

# Prologue

## *THE TUNNEL*

*Timeline: 12 December, 2013 – Homs, Syria*

It was barely sunrise when the day's barrage began. Light pulsed in the dull sky beyond the collapsed apartment block next door. The deep thud of incoming arrived a split-second later.

The floor shook. James Royce didn't even flinch. 'Fuckers,' he mouthed silently. It had become clear that the free media was now considered fair game.

Although indoors, he and Jo Brampton were both fully dressed, already wearing jeans, NATO helmets and blue PRESS flak vests. Government snipers were in the neighbourhood, lurking on the few remaining rooftops, just waiting to get lucky.

Brampton's curly black hair was up in a bun as she dictated into the satellite telephone. '...Only in the Old City and here in Khalidiya are the rebels still holding out. We're under constant bombardment and airstrikes from Assad government forces.'

'End it, Jo. Their drones must have got our co-ordinates off your phone –'

In confirmation the neighbouring apartment block disappeared under a triple impact of shells, hidden in a billowing burst of choking brick-dust. Particles of it blasted in, with displaced cold air, through

the glassless windows of the room. The ear-shattering explosions were followed by a gentle pitter-patter like rain.

Her minder grabbed Brampton by the sleeve of her fleece. 'Fuck me, Royce! What d'you think..!'

The sat-phone spun free from her hands.

He hauled her from her seat in front of the kitchen table and dragged her to the door. Without ceremony, he pushed her out to the hallway and into the space beneath the wooden staircase that led up from the basement. It was the safest place in a place where there was no safe place.

He threw himself on top of her, pressing himself hard against her. In the confined space, her body smelled of stale perspiration and her breath of coffee and Sobranie cigarettes.

That's when the guns of the Syrian Republican Guards 154th Artillery Regiment hit their target. With co-ordinates adjusted by an observing gunner with binoculars, three howitzer shells arrived, one after the other. In such quick succession, the hits almost sounded simultaneous. They took the roof off and created a chasm that split the building in two as if with a giant meat cleaver.

It was probably that effect that saved the lives of the frontline reporter from the *Sunday News* redtop and her former Royal Marine SBS bodyguard. The rubble of the three-storey collapsed either side of the wooden staircase, leaving it standing bizarrely like a proud finger of defiance against President Bashar al-Assad.

Very, very slowly the choking, stringent miasma of brick dust and gunpowder wafted away to reveal the street of flattened houses. Telephone wires hung like tangled spaghetti, trying hopelessly to keep the buildings linked together. Small fires burned fitfully or smouldered sullenly in the endless carpet of rubble.

It seemed stunningly silent for a moment until another volley of artillery struck with muted violence, the sheer power of it shifting eddies of dust and smoke back in another direction. That's when Royce and Brampton realised they'd been partially deafened in the strike.

‘A rolling barrage,’ Royce observed, hardly able to hear his own voice. His ears hurt.

Brampton pushed him to one side to see out of the cave beneath the lone staircase. ‘Thank God. Must have my lucky knickers on.’

Royce twisted round so that they could both turn to sit and watch as the rolling carpet of explosions continued receding across the wrecked townscape of Khalidya. Eventually it fell silent. Amazingly, people began to emerge from the carnage, again, like they emerged every day after the bombing. Zombies after the apocalypse, Brampton thought, making a mental note to use that in her next piece for the paper. How the hell did they survive, day in day out, week in week out, for months on end? No heating, no food and no water from broken pipes. In the far distance two toddlers appeared, a boy and a girl. They held hands as they scoured the debris, then disappeared from view. Nearer, a scraggy dog scavenged, pulling at something ferociously. It was a buried human arm.

Royce picked up a half brick and threw it at the dog. The animal ran off but the arm remained protruding, the fingers stiff and permanently clawed in a lifeless plea for help that never came.

Brampton stood up and looked around. ‘Everything’s gone. My sat-phone. All my stuff.’ The basement was under three collapsed floors.

‘You’re still here. That’s what matters.’

She scowled at him. ‘Lucky I’m wearing my fleece. And my boots.’

‘You can have my windproof,’ he offered, indicating his neatly-packed bergen and other personal kit stored in the far corner of the stair cave.

His stockless MP5K “Kurtz” was propped against the remaining segment of under-stair wall, ready for use.

‘Smug bastard,’ she said, almost smiling, but the humour didn’t quite reach her smoky brown eyes.

‘I did suggest you store your stuff there, too,’ he reminded.

She ignored that and took a pack of Sobranie blacks from the pocket of her fleece. Lighting one, she stared out across the decimated

blocks of crushed housing. A few old women and couples were picking through the debris, she could see no younger men. The badly bruised sky seemed lower and the temperature had dropped. She suddenly realised that even the distant shelling had finally stopped. 'Guess I'm finished here. I can't do any more without the link.'

'Time to go,' Royce agreed.

A figure emerged through the drifting wafts of smoke and dust. He was wearing bizarrely-patterned DPM combat trousers, a civilian anorak and a *shemagh* worn as a scarf, the outfit completed with a woollen beanie and an AK47 carried loosely in his right hand.

Antar Tarek was with the Free Syrian Army brigade, rebels who were spawned from defected government army officers. Those men tended to be majority Sunni Muslims rather than the ruling minority Shi'ite Alawites tribe, which had ruled the country for generations. The rebels were funded, armed and encouraged by the American CIA to overthrow President Assad, whose dynasty had been supported by the Russians since the Soviet era, because it gifted them a much-needed port in the Mediterranean. The United States had seen the so-called "Arab Spring" as an opportunity to rid itself of another hostile regime in the region. It backed the insurrection with arms and money.

The smile within Tarek's straggly mass of youthful beard was genuine. 'I pleased! We are convinced you are dead. *Allahu akbur*. He loves you, for sure.'

'I'm finished here,' Brampton said. 'I wanted to visit the hospital again, but—'

Tarek shook his head. 'It best you go. I understand. Assad wants you dead, I am sure. Best you go today.'

Royce said, 'We need an exit plan.'

'Come with me, we talk.' He looked at Brampton closely for a moment, taking in the drawn face, the glossy raven ringlets now dulled and gritty with the dirt of war. 'You eat today?' he asked.

Brampton shook her head. 'Coffee and a smoke.' She threw away her cigarette butt.

‘They will kill you,’ Tarek said.

She fixed him with a stare. ‘Really?’ A smile played on her lips, the dimples in her cheeks deepening a fraction.

Royce shouldered his bergen, picked up their blue NATO-style helmets and handed her his jacket. ‘Let’s go.’

They stumbled over the rubble, following Tarek into an alleyway that ran behind a row of roofless and windowless buildings that were, at least, still standing.

‘I also plan to leave this town soon,’ Tarek said.

‘I guess there’s not much to stay for,’ Brampton replied.

‘My fiancée in refugee camp on Turkish border. We are married next month.’

‘How lovely! I wish you all the luck in the world.’

‘Thank you. I think we will not come back to Syria.’

After a few minutes they found themselves in an open courtyard that offered some shelter from the nagging wind. Incongruously, padded armchairs and settees of assorted colours and patterns had been drawn up around a metal dustbin brazier in the walled garden. Senior rebel commanders sat relaxed, smoking and drinking from cans of fruit juice. They studied the cooking pot that hung over a smouldering fire. Mesmerised, no doubt, wishing that they were anywhere else in the world than where they were. The sky had become lower and darker. Sleety snow was in the air like flecks of dandruff.

Royce and Brampton sat together on a smart carved wood and leather sofa that had been sacrificed to the elements over time. A woman wearing combat fatigues and a black *hijab* put a pile of tin plates on an upturned plastic milk crate and began serving the contents of the pot.

In Arabic custom, she ladled the contents of meat and vegetables to their guests first, Royce and then Brampton. Another rebel handed out forks and spoons.

‘Smells delicious,’ Brampton said. ‘What is it?’

‘Don’t ask,’ Royce advised.

‘Just chicken stew,’ Tarek said.

Royce got stuck in, enjoying the typical tasty Arabic spices.

Brampton peered closely at her plate, puzzled. With her thumb and forefinger, she drew out the long, worm-like tail. ‘Oh, shit.’

‘What’s the plan?’ Royce asked quickly, diverting the attention of the rebel hierarchy.

Tarek introduced three of the Syrian fighters. Royce recognised a couple of them as titled government officers, now in the Free Syrian Army.

‘And this is Isiah,’ he introduced the fourth man, a clean-shaven black man dressed in well-pressed, top-of-the-range designer adventure wear. ‘From the American Consulate in Adana.’

Isiah glowered as he accepted two spoonfuls of chicken stew on his plate. ‘Why don’t y’ just tell him ma inside leg measurement as well?’ he growled.

Tarek flinched. ‘Sorry.’

Royce tried the soup, pretending not to have heard. He realised Isiah was CIA. If it was a secret that America was backing, arming and encouraging the so-called Free Syrian Army, it was the worst-kept secret on the planet. The man was obviously Special Activities Division. Either their Special Operations group for deniable black ops – or else the Political Action Group, which interfered with other countries’ politics when it suited them. The difference between the two confused Royce, and he suspected it confused the Americans themselves, as often as not.

‘Civilian consultant to the Defense Attaché,’ Isiah clarified.

‘So, is that Special Ops or Political Action?’ Brampton pressed.

Isiah mumbled, ‘I advise on refugee aid and stuff.’

Brampton smiled. ‘Well, at least I’m clear on that.’ She leaned forward. ‘And how many of you are there?’

‘Just me.’

Lying bastard, Royce thought silently. A gleaming latest M4 upgrade was propped against his chair.

‘Miss Brampton is a journalist.’ Tarek said. ‘Works for a popular London newspaper, the *Sunday News*.’

Isiah shrugged. ‘Never heard of it.’

Brampton hid her irritation. ‘So can you confirm to me a couple of things?’

‘Like what?’

‘US policy.’

Isiah looked uncertain. ‘I ain’t no politician.’

‘Most Middle East countries are run by dictators or tribal despots, right?’ She smiled sweetly. ‘Most aren’t particularly nice people.’

‘President Assad is one particularly vile sonofabitch,’ Isiah drawled.

‘So, America funding and arming an insurrection here is nothing to do with the fact it wants a friendly government in place?’ Brampton asked. ‘In order US companies can run a fuel pipeline it desperately needs across Syria from the Med to the Gulf of Arabia?’

Isiah waved his hand dismissively. ‘Hey, lady, that kind of info is way above my pay-grade.’

She added, ‘And thereby also denying Russia its treasured direct access to the Mediterranean? Isn’t that an extra prize the Pentagon would like?’

Isiah glared. ‘You trying to milk me, lady?’

Royce had been impressed with her story-digging on this mission, finding out what was really going on. But now was not the time to antagonise the Americans, especially when they might be in a position to assist their escape.

‘Can we get back the way we came in from Lebanon?’ he asked. He meant hitching a lift with a non-government aid agency convoy.

Tarek shook his head. ‘All routes now sealed off by Assad army. North and west. No roads open between here and Lebanese border. No water, no food for us anymore.’

Royce smiled at Isiah. ‘I guess your guys still get in and out?’

Isiah’s face was poker-straight, but his eyes were relishing the moment. ‘Sorry, buddy, our rat lines are full to capacity.’

‘There is a way,’ Tarek said. ‘You can take a street drain out of Homs.’ He wrinkled his nose. ‘Not nice, but better than dodging the sniper. Or the big guns.’

Brampton frowned. ‘Isn’t that how Paul got out? Marie Colvyn’s photographer.’ The incredible story of his escape from Homs earlier that year, after she’d been deliberately targeted and murdered by Syrian government artillery, had galvanised the whole media industry back in London and around the world.

‘I thought the drain collapsed?’ Royce said. ‘Under artillery fire.’

Tarek pulled a face. ‘We have more than one storm drain. And we repaired it.’

One of the other Syrian fighters said, ‘If we can get you to suburbs, outside siege, you will go across country to Lebanon, I think. Follow the Orontes River to the Beqaa Valley.’

‘Dress like peasants,’ Tarek added. ‘We give you goat on rope. You walk. Man and wife with goat is going nowhere far. You have no problem.’

Isiah listened, bemused. ‘That’s you sorted.’ He couldn’t hide the smirk on his face.

And sorted they were. With their exceptionally tasty yet inedible meals discarded, Tarek led them through a labyrinthine route down rubble-strewn streets and alleys on foot for a couple of miles. The bomb damage was so vast and complete that it was sometimes impossible to use any type of vehicle. Tarek had a short-range walkie-talkie radio and used it to communicate with fellow fighters of the FSA on the perimeter of the neighbourhood.

It must have been lunch-break over when the artillery kicked off again. The Syrian gunners’ first task, it seemed, was to take out the solitary staircase that stood poking like a rude finger at President Assad. When the smoke cleared, it was gone.

Thankfully they had reached a roadside culvert, where half a dozen FSA fighters were waiting for them, huddled in the ditch against the thickening fall of sleet or fine snow that was beginning to settle.



Next to them was a slightly odd-looking, dwarf motor-cycle with a pillion seat. Some mechanic had bastardised it, modifying and shortening its front fork and the rear suspension and chassis to take smaller wheels. The reason became obvious. They were standing beside the gaping mouth of a storm drain that was no more than five feet in diameter.

Brampton took one last look at the decimated town that had been home for the past few days. The thickening coat of winter white was the kindest thing nature could do for this ravaged moonscape of civilisation, she thought savagely.

Despite her obvious resistance, Tarek took Brampton's arm. He courteously insisted on helping her down the fifteen-foot slope. Meanwhile Royce slipped and slid after her, unaided.

The men, scruffy and unshaven, nodded politely at the journalist as she regarded the motorcycle. 'That's something else,' she remarked, a smile on her face. 'Started life as a Yamaha?'

'We convert. Very difficult,' one of the fighters said.

'I bet.'

Tarek looked at Brampton. 'I remember you tell me you ride motorcycle?' he asked.

'A right little Hells Angel,' Royce said.

Tarek didn't get the joke.

'We both ride,' Royce confirmed. 'I think I'll ride shotgun.'

Brampton raised an eyebrow. 'Will you now? *Let* me drive it?'

Royce allowed himself a smile. 'I seem to remember I shoot straighter.' They both understood their private joke. In their distant past he had once failed her on an army test for closing her eyes whenever she pulled the trigger.

'You'll also need to carry your bergen,' she pointed out.

Tarek indicated their NATO-style helmets. 'You must keep them on,' he advised. 'Sewer floor is slippery and uneven. Roof low also.'

Brampton looked apprehensive. 'Suddenly I wish I wasn't so tall.'

'You'll be fine,' Royce assured, with more confidence than he felt.

She swung her leg over the bike, like mounting a miniature pony rather than a horse.

Just then an artillery shell landed some hundred metres away. Displaced air and debris reached them. Royce turned in surprise, looking in the direction where he knew the Syrian Army guns were sited. Light glinted momentarily somewhere on a distant rooftop. It was too far away to be sure, but he wondered if it was an artillery spotter, the reflection off a pair of binoculars? Had the man seen the cluster of men around the storm drain? The Syrians would have access to architects' maps and plans of the city layout, its gas, electric and water supplies, its sewers and drainage systems. Shit!

Royce climbed quickly onto the bike behind Brampton, checking the weight and balance of his bergen, tightening the straps to pull it closer to his back. He'd attached the MPK to its side, instead carrying his 9mm Czech CZ85 automatic handgun, unholstered in case it was needed.

Another artillery round landed. Only fifty metres this time, louder. Closing in. Mud and brick debris scattered all around them; the fighters ducked and hunkered down in the drain entrance.

The feisty little motorcycle barked into life and the headlight sprang on. Brampton revved it up, felt the power.

'Not too fast,' Tarek warned. 'Much slippery. Or you break your neck on low roof. Our people know you come, meet you other end.'

Brampton looked at him, trying to understand what he said above the raucous engine noise and another artillery round. 'How long's the tunnel?'

'About five kilometres!' Tarek shouted. 'Our men know you come! Meet you there!'

Royce was afraid the artillery now had the range. He hit her on the shoulder, hard.

'GO, JO! GO NOW!'

'Fuck you, Royce!'

She engaged the clutch lever on the left of the handlebar, fed in the

power. The engine roared, coughed throatily, and the bike wobbled forward, finding traction. She threw the headlamp switch to full beam, illuminating the tiny tunnel ahead of them. Immediately she realised the Yamaha would be a bastard to control. The conversion had thrown its balance and dynamics and it was carrying too much weight. Brampton struggled as the wheels slipped over the sloppy wet surface of the tunnel, reluctant to get a grip.

Added to the problem was that the base of the drain had an indented central channel, about a foot across, to help keep minimal water levels flowing in the dry season. The channel allowed the Yamaha's wheels to slot in like a tram. Fine on a straight run, but trickier when the drain turned left or right.

At that moment the Syrian artillery spotter perfected his coordinates. The shell landed in the culvert where the rebels were crouched. The gaping mouth of the drain pulsed with exploding light like a giant sun behind the receding motorbike. Simultaneously, a cacophony of noise and hot, displaced air rushed down the tunnel like a trade wind, urging them forward. It pushed too fast, causing Brampton to fight against a skid under pressure from the sudden acceleration. She managed to steer back into the skid, checked her wavering balance. Sparks flew suddenly as her helmet scraped the roof, jarred her head back threatening to break her neck. Aware of what was happening, Royce pushed himself down further, his head hard between her shoulder blades. They gathered speed, both deaf and blind at the same time, engine noise roaring but hearing nothing, seeing nothing as Brampton drove into a wall of dazzling reflected light.

The journey was endless, a nightmarish fairground ride. Like a ghost train, a rat in a trap, claustrophobic and exhilarating.

How far, how long? Royce tried to remember. Brampton with no mental capacity left to think as she fought to keep the Yamaha upright and moving forward, kept their balance as the wheels spun and skidded in the watery mud and shit.

Five clicks, Royce remembered. About three miles. At what mph?

God, impossible to tell. The crumbling bricks seemed to pass by at rocket speed, but how could that be? What, fifteen or even twenty miles an hour, max? Surely? Must be twenty to keep stable. This was no time for mental arithmetic. No, it was the *very* time, maths under pressure – a cornerstone of his lifetime's training, he scolded himself. So, if three at twenty...Sixty minutes to do twenty miles...So three minutes to cover one mile...Times three equalled nine!

At that moment Brampton found her confidence, throttled up, throwing his calculation. Maybe now travelling at over twenty, too fast, too fast. Maybe just seven or eight minutes to get there.

The crashing roar behind them was mind-blowing and disorientating, sending Brampton into a waggling skid.

Using a map and superb judgement, the spotter's calculation had been better than Royce's ragged attempt to get it right. He felt the shrapnel rip into his calf, the sting of pain. He glanced down, saw the trail of blood.

'Fuck it,' he cursed, but guessed it wasn't serious. Hoped to God it wasn't.

The artillery shell had exploded some distance behind them, bringing down a hole in the roof of the storm drain, but still they felt the satanic force of air pressure in the confined space. Thank God Brampton had throttled up when she did. He was the luckiest man alive, or the artillery spotter was the unluckiest.

Unexpectedly the tunnel took a sudden turn. From being arrow-straight it turned quite abruptly right and thereby probably saved their lives, throwing the spotter's calculations. It also caught Brampton off-guard.

She snatched the brakes hard, just in time as the tyres hit the sides of the narrow central channel they were in. The sudden loss of momentum set them into a precarious wobble. Brampton threw the machine into the turn and revved up again, the tyres biting. Situation retrieved.

Royce breathed again. He peered over her shoulder, saw the distant

pinprick of light. The tunnel was straight now, the end in sight. Like a near-death experience, entering into light. Welcome to heaven, or would it be hell on earth? Royce mused.

The circle of light was expanding fast, like the ground rush on a parachute jump.

‘SLOW, JO!’ he yelled at the back of the helmet.

‘What?’

‘SLOW DOWN!’ he repeated. ‘STOP SHORT!’

She nodded and throttled back as the opening came into view, the sound of the Yamaha dying away to an irritating throb.

‘Kill the lights!’ he snapped.

He was off, crouched low and leaning hard against the right side of the tunnel, his automatic raised.

She threw the switch, killing light and sound, and lowered the machine to the ground before dancing briskly to the left. Breathing in, she bent over at an awkward angle, pressing her spine against the tunnel wall, presenting as small a target as possible.

There were dark figures looming in the bright circle of light. Silhouettes, carrying weapons.

Royce squinted. Trying to focus, trying to readjust his vision after the ride. He cursed, blinked and squeezed his eyes again. The men in the tunnel came into slightly sharper focus. Helmets, they were wearing helmets. That suggested Syrian Army. And the weapons? They had the distinctive curved magazines of Russian AK47s. Tarek’s men were mostly supplied with American weapons. Shit!

One of them switched on a torch.

An LED light blinded Royce. A voice shouted, ‘*Arfae yudik! Yazhr!*’

His brain went into auto-translation: Hands up! Come out!

That wasn’t an invitation, it was an order.

If Assad’s army got hold of them, they would both be questioned, tortured. Brampton would probably be raped or worse. And so would he, it was the Arab way. Either or both of them might well be killed anyway.

Where were Tarek's fighters? They shouldn't be far away.

Royce made a split-second decision. There were three figures in the tunnel exit. He raised his CZ85 and fired in rapid succession. Two went down and he caught the third man in the back as he turned to run away.

'Let's go!' he said, starting to cover the thirty feet to the entrance.

Such a short distance had never seemed so far. Two Syrian soldiers on the ground didn't move. The third lay twitching.

They had come out into a depression of land, overlooked by bombed-out buildings. The rest of the Syrian Army section stood around, taken by surprise at the turn of events. Drink cans were discarded, cigarette butts tossed away, and weapons hurriedly raised. The five faces were puzzled, probably confused by two Westerners with PRESS on their flak vests. One a woman and the other an armed male.

Royce made a mental note of how many rounds he had left in his CZ85. Did he stand a chance? He made a quick calculation and it didn't look good...

But then the decision was made for him.

There was a sudden burst of light machine-gun fire into the group, cutting the Syrian soldiers down like skittles in a strike. The men stumbled over each other as they fell to the ground, some dead and some mortally wounded.

Rebel fighters emerged from the surrounding rubble, dozens of them. Some went to the bodies, finishing off any who had survived the onslaught of bullets. Any who survived were summarily executed. Assad's government troops had already destroyed all the rebel clinics and hospitals that would anyway have been the soldiers' only hope of survival.

There are no winners in war, Royce didn't need to remind himself.

As the rebel leader approached, Brampton asked him in English, 'Is Tarek all right?'

The young man, with the face of someone way beyond his years, stared back at her. 'Tarek just killed. At other end of tunnel.'

Brampton gulped, hardly believing what she already knew in her heart. 'I'm so sorry.'

She was getting hardened to this, she realised, and lit a Sobranie. Fuck, she decided, she needed one. In her mind, all she could picture was a pretty Arab girl in a tent on the Turkish border, laughing together with her mother as she made her wedding plans.

He made a split second decision...