

HARD LANDING FIRST CHAPTER

Trish Elliott ran her hand across her stomach for the hundredth time since she'd left the doctor's surgery. It didn't feel as if there was a new life growing inside her, it was far too early for any movement or kicks, far too soon for the baby to be making its presence felt. But Trish had known, known at the very moment that Jonathon had come inside her, that this time, after years of trying, she was pregnant. She'd bought a pregnancy test kit the very next day but it had been negative, and she'd gone out the day after that and it had also been negative. But Trish had known, deep down inside she'd known, and a third pregnancy test had confirmed what her body had been telling her. She was pregnant, at last.

She hadn't said anything to her husband and she'd left it another month until she'd gone to see her doctor, but now there was no doubt. Pregnant. She whispered the word to herself as she parked the car at the side of the road, relishing the sound of it. 'I'm pregnant,' she said softly. 'I am pregnant. I am having a baby.' She wanted to run down the street and tell everybody, to shout it to the sky, to phone every friend and relative she had. But she also enjoyed the fact she had such a delicious secret. She knew. The doctor knew. And that was all. For a while at least, the baby belonged solely to her.

She switched off the engine and shuffled across to sit in the passenger seat. Her husband loved to drive. It wasn't a macho thing, it wasn't that he didn't trust her at the wheel, it was just that he enjoyed driving so much that she was happy to let

him do it. Trish thought that she was probably the better driver of the two. She took more care, followed the Highway Code religiously, checked her mirrors constantly, and was always happy to let other motorists get ahead of her.

Jonathon, well Jonathon drove like a man, there was no getting away from it. But he enjoyed driving so she sat in the passenger seat and waited for him to leave the office.

That was something else that was going to change, she thought with a smile. Jonathon had promised, crossed his heart and promised, that when they had a family he'd get a desk job. No more late nights, no more weeks away from home, no more putting his life on the line. He'd promised. He'd take a regular job, with regular hours, and he'd be there for her when she needed him. Someone else could take the risks, someone else could get the glory. He'd be a husband and father. A family man. He'd promised and she would keep him to it.

She saw her husband walking along the pavement towards the car and she waved. Jonathon got into the car and gave her a kiss on the cheek. As he pulled away, Trish slipped her hand around his neck and pushed her lips against his, kissing him deeply. He kissed her back, with passion, and slid his hand down to cup her breast.

'That was nice,' he said as she finally released him.

'You deserve it,' she said.

'For what?' He started the engine and revved the accelerator as he always did, boy-racer style.

‘For being such a good husband.’ She stroked his thigh and smiled to herself. She wasn’t going to tell him yet, not until the time was absolutely right. The food was in the boot, all the ingredients for his favourite meal. And a bottle of his favourite wine. She’d only have a sip to celebrate and that would be the last alcohol she’d touch until the baby was born. She wasn’t going to do anything that would remotely jeopardise the health of her child. Their child. The child they’d been waiting for for almost three years. Their doctor had insisted that there had been no medical reason for her inability to conceive. She was fine. Jonathon was fine. There was no need yet for medical intervention, the doctor had said, they just needed to keep trying. They were both young, fit and healthy. Jonathon’s job meant that he was under a lot of stress most of the time, but other than that all they needed was lots of sex and a bit of good luck. They’d had lots of sex all right, thought Trish with a smile. The sex had always been great, from the moment they’d met.

‘What are you smiling at?’ asked Jonathon, putting the car in gear and driving away from the curb. He pushed his way into the traffic without indicating, waving a careless thanks to a BMW that had to brake sharply to let him in.

‘Nothing,’ she said. She wanted to tell him there and then, but she wanted it to be perfect. She wanted it to be a moment that they’d both remember for ever. The moment when she told him that she was pregnant. That they were pregnant.

‘Come on, come on,’ muttered Jonathon. Ahead of them was a set of traffic lights. Jonathon groaned as they turned red. ‘See that?’ he said. ‘Now we’re stuck here.’

‘There’s no rush,’ she said, patting his thigh. She looked across at her husband and smiled. He was so good-looking, she thought. Tall, broad-shouldered, and a mop of black hair that kept falling across his face. Perfect teeth. A toothpaste advert smile.

He grinned at her. She loved his grin. It was the grin of a mischievous schoolboy that had never grown up. ‘What is it?’ he asked.

‘What?’

‘You. You’re smiling like the cat that got the cream.’

She wanted to tell him. God, she wanted to tell him. She wanted to grab him and kiss him and hug him and tell him that he was going to be a father. But she just smiled and shook her head. ‘Nothing,’ she said.

A large black motorcycle pulled up next to them. The pillion passenger leaned down so that he could look into the car. Trish thought for a moment that he wanted to ask directions, then she saw the gun and frowned. It was so unexpected that for a few seconds it didn’t register. Then time seemed to stop dead and she everything clearly. She saw the gun. A dull grey automatic in a brown gloved hand. The pillion passenger wearing a bright red full face helmet with an black visor. The driver wearing a black helmet, his visor also impenetrable. Men without faces. The driver revved the engine. The passenger held the gun with both hands.

Jonathon was still looking at Trish, but as her frown deepened he started to turn, to see what it was that she'd seen. As he moved, the gun kicked and the window exploded and cubes of glass splattered across Trish's face.

The explosion was so loud that it deafened Trish and she felt rather than heard the next two shots. Her face was wet and she thought that she'd been cut but then she realised it wasn't her blood but her husband's. Her face and chest were soaked with his blood and she started to scream as he toppled forward onto the steering wheel.

* * *

There were eight of them in the minibus, all wearing blue overalls and training shoes and baseball caps with the logo of the pest control company above the peak. As the minibus stopped at the gate a bored security guard with a clipboard waited until the driver wound down the window and then peered at the plastic ID card clipped to his overall pocket. He did a head count and made a note on his clipboard.

'No one off sick tonight then?' On a bad night there'd only be four in the squad. Eight was a full complement, and with the company barely paying above minimum wage they were usually at least one man short. No women. The work was unpleasant and physically demanding, and while sex discrimination laws meant that women couldn't be refused a job, few made it beyond the first night.

‘New blood,’ said the driver. ‘Still keen.’

The security guard shrugged. ‘Yeah, I remember keen,’ he said wearily. He was in his late twenties but looked older with hair greying at the temples and a spreading waistline. ‘Okay gentlemen, hold your ID cards where I can see them, please.’

The men did as they were asked and the security guard shone his torch at the cards one by one. He was too far away to check if the faces of the men matched the faces on the cards, but even if he had checked he would have seen nothing wrong. A lot of time had been spent to make sure that the ID cards were flawless. The van was genuine, as were the overalls and baseball caps. The original occupants of the van were in their underwear in a disused factory in east London, gagged and bound and guarded by another member of the gang. He would stay with them until told that the job was done.

The faces that looked back at the security guard had the bored resignation of men about to start eight hours of tedious night work. Three were West Indian, including the driver. The rest were white, all of them aged under forty. One of the youngest yawned, showing a mouthful of bad teeth.

The security guard nodded and stepped back from the minibus. He waved across at his colleague and the white pole barrier with its ‘STOP’ sign rose gently up. Standing at the gatehouse were two uniformed policemen wearing bullet-proof vests and cradling black Heckler and Koch automatics. They watched the minibus drive by, their fingers inside the trigger guards of their weapons. The

driver gave them a friendly wave and drove towards the warehouses. Overhead a British Airways 747 swooped low, its landing gear down, wheels ready to bite into the runway, engines roaring in the night sky.

The man with bad teeth ducked involuntarily and one of the West Indians laughed and slapped him on the back. ‘Don’t fuck around,’ said the man sitting next to the driver. He was a wide-shouldered man in his late thirties with sandy brown hair cropped close to his skull. His eyes scanned the darkness between the warehouses. He wasn’t expecting trouble, virtually all the security was at the perimeter of the airport.

In the rear of the minibus, the men began pulling sports bags from under their seats.

‘Right, final name check,’ said the front seat passenger. His name was Ted Verity and he’d been planning the robbery for the best part of three months.

‘Archie,’ he said. He opened the glove compartment and took out a portable scanner. He switched it on and clipped it to his belt.

‘Bert,’ said the man directly behind Verity. His real name was Jeff Owen and he’d worked with Verity on more than a dozen robberies. Owen pulled a Fairy liquid bottle out of his sports bag. He sniffed the top and wrinkled his twice-broken nose.

Verity took a second scanner from the glove compartment, switched it on and placed it on the dashboard.

‘Charlie,’ said the man next to Owen. He was Bob Macdonald, a former squaddie who’d been kicked out of the army for bullying. Verity didn’t know Macdonald well, but Owen had vouched for him and Verity trusted Owen with his life. Macdonald pulled a sawn-off shotgun from his holdall and slotted a red cartridge into the breech.

‘Doug,’ said the man next to Macdonald. He shoved a clip into the butt of a handgun and pulled back the slider. He was the youngest of the West Indians, a career criminal who’d graduated from car theft and protection rackets to armed robbery after he’d done a six-month stretch in Brixton prison. That’s where Verity had met him and spotted his potential.

The alphabetical roll-call continued. A to H. The young guy with the bad teeth was Eddie. He had a revolver in his right gloved hand and a stun gun in his left. Eddie pressed the trigger of the stun gun and blue sparks crackled between two metal prongs. The high voltage charge was enough to disable a man without causing permanent injury. The tall lanky West Indian next to Eddie was Fred. He had a twin-barrelled sawn-off shotgun. Sitting on his own in the back cradling a pump-action shotgun was a thirty-something Glaswegian with a shaved head and football tattoos hidden by his overall sleeves. He was George and he had an annoying habit of cracking his knuckles.

The West Indian driver was Harry. Verity didn’t know what Harry’s real name was. He’d known the man for five years and worked with him on a dozen jobs but had only ever known him by his initials, PJ. He was one of the best drivers in

London and claimed to have once been Elton John's personal chauffeur. Verity nodded at P.J. and he brought the minibus to a halt.

'Anyone uses any name other than the ones you've been given and I'll personally blow their head off,' said Verity, turning around in his seat.

'Right Ted,' called George from the back of the minibus, then he slapped his forehead theatrically. 'Shit, I forgot already.'

'Very funny,' said Verity. He pulled a sawn-off shotgun out of his bag and flicked off the safety. 'Remember, we go in hard; hearts and minds. Don't give them time to think. They sound the alarm and we've got less than six minutes before the blues and twos arrive and we're up to our arses in Hecklers. Everybody set?'

The six men in the back nodded.

'Masks on,' said Verity.

The men took off their baseball caps and pulled on black ski masks with holes for eyes and mouths. Verity nodded at P.J. and the West Indian drove forward. Verity's heart raced. No matter how many jobs he did, no matter how many times he'd piled in with a gun, the fear and excitement always coursed through him like electricity. Nothing compared with the high of an armed robbery. Not even sex. All his senses were intensified as if his whole body had gone into overdrive. Verity pulled on his own mask. He connected an earphone to the scanner and slipped the earpiece under his mask and into his left ear. Just static.

P.J. turned sharply to the right and pulled up in front of the warehouse. Verity swung open the door and jumped down, keeping the sawn-off close to his body. The earpiece buzzed. A suspicious passenger in the arrivals terminal. An IC6 male. An Arab. Good, thought Verity, anything that drew attention away from the commercial area of the airport was a Godsend.

Owen pulled back the side door and jumped out of the minibus. He had a revolver sticking in the belt of his overalls. The rest of the team piled out and rushed over to the entrance to the warehouse. There was a large loading area with space for three trucks but the metal shutters were down. To the right of the loading bay was a metal door. The men stood either side of the door, weapons at the ready.

Verity walked up to the door and put his gloved hand on the handle. The door was never locked, even at night. There were men working in the warehouse twenty four hours a day, though there was only a skeleton staff at night. Four men at most. Two fork lift truck drivers, a security guard and a warehouseman. Four unarmed men in charge of a warehouse containing the best part of twenty million pounds worth of goods. Verity smiled to himself. Like taking candy from a baby.

Verity pulled open the door and rushed in, holding his shotgun high. To the right of the door was a small office containing three desks and wall-to-wall shelving filed with cardboard files. A uniformed security officer was sitting at one of the desks, reading a newspaper. Verity levelled his shotgun at the man and motioned with it for the man to stand up. As the man got to his feet, Eddie rushed

by Verity and pressed the prongs of the stun gun against the guard's neck and pressed the trigger. The guard went into spasm and slumped to the floor. Eddie caught him as he fell and dragged him behind the office door. He took a roll of duct tape from his overall pocket and used it to bind the man's hands and feet as the rest of the men fanned out, moving through the warehouse. It was about half the size of a football pitch with cartons of cardboard boxes piled high on wooden pallets. Most of the boxes were marked 'Fragile' and came from the Far East. Japan. Korea. Hong Kong.

An orange fork lift truck reversed around a stack of boxes and Doug ran up to it and jammed his pistol against the neck of the operator, a middle-aged man in white overalls. Doug grabbed the man's collar and pulled him from the vehicle, then clubbed him across the head with the gun.

Verity could hear the second fork lift truck whining in the distance and he pointed in the direction of the sound. Fred and the Glaswegian ran off, their training shoes making dull thuds on the concrete floor.

Doug rolled the fork lift truck driver onto his front and wound duct tape around his mouth before binding his arms.

Verity motioned at Macdonald and Owen to start moving through the stacked pallets. They were looking for the warehouseman.

The three men moved silently through the warehouse, their weapons at the ready. Macdonald looked at his watch. 'Plenty of time,' whispered Verity. 'Radio's quiet.'

The second fork lift truck stopped, and there was a bumping sound in the distance as if something soft had hit the ground hard. Then silence.

The three men stopped and listened. Off to their right they heard a soft whistling. Verity pointed and they headed towards the noise.

The warehouseman was in his early thirties with receding hair and wire-framed glasses. He was holding a palm computer and making notes with a small stylus as he whistled to himself. He was so engrossed in the tiny computer that he didn't see the three masked men until they were almost upon him. His jaw dropped and he took half a step backwards, then Verity jammed his shotgun in the man's stomach. 'Don't say a word,' hissed Verity. 'Do as you're told and we'll be out of here in a few minutes.'

He grabbed at the man's collar with his left hand, swung him around so that he was facing in the direction of the office, then frog-marched him with the shotgun pressed into the base of his spine. 'There's no m-m-money here,' the man stammered.

'I said don't talk,' said Verity. He rammed the shotgun barrel into the man's back for emphasis.

When they reached the office the two fork lift truck drivers were lying on the ground outside the door, gagged and bound with grey duct tape. Owen was standing over them, his gun in one hand, the Fairy Liquid bottle in the other.

Verity pushed the warehouseman to the floor next to the two fork lift truck drivers. The man rolled onto his back and his glasses fell off, clattering on the

concrete. Verity pointed his shogun at the warehouseman. 'The Intel chips,' he said through gritted teeth. 'The ones that came in from the States this morning.' Voices buzzed in his earpiece. A Police National Computer check on the Arab. A name, date of birth. Nationality. Iraqi. 'Bastard ragheads,' muttered Verity.

'What?' said the warehouseman, totally confused. He groped for his spectacles with his right hand.

Verity nodded at Owen. Owen squeezed the Fairy Liquid bottle and sprayed the contents over the three men. Macdonald frowned as he recognised the smell. Petrol. The fork lift truck drivers bucked and kicked but the warehouseman just lay on the floor in shock, his hand clutching his spectacles.

Owen emptied the plastic bottle, then tossed it to the side. He took a gunmetal Zippo from the pocket of his overalls and flicked it open. 'You heard what the man said, now where are the chips?' He span the wheel of the lighter with his thumb and waved a two-inch smokey flame over the three men.

'Archie, what the hell's going on?' shouted Macdonald, taking a step towards Verity. 'No one said we were going to set fire to anyone.'

'You've got a shotgun in your hands, this is no different.'

'Have you seen what third degree burns look like?'

Verity turned and levelled his shotgun at Macdonald's legs. 'Have you seen what a kneecapping looks like?'

Macdonald raised the barrel of his shotgun skywards, showing that he wasn't a threat. 'Just wished I'd been fully briefed, that's all.' He shrugged. 'You're right. In for a penny...'

The warehouseman scabbled on his back, away from Owen. Owen followed him, bending down to wave the flaming Zippo closer to his legs. The warehouseman backed against the wall of the office, his hands up in front of his face. 'I'm not sure how close I can get before you go up in flames,' said Owen. 'The Intel chips,' he hissed at the warehouseman. 'Where are they?'

'I'll have to check the computer,' stammered the warehouseman. A dark stain spread down his left trouser leg.

Owen clicked the Zippo shut, grabbed the warehouseman by the scruff of the neck and dragged him over to the office door. Verity followed. The earpiece buzzed and crackled. There'd been a car crash outside the departures terminal. Two minicabs had collided and the drivers had started fighting. Verity smiled under his ski mask. The more distractions, the better.

Eddie threw the warehouseman into the office. Owen snapped the Zippo shut. 'You've got ten seconds, then it's barbecue time,' he snarled. He grabbed the warehouseman and pushed him down onto a swivel chair.

The warehouseman's hands trembled over the keyboard. 'I have to think,' he said. 'I'm only the n-n-night man.'

'Think about this,' said Owen, lighting the Zippo again and waving the flame close to the man's face.

The warehouseman shrieked. ‘Okay, okay, wait!’ he shouted, stabbing at the keyboard. ‘I’ve got it.’ He wiped his sweating forehead with the arm of his coat. ‘Row G. Section Six. Twelve b-b-boxes.’

Verity turned to the office door. ‘Fred, Doug!’ he called. ‘Row G. Section Six.’ The earpiece buzzed. Despite the clean PNC check, the Arab was being taken into custody.

Owen closed the Zippo and used duct tape to tie the warehouseman to the chair. ‘I d-d-did what you wanted, d-d-didn’t I?’ asked the warehouseman fearfully. Owen slapped a piece of tape across the man’s mouth.

Verity pointed at Owen. ‘Tell P.J. to get the minibus ready,’ he said, then jogged towards Row G.

‘I’ll do it,’ said Macdonald.

Verity stopped in his tracks. He pointed a gloved finger at Macdonald. ‘I said him. If I’d wanted you to do it I’d have told you.’ He pointed at Owen. ‘Do it!’ he shouted. Then he pointed at Macdonald. ‘You stay with me where I can keep my eye on you.’ Verity jogged down the centre aisle. Macdonald and the Glaswegian followed him while Owen ran towards the front door.

Doug was already sitting at the controls of a fork lift truck. ‘Here they are,’ shouted Fred, gesturing at a pallet loaded with cardboard boxes.

‘Come on, get them loaded and let’s get out of here!’ shouted Verity. The boxes contained the latest Pentium chips from the States. According to Verity’s

man on the West Coast, there were twenty-four boxes in the shipment worth almost a million pounds, wholesale.

In the distance, the metal door slammed. They all turned at the sound of running feet. Verity and Macdonald ran into the main aisle and saw Owen hurtling towards them. ‘Cops!’ yelled Owen. ‘There’s cops everywhere!’

Verity whirled around. ‘What?’

‘They’ve got P.J. There’s armed cops all over the place.’

Verity’s hand dropped towards his scanner. He checked the frequency and the volume. Everything was as it should be. ‘They can’t be,’ he shouted.

‘They must have hit a silent alarm,’ shouted Owen.

Verity ran towards the office, where Eddie was standing with both hands on his pistol. ‘What do we do?’ shouted Eddie.

Verity gestured at the metal door. There were bolts top and bottom. ‘Lock it,’ he said. Eddie ran over and slid the bolts, then ducked away. There were no windows in the warehouse structure, no way of seeing what was going on outside. Owen was panting hard. Verity put a hand on Owen’s shoulder. ‘How many?’ he asked.

‘Shit, I don’t know. They were all over the minibus. Three unmarked cars. A dozen cops, maybe. I didn’t hang around to count.’

Verity rushed into the office and slapped the warehouseman across the face, the ripped the tape away from his mouth. ‘Did you trip an alarm?’ he asked.

The warehouseman was shaking. 'How c-c-could I?' he stammered. 'You were w-w-watching me all the time. You know you were.'

'What are we going to do?' asked Eddie.

'Shut the fuck up and let me think,' said Verity.

'There's nothing we can do,' said Macdonald. 'If the cops are outside, it's all over.'

Verity ignored him and turned to Owen. 'You said they had P.J?'

'He was bent over the bonnet of one of the cars, one of the cops was handcuffing him.'

'Did they see you?'

Owen nodded.

'The minibus was still there?'

Owen nodded again.

'Okay,' said Verity. If the cops knew that they'd been seen then they had only seconds. He gestured with his shotgun at the two men on the floor. 'Free their legs,' he said. 'And untie the twat in the chair. They're our ticket out of here.'

Eddie rushed into the office. Fred and the Glaswegian bent down and ripped the duct tape away from the legs of the fork lift truck drivers.

Verity stood cradling his shotgun as he stared at the bolted metal door. If the cops knew that they were armed, they wouldn't come storming in. And if they went out with hostages, the police wouldn't be able to shoot. Verity tried to visualise the geography around the warehouse. So far as he could recall, there

were no vantage points for snipers, no high ground from where they could be picked off. It would all be up close and personal, and that meant the cops wouldn't be able to fire without risking the hostages. But they had to move quickly. 'Come on, come on!' he shouted.

Eddie pushed the warehouseman out of the office. 'The security guard's still out cold,' he said.

'Three's enough,' said Verity.

'Enough for what?' asked Macdonald.

'To get us out of here,' said Verity. He went over to the warehouseman. 'Give me the duct tape,' said Verity, holding out his hand to Owen. Owen tossed him the roll of tape. The warehouseman tried to speak but Verity pushed the barrel of the shotgun under his nose and told him to shut up. 'George, come over here.' The Glaswegian stood up and walked over to Verity. 'Put your shotgun against the back of his neck.' The Glaswegian did as he was told, and Verity wound duct tape around the weapon and around the warehouseman's neck.

'You use him like that and it's kidnapping,' said Macdonald. 'Shoot him and it's cold-blooded murder.'

'If the cops let us go, no one'll get hurt,' said Verity. He nodded at Fred. 'Do the same with him,' gesturing at the fork lift driver. The West Indian hauled the man to his feet and started fastening his sawn off shotgun to the man's neck with tape.

'They won't let you walk out of here,' said Macdonald. 'Even with hostages.'

‘Armed robbery will get us twelve years, maybe fifteen,’ said Verity. ‘If a gun goes off and one of these sad fucks gets it, it’ll be manslaughter. Ten to twelve. We’ve got nothing to lose.’

‘Ted Verity, I know you can hear me,’ said a voice. Verity whirled around in surprise, then realised that the voice had come through the earpiece of the scanner. It was being broadcast on the police frequency. ‘This is the police. It’s over Ted, come out now before this gets out of hand.’

Verity roared and ran over to the fork lift truck driver that Fred was tying up. He slammed his shotgun against the fork lift truck driver’s chin, then kicked him between the legs, hard. The man fell back and Verity hit him again as he went down.

Macdonald grabbed Verity’s arm and pulled him away. ‘What the hell’s got into you?’ shouted Macdonald.

Verity shook him off. The earpiece buzzed again. ‘There’s armed police out here, Ted. There’s no where for you to go. Leave your weapons where they are and come out with your hands in the air. If we have to come in and get you, people are going to get hurt.’

A telephone began to ring in the office.

‘Answer the phone, Ted,’ said the voice in Verity’s ear.

‘It’s the cops,’ said the Glaswegian. ‘They’ll be wanting to talk to us.’

Eddie hurried over to Verity.

‘They’ve already talked to us,’ said Verity. He slapped the scanner on his belt. ‘On the radio.’

‘How did they know we had a scanner?’ asked Eddie, his face just inches away from Verity’s. Verity could smell garlic on the man’s breath.

‘They knew everything,’ said Verity. ‘We’ve been set up.’ He swore and then pushed Eddie in the chest. ‘Get the fuck away from me!’ he said.

‘It’s over,’ said Macdonald. He turned to the Glaswegian, looking for his support. The Glaswegian shrugged but said nothing. ‘If we go out with hostages, they’ll throw away the key,’ said Macdonald. The Glaswegian’s finger was on the trigger of the shotgun. Most of the barrel was covered with duct tape, binding it to the back of the warehouseman’s neck. The man was trembling and the piece of duct tape across his mouth pulsed in and out as he breathed.

‘There’ll throw away the key for me anyway,’ said the Glaswegian. ‘One look at my record.’ He jabbed the shotgun against the warehouseman’s neck. ‘Let’s just do what we’ve got to do.’

Macdonald groaned and shook his head. He nodded at Owen. ‘Jeff, help me out on this. This mad bastard’s gonna get us all killed.’

‘No names!’ screamed Verity, brandishing his shotgun. ‘No fucking names!’

‘Ted,’ said Macdonald calmly. ‘Them knowing who we are is the least of our problems.’

‘He’s right,’ said Doug. ‘If the cops are outside then it’s thank you and good night.’ He gestured at the door with his handgun. ‘This peashooter’s gonna do me no good against pigs with heavy artillery.’

‘We’re not gonna shoot at them,’ shouted Verity. ‘All we’re gonna do is to tell them if they try to stop us, the hostages get it. Look, the minibus is out there. P.J. is there. If we move now, we can still get out of here. If we keep yapping they’ll be firing tear gas and God knows what else in here.’

The phone stopped ringing. Fred went to stand by Doug. The Glaswegian pulled the warehouseman back so that he was closer to Verity. Battle lines were being drawn. Owen cursed and moved over to Verity, his sawn-off shotgun at the ready. He gestured with his chin for Macdonald to join him but Macdonald shook his head.

‘Eddie,’ said Verity. ‘Get the hell over here.’

Eddie looked across at the two West Indians, then at Verity. ‘I didn’t sign up for a shoot-out,’ he said. ‘In and out, you said.’

‘Eddie, get over here or I’ll shoot you myself.’ Eddie gritted his teeth. Verity levelled his shotgun at Eddie’s groin. ‘I swear to God,’ said Verity. ‘Get your fucking arse over here.’

Tears welled up in Eddie’s eyes but he did as he was told.

‘Answer the phone, Ted,’ said the voice in Verity’s ear. ‘What we’ve got to say is better said over a secure line, right? Don’t you agree?’

Verity ripped the earpiece from his ear and pointed at the fork lift truck driver on the floor. 'Get a shotgun taped to his neck, now,' he shouted at Owen, keeping his own weapon aimed in the direction of the West Indians.

Owen grabbed the roll of duct tape and pulled the injured man to his feet.

'Give me a hand,' he said to Eddie.

'If you're going to go through with this, I'm out of here,' said Doug.

'You're not going anywhere,' said Verity.

'This ain't no three musketeer thing,' said Doug. 'You do what you've got to do, but I'm walking out now.'

'I'm with him,' said Fred, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

The telephone started to ring again.

'We're going out there together,' said Verity.

Eddie began winding tape around the fork lift truck driver's neck.

'They're not going to let you drive away,' said Macdonald.

'They won't have a choice,' said Verity. 'What are they going to do? Shoot at us while we've got these guys by the short and curlies?'

'And what are you go going to do when they say there's no deal?' said Macdonald. 'Blow the heads off civilians?'

'They'll deal,' said Verity.

'If that's what you think then you don't know the cops.'

'Do you?' yelled Verity. 'Is that how they knew we were here? Did you grass us up?'

‘Screw you, Verity,’ said Macdonald. ‘I don’t need this shit.’

Verity pointed his shotgun at Macdonald’s midriff and his finger tightened on his trigger. Macdonald swung his own shotgun up so that it was levelled at Verity’s stomach.

‘Guys, for fuck’s sake!’ shouted Owen. ‘We’re on the same side here!’

‘We’re in this together,’ said Verity. ‘If we split up now, it’s over.’

‘It’s over anyway!’ shouted Macdonald. ‘You just don’t see it.’

‘Bob, we’re damned if we do and we’re damned if we don’t,’ said Owen.

Macdonald snarled at Owen, though he kept his weapon aimed at Verity. ‘You told me this was a straight robbery,’ he said. ‘In and out before anyone was the wiser, you said. Now we’re taking hostages.’

‘The cops are going to say we took hostages anyway,’ said Owen calmly.

‘Soon as we tied them up we were holding them against their will. Look, I brought you in on this because you were a cool head. Don’t let me down now.’

The phone stopped ringing again. Outside the warehouse they heard rapid footsteps. Then silence.

Macdonald nodded slowly and lowered his weapon. ‘Okay,’ he said.

Verity stared at Macdonald, then nodded curtly, acknowledging Macdonald’s change of heart. ‘Check the door,’ Verity said. ‘Don’t open it, just listen.’

Macdonald walked towards the door. As he passed Verity, Macdonald turned suddenly and slammed the cut-down stock of his shotgun into the man’s stomach. The breath exploded from Verity’s lungs and he doubled over. Macdonald brought

the stock crashing down on the back of Verity's head and Verity dropped like a dead weight.

Owen stared at Macdonald in amazement. Doug and Fred cheered. The Glaswegian tried to rip his shotgun away from the warehouseman's neck but the duct tape held firm and he cursed. Macdonald swung his shotgun towards the Glaswegian. 'Don't even think about it, Jock,' he said.

'You're dead,' said Owen. 'When he gets hold of you, you'll be wearing your balls around your neck.'

'If we go out there tooled up, we're dead anyway,' said Macdonald. He backed away from Owen. The Glaswegian ripped his shotgun free with a roar. He aimed it at Macdonald as the warehouseman slumped to his knees.

Macdonald kept backing away. 'I've no problem with you, Jock,' he said. 'Or you, Jeff. I just want out of here.'

There was a loud bang at the entrance and they all jumped. As the Glaswegian turned to look at the metal door, Macdonald sprinted down the warehouse. He ducked between two towering stacks of pallets, then zigzagged right, left and right again. He dropped the shotgun and kicked it under a pallet, then sprinted towards the rear of the warehouse. Behind him he heard the metal door crash open followed by the staccato shouts of men who were used to their orders being obeyed. 'Armed Police! Down on the floor, now! Down, down, down!'

Macdonald zigzagged again, and reached the warehouse wall. The emergency exit was at the mid-point and Macdonald ran towards it. From the front of the

warehouse he heard a single shotgun blast, then a burst of automatic fire, then more shouts. He wondered who had fired. Owen was too much of a pro to shoot at armed police. It was probably the Glaswegian. Macdonald hoped that he hadn't hit anybody and that the police had been firing warning shots. A pump action shotgun against half a dozen Hecklers was no contest at all.

Macdonald kicked the metal bar in the middle of the door and it sprang open. An alarm sounded off in the distance. The door bounced back and he shouldered his way through.

'Armed police!' shouted a Cockney accent. 'Drop your weapon!'

Macdonald stopped dead and raised his hands in the air. 'I'm not carrying a weapon, dipshit!' he shouted, then stood where he was, breathing heavily.

'Down on the ground, keep your hands where we can see them!' shouted the officer. He was in his mid twenties, dressed all in black with a Kevlar vest and a black baseball cap with POLICE written across it in white capital letters. He had his Heckler aimed at Macdonald's chest. There were two more armed officers behind him, both with their guns aimed at Macdonald.

'Can we all just relax here,' said Macdonald. He took off his ski mask and stared sullenly at the three armed policeman. 'Okay now?' he said. They looked at him with grim faces.

'Down on the floor!' said the oldest of the three, gesturing with his Heckler.

‘Yeah, right,’ said Macdonald. ‘Look, I don’t have time for this.’ He moved to walk by them. The Cockney swore at him, raised his weapon and slammed the butt against the side of the Macdonald’s head. Macdonald went down without a sound.

* * *

Macdonald came to lying on his back, staring up at a man in a white mask wearing a dark green anorak. He was shining a small flashlight into Macdonald’s left eye. Macdonald groaned. He heard the wail of a siren and realised that he was in an ambulance. He groaned again. He tried to sit up but the paramedic put a hand in the middle of his chest and pushed him back down. ‘Lie still, you’ve had a nasty bang on the head.’

‘He hit me,’ said Macdonald. ‘Why the hell did he hit me?’

‘Because you were resisting arrest, you twat,’ said a Cockney voice.

Macdonald tried to sit up again.

‘Really, Sir, I wouldn’t,’ said the paramedic, pushing him back down. ‘There’s a good chance of concussion. We’re going to have to give you a scan.’

Macdonald tried to push the paramedic away but his arm wouldn’t move more than a few inches. He looked down. His wrist was handcuffed to the metal bar of the cot he was lying on. He tried to raise his other hand. That was cuffed, too. The cop who’d hit him was sitting next to the cot, his Heckler cradled in his lap. He

had a long face with deep-set eyes and he'd turned the baseball cap around so that the peak was at the back. 'I should have hit you harder,' he said.

'What the hell's going on?' asked Macdonald, groggily.

'Your mate shot one of ours,' said the cop. 'You're all going down for attempted murder on top of armed robbery.'

'He's okay?'

'Your mate? Took one in the arm. He'll live.'

'Screw him, he almost got us killed. The cop who was shot. Is he okay?'

'Now you're worried, aren't you?' The cop slapped his Kevlar vest. 'Vest took most of the shot, bit of damage to his lower jaw. But the intent was there and you're all in it together.'

Macdonald lay back and stared up at the roof of the ambulance. They were moving at speed, the siren still wailing, but he could tell that he wasn't hurt too badly. He'd been hit before, by experts, and the butt of the Heckler hadn't done any serious damage. What worried Macdonald was why the job had gone so badly wrong.

TO BE CONTINUED.....