

THE HEART-STOPPING NEW
NICK STONE THRILLER

ANDY McNAB

AUTHOR OF *BRAVO TWO ZERO*

DETONATOR



Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Part One

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Part Two

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23

Part Three

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Epilogue

Extract from *Cold Blood*

The Andy McNab Dossier

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Ex-deniable operator Nick Stone has spent a lifetime in harm's way – but when someone he cares for very deeply is murdered in cold blood, he can no longer just take the pain.

A high-level internecine conflict at the dark heart of the resurgent Russian Empire and an assassin's bullet on an isolated Alpine pass propel him from an apparently run-of-the-mill close-protection task into his most brutal and challenging mission yet.

As the body count increases, Stone becomes one of Europe's Most Wanted. He must evade the élite police forces of three nations in his pursuit of faceless men who trade in human misery, and a lone-wolf terrorist who threatens to unleash the western world's worst nightmare.

Vengeance of the most explosive kind is top of Stone's agenda. The fuse has been ignited – but who really holds the detonator?

DETONATOR

Andy McNab

PART ONE

1

'Nick ...'

Voices.

'*Nick ...*'

Women's voices. One of them sounds ... Russian ...

'*You stupid little—*'

Not that one. That's my mate Gaz's mum. I'd know her anywhere. She'd caught us throwing condoms full of tomato sauce off the roof of his block of flats ...

Fuck, my head hurts.

Gunfire.

I can hear gunfire.

And screaming.

Not human screams. The scream of twisted, tortured metal.

I'm hiding in a storm drain. Darker than a shit pit down here. And colder than the grave. I've tabbed across the desert for ever, under fire. If I curl up tight, maybe they won't find me.

The steel plates above me creak and groan.

'I need your help, Nick ...' A man's voice, now. 'I need your help ...'

I hear breaking glass.

I'm moving. Shards of gleaming light. Blindingly bright.

I'm being dragged into the sun.

Wait a minute ...

Glass breaking in a storm drain?

Where the fuck am I?

My eyelids flicker.

I'm right about the daylight, at least. But I can't see a thing.

I try to open them wide. The left one seems to work. The other's been glued shut. I wipe it with the back of my hand, smearing my knuckles with crimson.

My stomach clenches. Bile floods through my chest. I can feel it burning its way up to the back of my throat. I can't stop myself gagging. Whatever I had for breakfast fills my mouth. I try to control it. And fail.

Breakfast ...?

Lunch ...?

Dinner ...?

Whatever ... It's all over the fucking place now.

I blink. Twice, I think. Maybe more.

A face looks back at me through the haze. A man's face. Fucked up. Blood leaking from a gash on his forehead. Spiky hair. Vomit clinging to the stubble around his lips.

I open my mouth to speak.

So does he.

A strand of yellowy green mucus stretches between his top and bottom teeth, like a bar on a cage.

I'm staring into a mirror. A rear-view mirror.

I glance down.

There's a wheel in front of me. A steering-wheel. At its centre, a silver badge.

Letters.

A word.

Nissan.

I'm pretty sure I don't drive a Nissan.

More creaks and groans. I lurch forward. A strap bites into my left shoulder.

Left shoulder ...

What the fuck am I doing on this side of the wagon?

I grip the wheel hard. Both hands. Try to focus on the road ahead. But the windscreen is a starburst, a glass mosaic, impossible to see through.

I ram my foot down on the pedal. The middle one. The brake. It seems to make things worse, not better.

A digital display glows on a console to the right of the dashboard. An arrow at the bottom edge of a patch of green. Along the top, a thin orange line. Nothing else. Nothing to tell me where in the world I am. I scrabble at the knob on the right of the screen. Start to zoom out, maybe get some sense of my surroundings.

A crack. Then another. And another.

Not gunshots. Snapping wood.

Grinding. From below me, and each side.

I freeze.

Straighten my back, so slowly I can't even see myself move.

Then silence. Except for the whisper of a fan.

I reach for the air-con button, a millimetre at a time, and switch it off. Air-con. Somewhere hot? Desert? Maybe just summer.

I turn towards the passenger seat, where I guess the first of the voices must have come from.

The seat starts to spin.

No. Not the seat. My head. It's my head spinning.

I close my eyes. More vomit rushes up to invade my mouth. This time I manage to swallow it back.

When I open my eyes again I see there is no one there.

Which is fucking good news, because a very shiny black-and-white-striped steel rod has rammed itself through the windscreen and into the backrest.

Beneath it, where my passenger's arse would have been, lies a cigarette pack. I pick it up. Examine it closely. Marlboro. With a picture of a pair of charred, weeping lungs, and some kind of warning I can't read. Cyrillic, maybe. Whatever, the message is clear. These things aren't good for you.

I run my tongue around the inside of my mouth, blow into my hand. I smell like a sewer. I can't tell if I'm a smoker. I

examine the index and middle fingers of my right hand. No nicotine stains. I don't think the cigarettes belong to me. So whose are they?

I slide the pack into the left-hand pocket of my bomber jacket. There's something in there already. Cold. Compact. A loaded mag for a pistol. Brass casing. Ten rounds. No. Thirteen?

Who cares?

Me. I should. You can't just spray these things around without knowing how many you've fired. How many you've got left.

How do I know that?

What was the brand again?

I can't fucking remember.

My hand retraces its journey into my pocket. It seems to know more than I do. Closes around a cardboard box. Brings it out.

Oh, yeah. Marlboro.

With a picture of a pair of charred, weeping lungs, and some kind of warning I can't read. Cyrillic, maybe. Whatever, the message is clear. These things aren't good for you ...

I've been here before. I'm caught in a loop.

Pictures ... words ...

The same pictures, the same words, echoing in my head

...

Then sliding away. Sliding beyond my grasp.

There's a day sack in the passenger foot well. Still in slow-mo, I release the safety-belt and lean towards it, clutch its handle, drag it on to the seat.

I see an eagle, wings and talons outstretched.

A manufacturer's logo, almost obscured by a smear of blood, stamped on to the stripy steel missile a hand's width from where it has punctured the skin of the wagon's grey leather upholstery. My blood, I reckon. I give it a wipe. There's a string of letters and numbers beneath.

Adler ...

Adler Gesellschaft.

I repeat the words aloud. I have no idea whether they'll be of any use to me, but try to fix them in my mental databank. I need something to grab hold of. Something solid.

It isn't happening.

Above and beyond the missile: branches. Branches, covered with dark green needles. Pressed against the window. I swivel my head and shoulders to the left. Same on my side.

I'm in a malfunctioning dark green car wash. I need to get the fuck out of here.

I lean back. Bend my knee. Raise my foot above the dash. The wagon starts to tilt with me as I push at the screen with my boot. The safety-film balloons outwards, then bursts. A few fragments of glass lose their grip on the laminate and sprinkle across the bonnet. The rest cling on, but now I have a porthole to look through.

Cool air rushes in, heavy with the scent of pine.

More branches, left and right.

At the centre, sky.

A lot of sky. Sky of the brightest blue. A canopy of blue, rising from a distant jagged grey snow-topped mountain ridge.

That grinding sound again. The nose of the wagon dips far enough for me to see what's directly in front of me.

Nothing.

A break in the trees.

A sheer drop.

Rock.

Rock.

And more rock.

Pasture.

A river snaking through a valley.

Maybe four hundred below. Maybe more. My eyes aren't focusing too well.

Someone - fuck knows who - once told me it takes about five seconds for a falling body to reach terminal velocity. So how long before I hit the dirt? I have a feeling I once knew how to work out shit like that.

Now all I know is that it's the distance between living to fight another day and being totally fucked, once and for all.

I try the door.

No joy there. My palm slips off the handle. Jammed solid. Bent panel.

And the window won't power down.

I take a deep breath. Sit absolutely still. For fuck's sake, I need to get a grip here.

I wipe away the sweat on my jeans and feel something solid under my right thigh. The shape seems familiar. I bring it out into the open. A pistol.

I know about pistols. Not sure why.

I remove the mag, eject the round from the chamber; realize I can run through this drill blindfolded.

I close my palm over the top slide, so that enough of the muzzle protrudes from the bottom of my fist to smash it against the corner of the side window, immediately above where the part number is etched. I don't need to do it twice. There's a crack and a pop, a shower of sparkly bits and a whole lot more fresh air where the glass had been.

I unzip the day sack, then shove the mag and the weapon inside. Looping its strap over my right arm, I brush away the remnants of the glass from the edge of the frame with my left sleeve, get my arse off the seat and start to lean out.

With a noise like tyres on gravel, the pointy end of the wagon drops even further and its tail comes up. The trees on both sides do their best to hang on to it, but they're losing the battle. I grab the nearest branch, bend my knees,

kick hard and launch myself out of the cockpit as it gives a final lurch and disappears over the edge.

I manage to hang on, but my hands are on fire. As they slide down the branch, pulled by the weight of my body, needles and splinters of bark tear into my flesh. I search for some kind of purchase with my toecaps but that just makes things worse. From the waist down I'm hanging into space.

I tighten my grip. Work my way back towards the trunk, hand over hand. It's not just my palms that are burning now. My shoulder muscles are too. I somehow manage to swing one knee on to firm ground, then pull up the other.

The dull crump of an explosion echoes across the valley. The wagon's fuel tank must have ruptured as it bounced off the rock face. The first spark would have ignited the fumes.

I don't look down. I can't.

The world's biggest fireworks display sparks up inside my head. A wave of molten lava forces its way up from the pit of my stomach, setting my chest on fire as it goes.

A jet of weapons-grade vomit spews out of my mouth.

I can't remember the last time I vomited.

I can feel myself frowning as I look at the sticky, brightly coloured stream that seems to be connecting my face to the bed of brown needles below it.

Then the pool of vomit rises up and smacks me between the eyes and the darkness rushes in again.

2

I don't know how long I lay there.

I thought I was drowning, to start with. Drowning in a mountain lake. No. Drowning in a pool of vomit. My own vomit.

'Nick ...'

A man's voice.

Clipped. Precise. Eastern European.

'I need your help, Nick ...'

You need *my* help?

That can't be right. I can't even help myself.

'I need your help ... I don't know who else I can trust ...'

'Don't know who else I can trust ...'

'Can trust ...'

'Can trust ...'

My head was an echo chamber.

Somewhere deep inside what was left of my brain, a drumbeat sounded.

Pounding.

Insistent.

'This is not a drill ...'

More drums. A guitar, maybe.

'This shit is for real ...'

I raised my head.

Fuck, my face stank. It was coated with puke. I was lying beside some trees, fir trees, on a bed of dank brown and yellow pine needles. I grabbed a fistful of them and wiped away as much of the puke as I could.

Then something made me rake over the needles so that there was no trace of it on show there either, and cover my

tracks as I scrambled beneath the trees.

I felt my right arm jerk back. The strap of my day sack was looped around a low-hanging branch. I unhooked the thing and deposited it on the far side of the largest trunk I could reach, then crawled after it.

Took a couple of slow, deep breaths. A couple more.

I rolled over and lay on my back. Struggled to slow everything down. I knew I was in the shit. Physically and mentally. But I had no idea why.

I shut my eyes tight, opened them and looked up through the trees. Brown. Green. Little diamonds of blue. Sky, maybe? Fragments of colour, like fragments of memory. They seemed to make sense for a moment, until I lost my grip on them again.

To try to get my thinking straight, I decided to count backwards from a hundred. I was vaguely aware that that was what a doctor would ask me to do. What I would ask someone to do if I thought they'd taken a blow to the head and lost a few marbles.

Did that mean I was a doctor?

I knew I'd given my brain stem enough of a rattle to fuck up my short-term memory.

And I knew some other medical shit.

Morphine syrettes ...

Field dressings ...

Tourniquets ...

I knew that when you took a round in the thigh you sometimes had to dig around and grip the soggy end of your femoral artery between thumb and forefinger to stop yourself bleeding out.

I filled my lungs with air and began.

'One hundred ...

'Ninety-nine ...

'Ninety-eight ...

'One hundred ...

'Ninety-nine ...'

I was getting nowhere fast.

I didn't think I'd forgotten how to count. I just kept forgetting where I was in the sequence.

Maybe because questions kept echoing inside my head.

The same questions, probably.

Who am I?

Where am I?

'I need your help, Nick ...'

I'm not a doctor. So not that kind of help.

No. I'm on a task.

I'd been briefed. By a man in a room. I couldn't remember who. But the room was green. A green room. A green room without windows.

'Nick ...'

I'm Nick. I must be. I've heard that name before. People keep calling that name.

I patted the front of my bomber. Then felt inside. A wallet. Battered brown leather. I rifled through it. Euros. Not pounds. Not dollars. Not roubles. Euros. Hundreds. Fifties. Twenties. And a bunch of Swiss francs. A plain black card with no markings, just a magnetic strip on the back. And that was it.

I pulled up my right sleeve. A watch. Green face. Black LCD display. Multifunction Suunto Vector.

Time: 11:16.

Altitude: 1,987 metres. 1,987 metres? Shit ...

Compass? South was the way to oblivion. I needed to go north.

Barometric pressure? I'd never understood barometric pressure.

A load of information. But nothing to help me ID the owner.

I reached into the neck of my T-shirt. No dog tags.

Look at my fingers, one by one. No rings. No bling.

I'm sterile.

What was I expecting?

'Nicholas ...'

The Russian girl again.

Fuck, my head hurt.

Other voices.

Faraway voices.

Maybe I was imagining them as well.

No, I wasn't. They were coming closer.

That was why I was lying up. That was why I'd brushed over my tracks.

I rolled on to my belt buckle, raised my head and scanned my immediate surroundings. I was at the lower edge of a stretch of densely planted firs. I couldn't tell how far they ran uphill. To my immediate left there was a break: a path or track through the trees.

I grabbed the day sack and crawled deeper into cover. I lifted the waistband of my bomber jacket and reached for my pistol. It wasn't there.

Had I dropped the fucker?

A mag in my pocket, but no weapon in my belt.

Concentrate, for fuck's sake.

No, relax.

Breathe.

And don't lose control.

I peeled back the zipper of the day sack and slid my hand inside. It came out holding a matt black compact Sphinx 9mm. The Swiss might be neutral, but they knew a thing or two about stuff that goes bang. I pulled the top slide back along its rails until it locked. Next came the mag. I checked that the rounds were correctly bedded and slid it slowly into the pistol grip until I heard a gentle click.

I needed to keep noise to a minimum, so instead of allowing the top-slide spring to snap into place I released it with the side lever and eased the working parts over the mag. Then I pulled it back a couple of mills. The glint of brass in the ejection opening told me a round was in the

chamber. I examined it closely, wondering why I knew this shit, then pushed it home again.

The weapon was ready. I hoped I was. For what, I hadn't a clue. These guys might have been coming to admire the view, but if there was a drama, I didn't want to take any chances.

The voices were louder now. I could also hear footsteps. Two voices. Two sets of boots on the ground. Getting closer.

I had no idea what they were saying to each other. Their waffle was low and guttural, one of those languages that makes even kids having fun in the playground sound like they're pissed off with each other.

Something else stirred in the depths of my mental databank. Then it was gone.

My eyes followed two pairs of legs coming down the track. One in shiny black tracksuit bottoms. One in khaki combats. They slowed to a halt some distance from the edge of the mountain. Turned towards me.

Acid attacked my sinuses as I lowered my nose into the pine litter. Unless you've caked it with cam cream, the shape of your face can give you away, and skin shines in the dark. If I knew stuff like that, maybe I wasn't completely fucked.

I felt my gut heave and vomit flooded over my tongue. To me, it sounded like an earthquake. Had it to them? I tightened my hold on the pistol grip. Fought to swallow as I slowly raised my head.

But they didn't move in. They bent to examine a trail of torn branches and scarred bark.

Were those lads on my side? Had they come to see if I was OK?

I kept eyes on them, hoping to catch sight of anything distinctive that might trigger some form of recognition. All I got to start with was footwear - hiking boots beneath the khaki, gleaming red and white trainers beneath the tracksuit. Then the occasional hand. The ones closest to me

the colour of ebony. The furthest away tanned, white, a mat of dark hair sprouting from the backs of them, all the way down to the knuckles.

Nothing above the waist.

I followed the hands, looking out for a distinctive watch, a ring, a bracelet, a wristband ... Though fuck knew how I'd hang on to the information if I did. No matter how hard I tried to focus on incoming sights and sounds, I could still feel them disappearing through the cracks in my brain.

No luck with the hands. These lads were bling free.

Then they stepped into the sunlight and looked over the precipice. I could see now that the shiny black tracksuit bottoms were topped off with a sleeveless Puffa jacket that matched the red of the trainers. The khaki combats went with a khaki shirt.

I could still see only bits of them, and from behind, but I could tell they liked whatever it was they saw. There was a lot of nodding and grunting and one clapping the other between the shoulder blades.

Wait a second ...

A glint of silver. Khaki Combats did have a ring. A silver device in a red setting. A double eagle, maybe, but I couldn't be sure. Albania is the land of the eagles. Why did I know that? An Albanian eagle?

I began to make out the odd word among the grunts. It wasn't tourist chat. It was satisfaction at a job well done. It was how you reacted when you'd pushed a guy off a mountain, then confirmed the kill.

The lad closest to me - with the flash trainers and Puffa - was a very big unit. He was the one with hands the colour of ebony. And a headful of dreads.

A chunky gold bracelet slid out of his sleeve and hung around his wrist as they gave each other a huge high-five.

I could almost hear the cogs whirring inside my skull. I'd seen that boy in action before. But the where, when and how remained beyond my reach.

His mate was shorter and squarer. Not just dressed like a Hesco barrier. Built like one too. Something about his body language said he was the boss. He brought out his mobile, jabbed the speed dial and waffled into the mouthpiece. Either he was ordering himself a takeaway or he was sharing the good news.

Then, out of nowhere, words I recognized.

'Yeah. You're right. Fuck him. He got what he deserved.'

He cut the call, waved an arm then they both turned and tabbed back up the slope.

I never saw their faces.

3

As soon as they were out of sight I opened my mouth and listened. I needed to make sure they were well clear before I carried on trying to work out how the fuck I'd got into this shit.

I didn't count backwards again. I couldn't be arsed. When I could no longer hear voices and footsteps I started counting forwards instead. Much easier. And it helped me measure time and distance. I couldn't move on until they were well gone.

I got to thirty. I was pretty sure I hadn't missed any numbers out.

I moved on to sixty. It was slow work, but I was ridiculously pleased with myself. I felt a stupid smile spread across my cheeks.

I reached a ton and felt like cheering. I wasn't firing on every single cylinder yet, but maybe my brain wasn't terminally fucked after all.

I grabbed the day sack to check out what else was in there. Had I done that before? Probably. But there was only one way of finding out. I was about to put the Sphinx on the ground beside me when I heard another of those voices. 'Pistols are always attached, you knob-head. On the body, or in the hand. You must keep control ...' No Russian accent. Jock, maybe. An instructor somewhere.

Control. Fuck. If that voice could see me now ...

I hauled myself to my feet and tucked the barrel of the weapon into the front of my jeans, polymer grip within easy reach in case I had to draw down. These things don't have a safety any more. They're double action, so unless I did

something really fucking stupid I wasn't going to lose my bollocks as well as my marbles.

I peeled off my bomber jacket, spread it out on the ground and emptied the contents of the day sack on to the lining.

Clean shirt and boxers. Socks.

Compact Pentax 10x50 binoculars on a strap.

Titanium pen. UZI stamped on the barrel. It looked like you could use it to hijack an aircraft or fire it from a Rarden cannon. The top end, above the clip, had been designed to punch holes through toughened glass.

Disposable lighter.

Clear plastic Silva compass. Not a bombproof prismatic number with folding sights, one that you could put flat on a map.

Small bottle of mineral water.

A couple of second-hand Nokia mobiles, ten SIM cards and four battery packs.

But no ID.

I was getting the strong impression I was the Invisible Man, but this was fucking outrageous. Even if I was on the holiday of a lifetime, I'd need ID.

And if I was on the holiday of a lifetime, I wouldn't need a 9mm Sphinx and a spare mag.

I gave the day sack a good shake, then felt around in the lining and found a zipped compartment. Tucked inside was a wad of euros, a UK passport and photocard driving licence, both in the name of Nicholas Head. The Nick bit made sense. The Head bit made me frown. Nickhead. Was that my real name or some kind of joke?

I unscrewed the top of the mineral water. Got the lot down my neck. I couldn't remember the last time I'd rehydrated. And the inside of my mouth needed all the help it could get.

I threw everything back into the sack, including the empty bottle, and slung it over my shoulder, then moved

towards the track.

I did a three-sixty before stepping out beyond the treeline. My head was spinning a bit, but maybe that was because of the sunlight. Pretty much everything stayed in focus as I looked right, up the hill. No sign of anything moving except the gentle sway of the firs as they reached for the ribbon of sky.

There was a trail of snapped branches and gouges in their trunks, some flecked with blue vehicle paint, on both sides of the track. The turf between them had been chewed up by tyres. Parallel furrows slalomed about eight metres to my left, ending with a short stretch of churned earth and rock where the funnel narrowed. Then nothing.

I walked to the edge of what must have been a four-hundred-metre drop.

A buzzard rode the thermals below me.

Then rock.

More rock.

Pasture.

A river snaking through a valley.

Smoke billowed from a chunk of burning wreckage. I narrowed my eyes. Shielded them with my hand. Some kind of wagon. Smashed beyond recognition. But I knew with sudden certainty that it was a Nissan. A 4WD. And that Hesco and his black sidekick thought I was still behind the wheel.

Good. Perhaps they'd relax now and leave it at that. Perhaps they'd get careless. But that didn't mean *I* could.

I turned back and followed the scars the Nissan's tyres had ripped into the grass that carpeted the break between the trees. The gradient steepened as I went. Thank fuck I hadn't a clue about my journey down. Was I even conscious? It must have been one hell of a ride.

I stopped short of the open ground and ducked into cover. I needed to check out the next tactical bound before making it. I knew that. Just like I knew the rules of

concealment. Shape, shine, shadow, silhouette, spacing and movement are the shit that give you away. Two more lessons that must have been driven into me so deep they had become second nature.

I wove my way twenty or thirty paces through the wood, until I found a vantage-point with a clear view of the next three hundred and fifty metres of slope.

My eyes swept right to left and back again. Outcrops of bare rock, bald baby's heads, were scattered randomly across the turf. A small furry creature appeared briefly beside one, sniffed the air, then made itself scarce.

No other bodies, no other sign of life in the territory that separated me from the place the tyre marks seemed to begin. Black-and-white-striped rods, spaced at regular intervals, stood proud of the crest to either side of it.

I guessed that was where the road must be.

I waited, listened and looked.

Still nothing.

I set off, running at the crouch. My head bounced around on my shoulders, like my neck had turned into a Slinky.

About fifty up, I doubled over and puked my guts out again. There was hardly anything there, but it seemed to take for ever to come out. Not good in open ground.

Once I'd stopped retching, I waited for my vision to clear. The splashes of watery puke by my boots were a world away from the multi-coloured explosions you see outside pubs and kebab shops: they were clear and shiny and flecked with brown. I kicked over the traces anyway.

About a hundred up, I had a clearer picture of my objective. A stretch of retaining wall to my half-left; thickly mortared stone, constructed to stop the tarmac throwing itself downhill. I paralleled the tyre tracks then veered left towards it. As I drew closer, I could see it was waist high, enough to give me cover. I stooped beside it and listened for vehicle engines and the crunch of boots on gravel and allowed my stomach to settle.

All I could hear was a siren. Somewhere behind me, a few Ks further down the valley. It wasn't getting any louder.

I raised my head fractionally above the parapet and scanned beneath the safety barrier. There was no one in my field of vision in either direction. A two-lane blacktop that had been carved out of the rock face which towered above me. I was at the apex of a curve. Fragments of shattered glass glittered in the sunlight on the far side of it.

I skirted the stonework for a metre or two, then clambered on top of it. To my right, violent skid marks swerved across the white centre line, leading to a point, short of the barrier and beside another clump of trees, where the edge of the metalled surface had crumbled on to the turf.

This was where my rollercoaster had kicked off.

A sudden flashback ...

I'm leading a two-car convoy. A shiny black SUV with darkened windows is behind me. I can see it in the rear-view. Then red lights fill the screen inside my head. A big fuck-off flatbed artic slamming on the anchors with zero warning.

A big fuck-off flatbed artic with a company name on the rear panel and an eagle logo on each mudguard.

The kind you'd expect to see clutching at a swastika.

I can hear the screech of tyres, see the smoke pouring out of the wheel arches. I can smell the burning brake fluid and bubbling rubber on the tarmac ...

I could feel the sweat prickle in my armpits and groin and on the gash below my hairline. I could feel my shoulder muscles clench. But I tried to hang on to the image.

I needed to know what happened next.

4

The artic's brake-lights faded, bleached by the sunlight. I hadn't a clue where the SUV had gone.

But I could see another skid pattern on the tarmac now. Twin sets of parallel tracks - a wide-wheel-base monster - starting behind the first traces of the smaller vehicle's attempt to avoid collision, and ending after its side exit from the highway.

I took a closer look at the nearest of the striped poles that lined the roadside, designed to keep winter drivers from taking the quickest route - my route - down the mountain. There was an ID code stamped on its paintwork, about a hand's width from where it had been sunk into the verge. Then the manufacturer's name: Adler Gesellschaft.

And a graphic of an eagle, with wings and talons outstretched.

I'd seen this shit before.

I fished the UZI pen out of my day sack and rolled back my left sleeve. I saw a pattern of raised, bite-sized scars just below my elbow. Guard dog. German Shepherd? Rottweiler? I had the vaguest recollection of one not liking me in another life.

Painfully slowly, I scrawled 'Adler Gesellschaft' on my skin, then did my best to draw the logo as well. The drawing was shit: it looked nothing like an eagle. But the cogs in my brain seemed to be moving up a gear. I knew that one of these missiles had been buried in my passenger seat.

I looked along the line of rods standing to attention at the roadside. There didn't seem to be one missing. And even if

it had been, there was no way it would have jumped up and hurled itself through my windscreen just for the hell of it. It had been launched off the flatbed. And some fucker must have helped it on its way.

I needed to find out who.

I needed to find out why.

And if I got half a chance, I'd plant the pointy end of one of those things - or something similar - in the middle of his fucking forehead.

I walked to the place my downhill adventure must have begun.

The ground fell away big-time from there. Going right or straight ahead, you'd leave the grass sharpish and the odd bit of shrubbery clinging to the rock couldn't stop a wagon launching itself off the precipice. That must have been the reason they'd chosen to force me off at this point. The wooded strip bottom-left offered the only safety barrier once you'd left the tarmac. And it didn't look as big from here as I'd thought it was when I was hidden in it.

So what had happened to the SUV once it had melted away from my rear-view?

I turned back to the road. As far as I could see, it was still deserted. Both ways. It continued beyond the curve, heading up the mountain through a corridor of trees. There was no sign of the artic. Of course there wasn't. After fucking me over, it would have kept on going.

I walked about fifty paces in the direction I must have driven from. To my left, the road hugged the hillside. To my right, there was another stretch of safety barrier. In the distance, the mouth of a tunnel bored into the mountain. I retraced my steps past the skid marks and carried on round the curve.

From there the tarmac snaked towards the trees. A hundred-metre length of heavy-duty wire mesh lined the scar that was left where it had been blasted out of the granite.

A signpost came into view, warning of a P half a K ahead. It didn't tell me where the fuck I was, but it told me what language they spoke here. Beneath a graphic of a big white tyre with snow chains in a blue circle were the words 'AIRE DE CHAÎNAGE'. So, France or Switzerland. Not Belgium. No mountains in Belgium.

Almost immediately, the bank of firs sheltered the left side of the main. I could see a gravelled area to my right, tucked into a fold in the rock. And another tunnel a half-K beyond it.

As I got closer to the turn-off I heard the sound of rushing water. I left the verge and took to the trees. It was slower going here because of the steepness of the slope and the uneven footing, but I didn't want to be caught in the open. I dropped down below the level of the road.

I stopped for a moment to draw breath. My head wasn't pounding any more, but my heart was, and my gut ached. Fuck it, I'd worry about that later if I needed to. Right now I had to keep going. I did my best to avoid the tangle of roots and dead branches that littered the slope, but slid from time to time on loose scree.

Water spewed from a concrete pipe running under the road ten metres in front of me and splashed down the mountainside. I got close enough to scoop some handfuls of it over my face and into my mouth. It was cold and clear, washed away the acid in my throat and tasted fucking wonderful. I got as much as I could down my neck. I had no idea when I'd last rehydrated. Did I have a bottle in my day sack? Did I drink it? Maybe. But who knew when I'd have another chance? I rinsed as much as I could of the vomit off the front of my gear.

Built over the mouth of the pipe, a small metal gantry bridged the stream. Using it as a platform, I raised my head gradually above the verge.

A wooden hut, shutters down, stood by the entrance to the layby. Nothing special. Just somewhere for the snow-

chain police to take a break from the winter-sports traffic and have a brew. A row of slatted tables and benches were anchored to a patch of concrete alongside it. This place obviously doubled as a picnic spot for anyone who didn't fancy an Alpine view.

The waterfall cascaded down the rock face at the back of the gravelled area, throwing up a curtain of spray. Nosy-parked a safe distance away from it was a shiny black SUV with darkened rear windows and a showroom shine. Armoured, probably, judging by how low it sat on its suspension.

My missing SUV.

A flash model that looked like someone with the world's biggest arse had sat on the roof and squashed it. A black Range Rover Evoque. I knew that was what it was because it said so on the tailgate.

It had French plates. I took out my magic pen and scribbled the registration on my wrist.

The wagon was completely still. No vapour spilling out of the gleaming twin exhaust pipes. I scanned the entire area for any sign of the big lads or their mates. Hesco had been talking to somebody at the top of the precipice. Somebody up here?

The place seemed deserted. Unless they were using the brew hut as cover.

I heard an engine. Lights blazed in the darkness of the tunnel. I stayed where I was long enough to check that they were just bog-standard headlamps, not blue and flashing, then dipped out of sight.

It slowed as it drew alongside the layby, and for a moment I thought it was going to pull in. Why? Reinforcements for Hesco and Dreads? Or holidaymakers stopping for a pig roll and a piss? I hoped neither. I didn't want to spend all day there.

Seconds later the engine note changed and the vehicle accelerated away towards my bend.