

A close-up portrait of a man with a full, dark beard and mustache, and striking blue eyes. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. He is wearing a white t-shirt. The background is a plain, light grey color.

THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

HARNESS
FEAR
AND LIVE
WITHOUT
LIMITS

ANT
MIDDLETON

THE FEAR BUBBLE

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DEDICATION

For my wife and children, who have been there for me without fail: Emilie, Oakley, Shyla, Gabriel, Priseis and Bligh. You give me the driving force to become the best version of myself and to want to succeed at everything I do. You really are my everything. Never forget that.

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PROLOGUE

There were ten of us up there, single file up a narrow track of rock and ice. The going was hard, the incline steep. We'd been up and out of our sleeping bags since dawn, with heavy daypacks strapped to our backs, and were hungry and thirsty and tired. Toes were sore and fingers were numb. The freezing air dried our mouths. I'd never been so high off the ground. The climb was such that we were half-crawling, ankles bent, hands grabbing at anything that looked as if it might take our weight. There wasn't much time to look around and take in the view, but with every glimpse upwards I took I could sense the world getting bluer and bigger around us as the sky swelled into a high dome. With every movement of arm, leg and lung, we were leaving our everyday lives further behind and inching higher into the heavens. It felt rare and unsettling.

The further we climbed, up towards the mountain's famous pyramidal peak, the thinner the track became and the slower the going. Nobody was talking any more. There was no laddy banter or gruff words of encouragement among the men, only grunting and panting and the silence of intense concentration. As I pushed on, I kept reminding myself that we were walking in the steps of my mountaineering hero Edmund Hillary, who'd penetrated these glacial valleys, known hereabouts as 'cwms', and scaled these icy cliffs more than six decades ago. We were way above the birds, it seemed, intruding into the realm of the gods and playing by their rules. I tried not to focus on the height or the danger, although I could feel the fear as a kind of tense sickness in my gut. This was getting serious. A couple of steps to the right and you were off the mountain. Dead.

A crack. A cry.

'Shit!'

A rock the size of a cannonball flew past my face, missing my jaw by about half an inch. It was so close I could smell its cold metallic tang as it shot by. I lurched out of the way, skidding on the track, almost following the rock down. Above my head a brown boot scrabbled on the snowy scree for purchase. I looked down to see the rock being swallowed by the abyss, smacking and echoing as it bashed down the mountainside. An icy wind blew around my neck and face.

'You all right?' I shouted up.

The lad above me was gripping on to the mountainside, as if the earth itself were shaking. His cheeks were pale, his shoulders slumped, his gaze

rigid.

‘Yeah,’ he said. And then, with a little more assurance, ‘Yes, mate.’

I watched him steel himself and try swallow his dread. He turned to carry on.

‘Good man.’

He lifted his leg once again, trying to find a more secure foothold. But then he paused, his boot hovering mid-air. He sucked in tightly through his chapped lips, breath billowing out.

‘I’m coming down,’ he said. ‘It’s, er ... I’m, er ...’

I thought he was going to lose it. His breathing became rapid and he started looking all around him, as if surrounded by invisible buzzing demons.

‘Just take it slow,’ I shouted up.

As he picked his way past me, I pressed my body into the freezing incline. His fear was infectious. I wanted so badly to go with him. It was safe down there. There was tea and biscuits and shelter. What the fuck was I doing up here? What was the point? What was I trying to achieve? The mountain didn’t want us crawling up it like fleas, it was making that all too obvious. It was trying to shake us off, one by one. Who was I to think I could take it on? Who was I to think I could succeed where Hillary himself had struggled? How was I supposed to know where to put my feet? The guy in front of me had placed his foot on a rock that looked like it had been rooted in place for a thousand years, and it had nearly made him fall off the mountain and taken me with him.

‘What you doing, Midsy?’ came a frustrated voice from below. ‘Come on!’

I had to make a decision, one way or the other. I had to commit. Up? Or down?

Up.

I pushed myself back into a climbing position. The instant my body followed my mind’s instruction, something incredible happened. The entire mountain changed. It wasn’t trying to shake me off any more – it was pulling me towards it. Every rock had been put there, not to trick me, but to help me. When they worked loose from the mountainside and gave way, that wasn’t the mountain trying to kill me, that was the mountain telling me where not to put my feet. These icy gullies weren’t death slides, they were ladders. Look how beautiful it was up there. I’d never seen anything like it.

I'd never felt anything like I was feeling, right then. I would achieve this. I would fight the fear. I would use it like fuel. I would make it up there, to the top of the world, to the seat of the gods. I would conquer heaven.

CHAPTER 1

TAMING THE GHOST OF ME

Twenty Years Later

‘Light?’

‘Cheers, buddy.’

I took a few rapid, light puffs of my cigar and heard it crackle into life between my fingers. The smoke that licked the back of my throat was rich and smooth, almost spicy. I took a deeper draw and peered at its glowing end. You could taste that it was expensive. But was this really £400 worth of cigar? That would make it, what, five quid a puff? I settled more deeply into the leather club chair and drew again, this time luxuriating in the experience, allowing the smoke to slide out through my lips gradually and wreath about my face in silky ribbons. Before it dissipated, I took a sip of the rare single malt whisky my new barrister friend Ivan had also bought me, this time at the bargain price of £60 a shot.

‘So, how are you enjoying your new life?’ he asked me, his accent as cut-glass as the tumbler in my hand.

His wry expression told me he probably wasn’t expecting an answer. After all, wasn’t it obvious? To all outward appearances my new life was going brilliantly. I’d seen my face on billboards, and my latest TV show *Mutiny* had been broadcast to millions of viewers and enjoyed critical acclaim. If that wasn’t enough, I was in the middle of a sold-out tour of the UK. Every night, in a different town, I’d spend a couple of hours on stage, talking thousands of fans through some of my favourite moments, not just from *Mutiny* but from two series of *SAS: Who Dares Wins*. I’d then be whisked away in a black Mercedes with tinted windows to a five-star hotel where an ice-cold beer and twenty-four-hour room service were waiting for me.

And here I was being wined and dined by a top barrister in one of the most exclusive and secretive private members’ clubs in the world. If you’ve not heard of 5 Hertford Street, it’s because the owners like it that way. If you walked past it, you wouldn’t know it was there. It’s set in a warren of closely packed streets in Shepherd Market, Mayfair, a corner of the capital

that used to bristle with high-class vice and scandal but now, aside from a red light bulb or two that shines out of an upstairs window, is polished and prim and postcard perfect. Downstairs, I could hear the faint bass throb of music coming from Loulou's, its nightclub. Next door, the beautiful faces of London high society ate Sicilian prawns or duck with broccoli in the restaurant, their scrubbed and trimmed dogs at their side. This was where billionaires, moguls and the aristocracy of both Hollywood and Britain's most gilded families went for their Friday-night drinks. And tonight I was among them.

'So, you're enjoying it, I take it?' Ivan asked again.

'What's that?' I said.

'Is everything all right, Ant? You're miles away.'

'Oh, sorry, bud,' I smiled. 'Yeah, it's not bad. It's OK. I'm bedding in.'

Ivan was one of the elite. He fitted right in to this place, gliding over the sumptuously patterned carpets and past the heavy, gilt-framed paintings with graceful ease. The fact was, with his blue pinstriped Turnbull & Asser suit, his wide pale yellow tie rakishly unknotted and his long fringe swept back, he'd have fitted right in anywhere in the monied world – London, Singapore, Frankfurt or Dubai.

'Well, yes, I can quite imagine,' he said. 'It must be a rather different experience being entertained here than it was back in the mess.'

'The mess?'

'That's right, isn't it?' He swirled the golden liquid in his glass and absent-mindedly watched the lights dance across its surface. 'In the military. Where you ate. The mess. That is what you call it? I've always thought that rather odd.'

'Why odd?'

'Well, it's a joke, I take it. Irony. Military humour.' His eyes flicked up. 'I mean, you know, *are* they messy places? One would rather imagine not.'

Between us there was a small mahogany table on which sat a heavy, polished-iron ashtray in the shape of a leaf. I tapped my cigar onto its edge and found myself mentally weighing it. It was big. Hefty.

'It's French,' I told him. 'From the word "*mets*", meaning a dish or a portion of food. It's not because it's ...'

'Oh, is that so!' he said, laughing. 'Of course. Yes, I should have known. Yes, yes, how silly of me. The French.' He kind of half-winked in my direction. 'That was an impressive stab at a French accent there, by the

way, Ant. It felt, just for a moment, as if I'd been whisked away to the harbour at St Tropez.'

Yeah, that ashtray had to weigh a good three or four kilos. Maybe more. You could do some proper damage with that. Put a door in. In fact, you could put someone's head in with that thing. Easily. I'd use the bottom edge. Curl my fingers into the bowl, get some proper purchase on it and wear it like a knuckle-duster. *Wallop.*

'I grew up in France, as it happens,' I told him.

'In France? Well, I never. Whereabouts?'

'So I'm fluent in French.'

'Well, bravo,' he said, raising his glass. 'Cheers to you. And I do hope we can come to some arrangement over this company retreat in April. We'll fly you in first-class. It would be a real morale booster for the firm to have you come along and speak to the troops, even if they're not of quite the same physical calibre as the troops you're used to working with. Although, saying that, some of the chaps and chapesses in the office are terribly into the fitness scene – it's quite impossible to get them out of the gym at lunchtimes. But it gets harder as you get older, doesn't it? I expect this new phase of your career has come at just the right time for you. Even if you do miss the military life, when you get to our age, it's ... I mean, you're clearly in very fine shape. I try to keep in reasonably decent order myself. But the selection process. The SAS. Do people our age do it? People in their forties?'

'Ivan, mate, I'm thirty-seven,' I said.

'Of course you are. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to imply ... Of course you could still pass Selection. You'd fly through it. You've only got to see your television programmes ...' He was beginning to bluster.

'Ivan, mate, it's totally fine,' I said, laughing. 'Forget it. Fucking forties! What are you like?'

As he relaxed once again, he began telling me about his own fitness regime. No carbs after 6 p.m., forty-five minutes in his home gym three times a week, a personal trainer called Samson. As I listened, enjoying my cigar, I found myself beginning to wonder, what would happen if it all kicked off in a place like this? What if Isis came through the door? A lone shooter or a guy in a bomb vest? What would Ivan do? How would that waiter over there respond? Rugby tackle him? Go for his legs? Or shit