when Beesely had taken Jane shopping in the small town of Zug. Now, Beesely and Jane walked knee deep through a huge field of yellow flowers, just a few miles from the castle. The field stretched down to a river, a few wooden houses dotted along its banks, a sturdy wooden bridge spanning its brisk flow.

Jane added to the handful of flowers that she had already collected, looking a little odd in the over-sized sunglasses she had borrowed. Keeping her warm was a thick polo-neck jumper inside a padded jacket.

‘Is that the river ... that the lake flows into?’ she asked.

Beesely glanced up at the bodyguards, the men fifty yards back towards the road. ‘What? Yes, bottom end of the lake just around that small hill I believe.’

‘So why don’t they dam it and use ... that hydro –’

‘Hydroelectricity? They do, more than five hundred of them around Switzerland.’

‘The summers here are good.’

‘Well, we’ve had a good week luckily, but you wouldn’t want to be here in the winter. Very chilly.’ He could see that she was struggling with that thought. He added, ‘Not that we would be here in the winter. Beach house in the Bahamas I’m thinking, large villa with a private beach.’

They slowly inched down the slope.

‘Oh. So we won’t be living here that much then?’

‘Good God no, just need to get things sorted, then we can travel a bit; a week here, a week somewhere warm.’

Otto can run this place like clockwork. Like a precision Swiss clock.'

'When do you think we'll leave then?'

'Oh, another week of sorting stuff here. I have a few other offices to visit, some around Europe. You can wait for me at the old house if you like - not sure I trust what those builders are doing. Yes, why don't you pop back tomorrow and get me a progress report?'

She gave it some thought. 'I'd be by myself, what with you and Johnno here.'

'You've been by yourself many times before when we were away. Besides, haven't you made a new friend here?'

She half turned her head. 'Sarah. Her mum was English, from Cornwall. Speaks God knows how many languages. She's the assistant to the Guest Manager, Mr. Freezer.'

'Frieserling. Fry-zer-ling,' he corrected.

'I know, but we call him Freezer. Bit of a robot.'

'Around here, my dear, that would be taken as the highest of compliments.' She laughed, Beesely offering, 'I'll assign her to you, she's probably missing the UK.'

'She hasn't been back for two years.'

'Well, there you go, she would probably jump at the chance.'

'What about Mr. Freezer?'

'I'll have a word with his boss.'

They stopped to inspect a cluster of bright blue flowers.

'Who's his boss, then?' Jane enquired.

'Old man Beesely. Apparently.'

They walked on, admiring the view. She ventured, 'I think Johnno has been ringing some famous American glamour model on the fancy phone. I heard him.'

Beesely smiled. 'I'll keep an eye on him. Still, it makes a change from the Alzheimer's Society.' His phone rang. 'Beesely.'

'It is Otto. We have a small security problem.'

'Can it wait thirty minutes?'

'Yes, of course.'

2

As Jane walked into the courtyard, Otto walked out, greeting her warmly and exchanging a few words, complimenting her on the flowers she had collected.

'We have a small problem,' Otto repeated as he reached Beesely.

Beesely led him towards the lawn overlooking the lake.

'Go on.'

'We have discovered a man renting a cottage on the far side of the lake –' Beesely glanced at him, then out across the lake. '- and he is a Serb.'

'Oh dear.'

'We have had complete surveillance for the last twelve hours, but it seems he was there for maybe a week or two?'

'Two weeks? That would have been long before we even contacted the Serbs. Before *you* contacted me.'

'He was already watching this facility, I think,' Otto suggested.

'Not much to see from over there. Besides, why in God's name would anyone try and watch this place, knowing that he would probably be caught and, more importantly, what we might do to him?'

'This man is no professional.'

Beesely gave Otto an intolerant glance. 'That's obvious!'

'He is alone and he does not leave the cabin. No one has seen him, not even the owner of the chalet. The booking was made by a Swiss man and paid in cash more than six weeks ago. This man drove across the German border two weeks ago, and he has with him a lot of food - he has not used the local shops, no gasoline, nothing.'

They both walked slowly down the grass, studying the far shore.

'Not so unprofessional, avoiding local people,' Beesely conceded.

'This man puts his rubbish outside with his fingerprints on bottles, his DNA, and even papers with his name on, maps with drawings on. All in his bag for rubbish.'

'Ah, not so clever.'

'And he does not know we are watching him. In the chalet he has a large telescope.'

'He wouldn't see much, even with a large telescope. Not from that distance.' Beesely massaged the top of his head, a heavy frown forming. 'What possible use could he be to anyone? The best he could hope to do is report when vehicles come and go.'

He turned about and studied the topography of the ground in front of the castle, which parts could be seen from across the lake. Finally, he shook his head. 'Can't see how he would even know who was in the vehicles. Does he have a receiver for a listening device?'

'No, nothing; we swept the chalet and surrounding area and his car. He has a mobile phone, but does not switch it on.'

'An amateur who has been sent by a professional, some elements of each,' Beesely mused.

‘If we have an agreement with the Serbian authorities, why is he still here?’

‘Let’s find out. Pick him up, keep him isolated and uncomfortable, but not hurt. Then go over his car, the house, and especially his phone.’

Otto stepped away and made a call as Beesely noticed a silver Mercedes SL coming up the road, not a vehicle he recognised. Slowly ambling up the grass, he stopped at the edge of the tarmac area.

Johno jumped out, and waved lazily as his female companion eased out under an armful of shopping bags. He kissed her on her cheek, exchanging a few words before she headed inside. The keys were tossed to a guard, who now drove the Mercedes away. ‘Need anything?’ Johno cheerfully asked as he stepped up to Beesely, Otto stood a few yards away with his back to them.

‘Only your undying love and devotion.’

Johno focused on Beesely, his eyes narrowing. ‘Don’t know about that.’

‘You seem to have made a new friend?’

‘Just one of the hookers.’ Johno stuck his hands in his pockets and glanced towards Otto. ‘I mean ... physiotherapists.’

‘Hookers, and physiotherapists, should still be treated like ladies; I should know, I’ve been through some of the best of them in my time. And if this one is nice then she could put her former life behind her and may become a useful companion.’

Johno seemed surprised at the suggestion.

Beesely stepped closer. ‘It does happen, you know - sugar daddy and all that. First, you would need to establish if she is any good in bed.’ He turned back towards the lake, hiding a grin.

‘She’s getting there. I’m teaching her. Slowly.’

‘Good, good. You wouldn’t want to rush into anything.’

Otto rejoined them. ‘Jane is waiting in the restaurant.’

Johno held his watch for Beesely to see. ‘I was back on time.’

Otto added, ‘We will pick up that man in a few minutes.’

‘What man?’ Johno asked.

Beesely answered, ‘Seems we have a spy across the lake. A Serb spy ... and he’s been rather haplessly spying on us with a large telescope.’

‘From over there!’ Johno laughed. ‘He ain’t going to see sod-all from over there.’

‘Yes, we know. A puzzler, isn’t it?’

Stood on the veranda of his villa, Pepi glanced at his watch, now observing the second hand count down. He waved to his grandchildren as they splashed around in his pool.

3

The sound of the bomb’s detonation registered as little more than a muffled ‘thud’.

Beesely glanced down the slope to the lakeside road, half expecting to see two vehicles stopped after a collision. Otto turned to the right, glancing at the office building. It sounded to him similar to a door slamming too loud.

Johno glanced every which way, grabbing Beesely by the arm as he did. ‘That sounded like a grenade!’ he shouted, loud enough for Otto to react.

‘Alarm!’ Otto shouted at the top of his voice towards the guards in the courtyard. The men began sprinting in all directions, but mostly towards Beesely. Red lights started flashing on the castle walls, a second later an alarm sounding.

‘Alarm!’ echoed, repeated by many voices in the distance.

‘That is the fire alarm!’ a surprised Otto shouted, now stood staring at the castle.

Johno manhandled the protesting Beesely to the nearest Range Rover, suddenly blanketed by six guards. Otto ordered a guard to drive, and he scrambled into the front passenger seat. Beesely was trying hard to avoid getting injured by Johno as he was unceremoniously lifted head first onto the back seat, Johno sat on his legs a second later.

‘Go, go, go!’ Johno shouted.

Another siren wailed, this second one distinctly different from the fire alarm.

‘My God,’ Otto muttered as the vehicle drove away from the castle, carrying on the way it had been facing and past the office block, not back towards the camp and the main gate. Beesely screamed for Johno to get off his legs, trying to edge upright.

Johno grabbed Otto’s shoulder. ‘What is it?’

Otto sat dialling his phone. ‘It is the alarm for a chemical attack. A chemical weapon has been used. Maybe nerve agent.’

‘Nerve agent?’ Beesely repeated.

Johno helped him to sit comfortably. ‘That’s what that bastard over the lake was waiting for, to see if we all come running out bleeding out of our eyes and ears!’

Otto sat shouting questions in German down his phone. Something was not clear, he kept repeating it over and over

again. He directed the driver where he wanted to go as Johno grabbed his shoulder again.

‘What’s happened?’ Johno shouted.

With a voice still buzzing from his phone, Otto turned all the way around to face Beesely. ‘There was an explosion ... in the restaurant.’

Beesely’s arms were immediately flailing around, reaching for the door. ‘Jane’s up there!’

Johno grabbed the top of his head, and held his face an inch from his own. ‘Stay with us!’ he barked. ‘Stay with the game - we need you focused. Kill the emotion ‘til the shooting stops!’

‘Jane!’ Beesely cried again.

‘We ... don’t ... know!’ Johno barked. ‘She could be anywhere. She could be on the bog or in her room.’

‘She was waiting for us...’ Beesely’s words were heavily distorted, his eyes now moist, his breathing irregular.

‘Stay with us!’ Johno repeated.

The car swerved hard, turning down a small lane towards thickening trees and the base of the mountain. A three storey traditional wooden cottage appeared from behind the trees, nestled against the base of the heavily overgrown cliff. The lower level housed a tall archway, big enough for a vehicle to drive into, a guard waving them into the black interior.

The driver flicked on the headlights and tooted his horn a few times as they entered a dark tunnel, lights appearing in the tunnel ceiling after twenty yards. The tunnel became much brighter as it widened into a cavern that a vehicle could easily turn around in. Ahead stood two guards in gas masks, each holding MP5s. Otto had lowered his window as they neared and now shouted orders. The guards

grabbed at large handles and started to drag a set of massive steel doors open. When there appeared enough room, just, the driver sped through, again using his horn.

With Otto's window wound down, the rush of cold air and the sound of rubber tyres on concrete filled the inside of the Range Rover. Lights flashed by, the noise level rose, and Otto strained to watch Beesely. Sharp braking slowed the vehicle as it entered an even larger cavern, the smooth interior walls painted a brilliant white.

'Quick! Out!' Otto shouted as he jumped down, more frantic than controlled.

Johno jumped quickly out of his door, so did the driver, and they bumped shoulders as Johno sped around to Beesely's side.

Beesely hadn't moved, he was sat transfixed in his grief.

'C'mon!' Johno barked, grabbing hold of Beesely and practically carrying him out. The driver grabbed an arm, and Beesely's feet hardly touched the floor as they rushed inside another chamber, closely following Otto.

The corridor narrowed and darkened, barely enough room for them three abreast, red lights flashing in the ceiling. A guard wearing a gas mask opened an inner door, warm air enveloping them.

'Here!' Otto shouted. 'Put him here!' He pointed at a sofa on the right, up two steps. 'Doctor!'

This was the emergency bunker, a quarter of the size of the main control room and on just one level; desks, chairs and computers laid out in a pattern similar to its big brother. The lights were dim, sirens wailed, and red lights flashed warnings from the walls and from many computer screens. Close to thirty people were now crammed into this room, which would have been cosy with just twenty.

Beesely was laid carefully down. Johno knelt beside him, holding his head and using his hand as a pillow. ‘You still with us?’ Johno whispered, their faces almost touching.

‘Secure ... the perimeter ... news ... blackout.’ Beesely’s eyes had remained closed as he whispered it. ‘Take charge.’

‘That’s more like it,’ Johno approved.

The doctor put a hand on Johno’s shoulder, a polite way of telling him to ‘get the hell out the way’. With one final glance back, Johno turned away, pushing through the staff and seeking out Otto. Otto did not recognise it was Johno pushing through the crowd until he stood right next to him. Seeing Johno’s face reminded him, so he launched onto tiptoe and looked towards Beesely.

Johno grabbed the side of Otto’s head. ‘Hey! Focus! Forget Beesely. First, win the fight. Second, secure casualties. We won’t be any good to him if *we* ... are dead.’

Otto needed a moment to compose himself, taking a breath and straightening his tie. He nodded his acceptance of the suggestion.

‘Is this room secure?’ Johno barked to no one in particular.

‘Yes.’

‘Gas proof?’

‘Yes,’ Otto replied. ‘Bomb proof also.’

‘Primary perimeter? Is it secure?’

Otto pointed at a screen. ‘We have video feed of outside.’

Johno led him closer to a screen that displayed nine small squares, each one a different part of the grounds. ‘All gates secure?’ he asked, loud enough for everyone to hear.

People were answering. ‘Any gunfire reported?’ Negative. ‘Any intruders reported?’ Negative again. Johno rubbed his face. ‘OK, tell the base guards to sweep for intruders in the grounds and also outside the gate, up to one mile. C’mon, move!’

Orders were barked into phones and radios, Otto now looking out of his depth compared to Johno.

Johno added, ‘Then sweep all buildings for explosives. And evacuate the non-essential admin’ staff.’ He checked the monitors. ‘Where was the explosion?’ he asked, tapping the screen.

An operator used a mouse to click the top of the screen. Up came nine boxes showing nine different views of the restaurant. And each overlapping image displayed bodies.

Johno straightened, taking a deep breath. If Jane had been in there then she would be one of the casualties; none were moving. He faced Otto. ‘You said it was a gas attack?’

Otto pointed to the wall. ‘That blue and white flashing light ... it ... it means gas of some sort.’

‘Is it calibrated for nerve agent?’

‘Yes,’ Otto nodded, studying the bodies. Others had noticed the display and were stood with their hands over their mouths.

‘Cut those damn alarms!’ Johno shouted to no one in particular. A moment later they were off. He turned back to the computer operator. ‘Call up the command centre.’

Up came nine more images, this time of managerial staff going about their business, albeit hurriedly.

‘It looks secure,’ Johno noted.

‘Yes, it seems only one small bomb, in the restaurant,’ the operator stated.

Johno held Otto's arm and whispered, 'Make sure no one in the outside world knows about this. We don't want to appear weak!'

Otto turned to an operator who had been listening in and nodded a signal.

'Is everyone in the castle out?' Johno asked.

The computer operator displayed an outside image. A few dozen people were stood in a group, one taking a roll call.

Johno pointed. 'Get *him* on the radio.'

'Herr Frieserling, bitte!'

The man on camera could be seen lifting up a radio.

Johno pointed to the operator who had made the call. 'Are they all outside?'

'Sieben verschollen!' Seven missing.

'I counted six in the restaurant,' Johno stated, leaning forwards and tapping the screen. 'Get the restaurant images back up.'

The live-feed images reappeared. With a finger touching the image of each body, he said, 'I still make that six. Wait, what's that?' There were four legs to a body; someone lay underneath. He turned to Otto. 'Are the doors to the restaurant fire proof?' Otto nodded. 'Gas proof?' Again he nodded. 'So no one outside is in danger. Yet.' He turned to the operator. 'Zoom in on the windows. Are they broken?'

Otto pointed at several staff and told them to help. Images appeared on many screens.

'Can anyone see any broken windows?' Johno barked. No one answered. 'Is there any way the gas could get out?'

The computer operator turned his head. 'There is the chimney to the cookers in the kitchen.'

‘Show me.’ A different image came up. ‘That’s the cooking area? There’s no one in it, so they ran into the main area when they heard the explosion, getting the gas all over them.’ Johnno pointed. ‘Is that door secure?’

‘Yes,’ the man replied. ‘Fire door.’

‘Cut off electricity and gas to the kitchens. Can that be done from outside?’ It could. Johnno stretched his back. ‘So the gas is contained in the restaurant for now. Go back to it.’

Up came the same set of images.

‘We have chemical suits –’ a man began.

Johnno turned to him. ‘Forget it, they are all *very* dead. And if you open the door a lot of other people will be dead too.’ He glanced towards Beesely, regretted having said that quite so loud.

‘That is the bomb, I think,’ a computer operator said, pointing at his monitor.

‘Zoom in,’ Johnno ordered. He could soon see what appeared to be an aerosol can on the floor, ripped open and shredded at one end. ‘Yeah,’ he confirmed. ‘Small gas device. Show me the windows.’

The camera zoomed in on a window.

‘More,’ Johnno ordered. ‘Best resolution.’ He peered at the screen. ‘Gel?’ he whispered. ‘Show me a body, close up on the hands.’

The operator glanced up at him, then zoomed in on a woman’s hands. ‘My God!’ The hands were twice their normal size, red and puffed up.

‘Now the face,’ Johnno quietly added.

The man panned right to the ghastly image of a head twice as big as it should have been.

Johnno straightened. ‘N20 nerve gas.’

‘N20?’ Otto repeated.

‘Its effects are called *Elephant Man Symptoms*; it blows up the skin and tissues, blisters the skin. Victims blow up like balloons.’

Otto turned and barked, ‘N20 nerve gas, get me all references!’

‘Don’t bother,’ Johno stopped him. ‘I know more about N20 than most. It was made by the Russians forty years go, maybe more. Only other people to have it are the Serbs.’

‘Serbs!’ Otto gasped. He stared questioningly at Johno.

Johno quietly explained, as he studied the screens, ‘My first mission into Bosnia was to recover it from a Serb base. We knew we didn’t get all of it, blew up what we could. Only good thing to say about it is that it oxidises quickly; you could walk through the restaurant in an hour with no ill effects.’

He pointed at the screen. ‘That’s gel. It’s used to transport the nerve agent, too dangerous to carry it around in aerosol form unless you’re wearing a protective suit. And we would have noticed that. It was in that little can in gel form for safety, and the small explosion was needed to spread it around.’ He tapped the operator’s arm. ‘Focus on the bomb.’ The camera zoomed in. Johno pointed to the rear of the frame. ‘There. That seat has blown out.’

Others were calling up the image.

Otto studied it with a determined frown. ‘The bomb was at the rear of that seat, behind the fixed padding?’

‘Pan down,’ Johno suggested. ‘There, a timer with three pencil batteries. No damage, explosion too small. We may even get fingerprints off that.’

‘Timer?’ Otto repeated. ‘How long could it have been there?’

Johno gave a slight shrug. ‘With those batteries on a small timer, six weeks,’ he informed them.

Otto appeared stunned; to think that this device could have been there all that time. And it could have killed them all. ‘Why would the Serbs risk coming here a day before it was due to go off? One small mistake and *they* would be killed.’

Johno sighed at Otto’s naivety. ‘Those Serb Ministers didn’t know about the device. No way they would have sat around that table.’

‘Another Serb group?’ Otto posed.

‘It’s Serb nerve gas,’ Johno pointed out. ‘That don’t mean they placed it there. Last I heard various terror groups were trying to buy the stuff from Bosnian Serbs.’

Otto repeated his request. ‘All references to N20 or Serbian nerve gas, all agencies, top priority!’

‘We already have a suspect,’ Johno quietly pointed out. ‘The man from over the lake.’

‘He could not have entered!’ Otto insisted.

‘Maybe not, but he might know who did. I will *personally* have a word with him later.’

‘No, you won’t.’ It was Beesely, stood a few steps behind. ‘I will have a chat with our friend at the right time.’ People moved respectfully out of his way, the noise level falling.

‘You OK, Boss?’ Johno asked.

‘No.’ Beesely navigated his way slowly through the staff to the computer screens, people edging out of his way. The images from the restaurant held his gaze for ten seconds. Pointing to a door directly ahead, he quietly asked Otto, ‘Does that lead to the control room?’

Otto confirmed that it did.

Beesely took a long slow breath, and lowered his head. For a moment he closed his eyes. Placing a hand on the first computer operator’s shoulder, he ordered, ‘I want all

video footage of that chair for the past few weeks. I want to see the face of the man who planted that bomb. Otto, Johno, if you please, my office.'

'Sir?' Pepi's assistant called.

Pepi turned his head.

'The bomb has gone off, many dead, no details yet.'

Pepi turned back to his meal, now sat having lunch with his daughter. 'Keep me informed,' he casually requested.

'They will have to evacuate the castle,' his daughter stated without looking up.

Pepi nodded as he chewed. Taking in the view of his vineyard, he said, 'They would have been better off with Gunter still in charge. This ... English actor, or whatever he is, has no idea of the history, or what factors are in play. Right now he will be flopping around like a fish out of water, wishing he was back in London at the retirement home.'

'Why do you think the Swiss brought him in?' she idly asked.

'Maybe Gunter fell ill. They could see that his will left K2 to the state, maybe they figured they needed to distance themselves from it.' He chuckled. 'Or maybe, after forty years, they've grown a backbone and want a fight.'

4

Despite prior standing orders, hardly relevant to today, all the staff in the command centre stopped what they were doing and observed Beesely as he made his way around the upper level and into his office.

'All managers,' he softly requested as he entered.

In a minute they were gathered, huddled in the doorway with notepads in hand.

‘Seats, coffee,’ Beesely ordered with a wave of his hand, Johno sitting behind him on the cabinet. ‘And some chocolate, please.’ His voice trailed off to a whisper as he finished with, ‘Blood sugar levels.’ He took out his old fountain pen, made it ready and placed it on his notepad as section heads dragged chairs into a half-circle and settled down. Otto remained in the doorway, phone in his hand.

Beesely waited. When the room reached a noise level not far above silence, he glanced up at Otto with a questioning expression. Otto simply waved the phone as he glanced out to the control room. Beesely nodded his understanding, rubbing the bridge of his nose. ‘Ladies and gentlemen.’ He had to clear his throat. Then, starting again and talking softly, said, ‘We have suffered a great tragedy today ... and a setback for the business. We ... are in the security business, so we should not suffer breaches of security. But the only area they managed to breach was the restaurant, just about the lowest security area. Still, if we had been having lunch on time then *we* would be the ones on those monitors.

‘We have lost seven people. For those of you who did not know, one of those was my daughter, Jane.’ Looks of great shock and sadness were exchanged. Beesely continued, ‘First, we have to contain this situation and make sure that no one else is in danger.’

Johno eased off the cabinet. ‘Any intruder reports?’ He noted only blank faces. ‘Any gunfire, suspicious packages, vehicles?’ He turned to Beesely, resting his hands on the desk. ‘This was no distraction, nor an attack. It was just the bomb, and our friend across the lake.’

Beesely's head remained lowered. 'Yes. Thank you,' he offered, barely above a whisper. Johno walked to the end of the office, hands in pockets, turned and ambled back.

'How long might that gas persist in there?' Beesely asked, the question meant for Johno.

'It's in gel form, so it could be there all bloody year. The gas released will go quickly, but the gel left will linger.'

'And the dangers outside the castle?'

'None. You'd have to touch it, get some on your skin.'

Beesely pressed, 'Are you completely sure?'

Johno made a face, giving a slight shrug. 'There's always the chance some of that gel got out in the blast. Outside it will evaporate slowly, quicker if in sunlight.' He made eye contact with Otto. 'Can we raise the temperature in the restaurant from here?'

'Yes, all air conditioning is controlled by the computers,' Otto replied.

'Can the temperature be raised to one-oh-two degrees Celsius?'

'I would not think so, it was never designed to go so high.'

'Then raise the temperature as much as possible, but no extractor fans running,' Johno suggested.

Beesely rubbed the bridge of his nose. 'What will that do?'

'It will make the gel evaporate and release the nerve gas.' Beesely raised his head. Johno continued, with his hands still in his pockets, 'In that temperature the gas oxidises quickly. Give it a few hours and there will be sod all left. But in the short term the gas will be concentrated.'

Beesely asked Johno, 'Is there any chance ... any at all... that those people may still be alive?'

‘If they was I’d stick a bullet between their eyes. Once you got that shit in your lungs or on your skin there’s no removing it.’

Beesely rubbed his forehead. Without looking up, he said, ‘I want the outside world to think that we had a cooking gas explosion, an accident ... that killed six people—’

‘Seven,’ Johnno corrected.

‘Seven people. Tell the local authorities that the building is unsafe, people are buried, but that we are dealing with it.’

Otto tapped a man on the shoulder and told him to take care of it.

‘We’re going to need a chemical clean-up team,’ Johnno quietly, but firmly, pointed out.

Beesely turned his head to Otto. ‘Do the Swiss—’

‘No!’ Johnno interrupted. ‘A proper team! That’s forty-year-old unstable nerve agent in gel. It needs a dedicated team. The Yanks have them.’

Beesely took a sip of his coffee, and a measured breath, before pressing a button on his phone. He hesitated, glanced at Johnno and Otto in turn, then said, ‘Get me Burke, CIA, England.’ When a response came, Beesely called, ‘Burke, this is Beesely.’

‘Hey, old buddy. I only just got back, still hung over. Love the Learjet, thanks for that and all your hospitality.’

‘Listen, we’ve suffered an attack.’

‘An attack? You OK? How’s Johnno?’

‘I’m here!’ Johnno shouted.

‘What happened?’ Burke asked.

Beesely explained, ‘Someone managed to slip a rather small device into our staff canteen, laced with nerve agent.’

‘Nerve agent? Jesus, are you sure?’

Johno rested his hands on the desk. 'Elephant Man Symptoms, quick death, skin-blisters.'

'Shit, that's N20. Serbian!'

Johno cut in, 'Listen, Burke, we need a good forensic bomb analyst and a clean-up team, and we need them today!'

'There's a chemical weapons team in Germany,' Burke informed them. 'Hell, several of them.'

'Get 'em on a plane!' Johno shouted. 'Full set of kit - tents, walkways, hoses, suits. First to third stage decontamination tents, chemical sprays and flame throwers.'

Beesely swung his head around at the suggestion of flame-throwers.

Burke replied, 'Leave it to me. Get authorisation from the Swiss Government to let us land on that private strip, C130 transport or two, two-dozen staff. But I'll have to make some calls, get clearance. You ready things your end.'

'We will,' Beesely offered. 'Stay in touch.' He hung up.

Otto sent a woman out of the room to tackle the Swiss Government.

'Flame throwers?' Beesely questioned.

Johno explained, 'The only way you remove gel is to burn it. And once you've finished with your decon' suits and tents you burn them as well. One thing nerve gas don't like is high temperatures.'

The phone buzzed. 'Sir?'

Beesely leant forwards and pressed a button. 'Go ahead.'

'Sir, the head of Serbian Intelligence is on the line, Mr. Biljana.'

Beesely eased back into his chair, glancing from face to face.

‘How the hell does he know?’ Johnno asked. ‘Someone else watching this place?’

Otto shook his head. ‘We can find no one!’

Beesely put a finger to his lips, and waved a flat palm around the room. He pressed a button. ‘Put him through.’

‘Hello? Mister Beesely?’ came an accented voice.

‘Mr. Biljana, surprised to be hearing from you so soon.’

‘Is everything OK with you?’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘We had a strange message today, saying that you and your staff had been killed.’

‘Really, do you know who sent that message?’

‘No, it was taken by my secretary, no name or number. Are you all OK?’

‘We had a small gas explosion earlier, in the conference room. Someone managed to interfere with the gas supply to the cookers, gas built up between floors, and then a timed incendiary device went off.’

‘Was anyone hurt?’

‘We lost seven members of the catering staff.’

‘That’s terrible. These were the ladies who served us yesterday?’

‘Yes, they were.’

‘And this timer, you have it?’

‘Yes.’ Beesely glanced at Johnno. ‘It was set incorrectly, a day too late.’

‘You mean, it was meant for us?’ Biljana queried.

‘For the meeting we had, yes,’ Beesely lied. ‘But I don’t think you, personally, were the target. I think we all were.’

‘Still, I was there, and I do not take these things lightly! My Government will hear of this. Our Ambassadors and Ministers were in that room.’

‘Well, anything you can do would be a great help,’ Beesely suggested.

‘Do you have any leads?’

‘We are holding a Serbian man who was caught spying on us with a large telescope.’

‘Serbian?’ Biljana gasped. ‘I want this man’s details! We have many dissident groups, any one of which might have wanted to kill our Ministers!’

‘We’ll send you what we know,’ Beesely calmly offered.

‘And I will then tell you what this man had for breakfast when he was in kindergarten!’

‘That’s good to know. Thanks.’ Beesely pressed END.

‘You believe him?’ Otto asked, stepping closer.

Beesely stared ahead. ‘They would not have sat down to talk knowing what was there. An old nerve agent, poor container, home made dodgy timer.’ He focused on Otto. ‘Would *you* risk it?’

Otto got called out of the office and handed a video still. Studying it intensely, he slowly rejoined the group.

‘Something?’ Beesely enquired.

Otto stopped and lifted his head. ‘The bomber.’

Otto showed the face in the photo towards the managers. Aghast at recognising it, the first man ran out, Otto placing the photo onto Beesely’s desk. The black and white image meant nothing to Beesely. Johno glanced at it over Beesely’s shoulder, but again it meant nothing.

Beesely made eye contact with Otto. 'You know him?'

'Yes,' Otto reluctantly answered. 'He has been known to us for many years. His father was friendly with Gunter for all their lives, from the war. This man was a regular visitor when his father was in good health and when Gunter was staying at the castle. I stopped this man from visiting our bank after Gunter died -'

'Why?' Johno asked.

'His father was a Nazi, and the son, Helmut, was in contact with many right-wing groups.'

'But you let him in one last time?' Johno asked, without blame.

Otto straightened and took a breath. 'He said he had information about right-wing groups that could be useful to us. When he came he only asked for money. I did not know he had visited the restaurant, but no one would have stopped him; he had been a regular visitor - known to all the staff.'

'I assume we know where to find him?' Beesely softly asked.

'We will find him,' Otto confidently suggested. 'His family have many houses in Switzerland and Bavaria.'

'Fire proof, are they?' Johno asked.

Otto slid his gaze across to Johno, then back to Beesely.

'It was not your fault,' Beesely told Otto. 'Being betrayed by a friend is always hard to spot.' He pressed a button on the desk phone. 'Get me Duncan, English newspaper reporter, his mobile.' He raised his head to Otto. With quiet determination, he ordered, 'I want every good field agent not working on something important to assemble in Switzerland.'

Otto walked outside and barked orders, an unusual display of emotion.

‘Duncan here,’ came from the desk phone.

Beesely leant forwards. ‘Duncan, it’s Beesely.’

‘Good to hear from you, sir. I’m making good progress on our *project*. Thanks again for all your help.’

‘Listen, need a favour. There’s a million pounds on its way to you -’ Beesely pointed a finger at a female manager, who immediately stepped out. ‘- and more to follow. British and European neo-Nazi groups: I want them under the spotlight, ‘new threat’, etc. I want some *very* unfavourable press on them, starting today. Understand?’

‘Sure, leave it with me.’

‘Talk soon, bye.’

Back in the office, Otto stepped forwards. ‘We have good influence in newspapers in France, Germany, here, Austria -’

Beesely quickly ordered, ‘Get them moving. We need the people of Europe angry and on our side before we strike back at anyone.’

Two managers were already on their satellite phones and stepping outside.

‘We need Mossad,’ Johno suggested.

Beesely turned, offering Johno a quizzical look. ‘Why?’

‘Last I heard, some N20 had been sent to two of their Ambassadors. They spotted the packages and no one was hurt, but they must already have a good idea who it was.’

‘Yes,’ Beesely agreed, deep in thought. ‘That could save us a great deal of time.’ He pressed CALL. ‘Elle Rosen, Mossad, London, please.’ They waited.

‘Hello?’

‘Beesely here.’

‘Ah, how are you?’

‘Not so good, we’ve suffered an attack.’

‘An attack? Are you OK?’

‘We lost seven staff to a small bomb laced with N20 nerve agent.’

‘N20! My God, what area is contaminated?’

Johno shouted, ‘It was in gel.’

‘Ah, the same method was used to attack our Ambassadors to Austria and France last year.’

‘Which is why we could use your help on this,’ Beesely stated.

‘Of course. What would you like from us?’

‘Send us a liaison officer, someone who has been working on this, with what information you have. Especially about the packages sent to your embassies.’

‘Where do you want to meet them?’

‘At our offices in Zug, Switzerland,’ Beesely suggested.

‘We have a decontamination team –’ Elle began.

‘The CIA are trying to get us a US Army team,’ Johno shouted.

‘Ours are better. I insist, they will be despatched immediately - they are always on standby. I will call you in a few hours. Sit tight, my friend.’ He hung up abruptly.

‘Two is better than one, I guess,’ Beesely muttered.

‘Going to need it!’ Johno firmly suggested. ‘Getting that room back and decontaminating the castle is going to be a bitch. Nerve gas can stick to the damp in the walls, burrow into stone. It’ll take weeks.’

Beesely sipped his coffee and nibbled some chocolate. ‘Let’s get all we have on this man Helmut. Draw up a list of primary associates, and then let’s try and figure out just who *exactly* ...would want to target us.’ Turning to Otto, he asked, ‘Was Helmut capable of making that bomb timer?’

‘No,’ Otto replied, still looking shocked. ‘He has the poor education standards, always to live off his rich father.’

‘Is the father alive?’ Beesely asked.

‘He is in a hospital home for old people in Bavaria, if I remember correctly.’

‘Let’s make sure his condition *does not* improve,’ Beesely ordered. ‘His death will bring out Helmut, but make sure the death looks like natural causes. Get our people into that home and surrounding area. And let’s find the father’s Will if we can, there are a few families we could send the money to.’

Otto made it to an empty first floor guest room, just making it to the toilet before being violently sick. Spasm after spasm kept him firmly bent double, kneeling over the bowl. Gripping his tie, he flushed away the smell several times, grabbing a towel and wiping his face, his eyes moist.

Finally, he felt well enough to stand, wiping the toilet seat with tissue and flushing it away. Running the cold-water tap and washing his face, he was unable to rid himself of the feelings knotting his stomach.

Staring at his moist reflection for many seconds, he asked of himself, ‘What have I done?’

6

Half an hour later, files were starting to be assembled in Beesely’s office. A white board had been set up with a family tree of Helmut and his known associates, Helmut’s photograph at the centre. Some names had photos, many just a question mark in a circle.

Otto sat with Beesely, both sipping coffee, Otto looking drained and dispirited. Beesely looked a little better than he had done, now more angered and resolute than shocked.

‘Sorted,’ Johnno announced as he entered.

‘What is?’ Beesely asked, barely above a whisper.

‘Got a hundred piglets on the way.’

Beesely shook his head. ‘Did you say ... piglets?’

Otto looked over his shoulder, a puzzled expression.

Johnno explained, ‘Yeah, hundred of the porkers. Skin of a pig is the same as human skin, that’s why they use them for training surgeons, as well as combat medics. We used to shoot them, then try and save them - stitch them up. We’ll stick a pig in every room in the castle and every corridor, then every twenty yards outside. Any nerve agent will blister their skin and kill them. Best nerve gas detector there is.’

Beesely turned to Otto. Quietly, he stated, ‘I often forget that he is a highly trained expert.’

Otto nodded, trying some of the chocolate. ‘I have arranged for a lorry to crash below the castle. We will say there is a chemical spill, and evacuate the houses nearby.’

‘Yes, a good idea,’ Beesely approved.

A lady manager entered carrying a file. ‘Sir, we have the details of the most recent transactions on Helmut Graf’s credit card.’

Otto stood and read the file that she held open for him. ‘Memmingen, Bavaria, not far from Munchen. And close to the hospital for his father, some thirty kilometres.’

‘Get our people up there,’ Beesely ordered, Otto handing back the file. The desk phone buzzed. ‘Yes?’

‘Swiss Interior Minister, sir.’

‘Put him through.’

‘Sir Morris?’

‘Yes, Minister Blaum.’

‘I am sorry to hear of the fire and your losses today. If there is anything you need, don’t hesitate to contact me.’

‘Thank you.’

‘We have been requested to grant permission for some American military aircraft to land at Zug, and now a strong request from Israel. May I enquire as to why these military aircraft need to come here?’

‘That gas explosion is just a cover, Minister. It was a nerve agent.’

‘Nerve agent! My God, what has happened?’ Blaum shouted.

‘Calm down, Minister. Someone planted a small bomb in our restaurant, laced with nerve gas.’

‘It was aimed at us yesterday?’ Blaum gasped.

‘No, it was planted many weeks ago. Maybe even six weeks ago.’

‘That was before your arrival,’ Blaum puzzled. ‘Who was the target?’

As Beesely spoke towards the desk phone, he turned his gaze to Otto. ‘Otto was.’

‘Why would anyone want to harm Otto?’

‘Seems that Herr Gunter may have had close links to various neo-Nazi groups, especially a Bavarian group. After Gunter’s death –’

‘Otto cut ties with people like this,’ Blaum put in. ‘Yes, I know. But what about the contamination, we cannot keep this quiet!’

‘We do not want our enemies, nor our customers, to know about this. Nor, Minister, do you want tourists to know about it.’

‘Is it isolated? Contained?’

‘Yes, quite contained,’ Beesely insisted.

‘These Americans and Israelis –’

‘They are military specialists, coming here to deal with the contamination quietly and discreetly in a way that no one will ever know about.’

‘You can assure me there will be –’

‘I can assure you, Minister, that the fools who set this small bomb made mistakes in how they stored the nerve gas. It is isolated to one room, with very little chance of escape. We are evacuating the surrounding area and we have arranged for a lorry to spill a chemical load.’

‘Yes, yes, that’s a good idea. But I must come down and see things for myself. This is very serious!’

‘As you see fit, Minister, you are always welcome. But please do not come down until after those planes land and prepare their equipment. Then we will be able to give you more information.’

‘Very well, but tomorrow afternoon at the latest.’ He hung up.

‘I need to sleep for an hour,’ Beesely informed them.

‘There is a small room with beds –’ Otto began.

‘No, no. This chair reclines, it’s quite comfortable. Wake me in exactly one hour. Thank you.’

Otto stepped to a side office and dialled Minister Blaum.

‘Otto, what the hell is going on?’ Blaum whispered. ‘Nerve agent? The publicity will destroy K2 and everything we have worked for!’

‘Then I believe we can know who is behind it, really behind it.’

‘You think...?’

‘I do not know. But we know the man who planted the bomb, perhaps even why.’

‘Can this be contained?’ Blaum asked in a forced whisper.

‘If the Americans send a decontamination team, I would hope so. But Minister, Beesely’s *daughter* ... was just killed.’

‘My God!’ Blaum gasped. ‘What ... what do you think he will do? Will he stay?’

‘I do not know. Let us talk tomorrow, or later today.’ He hung up, holding the phone for many seconds, breathing heavily and closing his eyes.

* * *

Mr. Grey lifted his mobile. ‘Get me the chairman. Now!’ He had to wait, pacing his hotel room in Zurich. ‘Sir? Someone just tried to take out Beesely and his entire command staff in one go; damn nerve agent was used.’

‘Is he still in place?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Are his staff OK?’

‘Yes, sir. But the girl, his secretary, and some others have been killed.’

‘Close in, we’ll step up things here.’

The chairman lowered the phone, ashen-faced, and stubbed out his cigar. ‘God damn it. It was all going so damn well.’

‘What is it?’ Henry O’Sullivan enquired.

‘Someone just tried to take out Beesely and all his people in one go; canister of nerve gas.’

Henry grew confused and concerned, but for a different set of reasons to the chairman. ‘Nerve gas? That can only be government level! Someone is trying to remove Beesely from our influence.’

The chairman nodded his agreement, glancing out of the window and thinking hard.

‘Serbs?’ a man asked.

The chairman turned back. ‘A day after he just gave them everything they wanted? Doubtful.’

‘Russians?’ Henry tentatively enquired.

Oliver regarded his number two. ‘Let’s not speculate until we have some facts.’

Second wind

1

Otto gently woke Beesely, offering fresh tea.

Beesely rubbed his eyes. ‘Anything new?’

‘We have the mobile phone details from our Serbian spy. There are frequent calls to and from a woman, a nurse. She is not known to the authorities or to Interpol, but her boyfriend is a Herr Rudenson. He is well known as a collector of money for political groups, nationalist groups around Europe.’

‘A fundraiser,’ Beesely stated as he stared up at the ceiling. Otto nodded to himself. Beesely lowered his head, and focused on Otto. ‘Would he have the knowledge to make a bomb and get hold of some nerve agent?’

‘Yes, most definitely. He has links to Serb nationalists and Serb groups in Bosnia. Also he has been arrested many times in Germany, once for possessing a gun and one time for making the small bombs.’

Beesely made strong eye contact with Otto. ‘And his link to Helmut Graf?’

Otto sighed. ‘They are well known to each other, yes.’

‘I would like a list ... of all the groups that he has ever been connected to ... then a members list of each. I don’t care who you have to pay or shoot, just get the lists. Then everywhere he has ever lived, people he has known. ‘This Rudenson, does he have any allegiances higher up, to any countries or groups?’

Otto shook his head. ‘A petty thief and nationalist.’

‘Are we making *every* effort to check that?’

‘We have everyone working on this, we are finding a great deal of information.’ He was about to leave when he

stopped and turned, his head lowered. ‘There is something else.’ Beesely could see that Otto was clearly upset. ‘The bomb detonated at thirty-five seconds after one o’clock.’ He choked the last few words out. ‘Jane’s satellite tracker was activated at one-oh-one, and twenty seconds, today. She pressed the red button ... and held it.’

Beesely could see Otto’s eyes misting over. But it took a moment for what he was intimating to sink in. ‘Oh God,’ he whimpered. ‘She struggled. She tried to use her phone...’

With the office now empty, Beesely remembered the first meeting with Otto, when he handed Jane her phone. ‘Hold the red button down and we can find you, wherever you are.’

Johno stepped in a minute later, noticing Beesely’s crushed demeanour. He sat on the desk and sighed quietly. ‘Didn’t we promise ourselves we wouldn’t get into this situation again? So much for life dealing us four aces.’ Beesely slowly inched his head up, his eyes half closed. Johno softly asked, ‘Feel like rewinding and giving back that hand of aces?’

‘The only way is forwards,’ Beesely muttered, lowering his head. ‘We play the hand. But now we raise the stakes. In poker terms, we go *all-in*.’

* * *

A pleasant afternoon greeted the Rudenson’s girlfriend, the nurse, when she stepped out for a break, the grounds of her Bavarian hospital blooming with bright flowers. She walked slowly up and around to her favourite spot, a good

view past the hospital and down the valley to the hills in the distance.

As she sat on a bench and opened her bag, she suddenly became aware that she was now in shade, two men stood over her. Something was sprayed into her mouth. She coughed, unable to speak – or to cry out. A gun. Two quiet shots. Pain. She looked down, her knees covered in blood, white bone sticking out.

‘Tell your boyfriend, Rudenson, that we are looking for him.’

They took her bag, her phone, snatching her lunch as an afterthought.

* * *

The house stood isolated, a quarter of a mile across a wooded valley from the nearest neighbour, many trees helping to both hide it and to shade it. A dog stood tethered to the porch, barking at the strangers.

‘We have everything useful out of the house?’

Another man nodded as two cars pulled away.

A call was made. ‘Operations. Everything useful has been removed.’

As his car bumped along a track of dried mud, the K2 operative lifted an electronic detonator. He glanced at the driver, then pressed the button.

The nearest neighbours rushed out, their hillside houses well above that of Rudenson’s. The sound of the explosion echoed around the valley, shaking their houses, breaking windows and travelling a great distance. A huge plume of smoke rose from the trees, swirling in the air currents of the valley floor. Rudenson’s dog no longer barked.

It was a fifteen-minute drive through the dark to where the Serbian 'spy' was being held. A uniformed local police officer manned the entrance to a farm and waved them through; three Range Rovers, eight agents heavily armed. The convoy halted outside a small barn, the agents from the first and third vehicles jumping down and spreading out in all directions. Another guard opened the barn door and stuck his face out, checking everyone as diligently as he could in the limited light.

Beesely slowly stepped down, helped by Johno, and entered the outbuilding. It took a while to adjust to the darkness. 'A little more light please,' he ordered.

The Serb sat naked, strapped to a chair in the middle of the room, the rest of the furniture consisting only of a table with a TV screen and a few chairs. As the illumination increased, via some gas-lamps, Beesely took a flimsy-looking chair and placed it down in front of the prisoner.

A punch from Johno, straight to the man's ear, knocked the man - and the strapped-on chair, into the dirt. Despite being gagged, the prisoner managed a loud groan. Beesely sat down, facing the prisoner.

'Sorry about that,' Johno offered, unconvincingly.

'Oh, my dear boy, these things happen.' The prisoner got lifted upright. Now Beesely could see blood around the man's mouth and nose, a prominent swelling underneath one eye. 'But I have always believed that things in life should be kept in balance.' He pointed to the other ear.

Johno quickly knocked the man the opposite way, again to the floor.

'I do hope this does not impair his hearing,' Beesely dryly commented.

After being righted again, the prisoner sat struggling, trying hard to say something through his gag.

Beesely turned and tapped the TV. 'Have they been showing you what we do to people we don't like? Well, not to worry, you'll be dead before dawn anyway and - to tell you the truth - pain is only a problem if you live to remember it.'

Beesely pointed. 'You see Johnno here? He carries around a great deal of pain, and he has been carrying it for a long time. And me, well, I have been carrying my pain around for forty years. You see, young man, I had a daughter. Problem was, I let my work come first and ... well, I did not raise the child. She was raised by her mother, poor soul, and a long list of unsuitable surrogate fathers. One of them, well, he raped her many times -'

Johnno straightened and focused on Beesely, never having known that fact. In a dark corner, two agents glanced at each other.

'- when she was just twelve years old. When she complained ... he beat her and her poor mother. It was almost a year before I found out, but then of course I did something about it. I killed the man of course, I beat him until his ribs were like rubber. He had problems breathing after the first few ribs broke.' He inspected his hand. 'You know, I did not realise until later that I had broken my hand in three places. Still, when you are angry you do not feel the pain.'

A signal to Johnno resulted in the man being knocked down and righted again.

'And pain is what it's all about. I carried that pain for forty years because I was not there for her. And today she was murdered. My daughter was murdered, and not in a

very pleasant way. She was subjected to a large dose of Serbian nerve agent.'

The man's eyes widened as he tried hard to say something through the gag, shaking his head.

'Yes, she was killed in that explosion today, the one that you were sent to watch out for.' He took a long, deep breath. 'You see, right now, young man, I do not really care if I live or die, let alone what happens to you. And Johno here, he was close to my daughter. I dare say he's a little upset right now.' A nod from Beesely and the man was soon knocked over and quickly righted. 'Take off his gag.'

As Johno stood to one side, the gag was cut still in place, slicing the skin on the man's neck, the prisoner now panting furiously and straining to get air. Beesely crossed his legs and rested his hands on his knee.

'I did nothing!' the man protested, gasping for air.

'That's almost correct. You did very little, simply watched us, and waited for the bomb to go off.'

The prisoner was about to say something when Johno ripped the man's ear clean off, screams filling the room.

'Johno, do you mind, I was having a nice little chit-chat.'

'Sorry, Boss.' Johno tossed the ear to the feet of the guards.

'So rude. Anyway, let's talk about ... *you*. You see, if you can provide me with some useful information about who you work with then maybe we will spare your suffering. And, more importantly, we will make the people who sent you here suffer.' Beesely idly brushed dust off his trousers. 'Now, who is Mark Rudenson?'

'He ... he paid me to come here,' the prisoner panted.

'To do what?' Beesely asked.

‘To ... to watch the top of the castle and say ... say when there was an explosion. It was ... was to be on the 31st, but he ... he wanted me hidden before ... and after.’

‘And then what were you going to do? Simply go back and confirm that there had been an explosion?’

‘Yes ... yes.’

‘And what does this ... Rudenson do for a living?’ Beesely asked.

‘Living?’

‘Work, what work does he do?’ Beesely clarified.

‘He is ... as you say ... fundraiser. Politics.’

Beesely checked his nails. ‘And where would we find him?’

‘Munchen.’

‘And what type of groups does he raise money for? In Munchen.’

‘For ... for nationalists.’

Beesely focused on the prisoner. ‘You mean neo-Nazis? German neo-Nazi groups?’

‘Yes ... and ... and for others.’

‘Other groups? Which groups?’

‘In Austria, Czech Republic. Many places.’

‘Well, here is the sixty-four million dollar question. Why does he want the people in the castle dead?’

‘There was a man ... a rich man ... old man ... he was to give a lot of money ... to us ... but he died. His son ... his son has the money ... and would not talk to Rudenson.’

‘Ah, I see. Gunter had promised your group money.’

With a loud sigh, Beesely stood up. ‘Now I understand.’

He stepped into the cool night air. Approaching the vehicles, he forced several deep breaths, rubbing his face. Johno joined him, inspecting the blood on his knuckles. Beesely gazed up at the first few stars to appear. ‘He’s just

a pawn, a part-time amateur who does not deserve *the chair*.' He lowered his gaze and turned to Johno. 'Just kill him.'

Johno stepped back inside, drawing his weapon, the guards jumping out of the way. As Beesely took in the cool night air a single shot rang out, its report muffled within the barn. Returning to Beesely's side Johno said, 'I want Rude-son-features.'

'You shall have him, my boy. All in good time.'

On the way back, Beesely dialled Otto, who sounded as if he had been asleep. 'Did I disturb you?'

'No, I am OK,' Otto whispered.

'Tell me, what's significant about the 31st, if you were planting a bomb long before I arrived here? What normally happens on the 31st?'

'The 31st? Nothing.'

'Perhaps the last day of each month then?'

'Ah, when Gunter was alive he always had staff reviews and sometimes punishment on the last day of the month. He used the restaurant.'

'Would most people know this?'

'Yes, he did this for many years.'

'And when he died, you continued to do this?'

'Yes, for two months, then I stopped,' Otto explained.

'But the people planting the bomb did not know that you stopped, stopped meeting on the last day at one o'clock.'

Otto paused. 'It is correct, yes.'

'So now we know.' Beesely pondered on what might be going through Otto's mind. 'Our visitor confessed ... about Rudenson, he was behind the bomb. It seems that he was angry at you for not giving him money for his groups.'

Otto took a long time replying. 'I am sorry,' he offered.

'Sorry? No one is blaming you, Otto. Everything you have done since Gunter's death has been well meant, especially breaking the banks ties with these right-wing groups. No, my lad, you could not have seen this coming. We'll talk later, get some rest.'

'And the Serbian man?'

'Johno released some anger.'

'I see.'

Beesely lowered the phone, staring down at it.

'Problem?' Johno asked as they approached the main road through Zug, the lake now in view.

Beesely glanced out of the car window. 'I had a feeling that the attack was someone else. Strange relief.'

'We expecting trouble?'

'I just remembered something ... something I should have remembered before. Stay armed. Even in the shower.'

Johno studied the side of Beesely's head. 'How will I know *who* to worry about?'

Beesely faced him. 'They'll be the ones shooting at us.'

Johno nodded, raising his eyebrows. 'Handy.'

In an empty barrack-room canteen, they sat drinking tea. Beesely studied Johno for a moment.

'What?' Johno finally asked.

'When I got this inheritance, I actually thought for a brief foolish moment that maybe we would be on easy street, that maybe you and Jane would be taken care of after my death.' He forced a stifled laugh. 'But, Jane's death has done some good after all.'

Johno offered Beesely a puzzled look. 'It has?'

Beesely made strong eye contact, a cold stare. 'Yes, it's woken me up inside.'

Johno's expression suggested further clarification was needed.

'I don't have many more years left, even fewer with my faculties intact, so I'm going to cause some trouble. I'm going to make use of this place and the money. You see, Jane's death reminded me ... reminded me that there are people out there, groups out there that we should be attacking – not least for the greater good of the planet. I'm not worried about my own safety, or incarceration, nor am I too worried about your life. If *you* have no interest in living, why should I argue with you?'

'Fair enough,' Johno said with a smirk.

'So we're going to war, and we'll probably get ourselves killed.'

'And ... Otto?'

'He's the problem, and my concern. He has a life, a valuable life and good prospects, and I can't send him off with some money; we need him to run this place. So, we are going to have to fight a good fight, without getting killed or caught.'

Johno tipped his head. 'Is that all?' he sarcastically asked.

Beesely sighed. 'I'm going to have to be clever, at seventy-nine years old. And you ... you used to be one of the best, so start remembering what it's all about. Put your boots back on, Sergeant Williams. But, there is one thing that may spoil my plans, something that has been nagging at me since we got here.'

'What's that?'

'All the security around here ... security that Gunter set-up. An underground bunker, old castle in the country, hundreds of well-armed guards. He had more protection than the Queen. So, who did he fear attacking him?'

‘He fucked off plenty of people, like the mafia.’

‘The mafia are not capable of launching an attack on this scale. You’d need a hundred commandos to get in here, and you’d lose most of them.’ He sighed ‘No, you’d only need this much security if you had upset a foreign government, someone capable of charging in here. But that doesn’t make a lot of sense either. What foreign power would risk an incursion on Swiss soil – heart of bleeding Europe?’

‘Gunter ... ain’t here now, so not a problem,’ Johnno firmly pointed out.

Beesely took a breath. ‘Yes, you’re probably right.’

It's not what you know, it's who you know

1

At 3am, Beesely's convoy pulled onto the private airstrip. He softly ordered, 'Let's see if we can move this lot before first light, then keep them out of sight of the locals.'

As they emerged from the side of the control tower, the airstrip suddenly seemed a lot smaller. Two American C130 transports were already unloading under lights rigged up by their crews and powered by their aircraft, a single engine on each plane ticking over. Trucks, buses, and cars were standing by, armed guards everywhere.

Beesely's convoy eased to a halt next to the small waiting room, twenty yards from the control tower. Beesely wound down a window, suddenly blasted by the noise of the aircraft's engines, the strong odour of aviation fuel, and the sound of another aircraft landing.

'That is the Israeli plane,' Otto pointed out.

Coming in to land, with its landing lights blazing, came a C130 'stretch', painted - unfortunately for stealth - all white. It touched down with a roar just a few seconds later, ground controllers with illuminated orange wands directing it around the back of the other C130s. Otto tapped the driver's shoulder, and the convoy resumed its progress.

Beesely made a point of welcoming and thanking many of the American crew, explaining that they would try and move everything under cover of darkness. Then, as soon as the equipment was clear, the planes could take off again. The American team leader, a Captain, had been asked to board the second Range Rover, the Israeli team-leader, an IDF Major, joining him.

As the convoy left the darkened airfield, Israeli pilots stood with folded arms kicking the wheels of American aircraft, all the pilots now huddled together as jokes about 'size matters' bounced around.

* * *

'This, gentlemen, is temporary command headquarters for decontamination,' Beesely quietly explained to the visitors, fighting his fatigue. 'We have kicked out the usual occupants, and there are more than enough rooms and beds for you all, showers and a canteen area. Food will be brought in, along with anything else you require. Americans ground floor, Israelis first floor, or sort it out between yourselves. We have five star hotels available for you, but security must be maintained - no one must know you are here. Brief your men, no calls home discussing this place. You are all on exercise ... somewhere else.'

'Is this a Swiss Army base?' the American Captain asked, standing in full fatigues, beret and shiny boots, his hands on hips. 'I mean, you're British, these guys speak German, and we're in Switzerland?'

'No, not Swiss Army,' Beesely explained. '*We* ... are a private security agency with close working links with British Intelligence, CIA and Mossad. It's similar work, but shorter hours and better pay. Were you not briefed?'

'Hah! I'm a soldier. I get briefed on what to do a short time after someone realises that we're being shot at.'

'Yes, of course. I was a soldier myself, France and Korea.'

'France?' the Captain asked, a slight frown forming. 'When was there a war in France?'

Beesely's eyes narrowed, focusing on the Captain. '1939 to 1945, old chap.'

'Oh, yeah, right. *That* war.'

Beesely gave the man an impatient look. 'If you'll take a seat, Johno will brief you. We have photographs, plus a live feed to the contaminated room. It's the top floor of a very old castle.'

Guards brought in food and drink, the officers settling around a large table. Beesely excused himself, heading for a five-star hotel and spa that he apparently owned.

Johno rubbed his eyes. 'OK, listen up, gentlemen. My name is Johno, and welcome to Schloss Diane. That's *Castle Diane* for those that don't speak German. I'm head of security here ... and personal bodyguard to Sir Morris Beesely.'

'Were you hurt in the bomb blast?' the Captain asked.

Johno did not understand at first, the Captain pointing at his knuckles. 'No, I killed a man last night,' he flatly explained.

'Ya beat him to death?' the Captain joked.

Johno examined his knuckles. 'Wish I had, but I was ordered to kill him quickly.' He stared down at the American.

The man turned to the Israeli Major. 'He's joking, right?'

With tired eyes, the Major answered. 'No, my friend, I believe he is not.'

The Captain stopped smiling.

'Beesely's daughter took a full dose of N20,' Johno coldly stated. 'I knew her almost twelve years, so when I got the chance to chat to the man who did it...' He shrugged.

The Captain looked horrified. ‘His daughter was killed?’

‘Along with six women who worked here, women who had children at home in the local town. We on the same page, Captain?’

‘Hey, sorry man.’

‘To business. I’m formerly British Intelligence, formerly SAS, before that Parachute Regiment.’

The Major asked, ‘You studied chemical warfare? They said there was a specialist already here.’

Johno nodded. ‘SAS.’

The Major commented, ‘I saw the piglets.’

‘We have them everywhere, especially all the rooms in the castle.’

‘Any symptoms so far?’ the Major asked.

‘None, not even outside the door of the contaminated room; and it’s been fourteen hours odd.’

‘The gel has helped us there,’ the Major commented.

Johno showed them a photo. ‘That’s the bomb.’

‘It’s just a standard deodorant can,’ the Captain commented, his counterpart agreeing.

Johno placed down a photo of the timer. ‘The timer they used.’ Next came a plan of the room. ‘That’s the restaurant. The walls are six feet thick, stone, the windows extra strong and bullet-proof. But there’s wood above, lots of it, empty spaces above that in the spires. Floor is concrete, solid enough. We’ve had the heaters on in there, roughly a hundred Fahrenheit.’

‘Good,’ the Major enthused. ‘It will have oxidised a lot of the N20. But I’m surprised the pig outside the door is not showing any symptoms with warm gas in there.’

‘Fire doors. Solid.’

‘The bodies are still inside?’ the Major asked.

Johno slowly nodded, studying the man. ‘Not pleasant, all the heads and hands are twice as big as normal.’

‘The swelling will go down after death, maybe twelve to twenty-four hours,’ the Major commented.

Johno took a breath. ‘OK, first things first. The corridor outside is large and long, perfect for a tent and stage one decon’. Down the fire stairs and out onto the grass, stage two. Five yards and you are on the tarmac, stage three.’

‘I’d like to see stage three well away from main zone,’ the Captain suggested. ‘And then no one walking unsuited within a hundred yards. And then upwind.’

‘You’re the experts, you decide. Just move quickly, please. Your men and your kit will be here in ten minutes, so I’ll show it to you from a distance.’ They stood.

‘You have incinerators close by for the bodies?’ the Major asked, Johno nodding. ‘Can they be used for contaminated materials as well?’

‘There’s an industrial incinerator in the town, we’re clearing a route for trucks. It’s big enough to get furniture in.’

‘Your people have suits?’ the Captain enquired as they stepped out into the dark camp.

‘Yeah, and we can get hold of anything you need.’

The Captain turned his head as they walked up towards the castle through the dark. ‘Start with a shit load of industrial bleach, fine lime powder, and rig up some outdoor shower areas, boot washing areas, hand washing areas on the main gate.’

Johno offered, ‘I’ll assign a senior guard to you. Ask for anything you need, money is no object around here.’

With the American Captain walking towards the castle for a better view, Johno made eye contact with the Israeli Major through the dark. Talking softly, he said, ‘This is

Switzerland, Major, full of big strapping Aryans – especially within K2. They’re all very disciplined, but... Israelis being here will be an eye-opener for some.’ The Major nodded his understanding. ‘If there are any comments, or problems, you find me – and I’ll shoot the fucker concerned.’

At the small Zug airfield, Technical Sergeant Grey helped unloading equipment, none of his colleagues aware of just who he really was.

2

With a plastic cup of coffee containing a little milk, and a great deal of sugar, Johno walked up the compound road in the grey dawn light, still in the clothes he’d worn the day before - the same black suit. It seemed quiet, none of the usual training going on, a slight mist hanging in the chill air. Passing a group of American soldiers, Johno ambled slowly up to within a hundred yards of the castle, halting next to the first spaceman.

‘Hey, morning,’ the American Captain called from within his dark orange suit. He stood holding his umbilical as if a tail.

‘How’s it going?’ Johno asked, clearing his throat and fighting to stay awake. The stage-three decontamination tent was so well camouflaged he almost didn’t spot it in the trees, only brought to his attention by another orange-suited man emerging.

‘We got the bodies out,’ the Captain reported, his words distorted by the suit. ‘Covered in lime and bagged, decon’ one and then hermetically sealed caskets before decon’ two and three.’

Johno nodded, deep in thought. 'Where are they now?' he asked, barely above a whisper.

'They went on the truck two hours ago.'

Johno turned, forcing his eyes open. 'They're gone?'

'Incinerator. No time.'

Johno breathed in the cold air, glancing at the dead calm lake surface through a gap in the trees. 'The remains?'

'Can't let you have them, it's still a risk. You know that.' The Captain studied the back of Johno's head. 'We've burnt the air in the room; tests showed very little gas. Found high readings in the carpets, so they were ripped up, limed and bagged, been incinerated as well. We're burning all the surfaces now, working in one hour shifts inside, groups of four.'

Without looking around, Johno said, 'Gut everything. Rip out all the fittings until you're down to bare stone walls, then burn the surfaces.'

'We should be at that stage by tonight, Israeli boys working like demons in there. Dozen of your boys suited up and helping to lug stuff around, saving us time.' As the Captain observed him, Johno sipped his coffee and stared ahead. 'Sorry about Mr. Beesely's daughter, we had to move them out first.'

Johno turned. '*You* didn't kill her.' As he walked off, he quietly added, 'And I wasn't there when she needed me.'

The path down to the lake was now eerily quiet; one guard on duty at a hut, another at the lower gate. Pausing, Johno gazed up at the trees, observing the light mist swirling through the branches, moistening the leaves before drifting down towards the lake. At the lake's edge, he stopped and

sat on a log, the sound of small waves rippling against a shore of dark red sand, a beach scene in miniature. Gentle footsteps approached.

Johno forced his head up, to see Ricky walking slowly down. Saying nothing, Ricky stepped to where his shoes were getting lapped, crouching down and running the fingers of one hand through the cold water. He studied the wet fingers for a moment before rubbing them across his forehead. He sat next to Johno without a word, a few seconds passing.

‘Where ya been?’ Johno finally croaked out.

‘Brazil,’ Ricky answered, just above a whisper. ‘Rich client had his kid snatched. We were negotiating with the kidnappers holed up in a villa, couple of dumb ass local boys. When I heard what had happened here I stormed the place by myself, just a pistol. Took ‘em by surprise, killed three. Boy had been long dead. Twelve hours, and four flights, to get back here.’

Johno nodded, lighting up.

After Johno had taken two drags, Ricky took the cigarette out of Johno’s mouth, puffed then returned it. ‘How’s the old man?’

‘Not so good.’

Ricky nodded to himself as he thought. ‘To be expected.’

Johno stared out across the lake. ‘Once ... once I was at the end of an exercise, just walking across the north side of Pen-y-fan, middle of winter, foot of snow; had to get down the north side to that little camp. I had plenty of time, I was well ahead of schedule. The top of the snow had frozen, so every footstep was a *crunch* –’

Ricky smiled and nodded, taking the cigarette again.

‘- and the wind stopped ... and the clouds broke a bit so the moon just suddenly lit this area like a floodlight being switched on. And there I stood, flat area, dead calm all of a sudden. Snow was brilliant grey-white, no noise. I took off my headgear and just stopped. I just stopped and looked around, thinking how beautiful it was and ... and how lucky people like us were to experience stuff that like ... stuff that civvies never get to experience.’

Ricky nodded. ‘Yeah, we’ve seen some strange things in our time. Remember that field in Kosovo, flat open field with knee-high flowers, bathed in the moonlight? And us two stupid sods, we were making our way across, clear as daylight for anyone to see us. And that cow, right in the middle, stood fast sleep. We went right past it and it didn’t even see us.’

‘I wanted to stop and tie its legs together with rope before it woke.’

‘Yeah, idiot; bleeding to death and wanting to play jokes.’

Johno gazed up at the trees and the mist. ‘It’s how we cope – we try not to take things too seriously. Otherwise you end up too tight, or going mad. Often wonder how those bomb disposal boys do it. I spent a night in a shed with one in the Falklands. In the morning, he got up, took a blanket off the live bomb he had been working on, and asked the rest of us to leave. Stupid wanker. But if he had told us about it we would have been sleeping in the wet.’

‘Why did you learn to fly?’

Johno took a drag. ‘When you were a trooper, did you go down to that little civvy airstrip, Shobdon, near Leominster?’

‘Couple of times, we parachuted there after work,’ Ricky replied.

‘So did we, when I was first *badged*. In fact, I think before that. We used to go down there in a truck after work, a bunch of us, early on a Friday. We parachuted with that school run by old Mac’ McCarthy.

‘Anyway, I had this notion that if I was behind enemy lines and needed to get out I’d steal a frigging plane, fly low, and Bob’s yer uncle. They had a flying school there, so I used up a chunk of my pay for lessons. I had sod all else to spend it on.’

‘I flew a Cessna across the English Channel once, under the radar,’ Ricky idly commented

Johno turned and stared hard. ‘That was you?’

‘Shhh, ain’t no one supposed to know, especially not the French.’

‘Shit. I heard rumours.’ Johno took a drag. ‘Why ... exactly?’

‘I was on a joint exercise with the Frogs, but what I didn’t know was that one of their officers was ex-Foreign Legion. I topped his best buddy in the Congo, plus a few other Frogs - can’t say why. Anyway, this guy recognised me. Let’s just say I had to *survive, escape and evade* - as it says in the manual. Jumped on a train across France like some Second World War black and white movie, got near Normandy and spotted an airfield.’

‘So you nicked a Cessna?’ Johno puzzled.

‘Not at first, they were all locked or out of fuel and I got spotted. But the idea was there, so I got a map, hunted around for little airfields, and finally found one with a Cessna taxiing for take-off. Not something you expect, being smacked in the mouth and dragged out of your plane, but it was the only way to be sure it was fuelled and not locked. I flew under several high-voltage power cables,

down to fifty feet across the Channel, and landed it on a road near Poole.’

‘Crazy bastard...’

They shared another cigarette.

‘Did she suffer?’ Ricky asked.

Johno passed the cigarette as he thought. ‘Worst death you could imagine; she probably tried to claw the skin off her own face.’

Ricky shook his head.

‘Did she tell you *the joke*?’

Ricky interest was piqued. ‘No?’

‘Well, it made her and the old man laugh. Proud of that joke she was. But like a lot of really good one-liners, she probably never even meant it, it just came out: the right words at the right time.’ He took a breath. ‘I was trying to kill moles in the lawn ... with a 9mm pistol.’

Ricky slowly turned his head.

Johno glanced back at him from under his eyebrows. ‘Yeah, OK, not the best of ideas, but the little bastards were doing my head in. We’d tried poison and traps and everything. Anyway, I had a go for an hour, sure they were ready to surrender. I gave them a headache at least. When I came back up to the old house she asked me how I got on. I told her the bad news. Then she just came out with it. She suggested I might do better if I was *camouflaged*.’

Ricky smiled widely.

Johno shot him an embarrassed look. ‘Well, Beesely laughed so much he fell over. We still don’t know to this day if she knew they were blind, or was just taking the piss out of me. If Beesely had said it you would have known it was a piss-take. She wasn’t known for being the brightest tool in the box, but she adopted that joke as her own after that.’

‘*Sharpest* ... tool in the box,’ Ricky corrected, an eyebrow raised.

Johno frowned as he thought. ‘Sharpest tool?’

‘I’ll be off now.’ Ricky stood, still smiling. ‘We’re driving up to Bavaria.’ Johno stared hard at his friend. Ricky added, ‘Before you ask, your job’s here, making sure Beesely stays in one piece; he’s more valuable than you realise, especially with K2 behind him.’ Ricky put a hand on the back of his friend’s neck, stared into his eyes for a long moment, then stepped away.

A hundred yards away, Technical Sergeant ‘Grey’ accepted a cigarette from a guard, watching Ricky walk off as Johno sat smoking.

* * *

Pepi noted the disturbed look on his assistant’s face as the man stepped briskly into his study, the man not waiting for permission to speak.

‘Sir, the American Army and the Israeli Army have sent specialist chemical decontamination teams to K2.’

Pepi stood, staring back, his mouth slowly opening.

His assistant continued, ‘There has been no evacuation of the castle, and the Swiss Government have not lodged any complaints or action, and K2’s headquarters are expected to be decontaminated in a matter of only a few days.’

Pepi walked around the window, his brow furrowed. ‘Israelis?’ He turned, the morning sun suddenly warm on the back of his neck. ‘Who does K2 blame for the bomb?’

‘German neo-Nazi groups, sir, as expected; the man, Rudenson.’

Pepi took a breath and calmed himself. ‘And what do our people in the Swiss Government think about these ... English?’

The aid hesitated, noticed by Pepi. ‘They are very positive towards this man Beesely.’

Pepi lowered his head. ‘That ... was not to be expected.’

‘Something else, sir.’ Pepi lifted his eyes. ‘They have begun recruiting former British SAS soldiers for the training of K2 staff and agents. Colonel Alonso has made an assessment of K2’s new strength, and capabilities, increasing that assessment four-fold with the new training schedules they have started.’

Pepi smiled, giving a gentle nod. ‘The Swiss have been clever. They knew this man Beesely would bring in British staff.’

‘And his bodyguard is former SAS, sir. He has done the recruiting.’

‘His bodyguard ... is an ill-disciplined, drunken, womanising, overweight *has-been*.’

‘His bodyguard, sir, is apparently one of a very few select experts in N20 nerve gas,’ the aid cautiously countered with.

Pepi stepped quickly to his assistant, frightening the man. Stopping and lowering his head, Pepi forced a big breath, rubbing his chin. ‘I have never believed ... in coincidence. God seems to be making this game a challenge for us.’ He made eye contact. ‘Go,’ he snapped at the man as he walked around his desk, lifting the phone.

Finally he said, ‘Sir, an interesting ... problem.’

Sending a message

1

Otto entered Beesely's office looking recovered and fresh. Beesely sat drinking coffee and nibbling on his chocolate, his shoulders hunched forwards. Otto began, 'I have prepared a response for those people who knew Helmut Graf, his family and friends.'

'Response?' Beesely repeated, lifting his head and squinting without his glasses on.

'K2 is Swiss, and the people here know not to make problems for us. Graf did so. Now we must make an example of him and his friends and family – both here and Bavaria.'

Beesely stared ahead for a moment. 'So that they know *who* ... they are dealing with,' he suggested. 'Yes, that makes sense. Like 'getting the chair'; power is no good if no one knows that you have it.'

Otto placed several sheets of paper in front of Beesely, explaining, 'What we do ... must be talked about for many years to come. A clear message.'

Beesely glanced at Otto from under his eyebrows, and read the detail.

* * *

Colonel Golon, DGSE Paris, read the report, his deputy stood waiting.

Finally, he looked up. 'This man Beesely makes a phone call ... and the Americans and Israelis land in Zug?'

'Yes, sir,' the aid pointedly agreed.

‘And no attempt by the British to search for the treasure?’

‘None, sir. No mention, no interest.’

Colonel Golon placed down the report. ‘It is early days yet.’

‘Sir, intelligence suggests that they are planning attacks on right wing and Nazi groups, revenge for the nerve gas attack. Do we ... do anything?’

‘Not without risking our sources.’

‘Another matter, sir. We have noticed the CIA making contact with several criminal gangs ... here, in Paris. They are preparing an action, which seems to be directed towards K2.’

Golon eased back, a perplexed gaze on his face. ‘They go to assist K2, then they attack them? That makes little sense, Pascal.’

‘Could the Americans know about *the list*?’

Golon stood, his concern clearly evident. He was about to say something, then checked himself. Turning to his office window, he peered down at the enclosed courtyard. ‘If ... K2’s castle was attacked, then that would not be a bad thing, if the result was that the castle was vacated, or that the newspapers exposed K2. Having K2 in place in the centre of Europe is a concern. After all, it is a privately run criminal organisation, strangely tolerated by the Swiss.’

‘We both know that the Swiss Government is weak; the banks *own* the government there.’

Golon turned, nodding his agreement, a slight shrug issued.

‘Do we do anything ... if the Americans attack?’

‘No, is the simple answer. We watch and wait, our long term goal to see the castle in someone else’s hands, then searched thoroughly.’

* * *

‘Police! Hello? My name is Stella Graf, come quick, someone has filled my house with concrete!’

What? No, I did not order the concrete.

Workmen, no - listen - the concrete is inside my house. I cannot go into the house, the doors and windows they are solid.

Yes, I have my door key.

You do not understand, my house, it has been destroyed.

No, it is still standing.

No, I am not lying.

No, not vandalised. Concrete. Concrete!

What, complain about the workmen? There are no workmen!

What? Ask the workmen to return? Are you crazy, my house is ruined!

Legal action? Trading standards bureau? No! I don’t want to complain, I want the police.

I know police cannot be involved in poor building work.

What, am I related to Helmut Graf? Yes, I have a cousin by that name.

Ask him about it?

Hello? Hello?’

* * *

‘May I help you, officers?’

The two police officers walked slowly around the man’s garden, to the rear of his house.

He followed. 'Hello? Is something wrong?'

'You are half-brother to Helmut Graf?'

'Yes. He was here a few days ago. Is he alright?'

The officers stopped. 'You are concerned for his safety?'

'Has something happened?'

'Yes, your half-brother made a serious mistake. He tried to kill some people, some people who you should never upset, let alone try and kill.'

The man shocked upright, mortified. 'These people, they are from Zug?'

An officer nodded then drew his pistol.

'Oh, God.'

'*He* cannot help you.'

* * *

'Police, there is a cow in my house.

What? No, it is not my cow.

No, I did not steal the cow!

No, there are many cows in my house. They are dead!

No, I did not kill them!

No, I don't mean I have steak!

I come home and my house, it has many dead cows in it, very large cows, all dead.

No, I am not having a barbecue.

I know the weather is nice.

Look, you idiot, someone has put a dozen dead cows into my house.

What? What do you mean *you* did it?

Helmut Graf, yes, he is a friend.

A good friend, why? What is this?

He is wanted? By the people in Zug?

Oh.
No, I don't mind about the cows.
Yes, I will clear it up.
Yes, I am sure, sorry to bother you.
Yes, thank you for your time.'

* * *

'Police, a lorry has crashed into my house!
A lorry! It has gone straight through my house.
Who am I? Franz Graf. I live above the village of
Bardenz.
Where? A kilometre above the old mine.
I know there are no roads up here.
Yes, there are no roads big enough for a lorry.
No, I am not drunk.
How did a lorry travel up a hill with no roads?
Why are you asking me, how would I know?
I know it sounds stupid!
But this lorry has destroyed my house.
No, there is no sign of the driver.
Skid marks! My house is surrounded by meadows.
Marks in the grass? No, no marks.
How can a lorry leave no marks? I don't know!
What? No, I don't think it's a flying lorry?
What? *You* think it's a flying lorry? Are you drunk?
You did what? You dropped it by helicopter?
Are you mad?
Helmut Graf? Yes, my cousin.
Ask him?'

‘Herr Otto, sir, Graf is in the Hotel Accordia, Munchen, false identity.

Lots of people, very public.

Yes, we have people in the room next door.

He is sitting in the restaurant.

Yes, our police friends are on the way.

Helicopter is a ten-minute drive away.

Wait ... Ricky is walking into the hotel.

No, not part of the plan.’

Ricky walked briskly through the lobby, his jaded appearance and shabby clothes causing a few comments. The manager sent a concierge after him as he entered the restaurant. There sat Helmut Graf, alone, booked into the hotel under an assumed name.

Ricky was tense, every muscle aching, his fists opening and closing. He reached the table, and loomed over his target. Graf lifted his head, suddenly terrified. Ricky had that effect, even on the innocent.

‘Graf!’ Ricky shouted. Then, in a good German accent, ‘Helmut Graf!’ Other diners were shocked and glancing around. ‘You were told to stay away from my daughter!’

Now the diners attention was mixed, some staring at Ricky, some at Graf.

‘She is fifteen!’ Ricky barked, loud enough for people in the street to hear.

Now all the diners were focused on Graf, who appeared terrified enough to have been guilty of something.

‘You raped my fifteen year old daughter!’

If Ricky had needed it, some of the men sitting nearby were actually considering helping him.

‘Sir?’ the concierge asked. ‘Please, sir.’

Ricky reached down and grabbed Graf by the jacket as he tried to get away. The tall glass was right there, a split-second decision. With all his strength, his bodyweight shifted and Graf half standing, Ricky plunged Graf's face down into the glass. Screams echoed around the restaurant, people started running. Ricky pulled Graf back up to the seated position, Graf's face covered in blood, a large piece of glass sticking out from the bridge of his nose.

'Police officers!' two men shouted, grabbing Ricky. They had him in an arm lock in a second and were leading him quickly out.

'K2,' one whispered.

Ricky struggled as a man in his position might.

'Police!' the two men shouted at the manager as they passed reception. Outside the hotel, they led him straight to a car, bundling him into the back. It sped off.

'You crazy bastard!' a K2 guard shouted. 'There are cameras in there.'

'Improvisation; we needed to move quickly,' Ricky barked. 'There'll be an ambulance in five minutes. Intercept it!'

The front seat passenger grabbed his phone.

As Graf sat there in shock, dabbing his face with a tissue, a grandmother walked briskly across and threw a boiling hot cup of coffee in his face. His screams could be heard in the street.

* * *

The chairman of The Lodge called the 'special' meeting to order. 'We have a complete picture now of who tried to kill Beesely. I think that the inheritance was somewhat dubious.'

‘Of course it was, it’s Beesely! How else would he end up in that position? I wouldn’t be surprised if he hadn’t been planning this for forty years.’

The chairman nodded, others approving of the notion and rapping their knuckles on the table.

The chairman continued, ‘It seems like the bomb was aimed at this young man, Otto, who was probably in on it; helping Beesely get into power. It also seems like the former head of K2 offered money to various political groups who never received the funds after his death. It was down to an amateur Nazi group, an amateur bomb, with old Serbian nerve agent. And Beesely is mopping up.’

‘Should we give him a hand?’ Henry risked.

The chairman cut the end off a cigar. ‘If he needed it, he would ask. He’s still playing the role, so let him. We’ll make contact when this settles down.’

‘Any news on the bank society?’ a man asked.

‘Not yet, but I’m sure that he’ll have to tread very carefully, even a sniff in that direction could be fatal. That’s why I think he did all the eccentric stuff, he had to look more like *him* and less like *us*. He had to, *has* to, look like a retired MI6 officer who has inherited the money ... and do what someone *like that* might do. The last thing he can afford to do is to behave like he’s one of us.’

‘What do we hope to achieve, exactly, from gaining access to this bank society?’ a man asked, earning a few glances for his lack of insight.

Oliver hid a smile. ‘Many of the world’s governments make use of Swiss clearing houses, a lot of it known to only a few senior figures. North Korea, Iran, Syria, Russia, you name it. The IRA had accounts, Red Brigades, ETA. Even Bin Laden has accounts. Whoever has their eye on those accounts and movements has an eye on the world; it

could end organized crime overnight. Accessing that group could be the single most significant event of the past sixty years.’

3

‘We have Helmut Graf,’ Otto flatly stated, no joy in his words.

Johno stood and stretched his back, Beesely sat staring into a mug of coffee.

Otto continued, ‘Thanks in part to Ricky.’ He recounted the story of what Ricky had done.

‘Improvisation,’ Johno pointed out, wagging a finger. ‘On the spot decision making, that’s what your boys could do with more of.’

Otto did not look as if he agreed.

Beesely waved Otto to a chair. ‘Leave Ricky to me. Now, where is Graf?’

‘We intercepted the ambulance, drove him to the airfield. Helicopter will be here in twenty minutes.’

‘Good. I think we have some ... *comfortable* accommodation for him.’

* * *

Ricky stepped into a car-hire shop with two agents. He had not slept much in three days, his appearance even worse than normal, enough to frighten small children in the street. Behind the counter, the top of a bald head was just visible.

‘Guten Tag?’ Ricky asked in German.

A very short man with thick glasses peered over the counter. ‘Tourist, not local,’ the top half of a face stated in

an oddly slow and heavy Germanic accent. 'I speak many languages, including perfect English.'

'Might be easier if you stood then, instead of talking to the fucking desk,' Ricky snarled.

'I am standing.'

Ricky peered over the counter. 'Oh, right. Sorry.'

'Don't be, I'm not. Now, what can I help you three large gentlemen with?'

Ricky thrust a photo of Rudenson over the counter and to within an inch of the man's face. 'Have you given a hire car to this man?'

'I may be short, but I am not blind,' the little man pointed out, studying Ricky through very thick glasses. He took the photo. 'Yes, this morning. He was nervous and in a hurry.' He handed the photo back. 'I can see why now. Are his library books overdue?'

Ricky was about to say something, but just stared down at the man, wide eyed. 'The vehicle and registration, if you please!'

'Which are you going to offer, money or threats?'

Ricky pulled out his pistol and placed it to within an inch of the man's forehead. 'Which will get me to my next sugar fix the quickest?'

'The money. Death does not frighten me.'

Ricky withdrew the pistol, slapping a wad of Euros on the counter. 'Plenty more where that came from.'

The attendant took the money, handing up a sheet of paper almost immediately.

Ricky turned and read it. 'Rudenson's hire car: Passat, KB PC 537, green,' he shouted. A guard called in the information.

'He's Swiss, Zurich by the sound of him, you're English, and the man hiring the car was German, Bavarian

I am sure. Since you are both armed, and wealthy, I would surmise that you are from Zug?’

Ricky turned back, offering a cold stare. ‘If you know who we are, then you’d know the danger that you are in right now.’

‘I know that you do not kill people for nothing, that you are normally far more stealthy. To be this open you must be in a very big hurry.’

Ricky considered killing the little man. ‘Don’t make me come back here.’ He turned to leave.

‘Wait!’ the man called. ‘I have more.’

‘More what?’

‘Information. When he first came in he did not see me, he made a call and went over to the cars, then came back.’

‘Don’t know how he missed you,’ Ricky muttered. Then louder, ‘How much did you hear?’

‘All of it. He is heading towards the Czech Republic. He spoke to a Serbian man about a passport, the man’s name sounding something similar to ‘Yani’. He’s going to meet with him. Not an easy language, Serbo-Croat.’

‘You understood him?’

‘Oh, yes. They are meeting in a bar at 3pm in the town of Protovin. I did not get the bar’s name, but the other man was coming by train, so it is probably close to the train station. I believe the town is on a main line south. Herr Rudenson, not his real name I guess, will be driving through the Bohemian Forest in a few hours, a quiet and lonely road either side of the border.’

Ricky just stared, wide eyed.

The little man continued, ‘There is a gasoline station ten kilometres before the border, always busy because there are not many on that road. He has enough gasoline to get there, but he will need to fill up at that station.’

Ricky turned to the first guard. ‘Get that? Call it in. I want everyone available on that border, in that town, and get that petrol station staked out!’

‘Glad to be of service,’ came a sarcastic voice, the midget now pocketing the money.

Ricky leant over and handed the man a business card. ‘Call me, Ricky, on that number if you think of anything else. And if you want a frigging job.’

‘My name is Herr Mole.’

‘Mole? Great, Johno will love you.’

4

The road leading up to the castle was now lined with staff, three or four deep in places. All stood silent, staring at the prisoner and his escorts. Graf, terrified and covered in blood, and with makeshift bandages on his head, glanced at the faces.

Silence. They just stared back at him.

Two agents led the handcuffed and gagged prisoner slowly up the road, deliberately slowly; it took nine minutes.

At the castle, six spacemen stood waiting, along with Otto, Johno and Beesely. As Beesely stood waiting, observing the staff turnout, he could not help thinking why the staff were here for this, such a dramatic show. He could not help thinking that Otto was making a statement, and that the staff were the ones meant to be getting the warning.

Beesely stepped forwards and took a moment to study Graf. Finally, he stated in soft tones and with no hint of emotion, ‘We have prepared a room for you.’ He turned his head up and around to the windows of the restaurant.

Graf struggled, squealing through the gag.

Beesely added, 'Not up to our usual high standards, I'm afraid, it's being renovated as we speak; it suffered a bomb attack. We got rid of most of the nerve agent, just a few damp areas remaining.' He nodded to the spacemen, who now took over, dragging Graf up the stairs, through decon' one, now with the water switched off, and into the gutted restaurant.

The prisoner was placed in a chair, a rope loosely thrown around him as he screamed. A gloved finger was rubbed around the inside of the bomb's aerosol can, then onto Graf's lips.

At first he just sat wondering if it was a trick; nothing happened for a few seconds. Then he twitched. His head began to jerk involuntarily, his lips starting to swell and burst with pus and blood. He screamed through the gag as his eyes started to bulge, blood oozing out of the corners, his body twitching violently, bones breaking against the restraints. The spacemen turned and left.

* * *

As Ricky sped along the Bohemian Highway, he noticed and recognised several other agents in cars, waving as they passed, or as Ricky passed them. He dialled. 'This is Ricky. Get someone to the German side of the border, half way between the petrol station and the border, crash a car and set fire to it. I want that road east blocked and the police busy.'

A helicopter flew low overhead, in the direction they were headed.

'Is that one of ours?' Ricky asked.

The hour dragged on. Then Ricky's phone rang. 'There's a who? A Mole? You mean a spy? Oh, the car-hire man, *Herr Mole*. Yes, put him through.'

'Herr Ricky? Is it convenient?' came the slow and heavily accented voice.

'Yes, thought of something else?'

'I have been going over the Serbo-Croat in my mind. One word could mean passport or identity paper, another aeroplane.'

'Shit! No, not you. Thanks, you'll be rewarded. Anything else, let me know.' Ricky hung up then re-dialled. 'Alert everyone, Rudenson is trying to get a fake passport, should be heading to an airport some time after 3pm. Find all airports close to this place Protovin or a few hours drive.'

The guard in the rear tapped Ricky's shoulder. 'Prague airport is perhaps forty minutes from Protovin.'

'Shit!'

'Vienna airport one and half hours –'

'Shit! We've got to close that box!'

His phone rang again. 'Yes!' He listened. 'OK.'

Ricky turned his head to address both the driver and rear passenger. 'Serbian Intelligence are on board, Rudenson was due to fly there from Vienna tonight. They cancelled his ticket and visa, and he's now on their wanted list.'

Twenty minutes later, as they neared the Bohemian Forest, Ricky's phone warbled, ascending in volume. He answered and listened briefly.

Cutting the call, he said, 'We intercepted a call to his mobile, this Yani tosser. He cried off his meeting, scared shitless, knows everyone is after Rudenson. And now so

does Rudenson, his phone was switched off.’ He stared out of the window. ‘Fuck! If he’s clever he’ll go to ground.’

Ten minutes later, Rudenson’s hire car was reported burning on a side road, no sign of a driver. A Volkswagen camper van moved north, driven by a woman and with two young children in the rear. She drove steadily, sobbing, the man crouching in the back now holding a gun to her child’s head.

And vengeance shall be mine

1

‘Herr Shultz, say hello to Herr Wagen.’

Two K2 agents waved the arms of two drugged men now sitting slumped and facing each other in the home of Herr Wagen. They placed pistols into the hands of the two drugged and unconscious gang leaders.

‘Oh, please, Mr. Shultz, don’t shoot me!’ an agent joked. A shot through the stomach elicited groans.

‘Oh, dear, I think he felt that. Sedative must be wearing off,’ the second agent noted.

‘Hey, you shot my dummy!’ the first agent protested, now shooting Wagen.

‘So, you want a fight, eh?’

Another shot, through the stomach, caused more groaning.

‘Hey! No shooting below the belt.’ He put a shot through Shultz’s knee.

‘Bastard! How is my man supposed to play football now?’ He shot back, through the arm.

‘Hey, he used to play the piano! How’s he going to play now?’ He shot an ear off.

The second man let his ‘dummy’ fall. ‘How are the police going to explain this? I think we have to make it appear as if one was trying to run away. Hold up your guy and turn him around.’

Wagen got shot in the backside and the kidneys, before being dropped onto a glass coffee table, smashing it.

‘Oops.’

‘My guy is still alive, time to call the ambulance.’

With a gloved finger the agent dialled, leaving the phone off the hook.

‘Ambulance. Hello? Hello?’ came from the phone as the agents left.

Otto lowered his phone. ‘The two main German gangs are making threats to each other. Wagen is dead, Shultz critical. Each side blames the other.’

Johno nodded. ‘Step two.’

‘Hello, my friend,’ came through the dark.

‘Who are you?’ the German skinhead asked, suddenly aware of a man blocking his path.

‘Nice tattoos. Did they hurt?’

‘I’ll hurt you –’

A shot through the stomach changed his mind.

‘Who am I? I’m the man holding a gun that belongs to someone you know, with his prints all over it. You die, he goes to jail - it’s an imperfect universe.’

* * *

‘A book store should not have so much paper in it.’

‘Flammable, paper is!’

‘Really? Probably should not have set light to it then?’

‘Bit of a compulsion with you, I have noticed.’

‘Not really a compulsion, more of a hobby.’

‘You cannot call it a hobby, more of a *pastime*.’

Their faces were brightly illuminated by the explosion, the front windows blowing out.

‘What did it say on the fascia?’

‘Books and Replicas.’

‘Strange. Next one on the list is *Publications* and *Replicas*.’

‘Come, it’s an hour’s drive. And we have six more before dawn.’

* * *

‘No self respecting skinhead should be hung from an autobahn bridge with his trousers down.’

‘What is that thing some people do with the choking of the neck, in sex?’

‘Ah, auto-eroticism.’

‘Well, that is what he was doing, no?’

‘He was a skinhead weighing a hundred kilos, jumping off a twenty-metre bridge with a ten-metre rope with his pants down. I think the police will not suspect auto-eroticism.’

A loud horn was soon followed by loud thud. The body landed back on the bridge. They stood and stared at it. They stared at each other. They stared at the body again and at the truck slowing down.

‘I am not telling the boss about this.’

They both shook their heads, quickly tipping the body back over the side.

2

‘It’s going to plan,’ Johnno stated as he entered Beesely’s office.

‘What about Bavaria?’ Beesely asked as Otto joined them.

‘Like the frigging end of World War II,’ Johnno reported. ‘German TV is jumping up and down like crazy.’

So far it's one gang fighting another. But even their Chancellor is questioning how thirty-six book stores went up in flames on the same night with no witnesses or suspects.'

'Austria?'

'Twenty odd bookstores,' Johno reported.

'England?'

'Handful. Lot of stuff is bought over the Internet,' Johno explained.

'Good point.' Beesely faced Otto. 'Ask the technology guys to start attacking right-wing web sites. After all, we wish to be *thorough* ... in our attack on these people.'

With Otto out of the room, Beesely eased back into his chair, swivelling to face Johno. 'Noticed anything ... *odd*, about Otto's behaviour over all this?'

Johno consider the question. He shrugged. 'Keen to get back at them – definitely takes it all personally. *He's* taken it worse than you!'

Beesely lifted his eyebrows for emphasis and nodded.

'So what you getting at?'

'Otto, has been very keen to ... send a message, *to whom it may concern*. A very clear message – mess with K2 and we track down your ancestors!'

'They are Swiss, thorough little buggers!'

'This is all ... way beyond thorough. Getting back at Rudenson and those responsible is one thing, attacking those who share the same ... loose political allegiances is another matter.'

'So K2 made a statement,' Johno considered. 'So did Gunter with *the chair*.'

'Yes, but to whom? And why? My lust for vengeance, what it was, ended with Rudenson. That is, of course, assuming that no one else was pulling Rudenson's strings.'

Johno cocked a teasing eyebrow. ‘Upset anyone ... over the past fifty, sixty years?’

‘A couple,’ Beesely conceded.

‘And with you landing on your feet here, all this money...’

‘It may well have caused some concern in distant parts. Unfortunately, it’s a long list.’

Johno expression suggested that that was the understatement of the century.

‘Let’s work on the assumption that –’

‘You’ve fucked off a few people. Governments, husbands, intelligence agencies...’

‘You overlook one fact,’ Beesely toyed.

Johno rested a cigarette on his lip without lighting it. ‘The timer.’

Beesely nodded. ‘Could have been anything from a week ... to six weeks. If it was beyond a week or two -’

‘Then mister shiny shoes and straight tie was the target,’ Johno finished off.

‘You see *the person* ... as the target. I think maybe –’

‘The organisation was the target,’ Johno finished off. ‘Someone Gunter fucked off, wanting to take it out in one go by cutting off the head.’

‘There are more effective ways of doing that,’ Beesely suggested. ‘Nerve gas is ... extraordinary.’

‘Would have made the papers.’

‘And made our new home uninhabitable ... in normal circumstances,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘Without the American and Israeli decon’ teams it would be just that.’

‘Lot of *whatifs* in there,’ Johno pointed out.

‘I take some solace in the fact that my being here, and my ... connection with those who could decontaminate this place, has created a double negative.’

‘Come again?’ Johno curtly asked.

‘If that bomb had gone off without us here, the castle would be uninhabitable. If my arrival here caused the bomb, it also caused the solution to it - hence the double negative. Bit like inviting a fireman to your house when the neighbours are planning arson.’

Johno stood, shaking his head. ‘I’ll leave the thinking to you.’

* * *

Dame Helen walked into operational control at MI6 headquarters, glancing at the array of TV screens showing CNN, Sky and Al-Jazeera.

‘OK. What’s new in Estonia?’ Dame Helen asked.

‘Ma’am, any clues about Germany?’

‘Germany?’ Dame Helen puzzled.

‘Thirty dead, a hundred injured. It seems that gang war has broken out between rival skinheads and neo-Nazis.’

‘When did all this happen?’

‘It started last night. Here’s the weird part: thirty odd Nazi book stores torched within four hours of each other, spread right across Europe.’

Dame Helen stared ahead. ‘That would take quite some ... organizing.’

‘No arrests, no suspects.’

Dame Helen turned, thinking hard and nodding. ‘Keep me up to date.’

Beesely sat facing four of the senior male members of his management team, their assignments in front of him, as

were Otto's and Johno's, the two of them sitting to one side of his desk.

'OK, gentlemen. The assignment was to consider what to do to Rudenson when we catch him.' Beesely glanced at Otto. 'A clear ... *message*, for anyone screwing with us in the future.' He held the first suggestion. 'Marcus, you are a sick and twisted individual.'

'But, sir!' Marcus began to protest.

Beesely cut him off with a wave of his hand. 'It's OK. We asked for suggestions, and yours is suitably ... sick and twisted. These other two are just improvements on *getting the chair*,' Beesely stated, handing them back. 'But thank you for your efforts.'

'Johno, yours I put down after the first paragraph.'

'Why?' Johno complained. 'Good idea.'

Beesely scowled at him. 'And impractical.' He held the next page. 'Steffan, this is good, it was considered.' Beesely showed it to Johno.

Johno nodded as he read it. 'Good ... I like this. Not too much pain, all psychological; but waking up three months later as a woman – that would screw with his head.'

Beesely held the last piece of paper. 'It was an idea that Otto gave me that I have expanded upon and come up with this. I hope, and trust, it meets with the *standards*... expected from K2.' He distributed copies and they all took a minute to digest it.

'Works for me,' Johno enthused.

'It is good,' Otto agreed. 'And we must let people know what happened to this man.'

The senior managers approved.

'So, gentlemen, are we agreed?' Beesely asked. They were. 'We shall call this *Endgame*.'

The Israeli school of diplomacy

1

The next morning, Beesely was sat working at his desk when Otto appeared in the doorway, looking hesitant. Beesely peered over the rims of his glasses.

‘The German Government have sent a delegation to us. They have just arrived and insist on seeing you.’ Otto waited for a response, standing in the doorway.

Beesely slowly sipped his lemon tea. ‘Guess we had better make sure we have enough milk in then,’ he muttered without looking up. Now louder, ‘Dig me out the relevant files.’

He looked up as Otto turned to leave. ‘Oh, Otto? Drive them past the castle, have plenty of spacemen visible – as well as armed guards, then bring them through the back way.’

Otto seemed uncertain. ‘Do you ... have a plan?’

Beesely sipped his tea. ‘Yes. I will make it up as I go along, as usual.’ He forced a quick smile.

Otto welcomed the delegation into Beesely’s office, polite and professional, a warm welcome for Minister Blaum. Beesely sat looking fatigued, but resolute. Chairs had been laid out around the front of the desk, but further away than might be normal for such meetings.

The German delegation consisted of their Ambassador to Switzerland, their Deputy Foreign Minister and their Interior Minister. Beesely had already decided who wore the long pants in this group; the Interior Minister, an imposing looking six-foot man, weighing twenty stone at the least. No briefcases or files were evident, so this

meeting was ‘off the radar’. Beesely waited as Otto sat and settled himself.

Minister Blaum was clearly uneasy. ‘Herr Beesely, may I introduce the Deutsche Interior Minister, Herr Wilhelm.’

Beesely lifted his head a degree. ‘Is there something I can help you gentlemen with?’

Wilhelm paused. ‘I must say I was surprised to find an ... *Englishman* here, and not Herr Gunter.’ Beesely did not respond. Wilhelm glanced at Blaum. ‘Minister Blaum has spoken highly of you, and your diplomatic skills, which seem to be sadly lacking today.’

Beesely eased forwards, resting his arms on the desk. ‘I have just finished incinerating the body of my daughter ... and six of my kitchen staff. You’ll forgive me if I don’t get up and dance on the table.’

Wilhelm was visibly shocked. He glanced at Blaum, suddenly concerned. ‘Herr Beesely, we are ... sorry for your loss. I did not know –’

‘There are many things that you do not know. Such as ... that it was a German national who planted the nerve agent that killed my staff –’

‘Nerve agent!’ Wilhelm exploded. ‘Here? That’s what those men in suits were for?’

‘Yes, they are decontaminating our facility,’ Beesely quietly explained.

‘Is there any danger?’ Wilhelm demanded.

‘A danger to you? Yes, but not from the nerve agent,’ Beesely softly stated.

‘I must remind you, Herr Beesely, that I am a senior Minister in the German Government –’

‘For the moment,’ Beesely responded, just above a whisper.

Wilhelm stumbled. ‘What?’

Beesely took a file from his drawer and rested a hand on it. 'If the contents of this file were accidentally leaked to the press you would no longer be a Minister, nor would many of your colleagues.'

Wilhelm was stunned, now reddening around the face and neck. He glanced at Blaum again, demanding, 'What is the meaning of this ... this threat?'

Beesely took a moment. 'A German national, sent by another German national – who just so happens to have close links to several political groups and current serving members of your coalition government - planted a bomb in this facility, in a low security area, our staff canteen. It was laced with Serbian nerve agent, which had been stored on German soil for more than ten years. I can't help feeling that, if your security services were not so damned inefficient, that the gas may have been found, and my daughter would still be alive.'

'You blame *us* for this?' Wilhelm barked.

'You were warned many times by various intelligence agencies - including the Israelis at the beginning of this year, after they tracked the packages sent to their Ambassadors, also laced with nerve agent, back to Germany.'

'Any such claim would have been investigated thoroughly by the police -'

Beesely banged his fist on the file, cutting the Minister off. He fixed the large man with a steely stare. 'My people yesterday found and neutralised a litre container of this nerve agent, stored in the basement of a house in a residential area of central Munich. If that gas had been released in an indoor sports arena it could have killed thirty thousand people!'

The Germans shifted uneasily in their seats, glancing at each other. Wilhelm had to mop his brow.

Beesely tapped the file. 'Would you like me to release the evidence to the German press and TV? Would you care to bet just how long you would remain in a job?'

Without any prompting, Otto poured out glasses of water and offered them to the visitors.

Wilhelm composed himself and slipped back into character as a Minister. 'This nerve gas should have been reported to our authorities. The street should have been evacuated—'

'And the press notified. Do you really want to tell the people of Munich that they have been sleeping with that stuff for ten years, the German police *ignorant* about its location?'

'No, gentlemen, I don't think you do. You see, over the next few days and weeks my people will find the gas - regardless of who they have to torture - and dispose of it quietly without anyone ever having known about it. And at the end of it all ... it will look like rival neo-Nazi gangs fighting each other.'

'That would seem a reasonable approach,' Blaum tentatively suggested to his German colleagues, 'considering the alternative.'

Beesely squinted at Blaum, surprised by the help he was getting.

'The alternative,' Beesely began, tapping the file, 'is full disclosure to the press of everything; the deaths of Swiss citizens at the hands of German neo-Nazis, formal complaints by the Swiss against the Germans, legal action from us against the German Government and police, panic on the streets in Germany as people fear public places ... and the release of this document.' Beesely opened the file

and held up a page for their inspection. ‘The detailed plans of attack, for releasing the nerve agent inside your parliament, your Bundestag.’

Wilhelm looked as if he was about to keel over. ‘We were the target? The Government?’

Beesely handed it over. ‘No need to thank me for saving your lives.’ He turned to Otto. ‘Tea please, and something to eat.’

Beesely settled the visitors, and eased them back from the edge of despair.

‘Gentlemen, I hope that everyone is refreshed, and back to normal.’ They sipped their drinks. ‘You came here, no doubt, because you probably heard rumours that we were behind the attacks on neo-Nazi bookshops. We were. Tough shit.’

Wilhelm and his Ministers blinked.

Beesely continued, ‘That phase of the operation is just about over, but the trail of those responsible for killing my staff is still hot. They may be in Germany, or elsewhere by now. We shall pursue them to the ends of the earth, and God help anyone who gets in our way.’

‘There are, I believe, one or two canisters left in Germany, which we will find and discreetly dispose of. There are also remnants in Bosnia, maybe some in Serbia itself no doubt. They will be dealt with!’

‘After that, gentlemen, we shall try as best we can to repair any damage that may have been done to relations between ourselves and the German Government - something which is very important to the Swiss Government, and to the people within this organization. Since I am its head, it’s also something that is also important to me.’

‘If you take the time to analyse the situation, you will conclude that no other course of action was available to us. The other paths that we could have taken would have been costly to us, to our business and to our reputation, to the Swiss Government and to your government - had you survived to think about it. At best the newspapers would have crucified us all; no one would have been a winner, all of us would have lost greatly. We will, gentlemen, sink or swim together on this, because we are too closely linked to do anything else.

‘We will try not to exaggerate the situation in your country, but we need the cover story, and we need to take power and organization away from the neo-Nazi groups, because only with organization and money can they afford to buy stolen Serbian nerve agent. If we keep them weak, then we need not fear an organized response. I apologise for walking all over your sovereignty, gentlemen, but necessity dictated that I do so, for the benefit of us all.’

Wilhelm nodded for several seconds. ‘Minister Blaum was correct about you, and your abilities, not least as a diplomat.’ He stood. ‘Now we must return and exercise some very serious damage limitation, and try and hold onto our jobs.’

Beesely eased up. ‘We have people well placed in your media sector, the TV and in newspapers. When we hear of them about to attack you, we will warn you and use our influence to suppress such stories.’

Wilhelm brightened. ‘That is good to know.’

‘And a few weeks from now we shall reconvene and start again.’

‘Rudenson got onto a flight to Moscow three hours ago, a Serbian passport,’ Otto dispassionately stated.

Beesely massaged his head as he sat on his hotel room bed. ‘Where did he fly from?’ he asked without looking up.

‘Warsaw.’

Now Beesely raised his head. ‘Warsaw? Long drive!’

Johno knocked and entered. ‘What’s up?’

Beesely slowly stood. ‘Our *friend* is in Moscow.’

‘Moscow? Shit, do we have people in Moscow?’

‘Not many,’ Otto replied.

‘Are we heading there?’ Johno asked.

‘It is not safe,’ Otto suggested. ‘For you, Sir Morris.’

‘Please don’t call me “sir”.’ He patted Otto on the arm.

‘Morris, or Beesely, will do just fine. Or even Herr Director, I’m getting used to that now.’

Otto gave a professional Swiss head tip.

‘Listen,’ Johno began, his hands in pockets. ‘The one thing I do know about Moscow, is that if you’ve got the money you can buy anything. For the sort of money we have, you could buy the whole damn city.’

Beesely agreed as he walked to the window. Turning his head to Otto, he said, ‘Ask our people in Moscow to take some money around to the ... most notorious gangster they can find, and put a price on finding Rudenson and delivering him *alive*.’

Otto made a call.

Johno joined Beesely at the window. Peering down, they could see tourists coming and going from the Spa Hotel. ‘Moscow has plenty of underpaid doctors and surgeons.’

Beesely half turned, nodding as he thought. ‘Yes, that’s true. When they have him we’ll move to *endgame*.’

Endgame

1

Yuri, an overweight guard, stood trying to shelter from the Moscow rain as he kept watch. The large doorway of this old apartment block afforded plenty of protection from the Moscow rain, but he was not allowed to stand too far inside; from there he could not see the street.

A taxi pulled up, the smart new vehicle unlike most of the dated cars that took short cuts through this street. This was a Mercedes taxi, not common, and for rich Moscovites or tourists only. A man in a smart suit clambered out carrying a large silver case, Yuri checking the rest of the street quickly. The taxi made off at speed, the man approaching, smiling confidently.

‘Evening, Yuri,’ the man offered in good Russian, but obviously not a local.

Yuri was puzzled. He did not wish to upset a friend or customer of his boss, but this could also be a trap. ‘Hello. Do I know you, sir?’

‘No, you don’t. But I wish to see your boss, Vladimir.’

‘Is he expecting you?’

The stranger’s features turned to stone. ‘No one ever expects me when I call.’

Even more puzzling. ‘Uh?’

‘May I see your boss, please? Now!’

‘Who are you, please?’

The visitor held up the case and displayed the contents. ‘I’m the man with a million dollars for him.’

Yuri could not believe his eyes. Many thoughts ran through his head; screw the boss, shoot him and take the

money, it's a trick, it's a bomb under the money. 'Wait here,' he finally suggested, dialling his boss on his mobile. 'Yuri here, Boss ... I'm downstairs where I'm supposed to be ... yes, there is a man here to see you ... I don't know ... he has a million dollars in a case. Yes ... no, he is alone. Yes, I've seen it ... in a case.' He faced the stranger. 'Wait here, please.'

A moment later, two gunmen came out. 'We want to see the money,' the first gunman demanded.

'I want to see your boss. I'll give him two minutes before I'm leaving.'

They glanced at each other. 'OK, inside,' the same man ordered, now with his hand inside his jacket. The gunmen shoed away some inquisitive prostitutes and showed the man in the suit into an old lift, never taking their eyes off him.

Vladimir had been eating, but now sat on a sofa as his food cooled, a liberal amount of his half-finished meal down the front of his bulging shirt, some in his moustache. Four more gunmen stood around the room, two skinny prostitutes peeking out from a side room.

'Hello,' he said, lost for other useful words.

The case was placed down and opened. 'This is for you; one million dollars, American.'

Vladimir shuffled along the sofa, his large stomach an impediment to that chosen method of movement, then examined a wad of dollars. He threw the wad to a guard. 'Check it.'

'My employers only deal in *real* money,' the visitor suggested.

'And who are your employers?' Vladimir asked.

'A Swiss intelligence agency called ... K2.'

The gunmen took a step back.

It was hard to maintain your dignity and authority as you slid off a couch, stumbled and then stood as if attacked by a swarm of bees. ‘You let K2 into my apartment!’ Vladimir barked. His men drew their weapons. ‘No, no,’ Vladimir shouted, holding out his hands. ‘No shooting in here!’

The man in the suit had just the faintest hint of a smile creasing a cheek. ‘I have not come here to harm you.’

Vladimir composed himself. ‘Why have you come here?’

‘My employer wishes that you do a job for him.’

Vladimir took a breath and composed himself. ‘Yes, of course.’ He wiped food off his shirt. ‘You ... you want someone killed?’

‘No, we want someone found.’

‘I see. And this money is for finding this person.’

‘No, this money is for your expenses in finding this person. When you have found him there will be another nineteen million dollars for you.’

‘Twenty million! Your employer wants this somebody very badly, no?’

‘My employer wishes to point out that ... if you don’t find this person ... he will be *disappointed* with you.’

Vladimir took a sharp step back before composing himself. ‘Yes, I know what happens when your boss is ... *disappointed* with people.’

‘Good. To business.’ The K2 agent produced a piece of paper and a photo. ‘Here are all the details you will need. It’s a German man that we are looking for, and he arrived by plane last night. He will not be staying in a hotel, he is not that foolish, he will be trying hard not to be found. His one connection here is a nationalist campaigner. Our German friend is a fundraiser for nationalist groups.’

‘Ah, yes, I know these idiots and where they drink. They have a club, small time hoodlums.’

‘That would be a good place to start. We expect him found by tomorrow night.’

‘Tomorrow!’

‘If you want the rest of the money, and to keep my boss happy, then we would like him tomorrow night - *alive and well*. My number is on the card, call me anytime, day or night.’

Vladimir was soon moving with a purpose. A hundred thousand dollars had been offered to anyone who had information, and that reward offer had been passed by word of mouth a thousand times inside an hour. Soon, every thug in Moscow wanted to find the ‘German Nazi’. The police had been tipped off, many officers refusing to go home at the end of their shift, many squad cars doubled up from two to four officers as they all hunted earnestly for Rudenson.

That evening became one of the safest on record in Moscow for a damp summer’s night, crime fell to almost zero; every police officer was out on the streets, every thug gainfully employed searching.

2

It turned 6am, and Beesely could not sleep. He tried a light breakfast and some tea, before heading down to the hotel’s sauna. As he eased down onto the wooden slatted seats, leaving guards in the corridor, a fit and tanned man entered from the changing rooms.

Beesely noted the man’s physique and his scars. ‘You look like you’ve been through the wars.’

‘Several!’ Mr. Grey sat. ‘The chairman of the Lodge sends his regards, and his condolences for your loss, sir.’

Beesely took a while answering, staring at the floor. ‘That’s very kind of them. Thank them for the helicopters. Who’s chairman at the moment?’

‘Oliver Stanton, sir.’

Beesely smiled. ‘Olly still going strong, eh? Tell him I will be in the Bahamas next week some time to meet up. Now be a good man, and scoot.’

Mr. Grey stood, faced Beesely, and added, ‘The group wishes to confer its complete support, sir.’

Beesely made no comment. Mr. Grey waited a second, before turning and stepping out, Beesely holding his gaze on the door that Mr. Grey had just walked through.

3

At 8am, Beesely emerged from his hotel room in a black suit, finding Johnno adjusting his tie in the corridor. Johnno had also received a new black suit from Otto and had shaved, trimmed his moustache, and had a haircut.

Then out popped a nervous young boy from behind Johnno. He seemed familiar, Beesely shooting a questioning look at Johnno.

‘The bellhop.’

‘Ah, yes,’ Beesely remembered, greeting the boy in German.

Johnno put a hand on the boy’s shoulder, giving the lad a reassuring hug. Beesely straightened, wide-eyed and questioning. ‘His mother worked in the kitchens,’ Johnno explained, making strong eye contact. Beesely’s shoulders dropped. ‘Kids got no relatives nearby, just some very old grandparents of his mum’s ex-partner, who she never

frigging liked. He's been living with a neighbour. Kid's up for adoption, so I went and fetched him. I figured he could crash out at the castle.'

Beesely squinted. 'You ... went and fetched him?'

Otto approached, flanked by two bodyguards in dark suits. He frowned a question to Beesely about the boy.

'Boys, meet your new adopted son,' Beesely pointedly, and firmly, announced.

'My God,' Otto whispered. 'His mother, I had forgotten.' He seemed stunned, especially at Beesely's reproachful glare.

'I want adoption papers drawn up.' Beesely explained to the boy in German that he was now part of their family, which pleased the boy greatly. Twelve-year-old Thomas explained, in broken English, that 'secret agent' Johnno would protect him.

Beesely inspected Johnno, Johnno inspected Beesely then they both checked Otto.

'I guess we're ready, gentlemen,' Beesely finally stated.

Off they set; Beesely at the front, two bodyguards well ahead ready to open doors, Otto and Johnno side-by-side behind him and all in step with military precision. Johnno held Thomas by the shoulder, who now walked along watching Johnno's feet, making large strides to stay in step.

The foyer became the first sign of things to come on this pleasant summer's morning. All of the hotel's staff had turned out; some in uniform with black armbands, some in sombre black suits. Beesely shook the hand of the manager, thanking him for his staff's respects before heading slowly out of the hotel. The hotel steps were lined with guards, the edges of the parking area three deep with people stood in silence. Quite who they were, Beesely did

not know. He paused at the car door, slowly surveying the faces around the entire car park before he eased himself into the waiting vehicle.

With the car door closed, he enquired in a concerned whisper, ‘Who are all these people?’

Otto half turned his head. ‘The Bank employs a great many people, especially in Zug and Zurich. Some have travelled down, but most are local. They are showing their respects.’

‘So much for secrecy,’ Johno commented, taking in the crowds.

The convoy moved slowly out to the main road, local motorbike police stopping traffic. Three Range Rovers joined the convoy, plus two motorcycle outriders at the front, another two at the rear – all keenly observed by Beesely.

‘How many people will be here today?’ Beesely asked.

‘We believe three thousand,’ Otto informed him.

Beesely held his gaze on Otto for a moment, an eyebrow raised, before exchanging a look with Johno.

The cemetery at Zug rested on a hillside, with a clear view towards the castle. It circled the hill, following its contours like a giant apron. Exiting the Range Rover, Johno stood taking in the scene.

To his immediate left he noticed an old section with strangely carved gravestones for the richer members of the town’s medieval dead. A line of bushes and trees next to a dilapidated old iron fence led to the middle section, which seemed to Johno to consist of British style gravestones, then finally came a flat grassy area off to the right ready for new arrivals.

He turned fully around. The castle itself was not visible, but he could just make out the trees that he knew edged the castle lawn, and he could see the cliff. He was sure he could see the glint of the restaurant windows and pointed it out to Beesely as they ambled away from their line of vehicles and towards the waiting crowd. As they progressed, Johno now noticed that Beesely seemed put-out by the public spectacle.

Five graves had been prepared, all in a line, all with new headstones and freshly laid turf, the edges of the grass squares visible in places. The remaining two graves had been prepared in other towns. Despite the fact that there were no bodies, just headstones, the graves had been prepared in a traditional style, most bystanders unaware of the exact circumstances of the deaths.

Chairs had been laid out off to the right, ten yards from the line of fresh graves, and behind the chairs stood the families of the victims, almost fifty people. The closest family members sat behind a row of chairs left empty for Beesely and company. Beesely had attended many funerals in his lifetime, but none for almost ten years. Now, Otto directed him towards the crowd, grouped just below the fresh graves, and twenty minutes of handshakes began.

The senior command-staff were present, Beesely thanking them all without shaking their hands. Then he was surprised to find the Mossad team, now in black suits, which he considered Otto must have provided. He thanked them all and worked down the line. Next came the American decontamination team, similarly dressed and similarly thanked; they had delayed their return home to pay their respects.

Johno thanked the Major and the Captain, a handshake and a nod. Beesely was then surprised to find Minister

Blaum and several of his associates. The men offered their condolences. The Serbian Ambassador putting in an appearance came as quite a shock for Beesely, but he acknowledged it as a nice gesture. The ambassador offered his condolences, looking as if he knew more than was publicly known.

Beesely suddenly stopped dead, glances at Johno and Otto. Beyond Blaum stood the British, American and Israeli Ambassadors, Beesely not quite sure how much they knew, or who had invited them. Johno became concerned, wondering what was going through Beesely's mind, since his features had hardened as they progressed.

The British Ambassador handed over telegrams of condolence from the Home Secretary, Dame Helen, the Foreign Secretary and the Queen – leaving Beesely holding the telegrams in silence for many seconds – a quick, unhappy glance at Johno as he pocketed them.

The senior staff from the banking divisions were introduced, some of them meeting their employer for the first time, followed by the heads of various divisions that Beesely had only recently heard of. He shook hands with the ex-SAS contingent, now six strong, four fresh faces catching his attention. He glanced at Johno.

Johno leant in and whispered, 'They're recent SAS boys, a sharp team. It's our first hostage rescue team of Brits, available for wet work.'

Beesely greeted the fit young men, none more than thirty years old in his estimation. Finally he turned to the waiting families. Earlier, Otto had explained that all of the families had received a generous lump sum payout and had been offered a pension for life equal to the salary that their family member earned when they had been killed.

Meeting the families was not an easy task for Beesely, Otto shouldering much of the burden since he was known to most of them. Mothers and daughters greeted Otto as if he was their employer, fathers thanking him for his generosity, the Swiss maintaining an in-bred stoic facade. And the few children present today affected Otto more than Beesely.

Johno separated from the group and read the gravestones, those he could understand. Finally there was Jane's, the words chosen by Beesely.

All the money in the world,
All of the mightiest armies,
cannot roll back the years,
cannot stop the ebbing tide,
cannot delay our appointment with death.
The sand runs out of the hour glass,
it knows no malice.

P.S. When shooting moles, wear camouflage!

Johno smiled. 'See ya', sister. Thanks for all the cuppas.'

Ricky appeared at Johno's shoulder, now squeezed into an ill-fitting suit and looking uncomfortable.

Johno sighed, and said, 'Late again.'

'We just dispatched the last of Rudenson's relatives.' Johno nodded, still fixed on the grave. Ricky added, 'His uncle lived on a lake, isolated enough. The neighbours said he loved the old lake, so now he's fucking resting in it, feeding the fish.'

'Where are you living?' Johno asked.

'A boarding house in the town; it's cosy enough.'

‘Otto never offered you a room in the castle?’ Johnno teased.

Ricky forced a tired smile. ‘I work for a living, that’s for the fucking in-bred officer class.’

‘Cheeky bastard. Anyway, I live in a dungeon. Pop down later for a beer and a chat.’

The priest, a company man apparently, performed the service in German, lasting around ten minutes. Otto then spoke at length, taking longer than the priest and making favourable personal comments about all the deceased without the aid of any notes.

Johnno spent the time taking in the many new faces, whilst Beesely simply sat and stared at the line of graves, deep in thought. When it came to Beesely’s turn to speak he simply shook his head at Otto, his prepared speech still in his pocket. Otto stepped across and sat as family members said a few words in turn.

Ignoring the German-Swiss speeches, Beesely stared dispassionately at the ambassadors. ‘You know ... it all comes down to politics,’ he softly stated, Johnno and Otto half turning their heads towards him. ‘Life and death, people, they’re just commodities at the end of the day – pieces on a chess board.’

Otto’s features displayed his lack of understanding, and his concern.

Beesely continued, ‘Here we sit, an obscure Swiss bank, with the world’s ambassador’s paying homage. On any other day I might feel popular. Today I feel like pawn in a game.’

Otto grew concerned, a quick glance exchanged with Johnno.

Johno took in the ambassadors. ‘If you’re a fucking pawn,’ he whispered, ‘that don’t say much for me. I figured you were the king on this chessboard.’

‘If I’m the king,’ Beesely responded, still focused on the ambassadors, ‘then I can move in any direction I like, but just one square at a time.’

Otto held his gaze on the side of Beesely’s head for many seconds.

* * *

Later that evening, Beesely took Otto and Johno to one side.

‘Now, gentlemen, we have a new addition to the family. Or should I say that *you* have a new addition. I will not live many more years, and when I’m gone young Thomas will be *your* responsibility.’ He wagged a finger. ‘The boy is in our care because his mother’s blood is on our hands.’

Johno looked as if he was about to say something, but got cut off by a pointed finger.

‘Now listen well. I screwed up my attempts to be a father; I did not do a very good job. You, gentlemen, will have to do better than I managed, which should not be so difficult.’ He pointed at Otto. ‘You will not spoil him –’

‘Spoil?’ Otto queried.

‘You will try and raise him just like a normal boy, if that is indeed possible given this dysfunctional family and what we do for a living. Understand? He will not be given too much, he will not be treated like a prince. Otto, I want

his English to improve. Quickly! Then arrange a tutor for him, make sure he keeps up with his lessons.'

Beesely turned his head a few degrees. 'Johno! No beer, no porn, no girls, no swearing around the kid.'

Johno looked at his shoes.

'Besides that, I want you to teach him weapons handling -' Johno lifted his head, clearly surprised. '- straight away; survival, escape and evasion, it might keep the kid alive longer. Teach him how to shoot and how to kill, and how to spot the bad men. Teach him how to look over his shoulder and how to look under a car before he sits in it.

'Otto, teach him how to climb and how to ski. Teach him languages, and educate him about how the world really works. Consider this, gentlemen, your greatest challenge yet. And it won't just be the boy doing the learning - it will be you two.

'Johno, you've never married, or had any kids - not that we know about anyway. This will be good for you, women like single fathers with cute kids. It will give you an element of ... respectability.' He wagged an accusing finger. 'You will make an effort to spend time with him. Pick him up from sports and drop him off, don't just send a guard for him. You, Otto, will help him with his studies, not just rely on a tutor. You, Johno, will rise early when the boy needs it. And not hung over!'

He took a breath. 'It would be nice, gentlemen, if I could go to my grave knowing that *my* boys will do the kind of parenting that I never did.'

Six hours after Vladimir had put the word out, and ten hours after Rudenson had landed in Moscow, the elusive German lay tied up, being rushed across Moscow in the back of a police car, its siren wailing.

It would not have been a bad journey normally, certainly not one to cause injury, save for this being Moscow, and any fast and long car journey obviously involved Moscow roads, not known for their smooth surfaces and good maintenance.

By time they arrived at Vladimir's dilapidated apartment block, Rudenson had been sick onto the already bloodstained seat. With his arms tied behind his back, Vladimir's men dragged their prisoner unceremoniously by the elbows up the steps and into the lift, depositing him onto the lounge's hard marble floor, making the apartment's owner a very happy, and very rich, man.

* * *

'They have him,' Otto calmly reported.

Beesely glanced at Johno. 'Endgame.' Turning back to Otto, he instructed, 'Arrange the doctors. Let our man in Moscow know about Endgame.'

* * *

'Look, look, we have your man!' Vladimir could not contain his joy.

The K2 agent carefully inspected the prisoner's face, the tattoos on his arm, a scar on his leg. Finally, he asked in perfect German, 'Which village were you born in?'

Rudenson managed to talk clearly through the improvised gag. 'Memmingen, Bavaria. You are Interpol?'

The K2 agent offered Rudenson a cold stare. ‘I work for K2.’

Rudenson flinched back as far as he could go before gunmen slapped him and held him forwards.

Vladimir laughed. ‘Ah, you see, he knows K2. He knows what waits for him.’

The K2 man stood, staring intently at the prisoner. ‘My employer has one final request, before you take *him* to an airfield south east of Moscow tomorrow night.’

Vladimir puffed up his chest. ‘Anything for my good friends at K2.’

‘We want you to find several good surgeons, and an operating theatre they can use. We want them to make a few small ... *alterations* to this man before he flies home.’

Vladimir’s eyes widened. ‘Surgeons?’

‘This has to be done before tomorrow night,’ the K2 man insisted.

‘Tomorrow night? My God, I have not slept! What must we do with these surgeons?’

‘You must take our *guest* here to the surgical theatre and perform the operation listed on this paper.’ He handed over the document, and a cheque. ‘This is a Swiss banker’s draft for ten million dollars; it can be paid into any bank in the world or drawn to cash.’

Vladimir readily accepted the cheque, studying it carefully. ‘I can pay this to my bank, here?’

‘Yes, the money will be transferred within one hour.’

Vladimir began to read the note, glanced at the prisoner, then read further. He swallowed several times before looking up. ‘I think this man made a big mistake,’ he informed the room, approaching Rudenson. ‘Yes, my friend, I think you upset the boss of K2. It was a big mistake.’

He shook his head as he turned to the man from K2. 'I will arrange this very quickly. And then your boss, he will pay?'

'Tomorrow night.'

'OK, my friend, you can rely on me.'

'Do a good job, Vladimir, and make sure our friend here stays alive. In the future we may have more need of your ... *services*.'

'Yes, of course. You pay well. And you are people of your word.'

* * *

'We're not going back to the old house,' Beesely softly stated. Johno glanced up from his newspaper, but said nothing. Beesely eased up from his office chair and opened the fridge, retrieving a cold can of apple juice. 'Everything there would remind us of Jane.'

Johno considered it. 'Guess you're right.'

Beesely sat back down. 'I'll have everything that was Jane's removed and destroyed. Our stuff will be moved out as well. I've told Otto to find us a penthouse in London to use, plus something down on the coast; Dorset, Poole maybe.' Johno nodded his approval. 'I'll leave the house to our people in the UK, safe house for boys on the run.'

Again Johno nodded.

Beesely glanced at his watch. 'Be out of here in a few hours.'

Otto walked in as Johno wandered out, Johno tapping his half-brother playfully on the arm with his rolled up newspaper.

'You wanted to see me?' Otto asked as he entered.

‘Please, close the door,’ Beesely requested.

Otto closed the door and sat in the seat vacated by Johnno. ‘Problem?’

‘Yes. You.’

Otto was puzzled. ‘Me?’

‘Yes. I want you to have a good long life and be happy,’ Beesely enigmatically began.

Otto tipped his head. ‘Sounds ... OK. What is the problem?’

‘Johnno and I would like to go looking for trouble. Problem with that ... would be that it would put us all in danger, something neither I - nor Johnno - have any issues with. Our problem ... is you; we don’t want to put you in danger, nor do we have any desire to damage K2.’

Otto eased back, confused. ‘I would not have considered myself an impediment to that approach.’

‘My desire to keep you safe ... is the impediment.’

Otto studied Beesely for a moment. ‘What did you wish to do?’

‘To discuss it with you, let you think about it. Then, if you are in agreement, we will sharpen the front end of K2, increasing the offensive capability.’ Beesely eased back and waited.

Otto breathed out. ‘When I ... *sought you out* ... for the inheritance, I considered this, that you may wish to be ... *involved* in matters that have previously been outside of the normal work for K2.’

Beesely held up an open palm. ‘And?’

‘I wish K2 to be more involved in such matters, but I am not sure just how, or to what level.’

‘Then we shall have to discuss it on a case-by-case basis,’ Beesely suggested.

‘That would seem a reasonable course of action, Father.’

‘Father?’ Beesely repeated with a heavy frown. ‘I can honestly say ... that *that* is the first time in my life I have heard that word used about me.’ He shook his head. ‘It seems a bit alien.’

Otto stood up, smiling. ‘No need to worry, I am - as you say - house trained.’

‘Er ... Otto, we say that when our dogs stop shitting on the house floor, not for when children grow up and become independent!’

* * *

In the dungeon, Johno found Thomas cleaning the room. With a puzzled expression, he called the boy over, telling him to stop what he was doing. Noting the boy’s look, and wondering about the boy’s state of mind, Johno directed him towards the small firing range. Taking out his pistol, Johno released the magazine, and for ten minutes – talking both in German and English – went through the basics with Thomas, finally letting Thomas fire at a target, six rounds.

When he had finally secured a weak smile from the lad, he made him a cup of tea, sitting him down on the central sofa. With his own painful memories resurfacing, Johno began, ‘When I was young, before about age twelve, I was happy - me and my mum were good together. I used to look out for her as much as I could, help around the house, do the garden. I quite liked being the man of the house. And I was good in school, top marks in a lot of stuff.

‘But then she met a man, who was great to start with – the first year. He bought us stuff, took us out, the usual bollocks.’

‘Bollocks?’ Thomas quietly repeated.

‘Word means ... rubbish.’

Thomas seemed to understand, sat attentively listening and sipping his tea.

‘But from my room I could hear them having sex, and I didn’t like that.’ He glanced at the wall. ‘I didn’t like that at all.’

He lowered his head, staring into his tea for a moment. ‘One day he came home drunk and hit her, so I got in the way. He hit me. And that ... was the start of it all, my life took a left turn. Till I was thirteen he hit me and my mum when he was drunk. Then one day he went to prison suddenly, Beesely arranged it.’

‘Beesely?’ Thomas puzzled.

‘Mister Beesely is my real father, but he didn’t live with us.’

Thomas was surprised, but understood.

‘He found out that ... this man was hitting us both, so he had him sent to jail for two years, probably three if I remember right. When he came out he was told to stay away, which he didn’t. He turned up drunk one day - his mistake - *I* hit him.

‘And I kept hitting him every time I saw him. Once I hit him with a stick, once I threw a stone and nearly blinded him. After that he gave up. But I never really recovered from that; I didn’t like going to school much after him, and I failed the exams. I left school at fifteen with no qualifications, and I got a job as a car mechanic - I was good with engines. A year later I joined the Army.’

Thomas cradled his tea. ‘My mother was very nice.’ Johnno studied the boy, as Thomas continued, ‘My father, he went away when I was four, but I can remember some

things. Christmas was always very nice, sledging in the snow.'

'I used to like Christmas,' Johno said with a smile. 'But you know what made me the happiest? When I earned my first pay packet. I took it home and gave it *all* to my mum.'

Thomas nodded slowly, deep in his own thoughts. 'Yesterday, Mister Beesely was very sad, but he did not know my mother long.'

Johno considered his answer, taking a moment. 'He was sad for two reasons. First, the people who sent the bomb, they may have done it to kill Beesely - so he blames himself for her death. Second, Jane was his daughter, my half-sister.'

Thomas was shocked. 'She was a nice woman. We talked - but my English - not so good. You ... are very sad?'

'No, is the simple answer. I don't get sad, I get angry.' Thomas considered the words, looking perplexed. Johno added, 'If you want to survive in this world, learn the difference. Quickly. I was your age when I started to learn that lesson, I just wish it hadn't taken so long.'

* * *

Otto walked through the newly dedicated International Peace Garden in Bern, Minister Blaum at his side, tourists thronging around the blooming flowers. With their hands clasped behind their backs, they ambled along at a very slow pace.

'How has Beesely taken the death of his daughter?' Minister Blaum enquired without turning to face Otto as he spoke.

'Badly, as you can imagine.'

‘Yes, a great loss. And what effect does it have on our overall position?’

‘They have continued to recruit more ex-SAS soldiers, the training continues at a good pace.’

‘And their reaction to Rudenson?’

‘As anyone might expect, although Beesely was a little surprised by how far we went.’

‘As was I,’ the Minister unhappily stated, a quick glance at Otto.

‘We needed to send a message,’ Otto insisted.

‘And is there any evidence that ... our enemies were linked to Rudenson?’

‘Some, but tenuous. No direct link is evident, some loose associations.’

‘Do you believe it was them?’ the Minister probed, making way for a tourist taking photographs.

‘It is true that Gunter’s will mentioned a few political groups, in fact some of those that Rudenson worked with, as you are aware,’ Otto quietly explained as they walked along. ‘But the one suspicious fact is that they moved quickly after Gunter’s death, too quickly. They should have waited the statutory six months after his death for claims to be made against the estate and the will. That bomb must have been readied little more than six weeks after Gunter’s death, which we did not widely publicise.’

‘So, it *was* ... who we suspect.’

‘Only by indirect evidence. But yes, I believe so.’

‘They hoped the castle would be evacuated because of the gas.’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘I was surprised by the quick actions of the Americans and the Israelis,’ Minister Blaum pointedly remarked.

Otto stopped and faced the Minister. ‘As was I.’ They exchanged uneasy looks. Walking on, Otto added, ‘They are ... gearing up for a fight, as the English say. Our psychological assessment of Beesely was completely correct; he has no desire to sit on a beach, despite previous plans for such a move. He has told me that he wishes K2 to become more aggressive, to recruit more agents.’

‘And this man Johno?’

‘He is very good under pressure. He ... knows his craft, as Beesely says. And, strangely enough, he has taken our bellhop under his wing.’

‘The boy who was orphaned?’ the Minister puzzled.

‘Yes. They are spending a lot of time together, something else that has surprised me. Johno said today that Thomas reminds him of himself at that age, but that when he was that age he had no one to look out for him.’

‘Having read Johno’s file ... I would not have expected him to behave that way.’

They exchanged looks, walking on.

* * *

Henry faced Kirkpatrick across the highly polished galley table. It was 7.03am and raining in Washington, the yacht's brass barometer pointing to ‘Low’.

‘It’s very hard to call either way,’ Henry stated. ‘Everything Beesely has done has been to our advantage, and greatly so. We’re even meeting up next week in the Bahamas.’

‘But with the new strength of K2, can we take the risk of exposure?’ Kirkpatrick asked, of himself as much as of Henry. ‘After that bomb he will be on his guard, tougher than before. You saw what he did to the Nazi groups.’

Henry agreed with a nod. 'I've arranged the removal of our assets in Switzerland, but we'll need one hell of a distraction to get them out without being noticed.' He sighed. 'Decades of research have gone into this, it's too valuable to risk - it's either him or the project. No, Beesely may have to be sacrificed, and we'll have to make that decision soon.'

Epilogue

1

‘You’re not going to like this,’ Willis suggested as he entered Dame Helen’s office, reading from a file.

She put down her pen and looked up. ‘What now? It’s five o’clock on a Friday!’

‘Beesely,’ he carefully mouthed.

‘Oh.’ She took off her glasses and eased back into her chair.

‘We’ve gathered some *unofficial* intel’ from a variety of sources, details still sketchy, but the gist of it is here. Plus we had some *very* detailed info’ sent directly to us from the old boy himself.’

She rubbed the bridge of her nose. ‘Give me the highlights.’

‘Death count of thirty six around Europe –’

‘Dear God,’ she whispered, straightening.

‘And that number is still rising. Wounded: two hundred seriously, another two hundred moderately, some missing.’

‘Christ,’ she quietly let out.

‘Not a good week for neo-Nazi groups in Europe. All headquarters wrecked, funds gone missing, computers and files removed; this has set them back fifty years. No one willing to meet, all too scared.’

She raised her eyebrows. ‘Can you blame them? Did you say something was sent directly to us?’

‘*This* ... you’re not going to want to read before bedtime. They’ve made some improvements upon *getting the chair*.’

Her eyes widened. ‘Improvements?’

Again Willis looked pained. ‘A more effective punishment.’

‘More effective? Than *the chair*!’

‘More horrific, in a really perverted sort of way.’

She sighed and eased back. 'Just give me the main points, save the gore.'

'Well, I don't know what this guy did exactly, but he certainly made K2 mad. First, they rounded up a group of surgeons. Then they removed his toes, to clinical standards.'

'Clinical standards?' she puzzled.

'The aim was to make sure he lived to a ripe old age.'

'He's alive?'

Willis held up a hand. 'Let me plough through it, then you'll understand:

'They removed his toes. Then they removed two bones from inside each foot, hindering walking, they removed several key tendons from feet, ankles and legs, hindering but not preventing walking. And this is where the surgeons come in - done in such a way as to be irreversible by another surgeon.

'Knee sockets adjusted to give permanent discomfort. Nerve removed, to give semi-permanent lack of sensation down the left side. Two middle fingers of left hand removed, left thumb removed. All fingers of right hand removed, thumb left in place. All teeth except front four removed, two up and two down - looks like Bugs Bunny. Photo attached. Large swastika tattooed on forehead.' He finished reading and looked up.

'My God,' she let out.

'Best is yet to come. This guy was some sort of Nazi fundraiser apparently. Now he resides in a Jewish hospice somewhere under twenty-four-hour suicide watch. I guess his swastika tattoo won't make him too popular.'

'They're making him suffer,' she considered, rising and walking to the window. 'Not just for now, but for years to come; disabled enough to be in pain and discomfort, but not enough to be life threatening. Not a pleasant prospect, no chance of a quick death for him. And it's a clear warning to *others*.'

'It doesn't say what he did.'

‘I have an idea, which I am keeping to myself,’ she quietly stated. Then louder, ‘Oh, by the way, should we need it, Beesely has something on Rawlins.’

* * *

Guido Pepi sat back and read the report: ten ex-SAS troopers now in place in K2 and training the Swiss agents and guards, the facility decontaminated and now being decorated, the Swiss Government fully supporting Beesely. Rudenson, Graff and others, dealt with by K2, no track-back to him. And what they did to Rudenson ... a chilling threat. His shook his head, looking up and at the Cardinal.

The cleric reported, ‘My contact in the American Government is meeting with Beesely next week, in the Bahamas.’

‘Excellent. I look forward to hearing what he has to say.’

The cleric smiled, an unusual move for the man. ‘They have their own concerns about K2, but for other reasons. They have not mentioned the files, or *the list*. And they are preparing a contingency for destroying K2.’

Pepi stood, closing the distance to the cleric with a concerned frown. ‘They are?’

The Cardinal bowed his head, affirming the idea.

‘I will need as much detail as you have. Eminence!’

With the cardinal gone, a side door opened and a white-haired man stepped in. Speaking in German, the distinguished looking eighty-year-old said, ‘This suggested American attack is an opportunity, but also a great concern.’

Pepi agreed.

The new man added, ‘Any suggestion of them going for the files, and we must act swiftly. Plans need to be in place before then. At no cost can the Americans have those files.’

Beesely raised a hand against the bright sunlight, squinting across to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, Thomas by his side. Johno's heavy footfalls could be heard, plus the odd '*Piss off!*' to Palestinians selling posters of the famous view.

'Seen our boy?' Beesely asked without looking around.

Johno drew level, a plain-clothes police officer and uniformed soldier hanging back. He glanced at a tour guide pointing out towards the golden dome, the man's audience quietly attentive. 'Yep. I took him some grapes, some Lucozade and a porn magazine,' he joked, ruffling Thomas's hair and peering down over the railings at the white marble graves.

Beesely turned, and squinted a question at Johno.

'I spoke to him in German, and he seemed to perk right up. Then I said who I was and he got a bit misty, flew into a psychotic fit and they had to sedate him.' He shrugged. 'I think I stood on his foot by accident.'

'And is he ... in good health?'

Johno took in the view of the old walled city across the valley. 'Considering; he'll live a long time yet.'

Beesely turned back to the view. 'Otto still wearing his skull cap?'

'No, he took it off; he's a bit pissed off with Israelis,' Johno answered, glancing at a group of attractive young lady soldiers in drab green uniforms, their M-16s slung across their chests. 'Being a quarter Jewish doesn't make you popular around here – certainly not with a Swiss-German accent it don't. And when he told them he ran a Swiss bank...'

Beesely offered him a look of mock horror. 'Anyway, they like me well enough.' Johno faced him squarely. Beesely explained, 'When Otto first turned up in the UK I had him donate ten million pounds – my money technically – to Jewish foundations.'

'And?'

‘He was happy enough to do so. If he’d been Swiss, but lying about his Jewish heritage, then he would have choked on that bit. Then we gave Mossad money and he didn’t flinch. So, are we all packed?’

Johno stopped Thomas from dropping his apple-core onto the graves below, then put his hands in his pockets. ‘Yep. Where we off?’

‘Booked us a large villa in the Bahamas. You ... taking your young lady?’

‘Christ, no; you don’t take coal to Newcastle!’ Johno tipped his head. ‘We need a yacht, of course.’

‘Oh, of course,’ Beesely agreed with mock seriousness. ‘I couldn’t be head of a bank without a yacht. So, has a certain Internet model finally agreed to meet you?’

Johno was embarrassed. ‘How’d you know about that?’ He waved away a poster seller.

‘I’m a spymaster,’ Beesely pointed out, pride in his voice. ‘Well?’

‘Yeah, she said she would meet up.’

‘Thanks to me!’

Johno squinted at him. ‘What?’ he curtly demanded.

‘I spoke to her on your behalf.’

‘Why would she talk to you, wrinkly?’

‘You forget, young man, that I am a ‘Sir’, and the Yanks like nobility.’

Johno looked peeved. ‘C’mon, let’s go spend some money.’ They turned and stepped to the road. ‘Oh, by the way, we found out who was tailing Max.’

‘Whom, pray tell?’

Johno lit up. ‘His ex-wife got some detectives on him, she wants more money.’

Beesely smiled. ‘Leave them alone, serves him right.’ He lifted his satellite phone. ‘Put me through to the British Alzheimer’s Association.’

Johno turned his head, a broad smile taking hold.

‘Hello? How may I help you?’ came a professional female voice.

‘Hello? Beesely repeated.

‘Hello, sir. How ... can ... we ... help ... you?’

‘Why are you calling me?’ Beesely asked.

‘You rang us, sir. How can we help?’

‘I had a note to call you, but I can’t remember why.’

Johno laughed so loud that the receptionist cut the line. ‘Try this.’ He raised his own phone. ‘Put me through to the Australian Embassy, London, immigration enquiries.’ They waited. ‘I was hoping to emigrate to Australia, but I don’t have a criminal record. Is it still required?’

Beesely laughed, but Thomas was not following, the grown-ups trying to explain the jokes as they drove off.