

JAMES DEEGAN

THE ANGRY SEA

Some men will stop at nothing.
John Carr is one of them.

**'Brutal
and brilliant'**

TOM MARCUS
AUTHOR OF
SOLDIER SPY



James Deegan
The Angry Sea
Серия «John Carr», книга 2

Аннотация

‘Brutal and brilliant’ Tom Marcus, author of SOLDIER SPY Former SAS Sergeant Major John Carr is relaxing on a Spanish beach, when a man with dark eyes attracts his attention. Fixated on a group of young Britons, the man doesn’t notice Carr and soon moves on. Within the hour, the Costa del Sol will be plunged into one of the most audacious and horrifying terrorist attacks Europe has ever seen. In a co-ordinated strike, armed men storm both the beach and a cruise ship anchored further up the coast. But the terrorists – hiding personal greed under the veil of religious extremism – have an even bolder plan. Constrained by the sensitive political situation, MI6 and the Prime Minister must confront the possibility of leading a secret operation against a brutal enemy. And then find the right man to head it . . . Enter John Carr. Praise for The Angry Sea: ‘Packed with authentic detail about the defence and intelligence communities, it rattles along at a furious pace, never taking its foot off the accelerator. A terrific story splendidly told’ Daily Mail ‘***** . . . top actioner’ Weekend Sport ‘knows how to tell an unnervingly realistic story – and The Angry Sea is involving from the start and gripping to the end’ Choice Praise for James Deegan: ‘You couldn’t make it up.

Brilliant' Jeffrey Archer'Inevitably Deegan will be compared to Andy McNab and Chris Ryan, but he adds his own brand of contemporary authenticity. Carr is a hero for our times.' Daily Mail'As close as it gets to the real thing' Mark ' Billy' Billingham MBE. Former SAS Warrant Officer and star of TV's SAS Who Dares Wins'James Deegan writes with masterful authority and unsurpassed experience as he transports the reader deep into the troubles of Northern Ireland – and then brings them back up to date with a dramatic bang' Chantelle Taylor, Combat Medic and author of Battleworn

JAMES DEEGAN MC spent five years in the Parachute Regiment, and seventeen years in the SAS.

He served for most of that time in a Sabre Squadron, from Trooper to Squadron Sergeant Major, and saw almost continuous service on operations in Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Africa, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. He fought in both Gulf Wars, and was on both occasions amongst the first Coalition soldiers to cross the border into Iraq. He was twice decorated for gallantry and, on his retirement from the Special Air Service, as a Regimental Sergeant Major, he was described by his commanding officer as ‘one of the most operationally experienced SAS men of his era’.

He now works in the security industry, in some of the world’s most hostile and challenging environments. His first John Carr novel, *Once a Pilgrim*, was published in January 2018.

The Angry Sea

James Deegan

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SAS Who Dares Wins

‘James Deegan writes with masterful authority and unsurpassed experience.’

Chantelle Taylor, Combat Medic and author of Battleworn

‘Authentic detail and heart stopping narrative grips you from the outset bringing the shadowy world of today’s special forces bursting in to life in a way that other authors of the genre couldn’t hope for ... the best thriller I’ve read in years.’

Major Chris Hunter QGM, author of Eight Lives Down and

Extreme Risk

‘Exposes the raw with the reality. This is a gripping high intensity drama.’

Bob Shepherd, ex SAS Warrant Officer and bestselling author

‘Move over Andy McNab and Chris Ryan, there’s a new SAS veteran writing thrillers and he’s good. Very good.’

Stephen Leather

‘An impressive debut, that rates up there with Gerald Seymour and Fredrick Forsyth; blending a realistic vernacular of special forces soldiering to make a cracking read with page turning pace from start to finish.’

Stuart Tootal

TO ALL THE BRAVE MEN I HAVE KNOWN WHO WILL NOT SEE OLD AGE. THEY ACCEPTED THE RISKS, THEY STEPPED INTO THE BREACH, AND PAID THE ULTIMATE PRICE.

UTRINQUE PARATUS

WHO DARES WINS

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION.

NONE OF THE EVENTS DESCRIBED HAPPENED, AND NONE OF THE CHARACTERS CONTAINED IN THE NARRATIVE ARE BASED ON ANY PERSONS, LIVING OR DEAD, UNLESS EXPRESSLY STATED.



*O turn your eyes to where your children stand
From *The Story of Hassan of Baghdad and How He Came to
Make the Golden Journey to Samarkand* (1913)*

JAMES ELROY FLECKER (1884-1915)

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[PROLOGUE](#)

THE TWO MEN knew each other of old, having fought as brothers-in-arms in various places over many years, but they had not seen each other in person for a long time.

Life for men like them had become a good deal more challenging and dangerous since September 11, 2001, so their contact was restricted to darknet chatrooms, snatched conversations on encoded VOIP systems, and, once in a blue moon, cryptic notes passed via trusted intermediaries.

Their secret conversations through these unorthodox channels were often surprisingly banal. One would grumble about the filthy weather in the grubby little town in which he was currently hiding, and the other would counter with complaints about the terrible food in his present, miserable location.

On the rare occasions when the mood was lighter, they talked of happier times, and of their families. Each had a wife and children back home, but neither expected ever again to kiss his wife nor hold his children; the path they walked was a path of shadows and sorrow, and it led in one direction only.

Their lives were full of uncertainty, and privation, and fear, and precious few comforts and the wise man cut his ties, of friendship and of blood, permanently.

Death stalked them daily, and, being only human, they sometimes wondered how it was that they, who had given so much, had ended up living like rats, while others, who had given so little, lived like kings.

Why were *their* days all stone and no fruit, all grit and no pearl?

Of course, each tried hard to cast this unworthy thought from his mind; it was dangerous to harbour such ideas – and not merely in the spiritual sense.

That had been the way of their lives for so long that they had almost – almost – forgotten what it was like to live normally.

And then, one day, the younger of the two men contacted his older friend via a mobile telephony app with secure, end-to-end encryption.

After the usual small talk, the younger man – a giant Chechen called Khasmohmad Kadyrov, who was presently living in a cramped room in a safe house in Cairo – made a tentative suggestion.

Very tentative.

What, he asked, if there were a way in which they might *both* strike the enemy *and* – and he tried hard not to be vulgar about this – achieve a more... *earthly* reward for themselves?

At first, the older man – a Yemeni called Saeed al-Shafra – was sceptical, and even hostile.

But this was something of an act.

Al-Shafra was nearly sixty, now, and he had grown tired, and listless, and, as he looked around the spartan room, in his modest, baked-mud home, in the compound on the edge of the dusty village in the dreary Balochi outpost of Nushki, it occurred to him that he was perhaps even a little bitter about the turns his life had taken.

‘Go on,’ he said.

‘I have a friend,’ said Kadyrov, hesitantly. ‘A good friend, from the old days. I mean, a *long* way back – he’s from Veden, fought with the 055 at Mazar-e Sharif.’

‘I missed that party,’ said the Yemeni. ‘So many men, slaughtered like goats.’

‘Indeed,’ said Kadyrov. ‘But my friend was lucky. He got injured, some shrapnel took a chunk out of his right calf, so he got taken away before the massacre.’

‘In that sense,’ said the older man, ‘he *was* fortunate.’

‘I saw him last in Now Zad,’ said the Chechen. ‘Or perhaps the Korengal. I can’t remember, exactly. He’s a fighter, but lucky again, because the *Americans*’ – he almost spat the word – ‘they don’t know him. This is the beauty of it. Two years ago, he’s in Islamabad, he flies to Turkey, then travels to Germany. Nobody says a word to him, nobody even looks at him. For the last year, he is in England, in London. There he has made a very good contact, with someone who has a very interesting situation. Very interesting indeed. But we need funding and I know that you can find money for us.’

Khasmohmad Kadyrov talked some more, and the Yemeni called al-Shafra listened, and he smiled.

And the more he listened, the more he smiled.

And when Kadyrov had finished talking, Saeed al-Shafra looked out of his window, across the empty, sun-baked Balochi desert, which lay between his humble home and Afghanistan’s distant Helmand River, and he chuckled.

‘Oh, Khasmohmad,’ he said. ‘Khasmohmad, *Khasmohmad*. Truly, this is a gift from Allah.’

PART ONE

1.

AT SEVEN-THIRTY, half an hour before unlocking, the prison came banging and rattling and echoing to life.

But Zeff Mahsoud and his cellmate had been up since well before sunrise, in order to perform their *fajr*.

Now they sat facing each other, Mahsoud on a tubular chair pushed hard against the cream-painted wall, the other man on his steel-framed bed.

‘I have a good feeling about today, brother,’ said the cellmate. ‘I think it will be good news.’

‘*Inshallah*, Hamid,’ said Mahsoud. ‘Time will tell.’

‘Be confident. Tonight you will be in your wife’s arms. Tomorrow...’ Hamid paused, and lowered his voice. HMP Belmarsh was not a place which rewarded the incautious. ‘Tomorrow, who knows?’

Mahsoud smiled. ‘Who knows indeed?’ he said.

Lazily, he got up and walked to the cell door, bending down to pick up the breakfast tray which had been handed over the previous night.

A plastic bowl of own-brand cornflakes, a carton of UHT milk, and a bread roll: he curled up his lip.

‘You’ll visit my friend?’ said Hamid. ‘Like I said?’

‘If I am released...’

‘You will be.’

‘If I am released, then yes, I will visit your friend.’

‘He will be most interested to meet you. I think he will have very interesting proposals for you.’

‘I hope so.’

‘I *know* so. He has big plans. *Dramatic* plans.’

Zeff Mahsoud smiled.

Cornflakes in hand, he walked over to the small window, and looked up at the clear blue skies over south-east London.

Seven or eight miles away, over Bromley, a passenger jet was climbing away through 6,000ft.

Mahsoud watched it go.

Three hundred souls and a hundred tonnes of aviation fuel, in a thin aluminium tube.

So thin.

So vulnerable.

‘I have plans of my own, brother,’ he said.

But I’m afraid I cannot share them with you, he thought.

2.

SEVERAL MILES NORTH, on the other side of the river, Paul Spicer – senior partner at the human rights law firm Spicer, McGraw and Hill, and long a thorn in the side of the government – was already at his table in the Booking Office restaurant at the St. Pancras Renaissance Hotel.

He was eating a much grander breakfast, his plate piled high with crispy bacon and waffles, drizzled with maple syrup in the

American style.

He ate methodically, his chin wobbling as he chewed, pausing only to drink from his cup of strong black coffee.

Around him buzzed smart waitresses, eager waiters.

On his left, the morning *maitre d'* showed another small group of businessmen to their seats, smiling unctuously.

At 7.45 a.m., Emily Souster joined Spicer.

Slim and elegant in her grey trouser suit.

Roedean and Cambridge.

Blonde.

Stunningly pretty.

At one time, Spicer had half-hoped... But she'd made it quite clear that there was no chance of that.

Emily sat down and looked at him, eyebrows raised.

Said, in her cut-crystal Queen's English, 'How on *earth* can you eat that?'

'Easy,' he said, in his broad Leeds. 'Open your gob, shove it in, and chew.'

She shuddered. 'I'm a bag of nerves,' she said.

A waitress came over.

Took her room number and her order – no food, just a fresh pot of coffee and a glass of orange juice.

Spicer said, 'What's there to be nervous about?'

'Aren't you?' she said.

'No. I'm ninety per cent certain we're going to win. And even if we don't...'

Even if we don't, we bank our money and move on.

He left it unsaid.

Shot her a glance.

The junior solicitor sitting across the breakfast table from him was a true believer: a passionate human rights lawyer, a righter of wrongs, a romantic burner of midnight oils in pursuit of every cause she could find.

Why was it so often like that?

Emily had known every advantage in life – an ambassador father, the best education money could buy, a trust fund to fall back on... If you grew up like that, it allowed you the space to spend what felt like half the year working *pro bono*, seconded to crew aid convoys, and going on marches and demonstrations.

Whereas, if you grew up like *he* had – born to a single mum in Harehills, eating chip butties for tea, sharing bathwater with three brothers...

Make no mistake about it, he loved the challenge, loved picking holes in the government's cases, but if you came up like that then you knew the value of a quid.

'There's no *even if we don't*, Paul,' said Emily. 'We *have* to win. We can't let him rot in there for the next fifteen years.'

Spicer smiled absently.

'I'll say one thing, Emily,' he said, forking half a waffle into his mouth. 'It won't be for want of trying.'

3.

AS HE SAID that, Charlotte Morgan was getting out of the

shower of her flat in Pimlico, and wrapping a towel around her dripping body.

She opened the door and leaned out.

‘What time is it?’ she shouted, wrapping another towel around her wet hair.

‘Quarter to eight,’ came the reply from the bedroom. ‘You’ll be fine.’

‘Bloody alarm,’ said Charlotte, half to herself.

Eddie appeared in the doorway of their bedroom, in his boxers and a white T-shirt.

‘You’ll be *fine*,’ he said, again. ‘It’s only twenty minutes. I’ll make you a cup of tea and some toast.’

‘Half an hour, if the traffic’s bad,’ said Charlotte. ‘I need to be there by nine. And my hair’s still soaking.’

‘You just crack on,’ he said. ‘I’ll check the cab’s booked.’

He passed her, and they kissed, before he disappeared downstairs, and she walked through to the bedroom to begin drying her hair.

Clicked on the *Today* programme.

‘...in the case of Zeff Mahsoud.’

The voice of the BBC Radio 4 presenter drifted from the speaker.

‘Mr Mahsoud, a charity worker from Yorkshire, you’ll remember, was arrested after arriving home to the UK on a flight from North Africa. He maintained that he’d been on a humanitarian mission to Libya, but six months ago he was

given a lengthy jail sentence for terrorism-related offences. He has always protested his innocence, and an increasingly noisy campaign for his release has led us to the Court of Appeal where, later today, his case will be re-considered. Whatever their lordships decide, the appeal has thrown into sharp relief a number of questions about the operations of both MI5 and MI6, and...’

She clicked the clock radio off.

She most definitely *didn't* need that.

4.

AT JUST BEFORE 8 a.m., Zeff Mahsoud was taken from his cell to the holding area.

There he was handcuffed to a prison officer, who led him through three sets of steel doors to the cold air outside.

He breathed in deeply, despite the diesel fumes which were filling the vehicle yard.

Overhead, the blue sky was slowly clouding over, but still he felt an overwhelming sense of release.

No matter who you were, and what you were doing there, prison was prison, and Belmarsh was worse than most.

Several police officers, wearing body armour and carrying MP4s fitted with suppressors, watched with undisguised contempt as he was loaded into the back of a prison transport vehicle.

There was a short delay as they waited for an armed robber whose appeal was to be heard on the same day, and then the truck

fired up and lurched out of the prison gates, sandwiched between two Met Range Rovers and assisted by a pair of motorcycle outriders.

It's an hour dead from Belmarsh in Woolwich to the Royal Courts of Justice on the Strand – for ordinary vehicles.

With their sirens and blue lights, and the motorcyclists zipping ahead to hold up crossing traffic, they made it in forty minutes.

On arrival in the secure parking area, Mahsoud was debussed and led into a cell in the bowels of the court.

Paul Spicer and Emily Souster were waiting nearby, and were shown to the cell a few moments later.

Spicer and Mahsoud shook hands – Emily knew better than to offer hers – and Spicer cleared his throat.

'I'm pretty confident, Zeff,' he said. 'As discussed, we've a strong case and you'll not find a better pair to put it across than Jim Caville and Charlotte Morgan. But nothing in life is guaranteed, as I've said, and there's always the risk that the judges won't see it our way.'

Zeff nodded.

'It wouldn't necessarily be the end,' said Emily Souster. 'Even if they find against us, there are other avenues. The Supreme Court, the European Courts...'

Mahsoud held up his hand. 'Please,' he said. 'Don't worry. I have every confidence.'

For a moment, he looked almost preternaturally calm.

Then, as though he'd been in something of a daze, he shook

his head slightly.

‘But, of course,’ he said, ‘if we fail we will fight on.’

5.

THREE HOURS LATER, five people stood on the Strand in London, in the shadow of the Royal Courts of Justice, and waited for the hubbub to die down.

On the left were James Monroe Caville QC and his junior, Charlotte Morgan, in black gowns, barristers’ wigs in hand, smiling.

Then Emily Souster, carrying a leather case across her middle.

Next to her was Zeff Mahsoud, in a dark, ill-fitting suit, a serious, even angry, expression on his face.

And next to Mahsoud was Paul Spicer – pink and plump, and wearing collar-length hair and a suit which fit him very nicely indeed. Three thousand pounds, bespoke, from Gieves & Hawkes, so it should.

Spicer held up a hand. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, please,’ he said, raising his voice over the traffic noise. ‘I have a statement to read on behalf of my client, Mr Mahsoud.’

The hubbub slowly died down.

Spicer cleared his throat and looked down at the sheet of A4 paper in his hand.

‘Today is a great day for British justice and the British people, and a terrible day for the repressive agents of the British State,’ he read. ‘Two years ago, on my return to this country from a fact-finding and aid expedition to Libya, I was detained by the

border authorities at Gatwick Airport. I was held on remand for six months, and astonishingly, although I was wholly innocent, I was eventually convicted of several terrorism offences and given a substantial prison sentence. I have since served a further six months of that sentence. Today the Court of Appeal found that my convictions were unsafe.’

Paul Spicer paused for a moment, and looked at the assembled journalists. Then he continued to read.

‘I am grateful to their Lordships for their decision, but the story does not end here. It is no exaggeration to say that this whole experience has been a waking nightmare for me and my family, and I have asked my legal team to explore ways in which I can take action against the authorities for their disgraceful actions.’

Spicer paused again, and shot another glance at the reporters.

‘My release today would not have been possible without the tireless work of that legal team, especially Paul Spicer and Emily Souster of Spicer, McGraw and Hill, and my barristers, James Monroe Caville QC and his junior, Charlotte Morgan. I intend to spend the next period of time with my family, especially my young daughter, before considering that legal action, and exploring once again ways in which I can help the people of Libya, whose plight remains my main focus.’

Spicer folded the A4 sheet and slipped it into an inside pocket.

Then he looked up once again. ‘The last year or so has been very trying and stressful for Mr Mahsoud, as I’m sure you can imagine,’ he said. ‘I would request very strongly that you allow

him and his family time and space to decompress and recover from this ordeal. He will take no questions today. That is all. Thank you.'

With that, the five turned and walked back into the Royal Courts.

Once they had re-cleared security, they made their way to the consultation room which had been booked for the duration of the appeal hearing.

Three days, they had expected.

'What the hell happened in there then, James?' said Spicer, as he closed the door. He shook his head in something that looked like amused wonder. 'I mean, we had a good shout, anyway, but once they withdrew the sources...'

'Just give thanks, Paul,' said the QC, unbuttoning his starched collar. 'It's a lot easier when the other side makes your argument for you.' He chuckled. 'I'll have a chat with Bernard later, but I suppose they just saw the writing on the wall. Charlotte should take a lot of the credit for that.'

Charlotte Morgan blushed. 'I don't think I did very much,' she said. 'I'd say it was Emily, more than me.'

'I always thought there was a chance they'd fold if we could put them on the spot over their covert sources,' said Emily Souster, her eyes almost ablaze. 'But even I didn't expect it to be as easy as that.'

Coffee was poured, and drunk, and there was the usual small talk which follows the end of a major case.

After twenty minutes or so, James Monroe Caville looked at his watch, stood up, and reached for his collar and wig and black leather box briefcase.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘There’s no rest for the wicked. My clerk has managed to squeeze in a con in Chambers at two, so I must bid you *adieu*. Best of luck, Mr Mahsoud.’

‘Thank you,’ said Zeff Mahsoud with a nod and a distant smile.

‘I’ll see you to the door,’ said Spicer. ‘While we have you, there’s another little matter that we need to run by you. Emily, do you mind...?’

He indicated that Souster should accompany them.

‘I’ll be back in a few minutes,’ she said, before following the two men.

Once they had left, Zeff Mahsoud turned to Charlotte Morgan.

‘I’d like to thank you for your assistance also, Miss Morgan,’ he said, in an accent that hovered somewhere between Bradford and the tribal badlands of southern Waziristan. ‘I was worried that we might not succeed.’

‘You can never be certain,’ she said. ‘But once they withdrew the evidence from those sources it was really only going to go one way.’

‘It has been a very difficult time for me.’

‘I’m sure it has. But it’s over now.’

‘Yes,’ said Mahsoud. ‘Well, as I say, I am grateful.’

He paused for a moment.

Then he said, 'I suppose you're very busy also?'

'Rushed off my feet,' she said, with a laugh. 'But it's better than the alternative.'

'I expect you are looking forward to your holiday,' he said, with a smile. 'Spain, I think you said?'

'Oh, goodness, yes,' she said. 'I'm shattered. Yes, my boyfriend and I are going with some friends at the beginning of August. Emily, too.' She nodded at the door through which Souster had left. 'Can't wait.'

'I had the greatest holiday ever in Barcelona,' said Zeff Mahsoud, sitting forward in his seat. He paused. Then he added, with a twinkle in his eye, 'And, of course, Spain was a muslim territory from 717.'

'Bit before my time,' said Charlotte Morgan, with a laugh.

'Wonderful galleries and architecture,' said Mahsoud.

'In Barcelona?' said Charlotte. She began gathering up her papers, and stood up. She smiled. 'So I believe. But too much culture never did a girl any good. It's Marbella for me, I'm afraid. I'm all about the sun, sea and sand.'

6.

LATE THAT EVENING, after he had travelled north from Euston, and been reunited with his wife and their daughter, Zeff Mahsoud slipped out of the family home.

He had an important call to make, to a keeper of secrets.

It was the first of many.

PART TWO

THREE MONTHS LATER

JOHN CARR LAY on a white towel in the hot sand, propped up on his elbows, staring out at the tranquil Mediterranean Sea.

Gentle waves – no more than ripples – broke, soft and frothy, on the beach.

Close to the shore, the Med was striped in dazzling turquoise shades, decorated with playful flashes from the noonday sun; further out, the waters turned a dark and mysterious blue, flat calm but hiding myriad untold secrets in their timeless depths.

It was very beautiful, Carr had to admit.

But despite that he was as restless as ever.

There were things John Carr liked about beaches, and things he didn't.

The things he liked were good-looking young women in bikinis – who often liked him right back.

The things he didn't like were sand, heat, flies, screaming kids, lying around doing nothing, and being caught looking at good-looking young women in bikinis by his teenaged daughter.

There was plenty of eye candy in the vicinity, but Alice was immediately to his left.

Stretched out on her towel, wearing mirror shades.

He *thought* she was asleep, but he couldn't be sure, because he couldn't see her eyeballs, because of the mirror shades.

So he kept his own eyes front.

John Carr had retired from 22 SAS as a Squadron Sergeant

Major, having fought his way across every theatre of operations from the first Gulf War onwards in a long and distinguished career.

He'd twice been decorated for gallantry – not for nothing had he been known as 'Mad John' – and he had taken no shit from anyone in a very long time indeed.

But Alice, seventeen years old, and sixty-two kilos wringing wet, could bring him to heel with one withering look and a few choice words.

He wasn't sure what they were filling her head with at Cheltenham Ladies' College, for his thirty-five grand a year, but a lot of it seemed to revolve around the patriarchy, feminism, and the objectification of women.

It mystified Carr, who'd grown up in the 1980s on the streets of the rough Edinburgh suburb of Niddrie: he respected birds, right enough, but since when had it become a sin to fucking *look* at them?

Still, better safe than sorry.

He rubbed the livid, inverted-crescent scar on his chin, and stared dead ahead.

They were twenty metres from the sea.

It really was beautiful.

Shame about those screaming kids.

One of them was really wailing now – he'd dropped his ice cream in the water, snot was bubbling from his nose, and his fat, orange, German dad was trying to calm him down.

Shame about the kids, and a shame about the sand in Carr's shorts, too.

And in the crack of his arse, and between his toes, and gritty in his mouth.

He sighed, and looked to his right.

His son George – seven years older than Alice – was eyeing up a couple of pretty Spanish girls, his own girlfriend face-down on her towel and oblivious.

Beyond George, a couple of older blokes casually ogled Alice as they trudged by.

Carr stared at them, hard, and once they caught his eye, and clocked his menacing physique, they looked quickly away and moved on.

He glanced down between his legs and flicked at a piece of dried seaweed with a grey driftwood twig.

Funny how life turns out.

You grow up in a council tenement block, surrounded by concrete, broken glass and graffiti, you don't expect to find yourself rubbing shoulders with Europe's filthy rich on a beach at Puerto Banús.

Back home in the UK, Carr's day job was as head of London security for the Russian oligarch Konstantin Avilov. Earlier in the year Carr had taken out a Ukrainian hitman who had tried to kill his boss on the streets of London, as part of the ongoing, low-level power struggle which increasingly stretched out from Moscow in every direction around the globe.

As a thank you, his boss had given him a big payrise, and a Porsche Cayenne – bit tacky, for Carr’s taste, so he’d quickly swapped it for a classy 5.0L V8 Supercharged Range Rover, in Spectral British Racing Green.

Avilov had insisted, too, that he take a couple of weeks at his Marbella villa, a ten-bedroomed, chrome-and-white monument to vulgarity, in a gated community five minutes away at Vega del Colorado.

Take the family, Johnny. It’s a thank you for everything what you done for me.

Including saving my life, he hadn’t said.

But both men knew.

A woman in her early thirties came into his eyeline, canvas bag in hand and diaphanous sarong hugging her hips, and gave him a long look through her Dior shades as she passed by.

Carr grinned at her, and then she was gone.

He looked at his watch.

One o’clock.

God, he was bored.

Sitting here, slowly chargrilling himself to death, in the heat of a Spanish midday in early August.

Christ, the heat.

Unlike many Scots, he was dark-haired and he tanned easily. Added to which, he’d spent enough time in hot, sandy places – carrying a rifle, 100lbs of kit and ammo in his webbing and bergen, *and* wearing a lot more than a pair of shorts – to have

got used to it.

But somehow Afghan heat, Iraqi heat, African heat, didn't feel so bad.

He grinned to himself: maybe it was the rounds cracking off past your swede. That had a funny way of putting things like the ambient temperature into context.

The two pretty Spanish girls got up and wiggled and jiggled off down to the water, giggling as they went.

Carr risked a quick glance.

Caught George's eye.

'You sad bastard,' said his son, with a grin and a shake of his head. 'You sad, *sad* bastard.'

8.

SIXTY KILOMETRES NORTH-EAST, the MS *Windsor Castle* sat at anchor on Pier 1 of Málaga's Eastern dock.

On the bridge, the captain – an Italian, Carlo Abandonato – sipped his coffee and studied the latest weather reports.

In a few hours, they would be underway again, heading up and through the Strait of Gibraltar, three days out from Southampton on the final leg of the cruise.

The Strait could be a tricky little stretch, even for a ship such as the *Windsor Castle*, which – while not in the front rank of such vessels – was relatively modern and well-equipped.

The convergence of the roiling Atlantic with the almost tideless Mediterranean, in that narrow channel where Africa stared down Europe, created strange and unpredictable currents,

and local weather conditions could make that much worse.

The cold Mistral, blowing down from the Rhone Alps, could quickly turn a warm summer's day such as this a bitter, wintry grey, and when the Levante blew across from the Balearics it often brought with it a sudden summer fog.

Worst of all was the Sirocco, which whipped up heavy seas and hurled sand from the distant Sahara at you in a blinding fury.

But today the water was duckpond flat, the wind no more than a warm breath, and the radar was set fair for the next few days.

Good news for Captain Abandonato, good news for the crew, and good news for the five hundred passengers who were currently drinking, eating, and sunbathing on the six decks behind and beneath him, or enjoying lunch ashore in one of Málaga's many excellent restaurants.

He was looking forward to getting to Southampton; from there he would head up to Heathrow to fly home on leave to Civitavecchia.

His wife was expecting their second child – a son, the doctors had said – and was due to give birth the day after he arrived home.

Abandonato had booked a whole month off to spend time with Maria and their children.

He was looking forward to it so much it hurt.

It was always a wrench to leave, but at least it paid the bills: Maria was under an excellent but cripplingly expensive obstetrician, they were looking to move to a bigger house inland, near the lake at Bracciano, and their daughter was down for one

of Roma's best private nursery schools.

Such things did not come cheap.

He finished his coffee and looked at his watch.

Shortly after 13:00hrs.

He turned to his Norwegian staff captain, the second-in-command and the man who really drove the boat.

'I'm going to freshen up and then have a walk round and see how the passengers are, Nils,' he said. 'Let's have dinner together later?'

'Sure,' said Nils.

Abandonato pulled on his cap, straightened the epaulettes on his crisp, white shirt, and left the bridge.

9.

A GUY WITH dark eyes came out of nowhere and walked in front of John Carr.

There he stopped, temporarily blocking Carr's view of the sea.

Flip-flops in hand, white three-quarter length linen trousers, billowing ivory shirt.

Flashy gold watch, which stood out on his tanned wrist.

Another Eurotrash millionaire, thought Carr.

The place was crawling with them.

Carr thought at first that the guy was staring at *him*, and Carr didn't like being stared at, but then he realised that the man's eyes had swept on, and that he was looking *past* him at another bunch of people.

Five seconds he stared, and then he carried on walking.

At which point Carr looked closer, his eye drawn by the guy's odd, limping gait, and the deep scar on his right calf, where something had taken a big bite out of the muscle.

It looked to Carr like shrapnel damage, something he'd seen plenty of.

As the guy moved away, almost unconsciously, from force of habit, Carr stored his image in the vast filing cabinet in his head.

Longish black hair, wavy and greasy, held back by a pair of Oakleys pushed up on his forehead.

Dark eyes.

Kind of a cruel mouth.

Lopsided walk.

And that big, pink hole in his right leg.

Once inside Carr's head it would never leave. He had an uncanny knack for remembering stuff like this – the skill had been honed during his near-two decades in the Special Air Service, and it had often proved invaluable on ops.

He looked over his right shoulder at the group the guy had been eyeballing.

Four young couples were in the process of laying out their towels, paperbacks, and iPads.

Their pale skin, Boden and Crew kit and beach cricket gear, would have marked them out as members of the British middle class, even if their accents had not confirmed it.

'For goodness' sake, Jemima,' one of the young men was saying, 'I thought *you* were bringing the Kindle.'

‘Oh piss off, Thomas,’ said Jemima. ‘You’re really getting on my nerves today.’

‘Yeah, Tom,’ said one of the others, good-naturedly. ‘Take a day off, why don’t you? What are you reading, anyway? *Fifty Shades of Grey*?’ There was a ripple of mocking laughter and jeers. ‘Right, who’s coming in?’

The second speaker pulled off his T-shirt and headed for the water, followed by three of the girls.

Very tidy, thought Carr. Especially the tall brunette, and the blonde girl in the shocking pink bikini.

He could see why the guy with the gammy leg had been gawping at them.

But it wasn’t worth the aggro, not with Alice by his side and George running his gob, so he turned his head and looked conspicuously in the opposite direction.

Way off at the top of the beach, unnoticed by Carr or anyone else, a young man in cut-off denim shorts and a Manchester United replica shirt hung around under a palm tree, and made a phone call.

As he did so, he watched the new arrivals keenly – though he took care not to show it.

The call was answered a hundred metres away, by the man with the dark eyes and the cruel mouth.

He was by now standing on the deck of a powerful white yacht, moored up in the marina at the extreme western edge of the Puerto Banús beach, at the end of Calle Ribera.

The open sea a matter of metres away.

‘Yes,’ said Dark Eyes. ‘Keep watching them, and await further instructions.’

He killed the call, stood up, pulled his Oakleys down from his forehead, and stuck a Marlboro Light in his mouth.

The dark-eyed man did indeed look like a member of the wealthy, leisured Eurotrash, who idled their summers away sailing around the Med, their winters in Klosters and Courchevel 1850, and the rest of the year drinking pink champagne at 38,000 feet.

But the flashy gold Rolex was fake, and the linen trousers stolen, and John Carr was quite correct about the damage to his leg – it had been caused by a piece of red-hot Hazara shrapnel at Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan, in 1997.

He was actually a Chechen, called Argun Shishani, and he was not the owner of the boat, the Mistral 55 class *Lucky Lady*.

He was merely borrowing it from someone – someone who, admittedly, would never need it again.

He had chosen this particular boat because its twin 7,400hp Codag engines made it capable of more than fifty knots – 52kts, to be precise, or 96kph, or a shade under 60mph.

And because it had a mooring ticket at Puerto Banús.

Argun Shishani threw his half-smoked cigarette into the water.

Watched in amusement for a moment or two as a dozen silver sardines flashed in and fought over it.

Then looked up at the endless blue sky, smiled, and went below to make the final preparations.

10.

CARLO ABANDONATO HAD taken time to walk around the sun deck, and all looked in order.

About half of the *Windsor Castle's* passengers had gone ashore, and those who had remained were sipping cocktails, splashing in the pool, or slowly giving themselves skin cancer in the roasting sun.

It was a mid-range boat, so they were mostly families and a few pensioners – the bulk of them British with a few Americans, Canadians and Europeans thrown in.

A young woman waylaid him as he walked by, and Abandonato stopped to crouch down by her sun lounger.

She was a Londoner, he thought, and not unattractive, and she was flirting furiously; her husband was taken up with their toddler, and either didn't notice or was used to it.

'So how do I go about getting an invitation for dinner at the Captain's table?' the young woman was saying, looking at him over her sunglasses.

'It's a big mystery,' said Abandonato, smiling. He was a handsome man, and he knew it, but he seemed to exert a particularly hypnotic effect on English women which he had never really understood. 'The *maître d'* has his ways, but I'm afraid I leave it to him.'

'Well, tell him Becky in 414 on deck four would like to come,'

she said, with a conspiratorial grin. ‘Just me, my husband will be busy with our daughter.’

‘Oi, oi,’ said the husband, distractedly.

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ said Abandonato, standing up. ‘Everything else is okay for you?’

‘Wonderful,’ said Becky, looking him up and down. ‘The view especially.’

Carlo Abandonato chuckled and walked on, heading to the elevator.

He’d travel a deck down, to two of the ship’s three restaurants, to make sure the lunch service was going well.

After that, he’d book himself off for an hour, go back to his cabin, and call his wife via the sat-link.

Then back to the bridge, go through the departure checks ready for 17:00hrs, when they were due to weigh anchor and be on their way.

He smiled to himself as the elevator doors closed and he started sinking.

There were worse jobs in the world.

11.

EIGHTY FEET BENEATH him, below the waterline, in the belly of the *Windsor Castle*, Farouk Ebrahim stood in the humming, throbbing engine room of the huge ship, looked at the wall clock, and spoke to the first engineer.

‘Excuse me, boss,’ he said, wiping his hands on a rag. ‘Is okay if I go toilet?’

The first engineer – an experienced ex-Royal Navy man called Phil Clarke – glanced at Ebrahim over his clipboard.

‘Again, Farouk?’ he said. ‘That must be the fifth time today.’

‘Sorry, boss,’ said the young Filipino motorman, putting the rag into the pocket of his red overalls. ‘I have a problem in my stomach.’

Clarke scratched his head. There wasn’t much doing – the engines were only running to generate power – and Farouk seemed like a good kid.

Not long on the crew, but eager to learn, and well aware of his place in the scheme of things.

‘Okay,’ said Clarke. ‘But don’t take all day, yeah?’

Ebrahim nodded and hurried from the engine room, and up and out to the tender station on deck three.

He squeezed himself out of sight in between two of the boats and leaned on the rail, breathing deep in the sea air.

He still couldn’t believe how easy it had been to get hired, and how lax was the security. His interview for the *Windsor Castle* – a ship carrying five hundred Westerners, each paying a king’s ransom to float around half-naked, eating, and drowning themselves in alcohol – had taken no more than half an hour, and only five per cent of bags were screened coming aboard.

You could get *anything* on.

Especially if you knew the guy doing the screening.

Perhaps it was not surprising that half the crew were alternately getting high on cocaine, or mellowing out on hashish.

Or that he and a few fellow travellers had managed to slip through the net.

He looked out at the Mediterranean, shimmering in the heat haze.

He was from a long line of Mindanao fishermen, and the chances were that, at this exact moment, seven or eight thousand miles away, his father was chugging back towards the twinkling early evening lights of the harbour at General Santos City to offload his day's catch.

Saltwater ran through Farouk Ebrahim's veins, and the sea looked particularly beautiful today – so beautiful that he could have cried.

And, in fact, he did.

The tears came with a rush, as a sudden melancholia broke over him.

But they'd warned him to expect this, and as quickly as the tears had come they were gone.

He wiped his cheeks dry with the backs of his greasy hands and pulled himself together.

In another life, he would perhaps have joined his father and his uncle in their little wooden, three-man pump boat – would have spent his days pottering around the Sarangani Bay looking for mackerel and anchovies, and maybe a few bigeye scad, to sell at the bustling market.

He'd have got married, raised a family, lived as his ancestors had lived for generations, more or less.

But Allah had had other plans for him, and if He called then you answered.

Still, the calm, electric-blue sea... he could almost taste its fresh salt, feel its ancient and mystical powers cleansing his body and soul.

For a fleeting moment, he actually thought about jumping overboard.

But then, in his mind's eye, he saw the pride on his father's face, and it lent steel to his spine.

He would not let anyone down.

12.

SIXTY KILOMETRES BACK down the coast, in the luxurious, cream leather lounge on the lower deck of the *Lucky Lady*, Argun Shishani had his mobile phone to his ear once again.

He made two calls.

The first was to a Yemeni security guard on the MS *Windsor Castle*, who quickly passed on the message to a pair of Moroccan waiters.

The second was to a young Mindanaoan in greasy red overalls on the same ship.

When Farouk Ebrahim finished taking that second call, he looked down at the phone in his hand and thought for a moment.

Perhaps a quick call, to his mother, to tell her that he loved her, and was thinking of her?

But he quickly cast the notion from his mind – he did not want to cloud his mind with unnecessary emotions, and, more

importantly, he did not want what he was about to do to come back to his family.

His trainers had warned him repeatedly of the fearsome reach and expertise of the Western intelligence agencies, and he knew that, in the coming days, every call made to and from the *Windsor Castle* on this voyage would be followed up and analysed.

So, instead, he took a final, longing look at the sea – was it his imagination, or were the waves getting up a little? – and whispered a quick prayer before throwing the mobile overboard into the eternal depths.

His last connection with the material world – the world of men, the world he despised – was gone: now there could be no turning back.

Ebrahim squeezed back out from between the lifeboats and hurried back inside.

First he went to the cabin he shared with an Indonesian oiler.

After a few minutes, he left the cabin and walked back down to the engine room of the *Windsor Castle*.

First engineer Phil Clarke was standing looking up at the various monitors and LCD panels, clipboard still in hand.

Off to the side, the third engineer was talking an engine cadet through a minor issue they'd had with one of the oil pressure gauges.

No-one paid the young Filipino any notice.

Until he walked up behind Clarke and, without warning, plunged a kitchen knife into his upper back.

The blade slid off the edge of Clarke's right scapula, bending under the force of the blow, and plunged through his right lung, clipping the edge of his heart, and burying itself in the cartilage where his ribcage met his sternum.

The first engineer fell forward and hit the floor, gasping and dying, blood flowering on his shirt and spurting onto the steel deck.

The motorman calmly looked down at him and then turned round.

The two other men were staring at him in horror.

The third engineer, torque wrench hanging slack in his hand, took a step forwards.

'What...?' he said.

But he got no further.

Ebrahim, his mind and body fizzing with adrenalin and hope, raised his arms above his head, as his instructor had shown him, to arm the built-in mercury tilt-switch attached to the suicide vest that he was now wearing underneath his red overalls.

In the event that anyone tried to take him down, that switch would initiate the eight one-kilogram blocks of military-grade C4 plastic explosive, each taped up with approximately two hundred steel ball-bearings, which were sitting in the pouches of the hand-made canvas waistcoat.

Unbeknownst to Ebrahim, the vest contained a further switch, which meant that the device would detonate if he tried to remove it once it was clipped on.

This was designed to deal with any change of heart on the part of the young martyr.

But he had no such change of heart.

‘Allahu akbar!’ he shouted, staring at the two men in front of him. ‘Allahu akbar!’

At the same time, he closed his fist around the button in his hand, which was attached by two feet of copper wire to the electrical detonator on his vest. The wires met, and the contact sent a pulse to the detonator, the resultant explosion in turn initiating the detonation cord linking the blocks of C4. The det cord exploded at 8,000 metres per second, igniting the C4 and spreading 1,600 ball bearings out through 360 degrees with the destructive force of a thousand shotguns.

The explosive energy turned Farouk Ebrahim into a pink mist where he stood.

A millisecond later the molten shrapnel destroyed all of the computers and levers and LCD screens and gauges in that end of the engine room, threw the four Converteam/Rolls-Royce engines instantly offline, and shredded the other men.

They did not even register the flash of the explosion which obliterated them.

13.

UP ON THE BRIDGE of the MS *Windsor Castle*, the power surged and died, and then the emergency batteries came on line.

A second later, a red light began flashing, and a horn started sounding.

Fire in the engine room.

The staff captain wasn't unduly disturbed – on a vessel of this sophistication, it was far more likely that this was a false alarm, linked to whatever had caused the engines to shut down, than that there was an actual fire.

But still.

He knew that the ship's duty fire control party would have received the alarm on their personal radios, but he called the head of the party anyway and made sure he was *en route*.

He had a quick look at the fire suppression system – it was showing deployed, which meant a fine drizzle was already descending in the compartment; if it was not cancelled it would be followed shortly by a mixture of argon, nitrogen, and carbon dioxide.

Still not overly troubled – this was an automatic response to an alarm, false or otherwise – he keyed in the command to close the fire doors in that zone of the ship, before glancing up at the overhead CCTV panel.

It was divided up into many dozens of small images; he called up a new screen showing the six views of the engine room.

All were blank.

He grunted in surprise.

Okay, now that *was* concerning.

He immediately put an intercom call out to the men down there.

No reply.

Tried first engineer Phil Clarke on his personal radio, with the same result.

Well, Houston, he thought to himself, *perhaps we do have a problem.*

He checked the ambient temperature sensors – they were elevated.

He clicked his own radio again.

‘Captain to the bridge, please,’ he said. ‘Quickly.’

Then he called the second deck officer, whom he knew was in his cabin not far from the engines.

The man picked up quickly.

‘Jerry, it’s Nils,’ said the staff captain. ‘Can you do me a favour? The engines have gone offline, there’s a fire alarm down there, and I can’t raise Phil Clarke or anyone else. Fire control are on their way, but would you mind just going along and telling me what’s going on?’

‘Sure,’ said Jerry.

The staff captain ran through some checks on his bridge systems, and then made another attempt to contact the engine room on the comms.

Same result.

His radio crackled.

It was Jerry.

‘Nils,’ he said, ‘it’s me. It’s... it’s a bit weird down here. I can definitely smell burning, but the door’s locked somehow. And one of the junior engineers reckons he heard a loud bang from

inside about a minute ago.’

‘*Shit*. Are fire control there?’

‘Yes, we’re forcing it. We’ll be inside in thirty seconds.’

‘Okay,’ said Nils. ‘Keep me in the loop. I’ll need to know whether it’s a general evacuation situation in...’ He looked at his watch. ‘In one minute. If I don’t hear from you, I’m calling it.’

‘Roger that. We’re nearly through.’

14.

FAR ABOVE, CAPTAIN Carlo Abandonato had known that the engines had stopped – he’d felt the slight change in vibration, and had seen the momentary dimming of the lights – but he was not terribly concerned.

They were not scheduled to shut down, but things cropped up now and then.

He assumed that Phil Clarke and his team had noticed something – almost certainly nothing major, the damned things had under 6,000 hours in them since a complete rebuild – and had taken them off for a short while to sort it out.

Clarke had done twenty-two years in destroyers in the British navy, and was fresh from a three-day manufacturer’s refresher course at Rolls-Royce Marine; it couldn’t be anything that he couldn’t fix.

Still, Abandonato had been keen to get back up to the bridge, and his unease had doubled or trebled with the radio message from the staff captain.

So now – careful to look smooth and unflustered – he took

his leave of the tables full of family diners and walked out of the burger restaurant.

It was as he was starting upwards in the elevator that he heard the first shots.

And then the human sounds of fear and horror.

Outside, unseen by the captain, the Yemeni security guard, called by Argun Shishani from the yacht along the coast at Marbella, was standing on the sun deck with an AK47, taking aimed shots at the sunbathers and swimmers in and around the pool.

Several people were already floating in red-tinted water, and others were scrambling to get away.

The Yemeni had been chosen for this operation precisely because he was battle-hardened; he had cut his teeth on the US Marines in the Second Battle of Fallujah, during the insurgency in Iraq, and had travelled the Middle East and Africa throughout the years that followed, fighting the kuffar in the name of Allah.

He'd spent most of the recent past fighting the Pesh and the al-Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq, and the YPG and others in Syria.

He was remorseless and dedicated: he accepted that death would embrace him today, and he welcomed the fact.

He thought of his friends, men who had gone before him and died in the same glorious cause, and he smiled.

This was for them: he would see them soon.

He had ten magazines of thirty rounds each on his chest rig, and he intended to make as many of those rounds count as

possible.

He took aim at a young child, standing by a gangplank on the deck below, screaming in frozen fear next to its dead mother, and heard the click as the hammer of his weapon struck an empty chamber.

His magazine empty, he allowed it to hang free on its sling, and took a grenade – a Swiss-manufactured L109A1, liberated from a British Army stores in Germany, on a four-second fuse – from his bag.

Leaned against the guard rail.

Pulled the pin.

Almost casually, he threw the grenade over the side at the child, and the panicking stream of humanity – if you could use that term to describe the dogs who were running like cowards down the nearest gangplank.

The grenade detonated with a dull crump, killing the child and two others outright and wounding many more.

Smiling, he reloaded the AK, fired a dozen rounds into the survivors and then turned and walked in the direction of the cabins in search of more victims.

It was a good day to die, here in the land of the infidel, bringing terror to the enemy, and his womenfolk, and his young.

15.

BY NOW, CARLO Abandonato had reached the bridge deck, his blood running alternately cold and hot.

He found the bridge empty, the staff captain and the navigator

having leaped overboard into the warm embrace of the Med when the shooting began.

‘Merda!’ spat Abandonato. ‘Bastardi codardi!’

He activated the *Windsor Castle*’s distress beacon, picking up the ship-to-shore telephone – as though the authorities were not already aware of what was happening.

He pressed the click-to-talk.

And then he saw movement outside.

A young man.

Abandonato recognised him.

An assistant purser?

No, a waiter.

Either way, it didn’t matter – he was here, and he could help.

‘You,’ said Abandonato, in English. ‘You need to get below and get as many passengers as possible off this damned ship. Boats, gangways, tell them to jump overboard... anything.’

In response, the man said nothing, but raised his arm.

Something in his hand.

Abandonato ducked instinctively as the man fired, and the shot passed two feet over his head and spidered the bridge windscreen.

Deafened, the captain scabbled left, hidden from view by the centre console.

His mind was scrambled.

He could hear the man’s feet slapping on the deck as he walked across to get another shot at him.

Abandonato looked wildly around.

The main door was ten feet away.

There was no way he could make it.

He felt a terrible sense of despair, and of resignation – but luck was on his side.

Fleetingly.

The shooter had suffered a stoppage – the empty cartridge, which should have been cleanly ejected, had stuck in the breech and jammed the pistol. He'd gone through the clearance drill a thousand times, but the shock of the moment had fried his brain and turned his fingers to thumbs, and he was fumbling with the slide.

It gave Abandonato the moment he needed.

His eye lit upon the drawer above his head.

The Very pistol.

Keeping low, he pulled open the drawer and groped for the pistol.

His hand closed around the grip.

Felt for a flare.

Found one.

Hands trembling, he loaded the gun.

As he snapped it shut, he saw the shooter's legs appear at the edge of the console.

Heard the sound as the man racked the top slide to load another round into the breech, ready to finish the job.

Abandonato crossed himself, offered a prayer to his own God,

and launched himself at the guy with the gun, yelling ‘Segaiolo!’

The shooter rocked back on his heels in surprise at the sight of the captain coming for him, tripped on his own feet, and fell onto his arse.

If Abandonato had pressed home his attack in the second, second-and-a-half, that his enemy was disoriented, he might have prevailed.

But instead he hesitated.

And now the attacker raised his pistol and fired from eight or nine feet away.

The round hit the skipper in the right side of his groin and knocked him backwards like he’d been kicked by a mule. There was remarkably little pain – his left brain noted this fact with no little surprise, even as his right brain was overwhelmed with shock and alarm – but the bullet had severed his femoral artery and his life was now measured in seconds.

Still prone, the attacker pulled the trigger again, but the top slide was back and jammed again – the curse of cheap ammunition – and the weapon didn’t respond.

He pulled the trigger again – frantically – and then smashed the thing on the deck, in a futile attempt to clear it.

And then looked up at the captain.

Saw the Very pistol.

The boot suddenly on the other foot, his bottle went.

‘No,’ he screamed, holding up a hand. ‘No!’

Staggering forward, pumping blood, Abandonato raised the

pistol and fired the flare into the other man's face from a distance of three feet.

Fifty grams of potassium perchlorate, dextrin, and strontium nitrate entered the terrorist's right eye at 330 feet per second, and came to a stop two inches inside his skull.

Burning at 2,000 degrees centigrade.

The bridge was filled with an unearthly screaming and banging as the man howled and clawed at his face, but Abandonato was past caring.

Suddenly weary, breathing laboured, he slumped to the floor in a puddle of his own blood.

Pressed his hand to the front of his trousers.

Looked at his palm.

Bright, shiny red.

He didn't know how he knew it, but he knew that he was dying.

He didn't feel frightened, only sad.

As the room started to go dim, a tear formed in his eye.

He wanted to speak to his wife, and his daughter, but he hadn't the strength to stand and reach for the sat-link.

His last conscious thought was that he would never see his unborn son.

Never smell him.

Never hear or hold him.

As that realisation formed, he slipped into oblivion and was gone.

THE SPANISH SECURITY complex had been dreading – and preparing for – a nightmarish attack like this ever since the Madrid train bombings way back in 2004.

Cruise liners and tourists were just too big and soft and tempting a target.

So within three minutes of the first shots, *Guardia Civil* officers were on scene at Málaga's Eastern dock, and dead and wounded people were being carried away at a crouching run.

Within six minutes, two mini-buses carrying locally based *Grupo Especial de Operaciones* teams – the *Policia Nacional* SWAT men – screamed on to Pier 1.

The shooter, or shooters, had by now disappeared inside the vessel, so the *GEO* inspector-jefe sent three snipers to take up the best positions they could find, stuck another couple of men on the cordon as liaison, and then led the rest of his blokes charging up an empty gangway to get aboard.

Forty kilometres out into the Med, aboard the amphibious assault ship SPS *Juan Carlos I*, the twin rotors on a giant, black Boeing CH-47 Chinook helicopter were almost up to take-off speed.

In the rear of the aircraft were sixteen special forces marines from the *Fuerza de Guerra Naval Especial*.

Flight time to Málaga, a little under eight minutes.

And the final response came from down the coast at Marbella, where that town's on-duty six-man detachment of *Grupo Especiales de Operaciones* special ops soldiers boarded their

Eurocopter AS532 Cougar helicopter and lifted off, heading west.

Absolutely flat out, their aircraft was capable of around 140 knots. That gave them a flight time of around fourteen minutes, which disappointed the soldiers – they knew the *Juan Carlos I* had been patrolling through the Med not far from Málaga, and that its SF marines were already inbound.

Chances were the whole party would be over before they even got there.

But they pressed on regardless.

17.

JOHN CARR WAS not a patient man at the best of times, and now – just as those special forces troops from Marbella arrived over Málaga, sixty kilometres to the north-east – he finally cracked.

‘Hey, George,’ he said, leaning over on an elbow. ‘D’you fancy a pint? I’ve had enough of this.’

George Carr turned to look at his father, eyebrows raised, mocking grin on his face.

The expression said, very clearly, *How can you have had enough of this?*

‘Nah,’ he said. ‘I’m good, thanks.’

‘What about me?’ said Alice, pushing those mirror shades off her eyes and squinting up at her father.

‘I’d love to take you, sweetheart,’ said Carr, with his best attempt at sincerity. ‘But you’re under age. We can’t break the

law, can we? Your mum'd kill me.' He turned back to George. 'I said, *Do you fancy a pint?*' he said, with meaning. 'The correct answer is, *Yes, I do.*' He stood up. 'Come on, I havenae brought my wallet.'

George chuckled. 'There's a fucking surprise,' he said.

He stood, brushing sand off his back and elbows, and off his Union Jack swimming shorts.

'Watch your language in front of your sister,' said Carr. He looked at George's shorts and shook his head in disdain. 'No class whatsoever,' he said. Then, innocently, 'And have you put a bit of weight on, by the way? 3 Para must have softened up since my day.'

'Fuck off,' said George, good-naturedly.

A slightly taller, slightly skinnier version of his old man, he was in the kind of shape you'd expect of a twenty-four-year-old Para Reg full-screw who was scheduled to undergo Selection later that year.

This holiday being his last blow-out before he got down to training proper, ahead of his journey to Hereford, Pen-y-Fan, and the jungle.

He looked down, and nudged his girlfriend with his toe.

'We're off up into town for a bit, Chloe,' he said. 'The old bastard's shit drills have left him dehydrated. You coming?'

She groaned. It had been a heavy night the night before.

'No,' she said, sitting up. 'I think I'll go for a swim instead.'

'Suit yourself,' said George. Then he looked at his dad. 'Come

on, then,' he said. 'I'm in the chair. Again.'

'Too right,' said Carr, with a grin, poking his son in the ribs. 'Tips on passing Selection don't come cheap, fatty.'

'Fuck me,' said George, shaking his head. 'Don't you ever give it a rest?'

'No way,' said Carr. 'Being this irritating takes a lot of practice.'

He laughed and looked at his boy, and felt an enormous surge of pride – a feeling that he knew was mutual.

The two men turned and started trudging up the beach.

18.

A LITTLE OVER ONE hundred metres away, in the calfskin and mohair interior of the gleaming white *Lucky Lady*, four men sat in silence.

Tense, but focused.

One or two knees bouncing up and down on the deep-pile beige carpet with nervous energy.

They were all dressed like everyone else nearby, in shorts and T-shirts or vests, though they were wearing trainers rather than flip-flops.

The better for movement.

Each had at his feet a beach bag, and each bag contained an AKS-74U 'Krinkov', a lightweight, shortened version of the AK47, with a folding skeleton stock.

Each Krinkov had a magazine in place, and each man had five spare mags – a total of 720 rounds of 5.45mm-short death and

destruction.

The dark-eyed Chechen called Argun Shishani sat on the steps to the upper deck.

He had a phone to his left ear, and a police radio, stolen three nights earlier, in his right hand.

He was talking to the young man in the cut-off denim shorts and the Manchester United shirt, who had moved down the beach a way but still had a good view.

‘I don’t care if two have left as long as the main target is still there,’ said Shishani. ‘She is? Good. Right, sixty seconds.’

He ended the call and looked at the four men. ‘Okay, boys,’ he said. ‘It’s on.’

He refreshed an iPad, on which was a single image – a woman, wearing a bikini, on the beach outside.

He tapped the tablet, and the four men took a final long look at the photograph.

‘You have seven minutes,’ said Shishani, ‘and no longer. Kill as many as you can, and bring me back my prize. And may Allah go with you.’

As they left, he followed them up and stood on the deck.

He watched the four men melt into the crowd, and briefly turned to look behind himself.

From his vantage point he could see clear out to sea.

It was a thin ribbon of serenity between the decadence of Europe and the very different lands of North Africa, lurking just over the blue horizon, with their violence, and turmoil, and

poverty.

At least, that was how it appeared to the Westerners.

Argun Shishani's lip curled in disgust.

These trivial, shallow people, splashing and playing in the shallows, and drinking themselves insensible in the nearby bars – they thought that that narrow, tranquil strip of water protected them from the rage.

But today it was an angry sea, and it had brought God's wrath to these shores, and after the wrath was spent the sea would carry away His servants to safety.

Shishani smiled, and waited.

19.

THE FOUR MEN left the *Lucky Lady*, beach bags over shoulders or in hands.

Walked onto the road leading from the marina to the beach, laughing and joking.

People passing the other way – lucky people, as it turned out – didn't give them a second's thought.

The four walked to the top of the beach, where they linked up with Mr Manchester United, who was standing on the other side of a parked car, a pistol jammed down the front of his cut-off shorts.

One of the men – a tall, slender individual in a faded *Hooters New York City* T-shirt – looked about himself casually, and then said something.

Hooters was carrying two bags, and now he handed one of

them to Man U.

Then – with final nods and smiles – they split into two groups.

Three of them stayed where they were, to act as a cut-off team – their job was to intercept any police officers who might try to get to the beach, and to cut down holidaymakers fleeing the main assault.

Which was to be carried out by Man U and a short, stocky man called Khaled.

The two of them now hopped over the low stone wall which separated the road from the heavy, dry sand, and slogged forwards.

When they reached the pre-arranged point, Man U looked at his accomplice and raised his eyebrows.

Ready?

Khaled nodded.

Both men reached into the bags at their feet and took out their loaded Krinkov AKs, locking the stocks in place.

Ten metres to their left, a middle-aged woman in a blue bathing suit and a floppy straw hat saw them do it and froze, hand to her mouth, unable even to scream.

Back at the top of the beach, Hooters NYC and the other two casually picked up their own weapons and slipped off the safety catches.

Twenty feet away from them stood a group of ten or twelve Spaniards in their late teens or early twenties, who were arguing, in a good-natured way, about where to go for lunch.

Hooters bent down and retrieved a hand grenade and pulled the pin.

Whispering a final prayer, he lobbed it into the middle of the group and ducked back below the stone wall as he did so.

The safety lever flew off and armed the weapon as it landed at the feet of a young man, looking for all the world like a ball thrown by a child.

Reflexively, he bent to pick it up, ready to send it back to its owner.

But it was surprisingly heavy.

‘What’s that?’ said one of his friends.

‘Mierda!’ said the man. ‘I think it’s...’

The grenade detonated, killing him and one other man instantly, and wounding every other person in that group.

It was the signal for the shooting to begin.

The panic was instantaneous and total.

Some dived to the ground.

Others stood and stared at the gunmen, their minds temporarily unable to make their legs move.

Still others ran – only to find that they were running towards the other shooters.

The fat German man was one of the first to die, along with his snotty-nosed son – whom he had scooped up into his arms. His wife went down, too, though their five-year-old daughter survived.

The two pretty young Spanish girls whom Carr had been

eyeing up – one of them was shot through the temple, and killed outright, the other through the arm and thigh.

She would bleed to death before help arrived.

The cut-off team were making hay with those who were trying to get off the beach.

Men, women, children.

Flip-flops and shorts and bikinis.

Screaming, shouting.

All the time, the remorseless crack-crack of the weapons.

The first police response came within seconds – a marked *Guardia Civil* Nissan Patrol had by chance been driving down towards the beach.

Three officers – two men and a woman – debussed, drew their pistols, and started moving towards the sand.

They were immediately spotted and engaged by three men some twenty-five metres to their left.

The female officer advanced gamely towards the three, and managed – with one lucky shot – to take out a tall man in a *Hooters New York City* T-shirt, before a skinny kid in an Adidas vest put her down with three AK rounds in the neck and shoulder.

The two male cops skidded to a halt. One slipped over in his panic, but in a flash he was up and turning and running, and following his partner, who was already five yards ahead of him, head down, weaving.

Dealing with drunken tourists and shoplifters was one thing: this was quite something else.

They were neither physically nor mentally prepared for it.

20.

A FEW MINUTES' walk along from the beach, John and George Carr were standing outside a bar, halfway down their first pints of San Miguel.

The place was as tacky as it got and it stank of stale cooking oil.

The street was busy with holidaymakers and loud with thumping bass from a nearby sound system, and the heat was still oppressive despite the overhead parasol.

John Carr was not impressed. He shook his head and took another deep, frothy swallow of lager – at least that was cold – as a group of fat, drunken Brits swayed towards them.

'Fuck's sake,' he said as they turned for the entrance to the bar.

One of them – a big guy with a skinhead, a Millwall FC tattoo and a beer belly – clipped Carr as he passed.

'Hey, watch yourself, pal,' said Carr.

'Or what?' said the guy, stopping and staring at the Scotsman. But when he saw the glint in Carr's eyes, his tune changed.

'Sorry, mate,' he said, before slinking away inside the bar.

Carr watched him go, shaking his head in disgust.

'Jesus,' he said, under his breath. 'You come here to get away from dickheads like that.'

'Chill out,' said George, grinning and holding up his beer. 'You're on holiday, for fuck's sake. You need to get on it. Five or six of these and everything'll look a lot better.'

‘Aye,’ said Carr, lifting his own pint. ‘Well, you’d better enjoy it because you’ll no be drinking once you’re in training.’

‘True,’ said George. He rolled his eyes. ‘Of course, Selection was much harder in your day.’

Carr chuckled. ‘I actually *pity* you, son,’ he said. ‘You havnae got a *clue* what you’re gonnae...’

But then he paused, glass in hand, and cocked his head.

Somewhere to their rear, a bang and then a rapid series of shorter, sharper reports.

‘What the fuck’s that?’ said George, his mind unable for a moment to assimilate the sounds of war with this environment.

But John Carr was already on the balls of his feet, his neck hair on end, pint glass thrown and gone, lager splashed on the dusty cobbles.

The detonation from the grenade was unmistakable, as was the crack and thump of the small arms.

‘That’s AK, George,’ he said. ‘A *lot* of fucking AK.’

AK, and screaming.

The hundred billion neurons in John Carr’s brain were pulsating with one almost overwhelming electrical impulse: *Get down there, and get Alice.*

But after taking two steps, he stopped.

Even when judged alongside other special forces soldiers, Carr had stood out for his singular ability to stay calm and to think clearly under extreme pressure.

He’d been in some very sticky spots indeed, but in the middle

of the biggest firefights, often hundreds of clicks behind enemy lines, outnumbered, overrun, fighting for his very life, his pulse rate had barely ticked up from its customary 60bpm.

And he had never panicked.

It was just logical.

Panicking got you killed.

So he didn't panic.

Not thinking got you killed, too.

So, although he was being tested now as never before, he stopped, and he stood, and he thought.

He could hear several weapons firing, perhaps as many as half a dozen.

People were already running past him, babbling, crying, freaking out.

Some of them wounded.

One guy holding his guts in, stumbling and dragging his bare feet, supported by two of his mates, his mouth slack, minutes from bleeding out.

Carr knew that he couldn't just sprint onto the sand, because that would get him killed, and if he was killed he couldn't help Alice.

But he needed to get eyes-on in order to formulate a plan.

To his left, George was staring at him, his own eyes wide with shock.

He'd joined the Parachute Regiment just after the Afghan draw-down.

He was fit and strong, and no doubt he was brave and well-trained, too.

But he was not tested, not hardened and tempered by battle.

And you never know how you'll react in a contact until it happens.

For an instant, Carr saw him not as the young man he was, but as the child he'd been.

He was on the verge of telling his son to run and hide, to stay safe, when – as if reading his old man's mind – George spoke.

'Wherever you're going,' he said, 'I'm coming with you.'

In that moment, Carr saw a soldier in front of him.

He knew he stood a better chance with some help.

'Okay, son,' he said. 'But you listen to everything I say, understand? No rushing off. You stick by me.'

George nodded.

Then two police officers came into view, running, heads down, terrified, away from the shooting.

Father looked at son.

'Those two,' he said. 'If they're not going to use their weapons, we will.'

21.

THEY STOOD IN THE street, against the flow of fleeing holidaymakers, and clotheslined the two cops as they sprinted by.

'Lo siento, señor,' said Carr. 'But I need your pistol.'

The man just stared up at him and said nothing.

It was a look that Carr had seen many times before – notably

in Bosnia, when the line was broken around Goražde and the men of the BIH were scrambling for the safety of the town, with only one thought in their minds: *Please let me survive another day, and I'll worry about tomorrow... tomorrow.*

Carr stood up. Next to him stood George, pistol in hand, an unconscious policeman at his feet, his jaw broken.

Carr looked at the weapon.

Heckler & Koch USP.

Made himself take another moment.

No point charging onto the sand with an empty pistol, either.

Dropped the mag out.

Pushed on the top round.

It moved downward only slightly, indicating that the magazine was full.

Hadn't even been fired.

Carr replaced the magazine, pulled the topslide back slightly, to double-check that a round was in the breech, and tapped the slide forward to rehouse the round.

Ready to go.

He looked at George, who had copied him.

'Used one of these before?' he said.

'No, we're on the Glock 17.'

'Same principle. Safety's *here*. How many rounds have you got?'

'Full clip.'

'Take the spare mags, too. Fifteen rounds of nine millimetre

in each one. Make sure you count your shots. And get as close as you can.'

George nodded.

Flinched at the rate of fire coming from the beach.

Looked down at the peashooter in his hand.

Hesitated.

'Now, son,' said Carr, clapping his boy on the shoulder, and flashing him a savage grin. 'Come with me, and I'll show you where the Iron Crosses grow.'

In spite of himself, George grinned, and felt his fear melting away at his father's certainty. And then John Carr was off and running towards the sound of the shooting, against the thinning tide of people, past dozens of white, multi-million dollar yachts bobbing at anchor, seagulls whirling overhead, oblivious, as though this was a day like any other.

In a matter of moments, the two men had reached the low wall in front of the sands.

They crouched behind it.

'Safety off,' said Carr.

'Safety off.'

They peered over.

Beyond was a scene of almost unimaginable carnage.

Dozens of people lay dead or dying on the beach.

Two pairs of killers.

One pair, thirty metres away to their left.

Slowly edging backwards on to the sand, covering approach

routes from the town.

As the Carrs watched, one of them leaned over a teenaged boy who was trying to crawl away.

Shot him in the head.

The second pair, forty metres to their right.

Levelling their weapons at four people.

Four of the Brits from earlier, Carr realised.

Not far from where he and Alice had been sitting.

But none of them was Alice.

And now, with a three-round burst into the chest, one of them killed the only male of the group.

The other grabbed the middle girl – the tall blonde in the shocking pink bikini – by the scruff of her neck, and started half-dragging, half-pulling her off the beach.

His mate got behind the other women and pushed them after him.

Shouting, *Yallah imshi! Yallah imshi!*

Hurry the fuck up!

Carr looked at George. ‘Can you see Alice and Chloe?’ he said.

‘No.’

‘Please God,’ breathed Carr.

He was not a religious man, and he didn’t see the inside of a church from one funeral to the next, but plenty of men find time to say a quick prayer when the rounds start flying.

Every man says a prayer when they’re flying around his baby

girl.

‘What do we do?’ said George.

Carr thought for a second or two.

His lengthy secondment to the Det in Northern Ireland had left him an outstanding pistol shot, that being the primary weapon of the surveillance operator, but if he engaged the further pair to his right at this range... The best shot in the world would be just as likely to kill the three women.

Whereas the closer pair, to the left, were actually edging his way.

Plus which, they were focused on the streets, not on what was behind them.

No-brainer.

‘Those two first,’ he said. ‘Then we get after the others.’ He turned to his son, and winked. ‘Hold your fire until they get as close as possible, and if it all goes to shit I’ll see you in Valhalla.’

‘Bollocks to that,’ said George. ‘One of these days it’s *got* to be your round, and I’m not missing that for anything.’

22.

THE TWO MEN were within fifteen metres when they began to turn around.

‘Now,’ said John Carr.

Both Carrs stood up and levelled their weapons.

The terrorists stopped in the sand, mouths open, startled eyes, and started to raise their AKs.

They never stood a chance.

Cumulatively, John Carr had spent months of his life double-tapping targets in various ranges and shooting galleries in Hereford and elsewhere around the world, and he'd done it for real enough times, too.

At the peak of his skills, he'd have got off four aimed shots in under a second, easy.

He was a little rusty, so it took him just *over* a second – though they were still fired so quickly that it was hard to distinguish between each round.

Tap-tap.

Tap-tap.

The Grim Reaper reached out from the muzzle of Carr's pistol and took both of the jihadis away to hell, a fifth shot – from George – extinguishing the last vestiges of movement in the twitching fingers of one of them.

Carr looked at his son, eyebrows raised.

George looked back at him, sheepishly. 'Fucked if I'm going back to Battalion and telling them bastards that you did all the shooting,' he said.

'I'll give you that one,' said Carr. 'Now grab that AK, and let's get going.'

He reached down and pulled the Krinkov from the nearest dead man's grasp, turning at the same moment to engage the remaining shooters.

But they were now out of sight at the bottom end of the beach.

George Carr had picked up the other carbine, and frisked his

guy for spare magazines, and now he hopped onto the low wall and looked in the direction of the marina.

‘No sign,’ he said, and hopped off onto the Calle Ribera on the other side.

He started walking down the line of the wall towards the sea, AK at the ready.

John Carr followed him, keeping good spacing, turning often to cover their rear, finger over the trigger, the weapon in synch with his eyes.

Ready to engage instantly.

‘Anything?’ he said, after fifteen metres.

‘No.’

And then they heard the sound of powerful marine engines – twin 7,400hp Codag gas turbines, to be precise – and a white yacht powered out of the marina.

Both men watched the boat go.

It was really shifting.

Carr raised his AK, but it was already out into the open sea and heading due south.

23.

‘WAS THAT THEM?’ said Carr.

‘Fuck knows,’ said George.

They continued down the line of the wall until Calle Ribera turned right and they were into the marina.

‘Go firm,’ said Carr.

They both took a knee and listened and looked, covering their

arcs as they did so.

Nothing.

At least, nothing but the sound of shouting and groaning from the beach behind them, and a distant wail of sirens.

Carr looked at his watch.

Three minutes since they'd clicked off the pistol safeties.

'Must have been them,' said Carr. 'Let's find your sister and Chloe.'

He jogged in the direction of the patch of sand that Alice had been occupying.

Jogged past the corpses of young children, elderly people, girls in bikinis, young men in dayglo shorts.

Past a man on his back staring sightlessly at the sky, a John Grisham novel still in his hand, the yellow sand dark with red blood.

Another slumped over a cool box, shot in the act of getting himself another beer.

'Fucking hell,' he whispered to himself.

He reached the spot.

Their towels were there, but there was no sign of either of the girls.

A wave of something like panic swept over him – a fear he didn't recognise, because he'd never experienced it before.

And then a police vehicle drove onto the beach, and Carr thought he'd better drop the AK and put his hands up.

'George,' he shouted, over his shoulder. 'Game over, son. Let

them see you're unarmed.'

24.

IT HAD BEEN a quiet day at the Vauxhall HQ of the Secret Intelligence Service.

Although the threat level across Europe had been high for some years now, there was nothing to suggest any imminent attack, and the duty officer on the Spain desk had spent the morning wading through intelligence related to a revival of Basque separatism in the north.

All that changed with a call from a GCHQ liaison officer, with intercepts of frantic communications between Spanish police and special forces on the Costa del Sol.

The duty officer's blood ran cold, and her hands actually shook for a moment or two.

Then she picked up her phone and called her boss, Director of Operations Justin Nicholls, third-in-command of MI6 and widely tipped to be a future leader of the service.

Within the hour, the world knew that terrorists had launched a massive and deadly attack on two towns on Spain's Mediterranean coast.

By then, Nicholls was just starting an emergency meeting of the MI6 senior management team, chaired by 'C' – the Chief of the SIS.

'What do we know?' said C, his voice brusque.

'Estimates are fifty dead on the ship, and thirty or more on the beach,' said Nicholls. 'Will go higher, I'm afraid. It looks

very much as though Puerto Banús was the main target. They hit Málaga first, and then went onto the beach when the first responders were out of the way.’

‘Why? What were they looking for at Marbella?’

‘That’s not yet clear.’

‘How did we not know about this?’ said C.

‘We can’t know about everything,’ said Nicholls.

‘A complex, two-pronged attack, on this bloody scale, and we had no idea? They must have been planning it for months.’

‘We’re already going back through everything remotely linked to the Costa for the last two years, just in case it was there and we missed it. But at this stage, no, we had no idea.’

‘The Spanish?’

Spain’s CNI, the *Centro Nacional de Inteligencia*, was not quite at the level of its counterparts in British or American intelligence, but it had improved dramatically since the Madrid train outrage of 2004, and was more than willing to share information and co-operate in the global fight against terrorism.

‘I can only assume that they were as much in the dark as we were.’

‘This isn’t going to go down well at No. 10, Justin,’ said C, shaking his head.

‘Tell me about it.’

‘You know the PM,’ said C. ‘I’ll leave you to brief her.’

Justin Nicholls and the Rt Hon Penelope Morgan MP had dated each other for a couple of years in their student days, and

had stayed close ever since.

Nicholls nodded.

On the wall to his right was a bank of screens – some showing news channels, others live feeds from Spanish intelligence cameras. One delivered the confidential feed, the updated intelligence picture available to the SIS.

A status update for the MS *Windsor Castle* said that the incident at Málaga was now over, with four attackers confirmed killed. At Marbella, two attackers had been shot dead on the Puerto Banús beach, and two other men had just been taken into custody.

And then a new line appeared on the feed.

Spanish police helicopter chasing high speed boat across Med towards Moroccan coast. SPS Juan Carlos I also launching marines. Royal Moroccan Navy alerted.

‘That’s them,’ said Nicholls.

25.

THE BOAT CARRYING Argun ‘Dark Eyes’ Shishani, the man in the Manchester United shirt, and the shooter called Khaled, and their three female hostages, had had a big head start.

In all the confusion, it was well over forty kilometres from the Spanish coast by the time the *Grupo Especial de Operaciones* Eurocopter EC120 Colibri lifted off in pursuit.

But the two pilots put the aircraft nose down and flew flat out, the single Turbomeca engine straining to throw out its 504 shaft-horsepower, and they had the speeding *Lucky Lady* in sight on

their on-board camera well inside twenty minutes, and in visual contact not long afterward.

Two kilometres out, the two *GEO* snipers aboard leaned out of the helicopter on harnesses and trained the scopes of their AMP DSR-1 .338 rifles on the streamlined yacht.

The officer on the left hand side, an *oficial de policia*, had the clearest view.

‘I can see two armed men on the rear deck,’ he shouted, into his collar microphone. ‘Three women are standing in front of them, hands on their heads.’

‘Roger that,’ said his colleague, a subinspector. ‘I’ll take the right, you take the left.’ Half a minute later, and a kilometre closer, he said, ‘Do you have a shot?’

He already knew the answer.

Both men were highly skilled, and their rifles, chambered for the Lapua Magnum cartridge, were effective out to 1,500 metres.

In theory.

At this distance, in a speeding helicopter caught in the up and down thermals of the Mediterranean, with the targets contained on a small rear deck, under an overhanging roof, on a boat crashing through waves, with civilians in the foreground...

‘No way.’

The second sniper leaned forward and tapped the pilot on the shoulder. ‘We need to get a lot closer,’ he shouted. ‘We can’t take any kind of shot at this range.’

The pilot nodded and pressed on.

Six hundred metres out, one of the men on the deck lifted his AK47 and started shooting.

It was nothing more than a gesture – an AK is useless at that range – but it made the pilot think again.

He slowed the helicopter to fifty knots, so that it was simply keeping pace with the yacht.

‘Go on!’ shouted the sniper on the left hand side. ‘They can’t hit us from here. I need to get closer.’

Again, the pilot nodded and tilted the helicopter forwards.

Both snipers were now leaning well out of the aircraft, trying to get their sights on the centre mass of their targets.

The left-hand marksman shook his head in frustration and hauled himself back inside.

‘This is no good,’ he shouted, to his colleague. ‘I can’t maintain the target in the scope. I’m going to try with the 41.’

He stowed his AMP, unclipped his Heckler & Koch G41 assault rifle, and leaned back out.

Way outside the effective range of the weapon, but he could at least keep the iron sights on the group and maintain better situational awareness.

‘Closer!’ he said.

In response, the pilot dipped the chopper slightly, to gain on the terrorists.

At which point, one of them vanished inside the boat.

‘One of them just went below,’ said the co-pilot.

‘Seen,’ said the pilot.

‘Keep going!’ shouted the left-hand sniper.

What happened next happened very quickly.

The *Lucky Lady* suddenly slowed, meaning that the helicopter shot forwards relative to the boat.

Both snipers temporarily lost her, as the controlling pilot throttled back, lifting the nose to avoid getting within 7.62mm range.

At the same moment, the terrorist who had gone below now reappeared, carrying something long and black in his right hand.

In one smooth motion, he hefted it onto his shoulder, braced his feet, and looked up.

‘Oh, shit,’ said the pilot, instinctively breaking right, away from the contact.

Unfortunately, the manoeuvre simply made the roaring engine – and its heat signature – more visible to the missile’s infra-red sensors.

Below him, out of the pilot’s eyeline, there was a flash, and the Russian-made 9K38 Iгла MANPAD released its projectile.

The pilot had pushed the Eurocopter hard right and down, desperately trying to throw the SAM off, but, with no countermeasure capability on the aircraft, they were dead and he knew it.

The missile detonated a little over a second after being fired, igniting the 280 litres of avgas still in the tanks and turning the front of the aircraft into an inferno.

As the disintegrating helicopter started to spin and descend,

the snipers could hear the pilots screaming over their headsets.

The left-hand man unbuckled himself and leaped out, breaking his legs and back when he hit the water two hundred feet below, and knocking himself out.

He drowned shortly afterwards.

The other three men lived only until the aircraft itself smacked into the surface and exploded.

By which time, the *Lucky Lady* was already back up to top speed, and powering south through the choppy Mediterranean Sea.

26.

THE LOSS OF THE *Cuerpo Nacional de Policía* helicopter was not immediately confirmed, but there is only one obvious reason why such an aircraft might have both suddenly dropped below the radar horizon *and* lost radio contact, and the controllers in Seville were immediately alarmed.

They made contact with the amphibious assault ship SPS *Juan Carlos I*, which had a section of marines aboard a long-range NH Industries NH90 some twenty minutes away and closing in on the *Lucky Lady*, and asked for a local SITREP.

In London, Justin Nicholls and the rest of the MI6 leadership watched the situation develop.

The *Policía* chopper had disappeared at 14:24hrs BST, and repeated radio messages had gone unanswered.

At 14:40hrs, the *Juan Carlos* aircraft arrived at its last known location and reported debris and at least one body in the sea.

It then departed in pursuit of the yacht, which was by now some thirty-five kilometres off the coast of Morocco.

The Royal Navy of Morocco, meanwhile, had a French-built VCSM fast boat and a Floréal-class frigate, the *Hassan II*, out on exercise to the east. After liaising with the Spanish, those craft were now steaming west to try to intercept the terrorists. The *Hassan* had had its Panther helicopter up, but the ship's captain now recalled it, understandably wary of letting it get within shooting distance of the yacht, which was heading at maximum speed towards Morocco's northern coast.

'What's their game?' murmured C. 'They must know they're going to be caught.'

'They don't care, do they?' said the head of the Spanish desk. 'They're hoping to ram something and go out in a blaze of glory.'

'So why go to the trouble of taking hostages?' said Justin Nicholls. 'Why not just kill them on the beach?'

27.

AT THE VERY moment Nicholls said that, the *Lucky Lady* slowed temporarily to thirty knots, and Argun Shishani and the man in the Manchester United shirt pushed the three women – all roped together and wearing flotation jackets – into the water, and jumped off after them.

All five of them got ears and noses full of water, and surfaced, winded and choking, to see the white boat powering off into the distance.

In the open water behind it, a small green RIB – a rigid

inflatable, its shape picked out by a rubber buoyancy tube – had been bobbing in the gentle swell, a sea anchor holding it on station.

Low profile, invisible to radar.

The single man aboard it pushed the throttle forward, spooling up the big outboard Yamaha motor, and made his way over.

Shishani hauled himself aboard, and then leaned out to pull the first of the women in after him.

She struggled, at first, but when he punched her in the face she gave in. The others obeyed, meekly.

As the other man clambered into the dinghy, Shishani turned to the women.

‘Lie down!’ he said.

They did as they were told, huddling together in the bottom of the small boat. Shishani bent down, unfolded a dark tarpaulin, and spread it over the women.

Then he crawled under and lay down alongside them, the other terrorist following him.

Anyone looking from above would now see a small boat with – apparently – one person aboard.

The guy at the helm turned the inflatable and headed south-east.

Under the tarp, Argun Shishani smiled to himself.

One of the women started crying.

28.

TEN MINUTES LATER, the NH90 from the *Juan Carlos*

finally caught up with the *Lucky Lady*.

Aware that another aircraft had gone down in the vicinity of the yacht, its crew were wary. Being military, they were at least trained to deal with MANPADs, and their helicopter was better-equipped with counter-measures, but still they stood off some 500 metres, the sensor operator observing the vessel's progress on his screen.

After a few moments, he said, 'No sign of the hostages on the rear deck. Take me to the side.'

The NH90 had a hundred knots on the boat, so it took a matter of moments for the pilots to get alongside.

The operator took his time, zooming in close on the yacht's narrow, darkened windows.

'Nothing,' said the operator. 'Front.'

The helicopter pulled ahead, the underslung camera swivelling to keep the speeding white craft in sight.

'Nothing. Other side... Nothing. They must have taken them below.'

The pilot keyed his microphone to talk to the *capitán* commanding the marines in the back, who had been listening in.

'You heard all that, Ramos,' said the pilot. 'What do you want to do?'

Capitán Ramon Ramos thought for a moment.

Fact was, he wasn't *sure* what to do.

His orders were to recover the three women and take the terrorists alive, if possible.

But Ramon Ramos knew that there was no way these guys were coming quietly – he'd known from the moment he climbed aboard the aircraft that this was going to end in tears for someone.

His best hope had always been that his blokes could see and take out the bad guys.

But if everyone was below deck...

'Ramos?'

'Get back alongside, close enough so I can see the fucking thing.'

The pilot did as requested.

Ramos tugged on his harness and edged closer to the open door of the chopper.

Below him, the gleaming white yacht smashed and bounced its way inexorably through the shining sea.

He turned to the man next to him, Cabo Primero Jorge Fernández, who was sitting with his legs dangling in thin air, his Accuracy International .50 cal rifle cradled in his lap.

'What do you reckon, Jorge?' shouted Ramos, nodding at the rifle. 'Can we stop him with that?'

Fernández shrugged. 'How the fuck should I know, boss?' he shouted back. 'If I hit the engine, yeah. But just firing blind into the damned thing – who's to say I won't hit the fuel lines and barbecue the lot of them?'

Ramos keyed his mike, and got on the net to León, the HQ call sign.

Quickly, he updated them, and listened to the response.

Then he said, 'We can take the entire back off it if you want, sir, but the hostages could be in living quarters directly underneath the rear deck for all we know. Meanwhile, the target will be inside Moroccan territorial waters in five minutes, I say again *five minutes*. Please advise whether we are free to pursue into Moroccan airspace. If not, please advise course of action, over.'

Again, he listened.

Then he turned to Jorge Fernández.

'Fucking hell, Jorge,' he shouted. 'What a balls-up. The Moroccans have pulled back their ships and HQ can't get any sense out of Rabat – it looks like they're swerving it, they don't want the blood of the hostages on their hands. And now HQ are swerving it, too. We're cleared into Moroccan airspace, but the decision as to what to do is ours. Wankers.'

As Fernandez shook his head and smiled wearily, the captain keyed his mike again.

'León, we are...' he said.

But that was as far as he got.

'*What the...?*' he said. 'Stand by, please.'

The helicopter had banked violently right, and out of the open door Ramos could see why.

Below them, the *Lucky Lady* had turned sharply inland.

The pilot came on the net. 'Looks like he's heading towards Ceuta,' he said. 'What do we do?'

Ramos, toying with the St Christopher's medallion round his neck, thought for ten seconds – a long time to think, at times like this.

Then he said, 'In the next few minutes, they're going to have to make a decision about where they go ashore. We're going to follow until they disembark. Maybe we can get a clear shot then. Any reason why that's a shit plan, Jorge?'

'No. I mean, it's not a *great* plan, boss, but we are where we are.'

'Do we put down?' said the pilot, over the radio.

'Not unless I say. Get us within range, but watch out for fucking MANPADs, for Christ's sake.'

'Oh, I will, don't you fucking worry about that.'

Below them, the yacht ploughed on.

Capitán Ramon Ramos looked ahead.

The boat was heading directly for El Chorillo beach.

Crowded with sunbathers.

It was still doing close to fifty knots, and showing no sign of slowing

And Ramos suddenly realised what was happening.

'Oh, fuck,' he shouted. '*Fuck!*'

29.

THE FIRST TWO to die were swimmers who were run over and dismembered when the final terrorist – a short, stocky Moroccan called Khaled Benchakroun – deliberately ploughed through a bunch of people in the water.

The next two were a pair of teenaged girls, who were smeared like strawberry jam on the sand as he drove the 190-tonne boat ashore and straight over the top of them.

Six more people were killed when Benchakroun jumped from the stranded, heeling yacht and shot indiscriminately at horrified holidaymakers on the very beach on which he had spent his teenaged summers, selling T-shirts and trinkets to identical tourists.

The eleventh person to die was Benchakroun himself, his head blown half off by Jorge Fernández from the hovering helicopter three hundred metres offshore.

Under Ramos' instructions, the helicopter then landed a hundred metres from the *Lucky Lady*.

Half of his men were sent to clear away those few people who had not run off the beach, and the other half began to approach the yacht, to engage the remaining terrorists, whom they had every reason to believe were still aboard, and to free the hostages.

But as they got within ten metres of the boat, a twenty-kilogram ball of Semtex was ignited by a timed detonator, initiated by Benchakroun in his last act before leaving the vessel, and five marines were killed, Jorge Fernández and Ramon Ramos among them.

30.

BY NOW, JUSTIN Nicholls was alone in his office, on the fifth floor of the SIS HQ at Vauxhall, digesting the news from the explosion on the beach at Ceuta and casting his eye over casualty

reports.

The numbers would change – they always did – but the best current estimate was eighty-nine Britons killed aboard the MS *Windsor Castle*, out of a total of 104 dead, and seventeen dead on the beach, out of a total of seventy-one.

It could have been worse, he supposed – but then, if you lost more than a hundred of your own and still found yourself looking on the bright side, that was a very bad day.

His phone buzzed, quietly.

It was his assistant, Hugo.

‘Alec Palmer from the Spanish desk, sir,’ he said.

‘Thanks, Hugo,’ said Nicholls.

He heard a click and said, ‘Alec?’

Palmer sounded breathless.

‘The three female hostages taken from Marbella, Justin?’ he said. ‘We’re pretty sure that one of them is the Prime Minister’s oldest daughter, Charlotte.’

Justin Nicholls was a very intelligent man, with a double first in mathematics from Cambridge and over two decades in the SIS behind him; it was rare that he was lost for words.

This was one of those times.

He and his wife were family friends of the PM, Penelope Morgan, and he’d seen Charlotte Morgan grow up from a shy teenager to a confident young woman in the early stages of what was sure to be a glittering career at the Bar.

He shuddered at the thought of her being taken by those evil

people, and blown apart on some foreign shore...

‘Justin?’ said Alec Palmer.

‘Yes. Sorry. Christ. *Charlotte*? When did you hear this? How?’

‘We’ve just put it together. She was on holiday with a group of friends. One couple had a row and went back to their hotel – luckily for them, as it turns out. That couple contacted the consulate an hour or so ago to say that their friends hadn’t returned, and that they couldn’t raise them on their phones. They’ve just identified the other three males in the temporary morgue in Marbella, but there’s no sign of the three females. We’ve had a look at their phones. Nothing since about 1 p.m., which was roughly when they went onto the beach. So we’re assuming...’

‘Shit,’ breathed Nicholls. ‘*Shit*. Did she not have RaSP with her?’

RaSP was Royalty and Specialist Protection, the Met Police element charged with protecting the Prime Minister and her family, among others.

‘She’d turned them down, apparently. Said she wanted to “live her life”.’

Nicholls was silent for a moment.

Then he said, ‘They must have targeted her. The whole thing, this was what the Málaga distraction was all about. It was aimed at seizing her.’

‘It certainly looks that way,’ said Palmer.

‘Her boyfriend’s dead?’

‘Yes.’

‘Does Downing Street know?’

‘It hasn’t broken with the media yet. But...’

‘But she’ll have known Charlie was out there,’ said Nicholls.

‘So she’ll have tried to get in touch with her. And...’

‘That was what I was thinking,’ said Palmer.

Nicholls was silent for a moment.

Then he said, ‘I’ll have to break it to the PM. Can you get me the latest from Ceuta? Last thing I saw, the boat was spread over a couple of acres and they were looking for bodies.’

‘Will do.’

‘Do you have someone getting alongside the surviving couple?’

We want whatever they have ASAP.’

‘The Málaga officer’s on his way.’

‘Good. Thanks, Alec.’

Nicholls ended the call and dialled his assistant.

‘I’m just going to see the chief, Hugo,’ he said. ‘Can you get me a car, please? When I’m finished upstairs I’ll need to go over to Downing Street.’

31.

THE MI6 INTELLIGENCE officer arrived at the Puente Romano hotel, on the Bulevar Príncipe Alfonso von Hohenlohe, just as Justin Nicholls climbed into the car to take him to Downing Street.

He was a nondescript Welshman in his early thirties, who went by the name of ‘Liam’, and who worked – officially – in a back

office notarial role in the Málaga consulate.

In reality, his job was to mooch around the place finding out what he could about serious organised crime that might lead back to the UK and assessing and updating the regional terrorism picture.

Thomas Carter answered his knock.

He looked shell-shocked.

‘My name’s Liam Smith, sir,’ said the MI6 officer. ‘From the consulate. May I come in?’

‘It’s not a good time,’ said Carter. ‘We...’

‘I’m afraid I do just need to come in,’ said Liam, firmly.

He stepped in, past Tom Carter’s weak protests.

It was cool inside. Jemima Craig was lying on the blue-and-gold brocade counterpane, her eyes puffy and red, a tissue in her left hand.

‘She’s in no fit state to talk,’ said Carter.

The MI6 man turned to face him.

‘I’m here on the instructions of the Prime Minister herself, sir,’ he said, very firmly. ‘I need to talk to you about your missing friends.’

‘Let him speak, Tom,’ said Jemima, from the bed.

Tom Carter’s shoulders relaxed. He sat down next to his girlfriend and looked up at Liam, his eyes strained and unbelieving.

‘What do you want to know?’ he said.

‘I need as much information about what happened today as

possible.'

The couple both said nothing.

'I know it's tough,' said Liam. 'I'll be as quick as I can.' He pulled out a notebook. 'You've been here for four days, yes?'

'Yes.'

'Did anyone know where you were staying?'

'My mum,' said Jemima Craig. 'But that was it.'

'Could the others have told people?'

'Yes. But I have no idea if they did. Why?'

'Did you tell anyone that Charlotte Morgan was going to be coming with you?'

They looked at each other, blankly.

'No,' said Jemima. 'Why would we?'

'Prime Minister's daughter,' said Liam. 'People might have been interested.'

'It's not a big deal to us. She's just our friend.'

Liam nodded. 'Did you go to the beach at Puerto Banús every day?' he said.

'No,' said Tom Carter. 'Today was the first time. We went to Bounty Beach on the first day. Elvira the next. Yesterday we did the Old Town.'

The MI6 man made a note. 'Who took the decision to go down there today?' he said.

Tom Carter looked at his girlfriend. 'Charlotte, wasn't it?'

'No, it was Emily,' said Jemima.

'That's right, Emily.'

Liam nodded. ‘Did you notice anyone watching you? Following you?’

‘Today?’

‘Any day. But today especially.’

‘No.’

‘I did,’ said Jemima. ‘I told you I had.’

Liam sat up straighter and looked over at the young brunette, who had raised herself onto her elbows.

‘Go on,’ he said.

‘There was a guy at the airport in Málaga,’ she said. ‘He was sort of loitering at arrivals. We’d ordered a minibus to bring us here, and it was ten or fifteen minutes late. The whole time, this guy was watching us. He tried to make out that he wasn’t, but he was. Charlotte saw it too, but... Anyway, at the time, I thought... well, Charlotte’s really pretty, and her friend Emily, she could be a model, so you kind of expect it. It was a bit creepy, but I didn’t think much of it. But then I saw him today, when Tom and I walked off the beach.’

‘What was he doing?’

‘Just kind of loitering by the palm trees up there.’

‘Can you describe him, Jemima?’

‘About my height, maybe a bit taller. Indian-looking. Mid-twenties. At the airport he was wearing jeans and a red football shirt. Manchester United, I think. Today he was wearing the same T-shirt, but a pair of shorts.’

‘If we could get some CCTV images, would you be happy to

have a look at them for us?’

‘Of course.’

Liam took a moment. Then he said, ‘We’re working on the assumption that the three women have been taken somewhere, probably for ransom. What can you tell me about them? Starting with Charlotte.’

Jemima had been friends with Charlotte Morgan since their schooldays, so she was able to talk in great detail about her.

‘Tell me about Martha Percival?’ said Liam.

‘Lovely girl,’ said Tom Carter. ‘Her husband is... He was a good friend of mine. I’ve known her for six or seven years. Gregarious, funny, very bright. Lovely.’

Liam made a note. ‘And Emily Souster?’ he said.

‘She and Charlotte know each other from work,’ said Jemima. ‘She’s a solicitor, I think. Mostly human rights-type stuff. They’re kind of friends, but *work* friends, if you know what I mean?’

‘What’s she like?’

Jemima and Thomas looked at each other.

‘We don’t really know her,’ said Jemima. ‘First time we met her was at Stansted.’

‘I’m sensing something,’ said Liam.

‘To be brutally honest,’ said Tom, ‘she’s a bit of a pain in the arse. She’s a very attractive girl, but massively high maintenance. No sense of humour. Started bad and got worse, to the point where she hardly said a word to anyone today. She was just in a foul mood, I guess. I thought time of the month, maybe.’

‘Tom!’ hissed Jemima.

‘I’m trying to be fair to her,’ he said, defensively. ‘If she had PMT, fair enough. If not... Anyway, we tried to ignore it. All week she’d been giving her boyfriend a hard time.’

‘How do you mean, a hard time?’

‘I don’t know. She was just very *cold* to him, I thought. What did you think, Jem?’

Jemima nodded. ‘Yes, cold’s the right word. They hadn’t been going out very long, and it was like she had to bring someone, so she brought Nick? He was pretty fed up with her, I think. I don’t think they were going to continue seeing each other after... after...’

She started crying again, apologising through her sobs.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Liam. ‘It’s fine.’

‘Boyfriend seemed a decent bloke,’ said Tom Carter. ‘She’s a teetotaller, so she’d go to bed early every night, and he’d stay up boozing with us.’

‘You said she was high maintenance?’ said Liam.

‘Yeah,’ said Carter. ‘Like, we had a massive drama yesterday because she suddenly realised she hadn’t packed her favourite bikini. Sunday and Monday, a green bikini’s fine. Then suddenly it has to be her shocking pink one. So we spent half the morning yesterday trawling round the shops in the Old Town trying to get a shocking pink bikini in her size. In the end, the rest of us left her to it. She eventually turned up with the damned thing at about three o’clock. Don’t get me wrong, it looked pretty good

on her, but...’

He tailed off.

‘I don’t know what more we can tell you,’ he said, eventually. ‘It’s just a terrible, terrible thing.’

32.

AT ABOUT THAT time, Justin Nicholls’ car arrived at the gate to No. 10 Downing Street.

He walked to the front door, nodded and smiled to the uniformed copper on duty outside, and stepped in.

As he did so, his mobile rang, with an MI6 identifier.

‘Nicholls,’ he said.

It was Alec Palmer.

‘The Spanish say the boat was empty when it blew up,’ said Palmer.

‘*Empty?*’

‘Yes. There was a guy driving it, but he jumped off and started shooting people, and it exploded a few seconds after that. The human debris field starts a few metres from the vessel itself – there were some Spanish marines nearby who copped the whole thing. But there’s no sign of any human remains from the inside.’

‘Could they be mistaken?’

‘No.’

‘If I’m going to tell the PM, I need to be sure.’

‘I’ve spoken to them myself,’ said Palmer. ‘They’re a hundred per cent certain. Meat is meat. No meat, no bodies.’

Meat is meat.

Justin Nicholls winced, Charlotte Morgan's face entering his mind.

'How did they get off?'

'The Spanish are working on that,' said Palmer. 'The target boat might have slowed for a few seconds and...'

'A sea transfer?'

'Looks that way.'

Nicholls nodded. 'Okay. Let me know immediately if there's any developments, Alec.'

'Of course.'

Nicholls ended the call.

'Mr Nicholls?' said a waiting aide. 'If you'd like to follow me?'

She took him down through the back of the house and outside to the garden.

On the other side of the large, bowling green lawn, on a wooden bench pressed against the tall, brick wall, and under the shade of a large buddleia alive with butterflies, sat the Prime Minister, Penelope Morgan.

She was ashen-faced but holding it together.

She always had been a tough cookie, Nicholls thought.

Next to her was Sir Peter Smith, the grey-haired Cabinet Secretary.

Smith stood up and pulled a garden chair out and round in front of the bench.

The two men shook hands, Justin leaned down and kissed Penelope on the cheek, and then he and Smith sat down.

'Is she dead, Justin?' said Penelope.

'No,' said Nicholls.

'How do you know? The boat... On the beach at Ceuta...'

'I've just had word. The Spanish say there was only one terrorist left on board when it went ashore, and he got off just before it went up.'

'How can they be sure?'

'Trust me,' said Nicholls. 'They're sure.'

'It was all about her, wasn't it?' said the Prime Minister.

'It does look that way,' said Nicholls, gravely. 'The cruise liner at Málaga seems to have been a diversion. The main target was the beach at Puerto Banús.'

'You mean *Charlie* was the main target?'

'Yes,' said Nicholls. 'She and two of her friends were taken aboard a yacht – some sort of super-fast, millionaire's plaything which had been stolen and the owner killed. The Spanish eventually got a chopper next to it and followed it all the way to Ceuta, where, as you know...'

Sir Peter Smith cleared his throat. 'So if Charlotte and her friends were on the boat when it left Marbella, but not on the boat when it exploded, how did they get off?'

'They must have had another boat waiting somewhere. You slow down, push them off into the water, and then haul them into the new boat... Not pleasant, but perfectly survivable. Clever, really.'

'So where is she now?' said Penelope Morgan.

Nicholls shrugged apologetically. 'I assume they landed somewhere on the North African coast. We're working on it.'

'No word from the... from the men who took her?'

'Not yet. But that's the one thing to hold on to. Look, Penny, there's no point in kidnapping the daughter of the British Prime Minister just to kill her.'

'What happened to Eddie?' said Penelope Morgan.

'Her boyfriend? I'm afraid...'

Morgan looked down, her hands clasped together tightly.

'He was a lovely young man,' she said. 'Paddy and I had high hopes of him. I must speak to his parents. They lost another son two years ago on a motorbike. How awful.'

'I'm sorry.'

There was another, heavier silence.

Nicholls looked up at the mortar fence protruding six feet above the weathered brick wall.

He felt a pang of nostalgia for the old days, when the worst threat they had faced was a few angry Irishmen and their home-made fertiliser bombs. That had been bad, but manageable. He wasn't sure the new enemy was going to be so easy to contain, much less defeat, unless the playing field changed dramatically – and the rules with it.

Penelope Morgan cleared her throat. 'Why didn't we know about this?' she said.

Justin Nicholls was silent.

'It's a major failure of intelligence, Justin.'

Nicholls looked down at his feet for a moment.

The scale and nature of the threat they faced meant that it was impossible to stop every attack, but he knew that she was right.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘There will have to be a full enquiry. But, for now, let’s worry about finding her and getting her back alive.’

The Prime Minister winced.

Sir Peter Smith stood up. ‘I have a couple of things to do ahead of the COBRA meeting. Will you be attending, Justin?’

‘No. C will be there, though.’

Smith nodded, said his goodbyes, and walked off into No. 10.

Penelope Morgan watched him go, and then looked up at the early evening sky above; it was a perfect blue, with a single fluffy cloud hanging overhead.

‘Gorgeous,’ she said, absently. ‘I remember my mother telling me that I was going to be Prime Minister one day. You know what she was like.’

Justin nodded and smiled, despite the situation.

‘We were down by the stables,’ said Penelope. ‘She said to me, “You’ll be the Prime Minister one day. Ten years at the Bar, then fifteen years of politics, then you mark my words, my girl, you’ll be the head honcho!” And here I am. I achieved her dream. Would have made her proud.’ She sniffed, fighting her emotions. ‘But I wish to God I’d married Dicky Coates and become a bloody farmer’s wife. When was the last time anyone kidnapped a farmer’s daughter?’

Nicholls said nothing.

The air was filled with late evening birdsong, and the muted sounds of London traffic.

Somewhere inside No. 10, a phone was ringing off the hook.

He said, 'Have you told Paddy and the other kids yet?'

'Paddy's in the States on business,' said Penelope Morgan. 'He's cutting it short and flying back tonight. Sophie was at her boyfriend's house and is on her way up to town. Joff's upstairs in the flat. He's in a terrible state. It's his big sister.'

She looked at Nicholls.

'One thing does occur to me, Justin,' she said. 'How did they know where Charlotte was?'

'Yes, that has occurred to us, too,' he said, drily. 'It's something else we don't yet know. We'll look at the airlines and the hotel and all that, but someone probably told someone they shouldn't have. It's usually loose lips.'

Morgan nodded.

She thought for a moment.

Then she said, 'I'll stop at nothing to get them back, Justin. Whatever it takes. She comes home. They *all* come home. Is that clear?'

'Well, we'll...'

'I'm serious. Never mind the courts. Those girls are in this position because I am who I am. And there's no point being who I am if you can't use what little power you have.'

Nicholls nodded.

Perhaps the rules *had* changed.

FIFTEEN HUNDRED MILES south, at 20:00hrs local time, John Carr was sitting in an interview room in the main *Policía Nacional* station in Marbella.

He was nursing a few bumps and bruises, and a split lip, and looking across a grey melamine table at a pair of Spanish detectives.

They'd just come back to the room after a while spent checking out his story.

Now the older of the two pushed a sweaty, Clingfilm-wrapped cheese-and-tomato roll across the table, along with a Styrofoam cup of weak Lipton's tea, the yellow tag showing that the bag was still in it.

'I'm formally telling you now that you are no longer a suspect,' said the younger man, Inspector-Jefe Javier de Padilla. He spoke in Spanish, since Carr was fluent – he'd spent a lot of time in South America on Regimental operations targeted against the coke barons of Colombia and Mexico.

'I hope you can see why we were not sure. Everyone else had run away, except for you and your son...'

He tailed off.

'Yeah,' said Carr. 'Don't worry about it.'

He'd had plenty of experience of terrorist situations, and he knew the deal: everyone's hostile until proven otherwise.

In fact, he'd been surprised at the professionalism of the guys who had arrested him and George.

They'd got them face down in the sand, hands on heads, and then he'd felt the muzzle of his No1's weapon pressed hard into the back of his skull, no room for ambiguity, while the No. 2 conducted a good search.

True, once he'd been cuffed they'd stuck a few punches and kicks in – a lawyer wouldn't like it, but lawyers operated in quiet, air-conditioned rooms, not with the air filled with gunsmoke and the groans of dying, blood-spattered children.

As far as Carr was concerned, they'd shown good drills.

'If you feel the treatment was too rough...'

'Nah,' he said, with a slight grin. 'I've had worse off my ex-wife. Like I said, don't worry about it. All I'm interested in is any news on my daughter.'

'I have good news, there, Mr Carr,' said de Padilla. 'I just heard from the officers we sent to your villa. Both she and the other member of your party are safe and well, and at the villa.'

'I need to go,' said Carr, pushing back his chair. 'She'll be worried to death.'

'Please, Mr Carr,' said the policeman, holding up a hand. 'I told my officers to stay with her, and to tell her that both you and your son are fine, and are helping us.'

Carr sat back in his chair.

'One hour,' he said. 'Then I have to go.'

'I understand.' De Padilla picked up a pen. 'So, I would like to take a statement. Is this okay?'

'Sure.'

‘Do you want a lawyer?’

‘Do I need one?’

‘As I say, you’re not a suspect. We have broadly the same laws of self-defence as in the UK.’ He smiled. ‘To me, the only question is which of our civilian gallantry awards you and your son will receive.’

Carr thought for a moment. ‘What about the two police officers and their pistols?’

The officer shrugged. ‘You did what you had to do. I am more concerned that you don’t tell people that our guys were running away. They’ll finish their careers in a small town somewhere far away, believe me.’

‘My lips are sealed.’

‘Sorry?’

‘I won’t tell anyone.’

‘Okay,’ said de Padilla. ‘So, I really want to see if you can help us identify any members of the gang.’

‘Sounds like a plan,’ said Carr.

‘So, we start from the beginning. You went to the beach with your son and the two ladies at what time?’

‘Before we get into that,’ said Carr. ‘I think I saw one of them.’

‘One of the terrorists?’ said de Padilla. ‘I don’t understand.’

Carr sipped his tea.

It was hot and weak.

‘You know my background,’ he said. ‘I’ve done a lot of surveillance work. There was a guy on the beach. Dark hair,

dark eyes, white clothing. Carrying flip-flops in his hand. He was trying to act like a normal tourist – playing the grey man, we call it – but he didn't quite pull it off. There was a group of young Brits, including four girls. Twenties, good-looking. One in a shocking pink bikini, one in a black bikini. A couple of others. I just thought he was scoping them out. I didn't blame him, to be fair. But given that the girls he was looking at were later taken away... He obviously had other things on his mind.'

'Did he see you?'

'No. He was so busy trying to disassociate himself from his target that he forgot about third-party. Most basic mistake in surveillance.'

'What's *third party*?'

'Me. The watcher watching the watcher. He thought it was just him, the target, and a bunch of random civilians. But I'm a paranoid motherfucker, and he stood right in front of me, so I paid attention. He stuck in my mind. He had a big chunk out of his right calf – probably a round, or a bit of shrapnel. It gave him a weird, rolling gait.' Carr finished off his tea. 'That's another mistake. Should have given that job to someone less distinctive.'

'Would you recognise him again?' said de Padilla.

'Aye. At night, in a jungle, blindfolded.'

'I don't understand, Mr Carr. Why *at night, in a jungle, blindfolded*?'

'Sorry,' said Carr. 'Sense of humour trying to kick in. Basically, yes, I would. I'd recognise him anywhere.'

AT AROUND THAT moment, the little green RIB finally came ashore, guided by a Garmin GPS device to a rocky beach on the western end of the Al Hoceima National Park, a remote and empty swathe of northern Morocco which was forested with thuja cypresses, and criss-crossed by dirt tracks.

His dark eyes flashing, Argun Shishani and the surviving shooter – Abdullah el Haloui, in his Manchester United shirt – hustled the three women onto the shallow beach and up into the cover of the trees.

‘Lie down!’ snapped Shishani. ‘Face the ground.’

‘No, please,’ said one of them, but when el Haloui raised his shortened AK they meekly complied.

‘Now be quiet,’ snapped the Chechen.

He cocked his head on one side, listening.

Nothing but crickets, and the rustling of the trees overhead.

He nodded, satisfied. ‘Wait here,’ he said, to his comrade. He nodded toward the water. ‘I have to speak to him.’

With his strange, lopsided walk, Shishani hurried back down to the inflatable, where the boatman, his face weathered by sixty years of sun and salt spray, was in the process of refuelling the engine from a jerry can.

‘Malik, my friend,’ said Shishani. ‘I have a gift for you.’

‘It’s not necessary, *saheb*,’ said Malik, with an open smile. ‘I am just happy to do my duty.’

‘But it *is* necessary,’ said Shishani, and as he walked towards

the other man he reached into the bag over his shoulder.

When he was six feet away, he pulled out a pistol – an FNP, loaded with .45 ACP subsonic rounds – and an angular Osprey suppressor.

Malik's eyes widened as he saw the weapon. 'What are you doing?' he said, nervously.

'I'm putting this suppressor on this pistol,' said Shishani.

'But *why*?'

Shishani didn't answer for a couple of seconds, but continued screwing the suppressor onto the FNP.

Then he said, 'Because although Al Hoceima is a desolate place I cannot discount the possibility that there may be someone nearby, and I don't want them to hear this.'

And, with that, he raised the weapon and shot the boatman twice in the chest.

Suppressors do not 'silence' gunfire, but the right equipment does greatly reduce the report, and subsonic rounds have none of the *crack* caused by a faster bullet as it breaks the sound barrier: the noise of the shots, and the brittle, metallic sound of the moving parts in action, was lost in the humid breeze.

Malik fell backwards into the shallows with a splash and there he lay, eyes and mouth open, his breathing laboured, the water lapping over him, a red cloud forming on either side.

His pupils tracked Shishani as he stepped forward into the water.

The dying man tried to speak, but produced only guttural

sounds.

‘Hush, my friend,’ whispered the Chechen, putting the pistol to Malik’s forehead. ‘I give you the gift of paradise.’

The single report from the pistol sent the old man on his way into eternity.

Shishani took a knife and stabbed the inflated rubber panels of the boat in several places. As the air hissed out, he pushed the foundering RIB out into the Mediterranean.

Then he walked back up the beach.

Abdullah el Haloui met him halfway, a sardonic smile playing on his lips.

‘Did you have to do that, *zaeim*?’ he said, his hands relaxing on the AK, which was slung from his neck across his chest.

‘I’m afraid so,’ said the Chechen. ‘I couldn’t risk him talking. And he is a martyr now. He should be grateful.’

‘I guess so,’ said the young Moroccan, with a chuckle. ‘But how do you know *I* won’t talk?’

‘I don’t,’ said Shishani, raising the FNP to other man’s chest.

The smile dropped off el Haloui’s lips in an instant.

He went for the pistol grip of his AK, but it was a futile move and the last thing he would ever consciously do.

Shishani fired two rounds, point-blank, into him.

The first clipped the top of his heart, and took his legs away. The second hit him in the throat as he dropped, smashing through his larynx and exiting the back of his neck, taking a chunk of his spinal cord with it.

The body hit the ground with a dead thud; this time, there was no need for any *coup de grâce*.

It was a moment or two before the Chechen could bring himself to look down at the fallen man.

Abdullah had played an invaluable role in the operation, from the moment when he had tailed the Morgan girl and her friends from the airport at Málaga to their hotel, to his glorious actions on the Spanish beach earlier this very day.

But this was no time for sentiment. If they were to succeed, then their mission had to be sealed off from the outside world.

Hermetically.

Not to mention, Abdullah was a true believer, utterly pure in spirit, and might well have caused trouble later.

‘I am sorry, brother,’ said Shishani, with genuine regret. ‘But I cannot bury you.’

He glanced up into the trees.

All three women were still lying face down, not daring to look around.

He bent down, pulled el Haloui’s weapon from his dead grasp, and walked back up the slope, looking at his watch.

Soon, soon.

‘Get up,’ he said. ‘We must walk. And if any of you does not do as I say she will die here and now.’

The three women stood up and walked into the forest along a sandy path, the heady scent of cypress filling their nostrils.

AS THE MOROCCAN night darkened, the headlights appeared.

Five minutes later, two Toyota Land Cruisers rolled and swayed along the undulating dirt road, and stopped.

A man got out – a giant, dressed in a grubby, blue *gandora* thobe and sandals, with a bushy, greying beard.

He beamed at Shishani, and the two men embraced and kissed each other on both cheeks.

‘Oh, it’s good to see you, Argun!’ said Khasmohmad Kadyrov, in Chechen. ‘When was it last, brother? Now Zad?’

‘Khan Neshin,’ said Argun Shishani. ‘I believe.’

‘So it was,’ said Kadyrov. ‘So it was. And today you have done a wonderful thing. Let me see her.’

‘Surely,’ said Shishani, and he led the other Chechen ten or fifteen yards into the trees where the three women still lay, face down, petrified.

At the sight of their bikini-clad bodies, Kadyrov’s face grew dark.

‘They’re dressed like whores,’ he spat. ‘What is this insult?’

Shishani raised his palms in placation. ‘I’m sorry, brother,’ he said. ‘We had clothes for them but they were left on the boat by mistake.’

‘Which one is she?’ said Kadyrov.

‘The middle one.’

‘Wait here.’

Kadyrov returned to his Land Cruiser. In his left hand were a

couple of black sheets; in his right, a digital video camera.

He dropped the sheets and handed the camera to Shishani.

‘The middle one, yes?’ he said.

‘Yes, she...’ said Shishani.

‘Give me that,’ said Kadyrov, pointing to the still-silenced pistol in Shishani’s waistband.

Shishani handed it over. Kadyrov stepped over to the women.

‘Get up!’ he said.

They stood, fearfully, not daring to meet his eye.

‘You,’ he said, pointing at the woman on the left. ‘Name?’

‘What?’ she said.

‘What is your name?’

‘Martha.’

‘*Martha*,’ he repeated, rolling it around his mouth. He nodded.

Then he looked at the woman on the right. ‘And you?’

‘Emily.’

He chuckled softly.

‘Well, well,’ he said, and looked at Shishani, eyebrows raised.

Shishani nodded.

‘Thank you, ladies,’ said Kadyrov. ‘Everyone stand up, come with me.’

He grabbed Emily Souster roughly by the shoulder, turned her around, and pushed her forwards. The other women followed as he walked them back twenty, twenty-five metres, to the overhanging branches of the trees.

‘Kneel!’ he snapped.

‘Please,’ said Emily. ‘What are you...?’

He raised the pistol, placed it against her forehead, and said, quietly, ‘Kneel.’

She did as instructed.

‘You two kneel either side of her,’ he said.

‘Emily...’ said Charlotte Morgan.

Kadyrov slapped her in the face. ‘Be quiet, woman,’ he said, ‘and kneel.’

The three women knelt in the sand, Charlotte and Martha held in position by masked men.

Kadyrov pulled on a black balaclava and stood behind Emily Souster.

‘Turn it on,’ he said.

There was an electronic beep as Shishani clicked the video camera.

‘Begin filming,’ said Kadyrov.

Shishani nodded.

The harsh glare of the light from the camera illuminating him, Khasmohmad Kadyrov looked into the lens and spoke, in heavily-accented English. ‘Oh, Britain!’ he said. ‘This is a warning from us, the Warriors of Jihad. A taste of what is to come.’

He placed the pistol to the back of Emily Souster’s neck, and she started and looked up at Shishani.

‘What’s he doing?’ she said. ‘I didn’t...’

‘Silence,’ said Kadyrov, sharply. He looked into the camera.

‘We have the daughter of the British Prime Minister. You can see her here. Now you will see that we are men of action.’

Somewhere overhead, an owl cried out.

The huge, masked Chechen pulled the trigger of the pistol.

The shot was aimed slightly to the right of Emily Souster’s spinal column, and was designed not to kill her immediately, but to cause pain and suffering, and to increase the horror of the footage.

The round exited her throat underneath her chin and sent her sprawling forward, her eyes wide with shock as her body tried to draw in air through the ruptured airway. The noise of her dying gasps filled the otherwise silent air, as her lungs filled with blood.

From somewhere, Charlotte Morgan heard a high-pitched scream; she only realised that the scream was her own when the man holding her punched her in the back of the head, sending her face forwards into the sand.

Shishani kept rolling as Kadyrov leaned over the dying Emily and casually dispatched her with another shot to the head, as a hunter might destroy an injured rabbit.

The giant Chechen turned back to the camera.

‘We will be in touch with your government very soon,’ he said, placing the pistol back in its holster.

‘Perfect, Khasmohmad,’ breathed Shishani, before clicking the camera off.

Kadyrov pulled off his balaclava.

‘You will transmit that to our friends in the Ivory Coast, for

them to disseminate?’ he said. ‘Along with our message?’

‘I will upload it as we drive,’ said Shishani.

‘And we’re a hundred per cent sure it’s secure? They won’t trace our location?’

‘We’ve been using these systems for long enough now, Khasmohmad. The encryption is superb.’

‘Designed by American nerds and made available for free to the world,’ said Kadyrov, shaking his head and chuckling. ‘It must drive the CIA crazy.’

He tapped Charlotte Morgan and Martha Percival on the heads and said, ‘To the vehicles.’

They stayed stock still, so the men who were holding them dragged them to their feet.

They were pushed roughly back towards the waiting Land Cruisers, where Kadyrov threw black sheets at them both.

‘Make yourselves decent,’ he said.

Charlotte slowly wrapped the sheet around herself, but Martha Percival simply stared vacantly at the ground, until one of the men threw the cloth over her.

Another man produced flatbreads, dates and a bottle of water.

‘Eat,’ said Kadyrov. ‘And drink.’

Martha Percival stared at her feet and said nothing.

Charlotte Morgan looked up at him.

‘No,’ she said. ‘You can kill me if you like.’

‘All in good time, my dear,’ said Kadyrov, with a smile. ‘What is your expression? Good things come to those who wait. I won’t

force you to eat, but it has been some hours since you were taken, and I cannot allow you to die of thirst. So...'

He nodded at the man, who grabbed Charlotte's face, forced her mouth open, and thrust the bottle into it.

She choked and spluttered, but a good half-litre of water found its way into her stomach.

When the bottle was removed, Charlotte looked at Kadyrov, defiance blazing from her eyes.

'Very well,' he said. He turned back to the other men and said, almost benevolently, 'Now tape them. This one first.'

Two of the men approached and seized Charlotte by the arms and legs, and a third began winding white duct tape around her ankles. He worked quickly and methodically, and by the time he was finished, her entire body was taped solid; a fourth covered her head, so that the only visible parts were her feet, her mouth and the top of her hair. She looked like a mummy.

During the entire time, Charlotte Morgan said and did nothing. She knew that resistance was futile, and, while her mind was reeling in panic and fear, she was determined not to show it; she would not give them that satisfaction.

When both women were taped, Kadyrov leaned forwards and spoke to Charlotte.

'Welcome to our lands, my dear,' he said. 'We do things differently here, as you will learn. We are going to travel now on a journey, about three hours, to Saïdia. It's a beautiful place, but ruined by your people. At Saïdia we will catch a boat and

go back to the sea.’ He chuckled. ‘Your intelligence people, we think they will be expecting us to stay on land,’ he said. ‘But they are not so clever.’

He turned and gestured towards the Land Cruisers.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘you must be placed in the back of one of these vehicles. We have made a special place, under the seats. Because we do not wish you to perish from heat exhaustion, we have fed the cold air through it. But it will be uncomfortable. You must be careful to make no noise. If we are stopped by any authorities, you say nothing. It will not help you, anyway – even if they hear you, some of the police are on our side, some are very stupid, and the others we can either bribe or intimidate. But still, remember this: *you say nothing*. If you disobey, you will die.’

He looked at the men standing nearby and nodded.

They lifted Charlotte Morgan’s stiffened, mummified form and carried her to the rear of the nearest 4x4.

It had, indeed, been modified, so that a narrow channel led from under the rear compartment’s floor to the passenger seat.

They pushed her into it, head-first, bodily.

Snapped it shut.

She heard them replace the carpeted floor.

Load some bags on top.

Then nothing for quite some time.

Outside, in the warm moonlight, Kadyrov turned to Argun Shishani and sighed, contentedly. ‘I can’t believe how well things are going, brother,’ he said. ‘Ride with me.’

They climbed into the rear of the first 4x4, and a few moments later the two vehicles set off in a slow convoy.

Beneath and behind them, in the lurching claustrophobia of the Land Cruiser's secret compartment, Charlotte Morgan was fighting an inhuman terror which was total and absolute and almost all-consuming.

It was like being in a coffin: her body touched the sides of the compartment, and her head was pressed against the end. Her nose was inches from its roof.

After a minute or two the heat was already almost unbearable, despite the air-conditioning.

She wanted to call out, and scream, and beg, and plead, but she knew that it would not help.

She told herself to stay calm.

Breathe.

Started whispering a mantra: 'You're going to be alright, Charlotte, you're going to be alright.'

Somehow, she had to get through this – one second, one minute, one hour, one day at a time.

What was to come she did not know. All she did know was that she was alive, and her friends were dead.

She gritted her teeth, closed her eyes, and concentrated on how she might kill these evil bastards.

And, strangely, she felt her pulse slow a fraction, and her strength return.

Revenge is a powerful incentive.

A LITTLE WHILE earlier, the police had finished with John Carr.

The main development was that they had been able to locate a shot of the man with the dark eyes, taken from a CCTV camera at the marina, for Carr to identify.

It wasn't very clear – the best angle was a three-quarter face, shot from above – but it was a start, and it was now being flashed to every friendly security service and police force in the world, to see what came back.

Inspector-Jefe Javier de Padilla had arranged for Carr and his son to be dropped back at the villa.

As soon as she saw her father, Alice flew at him, throwing her arms around his neck and burying her face in his shoulder, sobbing.

It took a while to calm her down, but eventually she settled.

'What happened?' said Carr, to Chloe.

'When you and George went, we went for a swim,' she said. 'We'd only got in up to our waists when they started shooting. It was... There were bullets everywhere. A little boy was killed just in front of us. We just swam further out and came back in up in the town.'

'It was horrible, Dad,' said Alice, wiping away tears. 'He was a toddler. There was so much blood. He screamed and then he went quiet. I wanted to help him, but I was too scared.'

'You couldn't have done anything, sweetheart,' said Carr,

stroking her forehead.

As he spoke, he felt a cold rage building in his soul.

Carr had no qualms about killing those who truly deserved it. Throughout his long career in the Regiment, he had come up against plenty of men who *had* deserved it, and he had killed them without emotion, and had walked away without a backward glance.

The battlefield had allowed him that space; the civilian world, a world he was still getting used to, was different. It was a world of prevarication and second-guessing, and judgment by men who had never picked up a weapon and stood firm in their lives, and could not and did not know what it meant to look death in the eye and prevail by sheer force of will.

He lived now by the rules of the civilian world, so he forced his rage back down into the dark depths, and hid it from his little girl.

They talked for a while longer, but eventually the two young women started to flag as the adrenalin died away.

He put his daughter to bed, reassured her that he wasn't going anywhere, and then padded out onto the veranda, into the muggy Mediterranean air, and dialled a number.

Fifteen hundred miles north, at her home in County Down, his ex-wife picked up the phone.

'How are they?' said Stella, the anxiety palpable in her voice.

'Physically fine,' said Carr. 'Alice saw things she shouldn't have seen, but she's unhurt. George did well.'

‘How do you mean?’

Carr quickly recounted the events.

‘Oh my God, John,’ said Stella. ‘Oh my God.’

‘He grew up today, Stell,’ said Carr. ‘Never took a backward step.’

They chatted a little more – Carr reassuring his ex-wife that he would be cutting short his holiday and flying Alice home the following day – and then ended the call.

A few moments later, George appeared, still in his Union Jack shorts, carrying a couple of cold San Miguels.

Three large candles were burning on a big wooden table, and the two of them sat there in silence for a while, drinking their beer in the cooling humidity, listening to the crickets and mosquitoes, and watching kamikaze moths fly into the flames.

A big white gecko scuttled up a wall.

Overhead, the stars drifted slowly by, oblivious to the momentous events of the day.

In the town below, the lights of emergency vehicles lit up various streets.

Carr sent George in for more beers, and when he came back he saluted him with a bottle.

‘You did well today, son,’ he said.

George felt a warm pride suffusing his body: his old man wasn’t big on unearned praise, and he knew what he was talking about.

‘What now?’ he said.

Carr took a deep swig and felt the cold lager fizzing in his throat.

‘We get shitfaced, I reckon,’ he said. ‘I’m taking your sister back home tomorrow. You stay out if you want. Lightning won’t strike twice.’

‘I didn’t mean that.’

‘What did you mean?’

‘How are we going to get our hands on the bastards who got away?’

Carr looked out and down to the sea, a mile or so distant, and the lights of Marbella twinkling merrily and incongruously in the black water, from which death had emerged so suddenly, and into which it had retreated just as quickly.

‘Not our problem.’

George finished his beer and went to fetch two more.

‘Maybe I’ll get a chance if I pass Selection,’ he said, when he came back.

‘Maybe,’ said Carr. ‘But that’s a big *if*.’

George turned away, looking dejected.

‘Hey, son,’ said Carr, reaching over and punching him on the shoulder. ‘Nothing against you, you’re as good a candidate as any I’ve seen. But it’s tough, and shit happens. I’ve seen good guys go down with injuries, or lose it in the jungle, or on combat survival, or just purely can’t hack it. There’s no guarantees.’

George Carr nodded.

‘Remember what I said when you told me you were trying for

the Paras?’ said Carr.

George looked at him, grinning slightly. ‘Not to come home if I failed, because no son of yours was failing.’

Carr threw back his head and laughed. ‘That’s right,’ he said. ‘Go and join the Foreign Legion. But I knew you’d pass. And I know you’ve got what it takes to pass Selection, too.’

A smile spread across George’s face.

‘But if you do fucking fail,’ said Carr, finishing his beer, ‘you can go and join the fucking Foreign Legion.’

37.

LIAM HAD INPUTTED the information he’d gleaned from the surviving couple, and Justin Nicholls picked it up on MI6’s confidential feed just after midnight UK time.

There was varying levels of background on each of the eight members of the party.

All under thirty years of age.

A *Times* journalist – Charlotte Morgan’s boyfriend, Edward Hanson.

Two lawyers, Charlie herself and a trustafarian solicitor called Emily Souster.

An investment banker called Nick Chandler who had travelled with Souster.

Jeremy Percival, who was a director at Percival Wareham, the London estate agency, and his wife, Martha.

Finally, the two lucky ones: financial adviser Thomas, and his nursery teacher girlfriend, Jemima.

Much of the focus would be on the three women who had been taken, but there was a decent new lead – the young guy in the Manchester United shirt who had followed them from Málaga arrivals, and then been seen on the beach. Some decent CCTV imagery of him had been found, and was being distributed.

And then there were the two who'd been shot dead; the results of DNA tests and fingerprint lifts from those bodies would be available soon.

If any or all of the men could be identified in some way, this would be a major start in working out where they were from and, most importantly, where they had gone.

It was early days, but they had a thread to pick at.

On the muted TV in the corner, tuned to the rolling twenty-four-hour Sky News channel, they were showing pictures of grieving family members starting to arrive at Málaga airport.

It was alternating with looped footage from Whitehall, showing people climbing into cars after the Civil Contingencies Committee meeting in the Cabinet Office Briefing Room.

Truth was, that wasn't much more than theatre: the media loved COBRA, but the real work was being done elsewhere.

He looked at his watch.

Nicholls had developed the ability to work for long stretches without sleep, but he was also long past any macho need to prove himself by staying longer, working harder, sticking at it.

There would be days ahead when he needed to pull longer hours, and he had to save his strength for those.

He switched his work station off, pulled on his jacket, and left the office.

38.

JOHN CARR WOKE with a start in the cool morning light, feeling damp and gritty-eyed.

It took him a moment to realise that he'd fallen asleep outside, on one of Konstantin's sun loungers.

He looked at his watch.

05:45 hrs.

He rubbed his eyes, stood up from the lounge, and padded into the villa through the open glass doors.

A security guy was asleep on the sofa.

Carr walked past him into the kitchen.

Made himself a cup of tea, and walked back out to the poolside with that in one hand and a stale chocolate brioche in the other.

Thought for a second, went back inside and prodded the security guard with his foot.

The man awoke with a start and a gasp.

'Morning, pal,' said Carr, cheerily. 'What's your name?'

'Yuri,' said the guard, rubbing his eyes and sitting up in shock. 'I...'

'You report to Oleg, right?'

Oleg Kovalev was Konstantin Avilov's head of security, a former Russian Foreign Intelligence Service spook and a good friend to Carr.

‘Yes.’

Carr bit into the brioche, started chewing.

He wiped a smear of chocolate from the corner of his mouth with his thumb, and looked down at the Russian.

Early fifties, he guessed, and thickset, with that hard, Eastern European look about him.

‘Spetznaz?’ he said.

‘No,’ said Yuri. ‘VDV.’

‘Airborne,’ said Carr, with an appreciative nod. ‘Me too. Afghanistan?’

‘Yes, for two year,’ said Yuri, proudly. ‘Also, First Chechen War.’

‘That’s some bad ju-ju,’ said Carr, with a grin.

He took another bite of the brioche.

The Russian security man relaxed, and smiled back at him.

‘You know my wee daughter’s asleep upstairs?’ said Carr.

The smile faded slightly, shading into confusion.

‘So answer me this, Yuri,’ said Carr. ‘When you were on stag – you know, sentry duty – in Afghanistan, or Chechnya, did you fall asleep?’

Now the smile well and truly fell from the Russian’s face. ‘No,’ he said.

‘No,’ said Carr. ‘I bet you didn’t. Because the Muj didn’t fuck about, did they?’

Yuri said nothing, but Carr knew he’d understood. On more than a few occasions, Soviet sentries had dozed off, and had

awoken to find their camp overrun, and themselves and their muckers about to be skinned alive by gleeful mujahideen.

Carr finished off the sweet bread, and washed it down with a mouthful of too-hot tea.

He paused.

Trying to decide whether to bollock the fucker, or punch him.

The look of contrition in the Russian's face softened Carr a little.

'Listen, Yuri,' he said, 'I'm going to let it go this time, but if you let me down again you and me are away round the back of the block, and then Oleg's going to have a go, and then when you get out of hospital you're looking for another fucking job. Do I make myself clear?'

'Yes,' said Yuri. 'I am sorry.'

'Good man,' said Carr. 'Don't worry about it. But it doesn't happen again, understood?'

The Russian nodded.

'Go and make yourself a strong black coffee, splash some water on your face, and keep alert.'

Carr took his tea outside and drank it while watching the sun rise over the hills to the east.

Felt the humid air warm a degree or two.

Another day in paradise, for some.

He finished the tea, threw the dregs into a flowerbed, and went back inside.

Had a piss, and a quick shower, and then padded along the

cold tiles to the study.

He booked a pair of lunchtime flights back to Heathrow for himself and Alice, and then went to pack his kit.

39.

JOHN CARR HAD just loaded Alice's suitcase into the boot of the villa's Range Rover, when his mobile rang.

Number withheld.

He tended not to answer unknown callers, but under the circumstances this could be a friend or a relative.

He clicked green, climbed into the driver's seat, and turned the engine on to get the AC kicked in.

'Yes?' he said, looking at his daughter.

The expression on her face, he'd seen it many times: it was the vacant look of a young squaddie who's just gone through his first real firefight.

He couldn't help smiling, slightly.

'John, it's Justin Nicholls,' said the voice on the other end of the line.

Carr said nothing.

'We met at your flat a while back?' said Nicholls. 'You, me, and Guy de Vere.'

A mental image of Justin Nicholls appeared in Carr's head: nicely cut pin-stripe suit, expensive shirt, pinkie ring, discreet silver watch.

Black shoes with a mirror shine.

Sitting, uncomfortably, in Carr's place in Primrose Hill.

With Guy de Vere, Carr's old platoon commander from 3 Para, turned 22 SAS CO, then DSF, and now Commander Field Army.

A meeting to offer Carr a role in a new outfit being set up, strictly on the QT, by certain people at MI6, in the British Army, and various other interested parties.

For various unspecified tasks.

'Aye,' said Carr. 'I remember you.'

'I understand you're in Marbella,' said Nicholls. 'I'm sorry to hear that your daughter got caught up in it.'

Carr didn't even bother asking how he knew.

'She's fine,' he said.

'And I've been reading with interest of your exploits.'

'Oh, aye?'

'Yes. First thing I saw this morning. We have pretty good sources in the Spanish police. Mind you, we're not the only ones with sources in the Spanish police.'

'Meaning?'

'You're all over the *Daily Mail* this morning.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes. With a photo.'

'Aye?'

They must have taken it as he left the cop shop – the place had still been crawling with media.

'Yes,' said Nicholls. 'Not a very good one.'

'Hard to take a bad photo of me, Justin.'

‘Low light,’ said Nicholls. ‘Taken from the side. You wouldn’t know it was you.’

‘What does the story say?’

‘“Hero Brit on beach of hell”,’ said Nicholls. ‘That’s the headline. You can look it up online.’

‘What does it say about *me*?’

‘It names you, and says you’re in your forties, and believed to be a former soldier.’

‘Does it mention the Regiment?’

‘No. It says you live in Hereford. I suppose people will work it out.’

‘Does it mention George?’

‘Who?’

‘My son. He was with me.’

‘No.’

‘Good.’

‘Anyway, I understand you may have seen one of the attackers?’

Carr chuckled – it amused him, the way the English upper classes tap-danced around things, using euphemisms and hints and never getting to the fucking point.

‘Justin, you know I saw him. I’m sure you’ve already read my statement to that effect. Why else would you be calling me?’

‘Ha,’ said Nicholls. ‘I haven’t yet seen the statement actually. Though I expect I will fairly shortly. Would you mind giving me a heads-up?’

‘Not much to tell. I saw a guy staring at the girls. Just thought he was a dirty old man at first. They pulled a picture of him off of the CCTV. Mean-looking fucker.’

‘Speaking of the girls, do you know the identities of the women who were taken?’

‘No. Should I?’

‘It’s all over social media.’

‘I don’t use social media.’

‘One of them was the daughter of the Prime Minister.’

It took a lot to shock John Carr, but that certainly knocked him back.

‘I see,’ he said, after a few moments.

‘Yes,’ said Nicholls. ‘I understand you’re booked on the one o’clock into Heathrow.’

Carr said nothing.

‘Anyway, I wondered... If anything occurs to you, if you remember something you didn’t tell the Spanish police, would you mind giving me a bell?’

‘Sure.’

‘You’ve got my number?’

‘In my head,’ said Carr.

He smiled to himself: it was actually stored in his phone under ‘James Bond’, but he wasn’t going to tell Nicholls that.

‘Great. Thanks. Look, I’d better get off. It’s chaos here, as I’m sure you can imagine.’

Carr certainly could imagine: he had a vision of the MI6 HQ

teeming with headless chickens.

Chinless, clueless, headless chickens, at that.

But he just said, 'Aye.'

The call ended and Carr turned to Alice.

'Buckle up,' he said.

'Who was that?' she said.

'Your granny,' he said.

'For fuck's sake, Dad,' said Alice, shaking her head. 'Why's everything got to be secret squirrel with you?'

He chuckled.

'I'm a leopard, sweetheart,' he said. 'I cannae change my spots.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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