

PROLOGUE

Andrew Horley tugged against the plastic that bound his wrists. It was a futile gesture. Even though he'd tried to leave space between them when the zip tie had been pulled tight, they were the kind of people who were wise to such actions and had simply pulled the plastic through another few notches.

The chair was hard and cold. Through the Savile Row suit, the rungs of wood dug into his back and thin plastic ropes cut into his chest. Duct tape covered his mouth, making breathing hard but he fought the unease which was threatening to become panic. He was sure the rescue team would come soon.

He moved as much as the bonds would allow, trying to ease the ache in his legs which were taped to the wooden spindles. The pain was testimony to the frenzy that had brought him to his current predicament. It was odd to think that just a short while ago he'd been minding his own business – well, official business – in the chill April sunshine. The shouting had come from nowhere – as did the nudge to the ground as his bodyguards had tried – and failed – to prevent the onslaught.

He'd been Prime Minister for less than a month: a whirlwind of meetings, dinners, briefings, phone calls and late-night conversations. It was ironic that sitting on the hard chair was the most rest he'd had in weeks.

The room was dark. There were no curtains but the small window faced trees and undergrowth which let in little light. In the doorway ahead stood a shadowy figure – a guard, presumably, and behind him Horley sensed another, although he was unable to turn round and check.

The furniture was sparse. There was a table and chairs by the window and a sofa to his right. Other than that, there was nothing. There was an odd smell too – a dampness mixed with burning which sent a chill down his spine.

It was OK, he reassured himself forcibly. They'd be here soon.

Company Sergeant Major, Andy Bateman, surveyed the gymnasium with frustration. Even though the advance party had already taken much of what they needed for the six month tour to Afghanistan, it seemed that the packing would never end.

He strode across to where a burley figure was issuing orders to a group of young squaddies.

‘How’s it going?’ Andy asked.

Sergeant Shaun Botham looked round. ‘Alright, Sir,’ he replied, the corners of his mouth twitching at the term of respect. ‘Think we’re getting there now.’

Andy returned the smile. ‘Carry on then, Sergeant.’

Only weeks ago, Botham would have called him “Colour”, being short for Colour Sergeant and Andy’s responding term would have been “Corporal” or perhaps even “Shaun” but since they’d both been promoted, it was one of those peculiarities that you had to get used to.

Andy moved on to another group who were being organised by a young, tall, serious-looking soldier. As Andy listened to the confident commands issuing from the young man’s mouth, he couldn’t help but smile. Richie had come so far since the last tour. Losing his best friend to a bomb had been the making of him and Andy felt proud that the now Corporal had grown into not only a confident man but a bloody good soldier.

‘Corporal Richards,’ he said.

There was a start and Richie turned round, giving Andy a look that reminded him that underneath it all, there were remnants of the old, doubtful boy. However, as he recognised Andy, he relaxed.

‘Sir,’ he said with deference.

‘Going all right?’

He nodded. ‘Should be finished on time.’

‘Good, good,’ Andy replied viewing the others who all looked like they’d had a rocket shoved up their arses. He remembered the first time he’d met his Sergeant Major – Grieves - who was now sitting pretty as Regimental Sergeant Major. It was one of the most terrifying days of his life.

He gave each a nod. ‘All right lads? Looking forward to it?’

‘Yes, Sir,’ came the dutiful responses.

They were probably lying, Andy thought wryly, but he couldn’t fault their positive tones.

‘Well, not long now,’ he replied with a smile.

He was tempted to stay and help but Major Ellis, their commanding officer, had gone with the advance party and in his wake there was a list as long as his arm of paperwork to sort out.

‘Right then, Corporal, I’ll leave you to it,’ he said then headed back to his office.

He sat down at his desk and viewed the spreadsheet that was displayed on the computer screen critically. He highlighted a number of items to indicate that they were complete before picking up the topmost manila file from the pile at the side of the desk and opening it.

There were the usual orders and he flicked through them without interest. He knew what he was doing and it was almost galling that the powers that Be felt it necessary to remind him. He

was about to discard the folder and return to the spread sheet when his eye was caught by a letter with an MoD heading, rather than the Regiment. As he scanned the words, he paused.

The name mentioned conjured many memories.

Frowning, he looked closer and as he read the content he didn't know whether to be furious that Major Ellis hadn't seen fit to inform him in person or be delighted as to its information. Apparently, Sarah King had been given permission to accompany them for a month as official photographer.

There was a post script from Major Ellis. It read simply:

The Colonel has expressed a wish to proceed with this and has informed Miss King of his decision. Please action logistics.

He stared at the letter thoughtfully.

The last time he saw Sarah, she was being arrested by Military Police as a suspected terrorist. Whilst he personally had never believed a word of it, it seemed odd that the shadow of suspicion had been lifted so completely. What was also unusual was that the operation they were heading out on was going to be full-on to say the least. Journalists were often embedded for a few weeks with a unit, of course, but he found it difficult to understand why the Colonel had agreed to it under such circumstances.

He glanced down the page and saw Sarah's contact details had been included. There was an email address, a mobile phone number and a landline with a Hereford prefix.

He chuckled – that answered a few questions.

He debated whether to call her but he was short on time and besides, he had no clue what to say. They'd been friends before but a lot of water had gone under the bridge since then – for both of them.

Instead, he sent her an email. He kept it brief and to the point. She was to present herself at the Base within two days if she wanted to come out in the first wave. Failing that, she would have to wait at least a month.

He pressed send then leaned back in his chair.

He supposed that he ought to return to the spread sheet but his mind was full of other thoughts – troubling ones.

He'd always known that the tour was going to be tough. He'd reconciled his mind to the difficulties and consequences of what they were about to do but having Sarah there added another level of challenge. Apart from the obvious safety issues, having her around could unsettle the men. She was stunning and with a quick wit and the ability to give as good as she got, she was most squaddie's dream.

On the other hand, if his suspicions about the Hereford phone number were correct, she was now hooked up with Rob Sanders, the legendary SAS operative.

And if that was the case, he reflected with amusement, it might be more appropriate to be concerned about his men's safety than hers.

Andrew Horley had lost track of time. If he could have taken his hands from behind his back, and looked at his watch, he would have realised that only thirty minutes had passed since his abduction.

In his terrified state, it felt like hours.

He tried the guards again.

‘Er, hello!’ he called. ‘You! By the door!’

The shadowy figure remained still and silent, his head turned towards the passageway that lay outside the room.

Anxiety bubbled up. It was his one weakness. Like many Prime Ministers before him, he had the constitution of an ox and the stamina to match. He could be in Washington for a breakfast meeting, London for lunch and Afghanistan for supper and still have energy to work on the flight back to the UK in the small hours. But he was prone to anxiety. It didn’t help that the first of his foreign trips in a ministerial capacity had been to Afghanistan, where his helicopter had been shot at and nearly brought down.

And now, the fear was threatening to overtake him. As the Prime Minister, panic wasn’t an option but in the damp, chilled room he wasn’t the PM, he was plain old Andrew Horley and Andrew Horley could feel terror clawing at his throat.

He breathed heavily through his nose, the duct tape over his mouth suffocating as a thousand dark thoughts crowded his mind.

Sweat trickled down his back; ice cold. All he could think of was the tightness in his chest and the even tighter binding on his wrists.

He tried again to loosen their hold but only succeeded in making them cut more sharply into his skin. Tears prickled his eyes and he blinked rapidly, terrified of his vision blurring.

The panic was rising – irrational, unhelpful and unstoppable. His nostrils seemed to be constricting. He snorted, desperate for air, trying to force his mouth open against the duct tape. His vision blurred as he hyperventilated. Blood pounded through his veins, filling his ears, blotting out all other sounds.

Then, all of a sudden, the room was full of smoke.

He cried, deep down in his throat and writhed against his bonds. The smoke stung his nostrils and caught at the back of his throat, making him choke. Through the fog, he saw the guard at the door move. There was the *crack, crack* of small arms fire and the guard fell forward, blocking the doorway. There was a *zip* overhead then from behind came a dull thud and Horley sensed the other guard had fallen like the first.

Two black-clad figures entered the room, stepping over the guard like he was a lump of meat, rifles primed against their shoulders. They had no faces, just two black circles where their eyes should have been.

He recoiled, terrified, gagging and trying to push himself backwards but the chair legs were stuck on the rough carpet.

The taller of the two stepped forwards and, lowering his weapon, peered into Horley's face. There was a curt hand signal then the other also lowered his weapon and stepped behind the chair.

'Please God, no!' Horley wailed, but all that came through the duct tape was a muted cry.

The bonds around his wrists tightened and burned, then suddenly released. His arms fell to his sides, weak, heavy and useless.

The figure in front pulled a knife from his belt and sliced the restraints around Horley's legs. They tingled with pins and needles as the blood flow returned but before he could do anything more than wince, they pulled him to his feet and propelled him towards the door.

The guard's body was gone but Horley had no time to think about it as he was half dragged, half carried down the passageway. Through the fog, he could see light and realised that they were heading for the front door of the house. It burst open, rammed by a foot from the man in front.

Cool, clean air swept over him and he drew it gratefully into his nose.

And then he emerged into the beauty of an English spring day.

The sun was piercingly bright and he closed his eyes against it. Smells enveloped him: grass, flowers and hot earth and from overhead came the sounds of birds mixing with the buzzing of insects.

Never before had he felt so alive.

They urged him forwards then rested him gently on the ground. He lay stunned, as yet unable to peel the tape from his mouth while his eyes and throat smarted from the smoke.

The two men were joined by four others and they gathered around, their backs turned in a guarding circle and he could hear their breathing, although none spoke.

After a moment's recuperation, he raised a shaking hand and lifted the corner of the tape. As he pulled it back, it felt as though it was taking a layer of skin with it, but as he pulled the final bit away and took a lung full of fresh, sweet air, he didn't care.

Shielding his eyes, he looked up at his rescuers who were turning around to face him. Feeling foolish, he realised that what he had seen as dark holes in their faces were in fact black gas masks. One by one they removed them and then took off their black head covers.

The faces were all smiling and in response, he started to chuckle.

'For a moment there I thought you weren't coming but I have to say that I'm impressed, gentlemen,' he said, 'very good indeed.'

'Thank you, Sir,' came a voice to his right. It was one that he recognised and he turned to look at its owner, giving a broad smile.

'Rob Sanders,' he said. 'We meet again.'

Rob stepped forward and held out his hand. Horley grasped it and allowed Rob to pull him up. It took a moment for his equilibrium to settle and he was glad that Rob inconspicuously steadied his arm.

'How long was I in there?' he asked.

'About half an hour,' Rob replied.

Horley stared at him disbelievingly. 'Seriously?'

Rob checked his watch. 'Thirty four minutes to be precise.'

'I... I can't believe it,' he said, frowning. 'It seemed much longer.'

Rob nodded. 'Always does, Sir.'

A figure in a green uniform, and bearing the three pips and a crown of a Colonel on his shoulder materialised beside them. His greying hair and beady eyes gave him a hawk-like appearance.

Horley held out his hand. 'Colonel Astor,' he said. 'Your men are very impressive.'

Astor gave a curt nod. 'Thank you, Sir. They train very hard. We thought you might appreciate having the opportunity to experience their skills first hand. I hope the exercise wasn't too traumatic?'

Horley considered that it was one of the most scary things he'd ever gone through but he wasn't about to admit that to Astor.

Instead he smiled. 'Not at all – it was exhilarating, actually.'

Switching to his professional mode, as much to get control of his continuing nerves as anything else, he went to each man in turn and shook hands.

The final in line was Rob. Horley paused. The last time they'd met, Rob had been his body guard and his quick wittedness had saved them both from a terrorist bomb. From time to time he still had nightmares about the event and he never had been able to thank the illusive SAS operative properly.

Horley turned to Astor. 'Colonel, I'd like Rob to join us at dinner tonight.'

Astor's expression clouded and Rob held up a hand. 'Thank you Sir, but I'm on duty tonight.'

Astor gave Rob an approving look and it was obvious to Horley that Rob had no such duties to perform. As ever, it was the damnable British Army class system at work. Horley had no idea what rank Rob was but from Astor's behaviour, it was obvious that he wasn't an officer and so would not be welcome in the Officer's mess.

'No, really, I insist,' Horley continued. 'I'm sure someone else can step in – at least for a few hours.'

There was an awkward silence, broken by Astor. 'The thing is, Sir...'

'I hope you're not going to give me some clap trap about ranks, Colonel,' Horley interjected, fixing the man with a hard look. As a state-school graduate he abhorred the elitist attitude that pervaded both the Army and Whitehall.

Before Astor could reply, Horley turned to Rob. 'Forgive me for asking, but I'm guessing you're not a Commissioned Officer?'

Rob shook his head.

He turned back to Astor. 'And I take it that it would be against etiquette for Rob to dine in the Officers' Mess - is that what you're saying?'

Astor's face reddened. 'We have our traditions – even in this regiment.'

'In that case, we have an impasse. Perhaps we should call it off completely and I'll take Rob and his team out for dinner in Hereford. I'm sure I'll be safe enough don't you?' he added with a condescending smile. 'I'll leave it with you, shall I?'

Astor pressed his lips together then forced a polite smile. 'I suppose we could make an exception – just this once.'

He turned to Rob, his eyes flashing angrily, as though it was his fault. 'Perhaps it would be best if you didn't come in Mess Dress, Rob and I'm sure we could find room on one of the lower tables.'

Horley's blood boiled. 'Perhaps I didn't make myself clear,' he said tersely. 'I want to be able to talk to Rob, not wave at him from across the room. He's my guest of honour – it's only right that we should be sitting together. I'm sure you can make the necessary arrangements.'

For a long moment, they locked eyes. Horley could see that Astor was itching to refuse but surrounded by his underlings, was unable to.

Horley gave him a slight smile, enjoying the power his position offered.

‘Now,’ he said brightly, ‘I seem to remember someone promising me a tour of the base. Colonel, would you do the honours?’

Rob watched as Horley and the Colonel walked away from the Killing House towards the hub of the base. As they rounded some trees and disappeared from sight, Rob lowered to the ground and the others dropped around him in a semi-circle.

‘OK, guys,’ he said darkly. ‘Debrief.’

There was a collective groan.

He held up a hand dismissively. ‘It took too bloody long. You were all shabby. Pottsie,’ he said, rounding on a lanky man with spiked blonde hair. ‘How long was it between throwing in the smoke grenade and taking out X-ray One?’

Pottsie shrugged. ‘Two, three seconds?’

‘Six,’ Rob retorted. ‘Long enough for X-ray One to have taken at least a couple of us out – or lobbed it back. And Mason,’ he added, looking towards another young man who was tall and dark haired, ‘where the fuck were you?’

‘Right behind Pottsie, Boss,’ he replied defensively.

‘No,’ Rob replied. ‘Right behind Pottsie and you would’ve got the blast wave off his farts.’

There was a chuckle amongst the others.

‘I had curry last night,’ Pottsie protested. ‘Can’t help it if they pump that stuff full of shite.’

‘You’re always full of shite,’ a slightly older man with a shaved head said, but without rancour.

‘Alright, Tadmor,’ Rob said, ‘back to the matter in hand. Mason, you were at least four feet away and Scotty,’ he said to a wiry man with receding brown hair and a lined face, ‘for Christ’s sake, when I give the signal for “move right”, go fuckin’ right, will you?’

‘Boss,’ he said automatically.

‘And Garcia,’ he added, turning to a young man with Latin looks. ‘Are you on acid or something? Steady down, will you?’

‘Will do, Boss,’ he confirmed seriously.

Rob raked his hands through his hair. He was rarely given to thoughts of nostalgia but at that moment he wished that the old crew was still intact. It wasn’t so much the men themselves, but their lack of experience.

Tadmor and Pottsie were all that remained of the tight-knit crew he’d worked with for the last two years and both had been the juniors of the team. The others for one reason or another had left the Regiment.

Jonesie, the blunt instrument and Skinny, the sharp eyed sniper were both retired. Mickey, his best friend and one of the most able SF operatives he’d ever known had given in to the lure of going private and was now earning a small fortune somewhere in Africa and Butters - the best medic in the Regiment - had grown a conscience and now worked for Medicines Sans Frontiers.

‘Right, let’s do it again,’ Rob said. ‘Garcia, you can be the hostage. The rest of you, usual drills. Mason, you can partner me and keep up. OK?’

Rob made them do the hostage rescue four more times until he was properly satisfied. Finally, with the sun sinking slowly in the sky, he called the practice to a halt.

‘That’ll do for today,’ he said, glancing around the tired faces, ‘ranges tomorrow. Then Friday it’s off to sunny Wales for a bit of phys on the mountains so I suggest you go easy on squaddie night on Thursday. I don’t want to see the contents of your stomachs flying on the wind, alright?’

They all nodded.

‘OK. See you O nine hundred tomorrow,’ he said then gave a rueful smile. ‘Have one for me in the bar, eh?’

He watched them saunter away in the early evening sunlight laughing and joking then gathered his kit and headed after them.

It wasn’t that he felt out of the team – normally he would have joined the banter – but today was not a good day. As the feelings of gloom that he’d managed to put to one side whilst busy closed in once more, he thought sourly of the imminent dinner.

He gave little deference to rank at the best of times. He neither cared about the imaginary split of “them” and “us”, nor envied the officers’ positions. Should he so wish, he could easily join their ranks. Major Brookes had been urging him to take a Commission and for someone of his skills, expertise and fitness, Sandhurst would be like Butlins but Rob had been a foot soldier all his army career and he’d rather quit.

It was bad enough that he’d been forced into the training arm of the Regiment due to breaking protocols to rescue and protect Sarah.

As he thought of her, his stomach clenched. The twelve months they’d been together had been some of the most pleasant of his life - but that was before she’d decided to go back to the East Anglians and apparently fall out of love with him.

Bitterness and anger seared through him and for a moment it was all he could do to hold off picking up his weapon and taking his feelings out on some unfortunate tree. However, that would see a Charge added to the shit-total and so instead he gritted his teeth and rammed the feelings down.

What was done was done and now he simply had to learn to live with it.

He reached the main compound twenty minutes later and made his way down to the stores. The quartermaster, Davies, a dour Welshman in his late forties, took each item of kit from him with the briefest of replies.

Rob checked that his weapon was empty then showed Davies.

‘Clear,’ Davies acknowledged then took it from him and put it back in the appropriate rack. He returned to the desk and took Rob’s empty and full magazines.

As Davies signed the log, Rob turned away dressed now only in his own issue black trousers, shirt and ops vest. ‘Cheers,’ he said to the unresponsive, bowed head.

Out in the car park, he made for his and Sarah’s car. She’d insisted that they buy something sensible and fuel efficient. At the time, loved up as he was, he’d happily agreed but now, as he gazed at the non-descript hatchback, he hated it.

He got into the driving seat, belted up then made his way to the exit.

He paused at the guardhouse for the customary checks then headed for the main gate. Giving the guards a nod, he waited for the security bollards to lower then pulled onto the road, turning right and heading towards the main road to Hereford.

The clock on the dashboard read eighteen forty five: just enough time for a shower and brush up before heading back to the base to take his place at the PM's side.

He supposed he should be happy. Most people would give their eye teeth for such an opportunity but he wasn't most people and instead, all he could think of was how interminable the evening would be. He'd far rather be in the bar with the guys.

At least then he could get pissed and blank out his feelings.