THE *SUNDAY TIMES* NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

THE POWER OF POSITIVE THINKING

ANT MIDDLETON

ZERO NEGATIVITY

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to you, the positive thinkers, the positive outlookers of life, and to those who possess the power of positivity and believe that anything can be achieved if you put your mind to it.

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INTRODUCTION

BULLETPROOF

IT COULD BE ANY NIGHT. We could be anywhere.

This one starts in a huge encampment out in the grim, grey, enemy-crawling desert. It's stuffed with millions upon millions of dollars of the most advanced military equipment known to man. During the day, hundreds of US personnel hurry about with their sleeves rolled up, their berets set just so and their regulation assault rifles slung over their shoulders. CIA operatives in tan chinos and sporting Oakley shades do their best to pretend they don't exist. All around us are massive hangars housing fully kitted-out Hawks, Apaches and Chinooks. This isn't a massive surprise. The gyms here are bigger than an entire British base.

There's an almost hallucinogenic difference between the US camp and my destination later tonight, a shabby, run-down compound deep in the desert. It's difficult to believe they exist in the same world, let alone the same country. For now, though, they're both shrouded by darkness, at that time when everything changes and objects lose the reassuring form they possessed in the day: the shadow cast by a dog is easily mistaken for a whole patrol of men, a dislodged stone sounds like a rifle shot.

We learned where we were going at a briefing two hours ago, and the following minutes have passed quickly. I'm absorbed by routines that have become deeply familiar to me. I check my kit, again and again and again. I know that if I make just one slip – a piece of carelessness in cleaning my weapon, an oversight when packing ammunition – I might as well be writing my own death sentence. I don't want my last thoughts on this planet to begin, 'If only …'

Once I'm sorted, I enter the coordinates of our target into my GPS. I check the map, looking for reference points. If I see a mountain, for instance, I'll want to remember its location so that when I see its triple peaks out of the corner of my right eye in the dark, I'll know we're heading in the right direction. After that, I look hard at every piece of intelligence that's come my way and stare at the buildings I'll soon be storming into. I commit every detail to memory, so I won't be surprised by a corridor that opens out unexpectedly or a door that leads nowhere.

I always have the same questions running through my head. What is my job? Where do I go first? Where can I expect to find armed guards? Are there civilians? When I see the target, how will I identify him? I try to break every element down until I've reached a point where I understand it completely. I have a visual mind. When I'm looking at a map there will come a moment when its contours levitate into three dimensions above the page.

When I've done all this, I run through the first plan, and for each key moment try to find an alternative in case something goes wrong. If this door won't open, how else will we get in? Secondary options? Try an entrance round the back? It's another form of visualisation. I try to imagine every single eventuality to the point where I almost have a muscle memory of it. When the action actually does unfold, it will be as if I've already experienced it.

The skill is not to overthink it or to overload yourself with more information than necessary. You need to stay nimble; you've got to be able to think on your feet. If you've absorbed too many details, your thinking will be rigid, undynamic. As Mike Tyson once said: 'Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.' When the shit hits the fan – as it inevitably will at some point – I know that I still have the foundations of the mission in my head. Everything else can be supplied by my training.

THE FIRST FEW times I went into combat I had a nervous feeling in the pit of my stomach that ended up destroying my appetite. It didn't last long. I don't stuff my face before setting out, but I have to make sure I'm fed and watered. Carbed up. The mission could last two or three hours. It could also unfold over two or three days.

Some people seek out others. I just want to be by myself and try to grab as much time alone as I can. I want to get into the zone, run the mission through my head again. Tonight I'm calm. This hasn't always been the way. There have been occasions when I was able to actually *see* my nerves. One night, before a mission that had very particular personal resonance for me, I remember how the adrenaline came on like a king tide. I could feel it in my veins, surging and throbbing in great liquid waves. I'd headed over to the hangar ahead of my comrades half an hour early, to give myself the chance to have a brew in the silence before it all kicked off. But as I dipped my spoon into the packet of sugar, I noticed it was shaking. Little granules were falling off its sides and back into the packet. I watched for a moment, focused on each crystal as it tumbled downwards, then looked up anxiously toward the hangar door. This was no good. I had to get myself under control.

I tried forcing myself to steady my breathing, slowing it down, deepening my draws of oxygen. But when I looked down, the spoon was still shaking. At that moment I heard footsteps. I glanced up. It was another soldier. Give it thirty seconds and there wouldn't be any sugar left on the fucking thing. The other guy's footsteps came closer towards me, echoing in the vast, dark hangar. As he approached, I felt a sudden rage at my weakness. It blasted through me, but I managed to control it. I allowed the fury to fill me up, every limb now engorged and primed, every muscle taut. A few years earlier, my anger would have taken over. Now I'd learned to use it like an injection of insanely powerful steroids. I was ten times stronger than I'd been a moment ago. A hundred times stronger. I looked at the spoon. It was almost still.

'Making a brew?' he asked.

'Yes, mate,' I said, looking up with a calm smile. 'Have we got any biscuits?'

I know that controlling my emotions is so important. I have no problem showing how I feel to others – I don't mind them knowing that I'm human and that I'm vulnerable – but in some situations it's selfish to unsettle others by exposing the worst of yourself. So whatever I'm thinking inside, I work hard to make sure nobody can guess that I'm anything other than relaxed and ready.

I SPEND A few more minutes alone in the hangar. Even now, at the beginning of a night that I know could well be my last, it's strange to be confronted by scenes that speak so strongly of another, more mundane kind of existence. It's also oddly reassuring, a reminder that no matter what happens later, life will go on without me.

Take the table in the corner. It's a sight that in all the years I've served in the forces I've somehow never been able to escape. Everywhere I go, it's exactly like this – an arrangement as British as the royal wave. The shitty table with the foldaway legs and the shiny brown wood-effect surface. The chipped mug full of spoons with the faded writing on it: HAPPY BIRTHDAY DAD or MG HOLDINGS LTD. The steel urn with the red light and the black power cord and the old taped-on Biro notice that warns 'CARE! HOT!', the trusty half-empty box of PG Tips, next to it the scaggy jar of Nescafe with the cracked lid. And, last but not least, the damp-stained, crumpled packet of Tate & Lyle, the sugar inside it rocky and discoloured after being dipped in by too many wet spoons. In many ways it's depressing, but there's something about this collection of tatty objects that never fails to make me smile.

After a while I'm joined by the rest of the team and we head out onto the night-shrouded pan. The silhouette of the Chinook is hard to make out at first, then slowly it comes into focus. Even standing idle, it projects brute power. With its rotors extended, it's a big, ugly beast: thirty metres long, almost six metres tall, and with guns bristling menacingly on either side. The helicopter has been stripped of all excess weight to aid manoeuvrability, its walls taken right back to the outer panels. Ungainly as it is, I feel a strange affection for the vehicle that has come to play such a big part in my life. More than the operations themselves, it's the minutes, hours even, that we spend in this machine that I remember most clearly. So much of what happens in combat is instinctive, with events often being over almost before they've begun. But here in the Chinook there's always time for me to think and reflect.

After we clamber aboard we all sit there in our team locations – our positions dictated by how we'll deploy as soon as we step off the aircraft. We sit evenly spaced on benches that run parallel to the helicopter's sides. It's more comfortable than you might think. Then the engine starts. You hear a loud, piercing noise, a wail so loud that for a moment it's almost unbearable, before it gives way to the heavy whirring of the rotors. I feel a tiny pulse of exhilaration as they pick up speed. Here we go again, I think. Then the Chinook's hatch door rises and we're lifted into the night air.

Whoomp whoomp whoomp.

Back at the base we were joking around, taking photos and laughing; far more relaxed, far more chilled out than you'd expect. We all know what we're doing, we know what we're capable of, so it creates a playfulness that often expresses itself in extremely bleak humour.

That mood is over now. The helicopter climbing up is the sign for me: shit's happening now, we're not turning back. I'm getting into the zone. I look around at the other men. They look back. Nobody says anything, but we exchange glances. Are we all here? Are we all good? Are we all ready?

Whoomp whoomp whoomp.

Moments pass, and when I next look up I see everyone lost in their own little zones, psyching themselves up. Some just stare into the middle distance, others have their

iPods on. It's a night mission, so the uncanniness of our environment is heightened by the fact that, inside and out, we're flying without lights in order to try to avoid unwanted attention. Looking out the window, I can see the dark silhouettes of the mountains that we're flying between, keeping as low – and as low key – as possible. I try to match them to the topography I'd seen on the map earlier in the evening. It's reassuring to have even a vague idea of where we are amid the all-consuming darkness.

Whoomp whoomp whoomp.

The rotors sound distant to me now, almost obliterated by the raw aggression pulsing through my headphones. It's cold at night. I'm swaddled in a big fucking jacket. It's XXXL, more duvet than coat. I listen to heavy metal – Slipknot, Metallica, Rage Against the Machine – at full volume. Drums crashing, guitars distorted and dirty, voices screaming. Wave upon wave of nasty, violent music that sends my heart racing, makes every nerve in my body feel alive.

Whoomp whoomp whoomp.

Forty minutes into the flight, a voice in my earpiece. It's the sergeant major: 'Ten-minute call.' My heart begins to thud. I put on my helmet, connect my night-vision goggles (NVGs) and begin getting used to seeing with them. They send me into a narrow, grainy world of green and black. When I first started to wear them they made me feel a bit like I was drunk, reeling about because my depth perception was way off and everything was tinged with a nauseous green fog. Now I can see as clearly with them as with my naked eyes. Once I get out there I know I'll be able to judge every crack in a door, every barely visible movement on the other side of a dark room, with incredible accuracy. My enemies will be struggling in the dark; I'll be able to see things down to the nearest millimetre.

Whoomp whoomp whoomp.

Only the briefest stretch of time separates us from the moment when we'll have to burst out of the helicopter and into the dust cloud it always kicks up as it lands. I've done it many times over, but the experience never fails to get my adrenaline surging. It's when we know we're at our most vulnerable. Eight to ten seconds when your world is reduced to a beige haze and the knowledge that every extra moment spent in it is an extra moment of danger. Propelled by the Chinook's downdraft you have to sprint, breath hoarse in your chest, legs burning with a sudden rush of lactic acid. You're not thinking of anything except escaping the dust cloud.

You're hyper-alert. It's almost like you don't miss a thing, as if all of your senses have been supercharged. You have to be able to absorb and assess every piece of information that's thrown at you, and you've got to do it in fractions of seconds.

And yet there's something euphoric about that time. People always say to me: Ant, you're an adrenaline junkie. They're wrong. I'm very calculated. I'm in control. I'm not a reckless person. But what I've realised is that there will always be part of me that's in love with walking that delicate line that separates life and death. I'm most alive during those beautiful, uncomplicated fragments of time when all the noise and mess falls away and your existence is stripped back to two stark outcomes. You're either going to live, or you're going to die. That's it. It's the purest form of life: to me, the ultimate form of peace. You run like fuck to reach the other side; and then you're through, ready to slide into a gun position.

Whoomp whoomp whoomp.

More time passes. I know how easy it would be to drift into a negative spiral. One thought leads to another. Before you know it, you're crippled, your head filled with doubt. You've ceased to live in the here and now and have instead stepped into a world of what ifs and maybes. I know that lots of people suffer from imposter syndrome. I don't. I'm here, in this helicopter, *because* I'm good at my job. If I start wondering whether I deserve it, if I let doubts creep in, I'll inhibit my ability to do what I do effectively. You don't want to be that guy who loses his nerve and pokes his head around the corner, in the process making himself the world's easiest target. As far as I'm concerned, when I hit the ground, I'm the best soldier in the world.

The first time I came under fire, all that ran through my head afterwards, when the mission was over, was: *That's it, that's it done.* I'd held my nerve, I didn't fall apart. Now it's become part of my everyday existence, although being shot at during the night will always remain strange to me. You don't see the bullets, or where they're coming from. But you hear the whipcrack as they zip past you. The louder the snap, the nearer the miss. As time goes by you learn to tell the different weapons apart. That's an AK-47; that's a heavy machine gun. Fuck, an RPG.

I don't let it affect me. I think to myself, if I do get hit then hopefully it'll be in the head and I won't know a fucking thing about it. If it's another part of my body, then I'll deal with it there and then. Worrying won't make me any safer. Far better to focus on the way I move, the way I use the cover. I'm fast, confident and aggressive. I believe I can do things that the majority of other people can't. Positive thinking. If I fixate on the bullets, I'll stop or I'll hide, and probably end up in more danger. I never go out there thinking I'll be shot. I've always believed I'll be getting back on that helicopter on the way home.

I'm sure the enemy can see my aggression. I'm sure too that it gets into their heads. If your enemy *looks* bulletproof, then the chances are that part of you might begin to believe they really are.

Whoomp whoomp whoomp.

The sergeant major signals the five-minute call. I switch into another zone. My hands run across all of my webbing and equipment. Checking. Checking again. Checking again. I'm still cool, still thinking calmly about what's ahead of us. Is my weapon's magazine in securely. Is it cocked? Do I have a round in the chamber? Safety catch is on.

My weapons feel as much part of my body as my hands or knees. There's something I can't fully explain to anyone else about the way I hold and nurture them. I've moulded my rifle with little bits of tape on its stock so that it fits perfectly into my arms; so perfectly that I can operate it with one hand. Once I go into combat I know exactly where it is at every moment. When I move, it moves. It never feels as if there's any conscious effort. Lifting my rifle is, to me, no different to stretching out a leg. I can carry it through tight spaces – narrow doors, tiny cubbyholes – without it ever snagging or catching on anything. It's my life. It's everything.

Two-minute call.

Whoomp whoomp whoomp.

I can feel the Chinook losing height, the sensation of rapid but controlled falling in the core of my body merging uncomfortably with my rising adrenaline. We all stand up, face the door and stabilise ourselves for landing by placing our hands shoulder to shoulder.

My mind flicks forward again, imagining those seconds before I kick the first door down. I don't fuck around; I don't overthink. I just commit. I know I have to get through it, no matter what. Holding back won't help me. What you're unbelievably conscious of in those seconds is the people around you. You're stacked up against the doorframe, about to launch yourself into a life-or-death situation, your two comrades sweeping to the other side of the entrance. You're all looking after each other. You need to know, with absolute, unshakeable confidence, that whatever happens to you, they'll get the job done, or take a bullet for you. These are men you've trained with, kicked doors down with. You know how they operate. The look doesn't last long. I nod, or squeeze a shoulder. *Let's fucking do this.*

A lot of the doors are shitty, worm-eaten relics. One kick and they smash almost into dust; you feel like Superman. Others you have to hammer away at – the tension rising with every blow that doesn't knock it over. But sometimes on those missions where everything is about discretion, once you get flowing you don't even need to kick them open. Keep it simple. If the door's already unlocked, then it probably doesn't need your size tens being put through it. There's you and another guy, lined up on the wall either side, whispering over our radio. 'Try the door.' The look … then, 'One, two, three.' Boom. You're through, your men behind you.

Whoomp whoomp whoomp.

I slip the jacket off, remove my headphones and get down on one knee. Another silent check of all the lads. Seeing them fills me with confidence. They're good guys. I know I can rely on them. I *have* to rely on them. I'm in that fucking zone. *Whoomp whoomp whoomp.* My NVGs are down over my eyes. The helicopter surges down to hit the ground, making my stomach feel as if it's trying to swallow my heart. No matter how many times I've been in this position, I've never quite got used to the speed with which these massive twin-rotored machines can be made to move. It's truly incredible. Their pilots hurl them around mid-air like they're plastic toys. If they see an RPG coming towards them, they can spin them on a dime, dancing elegantly out of its path.

Ready. Ready. Ready. Waiting for the tailgate to go down. A mechanical whirr, and the world outside comes steadily into view. The cold, dry, woody air of the desert rushes in, along with great billows of dust. We launch ourselves straight out.

GO.

ALL OF THIS feels like a long time ago. When I think about that part of my life, it sometimes seems as if all of these things were experienced by a completely different man. So much has happened since. I am no longer a warrior; I'm a TV presenter, an author and a businessman. I've experienced crushing lows, and incredible highs. I've been to prison, the top of Mount Everest, to places I'd never previously have believed possible. But there's a thread that connects that version of me to the one currently writing this book: positivity.

Although I didn't necessarily realise it back then, it was thinking positively that helped me to thrive in the armed forces. It was thinking positively that meant I could go into combat feeling as if I were bulletproof. And it's been the same ever since. My positive mentality has enabled me to overcome setbacks that might otherwise have been fatal; and it has allowed me to seize opportunities that another person might have let slip through their hands.

I was born positive. Maybe it was something I inherited from my father or absorbed from him in the short time I was with him on the planet. But my mindset is also the

result of the way my life has unfolded. Don't get me wrong – it's been a long, tough process. The growth of my positivity has been mirrored by the ways in which I've grown as a man. The missteps I've taken have been just as significant as the moments when I've looked to be flying. I wasn't the finished article when I was in the Special Forces, and I'm far from the finished article now, but I know I can look back at key moments in my life and tell myself that I've drawn the right lessons from them. I'm not sure I'd have been able to attain this knowledge had I not been through trials and tribulations, shit moments and low days, setbacks and outright failures.

Usually in this kind of book the author will tell you that he's sharing his mistakes so that you can avoid making the same ones yourself. I'm not going to do that in *Zero Negativity*. I want to show you that if you never make mistakes in life, you never make anything. Nobody in the history of the world has ever been perfect. Nobody. You'll never be perfect, and that's OK, that's human. But what you *can* become is the best version of yourself. Fucking up can be as valuable to your personal development as any university course. I needed to find myself in a position where I was making the same stupid mistakes over and over again – getting into fights, drinking heavily – before I reached rock bottom. And if I hadn't sunk to those depths, I know for sure that I wouldn't be in the position I'm in now.

There's nothing complex about my philosophy. If you tackle a negative situation with a positive mindset, you'll find a solution. If you tackle a positive situation with a positive mindset, then it's win–win: you'll be through the clouds. So why wouldn't you give yourself that built-in advantage? Why would you want to tackle anything in life with negativity? Having a negative mindset effectively means tying one hand behind your back.

Sometimes I ask people, 'Have you ever been excited about waking up?' Very often, I'll know the answer before it's even left their lips.

'No.'

'What, *never* in your life? Not even on Christmas Day when you were a kid?'

'Well, yeah, of course.'

'You were in a positive mindset then, because you were going to get presents and eat turkey. They're feelings you'll never forget.'

'For sure.'

'Then why don't you have them now? You don't put yourself in the right situations, you don't grab opportunities, you don't think positively.'

Most kids are naturally positive, whereas a lot of adults seem to have dedicated large portions of their life to deleting their capacity for positivity. We're told to worry about exams, we're told that we're not bringing up our children right, we're told that we should have a particular kind of job by a particular point in our life, we're told that we should be climbing up the property ladder. Conformity to these sorts of ideas is imposed upon us, and its effect is often very negative. You're expected to get in line with all these things, and you get so involved in doing so that you develop a one-track vision. We get so focused on the path that others have laid out in front of us that we forget to ever look up and take in the world around us.

We need to rediscover that excitement we felt when we were a kid, when the world appeared big and exciting, and everything seemed new and full of adventure. As most people get older, their horizons narrow; they tend to think more about what they can't do than what they can.

I'm different. I'll try to seize a positive from any negative situation that comes along. Sometimes it's obvious, sometimes it's not. Sometimes you don't think you've been able to extract any benefit until, having parked it up, three or four years down the line you realise its significance or how it connects to other elements in your life. If you're a positive person, you can leave negative experiences on the shelf, safe in the knowledge that they'll come in handy one day. They're there, but you don't let them distract you.

Over time I've trained my mind so that I approach every situation I'm in with a positive mindset. It comes naturally, without thinking. I've got to the point where I'm such a positive thinker that I'm permanently convinced that good things will come my way. If I told you what I see when I look ahead towards my future, you'd think I was an absolute madman. All I see are bright lights. And that was as true when I was in my prison cell, or sitting in the pissing wet of an Afghan hillside, as it is now.

When I left prison in 2013 I had £10.52 to my name. Nothing, really. But I was excited. I was at the bottom, and I knew I only had one way to go. I've got a rock-solid foundation now and I'm building, building, building. Charities, tech companies, clothing brands. I want everything life can give me.

I can see how some people might think I'm delusional. But I'm a realist. I believe I can get there. I can back everything up. I know I'm willing to work, sacrifice and suffer to get to the place I want to reach. I'm willing to try and fail, try and fail, try and fail until I get it right. I've got so much positive energy now that I sometimes feel as if you could run the National Grid off me.

What I want to do in this book is help you tap into the same.

Everything I do now – books, TV programmes, speaking tours – it's all because I want to help people develop and make them realise what they're capable of. I'm fascinated by people, I'm fascinated by their potential, and also by the fact that most of us only use a quarter of our power. I find that really frustrating. Negativity is the thing that, maybe more than any other factor, will put a limit on your ability to be the best version of yourself you can be.

The good news is that you're not doomed to negativity. There's a way out. Everybody can train themselves to think positively and tackle negative situations with a positive mindset. It just takes a concerted effort. You may not feel positive all the time – nobody does – and yet eventually you reach a point where you're automatically tackling every situation with a positive mindset. It takes time and it requires brutal honesty, but it's worth it. While I'd never say that you'll be invincible, I guarantee that not much will faze you.

Once you've mastered a positive mindset, you'll be *excited* to take on negative situations because you'll be desperate to see what their outcome will be. You'll see them as opportunities to discover where the limits of your potential lie and as chances to learn new skills, experience new things.

When a positive situation comes along, and you dive into it with a positive mindset, you'll feel like you're flying, or as if you've been transported to another dimension. I often experience extended phases of complete euphoria, riding the clouds with Zeus looking down on the world, endorphins racing through my veins. It can get to the point where I can't even get to sleep because I'm so excited about getting up the following morning and re-attacking life. This mood can last for weeks, each day speeding past in the blink of an eye.

Living a life with zero negativity has many physical benefits. It will encourage you to follow a healthier, more productive lifestyle. Studies show that positive people get more physical activity, eat a better diet and are less likely to smoke or drink alcohol to excess. In addition to this, current research shows that positive thinking can confer many health benefits, including lower rates of depression and psychological distress, greater resistance to the common cold and reduced risk of death from cardiovascular disease. They even think it will help you live longer. And the more positive you are, the better your relationships with everyone around you will be.

Being negative is isolating. Negative individuals don't tend to have many friends. By contrast, positivity attracts other people. When you're positive, you'll find that others just want to be around you – it's as if you've become magnetic. And being around somebody who exudes positivity is the most powerful thing. It can feel tiring at times because they'll be a mass of whirring energy, but you'll come away with excitement and inspiration pumping through your veins.

These are all good things, but it's the mental advantages positivity can offer that I'm most interested in, and which will be the focus of this book. In the chapters that follow I'll show you how to embrace failure and use it to your advantage, how to learn to see change as the foundation of your future success, how to develop resilience, how to deal with bullies online and offline, what it means to be a positive father, how to make and seize opportunities for yourself, and how to live a life with no regrets. I'm not here to tell you who to be, where you should live or what job you should do. All that is up to you. What I do want to do, however, is to give you the tools you need to become the best possible version of yourself.

One last thing. My voice isn't the only one you'll hear in these pages. Each chapter will feature my wife Emilie's take on whichever subject I've been talking about. My life has been improved a million times over by her kind, measured, no-bullshit perspective. I'm sure that yours will be too.

CHAPTER 1

I KNOW WHO I AM

AHEAD OF SERIES 4 of *SAS: Who Dares Wins*, one of the producers asked me in for a meeting. 'Ant,' she said, 'how do you feel about us changing things up a bit?'

Not long before we met, the British Army had announced that, from that point on, women would be allowed to apply for every single role in the military, including combat roles, with the Royal Marines doing likewise. For the first time in its history, recruitment would be decided by ability alone, and gender wouldn't have anything to do with it. The producer had suggested that we should follow suit and include female contestants.

Initially, every instinct told me to steer clear. 'I'm not sure,' I told her. 'This isn't for us to do. It's going to be complex – maybe it would be better if we left this to the army and Marines?'

I could see my producer was still thinking about it. Then she surprised me by asking me what it was I looked for in recruits for the show.

This was an easy one to answer: 'I'm looking for all-round, balanced individuals.' As soon as I said it, I realised something: that last word. It doesn't matter if it's a male or female – it's about an *individual*. What's most important is that they're somebody who knows themselves better than anybody else; somebody who knows their strengths, but who also acknowledges that they have weaknesses and insecurities. Within hours of the start of filming I saw how tough, driven and resilient the female contestants were. It was eye-opening to watch the way they threw themselves heart and soul into every challenge. They fought as hard as the men, maybe harder. I instantly regretted my original reluctance. Having women alongside men added a completely different dimension to the programme.

The whole show is about putting all the contestants under a microscope, exposing them to such high levels of stress that they're forced to confront elements of their personality that they've tried to keep hidden. Many discover talents within themselves that they never knew existed, others are surprised to find fault lines that, under pressure, start to crack apart. There's no contestant, no matter how far into the competition they get, who comes away without a greater understanding of every aspect of their personality. What I realised was that I still had lots to learn too.

If there was any positive to be gained from the upheaval and distress of my early years, it was that during that period I picked up the habit of self-reflection. Like the men and women trying to get through to the end of *SAS: Who Dares Wins*, an intense period of disorientation and discomfort helped me gain a new knowledge of myself. If I'd had a more normal upbringing, I bet I'd have continued on a happy, oblivious path, like most kids.

Instead, there was my father's death, and its unsettling, disorienting aftermath, when within days my mum married a new man, Dean, and every detail about Dad was wiped from our lives. Even his picture was taken off the walls. There were some days when it could seem as if he'd never existed at all. Or, at least, that's what the adults in our house appeared to want us to pretend. His money was still good, though. The family lived it up for a bit in Portsmouth, using his life insurance payout, which took us from a council house to a big fancy home and private schools. Then everything turned upside again in the blink of an eye.

It was never actually clear to me and my siblings what prompted the sudden move to another country. There was a feud of some kind between my mum's and late dad's sides of my family. We were mostly protected from it, but we could all tell that something was going on off stage. So perhaps that had something to do with it.

One cold, damp winter's day when I was nine, my mum picked me up from school early in the afternoon. I was a bit surprised as she didn't normally come at this time, so I asked her what was going on. She said, 'Dean's patio firm has burned down.' She was strangely calm and matter of fact. Even at that age I was knocked a bit off balance by this.

'What do you mean?'

'It's all gone, burned to the ground.'

We drove over to the factory. Cinders and ash were everywhere. The fire brigade had already been and so some things were only half-burned, just about standing. In the middle of it all was my stepdad Dean. He was clearly distressed, picking up horribly stained patio slabs and then throwing them down in disgust. He kept on saying, 'All that work. All that work.'

Apparently there had been an electrical fault. With the business literally up in flames, Dean and my mum decided that when the insurance money came through, they would move the whole family off to rural France.

Portsmouth is a working city. It's busy and vibrant, full of builders, bricklayers and scaffolders. And it's as British as they come. Going from there to a small village in Normandy was a lot for us to take in. All of a sudden we'd swapped the densely packed bungalows and villas of England's south coast for rambling open countryside. I'd been used to crowded cul-de-sacs, bustling high streets, the chatter of passers-by. Now we were surrounded by endless land, space and quiet.

Our new home was an ancient farm with a huge barn next to it. Dean threw himself into remaking the whole house, which was in a fucking state, almost a wreck. In those first few months while he tried to make it liveable, we slept and ate in caravans that were parked up in the barn.

That was when it all hit me. I remember asking myself: where did the good life go? How come we're living in a *barn*? You can deal with change when it's a question of moving two streets, even two towns, away. But starting your whole life again? That's something else, especially when, like me, you're still grieving for a dead father. There were other strange things that I couldn't get my head around. We were eating pasta and sweetcorn for breakfast, lunch and dinner. I was being dressed in hand-me-down shoes and clothes from my brothers. And the adults were driving a shitty old car that occasionally would simply refuse to start. But on the other hand, the house Dean was working on was massive.

To begin with, this strangeness was compounded by the exhilarating freedom my brothers and I discovered in our newfound isolation. We'd moved in summer, and since Dean and our mum were so focused on getting things up and running, we were given the run of the fields around the house. Nobody told us what we could or couldn't do. Even sleeping in a caravan was like an adventure after suburban Portsmouth.

And then it all came to an end. The threat of going to a French Catholic school had hung over us right through July and August, but we'd managed to shove it to the backs of our minds. I didn't speak a word of French, not even stuff like *bonjour* or *au revoir*. We were also going to be the first English children to ever attend the school. New kids are always treated like they're carrying a disease – surely the fact that we were foreign would make that even worse.

On the first day of school we were late – the fucking car wouldn't start. I can vividly remember going into the classroom. I walked in and there was a moment of silence. Every single pair of eyes in the classroom bored right into me. The way those rows of kids were staring at me – it was as if I'd murdered somebody. My cheeks went red, but it was going to get worse. On the way in, once it had become clear that we were going to be late, I'd asked my two older brothers how to explain that we'd had the problem with the car. They told me, 'Just say, "*voiture kaput*".' This would have been good advice, but what they hadn't told me was that you have to pronounce '*kaput*' as 'kapoot'. If you say 'kapot', people will think you're saying '*capote*', which is a French word for condom.

I went into the classroom in the middle of a French lesson being taught by Monsieur Laurent, the headmaster, who was bald, with glasses and a polo neck – he looked as French as you like – and who ran the school along with his wife (because it was a Catholic school, the majority of the staff were nuns, something that added an extra layer of weirdness as I walked in). Madame Laurent was known as the good cop, while her husband was the bad cop. The tradition there was that if you were late, you had to stand up in front of the class and explain why. Schools are stricter in France, especially religious ones. I was dragged up in front of the blackboard, and then Monsieur Laurent spoke some words in French to me. I looked blankly back at him. I had no idea what he was saying. He repeated his question, in English this time: 'Why were you late?'

That's when I said the only French words I knew: '*Voiture kaput*.' Except, of course, not knowing any better, I said 'kapot'. The whole class burst into laughter, and I just stood there, bewildered, with no idea what was going on. Then Monsieur Laurent put me out of my misery and escorted me to my chair. I sat there humiliated and angry, and increasingly anxious about what was to come next.

It was the longest day of my life. Everything was strange. Everything was a challenge. Going into the playground that very first break time I found that I was an object of fascination. Most of the other kids crowding around me had never met anyone from England. This was La Manche, Normandy, a place where a lost cow or a surprisingly big chicken could end up as the talk of the town. It was two hundred miles in distance, and about a century in time, from Paris.

To them I was a freakshow. One minute they were all laughing at me, the next they were firing a million incomprehensible questions in my direction. One thing they kept asking me was if I wanted to play '*babyfoot*'. I now know that this means table football, but at the time I thought they were warning me that we'd be having baby food for lunch. So when it was time for the rest of the kids to go to the cafeteria, I just found somewhere to hide. Going hungry seemed to me a better option than cramming mush down my throat.

I remember crouching down, asking myself again and again, 'What the *fuck* is going on?'