

TANGO ONE FIRST CHAPTER

The man had been tied to the chair for so long that he'd lost all feeling in his hands and feet. His captors had used thick strips of insulation tape to bind him to the wooden chair and slapped another piece across his mouth even though he was in a basement and there was no one within earshot who'd care whether he lived or died.

The three men who'd brought him to the villa hadn't said a word as they'd dragged him out of the back of the Mercedes and hustled him across the stone flagstones and into the pink-walled villa. He'd lost a shoe somewhere and his big toe poked through a hole in his blue wool sock.

The tape across his mouth pulsed in and out with each ragged breath as he looked around the room where he was being kept prisoner. No windows. A single door that had been bolted when the three men left. Bare walls, stone with a thick covering of yellowing plaster. A concrete floor. A single fluorescent strip light above his head. One wall had been shelved with slabs of rough local timber and there was a scattering of tinned goods at head level – Heinz baked beans, Batchelors peas, bottles of HP sauce and boxes of Kellogs cornflakes and PG Tips. The food cravings of an Englishman abroad.

The man fought to steady his breathing. Panic wasn't going to get him anywhere. He had to stay calm. He had to think.

In front of the man was a Sony digital video camera on a tripod, its single lens staring at him full on. The man stared back. He had a bad feeling about the camera. A very bad feeling.

He strained to hear where the three men were but no sound penetrated the depths of the basement. He hadn't heard them leave the villa or the Mercedes being driven away, but that meant nothing. The soundproofing of the basement worked both ways.

The man tested his bonds. The tape was grey and metallic-looking, the type used by plumbers, and while it was only an inch wide, it had been wound around his limbs so many times that they might as well have been made of steel. He tried to rock the chair backwards and forwards but it was big and heavy and he could barely move it.

He swallowed. His throat felt raw and every breath was painful but at least the pain meant that he was alive.

He wracked his brains, trying to think where he'd gone wrong. He must have made a mistake somewhere along the line, and if he could just work out what it was, maybe he'd be able to put it right. Had someone recognized him, had he said something to give himself away, some stupid slip that he hadn't noticed but which they'd picked up on? He replayed all the recent conversations he'd had but nothing came to mind. The man was too professional to make mistakes. Too careful. Too scared.

He knew two of the men who'd brought him down to the basement. One was Scottish, the other Colombian. He'd known them both for almost two years. He'd drunk with them, whored with them, on occasions almost felt that they were friends. But when they'd picked him up on the pavement outside the hotel their eyes had been hard and their faces set like stone and he'd known even before they'd grabbed him that he was in trouble.

The third man, the one who'd driven, was a stranger. Hispanic, jet black hair that had been swept back and high cheekbones pockmarked with old acne scars. He'd kept turning around and grinning at the man, but like the other two hadn't said a word during the drive to the villa.

Initially the man had tried to bluff it out, to make a joke of it, then he'd faked anger, saying that they had no right to treat him that way, then he'd threatened them. The Scotsman had jabbed the barrel of a large automatic into the man's ribs and kept his finger tight on the trigger. Eventually the man had fallen silent and just sat between them, his hands in his lap.

He heard footsteps on the stone steps that led down to the basement and he tensed. The door opened. Her recognized the man who stood in the doorway. He was a shade over six feet tall with sandy brown hair that was unfashionably long and had pale green eyes and a sprinkling of freckles over a nose that had been broken at least twice. Dennis Donovan.

'Don't get up, Greig,' said Donovan in a nasal Mancunian whine. He laughed harshly. The Colombian appeared at Donovan's shoulder and grinned, showing yellowish, smoker's teeth.

Donovan and the Columbian walked into the basement and closed the door behind them.

Donovan was wearing a red short-sleeved Polo shirt and khaki Chinos and in his hand was a sharp kitchen knife. The Columbian was holding a large plastic bag.

The man said nothing. There was nothing he could say. Donovan had used his real name which meant that Donovan knew everything.

'You've been a naughty boy, Greig,' said Donovan, stretching out the man's name as if relishing the sound of it. 'A very naughty boy.' Donovan took off his Rolex Submariner watch and put it on one of the empty wooden shelves. From the back pocket of his Chinos he took a black ski mask and he slipped it on his head.

He walked past the man, so close that the man could smell his aftershave, and bent over the video camera. He pressed a button and then cursed. 'Fucking new technology,' he said. 'Ever tried programming a video recorder, Greig? Bloody nightmare. You need a PhD in Astrophysics just to set the timer. Ah, there we go.'

Donovan straightened up. A small red light glowed at the top of the video recorder as the glass lens glared balefully at the man in the chair.

Donovan nodded at the Columbian who had also put on a black ski mask. Donovan tossed the knife to him in a gentle arc and the Columbian caught it deftly with his free hand.

The Columbian advanced towards the man in the chair, flicking the knife from side to side, humming quietly. The man struggled, even though he knew there was no point in struggling. His conscious brain knew that his life was forfeit, but his animal instincts refused to accept the inevitable and he strained against his bonds and tried to scream through the taped gag as the Columbian went to work with the knife.

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Peter Latham stabbed at the lift button and glared at the floor indicator as if he could speed up its progress by sheer willpower. He shrugged his shoulders inside his grey suit jacket and adjusted his blue and yellow striped tie. It had been a long time since Latham had worn plainclothes during the day and he was surprised at how much he missed his uniform.

The briefcase he carried was the same one he carried into work every day at New Scotland Yard, a present from his wife of going on twenty-five years. Black leather, scuffed at the edges, the gilt weathered on the two combination locks, the handle virtually moulded to the shape of his hand, it was something of a lucky talisman and he planned to keep it until the day he retired.

The lift doors opened and Latham stepped inside. He pressed the button for the fifth floor but the doors remained resolutely open. The hotel was advertised as a four-star but the carpets were stained and threadbare and there was a tired look to the place, like a faded actress who'd long given up on her agent ringing with an offer of work. It was in an area of London that Latham rarely frequented, just east of the City's sprawling financial district, and he'd traveled by black cab instead of using his regular driver. Strictly speaking, as an assistant chief commissioner with the Metropolitan Police, Latham was higher in rank than the man he was coming to see, but the man was an old friend and the manner and urgency of the request for the meeting was such that Latham was prepared to put rank aside.

The lift door closed and there was a sharp jolt as it started its upward journey. Latham could hear gears grinding somewhere above his head and he resolved to take the stairs on the way down.

The room was at the end of a long corridor punctuated with cheap watercolours of seascapes in fake antique frames. Latham knocked and the door was opened by a man in his early fifties, a few inches shorter than Latham's six feet and several stone heavier.

'Peter, thanks for coming,' said the man, offering his hand.

They shook. Both men had string, firm grips. A handshake between equals.

'We're getting a bit old for cloak and dagger, aren't we, Ray?' said Latham. Raymond Mackie pulled an apologetic face and stepped aside to allow Latham into the room. Two single beds, a pine-laminated dressing table and wardrobe, and a small circular table with two grey armchairs. There was a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label, two glasses and ice bucket on the table and Mackie waddled

over to it, poured two large measures and handed one to Latham. They clinked glasses and drank. Mackie's official title was Head of Drugs Operations, HODO, generally referred to as Ho Dough, though because of Mackie's expansive waistline that was frequently corrupted behind his back to The Doughboy.

A combined television and video recorder stood on the dressing table. Mackie saw Latham looking at the television and he picked up a video cassette. 'This arrived at Custom House yesterday,' he said.

'I hope you haven't brought me all this way to watch a blue movie,' said Latham. He dropped down into one of the armchairs and put his briefcase on the floor.

'I warn you, it's not pretty,' said Mackie, slotting the cassette into the recorder and pressing the "play" button. He waddled over to a sofa and eased himself down onto it as if he feared it might break, then took a long slug of his whisky as the screen flickered into life.

Latham steepled his fingers under his chin. It took several seconds before he realized that what he was seeing wasn't a movie, and that what he was seeing was the brutal torture of a fellow human being. 'Sweet Jesus,' he whispered.

'Greig Middleton,' said Mackie. 'One of our best undercover agents.'

On the screen, the man in the ski mask was slicing deep cuts across the chest of the bound man who was rocking back and forth in agony.

'He went missing on St Kitts two weeks ago. This came via Miami.'

Latham tried not to look at the man being tortured and instead forced himself to look for details that might help identify the assailant or the location. The torturer wore no watch or jewellery and he was wearing plastic gloves, the sort used by surgeons. There was no way of knowing if he was black or white, or even if he was male or female, though Latham doubted that a woman would be capable of such savagery. The walls were bare except for a few shelves on to the left. A fluorescent light fitting. Concrete floor. It could have been anywhere.

'Middleton was trying to get close to Dennis Donovan,' said Mackie.

'Donovan's been active in the Caribbean for the past six months, meeting with Columbians and a Dutch shipper by the name of Akveld. Middleton's in was through one of Akveld's associates. He's gone missing, too.'

A second masked figure stepped into the frame holding a plastic bag. He stood for a second or two looking directly at the camera.

'We think this is Donovan,' said Mackie. 'Same build. But there's no way of knowing for sure.'

The man walked behind Middleton and pulled the plastic bag down over his head, twisting it around his neck. The undercover Customs agent shuddered in the chair, his eyes wide and staring as the tape across his mouth pulsed in time with his desperate attempts to breathe. It was more than a minute before his head slumped down against his chest but the man behind him kept the bag tight around his neck for a further minute to make sure that he was dead.

The recording ended and Mackie switched off the television. ‘Middleton is the third agent we’ve lost in the Caribbean. Like Middleton, the bodies of the first two haven’t been found. They were hoping to bring Donovan down as part of Operation Liberator, but it didn’t work out that way.’

Latham nodded. Operation Liberator has been trumpeted as a major victory in the war against drugs – almost three thousand drugs traffickers arrested, twenty tons of cocaine and almost thirty tons of marijuana seized along with thirty million dollars of assets confiscated as part of a massive operation conducted by the United States Drug Enforcement Administration and British Customs. But Latham knew that most of the arrests were low level dealers and traffickers, men and women who would have been replaced before they’d even been strip-searched. And thirty million dollars was a drop in the ocean of a business estimated to be worth more than five hundred billion dollars a year.

‘Were they killed on tape?’ asked Latham.

Mackie shook his head.

‘So why this time? What was special about Middleton?’

‘It’s a warning,’ said Mackie, sitting down in the armchair opposite Latham and refilling their glasses. ‘He’s telling us what he’ll do to anyone that we send against him.’

Latham sipped his whisky. ‘It’s unusual isn’t it, killing a Customs officer. Screws up the whole risk-reward equation.’

‘Not really, not in the league Donovan’s in. If it a case of a couple of kilos in Brixton, maybe, but the last consignment of Donovan’s that went belly up had a street value of thirty million dollars. If the DEA catch him with the goods he’ll go down for life without parole.’

‘Even so, he could just give them a kicking and send them packing, couldn’t he?’

‘Sure, Peter, but you’re thinking like a rational human being with a conscience and a sense of right and wrong. Donovan’s a sociopath who’s been a criminal since he lost his baby teeth. I guess we’ve become a thorn in his side and this is his way of saying enough is enough.’

‘And is it? From your perspective?’

Mackie looked at the assistant commissioner with unblinking grey eyes. ‘I knew all three, Peter. I worked with Greig way back when. Checking cars at Dover, believe it or not. I’m not going to send any more men into the lion’s den.’

‘So he’s won?’

‘Not exactly.’ Mackie fell silent and stared at a painting of a vase of flowers above one of the beds.

‘Spit it out, Ray,’ said Latham eventually.

‘We’ve had an idea,’ said Mackie, still studying the painting.

‘Well I guessed that much.’

‘The problem is, no matter how good our agents are, and Greig Middleton was one of the best, an operator like Donovan can still spot them. They don’t have his

background, his instincts. No matter how good they are they're still playing a role. One slip, one wrong move, and their cover's blown.'

Latham nodded but didn't say anything.

Mackie put his glass on the table and stood up, his knees cracking like snapping twigs. He paced up and down the room, his left shoe squeaking each time it touched the floor. 'We put our guys through the most intense training imaginable, same as you do with your SO10 people. We teach them about surveillance and counter-surveillance, we teach them how to act, how to think like a criminal. And up against low level operators they pass muster. You see, if it walks like a duck and talks like duck, then the bad guys assume that it's probably a duck. But probably isn't good enough for a man like Donovan. First, he only does business with people he's known personally for a long time. He treats all strangers with suspicion. And he has an instinct for undercover agents. It's as if he can smell them. Apart from the three who've died, I've had half a dozen bail out of their own accord, convinced that Donovan was on to them.'

'I get the picture, Ray. I even get the duck analogy. But what do you want from me? From the Met?'

Mackie took a deep breath and turned to look at the assistant commissioner. 'Virgins,' he said, quietly. 'We need virgins.'

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TO BE CONTINUED....