

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Aggressor

Andy McNab

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Andy McNab joined the infantry as a boy soldier. In 1984 he was 'badged' as a member of 22 SAS Regiment and was involved in both covert and overt special operations worldwide.

During the Gulf War he commanded Bravo Two Zero, a patrol that, in the words of his commanding officer, 'will remain in regimental history for ever'. Awarded both the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM) and Military Medal (MM) during his military career, McNab was the British Army's most highly decorated serving soldier when he finally left the SAS in February 1993. He wrote about his experiences in two phenomenal bestsellers, *Bravo Two Zero*, which was filmed starring Sean Bean, and *Immediate Action*.

His novels include *Remote Control*, *Liberation Day*, *Dark Winter* and *Deep Black*. He is also the author of *The Grey Man*, a Quick Reads book for World Book Day, and, with Robert Rigby, *Be a Soldier*, *Payback* and for younger readers, *Avenger*. His new novel, *Recoil*, will be available from Bantam Press later in the year. Besides his writing work, he lectures to security and intelligence agencies in both the USA and the UK.

Acclaim for Andy McNab:

'McNab's great asset is that the heart of his fiction is non-fiction: other thriller writers do the research, but he has actually been there' *Sunday Times*

'McNab is a terrific novelist. When it comes to thrills, he's Forsyth class' *Mail on Sunday*

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‘Addictive . . . Packed with wild action and revealing tradecraft’ *Daily Telegraph*

‘Firmly established as one of the UK’s top thriller writers, McNab draws heavily from his experience in the world’s most highly skilled special forces unit to make his fiction explosive, pacy and authentic’ *Express Magazine*

‘The word page-turner seems coined for McNab’s work’ *Crime Time*

Also by Andy McNab

Non-fiction

BRAVO TWO ZERO
IMMEDIATE ACTION

Fiction

REMOTE CONTROL
CRISIS FOUR
FIREWALL
LAST LIGHT
LIBERATION DAY
DARK WINTER
DEEP BLACK
THE GREY MAN

and published by Corgi Books

AGGRESSOR

Andy McNab



CORGI BOOKS

PART ONE

Monday, 5 April 1993

The three of us clung to the top of the Bradley armoured fighting vehicle as it bucked and lurched over the churned-up ground. Exhaust fumes streamed from its rear grille and made us choke, but at least they were warm. The days out here might be hot, but the nights were freezing.

My right hand was clenched round an ice-cold grab handle near the turret. My left gripped the shoulder strap of my day sack. We'd flown three thousand miles to use this gear, and there was nothing to replace it if it got damaged. The whole job would have to be aborted and I would be severely in the shit.

Nightsun searchlights mounted on the four AFVs strafed the front of the target buildings. The other three were decoys; ours was the only one transporting a three-man SAS team. That was if we could keep a grip on the thing.

As our driver took a sharp left towards the rear of the target, our Nightsun sliced a path across the night sky like a scene from the Blitz.

Charlie was team leader on this one, and wore a headset and boom mike to prove it. Connected to the comms box outside the AFV, it meant he could talk to the crew. His mouth was moving but he didn't have a clue what he was saying. The roar of the engine and the clatter of the tracks put paid to that. He finished, pulled off the headset, and lobbed it onto the grille. He gave Half Arse and me a slap on the back and the shout to stand by.

Seconds later, the AFV slowed, then came to a halt: our cue to jump. We scrambled down the side, taking care our day sacks didn't strike anything on the way.

The vehicle swivelled on its own axis, mud cascading from its tracks, then headed back the way we'd come.

I joined Charlie and Half Arse behind a couple of cars. They were obvious cover, but we'd only been here a few seconds, and if the Nightsuns had done their job, anybody watching from the buildings would have lost their night vision anyway.

We hugged the ground, looking, listening, tuning in.

Our AFV was now grinding along the other side of the building with its mates, Nightsuns working the front of the target. And now that they were a safe distance from our eardrums, the loudspeakers mounted on each vehicle began to broadcast a horrible, high-pitched noise like baby rabbits being slaughtered. They'd been doing that for days. I didn't know how it was affecting the people inside the target, but it certainly made me crazy.

We were about fifty metres from the rear of the target. I checked Baby-G: about six hours till first light. I checked the gaffer tape holding my earpiece, and that the two throat-mike sensors were still in place.

Charlie was sorting out his own comms. When he'd finished taping his earpiece, he thumbed the pressle hanging from a wire attached to the lapel of his black corduroy bomber jacket, and spoke loud and slow. 'This is Team Alpha. We clear to move yet? Over.' Brits found his thick Yorkshire accent hard enough to understand; fuck knows what the Americans at the other end would make of it.

He was talking to a P3 aircraft circling some twenty-five thousand feet above our heads. Bristling with thermal imaging equipment to warn us of any impending threat while we were on the job, it also

carried an immensely powerful infrared torch. I checked that my one-inch square of luminous tape was still stuck on my shoulder. The aircraft's IR beam was invisible to the naked eye, but the reflections off our squares would stick out like sore thumbs on their camera. If we were compromised and bodies poured out of the target to take us on, at least P3 would be able to direct the QRF [quick reaction force] to the right place.

The reply from the P3 came to my earpiece too. 'Yep, that's a free zone, Team Alpha, free zone.'

Charlie didn't bother to voice a reply; he just gave two clicks on the pressle. Then he came alongside me and put his mouth right against my ear. 'If I don't make it, will you do something for me?'

I looked at him and nodded, then mouthed the question, 'What?'

I felt the warmth of his breath on the side of my face. 'Make sure Hazel gets that three quid you owe me. It's part of my estate.'

He gave me the kind of grin that would have won him an audition with the Black and White Minstrels. It had been years since he'd subbed me for that fucking bacon sandwich, but the way he went on about it you'd have thought he'd paid off my mortgage.

He rolled away and began to crawl. He'd know that I was second in line, with Half Arse bringing up the rear. Half Arse also had personal comms, but his earpiece was just shoved into his jacket pocket. He was going to be the eyes and ears while Charlie and I worked on target.

The crawl was wet and muddy and my jeans and fleece were quickly soaked. I was beginning to wish I'd worn gloves and a couple of extra layers.

Like the other two, I kept my eyes on those parts of the target behind which the P3 couldn't penetrate: the windows. The rabbit noise and searchlights should keep the occupants' attention on the front of the target until we were done, but we'd freeze at the slightest movement, and hope we hadn't been seen or heard.

'You've got thirty to target, Team Alpha.' P3 were trying to be helpful.

Torchlight flickered behind a curtain on the first-floor window. It was directed inwards, not outwards. It wasn't a threat.

We carried on, and six minutes of slow crawling later we were where we needed to be.

The flaky white, weatherboarded exterior was only the first of three layers. The building plans showed there were likely to be another two behind it. One was tarpaper to prevent damp and help with insulation, and then there'd be the interior stud wall, which would have a finishing coat of either paint or paper, or both. None of which should be a problem for the sophisticated gear we were carrying.

As planned, we'd crawled to a point between two ground-floor windows. A utility box the size of a coal bunker was set against the wall. It was an ideal location for the stuff we were going to leave behind.

Fingers shielding the lens of his mini-Maglite, Charlie opened the utility box with a square lug key and had a quick look inside.

Half Arse had his pistol out; he kept his eyes on the windows and his ears everywhere else. He had a buttock shot away during an op a few years back, and right now I wondered if it meant his arse was only half as cold as mine. His wife wanted him to have an implant so he didn't scare the kids when he took them swimming, but they weren't available on the NHS, and he refused to go private. 'I'm too tight-arsed' was his standard joke. 'Or rather, tight half-arsed . . .' Nobody ever laughed. It wasn't very funny, and nor was he.

We knew that everyone in the various Pods [tactical operations] would be watching the thermal and IR imagery of us at work, beamed down to them by the P3. We wanted to make sure it was a job well done; don't mess with the best was the message we wanted to transmit – though right now it was the last thing any of us was worried about; personally, I just wanted to do the business and get away alive. This was my last job before I left the Regiment. It would be the mother of all ironies if I got dropped or injured now.

I eased my day sack off my back. A distant voice inside the building shouted out something but was ignored. We'd only react if someone was actually shouting that they'd spotted us; otherwise, we'd be stopping and starting every five minutes. You just have to get on with it until you know there is no definite drama. That was what Half Arse was here for.

Charlie had worked out where he wanted to fix the device. He pressed a thumbnail into the wood at almost ground level and gave me a nod. I brought out a pyramid from my day sack, seven inches high and made of alloy. Instead of a peak, it had a hole, and at each of the four corners was a fixing lug.

Guided by the beam from Charlie's Maglite, I positioned the pyramid so the hole was directly over his nail mark, and held it there while he put a battery-powered screwdriver to the first lug. Very slowly, very deliberately, the shaft of the screwdriver rotated. It took the best part of two minutes to screw it in tight. By the time the first three were in, my hands were almost numb.

A different voice shouted from inside. It was closer, but it wasn't talking about us. He was complaining about the rabbit noise, and I couldn't blame him.

The sweat on my back was starting to cool and I could feel fingers of wind fighting their way down my neck. At last, Charlie fixed the last lug and I gave the structure a wiggle left and right to test it was stable. He was the mechanic; I was the oily rag. The rest was up to him now.

He retrieved a drill bit half a metre long and seven millimetres in diameter from his day sack and threaded it carefully into the pyramid hole, oblivious to everything else that was going on.

He blew on his fingers to warm them, then eased the drill in further until it just touched the wood of the exterior wall. This kit couldn't be worked by any old knuckle-dragger, which ruled me out.

called for a delicate touch and a steady hand. Charlie was the best of the best; he always said that if I hadn't gone into this line of work, he'd have taken up brain surgery. Maybe he wasn't joking; I saw him settle a bet once by turning one five-pound note into two with a razor blade. Back in Hereford they called him the CEO of MOE [method of entry]. There wasn't a security system in existence that he couldn't defeat. And if there was, he wouldn't lose any sleep over it. He'd get me to blow it up instead.

Next out was the power cable, connected to a lithium battery inside his day sack. Charlie plugged it into the pyramid. There was a moment's delay as jaws inside the pyramid clamped round the bit, and then it began to turn, so slowly it almost seemed not to be moving. The only sound was a barely audible, low-frequency hum.

There was nothing we could do now but wait as it started to work its way quietly, slowly and methodically through an inch of wood, a sheet of tarpaper, and about half a centimetre of plasterboard. I moved against the wall to make myself as small a target as possible if anyone looked out of the window. My right hand lifted my fleece and rested on the grip of the pistol pancake-holstered on my jeans belt. My left pulled the zipped-up front over my nose for warmth.

This kit worked on the same technology they used in neurosurgery; if you're drilling through a skull it helps to be doing so with something that stops when it senses it's about to hit the cranial membrane. Our one behaved the same way when it was just about to break through the final layer of paint and paper. And – so it left no sign – it automatically collected the debris and dust as it went.

Charlie disconnected the power and pulled out the bit, then took out a fibre-optic rod with a light at the end. He moved it down through the pyramid, just to make sure he wasn't about to break through the stud wall. Everything seemed to be fine. He removed the fibre optic, reinserted the drill, and reconnected the power. The gentle hum resumed.

It moved quicker as it hit the tarpaper, then slowed again as it encountered the plasterboard. Charlie stopped it again and repeated the operation with the fibre optic.

I looked over at Half Arse. He was lying on his back with his feet nearest the wall, his pistol resting on his chest, pointing up at the first-floor windows. He must have been freezing his arse off – or what was left of it. I thought about the Americans in the Pods, drinking coffee and smoking cigars while they watched our progress. Most of them were probably wondering why the fuck we didn't get a move on.

It took nearly an hour before the drill stopped turning for the third and final time. Charlie did his trick with the fibre optic again and gave us a thumbs-up. He removed the drill bit, put the screwdriver into the first lug, and began to turn it anticlockwise.

When he'd removed the pyramid, Charlie dug out the microphone. It too was attached to a fibre-optic cable, so it could be put into position correctly.

I stowed the gear carefully, bit by bit, in my day sack. No point rushing it and making noise.

With a flourish, Charlie connected the microphone to the lithium battery and laid a metre-long wire antenna on the ground.

As soon as the power was switched on, there was squelch in my earpiece. The signal was beamed to the Pods and then bounced back to us. We didn't want to have to get on the net to check that we'd done the business.

I heard the microphone rustle as Charlie fed it gently into the freshly drilled hole. He stopped now and again, eased it back a fraction, then pushed it through a bit more. As it got closer to the membrane, I could hear a woman murmuring to her children, and a man moaning in agony. It must have been the one who'd taken a round in the stomach during the first attack.

It was almost time to leave. Charlie closed and relocked the utilities box as I dug the wire into the earth and smoothed it over. He did a quick final sweep of the area with his shielded Maglite, and we got rid of a couple of footprints. Then we started to crawl back to RV [rendezvous] with the Bradley.

Voices echoed in my earpiece as we went; a man mumbled passages from the Bible; a child whimpered and pleaded for a drink of water.

We had done our bit.

Now it was time to hand our toys over to the Americans.

Two weeks later

The baby rabbits screamed all night long. It was close to impossible for us to sleep – and we were several hundred metres from the action. Fuck knows what it must have been like for the hundred-odd men, women and children on the receiving end of their relentless squeals, taped on a loop and amplified a thousand times through the AFVs' loudspeakers.

It was still dark. I unzipped my sleeping bag just enough to slide my arm out into the cold. I tilted my wrist close to my face and pressed the illumination button on Baby-G. It was 5.38 a.m.

'Day fifty-one of the siege of Mount Carmel.' I kicked the bag next to me. 'Welcome to another day in paradise.'

Anthony stirred. 'They still playing the same bloody record?' It was strange hearing him swear in perfect Oxford English.

'Why, mate? You got any requests?'

'Yes.' His head emerged. 'Bloody get me out of here.'

'I don't think I know that one.'

It didn't get a laugh.

'What time is it?'

'Half-five, mate. Brew?'

He groaned as he adjusted position. Tony wasn't used to sleeping hard. He belonged in a freshly starched white coat, back at his lab, twiddling test tubes over Bunsen burners, not roughing it up alongside guys like me, teeth unbrushed so long they'd grown fur, and socks the consistency of cardboard.

'The papers were calling it the siege of Mount Apocalypse yesterday,' Anthony said. 'Lambs to the slaughter, more like.' It came from the heart. He wasn't at all happy about what was happening here.

Once we'd fixed the listening devices, nobody was interested in the Brits who'd been sent to Washington to 'observe and advise'. We were surplus to requirements. After a three-day consultation with Hereford, who'd had a consultation with the FCO, who'd spoken to the embassy in Washington, who'd spoken to whoever, Charlie and Half Arse had flown back to the UK. I was told to stay and keep an eye on Tony. The Americans might still want to use the box of tricks he'd brought along.

I rolled over and fired up our small camping gas stove, then reached for the kettle. When it came home comforts, that was pretty much it. There wasn't a toothbrush in sight, which probably explained why the Yanks kept their distance.

I looked through one of the bullet holes in the side of the cattle trailer that had been our home for the last five days. The darkness of the Texas prairie was criss-crossed by searchlight beams. The AFVs circled the target buildings like Indians around a wagon train, Nightsuns bouncing wildly. The psyop guys were still making life a living hell for those trapped inside. The media had got it right. We were trapped on the set of *Apocalypse Now*.

The compound, as the Feds were calling the Branch Davidians' hangout, comprised a mishmash of wooden-framed buildings, two three-storey blocks and a large rectangular water tower. In anyone else's language, it would have been described as a religious community, but that wouldn't have suited the FBI. The last thing they wanted was for this operation to smack of persecution, so compound

was.

~~There's a ten-day rule when it comes to sieges; if you've not resolved the situation by then, the sh~~
has really hit the fan. And we were pushing the envelope five times over. Something had to happen soon. The administration wasn't looking too clever as it was; with every new day that passed, things just got a whole lot worse.

The ear-piercing, gut-wrenching screams suddenly stopped. The silence was deafening. I peered through the bullet hole. Three or four AFVs were clustered near the car park. Intelligence from ex-members of the cult had suggested that since storage space inside the buildings was at a premium, a lot of them kept their belongings in the boots of their vehicles.

The first AFV lurched forward, ploughed through the fence and kept straight on going. I gave Tony another nudge. 'Fucking hell, look at this.'

Tony sat up.

'They're crushing all the cars and buses.'

'What the hell are they trying to do?'

'Make friends and influence people, I guess.'

We watched the demolition derby while the water boiled.

As soon as the last vehicle was flattened, the AFVs spread out again. They started to circle, the Davidians' fresh laundry embedded in their tracks. Almost immediately, the screams of the animals boomed out again from their loudspeakers.

People were on the move outside our trailer, making their way to and from the array of show cubicles, toilets and food wagons that had sprung up on our patch of the seventy-seven-acre tent city. An army may march on its stomach, but US law enforcement drives there in a stretch limo and gets paid overtime.

There was no shortage of bodies to be catered for. SWAT teams, FBI hostage rescue teams, federal marshals, local sheriffs; the place was teeming with them. No fewer than four Pods were sprinkled around the compound. Alpha Pod was right next door to our trailer; the other three had their own command set-up, and, as far as we could make out, were doing their own thing. There were more chiefs than Indians on this prairie, that was for sure, and nobody seemed to be in overall charge. To make matters worse, they all wanted to be, and every man and his dog was clearly itching to fire up the biggest and ugliest military toys they could get their hands on.

This operation had all the makings of a weapons-grade gangfuck, and there was a rock-festival sized audience gathering to witness it. Hordes of shiny, aluminium-skinned Airstreams, clapped-on Winnebagos and bog-standard pickups lined the road the far side of the cordon. The rubbernecker were coming from miles around for a good day out, sitting on their roofs, clutching their binoculars and enjoying the fun. There was even a funfair, and stall upon stall selling everything from hotdogs and camping gas stoves to *Davidians: 4, ATF: 0* emblazoned T-shirts [Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Bureau of].

This was certainly cowboy country, in more ways than one. Waco was about a hundred miles south of Dallas, and home to the Texas Rangers' museum. Everybody I'd seen at the funfair seemed to be wearing a Stetson. Everybody apart from the Ku Klux Klan, that is. They'd turned up three days ago offering the FBI their help getting in there and killing all them drug-taking, cult-loving child molesters.

Tony and I sank back down and finished off our brews while I got the kettle on for the next round. This was the highlight of the day.

Muffled speech and laughter came and went along the outside of the trailer. I smelled cigarette smoke. The cocking of weapons and ripping of body-armour Velcro signalled the change of shift. By my reckoning there were at least three hundred police officers on-site, with vehicles to match. Most of them were in BDUs [United States Army battledress], and carrying enough weaponry to see off a small invasion.

I also knew that the Combat Applications Group – Delta Force – had a team here somewhere. Delta had been modelled on the same squadron and doctrine set-up as the Special Air Service in the 1970s. They were probably doing much the same as we were, stuck at one of the Pods, being told jack shit about what was going on and sleeping rough in a trailer. I hoped so, anyway.

We all knew that it was illegal for the military to act against US citizens. The Posse Comitatus Act banned it from domestic law enforcement, and 'domestic' included a three-mile stretch of territorial water. There was only one exception to the rule: President Clinton had signed a waiver allowing law enforcement officers on drugs interdiction operations to use military vehicles and personnel to combat the force

ranged against them. In other words, the ATF and FBI had a Get Out Of Jail Free card, and judging by the Abrams tank parked up across the way, it looked like they intended to play it at the first available opportunity.

David Koresh and his fellow Bible-bashers couldn't have known what they were letting themselves in for when they resisted the original attack by the ATF almost two months earlier.

The water boiled. I tipped Nescafé into two mugs and poured. You couldn't move for catering wagon round here, but I didn't fancy joining the breakfast queue now the night shift was over. Apart from anything else, it meant venturing out into the cold, and I liked to put that off until the sun came up.

I hung on to Tony's brew as he fuffed about, trying to unzip. He rubbed his eyes and groped around for his glasses in the glow from the stove. He was all right, I supposed. He was thirty-something, with the kind of nose that made it look like his forefathers came from Easter Island. His hair was brown and style-wise he'd gone for mad professor. Either he didn't have any idea what he looked like or more likely, he just didn't care; because he was one, his head so full of chemical formulae he didn't seem to know what day it was.

There were nine thousand or so eggheads employed by DERA [Defence Evaluation and Research Agency], and Tony was one of them. You didn't ask these guys at exactly which of the eighty or so establishments up and down the UK they worked, but I was pretty sure, given why he was here, that he wouldn't be a complete stranger to the germ warfare laboratories at Porton Down in Wiltshire.

I'd looked after boffins like him before, holding their hand in hostile environments, or escorting them into premises neither of us should really have been in, and I tended to just let them get on with whatever they had to do. The less I knew, the less shit I could be in if things went pear-shaped. These sorts of jobs always tended to come back and kick you in the bollocks. But one thing always puzzled me: Tony and his mates had brains the size of hot-air balloons, and spent their whole lives grappling with the secrets of the universe – so how come they couldn't even get a decent brew on?

The RAF had flown a big container in with us to Fort Hood, then had it trucked on-site, and Tony carried the keys. He seemed pretty much a pacifist, so maybe it just contained enough fairy dust to make everybody dance out of the building, but I doubted it. The FBI had been pretty keen to have access to Charlie's siege surveillance devices, but the inside of Tony's head was what they really wanted. His business was advanced gases; he seemed to be on first-name terms with every molecule on the planet. What's more, he knew how to mix them so precisely that they killed, immobilized, or merely incapacitated you to the point where you were still able to crawl.

A flurry of shouted instructions belted out of Alpha Pod's command tent. Special Agent Jim D. 'Call Me Buster' Bastendorf was tuning up for his morning gobbing-off session to the new ship commanders, and as usual making everything sound like a bollocking.

Bastendorf really did like everyone to call him Buster, but it took us no time at all to christen him Deaf Bastard, then, because it was less of a mouthful, Bastard for short.

Bastard was a Texan and that meant everything – his shoulders, arms, hands and, most of all, his stomach – was bigger than it needed to be. It would have done him no harm at all to stay away from the two-pound T-bones after Christmas. He had a severe crew cut and a heavily waxed Kaiser Wilhelm moustache. He kept on curling the ends, as if letting them droop would be a sign of weakness. Yessirree, Jim D. Bastendorf knew exactly what his mission was: to kick ass, bust heads, solve the problem.

Everything was a battle for this man; every minute of every day was a fight he had to win. His jaw worked non-stop on chewing tobacco. Every quarter of an hour he'd gob a mouthful of thick, black saliva-covered crap into a polystyrene cup, trawl out another wad from a tin in his back pocket, and start the whole process again.

His problem with us began with Tony's accent. Whenever Tony asked a question or tried to offer some input, he just looked blank, and took to referring to him as 'that Limey fag in the trailer' who 'don't know shit from Shinola'. I was this other Brit waste of space who kept asking damn-fucking questions: 'What about this? What about that? Do you really think that keeping these guys awake 24/7 is going to get them to come out?'

When it came down to it, he didn't have a clue what we were doing here. Our brief was short and to the point. So long as we kept out of his way, had the correct little blue passes hanging from our necks at all times, and shared his view that we'd all been floundering helplessly till he rode over the hill like the Fifth Cavalry, we could stay here for ever, for all he cared – which was just fine by me, because I didn't care much either. If Bastard didn't want to listen, it wasn't my problem. The Davidians' water supply had been fucked up, and sooner or later they'd get hungry or thirsty or bored. They'd come over eventually, so I'd just keep getting the kettle on for Tony and me until the white flags started appearing.

Bastard roared with laughter. People were shouting instructions to get over to the command post. Something was happening.

'Shut the fuck up!' Bastard boomed. 'Check this out – showtime!'

I unzipped my bag and got to my feet. There was another sound above the scream of rabbits and the screech of tank tracks. Bastard had thrown a switch so that his mates could listen in on the conversation between the negotiators and the Bible-bashers.

A child of no more than five was on the phone inside the compound. I could hear muffled crying in the background. 'Are you going to kill me?' her small voice asked.

The negotiator was on a US Air Force base miles away – another bad tactic. He spoke gently, and Bastard’s boys in the command tent shrieked and whistled. ‘No, honey, no-one is coming to kill you.’

‘You sure? The tanks are still outside . . .’

‘The tanks won’t hurt you, honey.’

Another, male voice took over in the compound. ‘Why are you letting your guys drop their pants on our women?’ He was going apeshit. ‘These are decent women in here; you know that’s not the way to go. Why should we trust you?’

Bastard roared, ‘About time them bitches saw some prime ass!’

From the sound of it, this got his boys’ vote. I bet they were mooning at the speaker.

I exchanged a glance with Tony, who’d been staring at his coffee. We both listened as the negotiator tried to come back with a reasonable response. ‘You know what these guys are like; you know the ones who fly the helicopters or drive the tanks, they haven’t got the same mindset as us. I’ll try and do something about it, OK?’

Bastard guffawed. ‘Fuck that, and fuck you too, Mr Mindset! You just keep on talking; leave the ass-kicking to the big boys.’

There was a fresh burst of applause. I could picture the big boys shrugging off their pants again, waving their arses at the speaker.

I took a sip of my brew. Whatever the negotiator said, it didn’t look good for Koresh and his crew. The ATF had ignored his invitation to come in and inspect the place for illegal weapons and whatever else they thought the Davidians had up their sleeves, and instead had mounted a full-scale armed operation.

Maybe it was a coincidence, but it just so happened that the ATF were losing credibility in Washington right now, and it was budget time. They clearly wanted to put on a bit of a display, so they’d invited the media along, and given them ringside seats. They’d even got their own cameras rolling, in case the newshounds missed any of the action.

The Branch Davidians must have known something was up when they clocked the film crew setting up shop. Their suspicions would have been confirmed when helicopters started swooping round the rear of the compound, partly to draw their attention away from the cattle trailers full of arms. ATF agents headed for the front door, partly so the US public could see their tax dollars on the screen.

The Davidians returned fire, as they were entitled to do under American law. They even called 911 to tell the police they were being attacked, and begged for help.

The gun battle lasted for an hour, the longest in American law enforcement history. At the end of it, four ATF agents lay dead, with another sixteen wounded. When little brother gets his arse kicked, big brother comes to sort it out. The FBI took over. From that moment on, the Branch Davidians were doomed. This was one movie that wasn’t going to have a happy ending.

Tony took a sip of coffee and looked at me sadly as he listened to the conversation that followed.

The Davidians wanted water . . .

The negotiators said they wanted to help out, but they just couldn’t oblige. Their hands were tied.

People were starting to die of thirst here . . .

It was possible the FBI might be able to do something if some of the Davidians came out and gave themselves up, as a token of goodwill. How did that sound?

Tony was totally out of his depth here. He didn't like the sound of the AFVs, and he didn't like the shouting that came as part of the law enforcement package. He particularly didn't like being so near things that went bang. He'd have given anything right now to be tucked away in that lab of his, feeding laughing gas to Roland Rat or whatever the fuck it was they did there. He gave me a brave smile. 'Another day, another dollar, eh?'

'Easier said than done, mate.' I tried to sound upbeat for him. 'Best not to worry about what you can't change. It'll give you a headache.'

Tony looked away, staring sightlessly through the side of the trailer as Bastendorf's audience got right on with enjoying the show.

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