

**BILLY  
BILLINGHAM  
AND CONOR  
WOODMAN**

**CALL TO  
KILL**



HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

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## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

I'm guilty of screaming at the TV sometimes. Especially if I'm watching a movie or a show about special forces operations which gets the operational details wrong. And it annoys me when writers describe procedures and drills in ways that real soldiers simply do not operate.

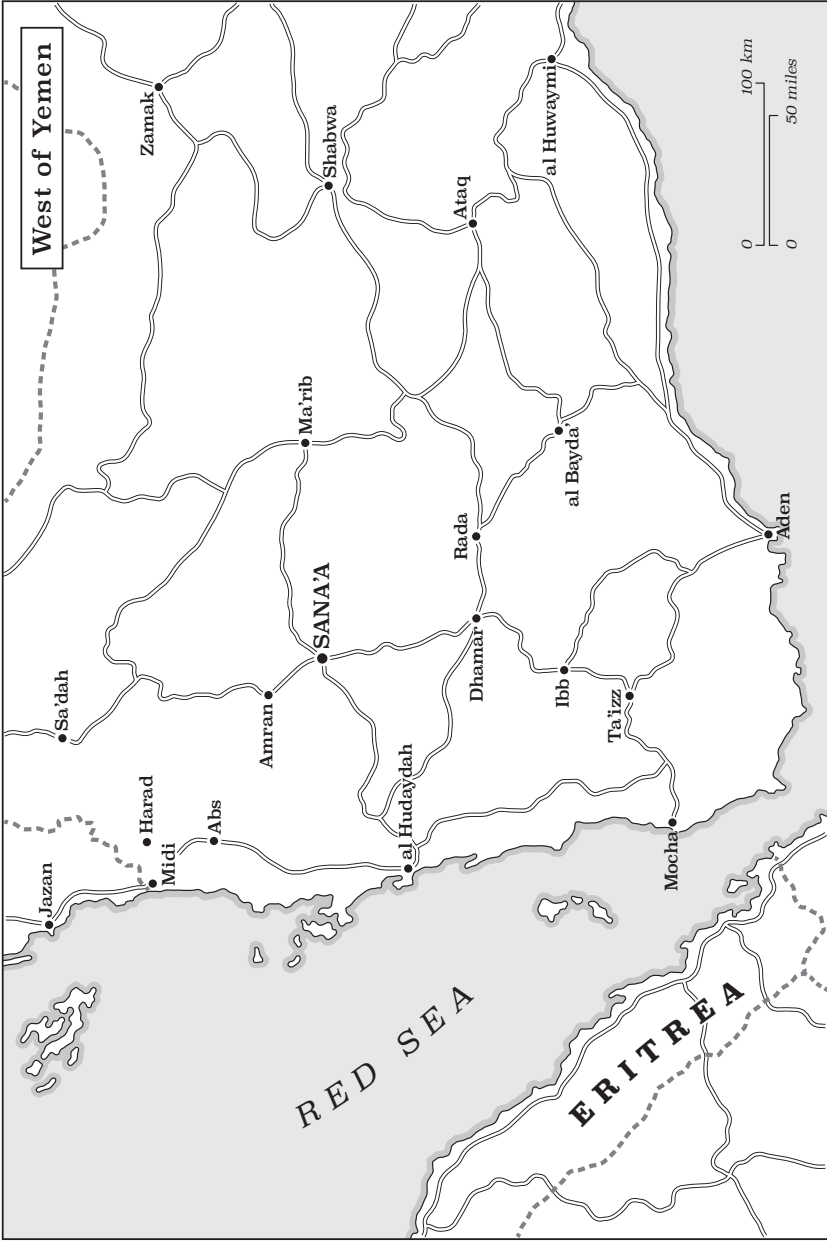
I wanted to write a book that tells it like it really is. I've acquired a unique range of experiences during my time in the British Forces, and I hope the many thousands of readers of my autobiography and people who've come to my sold-out shows can attest, I can tell a story that is packed with action and suspense but still gets those important details right.

The career that I've been lucky enough to experience enables me to bring an authenticity to my fiction that I believe readers will truly appreciate. For although Matt Mason is a fictional character, many of the things that he does are things that I've direct experience of myself.

MARK 'BILLY' BILLINGHAM, MBE

*Always a little further*





## PROLOGUE

Eli Drake's driver drove out of the mosque the same way that they had come in: past the guards, past the souk and out on to the highway that circled back to his hotel. While his translator, Karoush, and the driver chatted among themselves in Arabic, Eli sat quietly in the back and reflected on how his meeting with Imam Hari, a seventy-five-year-old revered Shia scholar, had gone. Pretty well, considering their differences. The two grey-bearded clergymen had happily discussed a range of theological issues, and the Imam had listened attentively while Eli explained the purpose of his own organisation, The Christian Apostles, in Arabia. Eli smiled, satisfied with his day's work, as the car passed a group of young men playing football on a dusty patch of ground by the side of the road.

The first thing out of the ordinary that Eli noticed was when two vehicles coming towards them, a minivan and a white Mercedes, veered into the middle of the street and stopped, forcing his driver to slam on the brakes to avoid a collision. Four men leapt out and strode purposefully towards Eli's car. Three of the men were dressed in Western

clothes, their beards cut short, each brandishing an automatic rifle. The fourth man was older, his beard longer, wearing traditional robes tucked under a suit jacket and carrying a pistol.

The largest of the men wrenched open the front door and began screaming in Arabic at Karoush, while another came round the far side and pulled the driver out by his hair. Karoush stepped out with his hands raised, begging the men to be calm, while Eli watched, helpless, terrified. What was happening?

The older man with the pistol opened Eli's door, and in heavily accented English instructed him to get out, pointing his gun to make clear it was non-negotiable. No sooner had Eli's feet touched the ground than the last man appeared and roughly grabbed hold of him. Eli thought that he seemed nervous, while the older man was calmer, more confident, shouting what sounded like instructions to the others.

Suddenly Eli's head was shoved down hard on to the bonnet and he felt a sharp pain as the heat of the metal burned his cheek. He saw Karoush and the driver shuffle into his view, noting that their hands had been tied behind their backs. One of the gunmen stood behind them and forced them down on to their knees. Eli wanted to look away but his head was held down too tightly to move. Instinctively, he began to pray, but the words dried up in his throat when he saw the man in charge appear behind Karoush and raise his pistol. Eli watched as a single bullet exploded through the back of Karoush's head, showering Eli's face in blood

and pieces of flesh. Eli closed his eyes. He wished that he'd closed them sooner. He heard four more shots. Two and then two more. He was sure of that.

The man wrenched Eli to his feet and shoved him into the back of the Mercedes. Someone covered his head with a cloth bag and the car pulled away, following behind the minivan.

The whole thing had taken less than thirty seconds.



# ONE

## *Sana'a, Yemen*

Matt Mason had grown used to that sound. Allahu Akbaaaaaaarrrrr. Even the early morning call didn't grate as much as it had when he'd first encountered it. Instead, now he felt almost becalmed by the rhythm of it. Five times a day, every day, there it was; no matter where he found himself, he heard it. Sometimes it was sung in lyrical tones from a rooftop, others simply screamed out of a poor-quality tannoy, but it was reliable. It gave his days structure. It was as dependable as the bells of Hereford Cathedral.

He thought about religion a lot when he had time to think, which in the Regiment was either a lot or not at all. The Regiment had a way of leaving you to sit around twiddling your thumbs for long periods of time, or taking over your every waking minute until you could hardly remember your own name. After twelve years of it, he knew one thing; he'd seen more terrible shit done in the name of religion than anyone should ever have to think about. Not that he was particularly set on any faith; far from it. In fact, the last time he'd been in a church

he'd been a teenager. It was the day he'd married Kerry in the Protestant All Saints Parish Church, to keep her family happy, even if it broke his own mother's Catholic heart. He'd never make that mistake now, he'd never put anyone else before his own flesh and blood.

Now Mason was in Yemen. The reasons for him being there echoed with the reasons he had been sent on every other mission. It wasn't that he didn't care about them, it was that caring wasn't a priority. The Regiment said he needed to be there, so that's where he went. Before Yemen it was Syria, and before that, Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan. It seemed there was no end of shitholes in the Islamic Middle East that the Regiment needed SSgt Matthew Henry Mason to be in.

When he had been a sixteen-year-old cadet, two soldiers from 3 PARA had come to talk to the young lads about Northern Ireland and Catholics and Protestants, and all the politics of it, why it was vital for the British Army to be over there, blah, blah, blah. He'd been bored by it, dozed off for a while until one of the soldiers started talking about a fire-fight at a roadblock in Belfast where his mate had got shot. What struck Mason even then was that he knew if it had been him he wouldn't have got shot, and neither would a lad on his watch. He wouldn't have fucked up like whoever ran that checkpoint must have. He felt it then and he stood by it now. He knew that day that he had to be a soldier, be the best, prove himself, show everyone what he was capable of.

So it was that he was sitting, eighteen years later, in Yemen, in a bare concrete room, with seven other stinking

men. The stench of their shit and piss oozed under the door from the latrine outside, filling the air and Mason's nostrils, while he listened to another call to prayer and waited for another order. He lay back on his camp bed, pushing the tatty mosquito net to one side while he lit a cigarette. He picked a loose piece of tobacco from his bottom lip and watched the smoke hang for a moment before it scattered under the draw of the broken ceiling fan spinning above. He chuckled at how pointless that fan was, when already the temperature outside was nearly thirty degrees. He wondered whether this was what he wanted any more or if he'd really ever wanted it in the first place.

What else would he do if he weren't a soldier? He'd never known anything but how to fight and survive. He'd beaten a grown man half to death when he was nine years old, which wasn't the last time he'd been in trouble either. Without a doubt, the army had saved him from an alternative life spent behind bars. Five years in 3 PARA were followed by twelve and counting in the Regiment. The army had given him a career; a status as a special forces soldier, decorated by Her Majesty the Queen no less, for valour and some other bollocks he couldn't remember.

Mason thought about the day at the Palace when the Queen had pinned a medal on his uniform, probably the last time his now straggly dark locks had been cut, long before he'd let his stubble become a permanent fixture on his chin. The medal was now in a wooden box under the bed where his wife was fast asleep back in Hereford. He thought about how she must still be expecting his

imminent return, even though last week he'd put in a request to delay his leave. He hoped that prick, Captain Peter Hopkins, would sign it off and keep Mason there for another month. With any luck, he would hear another one hundred and fifty-five calls to prayer before he had to face Kerry and the kids again.

The muezzin fell silent and Mason could hear the men sleeping, snoring and farting next to him again. Outside the glassless window, behind the shutters broken by the recent sandstorms, he was aware that the city was starting to wake. Cars beeping, even before dawn, was another sure sign that you were in an Arabian city.

The squad had been placed in an old police station on the edge of Sana'a, the capital of another country where civil war seemed to quietly rumble on while the rest of the world worried about Trump, Brexit and pandemic paranoia. Officially, the SAS weren't here of course, just like they hadn't been in Syria or Libya, because being in those places would be counter to British government foreign policy and would probably break a million UN conventions, but since when had any of that bothered the Regiment? Mason had spent most of his career in places where he never officially was. His whole professional life was deniable.

Before Mason left Hereford last month, he'd been briefed on the current situation in Yemen; a classic one country, two presidents type sketch. In theory it was an internal conflict, but in reality the Saudis were fighting hard for the old guard, while their sworn enemies in Iran backed a rebel alliance known as the Houthis. Now you had a classic proxy

war, two belligerent countries settling their differences in a third, where the place had gone to shit, and famine and cholera were everywhere.

Mason unpicked a small photograph tacked to his wall and looked at the face on it closely, the long grey hair and beard, the piercing blue eyes. Eli Drake, a priest from Norwich, was fifty years old and had been in Yemen since 2018, spreading the word of God. As if this country needed any more of that. Drake had been doing the wrong thing in the wrong place at the wrong time when the Houthis had lifted him. He'd been missing now for three months but new intel put him in Sana'a, at a Houthi-held compound, four miles north. The fly in the ointment was that their source believed Drake's execution was imminent, so London had decided now was the time to go and get him. Even though the fucker left clear instructions before he left Norwich about not wanting blood spilled on his behalf. Mason sighed. He hated civilian rescues; they were always complicated.

He slid Drake's photo into the clear plastic wallet strapped to his arm. In a rescue situation it was paramount that the hostage was immediately recognisable as the guy you didn't want to shoot. Mason had another wallet reserved for the ones he did. Next to Drake's picture were photos of the Houthis and Iranians thought to be behind his capture. The hierarchy of bastards was similar to what he'd encountered in Kabul and Baghdad, a mixture of ex-Al-Qaeda, ISIL mercenaries and former Islamic Revolutionary Guards, many released from Sana'a's prisons as soon as the Houthis took over. Mason looked closely at one picture in particular,

a poor-quality, long-range photo of Tango Seven, the mastermind behind Drake's kidnap, an Iranian general called Ruak Shahlai. The Americans had tried to assassinate him numerous times but Shahlai apparently wasn't ready to die. Mason smiled. Respect was due to anyone who could stay alive when the Yanks wanted you dead.

A new smell wafted into the air, fried meat with onions and something spicy. Mason took a full breath, sucking it deep into his lungs; it beat the stink of the latrine. In the bunk next to him, one of the newest lads to the squad, Andy Foster, began to stir. Andy wasn't a bad lad: Scouser, a bit cocky with it, but he had potential if he learned to shut up sometimes. Andy's shifting woke Mad Jack on the other side of him and Mason sat back and sighed again. Here we go, he thought, they'll all be awake now.

He looked down at Andy's kit laid neatly next to his bed. A special forces soldier's weapon is the thing that tells you all you need to know about him. The green army has strict rules about what kit you use, but in the Regiment nobody cares as long as you use it right. The new kid's rifle was already painted with desert cammo. In the army slang of the new boys, it was all 'Gucci this' and 'Ally that'. Andy had his gun pimped with a laser sight and two magazines strapped either side, one upside down so he could reload without pausing to flip. Mason looked along the row of beds and smiled at Mad Jack's weapon in comparison. No scrim, no paint, no laser, no magazines. The old sweat needed none of that shite. He was fast enough to load a magazine in his sleep if he needed to. Jack didn't wear body armour or

elbow pads or chest rigs either, preferring, like Mason, to just wear the army green; spare ammo tucked into a simple webbing, trusting his instincts to keep him alive. Jack was the best demolitions or ‘dems’ specialist Mace had ever met. Give Jack a rifle and something to blow the arse out of and he’d be happy, probably smoke a rollie while he did it.

Mad Jack and Mason had fought alongside each other for most of his years in the Regiment. They were both West Midlands boys, grew up a few miles from each other and knew a lot of the same faces from the pubs of Walsall and West Bromwich. Compared to Mad Jack, Matt Mason was a saint. Jack was a naughty little fat bastard with a dodgy, porn-star moustache and scruffy long hair. If you saw him in Hereford Tesco’s carpark, you’d probably give him a quid for a cup of tea before you ever suspected he was Regiment. People often made the mistake of thinking SAS guys must all be six foot four and built like brick shit-houses, but the truth was they came in all shapes and sizes. It was what you had inside that counted. Mason himself had always been the skinniest guy in the squad. As a lad he’d boxed in the flyweights and even now at nearly thirty-six there still wasn’t much to him. Not that any of that mattered, because he knew that every man in that room, Jack, Andy Foster, Briggsy, Pom, Jonny Elves, even Craig Bell, every one of them was a machine, capable of the most incredible things, from stripping a Land Rover and putting it back together blindfolded to throwing an injured man over his shoulder and running him out of deep jungle to save his life. These were the finest of men and the best of soldiers anywhere in the world.

Someone let out a fart that sounded like a dying duck. A ripple of laughter followed it around the room.

‘You dirty bastard,’ someone said.

‘Wasn’t me,’ said Andy. ‘It was Hopkins.’

‘Too meaty for a Rupert,’ said Mason, sad that the delicious smell of fried onions had once again been replaced by a foul stench. He had no love for his superior officer, Captain Peter Hopkins, a typical young Rupert, green and cocksure and a near constant pain in Mason’s arse. These young officers were rare in the Regiment but the ones that made it through were pretty much all the same: fancy boys with lots of education but no idea how proper soldiers fought. Nobody learns how to fight at Oxford, and qualifications won’t save you when you come face to face with Jihadi Bob and his AK-47. It takes a few years in the Regiment to teach them that.

‘Morning gents.’ Right on cue, Peter Hopkins’ voice was suddenly audible, sucking the life out of what little air there was in the room. ‘Task on. Mace, are we ready?’

‘Of course we’re fucking ready.’

Everyone in the room was already up on their feet. Next to each man’s bed was a grab bag filled with grenades, ammunition, food and a radio with spare batteries. Next to that was whatever body armour, helmet, night-vision goggles, gloves or shotgun they chose to roll with. Some of the men had gas grenades or extra hand grenades. Andy Foster was strapping on his elbow pads as Mason tightened the belt of his second pistol, at the same time checking that he had his map and GPS.



‘Wheels up in five.’ Mason said it calmly, making sure everyone in the room had heard.

He turned back to Peter Hopkins. The straight-backed officer, his mousey hair parted neatly to one side, stood watching them all while visibly twitching. Ruperts usually shat the bed when they knew there was action in the air. Most of them never got a chance to carry a gun or actually kick some doors in. A Rupert might be senior to the staff sergeant on paper, but in reality it was always the staff who ran the task, which was why Mason usually chose not to take them at all. They were best left back in Hereford or liaising with the ambassador in the embassy, doing the Ruperty bullshit educated talk that they all enjoyed. But Hopkins had some potential, so Mason had already decided he could come along on this task.

They were minutes away from engaging with whatever force the Houthis had assigned to guard Eli Drake. Mason’s experience suggested they were likely to meet with resistance, so it would be good for Hopkins to get a taste. There’d also be a ton of paperwork to file, which Mason could then pass on to the Rupert.

‘You’d better get your kit,’ said Mason.

Hopkins snapped to action, running back out to do exactly as the Staff had instructed him. Meanwhile, Mason slung his rifle over his shoulder and scanned to make sure everyone was ready.

‘What are those grenades hanging off your body armour, Andy? Get ‘em in your pouch now or I’ll shove ‘em so far up your arse, they’ll blow your fucking tongue off.’

‘Oh come on, Mace, they look ally there, man.’

‘No, they look like you’ve never been on an op before.’  
He glanced at his watch before he took a breath and nodded to Jack. ‘Dems good, mate?’

‘We’re all good, Mace.’

‘Right, let’s fucking do this.’