

SOFT TARGET FIRST CHAPTER

The heroin had come a long way. It had started life as opium in Afghanistan, harvested by tribesmen and carried on the backs of donkeys to a street market in Jalalabad where it sold for a hundred US dollars a kilo. The opium, sealed in polythene and then wrapped in burlap sacking, was carried over the mountainous border into Pakistan under the watchful eye of former Taliban fighters and from there to Uzbekistan where Chinese technicians converted it into morphine and then into heroin. Bribes were paid to Customs Officers and the heroin was shipped in a consignment of flour by rail into Poland in rusting Soviet-era trucks. There the heroin was transferred into hidden compartments in the bottom of a container-load of tinned plums and driven across Poland to Germany. Customs officers in the European Union were a lot harder to bribe than those in the former Soviet Union but the truck was only given a cursory inspection as it passed across the border into Germany. A German truck driver took the container to France, where a Turkish driver took over and drove the container onto a cross-Channel ferry. The Turk had a British passport and was a regular on the ferry. Customs at Dover didn't even give him a second look. Three hours later the heroin was on mainland Britain being driven on the M2 towards London and had increased in value to £30,000 a kilo, wholesale. There were two hundred kilos in the container. Six million pounds worth. Once cut, the street value would be closer to fifteen million pounds.

Twice when the truck drove under footbridges across the motorway it was checked out by spotters, men with mobile phones who checked that the truck wasn't been followed. Both men were satisfied that the truck was clean and phoned ahead to say that everything was as it should be.

As the Turk drove into Central London he was shadowed by two high-powered motorcycles. Once the riders were again certain that the truck wasn't being followed the Turk received a call on his mobile phone and was told where to make his delivery. The Turk drove the container to a warehouse in North London where the tinned plums were unloaded and piled up to be sold on to a legitimate supermarket chain. Four Turkish Cypriots unbolted a metal plate which ran the width of the rear of the container. Behind the plate were steel trays packed with white plastic parcels of brown powder, each the size of a small loaf of bread. The men unpacked the heroin, checked its purity and weight, and sent the driver on his way. The consignment was divided into four lots. The Turks took the lion's share and for a week or so the street price of heroin fell by ten per cent in North London. Forty kilos were sold to a group of former IRA activists who took the heroin on the ferry to Belfast where they were promptly arrested by the Northern Irish police. Another thirty kilos ended up on the streets of Liverpool. The dealers usually used milk powder to bulk out the drug but the heroin arrived on a Sunday and their local shop was shut. They had a supply of quinine and used that instead. The dealer who did the mixing used five times as much quinine as he should have done and twenty-seven heroin addicts ended up in hospital. Three died.

The Turks sold ten kilos to a Yardie gang in Harlesden. The Turks didn't like doing business with the Jamaicans but the Yardies were keen to buy and had cash. Customs had seized one of their deliveries in the suitcase of a mother of three at Heathrow Airport. Twelve kilos. She had just been unlucky. She didn't fit the profile of a mule but a Customs Officer had seen her nervously fumbling for her mobile phone as she pushed her trolley through the Nothing To Declare channel. The heroin wasn't even well hidden, the false compartments in the bottom of her oversized suitcases were discovered within minutes. The woman had broken down in tears and told the officer that a gang in Kingston had threatened to castrate her two sons if she didn't do as they wanted, and had promised her a thousand dollars if she did. Customs investigators told her that she'd get a lighter sentence if she gave evidence against the gang, but she just cried all the harder.

Another twelve kilos on the flight had gotten through but the Yardies were still short and so they had contacted the Turks. It wasn't as if there was an overlap of turf, and money was money so the Turks agreed to the sale. The handover took place on a petrol station forecourt in Wood Lane owned by one of the Turkish godfathers. The CCTV cameras were switched off and the Turks had three heavies with submachine pistols hidden in the filling station toilets just in case the Yardies decided to try to take the drugs for free.

The Yardies also came armed but they brought three hundred thousand pounds with them, mainly in fifty pound notes. The Turks counted the bundles and examined three of them in detail. Satisfied, they handed over the drugs. The Yardies had brought a chemical test kit with them and they tested two of the polythene-wrapped packages before pronouncing themselves satisfied. The deal was done. The Yardies piled into a BMW and drove off into the night with their heroin.

'I hate the Yardies,' said one of the Turks as he watched the BMW disappear into the distance. 'You can't trust them. Give me the Bangladeshi every time.' He lit a small cigar and drew the smoke deep into his lungs. 'You know where you are with a Bangladeshi.'

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'I hate the Turks,' said Delroy Moran. He was sitting in the front passenger seat of the 7 Series BMW. Gangly, with shoulder length dreadlocks, he'd flown into London six months earlier to escape a murder investigation in Jamaica. He was wearing a tight t-shirt and had a gold medallion of a cannabis plant dangling around his neck. The deal he'd just done was his biggest to date and he could feel the blood pumping through his veins. Moran planned to cut the heroin with milk powder and by the time it was on the streets of Harlesden the morphine that had cost a hundred dollars a kilo in Afghanistan would now be Grade 4 heroin, selling at £70 a gram. Seventy thousand pounds a kilo.

'Yeah, well they hate us,' said the driver of the BMW. Chas Eaton. He didn't have a driving licence or insurance but he did have three convictions for

dangerous driving under different names and had once run over and killed a thirteen-year-old girl at a zebra crossing in south London. Eaton had left the scene, abandoned and torched the car, and hadn't suffered a moment's guilt for what he'd done. 'But money is money, innit?'

'I'm just saying, given the chance they'd rob us blind. You've gotta count your fingers every time you shake their hands, know what I mean?'

The two heavies sat in the back of the BMW. Their legs were open wide but their knees still pressed against the seats in front of them. 'Starvin' Marvin Dexter and Lewis 'Jacko' Jackson. Both were London born and bred of Jamaican parents and when they weren't riding shotgun for Delroy Moran they were either in the gym or the boxing ring. The duffel bags were stuffed under their legs and they were holding their guns down between their knees. There were enough drugs in the car to ensure that they would go down for a double-digit prison sentence so they had no intention of going quietly if they were stopped by the police.

Eaton brought the BMW to a halt in front of a row of shops. A hardware store, a '£1 for everything' shop, a cut-price supermarket, a mini-cab company, a betting shop, an off-licence. Everything necessary for inner-city life. There were two floors of flats above the shops. The entrance to Moran's apartment was between the betting shop and the off-licence. Both were closed for the night. There were three young women huddled in front of the mini-cab company. Dyed blondes, short skirts, cheap jewellery. If Moran hadn't been working he'd have gone over and asked them if they wanted to party. One of the blondes, who couldn't have been more than sixteen, smiled at him hopefully through the windscreen but he ignored her. 'It's gonna rain, innit,' said Moran. 'Put the car away, yeah.' There was a line of lock-up garages behind the shops and Moran rented two of them. He twisted around in his seat and nodded at Dexter and Jackson. 'Swift, yeah?'

Dexter and Jackson nodded, then opened the rear doors, heaved themselves out of the car and shouldered the duffel bags, keeping their guns inside their jackets.

Moran hurried to the front door and opened it. Before opening the door he jabbed at an intercom on the wall to let the two men inside that they were on the way up. There was a small CCTV camera pointing down at the doorway and Moran flashed it a grin before stepping aside to let Dexter and Jackson head up the stairs with the bags. The intercom continued to buzz for a few seconds and then went silent. Moran cursed the two men he'd left in his apartment. Probably spaced out of their skulls again. He stabbed at it again and then this time he heard a sleepy voice. 'Yeah?'

'We're on the way up, everything okay?'

'Yeah.' The intercom went silent.

Moran glared up the CCTV camera. 'If they've been at the crack I'm gonna do for them, innit,' said Moran. He followed Dexter and Jackson inside, then closed the front door behind them. The door was reinforced with a metal sheet and the door frame was also lined with strips of metal. It would take a police ram minutes to even dent the door. Moran exhaled, his heart still pumping. He

was home and dry. Three hundred thousand pounds they'd paid the Turks. Cut and on the street, it would be worth almost three quarters of a million. Easy money.

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Chas Eaton drove the BMW slowly down the road, turned left and then left again down the alley that ran behind the shops. The lock-up garages were brick-built with corrugated metal roofs and most had wooden doors. The doors to Moran's units had been replaced with metal shutters and heavy-duty padlocks, and they had been alarmed. They kept the BMW in one of the garages and there were four stolen high-powered motorcycles in the other.

Eaton stopped and climbed out of the car. From where he was standing he could see the rear of the apartments above the shops. Most of the windows that overlooked the alley were bathrooms and several times Eaton had been able to glimpse naked flesh while parking the car at night. He scanned the windows. Most were in darkness. He saw a blur behind one of the lit windows. The glass was etched with fern patterns and Eaton couldn't even tell if the figure was male or female. The light in the bathroom of Moran's bathroom was off but Eaton frowned as he saw that the window was half open. There was a dark shape propped up against the wall under the window. A ladder. Eaton cursed. There'd be hell to pay if the flat had been burgled. Hell and retribution. If there had been a break in, it wouldn't have been local. Delroy Moran was feared for miles around.

As Eaton headed to the metal door he fished the padlock key from his trouser pocket. He heard a muffled footstep behind him and he started to turn. 'Say goodnight, Sooty,' said a voice and something hard crashed into the back of Eaton's head. He was unconscious before he hit the ground.

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Moran headed up the stairs after Dexter and Jackson. The stairs led straight up to a second door. Above it was a second CCTV camera. Like the door to the street, it was reinforced with metal. The door opened and Dexter and Jackson carried their bags inside. Jackson stopped on the threshold. Moran pushed him in the small of the back but Jackson seemed reluctant to move. As Moran peered over the big man's shoulder, he saw why. A man wearing a rubber alien mask was standing in the middle of the room, holding a large automatic in both hands. Dexter was kneeling on the floor, the duffel bag still on his shoulder. 'Inside!' hissed the man. The mask was metallic grey rubber with large teardrop shaped black eyes.

Moran reached for the Glock that was tucked in the back of his pants but a second masked man appeared at the side of the gunman, this one wearing a Frankenstein mask and holding a Magnum revolver. He was wearing a dark blue anorak with the hood up over the mask, black leather gloves, dark blue

jeans and black boots. Frankenstein waved his gun at the Yardie's face. 'Touch that gun and you'll be one sorry nigger,' he shouted. 'Now get inside.'

The man in the alien mask grabbed Jackson's coat collar and pulled him into the room, then forced him down on his knees.

Moran slowly moved his hand away from the butt of the Glock. 'You don't know who you're fucking with,' he said.

'Delroy Moran, drug-dealing scumbag, molester of underage girls and murderer of a taxi driver back in Kingston,' said the Alien. 'I know exactly who I'm dealing with and nothing would make me happier than to put a bullet in your sorry excuse for a face. Now take three steps forward and get down on your knees.' He was wearing identical clothing to Frankenstein. Only the masks were different.

'This is fucked up, man,' said Moran.

'Yeah, life's a bitch,' said Frankenstein.

'Fire that motherfucker and the cops'll be over you like a rash,' snarled Moran.

'Oh, right, Delroy. The cops rush over to Harlesden every time they hear a gun go off, do they? And just how are they gonna get through the two steel doors?' He gestured with the Magnum. 'I'll keep it simple, you being educationally challenged and all. In. Now.'

Moran swore and stepped into the room. Frankenstein kicked the door shut.

'Knees. Down. Now,' said Frankenstein.

Moran dropped to his knees, his eyes never leaving the gunman's face. 'You are dead meat,' he said.

'Sticks and stones, Delroy.'

Frankenstein grabbed the duffel bag from Dexter and ripped open the top. He examined the contents. 'Heroin,' he said to Alien. Then he took Jackson's duffel bag and checked it. 'Ten kilos, I'd say.'

'Heading for the big time, hey Delroy?' said Alien. 'Now, everyone put their hands behind their heads, fingers interlinked, nice and slowly.'

The three Yardies did as they were told. Frankenstein took the Glock from Moran and tucked it into his belt. 'Nice gun, the Glock,' said Frankenstein. 'Never jams. But me, I prefer the good old Colt. Can't go wrong with a Colt, that's what I always say.'

'You've got the gear, man,' said Moran. 'Do I have to listen to a lecture on guns?'

Alien took a step towards Moran and pointed his weapon his face. 'You're a very funny nigger, Delroy. But it's the cash we want, not your drugs.'

'There's no money. And the racial slurs are getting on my tits,' said Moran.

Alien whipped his gun across Moran's face. Blood spurted and Moran's head span to the left. He saw the two men he'd left to guard his flat, lying face down with strips of tape across their mouths, their hands bound behind them with plastic strips.

Frankenstein stepped in front of Moran. 'When did you get the safe?' he asked.

Moran's eyes flicked to the left, to the door that led into the main bedroom.

‘Three days ago.’

‘I need you to open it for me.’

‘It’s empty.’

‘So open it and show me.’

‘It’s empty, we used the cash to buy the gear.’

‘I’m not going to tell you again, nigger.’

‘Fuck you.’

Frankenstein lashed out and whipped the barrel of the gun across Moran’s cheek. More blood flowed. ‘Open the fucking safe.’

‘Open it yourself.’

Frankenstein grabbed Moran by the shirt collar and pulled him along the floor towards the bedroom. Moran crawled on his hands and knees, swearing loudly.

A shot rang out, the noise deafening in the small room. Frankenstein let go of Moran’s shirt and whirled around, cursing. Jackson was still on his knees but he was holding a small gun in his right hand. Alien staggered against the door. Jackson fired again and a second bullet thwacked into the wall above Alien’s head.

Moran rolled over towards a red plastic sofa. Jackson fired again and hit Alien in the chest. Everyone was staring at the gun in Jackson’s hand. Alien straightened up, then grunted and levelled his gun at Jackson.

‘They’re wearing vests!’ screamed Moran. ‘Shoot him in the head, man! Shoot the fucker!’

Jackson pointed his gun at Alien’s head but before his finger could tighten on the trigger Frankenstein fired and a bullet slammed into Jackson’s chest. Jackson pitched forwards, his face screwed up in pain.

Moran rolled again and slammed up against the sofa. He groped underneath for the loaded submachine pistol that he kept there. An Ingram MAC M10 with a bulbous silencer and thirty rounds in the clip. His grasping fingers found the butt of the Ingram and he pulled it out.

Frankenstein whirled around as Moran rolled onto his back, aiming his handgun. Frankenstein ducked low and fired twice at Moran, hitting him in the head both times. The Ingram fell from Moran’s lifeless hand, unfired, and clattered on the floor.

‘Shit, shit, shit,’ cursed Frankenstein.

Another shot rang out and a bullet thudded into the ceiling. Bang! Another shot. Frankenstein flinched but it was Alien who screamed in pain. He dropped his automatic and clasped his hands to his groin. ‘I’m hit!’ he shrieked. Jackson was lying on his side, his .22 still pointing at Alien. He was grinning in triumph, blood seeping between his teeth. Frankenstein fired the Magnum again and Jackson went still.

Blood seeped through Alien’s fingers. He looked at Frankenstein. ‘I’m hit,’ he said again, quieter this time. ‘I’m fucking hit.’ Then his legs buckled underneath him and he fell to the ground.

Frankenstein ran over to him and crouched down, examining the wound. The bullet had gone in under the vest, missing the Kevlar by less than an inch.

The intercom buzzed and Frankenstein hurried across the room and answered it. 'What the hell's going on up there?' said a voice.

'Get up here,' said Frankenstein and he pressed the button to open the door down below. Footsteps pounded up the stairs and there was a hammering on the door. A man wearing a werewolf mask stood in the doorway, holding a gun. 'What the fuck's going on?' he said.

'Andy's been hit.'

'Shit.' Werewolf pointed his gun at Dexter. 'How do we play it?'

Dexter held his hands high in the air. 'Don't shoot, man!'

Frankenstein looked around the room. Two men, bound and gagged. Two dead. Definitely dead. Another on his knees, pleading not to be killed.

Frankenstein's mind raced.

'How do we play it?' repeated Werewolf. 'It's your call.'

Frankenstein's mind raced. 'Let me think,' he said.

The driver pulled the van over to the side of the road and switched off the engine and then killed the lights. The werewolf mask was in the glove compartment, along with the short length of lead pipe bound with masking tape that he'd used to club Eaton unconscious. Eaton was bound and gagged and lying face down in the lock-up. The van had been stolen and was fitted with false plates and had the name of an emergency plumbing firm on the sides. Werewolf had wanted to drive to the nearest Accident and Emergency Unit but Frankenstein had told him to drive out of London. Now they sat in the darkened lane, the nearest house half a mile away, the engine clicking as it cooled.

'This has all turned to shit,' said Werewolf.

'Yeah,' said Frankenstein in the passenger seat. He had taken off his mask and pulled back his anorak hood. His head was cropped close to his skull and he was balding on top. He had a curving Mexican-type moustache. 'What the hell are we going to do?' He twisted around in his seat to look at Alien, who was curled up on the floor in a foetal ball.

'You know what we have to do,' said Werewolf, drumming the palms of his hand on the steering wheel. 'We've got to get Andy to a hospital, that's what we've got to do.'

'And just what do we tell them?' said Frankenstein.

'We leave him outside, we don't have to say anything.'

'Get real,' said Frankenstein. 'As soon as they identify him, they'll come looking for us.'

Werewolf slammed his hands down on the steering wheel, hard. 'So we deny everything,' he said. 'What can they do?'

Frankenstein glared at Werewolf. 'Don't be so naïve,' he said. 'They'll dig out the bullet and if they can match it to any of the bullets in Moran's flat then that puts Andy at a murder scene. It puts him in a gunfight with a Yardie

posse.’ Frankenstein slapped the dashboard with his gloved hand. ‘We should have killed them all. God damn it, we should have slotted them all.’

‘Rosie, listen to yourself,’ said Werewolf.

Frankenstein stared through the windscreen with unseeing eyes. ‘They’re witnesses,’ he said. ‘They started the bloody fireworks, we should have ended it. They know how many of us there were. Three. So if they identify Andy, they go looking for two others. How long do you think it’ll be before they come knocking on our doors?’

‘We can alibi each other,’ said Werewolf. ‘What are they gonna do, call us liars?’

‘I’m not doing a twenty stretch,’ said Frankenstein. ‘We agreed before we went into this. We knew what the downside is, we agreed to take the risk.’

‘We said that if one of us got killed, the rest of us would cover it up,’ said Werewolf. ‘Andy isn’t dead.’

‘He’s got a slug in the guts,’ said Frankenstein.

‘But he’s not dead.’

Alien groaned. Frankenstein had given him an anorak to clutch against the wound but blood was still pooling around him.

‘Let’s take this outside,’ said Frankenstein. He climbed out of the passenger side of the van and waited for Werewolf to join him. Their breath feathered from their mouths in the cold night air. Somewhere off in the distance an owl hooted and high overhead were the green and red lights of an airliner heading for Heathrow. ‘Let’s look at this logically,’ said Frankenstein, keeping his voice just above a whisper. ‘The way I see it. Andy’s a goner anyway. It was a bloody .22 so the slug’ll have spun around in his guts and done God only knows how much damage inside.’

‘Best will in the world, you’re not a doctor, Rosie,’ said Werewolf.

‘But I’ve seen enough people shot to know what’s bad and what isn’t,’ said Frankenstein. ‘And Andy’s bad.’

‘He’s not going to get any better lying in the van, that’s for sure.’

‘Agreed,’ said Frankenstein. ‘So what are our options? We take him to hospital and hold up our hands to shooting two Yardies and stealing their heroin? What if Andy goes and dies anyway, where does that leave us? Looking like twats staring at twenty years behind bars for nothing, that’s what.’

‘So we wait for him to die, is that what you’re saying?’ said Werewolf.

Frankenstein shrugged.

‘Why don’t you spit it out?’ said Werewolf.

‘I shouldn’t have to spell it out,’ said Frankenstein.

‘You want to finish him,’ said Werewolf flatly. ‘You want to put a bullet in his head.’

‘He’s dying anyway.’

‘What if it was me?’ asked Werewolf. ‘What if it was me lying on the floor of the van bleeding. Would you put a bullet in me? Look me in the eyes and tell me that’s what you’d do.’

‘If it was me, I’d expect you to do the same,’ said Frankenstein.

‘Easy for you to say, standing here while Andy’s bleeding to death,’ said Werewolf. ‘Look, maybe there’s another way. We take him to a doctor. Not a hospital, a doctor.’

‘They’ve all got to report gunshot wounds.’

‘A hookie one,’ said Werewolf. ‘Someone who’ll take the bullet out and not say anything.’

‘You know someone?’

‘There’s a guy in Peckham. We could be there in thirty minutes or so at this time of night.’

‘He needs major surgery, not a couple of stitches,’ said Frankenstein. ‘He needs blood. Lots of it.’

‘At least we can try,’ said Werewolf.

‘Then what?’ asked Frankenstein. ‘Your quack patches Andy up, then what? Andy goes on sick leave for six months to recuperate? For God’s sake, how’s he going to explain away a bullet wound? And what about the quack? Does he know you? Are you going to spend the rest of your life waiting for him to grass you up?’

‘We pay him enough, he’ll keep schtum.’

Frankenstein threw up his hands. ‘You’re mad,’ he said.

‘Maybe,’ said Werewolf. ‘But if it was you, Rosie, I’d be out here saying the same.’

‘He’ll probably die anyway,’ said Frankenstein.

‘But at least I’d know that I tried,’ said Werewolf. ‘Let’s just get him to the quack and see what the quack says.’

Frankenstein stared at the ground then took a deep breath and exhaled. He nodded. ‘Okay. Just don’t expect me not to say that I told you so when the shit hits the fan.’

‘The shit has already hit the fan,’ said Werewolf, but Frankenstein was already walking back to the van. Werewolf hurried after him.

As Werewolf got into the front, Frankenstein climbed through the rear door and knelt down beside Alien. ‘It’s okay, Andy, we’re going to get you to a hospital.’

Alien didn’t respond. Frankenstein took the glove off his right hand and felt for a pulse in Alien’s neck, but as soon as he touched the flesh he knew that the man was dead. Frankenstein looked up at Werewolf and shook his head. ‘You might think I’m a callous bastard, but thank heaven for small mercies is what I say,’ said Frankenstein.

‘What now?’ asked Werewolf.

‘We bury him where he’ll never be found. Then it’s back to life as normal.’

‘What about the gear?’ asked Werewolf, nodding at the two blood-stained duffel bags.

‘Leave that to me,’ said Frankenstein.

‘We didn’t go into this to steal drugs,’ said Werewolf.

‘You think we should have left with nothing?’ snapped Frankenstein.

‘I’m just saying, we went there for cash, that’s all.’

‘And there wasn’t any cash there. And Andy took a bullet in the gut. You want us to go through all that for nothing?’

Werewolf pointed at the MAC 10 that was lying on the floor of the van next to Alien. ‘What about that, Rosie? What the hell did you bring that for?’

‘Souvenir,’ said Frankenstein.

‘It’s a bloody liability, a weapon like that,’ said Werewolf. ‘Spray and pray.’

‘Looks the business though, doesn’t it,’ said Frankenstein. ‘A gun like that could be useful.’

‘You’re not thinking about doing this again are you?’ asked Werewolf. ‘After what’s just happened?’

‘I’ll sort it,’ said Frankenstein. ‘Don’t worry.’ He sounded a lot more confident than he actually felt. Werewolf was right. Cash was one thing. Even dirty money could be cleaned and moved and spent. Drugs were trouble, plain and simple.