

# MASTERS OF WAR

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# **CHRIS RYAN**

## **MASTERS OF WAR**



CORONET

First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Coronet  
An imprint of Hodder & Stoughton  
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 444 70647 5  
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 444 70648 2

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh  
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd  
338 Euston Road  
London NW1 3BH

[www.hodder.co.uk](http://www.hodder.co.uk)

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

On Thursday, 31 January 1991, a week after the ill-fated Bravo Two Zero patrol had been compromised, I crossed the Iraqi border into Syria. I was the only member of the unit to escape capture alive, but I was in a bad way. I'd been on the run for seven days and nights. I hadn't eaten for six days, or drunk any water for three. My toenails had fallen off and my blistered feet had become infected and were oozing pus. I'd been exposed to nuclear waste and I was hallucinating. But at least, here in Syria, I was safe.

Or so I thought.

The first Syrian people I encountered were villagers living so simply that they were cooking breakfast on a fire outside their little house of whitewashed stone. They gave me cool water. Without their kindness I doubt I could have survived much longer.

We did not speak each other's language, but I managed to make them understand that I needed to get to the nearest town. A young man helped me get there, but in the hours that followed I saw a very different side to life in Syria. I had to escape an angry mob who seemed determined to kill me. I found myself in the custody of three low-ranking Syrian police officers who performed a mock execution on me. Having covered about two hundred miles on foot in Iraq, I crossed most of Syria by car before reaching the capital, Damascus. There I ended up in the headquarters of the feared *Mukhabarat* secret police. The

very name was enough to terrify the ordinary citizens of Syria, as the *Mukhabarat's* tortures were notoriously cruel and they had a nasty habit of 'disappearing' anyone who displeased them.

Syria was a complex, dangerous place for me back in 1991. But now, more than twenty years on, one thing strikes me: it was not nearly so dangerous then as it is now. I got out alive. Tens of thousands of victims of the present Syrian civil war haven't been so lucky.

The story that follows is drawn from experience, and from first-hand knowledge of a country which, as I write these words, has become one of the most dangerous and war-torn places on earth. Some of it might make uncomfortable reading. I make no apology for that. Conflict is not a glamorous business. It's ugly and violent, and those who suffer the worst are not the politicians, for whom death tolls are little more than statistics. They are the ordinary people, stuck in the middle, and the soldiers sent to do the bidding of the masters of war.

Chris Ryan  
London, 2013

In time of war, when truth is so precious, it must be  
attended by a bodyguard of lies.

Winston Churchill





## PROLOGUE

*The maternity ward, the Ulster Hospital, Dundonald, Northern Ireland. 1989.*

If Susan Black had not been quite so brave, she might have got away with it. But bravery is always a gamble. You never know how it will turn out.

She lay in a hospital bed, propped up by pillows, her pale face exhausted. It was a plain room, about ten metres by ten, basic but not unpleasant. There was a blood-pressure machine to Susan's right and, on the wall behind the bedside table on her left, a laminated poster. It showed a suckling baby and stated: 'Breast is Best.' At the end of the bed was an empty cot. Susan softly hummed 'Rock-a-bye Baby' as she cradled her warmly wrapped newborn in the crook of her right arm. The little boy's few wisps of hair were matted with dried amniotic fluid. It was a bright spring morning, and the smell of newly mown grass wafted in through the open ground-floor window, where a lazy bee buzzed a counterpoint to Susan's humming. She looked over to the corner of the hospital room. Her husband Simon was there, cross-legged on the floor with their eldest, Kyle. The five-year-old was colouring – the excitement of his baby brother's arrival had already worn off, and Simon was doing what he could to keep the boy occupied.

Susan loved looking at her family. It gave her hope. Kyle had inherited her reddish-blond hair and his father's grey eyes. A perfect mixture of Irish and British. She had no time for the

sectarian rubbish that had surrounded her all her life. Never had, and nor had her family. She'd met Simon at New Forge rugby club, where he'd played for the RUC, and hadn't thought twice about making eyes at him. The Troubles were for other people. Sure, if she walked along the wrong side of the Falls Road she could, having married a member of the British Army, expect some insults she wouldn't want her children to hear. But living in Aldershot, as she now did, that stuff was just a memory. She had only come back to the Province for a quick visit with her parents – and of course with Simon himself, in the middle of his second six-month tour of duty with the Parachute Regiment – before the baby arrived. But the baby had decided to put in an early appearance.

Susan had expected to give birth in England, without the support of her husband. But sometimes, she thought to herself, things work out for the best. She hugged the bundle in her arms a little harder as Kyle bossily told his dad which crayon to use to colour in his He-Man and Skeletor picture. There weren't many people who could boss Simon Black around, but their lad was one of them.

Simon seemed distracted, though. Worried. There were frown lines on his face and he was absent-mindedly sparking the Zippo lighter carved with his initials that she'd bought him for Christmas – a clear sign that he was on edge. In a corner of her mind Susan supposed that she should be anxious about this. Why was he not more excited about the arrival of their baby? But the pethidine the doctors had given her hadn't yet worn off, and she had other things to occupy her, like the precious, fragile beauty of the child in her arms.

She caught her husband looking at her. 'You want some water?' he asked.

Susan gave him a smile and nodded. She wasn't really thirsty, but she knew how Simon hated having nothing to do. He walked over to her bedside table, where there was a jug of

water and a glass. As he stretched out his right arm to lift the jug she watched his muscles flex and caught sight of the tattoo on the underside of his forearm. The motto of the Parachute Regiment, in Gothic letters: *Utrisque Paratus*. Ready for Anything. She always joked that he needed to be, having got together with a good Catholic girl like her. *He* always joked back that there was nothing Catholic about her once the lights were out.

A clinking sound as jug touched glass. Scribbling from the corner of the room. And, as Simon handed her the water and took the baby from her so she could drink, the sound of the door opening.

‘Nurses can’t keep away, can they?’ Simon said, his Newcastle accent very soft. ‘It’s because he’s got his ma’s good looks, eh? Better hope he’s got her brains, and all.’

He flashed a smile at Susan, but then frowned as he saw the look on her face. Still holding the baby, he spun round.

He’d been expecting to see a nurse or a midwife. They’d been in and out of the room ever since the baby had been born. This newcomer was dressed in the standard green scrubs of a hospital orderly. Unlike a hospital orderly, however, he wore a black balaclava and tan leather gloves and brandished an evil-looking handgun with a cylindrical suppressor fitted to the barrel.

The bee buzzed near the open window. Kyle, unaware of what was happening, continued to scribble. Susan opened her mouth to scream, but no noise came.

The intruder strode towards them, his gun raised, silently closing the five-metre gap between the door and the bed. As he drew alongside the bed, he seemed uncertain where to fire. His preference was clearly for Simon’s chest – a wider target – but the baby was in the way and so his weapon drifted up towards the father’s head.

Down to the chest.

Up to the head.

Had the gunman not hesitated before firing, Simon Black would have died instantly. But Susan, although very weak, had pushed herself up from her reclining position and hurled herself at him. She wasn't strong enough to knock the gunman down, but she bashed into him just the same. 'Provo cunt!' Simon hissed, just as the round intended for the centre of his forehead clipped the edge of his left temple. Its trajectory altered, it smashed the water jug behind him. Simon fell backwards as a spray of blood and a small shard of bone flew from the side of his head, splattering the 'Breast is Best' poster with a flat, slapping sound. Still holding the child, he slouched against the bedside table, water streaming over his bloody head. The gunman took aim again, ready to finish the job.

Susan had once heard a story, an urban myth, of a mother whose child was stuck under a car and who managed, thanks to the adrenalin surging through her veins, to lift the car and rescue the child. She had never believed it. Now, though, she found herself filled with a similar strength. As the gunman prepared to take his second shot, she threw herself at him, screaming at last – an animal mixture of fury and fear. Her body slammed against the gunman's, and they became a knot of limbs.

They were already tumbling to the ground when the second round was discharged.

It was quieter than the first, muffled not only by the suppressor but also by the soft, post-natal flesh of Susan's belly.

There was a moment of silence. The gunman lay quite still under Susan's body. The bee had fled from the open window. And then, after five seconds, there was a horrific retching sound as a torrent of foam and blood erupted from Susan's mouth.

The gunman heaved Susan's body away from his. The baby started wailing, a thin but persistent sound that was mostly drowned out by the sudden screaming of the five-year-old boy. As the gunman pushed himself to his feet, Susan rolled on to her back. She was clutching the wound to her stomach but it was

useless: blood gushed over and between her hands, pooling stickily on the floor around her. She tried to say something, but simply spewed more blood as her lungs and other vital organs failed.

Then the door flew open. Two nurses stood frozen in the doorway. The gunman looked around at his handiwork. It was impossible to tell through the balaclava what he was thinking as, in another moment of hesitation, he stared first at the bleeding woman on the floor and then at her husband. Simon Black was still slumped by the bedside table. He still held his baby. But one side of his face was smeared with blood, his left foot was twitching and his eyes stared straight ahead without blinking.

The nurses screamed. There was a commotion in the corridor outside. The gunman – his green scrubs stained dark – ran to the open window and climbed through it, into the gardens outside.

By the time, forty-five seconds later, three security men burst into the room, he was gone.

In the minutes that followed, the chaos of the maternity ward increased tenfold. Doctors sprinted down the corridor to the room where the botched hit had taken place, barking instructions. Stretcher beds arrived. A nurse with trembling hands took the screaming baby from his wounded father. The midwife who had delivered him gave his five-year-old brother Kyle a hug so he wouldn't have to watch his mother and father being lifted on to the stretcher beds and rushed into the operating theatre. And when they had gone, she buried his face in her ample chest so he wouldn't have to see how closely the room now resembled an abattoir. She tried hard not to retch as she glanced at the poster above the bedside table, now gruesomely defaced with red spots.

In theatre number one, Susan Black lay under the bright overhead lights, an oxygen mask pressed to her face, her sheets

saturated by an oozing continent of her blood. A container of fresh rhesus negative hung on a drip stand next to the bed, but it was clear to the seven-strong medical team trying to save her life that she was losing blood faster than they could transfuse it. A surgeon shouted through his canvas mask: 'Haemodynamically unstable, we need a laparotomy.' Moments later he was making a lower midline incision, the scalpel passing an inch to the right of the catastrophic entrance wound in the patient's abdomen. As his scalpel cut through skin and a layer of subcutaneous fat, the rate of beeping from the ECG machine rapidly increased. To the shock of everybody in the room, the patient's eyes pinged open. Her abdomen arched upward. Her body stiffened. The screen on the ECG machine flatlined.

'Vasopressin!' the surgeon shouted. '*Vasopressin!*' Seconds later a nurse handed the surgeon a syringe full of a clear liquid, which he injected immediately in an attempt to revert the cardiac arrest.

There was no response.

He started to administer chest compressions, pumping rapidly and firmly down on the breastbone, just above the butchered abdomen. But after twenty compressions there was still no sign of electrical activity on the ECG. No pulse. Nothing.

The surgeon stepped back, his scrubs as bloody as the gunman's had been. From somewhere in the distance, beyond the walls of the operating theatre, came the sound of police sirens. The surgeon looked at his watch. 'Time of death, nine fifty-six a.m.,' he said. Then, unable to hide his anger at his failure to keep the young woman alive, he ripped off his mask and threw it to the floor, before storming out of the theatre.

Outside in the corridor a man was waiting. He looked scruffy. He was a head taller than the surgeon, and had shoulder-length hair and a straggly beard that were as dark as his eyes and the look on his face. His cheekbones were pronounced,

his nose slightly out of joint. 'What's happening in there?' he demanded.

'You'll have to speak to the hospital administrators,' the surgeon said, not even stopping to say it.

The man grabbed him by one arm. A firm, vice-like grip. The surgeon stopped, looked meaningfully at the hand restraining him, and then up at its owner.

'Sorry,' said the man. 'I'm . . . the name's Taff Davies. I'm a friend of the family. I need to know . . .' His voice had the faintest trace of a Welsh accent. It dripped with anxiety.

The surgeon bowed his head. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'We did everything we could. It was a terrible wound. The worst I've seen.' He looked up and down the hospital corridor. 'And I've seen some bad ones.'

Three British Army soldiers appeared at one end of the corridor. They wore camouflage gear, and as they approached, the surgeon – who had made a study of such things – recognised the red shoulder flash of the Parachute Regiment. One of the Paras walked straight up to the man who had introduced himself as Taff Davies, who immediately held out a small military ID card. 'I'm with the mob,' he told the soldier quietly. 'Don't make a play of it, eh?'

The grim-faced soldier looked surprised. 'The Regiment's here?'

Taff shook his head. 'They're friends of mine. I came to visit the kid. They know what's happened up at Palace Barracks?'

The Paras nodded grimly.

Taff loosened his grip on the surgeon, to whom this conversation meant nothing. 'Where's Simon?' he asked.

'The husband?'

He nodded.

'Theatre number two. I wouldn't get your hopes up.' With a respectful nod, the surgeon continued down the corridor. Seconds later a noise made him look back over his shoulder. Taff Davies had

picked up one of the plastic chairs lining the corridor and slammed it down on the floor, while the soldiers, clearly alarmed, stood at a safe distance of a few metres. Now he was clutching his hair, and looking around with a helpless, anguished expression. The surgeon had seen many people who had lost loved ones. He could tell instantly that Taff Davies was one of their number.

The corridor was spinning. Taff could barely stand. The doors to operating theatre number one swung open. A sombre collection of hospital staff emerged, wheeling a stretcher bed. A blue sheet covered the body on the bed. He heard one of the Paras swear under his breath. The sheet had a dark stain where it had come in contact with the corpse's abdomen. In his time Taff had seen more dead bodies than he could easily count. He'd added to them. But not all dead bodies are the same. The sight of some leave you as cold as the corpse itself.

Taff watched the bed disappear. Then he moved his substantial frame past the soldiers, in the direction the surgeon had indicated. A minute later he was outside operating theatre number two. Two nurses were standing about five metres beyond the door, talking in hushed voices, but fell silent as Taff approached. Standing by the door itself was a uniformed member of the RUC.

'News?' Taff asked.

The police officer shook his head.

Breathing deeply, Taff removed his wallet. His army ID was not on display, but hidden inside. He flashed the ID, which bore his name, photograph, army number and blood group, at the police officer. 'Family friend,' he explained.

The officer nodded.

'Anyone asks, the nurses or anything, just tell them that.'

They stood in silence outside the operating theatre. Time passed.

\* \* \*



At 13.24 another exhausted-looking surgeon emerged from the operating theatre. He gave the RUC man a respectful nod, then cast Taff an enquiring look. 'Next of kin?'

'Good as,' Taff said.

'He's critical but stable. The gunshot affected part of his temporal lobe. We've managed to stop the internal bleeding, but there's substantial damage to the brain. He'll survive, but . . .' The surgeon's voice tailed off.

'But what?' Taff said.

'The temporal lobe regulates memory, emotions, language, learning . . . We can expect full amnesia, maybe profound mental deficiency going forward. Sometimes I think it would be kinder to let patients like this . . .' The surgeon stopped himself. 'Maybe the amnesia's for the best,' he continued. 'I hear the wife didn't make it?'

Taff nodded.

'Bastard Provos,' said the surgeon with a sudden burst of anger. 'I sometimes think they should spend a few hours on the wards, see exactly what they're doing to people.' He passed a tired hand over his eyes. 'I apologise,' he said.

'Don't apologise to me,' Taff replied, his voice flat and dead. 'The only good Provo is a dead one as far as I'm concerned. When can I see him?'

'Not yet, I'm afraid. They'll be moving him to intensive care at some point in the next hour or so. Speak to the ward sister. I'm sorry for your loss.'

The surgeon moved away, massaging the back of his neck as he went.

'Kyle. *Kyle?* It's me. It's your uncle Taff.'

He wasn't really Kyle's uncle, of course, but he was as close as made no difference. Kyle was in a brightly coloured children's room with snakes and ladders painted on the floor and puzzle boxes with Sellotaped corners on the shelves against one side.

On the floor in front of him lay a selection of Action Man characters. In the corner of the room a uniformed female police officer and a social worker in a grey A-line skirt observed them silently.

'How you doing, kiddo?' Taff asked. But it was obvious that Kyle was doing shit. The kid's eyes were bloodshot and there were scratches down his face where he'd dug into them with his nails. Ordinarily the boy would be excited to see Taff, who always gave him fifty pence for some sweets. But not now. He picked up an Action Man and slowly started smashing it against the floor. Taff put one hand on his wrist to stop him ruining the toy, but Kyle snatched it away and went on banging it on the floor. Harder and harder. Quicker and quicker. One arm split away from its body. Its head cracked. The social worker hurried forwards and gave Taff a look that suggested now would be a good time to leave. He stood up and made for the exit. When he looked back, the social worker had her arm around Kyle, but he was still destroying the toy.

The room to which they'd moved Simon was now guarded by two RUC officers, both armed and wearing body armour. The original officer was accompanying Taff. 'This is the guy I was telling you about, fellas.'

They gave Taff a respectful nod and let him in. Taff closed the door gently behind him and turned to look at Simon. 'Jesus,' he breathed. 'You look like shit.'

And he did. His bed was surrounded by medical equipment. A plastic tube emerged from his nose and cannulas sprouted from both hands. But it wasn't the beeping of the equipment, or the drip stands, or the sinister bandaging around his head that made Simon appear so desperate. It was the look on his face. His eyes were open, but whether they saw anything was impossible to tell. His mouth was open too, and his tongue lolled to one side, a patch of white spittle just visible along one edge.

Although he was conscious, he gave no indication that he was aware of Taff's presence.

Taff leaned over the bed and looked straight into his friend's eyes. There was nothing. No hint of recognition. The machines around the bed displayed his vital signs. Even so, Taff checked for a pulse. It was faint, but it was there. He looked down at his friend's wrist. The letters of the regimental motto looked darker than usual against his pale skin.

Taff realised he was breathing in time with the patient. Slowly. The door opened. A female police officer who had been watching over Kyle appeared. She was holding the little boy's hand and stood respectfully by the door while Taff finished his visit.

'I don't know if you can understand me, mucker,' Taff said, loud enough for Kyle and the policewoman to hear, 'but I hope you can. One of these days we're going to find the bastard who did this to you. And when that happens, he'll pay. That's all. He'll *fuckin*g pay.'

But Simon was in no state to answer. He continued to stare straight ahead of him. The machines keeping him alive continued to ping.

The newborn baby lay in a Perspex cot. He was tightly swaddled and fast asleep. Taff looked down at him. He remembered someone saying that babies always looked like their dads – nature's way of stopping the father from running away. As far as Taff could see, the kid looked like neither his mother nor his father. He looked like a newborn baby, and they all looked the same.

Taff remembered the kid's mother and his face darkened. He thought of Simon, lying there in a near-vegetative state. The image of his tattoo popped into Taff's head. *Utrinque Paratus*.

'You'll need to be, kiddo,' he murmured. 'You'll need to be.'



# **TWENTY-THREE YEARS LATER**



# ONE

*'J'ai l'impression qu'on nous regarde,'* Fatima said. *I feel like someone's watching us.*

At six o'clock on weekday evenings the old tenement building on rue du Faubourg Saint-Antoine in Paris always smelled the same. It was the pungent stink of cheap cuts of meat, boiled long and slow so even the bones could be mashed with a fork, then mixed with North African spices. The meat itself was barely fit for animals, let alone humans. The spices went some way to masking the taste, and their aroma seemed engrained in the dirty brick walls. The building always *sounded* the same, too. Babies wailing. TVs blaring. Couples arguing. This evening was no exception.

Fatima looked around the single room that she shared with her husband Hakim and their twin daughters. It was about six metres by four and contained a double mattress on the floor, a wooden cot and a rickety Formica-topped table with two chairs. At one end was a kitchenette – little more than a sink, a water heater and a two-ring electric hob. To the right of the kitchenette, in an alcove, were a poky bath-cum-shower and a toilet. Neither worked properly, and both stank. Through some quirk of the plumbing, whatever went down the kitchen sink reappeared in the bath, where it festered. The babies were crying. They were always crying. From hunger, mostly. Sometimes Fatima felt like joining in. Hakim, in boxer shorts and a white vest, lay on the mattress staring at the ceiling. He made no

attempt to acknowledge what she'd just said. Fatima wasn't even sure he'd heard her.

She walked to the window. It looked on to a lightwell, open to the sky and about ten metres square. On each side of this were more cramped bedsits. The concrete walls were stained by years of exposure to the elements. All the grimy windows were open on account of the suffocating summer heat.

All except one. She stared at it carefully. Had she just seen a strange dot of red light in the darkness of the flat?

She pulled her threadbare cardigan a little tighter so it covered more of her breasts, then felt the heat of Hakim's body behind her. His hands on her shoulders. She turned and managed to smile at him. He smiled back.

*'Je pense que j'ai peut-être trouvé un boulot,'* he said over the sound of the twins' crying. *I think I might have found a job.*

'Really?' Fatima asked, her voice neutral and her French tinged, like her husband's, with an Algerian accent. She stepped back to the hob, on which she was boiling up meat and bones for the family. It was a conversation they had three times a week, and she was running out of ways to make it sound like she believed him.

'Yeah, this guy . . . sells old phones in the marketplace . . . said he maybe wanted . . .' Hakim's voice petered out.

'That's great!' she said as she stirred the contents of the pot. She drew a deep breath. 'Hakim, maybe we should go back.'

'What do you mean?'

'To Algiers. We have family there, and—'

'Don't be *stupid*. You *know* I can't go back there.'

Fatima turned to face him. 'Maybe we can change our identities . . .'

But she could tell that Hakim was somewhere between panic and anger. 'You want me to go to prison? Is that what you want? You know what they *do* to people in prison? Life has fucked me up the arse enough already.'



The babies' wailing became louder. In one corner of her mind Fatima was aware that this evening *they* were at risk of becoming the arguing couple whose voices echoed around the whole block. She didn't want that, and so she stepped across the room to her husband, took him by the hand and looked at him sincerely. 'Of course not,' she whispered. With a glance over at the steaming pot, she said, 'I'm not so hungry tonight. We'll feed the little ones, and then you have the . . .'

She stopped. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the red dot again, and inhaled sharply. 'Did you see that?'

But Hakim was lying back down on the mattress, his chest rising and falling quickly as he calmed himself. 'Nobody's watching us,' he said. 'Nobody even knows we're here. Give the kids some food. Their crying's getting on my nerves.'

Fatima nodded. He was right. Of course he was.

So why had she just shivered, when it was so hot?

She turned her attention to her babies while her husband went back to staring at the ceiling.

The bedsit on the opposite side of the lightwell from Hakim and Fatima's was in darkness, and almost unbearably hot since the window was closed. Two men occupied it, a squat, blond guy called Hector with a Union Jack tattoo on his forearm, and his lean, muscular companion, whose nickname was Skinner and whose real name even he himself had almost forgotten. Standing motionless, Hector was peering through binoculars mounted on a tripod into the bedsit opposite. 'Fuckin' Ada,' he said. 'I'm sweating like Jimmy Savile in a playground.'

There was a short silence, only broken by the faint crackling of Skinner's Gitane as he dragged deeply on it.

'Can't you put that fucking cigarette out, mucker?' Hector asked irritably. 'It's like waving a torch at them. I'm sure the bird just looked straight at us.'

Skinner sniffed, then took another drag before he answered. 'We're wasting our time here anyway,' he said, his cockney accent strong, though not quite as strong as Hector's. 'We can sort this Algerian fuck-knuckles in our sleep.'

Hector pulled back from the binos and inclined his head. Skinner had a point. As far as terrorists went, the Algerian kid they had under surveillance was hardly Carlos the Jackal. Carlos the Jackass more like.

'The sooner we make contact,' Skinner said, 'the sooner we can be out of this shithole. I say we do it in the morning.'

Hector looked over his shoulder. He could just make out Skinner's silhouette slumped lazily in a chair by the door, and the red dot of his cigarette as he put it to his mouth. As he dragged on the cigarette, the glow illuminated his features. Shaved head, pronounced Adam's apple, tattoos above the neckline of his T-shirt.

Skinner was right. The job was straightforward. And Hector sure as hell wouldn't miss being cooped up in the sweltering room. Surveillance was always the worst part. He stepped back from the binoculars again. 'Chuck us a tab,' he said. Skinner threw him a cigarette. 'We'll do it tomorrow,' Hector announced. 'Happy now?'

Skinner sniffed for a second time, and dragged once more on his cigarette.

At a quarter past eight the following morning, Hakim left his wife and children in the bedsit. The kids were still crying; they had been all night. He had to get out of there. He descended one flight of stairs and paid a visit to the communal toilet. It was just a tiny cubicle with a hole in the floor and there was no light. A good thing too, because it was never cleaned, and the walls and floor were covered with dried excrement. He added to it before heading down to the ground floor and out into rue du Faubourg Saint-Antoine.

The morning was already hot, but the crowded pavements and traffic made it feel even hotter. He headed towards Bastille, not because he had any business in that direction, but because he had to walk somewhere. It was a tired part of Paris, full of immigrant stores and faces. For that reason he liked it. It meant his Algerian features were unremarkable. He passed a little café where his countrymen were in the habit of gathering to drink small cups of strong coffee and talk about the old days. Maybe in time he could make friends here. For now, he had to remain anonymous.

So instead he stepped into another café, where the coffee was cheap so long as he stood at the bar. He handed over a single euro – the last of the money he had hidden from Fatima. He was halfway through his drink before he sensed the man standing behind him.

Hakim stared over the brim of his cup into the window behind the bar. The man was squat and tanned, with bleached blond hair, freckles and the remnants of a cut on his lower lip. He carried a grey rucksack over his right shoulder. He placed a gentle hand on Hakim's left shoulder. Hakim jabbed it away, as if he'd been electrified. His coffee sloshed over his hand.

'Hakim?' the man said. His voice had an accent. British? Hakim wasn't sure.

He turned round slowly.

And then he bolted for the door.

He might have made it out into the street had a second man sitting by the door not been waiting for him to run. This man had a shaved head, sunburned skin and a pronounced Adam's apple. As he grabbed hold of Hakim's arm with a tattooed hand, his strength was apparent. Hakim wasn't going anywhere so long as this guy held on to him.

'We're not going to hurt you,' said the blond man in serviceable French. 'Not unless you try to run away – in which case my friend Skinner here will break both your fucking legs.'

Skinner said nothing. He just looked at Hakim with unconcealed contempt.

‘Let’s walk,’ said the blond man. He nodded at Skinner, who manhandled Hakim out of the café and into the street. They turned right, back up towards, and then past, Hakim’s block. Skinner didn’t let go of his arm and although they attracted a few strange looks, nobody tried to help him. After a couple of hundred metres they came to a small park. Two tramps sat over on the far side sharing a bottle of unlabelled alcohol. The remaining wooden benches were vacant. Skinner forced Hakim on to one of them and, still gripping his arm, sat down to his right. The blond man sat on Hakim’s left. He rested his rucksack on his lap and, staring straight ahead, continued speaking in French.

‘Your name is Hakim al-Ashaba. Algerian. You entered France illegally with your wife Fatima and your two daughters via Marseilles three months ago. A week prior to that you were arrested parking a Toyota Corolla in front of a government building in Algiers with a boot full of plastic explosive. When an intelligence officer tried to restrain you, you punched him. He fell and hit his head on the kerb. Fatally, as it turned out, but giving you the opportunity to escape.’

The blond man’s words were sledgehammers. Each one of them was true. Hakim realised that his skin had gone clammy. He started to shake. ‘I didn’t *mean* to kill him,’ he said.

‘Ah,’ said the blond man. ‘You hear that, Skinner? He didn’t *mean* to kill him. So that’s all right.’ A pause. ‘Don’t worry, Hakim, we’re not here to turn you in. Not unless . . .’ His voice trailed away and he turned his attention back to the rucksack. He opened it.

The rucksack’s contents caused Hakim to catch his breath. It was filled to the brim with fifty-euro notes. The man lifted one of the bundles, to reveal more below.

‘Can’t be easy,’ he said. ‘You’re damaged goods for your

terrorist mates back in Algiers, so they don't want anything to do with you. You've got no job. A family.'

Hakim stared into the middle distance.

The man slowly closed the rucksack. 'This is yours,' he said. 'But only if you do something for us.'

Hakim blinked.

'What?' he asked. His voice was hoarse. '*What?*'

The blond man looked straight ahead again. 'Do you know how to use a handgun?' he asked.

Hakim shook his head.

'It's very easy. You'll only need one shot. And then, all this' – he patted the rucksack again – 'is yours.'

'I'm not a killer,' Hakim whispered.

'Yes you are, Hakim. That's why you're stuck in a stinking room with a starving family. But if you're not interested . . .' The man shrugged and stood up. 'Come on,' he said to his companion in English. 'Let's go.'

For the first time since the café, Skinner let go of Hakim's arm. He stood up and the two men walked away.

'Wait,' Hakim called after them. And when they didn't stop, he said it louder. '*Wait!*'

When they were fifteen metres away, the men turned. With a slow, lazy arrogance, they walked back to the bench.

Hakim licked his dry lips. 'Who?' he asked.

'There's an old man. You don't need to know his name. He goes for a walk every morning at seven a.m. It will be easy to get close to him, and easy to run away. And you already know how easy it is to hide.'

The sweat on Hakim's skin had grown warm again. 'If it's so easy,' he asked, 'why don't you kill him?'

'For the same reason I don't clean my own toilet. I can afford to pay someone to do it for me.'

'You have to give me the money first.' Hakim's voice cracked again as he spoke.

‘No, my friend. That’s not the way it works. You meet me tomorrow morning, you walk away 10,000 euros richer. If not . . .’ He spread out his hands in a show of regret.

There was a silence. Hakim felt as if someone had switched off the volume. He couldn’t hear the cars in the nearby streets, or the birds in the trees, or the passenger jet overhead. All he could hear was the grinding of his teeth. And the beating of his heart. It was faster than usual.

‘Ten thousand?’ he asked. His voice sounded like it was separated from his body.

The blond man nodded. ‘Cash,’ he said. ‘Untraceable.’

Hakim inhaled. He clenched his fists to conceal their shaking.

‘OK,’ he heard himself saying. ‘OK. I’ll do it.’

The following morning brought rain. A thin, persistent drizzle that failed to relieve the humidity. Hector’s expression was bleak as he walked in the half light of dawn along rue Berger towards the RV point. He had already recced the area to check there were no cameras on the street, no CCTV to link him to the Algerian. Just to be sure, the rucksack had a bright orange waterproof cover, which he’d remove when the time came to hand it over, so he couldn’t be linked to the bag either. But there were other things that could go wrong. If the rain continued, the target might break his regular habit and decide not to take his daily seven o’clock walk that morning, and that would royally fuck things up. It would mean staying longer in Paris, and Skinner was getting restless. They needed to get the job done and get out of there before he did something stupid.

By 06.40 hrs, however, the drizzle had eased off. And as Hector approached the Café des Amis, its glass doors closed and red awning retracted, he saw Hakim leaning against a nearby tree. The young Algerian saw him and stood up straight.

Hector nodded in greeting. His mobile phone buzzed in the pocket of his jeans, but he didn't bother to look at the message. He knew what it was.

Hakim nodded back.

Foaming water gushed from an outlet by the kerb. Fifty metres down the road, a green cleaning truck with spinning brushes at the front trundled slowly towards them. Two street cleaners, also in green, swept debris from the pavement into the water channel. Otherwise, there was nobody else in rue Berger. This part of the seedy Châtelet district had not yet awoken.

'Who knows you're here?'

'Nobody.'

Hector observed the dark patches of sweat around Hakim's armpits, spreading through his rough shirt and circled with salt.

'Your wife?'

'I told her I had a job . . . there's this guy in the market who sells mobile phones—'

'When I give you the weapon,' Hector interrupted, 'it will be already cocked. That means all you'll need to do is point and fire. It's an automatic pistol, so you can keep firing until you're certain he's dead simply by squeezing the trigger. The important thing is to get close to him. If you're not used to firearms, it's easy to miss if you're not at point-blank range. Do you understand?'

'Yeah,' replied the Algerian. Hector noticed how his eyes darted up and down the road, resting briefly on a narrow street twenty metres to the north-west. No doubt this was the way he intended to escape. Hakim returned his gaze to Hector's rucksack. 'You got the money there?'

'Of course.'

Hector made to hand the rucksack to Hakim, but at the last moment snatched it away again. 'One small thing,' he said, pulling his phone from his pocket. 'You're a clever guy. I can tell that. You're not the type to do anything stupid. But just in case

you were thinking of, ah, I don't know, running away with the money before the job's complete, or warning the target, or anything like that, perhaps you'd better look at this.' He pulled his phone from his pocket, unlocked it and swiped to his recent message. There was no text. Just a picture. He tapped on it so it filled the screen.

The two men examined the picture together. It showed a small bedsit. In one corner, crouched on the floor, was Hakim's wife. Her face was gaunt with terror, and she was clutching the two babies, whose little faces were blurred, though it was clear they were screaming. In the foreground of the picture, also slightly blurred but clearly pointing at Fatima and her children, was the barrel of a gun.

'They're perfectly safe,' Hector said quietly, 'just so long as you keep your side of the bargain. Of course, if you don't . . .' He returned the phone to his pocket and gave the dumbstruck Hakim a bland smile. 'If you *don't*, Skinner can be unpleasant.'

Hakim gave Hector a look of helpless hatred, which he ignored. He checked his watch. 'Eight minutes,' he said. 'Is that your stomach rumbling? You should have eaten. It settles things down. At least, it always does for me.'

Hector checked his watch again. 06.55 hrs. He noticed Hakim was sweating even more now.

Then Hector looked up at a window on the third floor of the apartment building on the other side of the street, immediately opposite their position. Somebody inside opened the curtains. Bang on schedule. Hector looked up and down the street. The cleaning truck was twenty metres away. He could hear its engine turning over and the whirr and hiss of its brushes. The two street cleaners were alongside it. They were concentrating on their job, and not on the two men loitering outside the Café des Amis.

Coming from the opposite end of rue Berger, an elegantly dressed woman walked briskly in their direction. She was about



thirty metres away and talking on her mobile phone. Seconds later, as she passed, Hector caught the scent of her perfume. He felt himself frowning as the smell drifted away, to be replaced by Hakim's stinking breath. 'Any minute now,' he murmured. He took the rucksack from his shoulder and removed the coloured waterproof covering. 'This is yours.'

Trembling, Hakim slung the rucksack awkwardly over his own shoulder. 'It's heavy,' he said.

'Lot of money, my friend. Lot of money.' From inside his jacket Hector pulled out a Browning Hi-Power semi-automatic pistol. Hakim stared at it. Hidden by the tree from the gaze of the truck driver and the street cleaners, Hector cocked the weapon, before carefully handing it over. 'Thirteen rounds,' he said over the noise of the brushes. 'You should only need one if you fire it close enough.'

Hakim accepted the weapon like an amateur, holding it lightly in his fingertips. Hector had to move the Algerian's arm out of the way so that the weapon was not pointing in his direction. He could feel the kid trembling.

'Remember,' he said. 'Skinner's with your family. Nobody wants them to get hurt.'

Hakim swallowed hard and a trickle of sweat slid down his face.

06.59 hrs. The door of the apartment block opened. For a tense few seconds, nobody appeared. And then, very slowly, an old man, clearly Middle Eastern, stepped out into the street, accompanied by a much younger woman. The man's shoulders were stooped, and he walked with the aid of a stick. He had a short grey beard and his head was wrapped in a red and white keffiyeh. The young woman was also Middle Eastern, but she was dressed in Western clothes – jeans and a scarlet jumper – and was strikingly beautiful. She gently held the old man's free arm and helped him as he tottered along.

Distance between Hakim and the target: twenty-five metres.

'That's him,' Hector said. 'Do it now.'

Hakim hesitated and Hector felt a moment of anxiety as the couple disappeared behind a parked Transit van. Surely they weren't going to get into the vehicle and disappear? He took out his phone again and waved Skinner's photograph in front of Hakim's face. That was enough. As the old man and his companion reappeared from behind the Transit, at Hakim's eleven o'clock, the Algerian moved nervously forwards, the rucksack firmly on his back, the Browning hanging by his side. He stepped into the stream of water gushing from the outlet, soaking his shoes. As he crossed the street he left wet footprints.

Hakim approached the target. Hector walked along the pavement in the opposite direction, looking repeatedly over his shoulder. He could see the cleaning truck getting nearer. He was not concentrating specifically on the Algerian or the old man, but on the distance between the two. Twenty metres. Fifteen metres. Ten.

Hector slipped his left hand into the pocket of his trousers and felt for its contents: a simple switch, fitted to a radio transmitter and a battery, the whole device no bigger than an ordinary house key. He continued to hurry along rue Berger, and to estimate the distance between Hakim and the target.

Seven metres.

Five.

Three.

Suddenly the elderly man stopped and looked at Hakim with alarm. With surprising vigour, he grabbed his young companion and manhandled her in between himself and Hakim.

Hakim stopped too. He looked around wildly as he raised his gun. He held it inexpertly with two hands and Hector could tell, even from this distance, that his chances of nailing the guy with that kind of technique were close to zero.

Not that it mattered, of course, because the Browning wasn't loaded.

There was just enough time, before the cleaning truck obscured Hector's line of sight, for him to see Hakim pull the trigger. When nothing happened, the look of astonishment on the faces of both the would-be assassin and his target was almost comical. The truck edged closer. Hector could no longer see them. He braced himself and flicked the switch.

The sound of the rucksack exploding was immense. Even Hector, who had been expecting it, felt an electric jolt through his body and winced at the pain in his eardrums. He heard glass shatter and the thunder of shrapnel and body parts hammering on the side of the truck. Even before the remaining shrapnel had settled, several car alarms burst into life. He could hear screaming too. Having packed the explosives into the rucksack himself, he knew it couldn't be Hakim, the young woman or the old man. They were already dead. Probably just one of the street cleaners. Wrong place at the wrong time. Bad luck, son.

He picked up his pace and, having reached the end of rue Berger, turned right before taking out his phone, dialling a number and holding the phone to his ear as he walked. It rang just twice before Skinner answered.

'Done?'

'Done,' Hector confirmed. 'Fucking muppet didn't even try to check the money. We could have saved ourselves a few euros on a cheaper copying machine to do the notes and pocketed the difference.' A pause. 'Everything OK at your end, mucker? What the hell's that banging noise?'

A pause. Long enough to make Hector uneasy.

'Nothing,' Skinner said. 'I'm leaving now.' He hung up.

Hector stopped and looked at the screen of his phone for a moment. Then he heard the sound of sirens. He removed the battery from the phone, ripped out the SIM card and bent it in two, then stuffed both down a drain. With the phone dealt with, he put his head down and headed to

Châtelet–Les Halles Métro station. An hour from now he'd be on a train out of Paris, and on to the next job, wherever that might take him.

Skinner shoved his phone into his pocket and looked around the room. What a fucking dump, he thought to himself. At least the brats were silent. He'd ripped a dirty dishcloth in two and shoved one half in each of their mouths. Shame he couldn't say the same for their bitch of a mother. She was whimpering like a child despite the scouring pad he'd shoved in her mouth to shut her up. He looked at her. She was naked and tied face down to the table, her thighs and torso bound so tightly with the sturdy duct tape he had brought with him that the flesh around the indentations was already swollen. Skinner's eyes passed over the area around her anus and genitals, bleeding from where he had violated her, and looked with contempt at her head, which she was rhythmically banging against the table as she wept.

That fucking banging. It got on his nerves. 'Shut up!' he told her. He couldn't speak French, but that was her problem, not his. '*Shut . . . the fuck . . . up . . .*'

The whimpering became more desperate. The banging a little faster.

Skinner spat. Then he grabbed his suppressed handgun from the drainer beside the sink and pressed the barrel against the woman's cheek. She opened her eyes and, for a moment, the banging stopped.

'*Mes enfants . . .*' she whispered. '*Elles sont trop petites . . .*'

The words meant nothing to Skinner. He muttered one of his own – 'Bitch' – before turning his head to one side and squeezing the trigger.

The woman's head thudded against the table for a final time.

Skinner's hand and weapon were covered with blood. He rinsed his fingers briefly under the tap, shook them dry, then

walked over to the little cot where the two newly orphaned babies were lying, the pieces of dishcloth still stuffed in their mouths. He raised his gun and pressed the butt of the suppressor against the cheek of one of them. A rectangular smear of their mother's blood transferred itself to the child's skin. Both babies lay very still. It was as if they knew their lives were in the balance.

They were hardly worth a bullet. He had another idea. There was enough duct tape left on the roll for him to bind the two of them together, like Siamese twins joined at the belly. They screamed as he did it, but this was the sort of place where the screams of children went unheard. He picked up the monstrously swaddled bundle and carried it over to the little bath. It was stained yellow, and encrusted with limescale around the plug-hole. He put the plug in, then laid the wailing babies in the bath.

He turned on the taps, leaving the babies to their watery death. He didn't even glance at their mother's corpse as he left the bedsit, closing the door silently behind him.