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Opening Extract from...

Shadow Force

Written by Matt Lynn

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MATT LYNN

SHADOW FORCE

headline

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The Unit

Steve West A South Londoner, Steve served in the SAS for five years, fighting in Bosnia and behind the lines in the second Iraq War. After leaving the Army, Steve started freelancing for Bruce Dudley's private military corporation, Dudley Emergency Forces – an outfit known in the trade as Death Inc. for the high-risk, high-stakes jobs it is willing to take on. With the money he made in Afghanistan – a mission described in *Death Force* – Steve has bought out his uncle Ken's half-share in a vintage car dealership in Leicestershire.

Ollie Hall Once an officer in the Household Cavalry, the most blue-blooded of British regiments, Ollie was trained at Sandhurst, and was, for a time, one of the fastest rising young stars in the armed forces. But he had a problem with drinking and gambling, and eventually left the Army to make a career in the City. When that failed as well, he started trying to form his own PMC, before joining up with Steve for the mission in Afghanistan. At the end of *Fire Force*, he breaks off his engagement to Katie, a London PR girl.

David Mallet With twenty years' experience as an officer in

the Irish Guards behind him, David is an experienced, battle-hardened soldier, an expert in logistics and military strategy and planning. He is divorced from his first wife, with two children at private schools to pay for, and his second wife has just given birth to twins.

Nick Thomas From Swansea, Nick spent two years in the Territorial Army before joining Steve on the Afghanistan mission. An only child, he was bought up by his mother Sandra, now working as a lap dancer, and never knew who his father was. He is the man with the least military experience on the team. But he is also the best marksman any of them have ever met, with an uncanny ability to hit a target with any kind of weapon.

Ian 'The Bomber' Murphy A Catholic Ulsterman, Ian grew up in Belfast, and spent ten years working as a bomb-maker for the IRA. He was responsible for several explosions that killed both soldiers and civilians, and was sentenced to life imprisonment. After spending years in the Maze prison, he was released as part of the Good Friday Agreement. He is no longer a member of the IRA, and has severed his connections with his old life. But he is still an expert bomb-maker, able to fashion an explosion out of the most basic components.

Dan Coleman A former member of the Australian Special Air Service Regiment (SASR), a unit closely modelled on the British SAS, Dan fought in Afghanistan as part of an SASR unit deployed to fight the Taliban. He accidentally killed two children, and spent a year in a military jail, although he always maintained his innocence. Haunted by the incident, he has

left the Australian Army, and has taken up freelancing for PMCs. Dan is an expert on weaponry, always aware of the latest military technology, and desperate to try it out.

Ganju Rai A former Gurkha, Ganju served for eight years in C Company, in the 2nd Battalion of the Parachute Regiment, primarily staffed by Gurkhas. He comes from a small Nepalese village, and is fiercely loyal to the traditions of the Gurkha Regiments. Rai's brother, also a Gurkha, was killed in Kosovo, and his wife and children are not getting a pension. Ganju has become a mercenary to earn enough money to help support his extended family back home. He is an expert in stealth warfare.

Maksim Prerova A former member of the Russian special forces, the Spetsnaz, Maksim is a suicidally brave soldier. His father was killed in Afghanistan in the early 1980s, and he has a bad vodka habit. During the mission in Afghanistan described in *Death Force*, he was tricked into betraying the unit, but was forgiven because he proved himself the most ferocious fighter any of the men had ever seen. Fit, strong and courageous, Maksim is always ready for a fight.

Henri Colbert A sailor with the French Navy, Henri qualified for Commando Hubert, that country's formidable unit of underwater combat specialists. After five years in Hubert taking part in missions around the world, Henri left the French forces and became a freelance consultant specialising in marine security. Brave and resourceful, Henri is a tough soldier, but he is also proud and argumentative, and finds it hard to fit into a team.

Bruce Dudley A gruff Scotsman, Dudley is the founder and chief shareholder in Dudley Emergency Forces. A former SAS sergeant, he left the Regiment ten years ago, and soon realised there was money to be made from running a private army. He was a legendarily tough soldier himself, and doesn't see why anyone else should complain about terrifying conditions. He has an acute understanding of what makes his soldiers tick, and knows how to manipulate them into fighting every battle as ferociously as he did when he was younger.

Deceased

Chris Reynolds A veteran of South Africa's Special Forces Brigade, known as the 'Recce' unit, Chris spent fifteen years in the South African Defence Force, and regarded the Recces as the finest fighting unit in the world. But he left the armed forces after he became disillusioned with the post-apartheid regime. He bought himself a farm in South Africa, but when that went bust he was forced to work as a mercenary to pay off his debts, even though it is illegal for South Africans to work for PMCs. He was brutally crucified in Batota, a mission described in *Fire Force*.

Jeff Campbell A former soldier, Campbell came from South London, and grew up with Steve. The two men were best mates. He was the man in the unit with the greatest sense of camaraderie, always organising a party, and making sure everyone had enough to drink. He died from wounds on the mission in Afghanistan described in *Death Force*, despite the best efforts of the rest of the men to save him.

One

Steve West was lying trapped beneath a beam that had fallen across his chest, attached to a bomb that could detonate at any second.

Only two men could help him.

One of them was on the end of a mobile with a fading signal.

And the other was a bloke who'd been drinking the local beer since breakfast.

So what the fuck could possibly be the good news?

'I said, do you want the good news, pal?' repeated Ian 'The Bomber' Murphy, speaking over the mobile in a low, throaty growl that sounded something like a diesel engine stuck in first gear.

'Why not, mate?' answered Steve with a ragged sigh. 'It hasn't exactly been my day so far. I could use some cheering up.'

'If the bomb blows, the blast from that quantity of explosives will move faster than the signals within your nervous system,' said Ian. 'So you quite literally won't feel a thing.'

'Thanks, mate. That's a load off my mind.'

'Back in PIRA, there was a bloke called Mick O'Brian

who used to show us boys how to make bombs. This was in Derry in the eighties, and there were always a couple of lads who got the shakes when they were handling high explosives for the first time. Mick would tell them that to try and calm them down.'

'Much as I'd love to stop and chat, Ian, there isn't much charge left on this mobile. Do you think we could crack on?'

'Right.'

Steve could feel the sweat pouring off his body. He was lying on the ground floor of an abandoned hotel on the island of Haikl, ten miles from the coast of Avila, a small Central American state sandwiched between Panama, Guatemala and Belize. The beam had trapped him, falling across his chest. And on top of that there was a two-hundred-pound bomb, packed with P4 plastic explosive: enough of it to destroy a decent-sized building, never mind the poor sod lying right underneath it. Ian would know how to make it safe, but he was trapped down the beach in a firefight. All he could do was give instructions to Ollie. And Ollie had been drinking heavily before the battle had kicked off.

Steve handed the phone back to Ollie. They'd arrived on Haikl only a week ago, after flying out from London to Avila. It wasn't meant to be anything more than a jaunt. Ian had been out here for a month, helping out a mate of his from his Provo days called Robert Finnan who was now working with what he described as the local businessmen but what most people would call drug dealers and gunrunners. They used the island as a staging post for secretly shipping contraband from South America into Europe, the same business the IRA had been in all through the troubles, before they dropped

the politics and turned themselves into full-time criminals. They were worried about some other gangsters trying to muscle in on their territory, and Ian was helping out with securing the island against attack.

Steve had only come out with Ollie and Nick, two mates from the missions they'd run in Afghanistan and Africa, because he reckoned a few days drinking the local beer and eyeing up the girls would be good for him. He hadn't counted on getting mixed up in a full-scale turf war between rival gangs.

That was the last kind of trouble he needed.

'Speak to the sod, will you?' said Steve, as Ollie took the mobile.

Steve remained completely still. There hadn't been much work to do since they stepped off the plane. Ian's job had been to rig the bay with mines, and Steve and Ollie and Nick were meant to be advising on that, but most of the time was spent sitting around the pool drinking the Panamanian-brewed Balboa Beer and chatting to the señoritas. Ollie in particular had been putting in more work on the beer than the girls; the way Steve saw it, he was still moping after Katie, the fiancée he'd broken up with at the end of the African job. He kicked off with a few beers for breakfast, then got stuck into the local rum around lunchtime, before getting into some serious drinking at night.

It was fine for a holiday, reflected Steve. But this was work. Of the most deadly kind.

'I'll get this sorted,' said Ollie, taking the mobile and pressing it to his ear.

Steve flinched. Outside he could hear the rattle of gunfire, but he could no longer keep track of who was shooting who.

A fly had landed on the side of his cheek. There was a deep cut where a nail from the beam had snagged his skin, and the creature was feasting on the blood that had seeped to the surface. There was a nasty stinging where it had clawed into his cheek. But there was nothing Steve could do about it. His right arm was pinned down by the fallen debris, and he could only move his left a few inches. And anyway, any kind of movement risked triggering the bomb.

'Sod it,' he muttered under his breath. Just get me out of here, and I'm packing in this lark for good.

The hotel had come under heavy bombardment at dusk. RPG rounds had pounded into the building. At first, they'd had no idea where the shots had come from, then it was clear that a couple of motor cruisers had pulled up in the bay and were putting some heavy-duty firepower straight into the building. Steve had rushed inside to rescue Midiala, the waitress he'd been knocking around with for the last couple of days. But as they'd tried to escape from the first floor, a shell had blasted the ceiling, bringing the beam down on Steve. And it just happened to be one that they'd already rigged up with a booby-trap bomb to protect the building in case of attack.

Just my sodding luck, thought Steve. And this drunk is the only bastard that can help.

Ollie burped twice, wiped a film of sweat from his forehead and put the phone down. He was approaching the beam. He paused, then steadied himself before leaning forward. Steve took a deep breath. The bomb had a simple battery-powered detonator, designed to explode when the wires were tripped. It hadn't been fully rigged yet, because they weren't expecting an attack this soon. Even so, it was a miracle it hadn't blown

when the beam came down; the chances were it would blow if they tried to shift it.

With one hand, Ollie flicked away a layer of broken plaster, and with the other he lifted the top from the device. The P4 was packed into a plastic container. The plan had been to lure any attackers into the old hotel, then blow them to pieces from a safe distance. But like most military plans, reflected Steve, it was a balls-up before it even started.

'OK, I see the wires,' said Ollie, putting the phone back to his ear.

'What colours are they?' snapped Steve.

Ollie looked down. 'No back-seat driving,' he said. 'Either I'm doing this or I'm not.'

He cupped the phone closer to his ear. Steve could hear talking but couldn't make out the words. He could feel his heart thumping in his chest. With time in the Regiment behind him, and then five years working as a fixer for Dudley Emergency Forces, he'd put his life on the line dozens of times. He'd been on two jobs with Ollie and together the two men had faced hundreds of rounds of bullets without Steve really worrying that any had his name on them.

But right now, he could feel death's damp, clingy embrace.

'OK, cheers, mate,' said Ollie to Ian, putting away the phone.

He leant forward. His hands were shaking slightly. With a knife in his right hand.

'You know what you're doing?' asked Steve.

'We reckon it's the right wire.'

'Which colour?'

'It's not a plug from B&Q,' snorted Ollie. 'There aren't any bloody colours.'

Steve felt another bead of sweat roll down his back. The right wire, he thought to himself. All Ian is doing is telling him left and right and to cut one of them. I haven't got any more than a fifty-fifty chance of surviving this.

And neither does Ollie.

Ollie steadied himself, and slipped the knife into the box. He paused. Then he looked down at Steve. 'I just wanted to say thanks, mate,' said Ollie. 'I mean, there have been some good times.'

Good times, thought Steve. He'd fished Ollie out of a brothel in Baghdad to sign him up for a mission in Afghanistan on which one of his best mates had died. He'd broken him out of jail in Africa before they'd headed off to assassinate Batota's President. A laugh wasn't exactly the way Steve would have chosen to describe it. Still, for the last two years, their lives had been intertwined, twisted together like the threads in a rope. It had never occurred to him that he might have to say goodbye.

'Let's just sodding do it,' growled Steve.

Ollie leant forward. His finger was on the knife.

'Shit,' he muttered.

Steve looked into his eyes. He could see the fear there, like a pale, ghostly shadow.

'You can piss off if you want to,' he said. 'I mean, there's not much point in both of us dying.'

Ollie shook his head. 'We're like brothers, old fruit . . .'

Steve permitted himself a brief, tight smile. He had a brother already. A guy who lived close to his mum and dad in Bromley and commuted to work at a bank every day and washed the car and looked after the kids at the weekend. But that was just blood. With Ollie, along with the rest of the

blokes in his unit, it was something different.

'In arms . . .' muttered Steve, drawing a long, deep breath of the humid, salty air that he sensed could well be his last.

Ollie steadied his wrist and flicked it forwards. There was a short, snapping sound as the wire was severed.

Then silence. You couldn't even hear either man breathe.

The building shook. Another RPG round had smashed into the second floor of the building, detonating with a brutal thud, shaking up a fresh layer of plaster that dropped down on to Steve like snow. Out on the beach, they could hear the rattle of machine-gun fire, and the sound of a hand grenade exploding.

But it was impossible to tell how many men were taking part in the scrap. Or who was gaining the upper hand.

'Lift the fucking beam,' yelled Steve. His voice was raw and harsh, shot through with the shattered emotion of a man who knew he had just survived death by the narrowest of margins.

'There's another wire to cut,' said Ollie bluntly. He was cradling the mobile in his neck. 'Ian,' he hissed. 'Ian . . . where the bloody hell are you?'

Another RPG round. Another layer of plaster. The stuff was coating Steve with a dusting of debris. Another pair of flies had settled on his cheek.

Ollie looked down at Steve. 'Listen, old fruit, I don't suppose you've got a credit card on you?'

'What do you mean, have I got a sodding credit card?'

Ollie held up the phone apologetically. 'Out of credit. Unbloody-believable the amount Vodafone charge you for calls from abroad. I put twenty quid on already this week.'

Steve rolled his eyes. 'Breast pocket,' he snapped.

Ollie looked down.

The beam was lying right across Steve's chest. There was no way they could get the card without moving it. He wiped another bead of sweat off his forehead, and burped again.

'Looks like we're fucked, pal,' he muttered.

'Two wires left?' said Steve.

Ollie nodded.

'You piss off, mate, I'll be allright.'

Ollie shook his head.

'I sodding mean it,' said Steve. 'Get down on to the beach, sort these fuckers out. Then bring Ian back here to dismantle the bomb.'

Ollie took five steps towards the window. The glass had been shattered and was lying in shards across the floor. As he looked out, he could see the two boats dominating the harbour. On the closest vessel, a man was on deck, putting RPG rounds into the building, but five more men had landed ashore in an inflatable dinghy and were advancing steadily towards the building.

Each of them was carrying an AK-47, clearing the way ahead of them. A round of incoming gunfire chipped at the concrete and blasted the glass out of the windows. Ollie ducked, shaking a few shards of glass out of his hair. 'There's no time,' he said.

He ran back towards Steve, and plunged his knife into the box of explosives.

Steve felt something he'd never felt before. Not in the SAS, not as a mercenary. A beat of panic close to his heart. 'Leave it,' he insisted. 'I'll take my chances.'

But Ollie was already holding up a severed piece of wire.

'Too late, old fruit,' he said with a rough, sly grin. 'Job done.'

He leant towards the beam. Ollie was a big man, six feet tall, with jet-black hair, and thick, broad shoulders. He grunted, then spat as he pushed hard on the five-hundred-pound block of wood. It moved a couple of inches. He grunted again, then with a roar he lifted it clear away from Steve's chest, tossing it contemptuously to one side.

He pushed down a hand, grabbed Steve's fist, and yanked him hard upwards.

Steve shook the dust free from his body. There were bruises and cuts running up from his chest to his neck. His sweatshirt was torn down the middle. The muscles in his chest ached and his shoulders rippled with pain. But so far as he could tell, nothing was broken.

Both men rushed towards the window. Two men had stepped into the building, another three were standing guard outside. As they looked down the beach, they could see that Ian and Nick and the rest of the men were pinned down behind a makeshift barricade. They'd piled tyres into a stack, setting fire to them, but another group of men had landed on the beach, advancing steadily towards their position.

Ollie slammed a Brazilian-made Taurus 24/7 pistol into Steve's hand.

'Got a plan?' said Ollie, his voice tense.

'Yeah,' said Steve tersely. 'Regiment rules.'

'You mean run like fuck and shoot anything that moves?'

Steve nodded just once.

They started to advance towards the stairs. Midiala had already escaped out the back of the building, so at least they

had only themselves to take care of. The staircase led up from the reception lobby, curving round in a ninety-degree arc. And as he looked down, Steve could see a single man advancing towards him.

About five foot ten. With curly orange hair, angry brown eyes, and his finger on the trigger of his AK-47, he looked like a mad, aggressive carrot.

Steve raised the Taurus level with his eyes.

The man hadn't seen him yet.

Squeezing the trigger, Steve fired once, then twice. Regiment training. The double tap. One to kill the opponent and one to make absolutely sure he was dead. It was drilled into him, an instinct by now.

The man reeled backwards. The Taurus's 9mm bullet had plenty of punch on it and at fifteen yards its impact was deadly. The first shot split open the man's chest, breaking a pair of ribs, and chewing into his lungs. The second smashed into the side of his face, knocking out most of one cheek before slicing into his brain.

He staggered back, blood seeping up from his mouth, then collapsed on to the floor.

Behind him, a man was shouting. 'Feckin' move, boys, feckin' move . . .'

Steve recognised the accent immediately. In the SAS, he'd done a couple of tours along the cold, damp fields that made up the treacherous border zone between Southern and Northern Ireland.

An Ulsterman? What the hell were those mad bastards doing out in Avila?

There was no time to worry about it now. He was the enemy, that was all that counted.

Steve started to run down the stairs, kicking aside the dead man.

The lobby looked straight out on to the beach. The glass doors had already been shattered, and the wall had been hit by a shell, so that the back door was blocked off. They could escape through the restaurant. Or else they could go straight through the front door.

Two men were firing into the lobby from the beach. Two more had gone round to the restaurant.

'Let's take the bastards,' said Steve.

Ollie nodded.

Cautiously, they started to advance through the lobby, their guns raised.

Steve looked towards Ollie. 'Shall we just forget anything we said in there, mate?' he said tersely. 'I mean, you're still a wanker.'

Ollie nodded, then grinned. 'And I should have left you to die.'