

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



Hit List

Chris Ryan

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About the Book

When Robert Maxwell is assassinated at sea by an unknown agency, it can only be a matter of time before the dark secret at the heart of the British establishment is exposed to the light of day.

SAS soldier Neil Slater has left the Army but soon it seems he is to be drawn back into the covert world. Bowing to the inevitable he allows himself to be recruited by the Cadre, a group that applies 'the rules of war' to those who threaten the internal and external security of the State. Slater soon finds himself in a rising body count situation and asking the question: who is the real enemy?

About the Author

Chris Ryan was born near Newcastle in 1961. He joined the SAS in 1984. During his ten years there he was involved in overt and covert operations and was also Sniper team commander of the anti-terrorist team. During the Gulf War, Chris was the only member of an eight-man team to escape from Iraq, of which three colleagues were killed and four captured. It was the longest escape and evasion in the history of the SAS. For his last two years he has been selecting and training potential recruits for the SAS.

He wrote about his experiences in the bestseller *The One That Got Away* which was also adapted for screen. He is also the author of the bestsellers *Stand By, Stand By, Zero Option, The Kremlin Device, Tenth Man Down, The Hit List, The Watchman, Land of Fire, Greed, The Increment, Blackout, Ultimate Weapon* and *Strike Back*. *Chris Ryan's SAS Fitness Book* and *Chris Ryan's Ultimate Survival Guide* are also published by Century.

He lectures in business motivation and security and is currently working as a bodyguard in America.

Also by Chris Ryan

Non-fiction

The One That Got Away

Chris Ryan's SAS Fitness Book

Chris Ryan's Ultimate Survival Guide

Fiction

Stand By, Stand By

Zero Option

The Kremlin Device

Tenth Man Down

The Hit List

The Watchman

Land of Fire

Greed

The Increment

Blackout

Ultimate Weapon

Strike Back

In the Alpha Force Series

Survival

Rat-Catcher

Desert Pursuit

Hostage

Red Centre

Hunted

Black Gold

Blood Money

Fault Line

Untouchable

In the Code Red Series

Flash Flood

Wildfire

Outbreak

Hit List

Chris Ryan



arrow books

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To Sarah

If you believe in the light, it's because of the darkness
If you believe in the truth, it's because of their lies
If you believe in God, then you must believe in the **DEVIL**

PROLOGUE

Tuesday 5 November 1991

Eastern Atlantic, due South of Gran Canaria

THE TWO MEN surfaced noiselessly. Raising their diving masks they scanned the area around them. Nothing, only the pale bulk of the *Lady Ghislaine* and the soft slap of the sea against her hull. It was 4.30am, and although no hint of dawn showed at the horizon both men knew that time was limited.

As they watched, a dark figure showed for a moment against the dimly illuminated windows of the stateroom. Moments later a man appeared from the stern door, a white dressing gown belted around his considerable waist. Clearly restless, he stood at the rail for several minutes. The night air appeared to offer him no relief, however, for after a brief circuit of the stern deck he turned abruptly on his heel and went back inside.

In the water the men glanced at each other. The older of the two, his features streaked and obscured by camouflage cream, raised a hand above the surface and tapped the armoured glass face of his watch. The younger man nodded. As one, they moved towards the yacht's stern. Below them, motionless and invisible, waited the two-man *Odyssea* submarine in which, four hours earlier, they had commenced their silent journey.

It had been a long stalk, but not a difficult one. The word 'yacht' as applied to the *Lady Ghislaine* was a serious understatement – if she had been in commercial ownership she would have been called a cruise liner. She had five

gleaming decks, weighed 430 tons, and was over 150 feet in length. Her swimming pool could quite comfortably have accommodated six topless models dressed as mermaids, and indeed – to the raucous delight of an invited party of *Daily Mirror* executives – had once done just that. She was, to say the least, a visible target. And an unsuspecting one. No one was manning her radar that night.

The *Lady Ghislaine* had set sail from Gibraltar on the Thursday. It had taken her crew two days to sail to Madeira, where the yacht had made anchor at Funchal. There, operatives from London were already in place and working on their tans. They had tailed the target to Desertas beach, where he swam without apparent pleasure, and later to the Central Casino, where he lost a little over £9000 sterling at blackjack.

On Sunday, the yacht had sailed towards Tenerife, reaching Darcene Pesquera at 10.00am the following day. Within the hour it had set off again southwards – the target remaining aboard throughout. His non-appearance was hardly surprising – by then the international press corps had learned what the target himself had known for some time: that his business empire was on the verge of meltdown. The Swiss bank he used was threatening to call in the fraud squad. His creditors were beginning to panic.

That was the point at which London had put the two-man diving team on stand-by, when they'd flown the miniature submarine into Layounne on the Moroccan coast.

By Monday evening the *Lady Ghislaine* was back in Santa Cruz. The target himself was ashore, eating *pil-pil* in the dining room at the Hotel Mencey. There had been a suggestion that the hit might be carried out right there and then – the concern being that he might take a car down to Los Christianos where the Gulf-stream jet was fuelled and ready to fly him back to London. In the event, however, the hit team held back, and to their relief the target returned to

the yacht after his meal and ordered the crew to set sail. By then a concealed transmitting device was on board, and from the moment they left port the *Lady Ghislaine's* course was relayed via geo-positioning satellites to the mission's command vessel five miles to the north.

The final go-ahead came from London at 11.55. It was a calm moonless night, and the *Odyssea* submarine slipped away from the command vessel around midnight. The wet-sub was a customised craft, built in Florida and refitted at a secret base on the East Anglian coast. It carried 500 cubic feet of onboard oxygen and its powerful batteries enabled it to cover up to twelve miles at a rate of two knots per hour. The wet-sub wouldn't have won any races, but it was perfectly adapted to its primary function of covert naval approach. Twelve miles was well outside the target's detection range.

Using a suction device, the younger of the two divers tethered the *Odyssea's* tow-line to the yacht. None of the crew seemed to be on watch, he noticed – perhaps the target had insisted that the decks be cleared for his own use. Shrugging off his oxygen-tanks and regulator, moving with the silence and fluency of long practice, he locked it into the specially adapted housing behind the *Odyssea's* left-hand seat. Beside him, his partner lowered his own gear to the right-hand housing.

From a pouch round his waist the older man removed two magnetic clamps. A cord ran between these clamps and from this he suspended a heavy equipment bag and his fins. Watching as his partner rid himself of his own fins, positioned a collapsible caving ladder against the stern rail and silently shinned up it, the older man opened the equipment bag. Taking care to avoid the percussion of steel on steel, he withdrew two MP5 sub-machine guns, extended their folding stocks, and passed them up to his waiting colleague. Crouching on the varnished teak deck the men

prepared their weapons, wincing at the oily clicks as the twenty-round magazines snapped home. Ears straining for the slightest sound – a footfall, an opening door – they drew back and locked the cocking levers.

The target shivered and pulled the towelling dressing gown more tightly around himself. He'd just phoned the bridge to ask for the air-conditioning to be adjusted by a couple of degrees. It was still warm outside, despite the time, but here in the stateroom the air had become uncomfortably cold. It was too cold to sleep, and sleep was what he craved most. A few hours' escape from the pressure – from the desperate worry of his debts, from the inexorable progress of the fraud investigation, from the certainty that the coming share sell-offs would leave his empire in ruins.

He was still one of the most powerful men in the world, but tonight he knew that the end was close. Part of him wished that this journey could go on for ever – just the sea and the sky and the soft thrum of the engines. But he knew that all of that would end within hours. Instead he would be flying back to London for one desperate last stand. Like Custer, he thought wryly – and look what happened to Custer.

Approaching his dressing-table, Maxwell bowed and examined his hair. The roots were growing out again – a centimetre of iron-grey now showed beneath the black dye. Would the law courts have his scalp as well as his dignity? There was little chance he could salvage anything now. If he was lucky, he might escape with a couple of million. And the house, perhaps. And maybe a couple of cars. Living expenses? He shrugged. He was bored with restaurant cooking, and he had all the Savile Row suits he'd need to see him out. But there would be no more helicopters, no more chummy Pall Mall lunches with ministers, no more Fleet Street boardrooms falling silent as he entered. Face it, he told himself, there was a better than even chance he'd

have to stand trial, and maybe even go to jail. He'd done things that no lawyer – not even the most urbane of silks – could possibly defend. Face it, he repeated, it was over. This was the endgame, the king brought down by a battalion of pawns. Checkmate.

Or was it? Was his last desperate gambit going to pay off? Was the wildest card he'd ever played going to win the trick for him?

There was a light knock on the door. Some problem with the air-conditioning, he supposed. And he'd told the captain – ordered him, dammit – that he wasn't to be disturbed. Wearily he made his way to the door.

It crashed against him as he turned the handle. Next moment it had been closed behind him and he was being dragged back into the room. He tried to struggle, but his arms were pinned in an iron grip behind his back. There was a crackling sound, and an excruciating pain jolted through his kidneys. He doubled up, retching, and as he tried feebly to straighten lost control of his bladder, warm urine coursed down his leg.

Dizzy with pain and shame, his throat stinging with bile, he sank to a sitting position on the bed. The dressing gown had fallen open, but he was too shocked to cover himself.

The two figures withdrew to the centre of the pale blue Isphahan carpet. Wiping his smarting eyes and running nose with his sleeve, Maxwell saw to his astonishment that both wore black neoprene wetsuits and carried automatic weapons slung in chest harnesses. Their faces were tiger-striped with camouflage cream. The younger man carried some sort of electric prod.

'Mr Maxwell,' said the older man, his eyes expressionless. 'Please sit still. This is your last warning. If you call for help or or try to escape, we will hurt you very badly indeed. To avoid that, just sit still and answer my questions. Do you understand?'

Robert Maxwell nodded. Anger was slowly beginning to replace humiliation. He drew the dressing gown closed around himself. Who the hell were these people? He had any amount of corporate enemies, but none of them would try a stunt like this. Were they Romanians? Mossad? He spoke quickly in Hebrew: *'Ma perush hadaver haze?'*

The two men looked at him blankly. The older man stepped forward. 'Mr Maxwell, we don't have much time. We need answers to our questions, and we need them right away. I think you know who we are.'

'I haven't the first idea who you are - and nor, for that matter, have I got any cash in this room. You're welcome to my credit cards, though - my wallet's in the pocket of that —'

'Mr Maxwell, you know who we are.'

The voice was anonymous, but unmistakably that of a born English speaker. A faint burr - West Country? Bristol? - but overlaid by the flatter vowels of the Thames estuary. Could they be MI6? Surely not. If those people wanted information from him they just had to pick up the phone, and they knew it.

'Mr Maxwell, I am instructed to tell you that Dietrich Wegner wants his property back.'

That name. After all these years, that name. The jolt of understanding which slammed through Robert Maxwell at that moment was worse than the electronic prod. He was as good as dead. He looked at them. Saw they knew that he knew.

Seeing Maxwell's shoulders slump, confident that the last vestiges of fight had departed him, the younger man returned the prod to his belt. Beside him the older man unzipped a waterproof pouch that he was carrying round his neck. The silence between the stateroom's three occupants was intimate, almost conspiratorial.

How would they do it? Maxwell wondered. Surely they wouldn't use their weapons? It would make a godawful

racket and they'd have to kill the entire crew. But a glance at the tiger-striped faces above him told him that, if necessary, they would do just that. By nightfall they'd be the other side of the Channel, probably watching *Match of the Day* over a couple of Special Brews. My God, he thought. If there was ever a lethal race put on this Earth it was the English.

He knew what they wanted, of course. He knew what they were looking for. He considered stalling and playing for time, but realised that the longer the whole charade lasted, the greater the danger to the rest of those aboard. Any crew members up and about when the men left the ship would be gunned down. And if one died, the rest would have to go too; there could be no witnesses. No, better to go quietly, hope it was fast, and limit the deaths to his own. The fear had gone now – all that was left was a quiet surprise that it could all end like this.

The older man glanced at his watch and out of the curtained window.

So that was how it was to be, thought Maxwell. The sea. No thumb to the jugular, no punch of silenced bullets, just the cold waters of dawn. And these two anonymous soldiers of his adopted country drawing him down to the darkness and the end of all worry.

'Mr Maxwell,' the older man said, 'before we bring this to a close, I'd like you to open your safe and give me the photographs you keep inside.'

Maxwell didn't move.

Seeing his hesitation the younger man's hand wandered towards the electric prod.

Maxwell walked heavily across the pale blue carpet, lifted down a framed *Private Eye* cartoon of himself as 'Cap'n Bob', and spun the dial of a small wall-safe. Taking out a sheaf of fragile-looking black-and-white photographs he handed them to the older man who placed them in the waterproof pouch.

‘Close the safe. Put the picture back.’

He did as he was bid.

‘Thank you, Mr Maxwell. Now I’m going to ask you to take off your robe.’

Slowly, Maxwell obeyed. He touched the appliquéd blue ‘Lady Ghislaine’ on the breast pocket of the dressing gown, gave the ghost of a wink to the photograph of the two boys.

‘Are you ready?’

Maxwell looked around him, at the walnut panelling, the Louis Quinze escritoire, the luxurious fixtures and fittings. He’d survived the war, he’d survived the Nazis, he’d built and lost an empire. Now, naked, he stood before his killers.

What a story, he thought. What a front page!

He dictated his last headline.

‘I’m ready,’ he said.

ONE

THE WIND, A hard north-easterly from the Chilterns, picked up once again. It scoured the valley and whipped through the pines which stood guard over the 1st XV rugby pitch, flattening the players' shirts to their bodies. The light was fading; the towers and parapets of Bolingbroke's School were an indistinct grey on the skyline.

Neil Slater glanced at his watch. Another ten minutes, then he'd send the boys in for showers and high tea. They'd done well, and he had a fair idea of whom he was going to choose for Saturday's match against Wellington.

Bracing himself against the wind, Slater watched as a slight sixteen-year-old American named Reinhardt intercepted an opponent's pass, made as if to pass in his turn, dummied, wrong-footed his opposite number, and raced for the try-line. A metre or two behind Reinhardt, a Saudi boy named al-Jubrin kept effortless pace.

The opposing full-back moved to block Reinhardt. His pile-driving tackle drove the breath from the American's body, but by then the ball was sailing towards al-Jubrin. That the athletic young Saudi would pluck the ball from the air without breaking step was a foregone conclusion, as was the subsequent try. Masoud al-Jubrin was born to play rugby.

al-Jubrin dropped the pass. There was no try – instead the ball spun away into touch.

'Good, Paul!' Slater called out to Reinhardt as the boy picked himself up. 'Masoud, what happened? You don't usually drop those – you'll have to do a sight better than that if we're going to beat Wellington on Saturday.'

The Saudi pupil was silent. The wind plucked at his neatly cut hair and snatched away the pale vapour of his breath.

‘What’s wrong, Masoud?’ asked Slater.

al-Jubrin shrugged. ‘Nothing, sir.’

Slater put his hand to the boy’s forehead, noted the feverish brightness of his eyes. ‘You’re burning up. How long have you been feeling like this?’

‘Sorry, sir. Since this morning, sir.’

‘Why the hell didn’t you tell me?’

‘Sorry, sir. Thought it would . . . go.’

And worried you’d be dropped from the team if you mentioned it, thought Slater.

‘I want you in that three-quarter line on Saturday,’ he told the boy. ‘Now cut along and see Matron – my guess is she’ll put you in sick bay for the night. I’ll look in during the evening, make sure you’re OK.’

al-Jubrin looked at Slater, opened his mouth to protest, then thought better of it. Nodding, he headed off towards the track suits piled on the touchline.

‘And while we’re at it, I’d like you to report to Matron too, Ripley. Have her take your temperature.’

Ripley, the son of a Midlands property developer, stared angrily at Slater. At six foot one, he was already two inches taller than the games master.

‘I’m fine, sir. Honestly.’

‘To Matron, Ripley. I’ll be checking with her.’

‘Sir, I can’t miss this evening’s prep. I’ve got a history project I’ve got to—’

‘You heard me, Ripley. I want you lean and mean for Saturday.’

The boy bit his lip, nodded, and loped off. Sometimes, thought Slater, these rich kids had it hardest. Would Ripley – basically a decent lad – be ruined by the privileges that he would undoubtedly inherit? And Reinhardt, he wondered, seeing the American limping towards him. How would he be

ten years from now? Would that cheerful sportsmanship survive whatever corporate hell was waiting for him?

‘All right Paul?’

‘Cream-crackered, sir.’

Slater smiled. If nothing else, an English education had broadened the boy’s vocabulary. ‘Train hard, fight easy, Paul – who said that?’

Reinhardt frowned. ‘You’ve got me there, sir.’

‘General Suvorov,’ said Slater, and for a moment he saw the words painted on the adjutant’s door at the old regimental HQ, smelt the gun-oil in the armoury.

‘Who was General Suvorov, sir? I’m afraid my modern history’s a bit shaky.’

Slater looked at the boy, at his narrow shoulders and mud-caked knees. God, he thought, they were so young. ‘Look him up, Paul,’ he said gently.

Watching the rugby squad trudge back to the school, Slater wondered if he was ever going to find life at Bolingbroke’s School normal rather than freakish. On paper his was a good job. Games master to a school like Bolingbroke’s was not a position to be sneezed at – on a good day the 1st XV could give Sedburgh or Ampleforth a run for their money. And the boys were good kids, for the most part. Too bloody rich and too bloody foreign, one of his colleagues had confided to Slater during his first staff tea, but Slater liked them. In many ways, he found the foreign kids – the Saudis, the Kuwaitis, the Indians – easiest to get along with. Away from their overindulgent parents they had a hunger to prove themselves as individuals. They had no real understanding of the British class system, and they treated Slater exactly as they treated the other teachers: with an earnest, if at times joshing, respect.

Like Slater, the foreigners had started out as outsiders. Unlike Slater, however, they soon discovered that wealth and privilege confers its own insidership. For all the importance attached to rugby and cricket, games masters

did not rank highly in Bolingbroke's pecking order. Slater was considered a cut above Jimmy McCracken – the semi-alcoholic groundsman who tended the pitches and was known to staff and pupils alike as 'Windy' on account of his dodgy colon – but well below any of the other teachers, most of whom were Oxbridge graduates and former public schoolboys. When he had first arrived at the school Slater had wondered whether he should imitate them, with their leather-patched sports jackets, their polished brogues and their baggy corduroys. He'd dismissed the idea immediately – he'd never get it quite right. To carry off that kind of upper-class shabbiness you had to be born to it.

And Slater, as was regularly made clear to him, hadn't been born to it. He wore civilian clothes – as one of the warrant-officers had memorably pointed out on the first day of his undercover course – like a squaddie on the piss. He'd never quite sorted out the whole clothes thing. Or, for that matter, the accent thing. Or the posh restaurant and vintage wine thing that was supposed to work so well with women. Or any of that host of other 'things' that made for an easy progress through life.

But he did, Slater mused ruefully as the cold dusk gathered around him, have certain skills. At this moment there was a hot shower waiting for him and with luck a pot of tea and a plate of Jammy Dodgers in the staff room. If he ended up drinking the tea alone, well, bollocks to the lot of them. It was a billet, and all things considered, a comfortable one.

He pulled on his sweatshirt. With a fair wind behind them Masoud and Paul and the rest of the lads should punch holes through the Wellington defence on Saturday. Train hard, fight easy.

As he made his way towards the school buildings, Slater's attention was caught by a vehicle on the public road beyond the boundary wall. It was a Cherokee four-wheel drive,

proceeding at about twenty miles an hour. Even given the warning signs outside the school, this seemed unnaturally slow for the road, and Slater realised that he had noticed the vehicle driving in the same direction and at the same speed earlier in the day. The Cherokee was a maroon colour, he remembered, although now in the failing light it looked almost black.

For a moment he wondered if the driver was a parent. A lot of the parents had Cherokees – it was pretty much Bolingbroke's signature vehicle – but not many went for the tinted window option. What was the point of spending all that money, after all, if no one could see who you were? And none of the parents considered themselves bound by the local speed restrictions, as this driver clearly did. Slater watched as the four-wheel drive crested a rise and passed out of sight. He had memorised the number.

Anxious to unload his misgivings and forget the incident with a clear conscience, Slater walked over to the main gate, where a white Mondeo, bearing the mailed-fist logo of a private security company, idled at the verge. The car was more of a public relations stunt than anything else, in Slater's opinion. All it served to do was to underline the fact that the children of some very rich people were in residence – a fact which the blue and gold school notice-board (motto: Fortitude, Truth, Valour) made clear at a glance.

It was Bolingbroke's proximity to Heathrow – less than fifty minutes in a chauffeur-driven Lexus – which attracted the overseas customers. Summer visits were especially popular. Parents could fly in in the morning, take in a lunchtime meeting and a dash down Bond Street, and then spend a lazy couple of hours in a deckchair pretending to understand the rules of cricket. Rather fewer of these parents, Slater had observed, volunteered for duty on the rugby touchline. In the winter months, he supposed, parents were happy for the formation of their sons' characters to proceed on trust.

But there were real security issues, as there were wherever the children of the super-rich gathered. And while the school did not wish to turn itself into a high-tech prison – much of its commercial appeal lay in its traditional appearance and atmosphere – it wished to make clear that it took these issues seriously. Hence the white Mondeo.

And hence, Slater assumed, the chugging exhaust. What made people leave their car-engines switched on for hours at a time? He knocked on the driver's side window, which was blurred with condensation.

The driver lowered the glass, releasing a warm odour of fart and processed food, and regarded him suspiciously. Beyond the driver a second man was leafing through a pornographic magazine.

'Hi! My name's Slater. I'm the games master.'

The driver, a heavy-set man in a Barbour jacket, said nothing. A half-eaten meat pie sat in its foil dish in his lap. Pastry crumbs speckled his thighs.

'Did either of you notice a maroon Cherokee passing here a minute ago?' Slater continued.

'Why would you be concerning yourself with a maroon Cherokee, sir?'

'It's been past at least a couple of times today. Going very slowly. Looked to me as if it was scoping the place out.'

The second man turned his magazine through ninety degrees. 'Fuck me!' he said, grimacing with disbelief 'Look at the state of that!'

The driver glanced at the magazine and turned back to Slater. 'A slow-moving maroon Cherokee that you think you've seen before.'

'And these have got to be silicone,' murmured the second man. 'They're all over the fucking shop.'

'I took the number,' said Slater, ignoring him. 'You might want to get it checked out. Here, I'll put it on your pad.'

Smirking, the driver handed Slater his pad. It was blank. Slater wrote down the number.

‘Don’t worry, sir,’ said the driver, returning the pad to his pocket without looking at it. ‘We’re professionals. But thanks for the tip.’

‘As the actress said to the bishop,’ added the second man.

As Slater made his way up the drive, he heard both men laugh.

The Cherokee was parked in a lay-by 500 yards down the road.

In the driver’s seat, smoking nervously, was a twenty-year-old man of Pakistani descent in an Umbro tracksuit. He was good with cars, and over the painful course of his teenage years – five convictions for taking and driving away, thirty offences taken into consideration – had refined his skills to the point where he was now considered one of the top wheel-men in the Gateshead area.

In the back seat sat two slightly older men, both bearded, both dressed in black windcheaters, jeans and hiking boots. They were Shi’ite Muslims from al-Ahsa, in Saudi Arabia’s eastern province. The men were cousins; their mutual grandfather had emigrated from the Iranian Gulf port of Basra in 1925 and, unlike their Saudi neighbours, the two had been brought up strictly in the tenets of their faith.

They were followers of a radical Shi’ite holy man named Shayk Nabil Rahmat. Rahmat was the founder of a revolutionary faction called al-Hizb al-Makhfi – the Hidden Party. Acting with the utmost secrecy, and guarding its identity closely, the Hidden Party had carried out bombings in Riyadh, Jeddah, and even the Prophet’s own city of Medina.

The Hidden Party, however, had been dealt a severe blow. Seven of its members had been convicted of terrorism by a religious court in Ahsa province, and condemned to death by beheading. Only the decision of a senior judge sitting on the Court of Cassation, the final court of appeal, stood

between the seven party members and the execution of sentence.

And unless extraordinary pressure was brought to bear, that decision was a foregone conclusion. The judge in question was known as one of the most conservative members of the Saudi judiciary, and vehemently opposed to everything that Rahmat and his followers stood for. His name was Shaykh Marwan al-Jubrin. He was Masoud al-Jubrin's father.

The two men in the Cherokee had come to England in order to set in motion the applying of extreme pressure on the old judge. They had secured false Turkish passports from the intelligence services of the Islamic Republic of Iran, flown from Tehran to Rome, and then travelled across Europe by train to Denmark. In Copenhagen they had embarked on an overnight ferry to Newcastle, where they had shown their Turkish passports and been met by a local sweet-manufacturer. This man, a devout Shi'ite who had once burnt an effigy of Salman Rushdie for the benefit of an ITV news crew, had placed his spare bedroom at their disposal. At dawn, having picked up the driver, the sweet-manufacturer had driven the cousins to a lock-up garage where the stolen and replated Cherokee was waiting. Concealed beneath the driver's seat were the two weapons they had requested: a loaded Smith and Wesson Model 25 revolver and a sheathed Gerber Patriot knife with a six-inch oxidised blade.

The trio had begun the drive south immediately and by 2pm, after an unpleasant meal consumed at a service station outside Henley-on-Thames, had begun to recce the roads around Bolingbroke's School.

The cousins waited in the car, smoking, until it was fully dark. Then they embraced, whispered a prayer, took a weapon each, and climbed out into the icy cold of the lay-by. Their point of entry to the school, selected two hours earlier,

was close to the rugby pitch where the 1st XV practice game had taken place earlier.

Within minutes both men were crouched outside the seven-foot perimeter wall. A leg up, a grunt of effort, a helping hand and they were both over, falling with a soft crunch into the frosted bracken. Purposefully they made their way towards the school buildings, by now a blaze of light. Their afternoon's reconnaissance had told them they had little to fear from the security guards and they moved fluently from shadow to shadow, eventually vanishing from sight among the ground-scraping branches of an elderly yew tree. A gravelled path led past this tree – a path joining the main school building to the modern refectory block. The two men settled down to wait.

For twenty-five minutes the darkness reshaped itself round them. Boys passed by, but always in twos or threes. Finally a solitary figure appeared, a slender fair-haired youth of about fourteen carrying a Game Boy. Apparently heedless of the cold, the teenager paused beneath one of the lighted refectory windows, his fingers stabbing at the little console. The two men's eyes met. Soundlessly they climbed to their feet.

It was skilfully accomplished. Within seconds the boy had been bundled into the blackness beneath the yew. One man held him, clamping a strong hand across his mouth, the other urgently motioned silence. Eyes wide with terror, the boy nodded. To reinforce the need for silence one of the bearded figures produced the Smith and Wesson. In response the boy wet himself and began to shake.

'Listen, my friend,' whispered the second man. 'We are not going to hurt you – we just wish to talk. Now, what is your name?'

'C-Christopher,' the boy managed.

'OK, Christopher, when I give the word we are going to walk down the hill towards the games fields. Like I said, we

will not hurt you but you *must* keep silent. Do you understand?’

The boy nodded, still shaking.

‘Good boy. Let’s go.’

The two men led the boy back in the direction they had come. Soon they were below the perimeter fence again. Getting him over was not easy. An icy frost now coated the stone, and terror seemed to have robbed the boy of all co-ordination. Eventually, however, they managed to bundle him up and over.

‘Are you hurt, Christopher?’ hissed one of the men as they landed to either side of him.

The boy shook his head.

‘Just walk then,’ said the man. ‘Like normal, OK?’

In the Cherokee they turned on the ignition and the heater. The man with the Smith and Wesson pocketed his weapon and took out a small mobile phone.

‘OK, Christopher. I want you to ask to speak to Masoud al-Jubrin. I’m going to dial the number of his mobile, and I want you to arrange to meet him in the same place that we . . . that we met you.’

‘But I don’t know Masoud. At least, I know who he is but—’

‘It doesn’t matter. Just say you have something of great importance for him. Something you have to give him in person.’

‘Are you going to hurt him?’

‘No. We just have to speak to him. To give him a message. That is all.’

The boy frowned doubtfully at the windscreen. At his side, the black-clothed figure punched out a memorised number and handed him the little Motorola.

A murmured conversation ensued. A more confident tone was returning to the boy’s voice, especially now that the revolver was out of sight.

‘Masoud’s in the sick bay,’ he said eventually, lowering the phone. ‘He’s got a flu bug or something.’

The men looked at each other.

'I'd like you to take us there, Christopher,' said one.

The Delves house prefects were watching a documentary about the artist Tracey Emin in their common room. In theory they were supposed to be in their dormitories by ten; their minds and bodies, the headmaster insisted, needed proper recovery time if they were to handle the combined demands of competitive sport and the A-level syllabus. In practice, however, they could request late TV time if the programme in question was deemed to be of sufficient cultural value. As deputy housemaster of Delves, it was Slater's duty to police this system. He had never heard of Tracey Emin but had given the programme the nod anyway.

When he stuck his head into the common room there was a pair of soiled knickers on the TV screen.

'What's this?' he asked one of the boys, a rangy computer-fanatic named Tyrell.

'It's the documentary I asked you about, sir,' said Tyrell.

The camera panned across a wrecked bed, paused to examine a discarded condom.

'How much longer has it got to go?' If Latimer, the Delves housemaster, came in now there would be questions asked.

'About fifteen minutes. Do you agree that this is art, sir?'

An unshaven man in square-framed glasses was now standing in front of Tracey Emin's bed. 'Bad sex, skid-marked sheets - today it's all up for grabs,' he was saying.

'I'm afraid it's not my special subject, Tristram,' Slater replied. It was a weak answer and he knew it. He should watch this business of Christian-naming the boys, too. The other staff-members didn't like it, and he'd been warned about it more than once. Undercutting discipline, he'd been told.

Tracey Emin was now on screen, topless.

'What do you think of that, sir? She's quite fit, isn't she?'