

## THE BOMBMAKER

It wasn't an especially big bomb. Just a couple of pounds of Semtex, a detonator, a small digital clock and a mercury tilt switch. The man carrying it wasn't overly afraid – he knew that the device had been tested a dozen times, with a light bulb from a torch in place of the detonator. There was no way it could explode prematurely. The timer was set to activate its circuit in thirty minutes' time, and even then the device wouldn't explode until it was moved and the mercury tilt switch was tripped. A third circuit, separate from the first two, contained a photoelectric cell linked to a second detonator. The Bombmaker had explained everything to him before closing the lid of the box and placing it in the blue holdall, the holdall that he was now carrying as casually as if it contained nothing more threatening than football kit.

The man looked left and right, then squeezed through a gap in the railings and went down the embankment to the railway tracks. He walked along the sleepers, confident that there wouldn't be a train for at least an hour, by which time he'd be long gone. He took a quick look at his wristwatch. Plenty of time. Plenty of time to place the bomb at the designated location, then to get to the phone box and make the coded call. This wasn't a bomb designed to kill, it was meant to disrupt. To tie up the police, the army and a bomb disposal team. That's not to say that it wasn't a serious bomb, but the men who turned up to deal with it would be experts. They'd X-ray it before touching it and they'd see the circuits and then they'd blow it up with a controlled charge. In effect, they'd be blowing up the railway line themselves. Hours of disruption. Great publicity. And a reminder that they had the ability and the supplies to do harm. A nudge, that's all it was, though the man carrying the holdall knew that it was a nudge capable of leaving a crater twenty feet wide.

Ahead of him was the entrance to a tunnel. He walked up to it and left the holdall a few feet inside. The fact that it was in darkness and close to the tunnel wall would make it that much harder to deal with. They'd need lights, and they'd know that if it did go off the tunnel would direct the blast outwards. Plus they'd also have to close the road that ran above the railway line. Two birds with one stone.

He went back along the tracks and climbed up the embankment, then walked along the road. A blue Fiat pulled up alongside him and he climbed in. "Okay?" said the driver, a cigarette sticking out of the side of his mouth.

The man nodded but didn't say anything. The driver was a driver, nothing more. Told where and when to pick him up and where to take him. The man looked at his watch again. Everything was going to plan.

Lucy Metcalfe hated it when her brother played rough. She was a year older than Tim but he was bigger and stronger and lately he seemed to take great pleasure in pushing her around. He was worse when his friends were with him. They were kicking a football, but every time Lucy got it, Tim would immediately tackle her, charging in with his shoulder and pushing with his elbows. "Mine, mine," he'd shout, before taking the ball off her. It wasn't even as if they were trying to score goals – they were just passing the ball to and fro, on their way back from school.

"You're a bully! she shouted at her ten-year-old brother as he barged into her for the umpteenth time and dribbled the ball away. She stood rubbing her shoulder and glaring at him sullenly.

Tim stopped and put a foot on top of the ball. "Yeah?" he said.

"Yeah. It's supposed to be a game."

"Yeah? Well, I'm better than you are."

"No, you're not better. You're bigger. And Uglier. And stupider."

Tim's friends giggled and his cheeks reddened. He kicked the ball at her, hard, but missed her by several feet. The ball bounced on the kerb and skidded across a strip of grass before disappearing through a line of rusting metal railings. "Now look what you've done!" Tim shouted. "Go and get it."

"Why should I get it? It wasn't my fault."

“I was kicking it to you.”

Lucy shook her head and folded her arms across her chest in the way she'd seen her mother do when she was insisting that they go to bed early. “You were kicking it at me, not to me,” she said. “You were the last to touch it. You get it.”

Tim clenched his fists and took a step towards her. Lucy turned and ran, her school bag banging against her hip. “Chicken!” Tim shouted, and started making loud clucking noises. His friends joined in. Tim waited until his sister was out of sight before ducking through the railings and sliding down the embankment. His friends followed him, shouting and screaming and flapping their arms like demented crows.

The ball was at the mouth of the tunnel. Tim ran over to it and picked it up. As he bent down, he saw something a few feet inside the entrance. A blue holdall. “Hey, there's something here,” he yelled. He kicked the ball over to his friends and walked into the tunnel. He was surprised how much colder it was and he shivered. He turned to look at his friends as if to reassure himself that they were still there. He suddenly felt a lot less brave. “Come on!” he said, and waved them over.

They ran towards him. Tim's confidence returned almost immediately, and he grabbed at the holdall, wanting to be the first to open it.

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The man replaced the receiver and left the call-box. He slid into the passenger seat of the blue Fiat. The driver was lighting another cigarette, and the man pointedly wound down the window. “You don't mind me smoking, do ya?” asked the driver.

The man shrugged but didn't say anything. He motioned with his finger for the driver to move off. As the driver's hand reached for the gear-stick, they heard a dull thudding sound off in the distance. The two men knew immediately what the noise was. They were both Belfast-born and bred and were no strangers to the sound of exploding bombs.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” said the man.

The cigarette dropped from the driver's lips. He fumbled for it as it rolled between his legs, cursing loudly.

The man stared out of the open window, a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. Something had gone wrong. Something had gone very, very wrong.

## TEN YEARS LATER

It had been a long and uncomfortable flight and Egan rubbed his knuckles into the small of his back as he waited for his luggage to appear on the carousel. The men from Beijing had booked him a first-class ticket, but Egan hadn't used it. People were noticed in first class, and Egan had gone through most of his life without being noticed. That was the way he wanted it. His features could best be described as nondescript. He was in his early thirties, a little below average height with receding hair, cropped short. He had pale blue eyes and a squarish face with thin lips that formed an almost straight line unless he smiled. The only distinguishing features Egan had were concealed by his dark blue suit. There was a thick scar that ran from the base of his neck to just above his left breast, a phosphorus burn on his right thigh, and two old bullet wounds in his right shoulder. Anyone who saw Egan naked would never forget the man, but most people would have difficulty describing him an hour after meeting him.

Egan's suitcase was as bland as he was. A grey Samsonite with an Air France tag. He picked it up and walked through Customs. Egan had started his journey in London but had taken the Eurostar train to Paris and flown out of Charles de Gaulle airport. The flight to Hong Kong had taken a little under twelve hours and he'd spent most of the time reading *A Tale of Two Cities*. He was working his way through the complete works of Charles Dickens and hoped to have finished by the end of the year.

As he walked out into the arrivals area he saw a liveried chauffeur holding a piece of white card with ‘Mr Egan’ written on it. Egan shuddered. He knew that his employers were

trying to impress him, and that face was all-important to the Chinese, but Egan had no wish to be impressed. He considered ignoring the chauffeur, but decided not to in case the man had him paged. Egan wasn't his real name, but he still didn't want it broadcast throughout Chek Lap Kok airport. He went over to the chauffeur and nodded.

The chauffeur touched the brim of his cap in an attempt at a salute and reached for Egan's suitcase. Egan let him carry the case. It contained nothing of importance – it was as much a prop as the suit he was wearing, to give him the appearance of a businessman or banker or any of the other vultures who were flocking into Hong Kong to take advantage of the economic crisis that was wreaking havoc in South-East Asia.

The chauffeur was in his sixties and bow-legged, and he was breathing heavily by the time they reached the top-of-the-range Mercedes outside the airport terminal. Egan climbed into the plush interior and settled back for the ride to Hong Kong Island. It was his third visit to the former British colony in six months, and he was as impressed as always by the sheer magnitude of the new airport and its transport system, ferrying thousands of passengers an hour from the outlying island to Hong Kong proper by road, rail and helicopter. It didn't have the character or the white-knuckle approach of the old airport at Kai Tak, but it was considerably more efficient, and if there was one thing Egan admired, it was efficiency.

There was a copy of the *Hong Kong Standard* in the seat pocket and Egan read the business section. The stock market was continuing its downward plunge and the Hang Seng Index was down more than thirty per cent year on year. There were rumours that the government was considering devaluing the Hong Kong dollar, and inflation was climbing. Egan smiled to himself as he scanned the list of stock prices. The days of the so-called Asian miracle were long gone.

The Mercedes drew up in front of the Mandarin Hotel and a red-liveried bell-boy carried Egan's case inside. Egan checked in, showered and put on a clean shirt, then watched CNN until it was time for his meeting.

The men from Beijing had booked a room large enough to hold fifty, even though there were just four of them. It was face, Egan knew, something the Chinese regarded as one of their cultural strengths but which Egan knew was a major weakness. They were already in the room when Egan arrived, sitting in a line at one end of a long apple-wood table. There was only one other chair, at the opposite end, and Egan sat down and studied the men facing him. Three were in their seventies, with watery eyes and lined parchment-like faces. The fourth was middle-aged, in his late forties, and was the only one wearing glasses. His name was Deng, and he was a distant relative of the former Chinese leader, the one they still called the Butcher of Tiananmen Square. The other three had never been introduced to Egan, but he had made enquiries and knew who they were and how much they were worth. One was a general in the People's Liberation Army, the other two were bankers. In the United States they'd be well past retirement age and would be enjoying their twilight years on the golf course, but careers were handled differently in China.

"Good to see you again, Mr Egan," said Deng. He spoke with an American accent, the result of three years studying for a master's degree at Harvard University.

Egan nodded but said nothing.

"Everything is proceeding satisfactorily?"

"It is."

Deng's three companions stared at Egan with unblinking eyes. The PLA general's mouth was open and Egan could hear every breath the man took. According to Egan's file on the man, he was suffering from emphysema and was a regular visitor to a lung specialist in London's Harley Street.

Egan leaned forward and interlinked his thick fingers on the table's surface. "The teams are now in place – we're in a position to move to the next stage. But before we do proceed, I want to make quite sure you realise the ramifications of what you're asking."

"What we're paying for," said Deng.

Egan nodded, acknowledging the point. The four men in front of him had already transferred half a million dollars to his bank account in Zurich, and following today's

meeting a further one million would be paid. If everything went to plan, Egan stood to receive a total of seven million dollars.

“Nairobi, 1998. More than two hundred dead, five and a half thousand injured. What I’m organising – what you’re paying for – is bigger, much bigger, than what I did in Kenya. Timing is the key. It can be done late at night and casualties will be minimal. It can be done at lunch-time and they’ll be digging the bodies out for weeks.”

Deng nodded, but the other three men remained impassive. Egan knew that at least one of the geriatrics spoke fluent English and that the other two had a reasonable grasp of the language.

“I have no qualms either way,” Egan continued, “but I want to make it clear before we go any further that if you do decide to go ahead with a daytime event, hundreds of office workers could die.”

Deng nodded again. He turned to his three companions and spoke in rapid Mandarin. All three men nodded. “We have no problems with matters as they stand, Mr Egan. If anything, it adds credibility to our scenario, does it not?”

“It could be taken either way,” said Egan. “I was thinking in terms of the degree of backlash. Africans are one thing, Europeans are something else.”

“Nevertheless,” said Deng, “we are of the opinion that we should proceed as planned.”

“No problem,” said Egan. “As soon as the next tranche is deposited in Zurich, we’ll move on to the next stage.”

The PLA general wheezed and then leaned over to Deng and whispered to him in Mandarin. Deng listened, pushing his spectacles higher up his nose. When the general had finished whispering, Deng nodded and then looked at Egan. “Time is still of the essence, Mr Egan. Do we have your assurance that everything will be completed on time?”

“You do,” said Egan. He was well aware of how anxious the men from Beijing were that his mission be completed without delay. He knew that their lives would be forfeit if he failed.

“The money will be in your account within the hour,” said Deng.

## DAY ONE

There were two of them, stocky men wearing matching blue track suits, black Reebok trainers and black ski masks. They vaulted over the back wall and ran, bent double, along the grass to the kitchen door of the house. They crouched at the door for several seconds, then one of the men nodded and reached for the door handle. It opened. They weren’t surprised. They’d been watching the house for two weeks and they knew the routine of the occupants. The kitchen door was never locked until the family’s golden retriever had been allowed out just after midnight.

The men slipped into the kitchen and gently closed the door behind them. They stood for a while, listening. They could just about hear the television in the sitting room. A comedy programme. Loud studio laughter. They reached into their track-suit tops and pulled out guns. Black automatics with bulbous silencers. The men didn’t expect to have to use them. But they were prepared, if necessary.

Their biggest worry was the dog. People could be threatened, people knew the damage that guns could do, but dogs would just growl and bark, maybe even attack to protect what they considered to be their territory. The dog was in the sitting room, so if they moved carefully they wouldn’t be heard.

One of them eased open the door to the hallway. More studio laughter. They moved on the balls of their feet, hardly breathing as they crept to the stairs. The stairs would be the dangerous part. Stairs creaked. They went up two stairs at a time, keeping close to the wall, guns at the ready.

They froze as they heard a police siren, but then relaxed as they realised it was on the television. Somebody had changed channels. They heard a roar. A football match, maybe. Then muffled voices. Then studio laughter again. The men moved along the upper hallway and knelt down at the door to the back bedroom. One of the men was wearing a small rucksack, and he slipped it off and placed it on the carpet. From the rucksack he pulled out a cloth and a small glass bottle containing a colourless liquid, turning his head to avoid the worst of the fumes. When the cloth was soaked, he nodded at his companion, who opened the door and stepped inside.

They moved quickly through the darkness to the bed. A small girl was asleep, her blond hair spread across the pillow, a cuddly Garfield toy clutched to her chest. The man with the cloth held it tightly against the girl's face. She stopped struggling after a few seconds, but he kept the cloth pressed over her mouth and nose for a full minute before releasing his grip on her.

The other man put a white envelope on a bedside table and gathered up the little girl. The Garfield toy slipped on to the floor. The man who'd drugged the girl picked up the cuddly toy, hesitated for a second, and then put it and several other toys into his rucksack. The man holding the unconscious girl made an impatient clicking noise. Even with most of his face covered by the ski mask, it was clear he was glaring at his companion. He nodded at the door.

The two men moved down the stairs as silently as they'd gone up, and two minutes later they were in a Ford Mondeo, driving south with the little girl hidden under a tartan blanket. The chloroform would keep her unconscious for the best part of thirty minutes, and they didn't have far to go.