

Chapter 1

Mallory's Treasure

The Royal Navy Search and Rescue Sea King helicopter flew low and fast over the flat grubby desert, all eyes in the cockpit focused on a thin trail of black smoke half a mile ahead. Beyond it was a blurred collection of dilapidated dwellings on the other side of a road that marked the northern edge of the town of Fallujah that was a short flight west of Baghdad. Visibility was poor in every direction, a fine dust filling the air like smog and with more trails of carbon smoke dotting the hazy landscape like plumes from the stacks of distant steamships, columns of dark vapour bending gently on a south-easterly breeze. The pilot was tracking a signal that had its focus point a little to the left of the closer, finer plume. It was on an emergency bandwidth emitted by a radio in the hands of a British Tornado pilot whose aircraft had been shot down in the last twenty minutes.

Royal Marine Corporal Bernard Mallory stood beside his Royal Navy partner, Petty Officer Mac Davids, in the narrow doorway that connected the cabin to the cockpit. At thirty, Mac was a couple of years older than Mallory, a head taller and not as strongly built but a hundred yards faster in a mile race. Mallory pushed the inside of his helmet against his ear as he strained to listen to the weak, intermittent radio message from the Tornado pilot who was answering the co-pilot's request for his situation report.

'All I want to know, for Christ's sake, is if the area is hot or not,' the pilot said, a little tense, more to himself than to anyone else. His eyes darted back and forth across the range of his vision,

looking for any sign of a threat that he knew was out there somewhere. It would not have been this crew's normal responsibility to carry out the rescue of a downed pilot in hostile territory. That task usually went to Special Forces flights and the rescue crews were normally made up of SAS and SBS operatives. But when the distress call came in none were immediately available and Samuels, the Sea King pilot, a gung-ho type who had missed the first Gulf War by only a couple of months, elected to at least check the level of hostility. The duty watch officer running the operations desk had allowed him to give it a go but only if there was zero enemy ground activity.

Mac and Mallory had exchanged glances when they'd first heard their boss's request to do a recce, knowing his hankering for a bit of the excitement whose lack he had been complaining of. His appetite was more urgent now that the war was fast coming to an end.

The tension in the helicopter increased perceptibly as Samuels took some lift out of the rotors and dropped the heavy beast to a couple of hundred feet above the ground. They were now exposed not only to anti-aircraft guns and rockets but also to small-arms fire.

In the back of everyone's mind was the questionable logic of risking the lives of four men to save just one but that was a danger they had accepted before joining the search-and-rescue service. This was the wrong time to dwell on it anyway but the arithmetical reasoning was more acute at this stage of an operation.

Mallory stepped back from the cockpit doorway, pulled his black-tinted sunshade visor down, gripped the heavy handle of the large side door and yanked it across on its runners until it engaged the catch that locked it open. The wind charged in aggressively, ravaging every inch of the cabin and tossing around anything that could not hold firm against it. He held on to the

winch above to lean out and get a better look to starboard while Mac went to a port-side window.

Mallory looked down at the arid ground a hundred feet below as it shot past: dirty gold sand with a sprinkling of black giving way to sparsely cultivated patches of bracken-like vegetation, a track with a battered pick-up trundling along it, a line of parched, dust-coated eucalyptus trees, a herd of scattering goats with the shepherd boy twisting in their midst to look up at him. What sounded like far-off explosions were barely discernible above the noise of the engines and rotors chopping the air and except for the handful of distant smoke columns he could see little evidence of the heavy air assault taking place in the southern part of the town.

The Sea King had originally been on its way to an American base – confidently named ‘Camp Victory’ – at Baghdad International Airport on the west side of the city when they’d picked up the downed pilot’s distress call. Soon after diverting from their course and picking up the location of the emergency beacon they heard the Tornado pilot’s voice confirming that he was alive. The level of Iraqi resistance in the area was unknown since there were no coalition troops close enough to make that assessment. But it was believed to be light since the main ground-fighting in the sector was concentrated further south on the Baghdad side of Fallujah. The Iraqi military had for the most part disintegrated. Isolated groups of Republican Guard were putting up a token resistance in places but the back of the enemy had been broken and the majority of the army had abandoned their weapons and uniforms. However, a lone helicopter close to the ground was an irresistible target to any Iraqi who still had a gun. One lucky shot could turn the rescue mission into a fight for survival. That danger would only increase when the moment came to hover close to the ground and pick up the downed pilot.

A loud *thwack*, like the noise of a stone striking the helicopter’s thin metal fuselage, made everyone start. The pilot banked the

lumbering whale of a craft as sharply as it could go, the rotors complaining loudly as he put excessive torque on the engines.

‘What was that?!’ he shouted.

Mallory instinctively ducked back into the cabin, suspecting that it had been a bullet. Then, gritting his teeth, he leaned back outside to inspect the helicopter’s body and saw a small hole only a couple of feet from him, towards the tail. ‘Got a strike low on the cabin skin below the numbers,’ he shouted into his mike against the wind. He looked inside for the corresponding hole but could not see anything: wrinkled padding and a row of folded hammock seats obscured the inside wall. ‘From what I can see we’re fine,’ he said, guessing while looking at the other side of the cabin for an exit hole. He didn’t find one. Mac scanned the roof for any sign of damage, then went back to the port-side window.

The immediate question on everyone’s mind was if the attack constituted a high enough level of danger to abort the mission. They all knew that as far as operational procedures were concerned the answer was affirmative – but the important issue was whether Samuels agreed.

Any indecision the Sea King pilot might have had evaporated when the Tornado pilot’s voice broke through to say that he could hear them. Samuels reacted by pulling the chopper’s nose back around and on track towards the emergency beacon.

Mallory spotted several puffs of smoke above a low wall, giving away the firing position of a machine gun that he could not hear above the helicopter’s engine noise. ‘Contact starboard! Four o’clock! Four hundred!’ he shouted. Samuels responded with another violent turn as a bright-orange tracer flew across the front of his windshield, heading skyward.

Mallory checked the outside of the craft again as best he could, hanging on tightly against the torque, then looked inside for signs of damage before stepping back and going to the cockpit door

to see how his crew were doing. 'Everything looks OK,' he said, seeing that they were fine. But Samuels ignored him as he gripped his steering and power controls while the co-pilot's hands whipped from one instrument button to the next, flicking switches and turning dials.

'Systems functional,' the co-pilot said as he turned off an engine alarm that had been triggered by the violent manoeuvring and tapped a gauge that had gone into the red: he did not seem overly concerned about it. He threw Samuels a couple of anxious glances in between his checks, wondering if his boss still intended to press on. But with no response from the pilot other than a fixed expression of concentration the answer for the moment appeared to remain affirmative.

Mallory was confident in his crew, having been with them for more than three months, and he went back to the external cabin door to maintain his surveillance. He had no say over their actions anyway and he had his own responsibilities. Being the only soldier on board, and a Royal Marine no less, he felt an inherent duty to be the cool-headed bulwark of the team. That was not to say that the others weren't up to the task. But as a Marine he was expected to be a stalwart. There was no doubt in Mallory's heart that he would uphold the pride of the Corps as well as his own if called upon. But this was the first time he had been under direct enemy fire and as the adrenalin coursed through his veins anxiety accompanied it. He was on his guard as he ventured into this level of fear for the first time, not truly knowing how he would react. Crouched in the open doorway of such a large, lumbering and attractive target he felt vulnerable as well as helpless to defend himself. His SA-80 assault rifle was secured in a bracket on the bulkhead behind him but grabbing it to engage an enemy he could not accurately see was pointless. More importantly, his crew would not appreciate him turning the rescue craft into a gunship unless there were clearly no other options.

Mallory had been a bootneck for six years and since graduating from Lymptone Commando Training Centre had spent most of that time in a fighting company of 42 Commando based in Plymouth. But six months after a long-awaited transfer to Recce Troop (42 Commando's reconnaissance team), the most expert fighting group in a commando unit, he tore a ligament in his knee playing rugby. To add to his disappointment he was transferred to the Regimental Sergeant Major's staff in the Company Headquarters to keep him employed during his rehabilitation, not an uncommon post for the walking – or hobbling – wounded. Then, at the outbreak of war, shortly before he was declared fit for duty, his boss read out an e-mail to the office from Naval Command requesting search-and-rescue volunteers. Mallory knew that he would not be able to slip back into his Recce Troop slot within the immediate future. His position had been filled and all he could hope for was to get back on the standby list. Therefore, when he heard the request for search-and-rescue volunteers, a somewhat specialised position, he asked immediately to be considered for the post. Mallory had never previously had aspirations of that nature. Being a part of a helicopter crew had not entered his head before that day. But his decision to volunteer was encouraged by rumours that few if any members of 42 Commando, including the Recce Troop, would join the war, at least the planned early stages of it. Having missed out on the fight in Afghanistan he desperately wanted the opportunity to see action.

The RSM agreed to put Mallory's name forward and within a week he received his acceptance notice. But by the time he had finished the training he had come to doubt the course he had chosen. Rumours abounded that the navy search-and-rescue squadron he was being attached to had little chance of seeing action since only Special Forces rescue teams would be permitted to operate in hostile areas. And for the early stages of the war that had been how it had panned out.

But now that Mallory was heading into the thick of it, having taken a bullet strike already, the old adage 'Be careful what you wish for' sprang to mind.

The Sea King pilot swung the heavy craft in a wide arc away from the source of the gunfire. But once again, as the downed Tornado pilot's voice came over the speakers sounding increasingly desperate as he claimed to have the helicopter in sight, Samuels brought the nose back around.

'I'm showing green smoke,' the downed pilot said, the quality of the communication suddenly better than it had been.

It was now obvious to all that short of a seriously damaging strike against the Sea King they would not abandon the desperate stranger. The man had fully committed himself by igniting a smoke grenade and would stay close to it, well aware that it could also attract the enemy.

Mallory strained to look through the haze and saw the puff of dark green that was quickly billowing into a substantial cloud in front of a collection of huts several hundred metres from the black smoke that marked the Tornado pilot's crash site. It indicated that the pilot was at least able to move.

Before Mallory could report the sighting he heard Samuels confirm to the downed pilot that he had the smoke visual. They were going in.

Mac joined Mallory in the doorway and both men checked that they had their 9mm pistols in holsters at their sides. The pair contemplated their next move. They glanced at each other, looking for signs of weakness, any talk unnecessary. Mallory forced a grin from which Mac appeared to take little reassurance.

Mac pushed his mike aside and moved his mouth closer to Mallory's ear. 'You ever read "Rendezvous with Death"?' he shouted above the noise.

'What?' Mallory shouted, having heard Mac's question but then unsure if he had done so correctly.

“Rendezvous with Death.” You ever read it?”

‘No, but I think I saw the film,’ Mallory replied.

Mac rolled his eyes. ‘It’s a poem.’

‘I must’ve missed that one,’ Mallory replied sarcastically. He had never read a poem in his life and suddenly felt a tinge of inferiority. It was not an uncommon feeling for him. Mallory envied servicemen who’d had a good education. It made him want to improve himself in that regard but he had never made the effort. His excuse was the company he kept: fellow bootnecks. A commando unit was not the ideal environment in which to cultivate culture. ‘Sounds a bit dramatic,’ Mallory shouted, regretting his initial sarcasm.

‘First World War,’ Mac shouted. ‘You should read it.’

Mallory didn’t dwell on the matter and concentrated on catching a glimpse of the Tornado pilot.

‘Stand by,’ Samuels warned over the radio as they drew closer and dropped lower towards the green smoke that was moving along the ground in the breeze before rising and spreading out. Mallory eyeballed the medical pack strapped to the bulkhead near the door as he adjusted his bulletproof jacket. The plates that covered his chest and back were heavy but he had worn them for so long now that they felt like a part of him. He went over the procedure and his responsibilities that they had rehearsed endlessly back in the UK as well as when they’d arrived in Iraq. This was the second live rescue he had taken part in but the other one had not taken place under fire. Although Samuels was bringing the helicopter in as fast as he could it felt as if they were moving through the air like a barrage balloon.

The Sea King suddenly shuddered heavily as Samuels increased the pitch and brought the nose up sharply to slow the massive aircraft. Mallory and Mac reacted by crouching in the doorway, their hands firmly gripping the sides of the opening as they leaned out, hoping that the Tornado pilot would reveal himself.

The ground was close enough for Mallory to pick out fine details such as a goat lying near a bush. The animal must have been dead because the others had scattered. Mallory disconnected the communication cord from his helmet as he got ready to exit the craft.

The down draught of the helicopter's rotor blades hit the ground with tremendous force and just as Mallory caught sight of a man in a grey one-piece flight suit scurrying from behind one of the buildings the dust rose up to mix with the green smoke and obscured his view. Mallory studied the ground as it drew closer, calculating the best moment to jump. It was an exhilarating feeling, getting ready to abandon the safety of the craft to leap into the unknown.

The Sea King jolted as it turned through ninety degrees, its tail majestically sweeping around, its rotors blowing all before them, before dipping a little as it came to a wavering halt. Samuels was positioning his cabin door to face the Tornado pilot, a sign that he too had seen the man and was giving his boys the shortest route and ensuring that they would not have to run around the 'copter's nose or tail.

Mallory estimated that he was a body's length from the ground and jumped out of the doorway, hitting the packed sand hard. He dropped to one knee, his outstretched hands only just stopping him from falling on his face. He cursed himself for not allowing for the added weight of his body armour and equipment. As Mac landed beside him he pushed himself up and, though all he could see ahead was swirling dust and green smoke, he ran on into it, knowing that the downed Tornado pilot was somewhere beyond.

As Mallory emerged a few paces ahead of Mac, his mouth and the back of his throat coated in dust, he saw the pilot on his knees the length of a tennis court ahead and wondered why he was not running towards them. As Mallory closed the distance

the pilot wobbled as he got to his feet, one of his legs unable to support him – it was clear the man had an injury.

Mallory glanced left and right for any sign of the enemy as he covered the last few metres. He threw an arm around the pilot's back as Mac grabbed him from the other side.

'You OK?' Mallory shouted.

'Did something to my bloody leg on landing,' the pilot said in a refined English accent, his breathing laboured. 'Just get me going and I'll be fine,' he added, displaying a strength of character as he clung on to both men's shoulders.

Mac and Mallory part-carried, part-dragged him back towards the dust storm as he tried to put his weight on his good leg when he could.

A shot rang out close by, followed by another. The three men kept up their pace as Mallory looked in the direction of the firing, an action made difficult due to the pilot's arm wrapped tightly around his neck. More bullets ripped into the sand in front of them and as the men responded by increasing their speed Mallory was struck by what felt like a hammer blow to his right foot. It was followed by a searing, burning pain. His leg gave way as if the nerves had been severed and he dropped, unable to stop himself.

The pilot released him and Mac slowed to look back for his partner. 'Mallory!' he cried.

'I'm OK,' Mallory shouted as he got to his feet. 'Keep going! Keep going!'

Mac saw him stand and obeyed, taking the pilot's weight onto his hip and pushing on into the swirling dust and smoke.

Mallory took a step but his leg gave way and he dropped to the ground again. The limb seemed to be losing its strength near his hip, as if a major nerve had been severed, even though the wound appeared to be in his foot. He pulled himself up, forcing his wounded leg ahead of him in an effort to kick-start it back

into action. But a painful spasm short-circuited the muscles and it buckled again. He looked up from the ground to see Mac and the pilot disappear into the dust storm and with a growling shout intended to inspire a supreme effort he pushed himself up once again. It appeared to have the desired effect but as he moved forward the ground immediately in front of him exploded in a series of bullet strikes from a machine gun close by and a round slammed into the side of his helmet, throwing him over like a rag doll. It was as if he had been kicked in the head by a bull and his vision blurred.

Mallory's animal will to survive took charge and he staggered to his feet once more. But as he lurched towards the helicopter another swarm of bullets spat around him. His subconscious screamed at him to take cover and he dived towards a low wall, misjudging the distance and hitting the top of it. As another volley struck the wall beside him he slipped over the top to fall hard on to his back. The voice in his head continued to cry out for him to move and he crawled as fast as he could, scurrying on his belly like an alligator, every limb pushing and clawing at the dirt, keeping his head and backside low. He reached a small gap in the wall and caught a glimpse of the helicopter inside its shroud of dust – the green smoke had dissipated now that the dispenser was exhausted. The seconds were ticking away and Mallory knew that the Sea King would lift off as soon as Mac and the pilot were on board. They had to. The extraction had turned hot and the chopper pilot had a responsibility to the others.

Mallory braced himself to get up and run towards the craft but as he raised his body and brought his good leg beneath him the Sea King's screaming engines powered up to the max and the rotor-driven sandstorm intensified. The hub of the 'copter's blades then emerged from the top of the dust cloud. The craft followed its nose in a tight turn before straightening up as it continued to rise, gaining speed with every second. The nose dipped as the

helicopter moved away from Mallory, the aircraft banking to one side and then the other like a fish trying to avoid a shark snapping at its tail. Mallory was compelled to stare at it, partly in disbelief and partly hoping that it would turn in an arc to come back for him. But deep down he knew that it had gone for ever and a voice inside his head urged him to run . . .

Mallory could hear his own heavy breathing as the sound of the chopper's engines faded. He scanned around, assessing his options, and saw his only way out: the collection of buildings where the Tornado pilot had originally hidden. He dropped to the ground and scrambled as far as he could on his stomach away from the wall, keeping it between him and the original source of the gunfire. But Mallory was moving far too slowly and, unable to bear it, he leaped to his feet, gritted his teeth against the pain in his leg and ran for all he was worth. The nerves in his hip seemed to have rediscovered their connections and he got into his stride. But he had covered barely a dozen metres when he was struck by a fierce blow to his back that punched him forward with the force of a flying sledgehammer and he sprawled in the sand. Mallory did not pause to speculate about what had happened nor about his condition. If he was alive he would keep going and if he was seriously wounded he would not be able to. He pushed himself up and onward and another round whistled past him. He dived over a waist-high wall as several bullets struck it and he rolled ungracefully onto his knees. Then, pushing off like a sprinter starting a race, he propelled himself forward, straightening up as he gained speed, and ran as if the very hounds of hell were snapping at his heels.

Mallory arrived at the first building and skidded around the corner where a dirt street separated two blocks of shacks opposite. Not a soul was about: the only movement that caught his eye was a goat wandering along the street. He sped across the gap, the pain shooting up his leg which he fought to control.

As he ran down the line of dilapidated buildings he reached for his holster, finding the pistol and wrapping his hand around the grip, his thumb pushing aside the Velcro tab that held it in place. He pulled the gun free. His feet lost traction on some slimy garbage as he made a sharp change in direction into an alleyway but hitting the far corner wall helped him to regain his balance. He jumped over a mound of trash and charged on through a long puddle of rancid water, close to slipping several times. But his momentum kept him going. Unable to look back as he ran in case he lost his footing, a strangely euphoric feeling spread through him. Perhaps it was the release of endorphins into his bloodstream, or the buzz of fear itself. Whatever the cause he suddenly felt he had the wings of Mercury on his heels. But the high was not enough to kill the pain in his leg or lighten the reality of his position. Although the shooting appeared to have stopped he had to believe that the bullets could fly his way again at any second.

A woman carrying a bundle suddenly stepped from a doorway and, unable to change direction, Mallory slammed into her with such force she hit the wall of her house and bounced off it to fall flat on her back in the dirt. Mallory hardly felt the impact: his weight, more than twice hers with his body armour, and the kinetic force of his speed must have been like having a horse hit her. Mallory kept on going without a backward glance, every sense concentrated ahead.

The end of the dead-straight alleyway was still some distance away and Mallory's fear of being shot from behind became more intense. Unable to bear it any longer he slammed on the brakes and swerved into the opening of a hut, bouncing off the wall as he fell in and slipping onto his side on the dirt floor. He got to his feet right away, hunched in a stoop because of the low ceiling, and spun in a circle, gun held tight in a two-handed grip, ready to shoot, gulping in air as perspiration flowed, his eyes straining

to see into the darkened corners. The room looked like someone's home: rugs, cushions and cooking implements were laid out as if the occupants had recently departed in a hurry. An opening in the opposite wall, looking as if it had been fashioned with a sledgehammer, led to an adjoining room and Mallory moved to look inside. It was another living quarters, with blankets and pillows on the floor, its walls bare but for a jagged hole high up that served as a window.

Mallory was breathing heavily and he removed his helmet, feeling stifled by it. He wiped away the sweat that was flowing into his eyes as he moved into the smaller room where he jumped up and held onto the edges of the opening to take a look outside. It was another narrow alleyway like the one he had just run down but the point was that it was a different one. He tossed his helmet out, pulled himself up, wriggled through like a maggot and dropped hands first without dignity onto the mucky ground outside. As he got to his feet and picked up his helmet the pain shot through his leg again and he part-jogged, part-limped along the cramped passageway. He checked behind him every few paces, anxious to increase the distance from his landing place but at the same time mindful of the risks of remaining out in the open. Moving increased the chance of running into other dangers and the wisest option was to find somewhere to hide. That would also give him time to formulate a plan, sort himself out and, most importantly, open up communications with his people.

A wrecked car blocked the end of the alleyway, as if someone had once tried to drive it through, got stuck between the buildings, given up and left it to rot. Tatty flat-roofed mud huts lined either side of the alley and just before Mallory reached the car a gap appeared on his right as if one of the buildings had collapsed. He slowed as he reached it, his gun held in front of him, and turned the corner into what looked like a small yard surrounded by buildings on three sides. Each had an opening although only

one had a door, fragile and battered, which Mallory opted for since it offered concealment. He approached it stealthily with his pistol leading the way and eased it open, helmet in his other hand, and looked inside. It was dark with no windows and he quickly moved into the room, stepping away from the doorway and out of sight in case someone passed. The air was musty, smelling like rotten rags, and the room did not look as if it had been recently used, although there were some signs of a previous occupation: cooking pots, wooden boxes containing what appeared to be rusty electrical fittings, a stripped engine block and an assortment of other junk. A rug covered a large portion of the dirt floor but like everything else in the place it was decomposing and caked in dust.

Mallory closed the door and, feeling overheated, took a moment to get some air. He would have liked to undo his bulletproof jacket to let the air circulate around his sweating body but he knew better than to relax. His injured foot was throbbing and he allowed himself the luxury of squatting on a log for a moment to stretch out his legs and ease the pain. He moved the injured foot into a shaft of sunlight coming in through a crack in the door and inspected it. There was a hole through the instep of the sand-coloured suede boot with a corresponding one on the other side, a dark bloodstain around both. But there was no sign of blood leaking from the wound at that moment. A bullet had passed through the fleshy part of the sole of his foot but it had missed the bone or at worst had only grazed it. An inch higher and the outcome of his escape might have been different, not that it was by any means a done deal at the moment.

The foot grew more painful as blood was allowed to circulate more freely through it and Mallory contemplated removing the boot to put a dressing on it. He had a small medical pack on his belt but the risk was too great. And the boot might be difficult to get back on if his foot swelled. If it had been bleeding he

might have taken the chance but no one ever died from pain, he mused, and decided to forget about it. The worst that could happen to it now was infection and that would take days before it showed.

He picked up his helmet which gave no ballistic protection and inspected the entry and exit holes in the top of it. He felt the top of his head in case it had been nicked by the bullet and though it was soaked a check of his fingers revealed only sweat – no blood. He had been lucky there, too – an inch lower and it would have been curtains. He reached around his back to search for the third bullet strike in his body armour, his finger finding the hole in the shock-absorbent powdery material that had done its job. Mallory had used up a lot of luck so far but he was going to need more if he wanted to make it home in one piece. The thought of what he needed to do to get out of this mess was depressing and he considered his options for escape.

The first thing he had to do was set up communications to let his people know he was alive and where he was. He removed his standard-issue SARBE emergency search-and-rescue radio and beacon from its pouch on his belt. It was a waterproof and robust device no bigger than a cigarette pack, and he checked it for damage. He turned it to the radio function long enough for a light to flicker – indicating sufficient power – before turning it off and putting it back in its pouch. This was not the place to send his emergency signal. Mallory needed to be in a secure open area for any rescue craft to land.

He checked his watch. The ideal location for a pick-up was outside the town and that meant waiting until dark. The Tornado pilot had initiated his beacon immediately because he was in dire straits but Mallory had a responsibility to ensure the rescue team's safety as well as his own. That meant he had to find a safe landing site.

Mallory was parched, his mouth dry as a bone, but he had no

water. Adding a bottle to his belt kit was something he had considered but decided against, limiting the amount of equipment he carried to enhance his mobility.

Mallory's eyes gradually became accustomed to the dim light and he noticed a dirty sheet that was hanging on a couple of nails on the opposite wall and that appeared to cover a hole. He got to his feet, ignoring a stab of pain from his stiff foot, limped over to the sheet and moved it aside. The roughly hammered hole was an entrance to a smaller, darker room that seemed to be filled with more junk. He removed a small pencil light from a pouch and switched it on. The light revealed a weapons store, an Aladdin's Cave of armaments: dozens of AK47 assault rifles, RPG7 handheld rocket launchers and an assortment of metal ammunition boxes. Mallory's first thought was to get out of there, imagining that the owners of such an important storage facility might not be far away. But on the other hand a high-velocity rifle would be more useful in a fight than his pistol.

He stepped inside, allowing the sheet to drop back across the opening, and took a closer look at the cache. There were hundreds of AK47 magazines, many of them filled with bullets, and inside an open ammunition box were several pistols. On closer inspection much of the ordnance turned out to be old and rusty, while the wooden stocks and butts on some of the AK47 rifles were badly damaged. Mallory holstered his pistol to inspect an AK47 that looked in better condition than the others and carefully drew back the working parts to check the breech and ejection mechanisms. It didn't look too bad – a touch of oil would do it the world of good. The AK47 was a cheaply manufactured weapon but that was also its advantage. Its low-tolerance moving parts could function even when poorly maintained, one reason why it was the most popular weapon with poorly trained ragtag armies.

Mallory sorted through the ready-filled magazines, all of which were in bad condition. A couple of empty ones were in reasonable

shape but he needed some loose ammunition to fill them with. The next ammunition box he inspected contained pistol rounds and the one beneath that was empty. Another ammunition box was filled with spare parts for an 82mm mortar: a rusty tube and base-plate lay on the floor beside it.

A clean, relatively new-looking metal ammunition box sitting alone in a corner under a stack of empty sandbags caught his eye. Mallory squatted on a bundle of dirty Iraqi army uniforms in front of it to take the weight off his throbbing leg. He removed the sandbags and pulled on one of the box's catches but it was tight. He put the end of the flashlight in his mouth, allowing him to use both of his hands, and after a struggle the catch sprang open. He gripped the sides of the lid and raised it. The light bathed the inside of the box and Mallory almost dropped the small torch from his mouth when he saw what was inside.

He pushed the lid back fully and removed the pencil light from his mouth – which stayed open in disbelief. The box was filled with neatly packed rectangular bundles of green-grey printed paper, each sheet of which had the image of Benjamin Franklin in its centre and the figures '100' in each corner.

Mallory took out one of the bundles to examine it more closely, turning it on its side and flicking through the crisp notes with his thumb to find every one identical apart from its serial number. He took out a couple more bundles to reveal that the ones beneath were also all made up of United States of America hundred-dollar bills. Suddenly worried that the owners might appear at any moment he went back to the opening to peer through it.

He stepped into the outer room and crossed to the front door to listen. The only sound was a distant rumble but the urge to get out of the building consumed him.

Mallory hurried back into the small room, grabbed an empty sandbag, shoved several AK47 magazines – loaded and unloaded – into it, picked up the assault rifle he'd selected and his helmet

and looked down at the box of money. It suggested to him more than anything else in the room that the owners could return any time. Nobody would leave that amount of money unattended for long, certainly not these people to whom it was worth ten times its western value. At the same time he found it impossible to simply walk away from that amount of cash.

He had at least to satisfy a nagging curiosity. He put down his hardware booty, sat back down in front of the box, picked up a bundle of notes and riffled swiftly through it. A rough calculation put the bundle at ten thousand dollars and there were ten bundles per stack and eleven stacks. Mallory whistled softly to himself as he realised he was staring at over a million US dollars – worth well over five hundred thousand pounds, more than he could earn in the Marines if he stayed in for the next twenty years.

Mallory got to his feet, his stare fixed on the treasure, and wondered how a person could have the worst and best luck in his life all in one day. That was so typical for him, though, he thought. In this case each sort of cancelled the other out, leaving him with a fat zero and the rest of the day still to go. Even if he were to take the money, and assuming that all went well with the rescue, the first thing he would be asked about would be the contents of the box. And once declared, there was no doubt about how much he would be allowed to take home with him: none of it, since it was war loot and hence illegal.

But on the other hand he *could* take a little if he hid it on his person. So he stuffed one bundle into a thigh pocket, another into a breast pocket which was only barely big enough – and then he stopped himself. Greed simply increased the chance of discovery. After his rescue Mallory would be escorted to the hospital where he would have to discard his clothing. He could probably secure one bundle but more would be pushing it. It all depended on so many things: being left alone for even a few seconds before he was examined; his clothes being taken away

once he was in hospital garb; finding somewhere in the examination room to hide the bundle so that he could retrieve it later. He knew he was probably being too paranoid but it worried him nevertheless.

A noise outside startled him and he drew his pistol, grabbed up the bag, AK47 and helmet, carefully pushed the concealing sheet aside and moved stealthily across the room to the door. There was no follow-up to the sound, the source of which was unclear, but it was yet another warning to get out of there as soon as possible.

As Mallory placed a hand on the door to open it he paused and looked back towards the storeroom. There was one possible low-risk solution to keeping the money that was admittedly a long shot but better than simply walking away and eternally regretting that he had not given it a go. He was already succumbing to peer pressure, imagining some of the names he would be called by the lads back home if he told them how he had found a cool million and then just walked away from it.

Mallory reached into a pouch, pulled out his GPS and turned it on. A message window declared it was searching for satellites and he turned it off, satisfied that it was working. He weighed the pros and cons of his hastily thought-out plan and the pros came out on top, no doubt enhanced by thoughts of a fancy new house with a pool, a new car, et cetera. Enough, he told himself. He could daydream later, which was another positive aspect of the plan since it gave him something more to look forward to, not that the prospect of survival wasn't encouraging enough.

He pocketed the GPS, placed his helmet, AK47 and bag on the floor by the door and went back into the storeroom.

He took the bundle poking out of his breast pocket, tossed it back into the box, leaving the one in his thigh pocket, closed the lid and picked it up to test its weight. It was heavy but manageable. The problem was that he would need his hands free to hold

his gun. He scanned around the room, found a length of old nylon rope that appeared to have the strength for the job and threaded it through the handles at either end of the box, tying it off to form a loop. He bent forward, placed the line over his head, stood up, moved the box around so that it hung low across his back and tested it. It was not perfect and would annoy the hell out of him but it was worth a try.

The urge to get out of the building was now overpowering. Mallory went back to the front door, took up his Kalashnikov and bag, elected not to wear his helmet at that moment since it impeded his hearing, clipped it around the nylon line by the chin strap, took his pistol from its holster and opened the door.

He crossed the yard and checked inside the opposite building. There was a partially open door at the far side and he crossed the dirt floor towards it.

The door led onto a street and Mallory carefully looked out and checked in both directions. A man was on the road in the distance but far enough away not to be an immediate threat. Otherwise it looked clear. Mallory focused on the entrance to an alleyway directly opposite and, holding the box in place with the same hand that was holding the bag and AK, his pistol in the other, he moved off.

Mallory wasn't far along the alleyway when the difficulties he had expected to have carrying his load became a reality. He paused long enough to undo the helmet, drop it to the ground, and kick some rubble over it. Then he moved on.

Halfway along the alley he ducked through a gap between the houses, stepping around what looked like an old generator to arrive at a corner where he stopped. In front of him was a large expanse of open ground, marked with the rudimentary boundaries and goalposts of a football pitch, whose perimeter was lined by brick buildings, many of them two-storey. A few metres away in a corner of the waste ground was a flimsy wooden shed that looked as if

it had been built to keep animals. He needed somewhere to wait until dark; he didn't fancy backtracking and since he couldn't risk moving in the open any more it was the only option he felt he had.

Mallory moved towards it at the crouch, eyes checking in every direction while the box swung awkwardly behind him. He ducked inside the rickety construction.

The dirt floor was covered in old palm leaves and the ceiling was not high enough for him to stand upright. He dropped to his knees, quickly removed the line from around his neck and moved to the back of the hut to watch the direction he had come from in case he had been followed. The smell and the absence of any man-made implements suggested that animals had probably been the hut's last occupants. Mallory remained still for several minutes, listening intently to the local sounds, until his breathing returned to normal.

A glance at his wristwatch told him he had at least another hour before the sun began to set and probably an hour more until it was really dark. He couldn't remember if there was a moon or not that night but it didn't matter. He was moving out whatever happened.

Mallory quickly set about his next task and emptied the contents of the sandbag onto the floor. He quietly unloaded two old AK47 magazines and one by one pushed the bullets into the ones that were in better condition. Once they were loaded he firmly pressed a magazine into its housing on the weapon until it clicked home. Then, pulling the working parts to the rear, he controlled the return spring, letting the breech-block slide forward to push a bullet out of the magazine and into the breech. He could not allow the return spring to fly forward as normal because of the noise it would make and so the breech had not seated properly and he spent a couple of minutes working it into place. Once he had the AK47 properly loaded he left the safety catch off and

rested the gun across his lap – not normal safe practice as he was taught but this wasn't a normal situation, alone and unsupported.

His ears gradually tuned to the noises that surrounded him, far and near, and he leaned back against the wall that moved a little under his weight but held firm. He stretched out his legs. The pain in his foot had eased and Mallory's thoughts drifted home to Plymouth and to the apartment he had shared with Jenny, his girlfriend, until she'd dumped him for a policeman two days before Mallory left for Iraq. Her reason for leaving after two and a half years together was that she did not want to live with someone who was not home every night. He knew the real reason was that she didn't fancy him any more. If she had loved him she wouldn't have left. But then, the truth was that *he* didn't love *her*. He couldn't have or it would have been more painful than it had been. It made him wonder why he had lived with Jenny in the first place. But there had been some good times – in fact, it had all been quite good for him. Clearly not for her, though. But at that moment she would have been nice to come home to.

Mallory exhaled heavily as he checked his watch, calculating that it was three p.m. back in England. It was also Sunday and the lads would be watching football down the pub. What he wouldn't give to be with them at that moment, having a pint and a fish-and-chip lunch covered in tomato sauce and salt and vinegar. His mouth was dry as paper and thoughts like that only made it worse. He forced himself to think of something else.

A sudden noise took care of that. He pointed the Kalashnikov at the hut opening and his ears focused on the sound. It came again, like a tapping noise but not in any kind of rhythm. It seemed to be coming from the direction he had arrived from and was getting closer.

Mallory placed the butt of the weapon against his shoulder as the noise stopped. When it started again Mallory leaned forward onto one knee, both of his eyes open and looking down the

length of the rifle, the pad of his index finger resting lightly on the trigger.

Something came into view below the end of the barrel and he dropped the front sight enough to see the shadowy outline of a goat. The animal continued out of the alley, oblivious to Mallory's presence, and ambled towards the hut where it stopped in the entrance.

Mallory and the goat stared at each other as if each of them was waiting to see who would make the first move. Mallory exhaled slowly in relief and as he lowered the rifle the goat turned on its hooves and trotted away, flustered that its planned rest in the cover of the shed had been thwarted.

Mallory felt suddenly exhausted by yet another shot of adrenalin and he realised that his hands were shaking. The fear of being stuck in a place where anyone who saw him would kill him or alert others who could get to him. The million dollars and the comforts it could buy gave him no pleasure at that moment and he wished the damned Tornado pilot had not been shot down.

He leaned back as Mac's last words in the chopper popped into his head – something about a rendezvous with death – and wondered why the man had brought it up at such a moment.

Mallory closed his eyes, let his ears monitor the outside and waited in silence as darkness fell. Eventually he could hardly see the spot where the goat had first appeared.

He crept outside quietly, carrying the box, leaving the empty magazines and the sandbag behind. There were no street lights and only a handful of the houses had lights inside, faint orange-yellow glows from kerosene lamps. The southern sky was a dull orange, silhouetting the rooftops as if a large fire was burning, but it could also have been the lights of the US military base around Baghdad airport. Mallory considered walking in that direction. It was not more than thirty kilometres away and he could cover the ground by the morning. But that would mean heading through

the middle of Fallujah – or going around its perimeter, since he was near the northern edge of the town. Either way, it was not a good idea. He could end up a victim of either side.

Mallory looped the line attached to the box over his head, got to his feet and headed across the waste ground, keeping his distance from the dark, silent, dried-mud dwellings.

His foot throbbed but Mallory ignored it. This was the final phase of his operation, with luck, and he hoped sincerely that the next time he fell asleep would be in the safety of his camp. His basic plan was to make his way out of the town and find a deserted patch of ground large enough for a helicopter to land on and where he could establish communications and activate his beacon. From what he could remember of the terrain, a mile or so should see him well north of the town and in farmland. The moon had not yet shown itself and there was a slight breeze. The temperature had dropped, making conditions as good as he could expect, for which he was thankful. If he needed to run he would have to dump the money but that was part of the deal he had made with himself.

Ten minutes later, moving carefully and then only after frequent pauses to look and listen, Mallory came to a low wall and went to ground as much to rest as to check the route ahead. An inspection over the wall revealed that he was at the boundary of a cemetery. It was difficult to tell how large it was: the awkward, tilted headstones and ragged flags moving gently on poles filled the view.

Mallory lifted the box over the wall and crouched on the other side. The box was a complete pain, not just its weight and awkwardness but the metallic noise it made every time it touched something solid, a sound that carried a long way on the night air.

The cemetery seemed an ideal place to cross as the odds on meeting anyone there at such a late hour were slim. However, there was a risk of being silhouetted due to the lack of

background and tall structures: the majority of the graves were bordered by low concrete rectangular frames, and he would have to keep low.

Mallory set off among the graves at a crouch but after several metres he lost his footing and the box scraped loudly against a gravestone. He lay flat and took a moment to listen, worried not only that he had been heard but also that the accident had every chance of being repeated. The graves were close together and it was so dark that stumbling as he walked in such an awkward way was unavoidable.

Then Mallory had a thought. The cemetery could be the ideal location to hide his booty. He had originally planned to bury the box somewhere near his pick-up point simply because if it was quiet enough to serve that purpose it would also be an ideal spot to dig a hole. But the bigger problem at the moment was getting to that location undetected.

He put down the box and sat on the edge of a grave to give the matter some serious thought. Burying the money inside a grave might work – but then, there was a chance that it could be visited in the near future and the freshly turned earth would attract suspicion. Mallory looked down at the narrow path he had been following between the graves and it struck him as actually a highly unlikely place to dig a new grave. Therefore it just might be the perfect place to bury something so that it would not be discovered.

Mallory pushed a finger into the earth. It wasn't too firm. He placed the ammunition box on a grave, set his rifle against it, removed his penknife from its pouch, opened it and shoved the blade into the soil. It sank in easily. He carved out a rectangle slightly larger than the box and began to scrape away the topsoil, placing it in a pile to one side.

Mallory was soon frustrated with the small amount of earth he was shifting and he searched around for a better digging imple-

ment. A can with a couple of plastic flowers in it was resting on a nearby headstone. He put the flowers to one side and used the tin as a shovel. Several minutes later he'd dug a substantial hole. He compared its depth with the height of the box. Ideally the top needed to be at least a foot below the surface. After a pause to look around and listen he pressed on.

A minute later Mallory had dug a considerably deeper hole, although now stones began to obstruct his efforts. He discarded the can and pulled the stones out by hand, decided he'd gone deep enough, picked up the box and lowered it inside. It lay at a slant, its highest point nine inches from the top, which Mallory reckoned was good enough. He dragged the loose soil back into the hole with his hands. When he had created a slight mound he got to his feet and, stamping as hard as he dared, used his weight to level it off. Then he spread the remaining soil around, depositing the stones further away.

As a final touch he shuffled up and down the path, trying to obscure any traces of his efforts on the surface for several metres in both directions. It was difficult to tell in the darkness how successful this operation had been and he would never know until the day he came back to retrieve the box. And God only knew when – or if – that day would come.

Mallory put the plastic flowers back in the can, placed it back on the headstone, wiped his hands on his thighs and removed his GPS from its pouch on his belt. As he turned it on he covered the small glowing screen and scanned around while he waited for the device to acquire the local satellites. A screen message eventually indicated this had been achieved and was followed by a display showing his position in latitude and longitude. He hit the 'man overboard' button and went through the menu to select the 'save' option. It asked him to provide a name and he paused to consider the request. He wanted something memorable but not obvious to anyone who might come across it and as he

considered several possible names the word *rendezvous* popped into his head. He counted the letters on his fingers, ten being the maximum number of characters he could use, and since the word fitted perfectly he punched them in and saved it to the memory chip before turning off the instrument. He placed it back in its pouch, picked up his weapon and, after a final check around, headed between the graves towards the northern boundary wall, feeling relieved at having rid himself of his main burden.

Mallory saw a tarmac road on the other side of some waste ground beyond the low wall that marked the northern edge of the cemetery and took a moment to watch and listen. The only sounds were distant *booms* from the direction of Baghdad accompanied by flashes of light but ahead was total blackness. He climbed over the wall and moved down a slight incline and onto the waste ground, looking left and right as he dodged across the narrow road before picking up speed on reaching the other side. He carried on without slowing down and covered several hundred metres before he stopped and lay down near what appeared to be a motorway running across his way ahead. He remembered a major artery north of the town, a road that ran from Baghdad to the Jordanian border, and then the sound of a distant vehicle reached his ears and he looked east to see a pair of flickering headlights in the distance.

Mallory's first thought was that it could be a coalition vehicle – but that was not necessarily good news. This was a war zone, at night, and alert and often nervous fingers were constantly poised on triggers, their owners ready to shoot at anything remotely suspicious. A lone figure in the darkness might invite an attack before any recognition was attempted. On the other hand, it would be unusual for a military vehicle to travel alone in a hostile environment and Mallory elected to remain where he was, hugging the ground until it passed.

The dark shape behind the bright headlights gradually took on

a form that was distinctly civilian and Mallory watched it as it drove on by and out of sight.

The motorway had two lanes either side of a meridian flanked by crash barriers and it would take Mallory a few seconds to cross. A thought struck him that the road might be watched. Still, the car had driven along unmolested. The other side of the road was in complete darkness and this was, he hoped, the final obstacle. Luck had remained with him so far and he needed it to stick around a little longer.

Mallory got to his feet, moved forward at a crouch and raised his injured foot over the first of the knee-high crash barriers. Pain shot through him as the edge of the tarmac dug into his wound but he did not falter. It then suddenly occurred to him that if troops were watching they would have night-vision aids and the AK47 with its uniquely curved magazine was unlike any weapon carried by coalition forces. They might allow a car to pass but a man with a gun would be an irresistible target. He held the weapon close to his body to remove it from his silhouette, ran to the meridian, climbed the double set of barriers, and hurried across the final stretch of tarmac, over the last barrier and down a sandy bank. Mallory did not slow and ran across a stretch of open ground, still feeling exposed and vulnerable, towards what looked like an earthwork that in the darkness appeared to be further away than it actually was. He was soon upon it, scrambling up a short incline where he dropped over the other side and found himself in a dry ditch. He moved along the earthwork for several metres before crawling back up and looking in the direction he had come from to see if he had been pursued: anyone following would be silhouetted by the glowing horizon beyond Fallujah. But there was no sign of movement and he slid down to the bottom of the ditch, scrambled up the other side and ran on across another flat open space.

A black scar appeared in front of him that did not quite look

like a road and as he drew closer it became a railway line that he had forgotten about. Mallory crossed the rails and pressed on into the darkness, his breathing becoming laboured, his dry mouth aching, his foot throbbing wildly. But the promise of freedom pushed him on, with every step making the prospect more of a reality.

Mallory passed through a line of bushes and found himself on the edge of what appeared to be an open area. He dropped to his knees beside a bush, utterly exhausted, and gulped in air through his sandpaper mouth. He could not remember ever being as exhausted: his only truly comparable experience had been during his commando course when he had run with a thirty-foot telegraph pole from Woodbury Common to the Lymptone camp, a six-mile race, sixty men, six poles, ten men on each. With two miles to go and despite his pole being down to just four men they were in the lead by a couple of hundred metres. But then, with under a mile to go, the man beside him dropped out, unable to keep up the pace and Mallory was left with the end of the pole to carry on his own. He began to see stars, almost collapsing under the physical stress and might have done so had he not seen the tops of the rugby posts that were the finishing line beyond some hedgerows a few hundred metres ahead. Those days seemed as far away as his early childhood at that moment.

Mallory decided the location would do and he pulled his SARBE from its pouch, took hold of a bright-orange cord on its side and pulled it, releasing a pin that activated the device. There was no sound and the only indication that the beacon was transmitting was a small flashing LED light. The transmitted signal would include his GPS position as well as his pre-programmed identity. He laid the Kalashnikov on the ground beside him and waited for the voice of the rescue crew informing him that his signal had been received and that they were on their way.

Mallory was supremely confident that he would be picked up some time that night. If there was one thing he had experience

of it was the Air Sea Rescue teams. As long as his SARBE was working, and they rarely failed, he was as good as home. Most passing aircraft, or an AWACS if one was in the area, which was likely, would be able to pick up the signal. The information would be passed on to the relevant operations room and the rescue mission would be set in motion.

An hour passed before the voice of a pilot brought Mallory's SARBE to life. He almost jumped when he heard it. He pressed the 'send' button and was horrified when he could not talk. His mouth, without a trace of saliva, could not form an intelligible word. It took what seemed an age before the pilot finally understood and informed him that they would be with him in approximately ten minutes.

Mallory got to his feet and several minutes later heard the distant drone of an aircraft engine. A minute after that he thought he could see a black speck in the sky to the west and although he could not be sure his eyes weren't playing tricks on him his ears were in no doubt. As the sound grew louder the suspicious speck became larger and formed into two separate objects which shortly after became silhouettes that he recognised: Blackhawks.

They flew towards him, one close behind the other and then they suddenly split up, one chopper dropping height while the other moved into a circling pattern above. Mallory knew that the higher craft would have a heavy machine gun mounted in its doorway to provide covering fire if the pick-up point came under attack.

The incoming craft covered the remaining distance in seconds and when the dust kicked up as it came into the hover Mallory ran towards it. Several figures jumped out of its side when it was a couple of feet off the ground and while two knelt in firing positions the others ran forward, took hold of Mallory and unceremoniously guided him back to the craft.

Seconds later they were all aboard and the helicopter lifted off and accelerated away.

‘You OK?’ one of Mallory’s rescuers asked in an American accent.

‘Fine, thanks,’ Mallory replied in his parched voice. They were US Special Forces – Delta, he suspected – though the Yanks also had guys who trained specifically for hostile extractions. One of them handed Mallory a bottle of water which he practically drained on his first hit. When he sat back, clutching the empty plastic bottle, his hand drifted to his thigh map-pocket and felt the bundle of money inside.

Thirty minutes later they had landed somewhere near Baghdad airport and Mallory was on his way to his accommodation. Worried about the bundle of money he had concealed in his pocket he had not mentioned his injury and expressed a desire to go to his basher where – he said – he badly needed the toilet and to change his clothes before his debrief, hinting that he’d had an accident in his trousers that needed to be taken care of. As soon as he’d secreted the money in his backpack by cutting into the padding and placing the cash inside to be stitched up later he had a shower, got changed and then made his way to the sickbay to have his wound seen to. After a hearty meal Mallory attended a debrief after which he was exonerated of any blame for having been left behind and, since no one had suffered any serious injuries and his crew’s Sea King had returned with only minor damage, the affair was quickly forgotten. The war was coming to a speedy end and the powers that be were preoccupied with preparations for the occupation.

Within five days Mallory was on an RAF flight back to the UK and his unit where he was immediately sent on leave after being congratulated by his RSM for his war efforts.

Mallory arrived at his apartment to discover that most of his furniture, including his television and stereo, had been cleaned out – not by burglars but by his former girlfriend. Under normal

circumstances Mallory would have been annoyed enough to go and look for her and demand an explanation since it was his money that had bought everything. But he decided to forget about it as he placed the bundle of dollars on the kitchen table, made a cup of tea, sat down and stared at his money. Chasing after Jenny would have been a hassle anyway and he preferred to focus his efforts on more important matters.

Mallory had checked the exchange rate at the first opportunity and calculated that his dollars were worth just over six thousand pounds sterling. Another calculation revealed that it was more than the Royal Marines had paid him after deductions for the period he had been at war. All he had to do now was find a way of changing it to pounds without drawing any attention to himself and then spend it. The best idea he could come up with, and quite an attractive one at that, was to go on holiday to the United States – Orlando, for instance – have a good time, buy some new technical stuff from the duty-free shop, change the rest to sterling on his way home and then buy a TV and some furniture. There wouldn't be much left after all that and Mallory wished he had stuffed another couple of bundles into his pockets.

Mallory thought about the ammunition box filled with money that he'd buried in the cemetery in Fallujah: a million dollars just waiting for him to dig up and bring home. But the only way he was going to be able to do that was to get over there – and that would require some planning.

The first step would be to find out which commando unit was going next to Iraq, specifically Baghdad, and then explore the chances of it making a trip to Fallujah, something which would probably be difficult if not impossible to find out in advance. He would then need to apply to join that unit, which of course he might not be permitted to do. And there was another even bigger problem. The Yanks were in the centre and north of Iraq and the Brits were in the south and it didn't take a genius to figure

out that those positions were unlikely to change. Even if by some remote chance Mallory could get to Fallujah he would still have to slip away from the rest of his troop without them knowing, dig up the box without being seen, conceal its contents and keep it secure until he was finally moved back to the UK. Each phase was fraught with impossible difficulties and if he was caught at any stage he could end up in jail for his troubles or at best lose the cash.

Mallory gave a long sigh as the possibilities of ever getting his hands on the money shrank – at least while he remained in the Marines.

As soon as the implication of that thought sank home it struck him that the only way he was ever going to get hold of the money was as a civilian. He needed freedom to go where he wanted, when he wanted, to go to Fallujah on his own terms, take as long as he wanted and decide how he was going to get out of the country with the money. The burning question he needed to answer was whether he really wanted to leave the Royal Marines and end a career that he had set his heart on since he was a boy.

Mallory got up and looked out of the window onto the field below where several youngsters were playing football. The thought of quitting the Marines didn't sit comfortably with him. He had planned on doing his full twenty-two years of service up to retirement before seeing what else the world had to offer. But now, out of the blue, here he was contemplating his resignation with only a quarter of his time done. It was a gamble on so many levels, not just on whether the money would still be in Fallujah when he got there but on whether that was more important than quitting his chosen career. But a million dollars was a lot of money, to be sure, enough to buy a damned nice house as well as a damned nice car.

Mallory decided to explore all the pros and cons and only

when he was satisfied that he had covered everything would he make a decision. It had to feel right and at that moment the notion of leaving the Marines did not. Perhaps it was just fear of the unknown.

But the period of indecision was not easy for Mallory. He tried at first to forget about the money – which turned out to be impossible – and then took to concentrating on the negative aspects of leaving a fine career in the Royal Marines simply to pursue a pile of cash. But the thought of the box in the graveyard would not let him go and tormented him endlessly. He didn't take the holiday to Orlando in the end. In the back of his mind he knew that if he did decide to leave the Marines he would need to finance his Fallujah operation.

When Mallory returned to work he was told to report to Recce Troop, the position he had originally longed for. But the satisfaction was no longer there. Finally, a month after his return from Iraq, he made the decision to resign. The money or the adventure of retrieving it dominated his thoughts and he knew that he would remain restless until he did something about it. It was only after he committed himself, when he walked into HQ Company, met with the duty clerk and asked for the necessary papers, that the thought of the cash in the graveyard stopped pestering him and he set about planning his expedition in earnest. But he was soon to acquire a whole new collection of concerns.

Mallory's initial research had already revealed that his mission was going to be more complicated than simply arriving in Iraq, digging up the box and leaving with it. The struggle between the various religious and political factions in the country as well as the general resistance to the coalition occupation had begun. There was an increase in crime and banditry due to the absence of law and order. Further research revealed that westerners were not permitted visas to enter the country unless they were employed by a certified Iraqi reconstruction contractor. But the Marines

were not going to let Mallory go for another ten months anyway, by which time he hoped Iraq would be back to normal. With luck, he could then go there on holiday, hire a car, buy a shovel, dig the money up at his leisure, take a tour of the country, go out by road through Turkey or Jordan and start spending his cash on a relaxing drive back through Europe.

Mallory saw it all as a great adventure and began to feel more relaxed about the whole thing. He started enjoying his work once again and appreciated the company of his colleagues more than ever, knowing that it was all soon to come to an end. And, of course, he spent many hours contemplating the delightful problem of how he was going to spend the money. What finally made everything much more worthwhile was the realisation that whatever happened, even after he'd got the money, he could always rejoin the Marines and pretty much take up where he'd left off. There'd even be an amusing exploit to tell his grandchildren. Mallory would be a winner whatever happened: he looked forward with relish to revisiting Fallujah and concluding the greatest adventure of his life.