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I didn't like it at all.

It was all too damn easy. A small voice in my head was nagging away, telling me this was wrong, and my instincts rarely were. Like a wary animal, I could almost smell the scent of danger in the chill summer night air.

Yet the large English suburban house and garden I was viewing through the small image-intensifying night-sight could not have appeared more tranquil. The optical device jacked up the ambient light to create a ghostly green and white image that was something akin to that of a strong full moon.

All the house lights had been off since eleven o'clock, and that had been nearly an hour earlier. Mullah Reda Rashid was a man of habit.

Every day for the past five that I had been watching him, the imam had retired at that time to pray in his bedroom, one final act of worship before sleeping. Every morning he rose at five. What looked like black tea was taken to him by one of the two young male theology students who shared the house with him. Then one of them would drive Mullah Reda to the nearby mosque in time to take morning prayers at six. Every night he would be driven home again at around seven-thirty, when he would eat the evening meal that had been prepared for him.

After supper, the cleric would potter around in his extensive garden, lovingly pruning roses and watering the potted plants. As the light faded, he would return indoors and work on his laptop until bedtime. Very occasionally he would watch a television soap or catch the news.

That was the routine. There was nothing suspicious about it all.

According to Lassiter, my liaison officer at MI5, the imam was known as a soft-spoken, mild-mannered, kindly moderate cleric with a generous sense of humour. It had even earned him the affectionate nickname of the ‘Merry Mullah’ amongst some of his congregation. But then I’d known Joe Lassiter for a long time, long enough to realize that he liked to hold his cards close to his chest and could be very possessive of his little pile of secrets.

So why, I had asked him, were government funds being allocated to a trusted private investigator and former soldier like me to keep such a man under costly surveillance? Lassiter had pulled one of those infuriating, enigmatic little smiles of his.

‘Listen, Phil, if Mullah Reda is such an innocent and peace-loving cleric,’ he replied, ‘we have to ask ourselves why he surrounds himself with high-security fencing and has CCTV cameras installed? And why have two Dobermanns wandering around loose in the grounds of a grand house he can’t possibly afford – given what we know about his financial circumstances?’

That was all I got from Lassiter. Of course, there was more to it than that, but it was clear that I wasn’t going to be told what.

I was just a humble ‘alongsider’ as we are known in the intelligence trade, usually former military or police officers, with impeccable security credentials, who are hired as freelancers in low-priority cases to ease the Security Service’s workload. And I knew that since the 9/11 disaster, when members of the al-Qaeda terrorist network flew two hijacked airliners into the Twin Towers in New York, MI5’s resources had been stretched to breaking point and beyond.

Then, in July 2005, it all moved much closer to home with the deadly, co-ordinated London bombings.

The trouble was, there was no quick-fix available. All the British intelligence agencies had been run down since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the uneasy but ongoing peace in

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Northern Ireland. Of course, they all knew about the threat from the Islamic fundamentalist movement, which came to be called al-Qaeda by the Americans, but it hadn't been given quite the high priority it deserved. Then 9/11 changed all that, big time.

But MI5 and the Secret Intelligence Service, MI6, which operates overseas, were in a poor position to infiltrate the Arab and Asian communities at home and abroad to gain the vital information needed to protect British interests. In desperation they tried to recruit staff from the ethnic minorities in the UK, but met with little success.

Gradually it became clear that many more young Muslims than had first been realized were being sucked into the terror networks in Britain. So the number of possible suspects needing investigation just grew and grew, and grew.

That, I guessed, was why Lassiter had given Mullah Reda to me to have a look at. I wasn't complaining. The money was good and, by God, didn't I need it just now!

I repositioned myself in the tree, trying to get a little more comfortable. It was going to be a long and no doubt fruitless night.

The tree, an oak, had probably been standing there for three hundred years – long before the 1930s house had been built and the garden fenced it in. I'd had to do my squirrel act, using a lightweight ladder to reach the branches of an adjacent chestnut tree on the outside of the garden. After hauling the ladder up after me and securing it amongst the leaves, I'd crawled out onto a bough, then swung myself precariously across onto a branch of the oak where they crossed over each other.

I hadn't done that sort of thing for years, even as a sniper in the Royal Marines, and there's no bloody way I'd have considered it had there been any other position that gave me both the view and cover I needed. Although I'd learned to cope with it in my military life, I didn't like heights and, at forty-three, I knew I was definitely too old for this sort of thing. It was a long way down and the ground was bone-hard.

I'd just raised the night-sight to my eye for a quick check on the darkened house when a movement on the lawn caught my attention. A shadow appeared to detach itself from one of the low evergreen shrubs and dart across the lawn and patio, past the closed French windows. It was so quick I barely had time to realize that it wasn't a cat but an urban fox.

Even as that registered, dazzling light exploded in my eyes and head like the Second Coming. The sudden blaze from the thermally triggered security lights was literally blinding as it was magnified through the night-sight, seemingly burning into my retinas. I'm sure I gasped aloud as I dropped the device into my lap, trying to steady myself on the branch.

Then the air was filled with the menacing yap of dogs, as the two huge Dobermanns rounded the corner of the house, neck-and-neck, each in a frenzy to find the intruder before the other. One pulled up short, salivating in his anticipation of prey, foam streaking from its powerful jaws. It halted at the shrub from which the fox had emerged. The second dog slowed and turned, watching its kennel mate as the creature rapidly began to follow the scent trail across the lawn towards the patio. The two of them vanished from my view, but then the barking began again.

That was when the light came on in the main living room and the French doors were suddenly thrown open. Mullah Reda's two theology students emerged, looking decidedly anxious as they rapidly surveyed the floodlit garden.

I was surprised they were still fully dressed as all the house lights had been out for some time. But what was much more disconcerting was that they were both carrying automatic pistols and looked as though they knew how to use them.

Instinctively I drew back a little into the leafy cover of the oak. I was used to doing surveillance work as a sniper when I held all the cards and was armed to the teeth. Like this I felt as naked and vulnerable as a new-born babe. I thanked God I'd made the decision to dig out my old army 'ghillie', a special hooded camouflage overall draped with naturally coloured hessian strips. It was designed for snipers, with fitments that allowed

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them to attach additional natural foliage. Ghillie-suits were named after the Scottish estate gamekeepers who first came up with the idea in their fight against poachers at the turn of the twentieth century. And to think I'd almost considered it would be over the top for a low-priority civvy assignment.

And just how wrong had I been? Very, it seemed now, as Mullah Reda also emerged from the French windows, wearing his white tunic and lacy skullcap. So he hadn't gone to bed either. Seemed like I'd made one dangerous misjudgement after another.

'Probably just a cat,' I heard one of the students say.

The other one nodded. 'I think so, Imam, there was nothing on the cameras.'

But Mullah Reda didn't look so convinced and scratched at his beard. 'Don't be too certain, we cannot afford mistakes tonight,' he warned. 'And remember, if we are being watched, it will be by professionals.'

God, that was a joke! Me stuck up a tree with no self-protection, no back-up and my only form of communication was a mobile phone with the battery on the blink.

'Then we'd better do a thorough search,' the first student decided.

'I think that is best,' Mullah Reda agreed. 'And let the dogs have a good sniff around.'

The cleric returned inside the house while his two henchmen walked off cautiously in opposite directions to circle the house, their automatics at the ready.

It was a tense few minutes up in the tree as I hardly dared breathe, watching and waiting tensely, my leg muscles starting to cramp and a niggling tickle trying to develop at the back of my throat. The desire to cough just grew and grew until it almost took on the form of torture. I hardly knew what to do with myself.

At last the two students returned, the dogs now back on the leash. One of the hounds kept looking in my direction, I'm sure, but thank God it didn't bark or growl. Maybe its head was still filled with thoughts of the fox that got away.

They took the dogs inside, closed the French windows behind them, and drew the curtains. This time the lights stayed on.

I felt my shoulders relax and my lungs begin to work again. I cleared my throat at last, and considered what to do.

I had Lassiter's private mobile number, but didn't think he'd appreciate a call at this time of night. All I had to tell him was confirmation that Mullah Reda didn't seem as innocent as his reputation suggested, and his two theology students were tooled up and acting as minders. I figured that could wait until the morning.

It would probably mean he'd now get authorization to put MI5's own expert 'watchers' on the case. So I was probably just about to put myself out of a job.

In fact, knowing that there were actually armed men in the house, I thought it over and decided that probably discretion was the better part of valour. I'd give it another hour and, if everything remained quiet, I'd call it a night and withdraw from my leafy eyrie.

Of course, to do that I'd prefer that the house floodlights be turned off but, irritatingly, they remained on. Perhaps the minders were still watching on the camera monitor for signs of an intruder.

As I waited my mind wandered; I was aware of my eyelids becoming heavy with fatigue. Forcing myself to concentrate, I glanced at my watch. I couldn't believe it; only half an hour had passed.

Just then I noticed the headlights of a car as it turned into the residential avenue below me. It was closely followed by another. The first car slowed as it approached Mullah Reda's house, before turning into the space in front of the electric gates. The second car stopped behind it.

Suddenly there was movement at the house. The double front doors opened and the two minders appeared under the ornate portico at the top of a short flight of terracotta steps. Then the electric gates slid silently back to admit the two vehicles while the two minders advanced to meet the new arrivals. But they were taking no chances, their automatic pistols kept at the ready.

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I reached for my digital camera with the zoom lens.

Both cars were older Mercedes saloon models with darkened windows. All the doors were thrown open at virtually the same time and the gravel drive was suddenly filled with people. I quickly counted eight. All were male and most had swarthy, dark features that suggested either Middle East or Asian origins. Everyone wore Western-style clothes, two older men in sharp, expensive suits and the rest dressed in jeans, sports tops and baseball caps. Two of the younger men made no attempt to conceal the Ingram mini-machine guns they carried.

I tried to snap the older men first, then moved on to the bodyguards. The group paused for a moment, confronting Mullah Reda's two minders. Both parties seemed tense and uncertain, eyeing each other suspiciously. Then the brief stand-off ended as everyone seemed to decide that all was well. Reda's two minders turned and led the way back inside the house.

I thought I'd got good shots of the older Arabs, but I only managed to frame three of the bodyguards before they had their backs to me. Even so, my guess was that the peaks of the baseball caps would prevent positive identification.

The front door shut, one of Reda's minders and one of the newly arrived bodyguards remaining outside as sentries. Annoyingly, the garden floodlights remained on as the soft, summer night silence settled in again.

Clearly, something big was going down here. It was obviously some sort of secret meeting between armed Arab or Asian groups in the suburbs of Birmingham in the middle of the night. Maybe they were terror cells, maybe criminal gangs. Either way, Lassiter had to be informed. But if I made a move with the arc lights on, I'd certainly be spotted and would be a sitting target . . . or rather a falling one with a forty foot drop. If I used the mobile phone in the tree, there was a serious risk that the sentries would hear me as sound was carrying well in this still night air.

Dammit, a text message. I never used them, hated them. Texts were for kids who couldn't afford their phone bills. Now I

wished I'd practised more after my secretary Kate had explained it to me, because I was still all fingers and thumbs. It would take forever for me to send a comprehensive message.

I'd just have to risk making the call. I took the mobile from my pocket . . . the screen lit up, which meant at least the battery was working, even if it was down to just one bar.

I scrolled to Lassiter's number and called.

But I wasn't hopeful as it began to ring. Lassiter would be asleep and might not even hear the ring tone, assuming he'd remembered to leave it on.

So it came as a welcome surprise when he seemed to snatch it up. 'Phil, you okay?' He sounded wide awake, and concerned.

'Yes,' I whispered. 'Something's going down here.'

'Sorry,' he replied. 'Can't hear you very well. Speak up.'

Bloody idiot, I thought. 'Can't, I'm in the OP and may be heard.'

'Oh yes, of course. What's going down?'

'Reda's two minders are tooled up and two cars have arrived for a late-night meeting of some sort. They are armed too.'

'Two Mercedes?'

That threw me. 'Er, yes. Do you want the reg numbers?'

'Won't be necessary. There are two visitors, yes?'

'Eight. Two older guys in suits, Arabs, I think. And six younger men.'

'Yes, their bodyguards.'

'What the hell's going on, Joe? You seem to know all about this.'

'I'll explain later. You just stay put.'

'Joe—!'

'Trust me.' And the line went dead.

Jesus, what was all this about? Stay put, he'd said, as if I had an option.

I'd been distracted and failed to notice that the two young Arabs on the front door were moving down the steps and walking very slowly in my direction. They were frowning, heads cocked to one side as if trying to hear something. And I had a



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damned good idea what. Mostly their eyes were scanning the shadowy shrubs, but occasionally they glanced up at the trees. Suddenly one of them appeared to be staring straight at me. Then he turned his head away and I breathed again. Once more in my life I'd been saved by the ghillie suit, its rough patterning and added oak sprigs merging with the leaves of the tree to break up my recognizable human shape.

'You sure it was a voice?' one of them said. He was now standing right underneath me.

'Sounded like "Joe".'

'Or an owl?'

The other one shrugged. 'There was an owl around earlier.'

That devilish tickle in my throat returned dead on cue.

It was then that all three of us heard the racing V8 engines and the complaining squeal of tyres as the first of a line of vehicles swung into the residential avenue. Below me, the two men looked at each other uncertainly.

But they could not see what I could see from my perch. The leading white Range Rover, with its reinforced cow-fenders and mesh-covered windscreen, accelerated in a tight arc at the front of the garden. The driver pushed his right foot to the floor and the nose of the vehicle smashed into the electric gate with a deafening crash, ripping the steel bars from their mountings and driving them forward like two giant bat's wings.

Half a dozen more police vehicles, cars and people carriers, rushed in through the demolished gateway and fanned out on either side of the lead Range Rover. Suddenly the driveway was filled with armed police in blue body armour and NATO-style helmets, carrying Glock automatics or Heckler & Koch sub-machine guns. It was clearly a well-rehearsed manoeuvre as dozens of men broke out into prearranged groups. One headed for the front door, including two burly officers who carried a massive steel battering ram between them. Two other groups split right and left to encircle the house, whilst the fourth settled into support and sniper positions with Enfield Enforcer rifles, using their vehicles' engine blocks to provide hard cover.

Immediately the onslaught began, windows shattering with well-aimed single rounds to allow the follow-up launch of gas and smoke grenades. The mayhem inside could be imagined, the sudden burst of disorientating fog and the acrid, choking fumes. All this gave the assault teams vital seconds to launch their main attack through the lower windows, which followed the ear-piercing screech and blinding flash of stun-grenades.

I'd been so taken aback by events that it took a few moments for it to dawn on me that this had all been set up. Lassiter must have had Special Branch and specialist armed-response teams sitting at the end of the road in anticipation of my call. I'd been set up and almost fed to the bloody lions.

Of course, the whole operation had only taken a few seconds. It was very professional and the speed of the operation had been awesome, but there was a developing hazard of which the police were totally unaware.

Immediately beneath me, the two startled gunmen were frozen in surprise, gawping with their mouths open at the sudden start of the police assault. But as soon as it became clear to them what was happening, their evident terrorist training kicked in. I'd little doubt they'd be happy to take the short cut to heaven if they could take half-a-dozen infidel coppers with them. They didn't even hesitate or seek cover before they raised their weapons in unison. They'd left me no choice.

'ARMED HOSTILES!' I bawled suddenly and as loudly as I could. 'OVER HERE!'

A couple of officers in the support group heard me, and turned their heads in my direction. At the same time the two gunmen below me looked up, startled.

Oh shit, I thought as I saw the automatic of Reda's minder aimed at me.

'ARMED POLICE!' someone yelled from the drive. 'HALT OR WE FIRE!'

The muzzle flash, discharge and whistling bullet from the minder's automatic were a simultaneous blur of sound and vision, along with a sharp razor-burn sensation in my left bicep.

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Half-a-dozen rounds of fire burst raggedly from the police support group and the two gunmen beneath me dropped instantly as if their legs had been chopped from under them.

I put my right hand to the left arm of the hessian ghillie, saw the ragged hole and the blood on my palm. It dripped solemnly down onto the two corpses below me.

Clenching my fist and working my fingers, I tried to determine how bad the damage was. Everything seemed to be functioning. It must be a flesh wound. My lucky day.

Six officers raced across the lawn towards the bodies beneath the tree. As they approached, two held back to cover the remaining four as they pounced on the corpses, not knowing for certain they were dead but taking no chances anyway. Slack arms were wrenched hard up behind their backs and their wrists snapped into PlastiCuff shackles. There was no resistance. Only then were the bodies carefully turned over and the injuries inspected. The police caution was well vindicated, as one officer detached something from the belt of one of the dead and stood up.

‘What is it?’ asked his colleague.

The officer held it up. It was a hand grenade. ‘Would have taken us with ’em given half a chance.’

The other man nodded, glancing around the shrubbery. ‘Who the hell shouted that warning?’

‘God knows – but I’m fucking glad he did.’

This was tricky. Although there’d been no gunfire from the house, the noise and confusion continued as the room clearance began. The police team beneath me had just been shot at, their blood was up and they would be on a fearsome adrenalin rush. If I was suddenly spotted, there could be an immediate reflex reaction before anyone stopped to think or ask themselves a question.

I made a snap decision. ‘DON’T SHOOT!’ I yelled. ‘SECURITY SERVICE! REPEAT DON’T SHOOT!’

The six men looked up, Heckler & Kochs pointed, a torch-beam flashing in my face. ‘What the fuck . . .?’

I forced a smile. 'Covert OP,' I explained.

The guns stayed pointed. After a tense pause, the lead officer said, 'Throw down your weapon.'

That was a good one. 'Don't have any friggin' weapons, officer. This is a surveillance operation.'

Again the guns stayed pointed. There was another hesitation. 'You'd better get down, mate, we'll have to check you out.'

That was when I noticed Lassiter. He was trudging across the lawn, a dumpy hunched figure in a navy summer raincoat and dark fedora hat, like a man who carried the weight of the world's problems on his shoulders. But he also seemed oblivious to the fact he was in the middle of an armed police operation.

He came to a halt behind the semicircle of policemen and looked up at me. There was a deadpan expression on his face as he said in that slightly squeaky voice of his, 'It's all right, gentlemen, he's one of mine.'

The lead officer looked relieved. 'Right, sir. But we'll probably have to call him as a witness to the Coroner's Court.'

'I don't think so,' Lassiter replied quietly. 'But then you can always ask.'

Things seemed to have quietened down at the house and some members of the assault teams were starting to emerge. I recognized Mullah Reda and some of his visitors, who were now handcuffed and being bundled into the white police vans.

As the officers below me waited for the arrival of the scene-of-crime specialists, Joe Lassiter came closer and looked up again, with that oval face that always reminded me of a pumpkin. I could see his eyes squinting through his specs.

'Look like the Cheshire Cat perched up there,' he said, smiling for the first time.

I was angry enough without that. 'Do I look like I'm bloody grinning?'

'Who rattled your cage?'

'You, as usual,' I retorted.

He ignored that and proceeded to light a cigarette. 'Anyway, Phil, well done,' he said absently. 'Better come down from there.'

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I said, 'We need to talk.'

'Sure, tomorrow.'

I knew Lassiter well enough to know that, if it suited him, tomorrow never came. He could be as elusive as a shadow. 'No, now. I've some questions that need answering.'

He gave a pained expression. 'I'm a little busy just now, Phil, as you can see.'

'Not good enough, Joe.'

He sighed. 'Tell you what, I'll come round and see you as soon as I've wrapped up here.'

'Don't feed me that bullshit, Joe,' I warned. 'I'm not in the mood.'

'No, I promise. Grandmother's grave and all that. You still staying at that travel lodge on the outskirts?' He didn't bother to hide his disdain. That didn't bother me, Joe Lassiter didn't have a wife divorcing him and milking him for every penny he had. I couldn't afford to be proud, I needed to save money wherever I could.

'I'll give you a couple of hours—' I began but the sentence was cut off by the sudden blast of an explosion.

It blew out a couple of upstairs windows, a crystal cloud of glass floating momentarily in the arc-light glare, and sent roof tiles spinning into orbit like demented Frisbees. Following the initial blinding fireflash, I could see the flames raging within the building and the acrid smoke start to tumble out into the night. My blood went cold.

'Holy Mother,' I heard Lassiter mutter below me, 'that's all we need, a bloody booby trap.'

I called down, 'That was Reda's study, just next to the bedroom.'

But I don't know if Lassiter heard, because he started walking away towards the house.

I called after him, 'Don't forget, Joe! Two hours!'

He didn't bother to turn back, just raised his hand in acknowledgement.

Somehow I didn't believe he'd show, not for a few days

anyway when he'd hope some of the venom had gone out of my anger. He knew full well the answers I wanted and why. He'd just damn near got me killed.

Still seething, I packed away the optical surveillance equipment in my belt pouches and began wriggling back along the branch, ready to perform my ape-man swing over the fence to the adjacent tree. Although I'd somewhat perfected it now, I wasn't at all unhappy to think that this would be the last time I'd have to do it. I grabbed the next tree branch with both hands and dropped my feet onto a lower limb before edging towards the trunk. From there I scaled down the uneven succession of branches until I reached the lightweight aluminium ladder I'd concealed some ten feet above the ground. After lowering it carefully, I climbed down until I had the blessed feel of solid earth beneath my feet once again.

In the shadows, I removed the ghillie oversuit and stuffed it into a small rucksack with the rest of my equipment. Then I began making my way to my sorry-looking old Ford Transit van, which I'd parked a couple of streets away. The bits of it that weren't rust were faded blue, a typical tradesman's vehicle that wouldn't get a second glance. It wasn't much, but it was ideal for surveillance work and it was home – well, it had been on a few occasions. Kip-mat, sleeping bag, camping stove and boxes of provisions, what more could a man ask for?

I turned on the interior light, took my tobacco tin from the glovebox and began rolling a cigarette. It was only then that I realized my hands were trembling slightly.

Hardly surprising, I reasoned, it had been some time since I'd been shot at. In fact ever since I had lost the taste for shooting back. That reminded me, and I inspected the wound on my bicep that was beginning to throb. As I suspected, I'd been 'winged' as they used to say in the old cowboy films for kids. A bloody gouge about a quarter of an inch deep and an inch and a half long. The friction heat of the bullet must have torn and semi-sealed the flesh as it zipped past, so that now it was only weeping slightly. There was no medical kit in the van – an oversight I would have

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to correct – but I wasn't concerned. It could wait until I got back to the motel. In the meantime I fished my hip flask from a pocket in the rucksack, and doused the deep graze with whisky before taking a welcome mouthful to finish it off.

By that time I was feeling better, the trembling had almost stopped and my anger at Lassiter had ebbed – well, a little anyway. I'd wait to see what he had to say for himself . . . if he showed.

I started the engine and began the journey back to the travel lodge on the outskirts of the city. The advent of these cheap, functional motels with all the basic amenities were excellent for families, small businessmen like me and corporations trying to keep down the soaring cost of salesmen on the road. In my line of work, they also offered the bonus of absolute anonymity. Of course, there are many chains of them nowadays, some good and some bad. This one was somewhere in the middle, the worst thing about it was that its meals were provided at the adjacent theme pub. A leather-sole steak and soggy chips in dirty grease was the most appetizing dish on the menu. Since I'd been on this operation, I'd taken to eating salads on the basis that their chef couldn't get that wrong. A mayonnaise-covered slug crawling through the lettuce had rather hit that notion on the head.

At least the motel had a duty manager on the desk all night. The bored, sleepy twenty-year-old was clearly irritated at having her late-night listening to Radio BRMB disturbed and ungraciously began hunting around for the statutory medical kit. She produced it after five minutes of rooting around beneath the desk.

'You can't take it away,' she said sternly.

'I'm not going to steal it.'

'You'd be surprised what people nick, just about anything what's not nailed down. And that's my responsibility,' she replied as I opened the lid of the green plastic case and peered inside. 'You'll have to use it here. What you looking for?'

'Haemorrhoid cream,' I said mischievously. She gave me a very uncertain look until I added, 'Just joking.'

She looked relieved and almost managed a smile as I extracted some TCP, gauze and bandage. As I rolled up my sleeve, she wrinkled her nose. 'That looks nasty. You cut yourself?'

I couldn't resist it. 'Someone shot me.'

Her smile broke through for a second. 'Quite the wag, aren't you?'

I cleaned the wound in TCP, then added the gauze and bandage, which the girl offered to tie up for me when she saw me struggling one-handed.

I thanked her for her trouble and handed her a fiver. 'I'm expecting a friend along shortly—'

She interrupted, 'We don't allow no – er – you know, professional ladies . . . Company policy.'

'He's male and heterosexual,' I replied with a grin. 'It's business.'

She glanced at the lobby clock. 'At this time?' She giggled. 'You a drug-smuggler or something?'

'If I told you what I was, I'd—'

The giggle developed into a chuckle. 'Yeah, yeah, you'd have to kill me.'

I smiled. 'Just be sure to let him in, will you?'

'Sure, don't want to fall foul of you, Mister, do I?'

I played along. 'You'd better believe it, honey.'

Leaving her in a better mood than I'd found her, I went to my room. It was a good size and blandly decorated with a king-size bed and the obligatory electric kettle and multi-channel pay TV. I passed on the minibar, instead taking a bottle of my own Scotch from my suitcase and pouring a couple of slugs into a tumbler.

As I took a gulp, I caught sight of my face in the mirror. It was a bit of a shock, an unexpected glimpse like that in a certain light. God, I didn't look good. Apart from the day's growth of beard on my chin, my face looked lined and gaunt. Even my naturally dark Latino skin appeared pale and my greying black hair was in dire need of a cut. My eyes, which I always remembered being slate-blue and mischievously cheerful, were tired



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and sunken. I could see I'd lost weight – the 'stress diet', as I quipped if anyone commented on it, was getting beyond a joke.

I raised my tumbler to the haggard image in the mirror. 'Cheers, Nina, thanks a bunch!'

Then I turned away. I didn't want to dwell on her and what had happened to our marriage. I stretched out on the bed and waited, none too hopefully, for Lassiter to arrive. Instantly I was asleep.

The sharp knock on the door startled me awake. I was momentarily disorientated, still half in the world of a bizarre dream where I'd been swinging on jungle vines like Tarzan while being chased by angry nuns armed with Kalashnikov rifles. The dial on my wristwatch showed four o'clock.

I struggled to my feet and opened the door. Joe Lassiter stood there, a miserable expression on his face that was part shaded by the brim of his fedora. 'What a cock-up,' he announced. 'I need a drink.'

I stood back to let him in. As I closed the door, he was already examining the room, his eyes searching out the whisky bottle. 'Thought you'd have some hooch.'

'Is that the only reason you came, Joe?'

His thin lips upturned a fraction, but it was difficult to tell if his eyes were smiling behind the specs. 'Course not. My word is my Bond, James Bond.'

I ignored the bad joke he'd made more times than I cared to remember. 'Water or ice with it?'

'No, as it comes. A large one.'

'Help yourself,' I said, watching as he picked up the bottle and examined the label.

'Tesco's own?' He didn't bother keeping the sneer from his voice.

'It's all I've got,' I replied flatly.

Lassiter was as tight-fisted as they came; I reckoned he must somehow have Scots, Yorkshire and Jewish ancestral blood flowing through his veins. He was on an enviable salary and pension package from the Security Service and had a generous expense

account for wining and dining his agents as part of the attraction of working for him. Yet he was always on the scrounge and was always the last one to put his hand in his pocket for a round in the pub. He hadn't changed in all the years I'd known him since that first time in Belfast.

When he'd filled his tumbler to the brim, he tossed his fedora onto the bed, exposing a head of thinning black hair carefully combed to hide his bald crown, and perched himself on an upright chair. Not for the first time I thought how shabby and sort of seedy he always managed to look. Crumpled raincoat with food stains on the lapels and a grubby white shirt underneath, with his tie askew. I'd never been sure if it was the image of a spy he'd cultivated from reading too many trashy novels, or if it was just Lassiter being himself.

For the first time his eyes focused on me properly. He noticed the bandage that had seeped a little blood. 'You hurt yourself?'

'That's why I wanted to speak to you,' I replied sharply. 'You got me shot tonight.'

Momentarily his pale face went sheet white. 'Holy Mother, you haven't been to A and E have you? Did they ask—'

'Relax, Joe, I know the form. It's just a flesh wound, luckily. Another few inches and I could have been killed.'

Colour returned to his face. 'Your lucky night then. More than I can say for us.'

I wanted to retort, but I recalled the explosion at Mullah Reda's house. 'Was anyone hurt back there?'

'None of ours . . . well not really,' Lassiter replied in an abstract manner that suggested he didn't really care that much one way or the other. 'Those two minders shot dead, of course. And the dogs. Oh, and one policeman suffered minor flash burns when that bomb went off, dammit. Destroyed all the evidence.'

I realized what he meant. 'It was in Reda's study, wasn't it, next to his bedroom?'

Lassiter nodded gloomily and took another swig of my whisky. 'An incendiary charge. Must have been set up under his

desk for just such an event. Totally destroyed his computer, mobile phones and all his paperwork before our chaps could get to it.'

I began rolling a cigarette. 'So what's going to happen now?'

'Not a lot,' Lassiter replied with a shrug. 'We'll probably be able to get most of the youngsters – the minders – on firearms and/or attempted murder charges. But if their lawyers are any good, Reda and the other two will probably walk. The ones that matter.' He took another slurp of whisky. 'Probably get them on Control Orders, I suppose, which is some consolation. You know, curfew, daily reporting to the nearest nick, no use of mobile phones or the Internet, and no home visitors without our prior permission.'

'Guess that'll restrict their style,' I said. 'And who are the other two, by the way?'

Lassiter scratched at the stubble on his chin. 'One runs an Islamic bookshop. It's believed to be a front for recruitment to al-Qaeda in this area. You know the sort of thing. Inflammatory fundamentalist literature. Video speeches by bin Laden and footage taken in Iraq and Afghanistan depicting so-called atrocities by American and British forces. Stuff to get young recruits riled and fired up.'

'And the other one?' I asked.

Lassiter sounded weary, as though he'd answered these questions a hundred times before. 'Wealthy entrepreneur. Runs a chain of Indian restaurants, but he's actually Pakistani. So are most of his staff. We suspect he's involved in illegal immigration, or possibly a conduit for al-Qaeda "facilitators".'

I was out of touch with spooks' jargon. 'Facilitators?'

'Support from professionals,' Lassiter explained. 'Money men, bomb-makers, communications experts, fieldcraft trainers. Wherever al-Qaeda operates in the world, these foreign experts usually come in to set up operations with local recruits. Then they bugger off out of it before the balloon goes up. Don't mind young hotheads blowing themselves up, but they're not so keen on the idea themselves.'

I knew what he meant. 'But nothing much has happened in the UK since the July 7 bombings and the July 21 attempt, has it?'

His smile was thin. 'Only because we've got lucky – so far. We've disrupted some two hundred planned attacks.' He sighed. 'We'll be raiding the premises of the bookseller and restaurateur and all his outlets' – he glanced at his watch – 'even as we speak.' 'Then maybe you'll crack it.' I tried to sound optimistic.

'I doubt it, Phil, these are wily bastards. Probably professionally trained in the al-Qaeda camps. Not given to leaving trails of evidence.'

'And Mullah Reda himself?' I asked. 'The carefully-groomed moderate face of Islam?'

Lassiter nodded. 'Probably he's been a recruiting sergeant. Picking up disillusioned or dysfunctional youngsters passing through the classes at his mosque. He befriends them when maybe their families and others don't, tells them how Islam holds the answers to their woes and sends them off to study more.'

'To the bookshop?' I guessed.

'That seems to be the pattern. Hard to prove anything concrete.'

'But the bomb in his study?' I suggested.

Lassiter almost laughed in my face. 'He'll say it was a result of the police assault! Might not be much left after that explosion and fire to prove or disprove anything. As with the other two, we'll probably be left with wobbly or circumstantial evidence from us, MI6 and GCHQ, which Her Majesty's Government won't want to air in court.'

I tried to sound upbeat. 'At least it might torpedo any immediate plans –with them cooling their heels on remand.'

Lassiter drained his glass. 'I hope to God you're right, Phil. Trouble is we don't know how many other Redas are out there . . .'

I'd almost forgotten why I'd insisted on seeing him that night. 'So, Joe, knowing all this, you sent me in there on a surveillance operation, unarmed and without back-up.'

The dark eyes blinked behind the specs. 'Didn't turn your nose up at the money, I recall.'

Anger flashed in my head as I remembered the moment that the Arab's gun was pointed at me. 'Don't be cheap, Joe. I was deliberately kept in the dark. D'you seriously think I'd have taken it on if I knew we were talking about a known al-Qaeda cell guarded by armed terrorists?'

'We didn't – we still don't know that's what it is.'

'Don't give me that bullshit, Joe,' I retorted. 'I'm not the bloody judge and jury you have to convince. You bloody knew all right! Dammit, you had that police firearms unit on immediate standby. D'you think it would matter to me that you just couldn't prove it to the satisfaction of the courts? You screwed me, used me.' I paused for a second to gather my thoughts. 'Although I can't think why the hell you did. Why in God's name didn't you use MI5's own surveillance people for the job? I don't understand.'

For the first time Lassiter looked just a little embarrassed. 'Mind if I have another drink, Phil. My nerves are bad.'

God, his nerves were bad. He should have been sitting up that tree. 'Go on, help yourself,' I snarled.

I waited with growing impatience while Lassiter took his time pouring another tumblerful, settled down and prepared to talk himself out of trouble.

At last he said, 'Not my decision, you see, old son. It's down to my dreaded section chief. The Ice Queen.'

I shook my head in despair. 'What?'

'That's what we call her,' he explained, adding, 'behind her back, of course. Felicity Goodall. Late thirties, or early forties. Tall, blonde and a body to die for.'

'Yeah,' I said quickly. 'But I don't want to die for it.'

Lassiter chuckled at that. 'No, mate, you wouldn't. Because behind her cover-girl looks, she's one mean, hard and ambitious bitch with a black heart. That's the trouble with the Service nowadays. The women have all but taken over. At least we've now got a bloke back at the helm, but most of the Heads of

Desk and a few Branch chiefs are female. And they all hate each other, all scoring points and backbiting. Life's not much fun any more. They don't think like us, Phil, they're a different species.'

I felt Lassiter was sidetracking me. 'What's this to do with me being stitched up?'

Lassiter contemplated me like I was a dumb schoolkid who couldn't even understand elementary arithmetic. 'The Ice Queen's clawing her way to the top. She wanted a result on this and she wanted the result to be all hers. Our section stumbled on this cell . . . but it was, as I've explained, very circumstantial information from our section's field agents. If she'd made an issue and called in A4, then it would have to be referred to Head of Desk.'

'A4?' I queried.

'The "Watchers", our surveillance experts,' he explained irritably.

I nodded. 'So what's wrong with referring it to her Head of Desk.'

'To Melissa Thornton?' Lassiter thought the concept a huge joke. 'Medusa and the Ice Queen hate each other with a vengeance. As schoolgirls they were rival prefects at The Godolphin School in Salisbury. Melissa would probably have refused to sanction the operation on principle – or else taken it over and claimed all the glory. So Felicity kept the lid on it and put you on the case, but charmed and blagged the local chief constable into putting a firearms unit on standby.'

I shook my head in disbelief. 'A comedy of errors,' I murmured.

'Not unusual in our game,' Lassiter conceded.

'Once it all comes out, won't this Felicity Goodall be in trouble?' I asked.

Lassiter shrugged. 'Probably not. It's results that matter and Felicity's got a result, of sorts. Besides, Melissa's and Felicity's boss is the Head of G Branch – fundamentalist terrorism – and he's got the hots for Felicity. Need I say more.'

'Very Machiavellian,' I commented acidly.

## PRESIDENT DOWN

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An almost genuine smile settled on Lassiter's face. 'So you see, Phil, it was out of my hands.'

He wasn't wriggling out of it that easily. 'Not really, Joe. You could have created a stink, put your head above the parapet and told this Felicity Goodall woman she was wrong to do what she did, put her right.'

Lassiter leaned towards me. 'I told you, the place is run by women now. Doesn't matter how good you are, if your face doesn't fit or they don't like you, you're finished. And Felicity doesn't like me much, so I just keep my head down and do what I'm told. I've got a huge bloody mortgage and three kids at private school.'

'My heart bleeds,' I replied with all the sympathy I could muster.

Lassiter drained the last of his drink and stood up. 'Well, if it makes you feel better, I'll make damn sure nothing like this happens again, Phil, you can be sure of that. And I'm certain Felicity will be very pleased with your work. Maybe there'll be a bonus in it for you.'

I was very tired now, and didn't want to hear any more of this garbage. 'Just get out, Joe, will you? I've had enough.'

'Sure, mate, you look all in. Thanks for the drink.' He picked his fedora off the bed and moved towards the door. 'See you around.'

When he'd gone I stretched out on the bed and again was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. This time there were no dreams, no mad nuns with Kalashnikovs.

I slept well, too well. As soon as I started to come to, I just sensed that it was late. The light was still on and I was fully clothed. When I glanced at my watch I could scarcely believe that it was nearly eleven o'clock. I'd planned to be back in London by that time.

Mentally rearranging the day's schedule, I put the kettle on for some coffee, drew the curtains, turned the TV on and ran the shower.

I was just unbuttoning my shirt when I saw the news broadcast. Two massive car bombs found in the early morning in

London's West End. A deadly mixture of petrol, gas cylinders and nails, suspected to be the work of al-Qaeda. One outside the Tiger Tiger nightclub in Haymarket and a second, waiting to catch any survivors who escaped, in Cockspur Street.

If it hadn't been the good fortune of a paramedic spotting vapours in one of the two Mercedes and the subsequent bravery of bomb disposal officers, hundreds of innocent civilians would have been killed and horribly maimed.

Shocked, I sat down heavily on the edge of the bed and stared at the screen in disbelief. Christ, was this the work of Mullah Reda and his friend? We could so easily have been one day too late.

The kettle began boiling, but I suddenly needed something a lot stronger than black coffee.

I reached for the whisky bottle. It was empty.

'Lassiter,' I muttered, 'you selfish bastard.'