

Rob Tyler wanted a beer, but he was working and on a point of principle he never drank on the job. He was sitting in a house in Queens, about ten miles from the towering skyscrapers of Manhattan. The house was in a quiet cul-de-sac, and probably worth a couple of million dollars. Three bedrooms, a nice yard, a garage easily big enough for two cars and a hot tub on a terrace leading off the main bedroom. He was sitting on an Italian sofa and on the marble coffee table in front of him was the rope that Tyler would use to hang the man who was expected home at any moment.

Tyler was dressed for murder. He was wearing white forensic overalls, paper covers over his shoes, and a shower cap. There were blue latex gloves on his hands, and in the kitchen was a black garbage bag into which he'd put all the protective clothing once the job was finished. The job specifications had been clear. The man was to be killed by hanging and everything had to point to suicide. That didn't necessarily mean a note – it was a fallacy that all suicides left a note before killing themselves – but it did mean that the marks on his neck would have to be consistent with hanging and there would have to be rope fibers on his hands. Tyler had already selected the perfect spot for the hanging – the bannisters around the main hall would do just fine.

Tyler had done more than a dozen killings that had appeared like suicides. Hanging was the most popular but he had also slit the wrists of a woman in a bath and had done a couple of overdoses. Overdoses were messy. The best way was to force a liquid down the victim's throat with a large syringe and then follow up with tablets when they were unconscious. The overdoses were two-man jobs, Tyler doubted that one man could do it on his own. He'd done hangings on his own but this time the job had been assigned to two contractors. Tyler wasn't overjoyed at working with another contractor, especially one he hadn't worked with before, but the woman seemed professional. She'd said her name was Leila and was vague about where she'd come from and she hadn't given much away. She was pretty, with mahogany brown skin and the blackest eyes he'd ever seen, short, curly hair and a body that wouldn't quit. She was wearing high heels and a short skirt that showed off a pair of awesome legs and a low-cut top with a cleavage that he couldn't stop looking at. From her dark skin and hair Tyler suspected Guatemala or Nicaragua but her accent was a puzzle. Her English was perfect but her accent was slightly off as if she'd been born overseas.

He'd tried speaking to her in Spanish but she hadn't replied. Tyler assumed she had been hired because of her looks – she was the perfect honey for a honey trap.

Leila had made contact with the target and had been to the house with him the previous night. The target was divorced, she said, and had jumped at the chance of getting between her legs. He'd been so enamored that he hadn't realised she had copied his key and noted the burglar alarm code.

Now they were in the house and waiting for him to return. It was seven in the evening and they had been inside for the best part of four hours. Tyler had jokingly suggested that they visit the bedroom to pass the time but she had smiled sarcastically and said that he wasn't her type. Tyler wondered if that were true. He was a little over six feet and was in the best physical condition of his life, better even than when he'd been in Delta Force. He wondered if it was worth trying again, after the target was dead. Killing could be the ultimate aphrodisiac, with the right kind of girl. He realised he was staring at her breasts again and that she was looking at him. He smiled and looked away. "How long have you known Mercier?" he asked. Mercier had hired them for the job. Tyler was getting a hundred grand for the gig. He didn't know how much the girl was being paid. He'd be doing most of the work. As soon as the target turned up, the girl would cover him with her gun. He'd already brought a quilt down from upstairs and laid it behind the sofa. He'd wrap the target with the quilt and then place the noose around his neck and pull it tight until he was dead. That way there would be no signs of a struggle. Once the target was dead it would be easy enough to attach the rope to the bannister and set the scene. Tyler had already selected a dining room chair. He would put the target's fingerprints on the back and make it look as if the chair had fallen to the side.

"A couple of years."

"Done many jobs for him?"

"A few."

"Anything I might have heard of?"

She tilted her head on one side and scrutinised him with her jet black eyes. "Do you always ask this many questions?"

"I'm just curious."

"Well you know what curiosity did to the cat." She checked the action of her gun.

"You do that a lot," said Tyler. "Check you gun."

"I like to be sure," she said.

“You always use a Glock?”

“For close up work, sure. You can’t go wrong with a Glock. Plus there’s a lot of them about so they’re harder to track down.”

“They kick their cartridges everywhere though.”

“If you dump the gun, that’s not an issue.” She shrugged. “Horses for courses.”

Tyler nodded. “And what did they tell you about me?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Not much.”

“And you didn’t ask?”

“Why would I ask?”

“Not curious?”

She laughed. “You’re the curious one, Robert. I don’t have a curious bone in my body.”

“But when they said there’d be two people on the job, didn’t you ask for details?”

She shook her head. “No.” She tilted her head on one side again and fixed him with her eyes. “You asked about me?”

“Of course,” said Tyler.

“And Mercier told you?”

“He just said that you were very pretty and I should keep my cock in my pants.”

“Good advice,” she said. “That’s all he told you?”

“Why, does that worry you?”

“I’d have hoped there would have been some sort of confidentiality. I wouldn’t want an employer to start giving out my personal information to a ...”

“Stranger? But I’m not a stranger. I’ve worked with Jules for many years. And it’s not as if he gave me your real name. Other than that he told me nothing.”

She walked over to the window and looked down at the street, then at her watch. “So what do you want to know, Rob?” She reached into her pocket and took out a bulbous suppressor and screwed it into the barrel of her Glock as she continued to look down into the street.

Tyler shrugged. “You’re a pro, that’s obvious. But you’re young. What are you? Twenty-one? Twenty-two?”

She smiled. “Twenty-four.”

“That’s still young. How did you get the experience?”

“Israeli army,” she said. “Signed up at eighteen.”

“You’re Israeli?”

“My parents moved there before I was born.”

“So you’re Jewish?”

“Is that a problem?”

Tyler laughed. “Of course not. Wow, I wouldn’t have put you down as a former soldier.”

“It’s compulsory in Israel, national service for everyone. Three years for men, two years for women. But only half go into the military. And a lot of kids duck it if they can. But I enlisted. I wanted to serve.”

“And you got a taste for it?”

“For what?”

“Combat?”

“There wasn’t much combat. But a lot of training. Then I joined Mossad. The Israeli equivalent of the CIA.”

“What did you do for them?”

“That’s classified. But between you and me, pretty much the same as I’m doing today.”

“You were a government assassin?”

She smiled tightly. “Like I said, it’s classified.”

“And now you do it for money?”

She nodded. “A lot of money. And you were what? A Navy Seal?”

“Delta Force,” said Tyler.

“Were you one of the ones that got Bin Laden?”

“I’d gone private before then,” said Tyler.

“How many jobs have you done?”

“In total? A couple of dozen.”

“You don’t know for sure?”

“To be honest, once a job is done, it’s done. I don’t dwell. It’s like women. I have absolutely no idea how many women I’ve fucked over the years. A hundred. Two hundred.” He shrugged. “I can’t remember their faces, never mind their names. It’s the same with targets. Mind you, there’s one coming up that I’m never going to forget.”

She looked at him, intrigued. “Tell me more.”

“I can’t,” he said.

“Is it for Mercier?”

“No. Someone else. It’ll probably be my last job. For a while, anyway.”

“It’s big?”

Tyler grinned. “Very big. The biggest.”

She smiled and locked eyes with him. “You can tell me,” she said.

He shook his head. “I can’t tell anyone. That’s one of the downsides of this job, you know? It all has to stay secret. Otherwise you’re fucked.”

“You can tell people you trust,” she said.

“Yeah, but who can you trust?” he asked. “You can’t trust anybody.” He looked at his watch. “Why is he running late?”

“What do you mean?”

“The target. Where the hell is he?”

“He’s here already,” said the girl.

Tyler frowned. He was about to reply when he realised what she meant. He started to raise his gun but it was too late, way too late. Her Glock was already pointed at his chest and he barely had time to open his mouth before the first shot smashed into his chest, followed closely by a second. He was barely aware of the muffled pops of the suppressed shots and the bullets felt like nothing more than punches to his chest. He fell backwards and was dead even before the third shot hit him in the face and his brains and skull splattered across the wall behind him.

* * *

PATTAYA

Lex Harper tapped his pool cue on the side of the table and tried to focus on the balls. “Remind me again, am I big or small?”

The three men sitting on bar stools to his left groaned as one. “He’s pissed,” said a big man wearing a Singha beer vest and baggy shorts.

“He’s taking the piss, that’s what he’s doing,” said the man sitting in the middle of the three. He was tall and thin with a beard that compensated for a rapidly-receding hairline. “Lex, mate, time to go home. And don’t use the bike. I don’t want to be visiting you in the ICU.”

“I’m fine,” said Harper, struggling to focus on the table. He frowned. “Just tell me, big or small?”

“Small,” chorused the three men. The barman put down fresh bottles of Heineken down in front of them, each protected with a foam tube stamped with the logo of

Noy's Bar, a red lipstick kiss on a St George's Cross. The bar was open to the air and even with the large fans playing down on them from the ceiling, the beer wouldn't have stayed cool for long without insulation. Noy's Bar was just off Pattaya's Walking Street. Most evenings Walking Street was packed with tourists eyeing up the red light area's bars and hookers, but Noy's Bar was off the beaten track enough that Harper and his pals could enjoy a quiet game of pool and a few beers without being disturbed by crocodiles of Chinese and Korean tourists snapping away with their smartphones. Though in Harper's case it had been more than a few beers along with half a dozen tequila chasers. It was just after 8pm but the four men had been drinking and playing pool after an extended lunch in the Pig and Whistle and all the signs were the drinking at least was going to continue into the early hours.

As Harper leaned over the table to play his shot, he felt a vibration from his denim hip pack. Night or day Harper always had the pack around his waist. It contained one of the many mobile phones he used, an Irish passport and two credit cards, and fifty-thousand baht in cash. The pack, together with the heavy gold neck chain he always wore, meant that he could get out of Thailand or anywhere else he found himself at a moment's notice, leaving by the airport, by boat or travelling overland to a neighbouring country. He had a larger bug-out bag under the bed in his apartment and another in the back of his SUV, but all the essentials for a fast escape were in the hip pack. Much as he loved Thailand, his unbreakable rule was never to be so fond of a place that he couldn't leave at a moment's notice, without a backward glance.

His companions groaned as he straightened up, took out his phone and read the three word text message from a UK number: "YOU HAVE MAIL".

'Guys, I've got to go,' he said, slotting his cue into a rack on the wall.

'He's on a mission,' laughed Singha shirt. 'It's that dancer from Anglewitch, the one with the tits.'

'To be fair, they've all got tits,' said Harper. 'Real or fake. Okay, I'm off.'

'Take a taxi, Lex.'

Harper nodded and waved a thanks for the advice. He was just sober enough to know that he was too drunk to be riding his Triumph Bonneville home. Pattaya's streets were a death trap at the best of times, but being drunk on a powerful motorcycle when pretty much everyone else on the road was either equally intoxicated or high on drugs was a recipe for disaster. He headed off down the road in search of an internet café. The nearest was run by a middle-aged former gogo dancer

called Rose. Rose was still a stunner, so much so that at least four foreigners had given her the money to start her own internet café come print shop. Two of her backers were British, one was Australian and one was an Indian. The Indian and one of the Brits thought they were married to Rose, having gone through a traditional Thai ceremony in her home town of Udon Thani. Rose had never followed up with the paperwork which meant she was free and single and open to offers.

All four of her backers lived overseas and, so far at least, had never decided to holiday in Pattaya at the same time. They all deposited regular sums into her bank accounts and sent her presents to prove their devotion and in return received daily Skype calls where she would shed a tear and say how she loved them and missed them.

When Harper walked in she was sitting at one of her terminals helping a pretty teenage girl with a tattoo of two Japanese koi on her back compose an email to an overseas sponsor. “Tell him you can not dance because you miss him so much,” said Rose, pointing at the screen. “And tell him your mother has to go into hospital soon. Don’t say what’s wrong with her. Wait for him to ask. And don’t ask him for money. Wait for him to offer.”

The girl frowned. “What if he doesn’t offer?”

Rose smiled. “He will,” she said, patting the young girl on the leg. “They always do.”

‘Can I use a computer, Rose?’ asked Harper.

‘No problem, Mr Lex,’ she said. “Take any.”

Harper sat down at the furthest terminal from the counter and logged on to Yahoo Mail. He had memorised the email address and password, but had never sent a single email from the account. Its sole use was for communications with his MI5 handler, Charlotte Button, the only other person who knew the password. They sent messages to each other using the Drafts folder - a technique first developed by al-Qaeda terrorists, allowing instantaneous communications that by-passed even the most high-tech surveillance systems. The National Security Agency in the States and GCHQ in the UK had the capacity to eavesdrop on every phone call and email anywhere in the world, but using the Drafts folder trick meant that the emails were never actually transmitted and therefore could not be flagged up by anyone monitoring his communications. Only if a spook had discovered the existence of the email account and hacked into it, would the messages in the Drafts folder be compromised, and even

then, they'd have to be quick because Button and Harper's SOP was to delete every message as soon as they had read it.

A single message had been added to the Drafts in the last couple of hours: "LOCATION ONE. SOONEST. TEXT ME WHEN IN SITU". Harper smiled to himself as he deleted the message. Even if someone really had hacked into his account, the message wouldn't tell them much. Location One was London. He waved over at Rose. "Rose, coffee, black. Two sugars."

'Coming, Mr Lex.'

"And a bottle of water."

Harper went back online. There was a KLM flight due to leave Bangkok at two thirty in the morning. He booked himself a business class seat and a connecting flight to Dublin. Rose brought him his coffee and Harper thanked her.

"And when I've finished this one bring me another, and another. In fact, if you can put me on an intravenous drip, that would be great."

Rose frowned, not understanding.

"Just coffee, Rose, and keep it coming."

He sighed and looked at his watch.. At this time of night it wouldn't take much more than an hour to get to Suvarnabhumi Airport. He had plenty of time to get a couple of coffees under his belt before heading home to grab what he needed.

* * *

There were two of them sitting in the back of the van, and the ventilation wasn't the best. The air quality wasn't helped by the continuing flatulence of Jamie Brewer, Spider Shepherd's number two on the surveillance operation. "I'm sorry, mate, really," said Brewer after breaking wind for the third time. "I had a curry last night."

Shepherd wrinkled his nose in disgust. "That is awful. Really."

"Mate, I'm sorry."

Shepherd would have loved to have opened the rear doors but that wasn't possible, not when it was packed with transmitting and recording equipment. The van they were in had the livery of a courier company and sitting in the front seat was a brunette in a beige uniform. Her cab was sealed and they had to talk to her via an intercom

Shepherd stared at one of the four flatscreens on the side of the van. It showed an electronic map of the area around them along with six flashing red dots. Above each

of the dots was a number from one to six, representing the six watchers on the operation. The watchers had been tasked with following Ahmed Khalaf, a twenty-three-year-old former medical student who had ended his studies early and travelled to Syria to fight alongside the jihadists of ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Khalaf had been easy enough to track as he has posted numerous photographs on his Facebook page. He had been allowed back into the country but MI5 had kept him under surveillance from the moment he had arrived at Heathrow. It was clear from the way that Khalaf behaved once he was back in the UK that he had been well taught by ISIS. He didn't have a mobile phone and he didn't own a computer. He made calls from phone boxes and twice a day he went to one of several internet cafes. It was clear he was up to something and MI5 put him high up on their list of priorities. There were three teams of five assigned to Khalaf, working eight-hour shifts. Shepherd had been assigned to monitor the teams and he took it in turns to do ride-alongs. Surveillance was a difficult job at the best of times and long-term surveillance was especially demanding, hour after hour of sitting outside buildings followed by short bursts of frenetic activity. As days turned into weeks and even months, the job got that much harder. Surveillance teams would start to make assumptions and let down their guard. A target might leave the house every day at the same time, walk down the road and turn left. He might do that every day for a hundred days. But on day one hundred and one he might turn right and disappear. Shepherd's job was to make sure the teams didn't lose their edge and were constantly ready for everything.

For the first couple of weeks of surveillance Khalaf did nothing out of the ordinary. He spent most of his time in a bedsit in Stoke Newington, venturing out only to pray at a local mosque. MI5 had two men in place at the mosque and they were able to ascertain that Khalaf spoke to no one while he was at prayers. He would occasionally shop for food and once a day he would take a walk through the 31 acres of Abney Park garden cemetery.

The cemetery was always a difficult venue. There were dozens of paths winding between the two hundred thousand or so graves and while there were always some people wandering around, it was difficult to stay close without being seen. Dogs were always a good bet and the teams could call on more than a dozen offered up by volunteers prepared to allow MI5 to borrow their pets.

During the third week Khalaf visited Stoke Newington public library in Church Street. On the first visit he had wandered around the bookshelves for ten minutes

before leaving. A few days later he visited again, this time making use of one of the library's six computers. The visit to the library then became a daily event, and each time he would spend up to an hour on one of the computers. The surveillance teams installed keystroke programs on all of the machines and they were able to keep track of his internet activities. Immediately they saw what he was doing the teams went on to full alert. Khalaf was reading articles on the mass jihadist killings in Iraq, Kenya and India, and spent time studying online newspaper articles about the murder of British soldier Lee Rigby who was hacked to death near the Royal Artillery Barracks in Woolwich. During the fifth week of surveillance, Khalaf went to the place where Fusilier Rigby was murdered and spent more than an hour walking around.

During the sixth week of surveillance, Khalaf opened a Yahoo email address account and sent an email to an address that was traced to a library computer in Ealing. Khalaf used a drafts folder for the account to contact a British-born Somalian later identified as Mohammed Mahmud. Like Khalaf, Mahmud had broken off his studies and travelled to Syria to fight with ISIS. He had somehow managed to travel there and back without attracting the attention of the security services. From the messages that piled up in the drafts folder it was clear that the two men were planning a beheadings rampage in the London area. In the sixth week they were joined online by a third London-based jihadist who had also joined ISIS. The third man had been harder to track down, he went online using a pay-as-you-go smartphone and was rarely active for more than a few minutes at a time and changed his SIM card every week.

A second five-man team, also under Shepherd's guidance, had put Mahmud under the microscope. Like Khalaf, he lived alone and frugally, leaving his small flat in a terraced house to shop, visit a local mosque and the library.

During the eighth week of Khalaf's surveillance, both teams converged on the Abney Park cemetery. When it became clear that the two men were going to meet, Mahmud's team pulled back.

The two men sat together for more than an hour on a bench close to the Gothic church in the centre of the cemetery. Three watchers walked by during the time they were together but none was able to hear even a fragment of their convention.

There was no doubt that the men were planning a major terrorist atrocity and Shepherd had recommended that they be arrested and charged. His boss Charlotte Button had agreed with him but they had been overruled – the surveillance was to

continue until the third man was identified. That had been three weeks ago and they were no closer to finding out who he was.

The surveillance had turned up another cell, however, this one in Bradford. Khalaf had gone to a second email address draft folder and began communicating with another potential ISIS soldier, a British-born Pakistani who was about to fly out to Syria. Through him they managed to trace and identify another four would-be jihadists.

Meanwhile Khalaf was also using Google Earth to look at the roads around several shopping centres and railway stations in London, and visiting websites for large shopping malls including the giant Westfield malls in White City and Stratford. Mahmud was just as active on the Ealing library's computers, spending hours looking at websites that detailed the construction of IEDs.

As the two men continued to research and plot, the surveillance teams increased their hunt for the third jihadist, but his habit of only using a pay-as-you-go phone and constantly changing his SIM card meant he was impossible to pin down. The teams drew up more than a dozen possible suspects from the people that Khalaf and Mahmud met, but they couldn't get any concrete proof as to who the elusive third man was.

Shepherd had joined the surveillance team at eight o'clock in the morning, just as they had taken over from the night shift. There was one man in the van, Jamie Brewer, and one driving. The driver could also be used as a pedestrian if they were pushed. Outside the vehicle were three watchers, codenames Whisky One, Whisky Two and Whisky Three. Whisky One and Whisky Two were on the pavement and Whisky Three was kitted out as a bicycle courier. All were in position outside Khalaf's building. He wasn't expected out before ten o'clock.

It wasn't until after eleven that Khalaf appeared. He was wearing a black Puffa jacket with the hood up and he had a grey North Face backpack slung over his shoulder.

"That's new," said Brewer, nodding at the screen showing the view from the CCTV camera mounted under the van's rear-view mirror. It could be moved using a small joystick on a panel in front of Brewer.

"He's had a backpack before, right?"

"Small than that. Adidas."

"Tango is on the move," said Shepherd. He was wearing a Bluetooth earpiece

connected to the transceiver on his waist.

“Whiskey Three, I have eyeball. He’s going back behind the house.”

Shepherd and Brewer watched on the screen as Khalaf disappeared behind the house. There were a dozen occupants, each with their own room, though they shared two bathrooms and a kitchen. The rubbish bins were at the rear but Khalaf hadn’t been carrying any rubbish.

“What’s he playing at?” said Brewer.

The mystery was solved soon enough when Khalaf reappeared pushing a bicycle, an old-fashioned type with a wicker basket fastened to the handlebars.

Brewer cursed. “Where did that come from?”

“Whisky Three, you need to stay on him,” said Shepherd. He nodded at Brewer. “Get the driver moving.”

“He’s never done this before,” said Brewer.

“It’ll be okay,” said Shepherd. He looked back at the screen. Khalaf was pedaling down the street. “Whiskey Two, Whiskey One, you need to get mobile and head south. Taxi or bus. Over.”

“Whiskey One, roger that.”

“Whiskey Two, roger.”

Shepherd picked up his mobile and called the supervisor of the second surveillance team, over in Ealing. Her name was Lisa Elphick and like Shepherd she was sitting in the back of a van. “Dan, hey, we’re a bit busy here,” she said.

“Us too. Our Tango’s on a bike. Heading south. He’s never done that before.”

“Ours is running what looks like counter-surveillance, and he’s never done that before. I’m down to one eyeball at the moment.”

“You’ve got a guy on a motorbike, right? I’m looking to borrow him for a while.”

“That’s not going to happen. He had a car stop for him, turns out it’s a Uber cab. Normally he takes the bus so we were on foot. The bike is the only eyeball I have at the moment.” She swore vehemently. “He’s just got out of the cab on The Broadway. Bravo Two stay close. If necessary dump the bike. Bravo One, Bravo Three, where the hell are you? Dan, sorry, we’ve lost him, I’ll have to call you back.” She cut the connection.

Shepherd brought Brewer up to speed. “You think they’re up to something?” asked Brewer.

“Could be a coincidence.”

“Both out of character at the same time,” said Brewer. “That sets alarm bells ringing.”

“Do you want to call for back-up?”

“I’d be happier,” said Brewer.

“Whiskey One, I’m in a cab.”

“Good man. Stay on him.”

“Whiskey Three, I have eyeball.”

Shepherd looked at the screen showing the positions of the watchers. They were all moving. “I’ll see what I can do,” said Shepherd. He called up the Head Of Mobile Surveillance and got through to his number two. Shepherd quickly explained what he needed and the officer agreed to get two surveillance bikes in his area as soon as possible. Shepherd asked for a time frame and was told five minutes, possibly ten. It was better than nothing. Shepherd ended the call. “Help’s on the way,” he said.

The van lurched to a halt. “Sorry,” came the driver’s voice over the intercom. “Red light?”

“Whisky Three, we’re held at lights. Do you still have eyeball?” said Shepherd.

“Whisky Three, affirmative. He’s heading south on Essex Road. I’m about a hundred yards behind him. He’s taking it easy and isn’t looking back. Over.”

“Whisky One, are you still in the cab? Over.”

“Whisky One, passed him about fifty yards back. Over.”

Shepherd looked at the map. “See if you can get the cab to wait at City Road. Over.”

Shepherd looked at the screen showing the forward video feed but Khalaf was too far ahead to be seen. “Has he ever done anything like this before?” Shepherd asked Brewer.

Brewer shook his head. “Never. He always goes to the same place. The mosque. The shops. The library. The cemetery.”

“There was no indication that they were getting ready to go,” said Shepherd. “That new backpack is a worry.”

His phone rang and he looked at the screen. It was Lisa. “We lost him,” she said. “He was on foot and we couldn’t get to him on time.”

“Could he have got to a Tube station?”

“Ealing Broadway? Possibly.”

“What are you doing now?”

“Canvassing the area. If he did go down the Tube then we lost him. Sorry.”

“Any chance of you sending your bike my way? Our target is on a bicycle and we’re having trouble keeping up with him.”

“You think something’s up?”

“Maybe. There was no chatter, though. I could do with your bike, Lisa.”

“It’d mean I have one less pair of eyes on the ground.”

“I get that, but the bird in the hand and all that.”

“Your call. I’ll send him over.”

“Our target is heading south down Essex Road to City Road. Brown coat, bicycle with a wicker basket on the front.”

Shepherd ended the call just as the van started moving again.

The van sped south. Shepherd watched the progress of the watchers on the screen. Whisky One had stopped close to the junction of City Road and Essex Road. Whiskey Two was still in Stoke Newington. Whiskey Three was moving slowly down Essex Road.

“Whisky Two, what’s your situation, over?” asked Shepherd.

“Whisky Two, still on foot, sorry. No bloody cabs for love or money. I might grab a bus. Over.”

“We need you on City Road, Whisky Two. Do what you can. Over.” He looked up at the video feed. The traffic was moving slowly and there was still no sign of Khalaf.

Shepherd scowled at the digital map. Whiskey Three was getting close to City Road. At the junction Khalaf could turn west or east or continue south on the A1.

“Whisky Three, stay with him, over,” he said.

“Whisky Three, I’m about fifty yards behind him. I have eyeball. Over.”

Shepherd looked over at Brewer. “He’s never gone this way before?”

Brewer shook his head.

Shepherd called up Lisa on the phone again. “Any joy?” he asked.

“No sign of him, sorry,” said Lisa. Her professional pride was obviously hurt. Losing a target was the worst thing that could happen to a watcher. “The bike is heading your way. What do you think? Do we have a problem?”

“I’m not sure,” said Shepherd. “Did your guy have a backpack?”

“Yes. But that’s not unusual. More often than not he has a bag of some kind.”

“Our target has a different bag to his usual one. And he’s never used a bicycle before.”

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t sweat it. Just keep sweeping the area, he still might turn up.” He ended the call. “Mahmud’s gone,” he said to Brewer. “And he had a backpack. Might not be significant...”

“...or it might be,” said Brewer. They looked at the video feed. In the distance they could see Whisky Three, weaving in and out of the slow-moving traffic.

“Whisky Two, I’m in a black cab and heading south on Essex Road, but the traffic’s bad. Over.”

Shepherd looked at the digital map and pointed at the flashing light that signified Whisky Two’s position, well back from where the van was.

“Whisky Two, be prepared to head west or east on my word. A rat run might save you some time. Over.”

“Whisky Two, roger that. Over.”

The van had slowed now. Shepherd glanced at the video feed. The traffic was heavier and Whisky Three had disappeared into the distance.

“Whisky One, I have eyeball.”

“Soon as you see which way he’s headed, let me know, Whisky One. Is your cab okay to follow?”

“Whisky One, all good. Over.”

Shepherd looked at the digital map. Whisky Three was getting close to Whiskey One which mean that Khalaf would be somewhere in between.

“Everyone on full alert, he could go anywhere at the junction,” said Shepherd. He looked at the map. The van was a couple of hundred yards away from City Road.

“Whisky One, he’s off the road. He’s pushing the bike along the pavement. Heading west.”

“Out of the cab, Whisky One. Follow on foot.”

“Whisky One, going on foot. Over.”

“Whisky Three, what’s your situation?”

“Whisky Three, I’m on the pavement.”

Shepherd looked at the digital map. Whisky Two was still stuck in traffic, a mile or so behind the van. The van came to a halt. Shepherd looked at the video feed. The traffic was bumper-to-bumper ahead of them. “I’m going on foot,” he said. “They need help out there.”

“No problem, I’ll mind the shop,” said Brewer.

Shepherd pushed open the door and jumped out. He began jogging south along Essex Road, keeping at a reasonable pace so as not to attract too much attention.

“Whisky Three, he’s left the bicycle by some railings.”

“Stick with him, Whisky Three.”

“I’m having trouble with the bike.”

“Dump it,” said Shepherd, increasing his pace. “Whisky One, do you have eyeball?”

“Whisky One. Just lost him. Wait. Yes, I have eyeball. He’s outside the Tube station. He’s looking at his watch.”

“Is he heading in?”

“Not sure, he seems to be waiting.”

Shepherd ran faster, not caring now who was looking at him. His feet pounded on the pavement. Ahead of him he saw the junction with City Road. Angel Tube station was to the right. The traffic was barely moving so he ducked between two cars and crossed the road.

“Whisky Three, he’s going inside. Over.”

“Whisky One, I have eyeball. I’m following him inside. Over.”

“Whisky Control, See if you can fix up a feed from the station’s CCTV,” said Shepherd.

“I’m on it,” said Brewer.

“Whisky One, I have lost eyeball. Repeat. I have lost eyeball. Over.”

Shepherd cursed. “What’s happened, Whisky One?”

“Loads of people just came through and then I didn’t see him on the escalator. He must have gone down the stairs.”

“After him, quick as you can. Whisky Three, where are you? Over.”

“Just at the entrance, I’m going in. Over.”

Shepherd ran as fast as he could, his arms pumping at his side, the transceiver banging against his hip under his jacket. He slowed as he reached the entrance to the station and had to weave through the exiting passengers. “Does anyone have eyeball?” he asked.

“Whisky Three, negative.”

“Whisky One, negative.”

“Don’t do this to me, guys. Find him.”

Shepherd didn't have an Oyster card so he jumped up and over the ticket barrier. A uniformed Tube employee shouted for him to come back but made no effort to chase after him. As he hurtled down the escalator he pushed the earpiece of his transceiver into his ear and clipped the main unit to his belt. He reached the bottom of the escalator. "Whisky One, Whisky Three, where are you?"

"Whisky Three, eastbound platform."

"Whisky One, same. eastbound platform."

"Do you see him?"

"Whisky Three, negative."

"Whisky One, no eyeball."

Shepherd cursed and ran towards the westbound platform. The tunnel opened midway on the platform. He looked right and left. There were several dozen people waiting for the train.

"Jamie, what's happening?"

"Negative on the CCTV feed," said Brewer. "Where are you?"

"Westbound platform," said Shepherd. He looked up at the electronic announcement board. "The next train is one minute away. Whisky One and Whisky Three are on the eastbound platform."

Shepherd turned left and walked down the platform, scanning faces. A middle-aged man with a briefcase. An Asian woman with two young children. A teenage schoolboy, his eyes glued to an iPhone.

"What are you going to do, Dan?" asked Brewer.

"Play it by ear," said Shepherd.

Two black guys long coats, one carrying a guitar case. An old Asian lady in a sari with a Harrods carrier bag. Two women in full burkhas, one of them with a toddler in a stroller.

"You think he's going to get on a train?"

Shepherd could feel the wind on his face. There was a train heading his way.

"I don't know. What's happening up top?"

"All quiet here."

"Whisky Three, still no eyeball."

"Whisky One, no eyeball."

"If the station was the target he'd have started by now," said Shepherd.

A young man with a backpack was eyeing up a pretty blonde girl in torn jeans. She seemed to be deliberately avoiding eye contact with him.

Shepherd's heart was racing. The target had to be on one of the platforms, there was nowhere else for him to be. He reached the end of the platform. There was an old man in a heavy overcoat, mumbling to himself. And a woman sitting on a bench chewing on a sandwich. Shepherd turned and started to jog back down the platform. He could hear the train now, roaring through the tunnel behind him.

"The train's coming," he said. "Can you stop it, Jamie? Get them to say there's a mechanical fault."

"I'll try."

The train burst out of the tunnel and the brakes screeched as it drew up at the platform. The doors opened and passengers poured out.

"What's happening, Jamie?"

"Negative on the stopping," said Brewer. "They've got me on hold."

"I'm going to have to get on the train," said Shepherd. "Whisky One, Whisky Three, give me a sit-rep, over."

"Whisky One, no sign of target. Train's just pulling in. Over."

Shepherd cursed under his breath. Three followers. Two trains. One target.

"Stick with your train, stay in touch with Jamie best you can. Over." The transceivers were functioning just fine in the station but he had no idea how they would perform in the tunnels.

The flood of exiting passengers was over and the passengers on the platform were now making their way onto the train. Shepherd reached the halfway point of the train. "Jamie, I'm getting on the westbound train. See if you get back-up at the next station. Same with the eastbound train. Over."

"I'm on it. Over."

The doors began to close and Shepherd jumped on board. He quickly scanned the passengers. There were four Asian males but two had long beards, one was wearing a long frock coat and the remaining one was with a pretty Indian girl. He moved down the carriage towards the front of the train, weaving between passengers who either ignored him or glared at him for invading what they saw as their personal space.

The train lurched forward and within seconds had rattled into the tunnel.

Shepherd continued to scan faces. Another Asian male, but this one bearded and engrossed in his smartphone. Two Japanese tourists squinting up at a Tube map on the

carriage wall. Two girls in school uniform, sitting with their heads together, sharing a pair of earphones.

Shepherd reached the end of the carriage. He looked through the windows of the connecting doors into the next carriage. His breath caught in his throat as he saw the target, standing by the door halfway down the carriage.

He turned away and held the microphone close to his lips. "I have eyeball on Tango One, over," he said. There was no answer. "Jamie, can you hear me?" There was nothing in his earpiece, not even static. Shepherd turned back to look through the window again. Khalaf was looking at his watch and shifting his weight from foot to foot. He was gearing up for something, Shepherd could tell.

Moving from one carriage to the other involved opening the two heavy connecting doors and stepping across the gap between the two carriages. It would be noisy and attract a lot of attention. It would be better to wait until they reached the next station and then change carriages.

Khalaf had turned his back to the door and was now looking down his carriage, towards the front of the train. Shepherd realised he was looking at another Asian man. He could have been Khalaf's brother. Tall and thin, wearing baggy jeans and a grey hoodie with the hood up, his eyes hidden behind impenetrable sunglasses. On his back was a North Face backpack, the same style as Khalaf's but his was red. Like Khalaf he was agitated, swaying from side to side. The two men looked at each other and Khalaf nodded. The other man flashed Khalaf a tight smile and Shepherd's stomach lurched as he realised there wouldn't be time to switch carriages. His mind raced. There had been no intel that Khalaf's cell had access to bomb-making equipment but the backpacks were a worry. If there were bombs in the backpacks then a double explosion in a confined space would be deadly. He ran through his options, but truth be told there weren't many. He could pull the emergency switch and stop the train, but he didn't see how that would help. He could shout a warning but that would only serve to start a panic. If he'd been armed then he could pull out his gun and try to take them out before they commenced their attack but that was pure wishful thinking because he didn't have a weapon. He could wait until the train reached the next station but from the way the two men were behaving it was clear they were getting ready to act. Or were they? Nothing they had seen during their surveillance had suggested that they were going to attack a Tube train. And the choice of target made little sense. If they were suicide bombers then a carriage was the perfect target as the

confined space meant guaranteed casualties. But if it was a knife attack then a carriage would serve to limit casualties, and block off any means of escape. Was he reading it wrong? Were they getting ready to attack now or were they just tense?

He looked up at the Tube map on the side of the carriage. The next stop was King's Cross St Pancras. The mainline station and London home to the Eurostar. That had been one of the places Khalaf had visited on Google Earth.

The train began to slow as it approached King's Cross. Shepherd glance through the window. The two men were now ignoring each other and seemed more relaxed. Shepherd had come around to the view that there was no risk of an explosion on the Tube. It wouldn't make sense to have two suicide bombers in the same carriage. That meant they were en route to the target, or it was a knife or gun attack. Guns were unlikely because there had been no chatter about firearms, but then the bicycle had caught them all by surprise.

The platform flashed by and the train stopped. Shepherd started moving towards the door but took a quick look over his shoulder and saw that Khalaf wasn't moving. Passengers poured off but Khalaf stayed where he was. So did the other guy with the backpack who was now studiously avoiding Khalaf's gaze.

"Jamie, can you hear me?" whispered Shepherd, covering his mouth with his hand.
"Affirmative."

"Tango One is on the westbound train, now at King's Cross, heading west. Over."

"Roger that. Over."

"I don't think anything's going to happen on the train. There is another Tango with him. Repeat, two Tangoes on board. Tango Two is an IC6 male, tall and thin, grey hoodie, baggy jeans, sunglasses and a red North Face backpack. Over"

"Roger that."

Passengers were now getting on to the train. Khalaf moved further into the carriage to make room at the door. Shepherd tensed and took a step closer to his door just in case Khalaf made a last-minute dash for the platform.

"Euston is the next mainline station, then it's south to Charing Cross," whispered Shepherd. A middle-aged businessman with a briefcase was looking at him curiously but Shepherd couldn't turn away because he had to keep Khalaf in sight. "Get Alpha Romeo Uniforms to both locations ASAP."

"Roger that," said Brewer.

Getting Armed Response Units to the station would take a few minutes at least, possibly longer depending on traffic. But it was the best way of dealing with any attack.

The doors to the train rattled shut. “We’re moving again, I’ll be losing my signal soon,” said Shepherd. The train lurched forward and within seconds they were back in the tunnel.

Shepherd kept glancing at the next carriage, but the two men made no moves to open their backpacks. Khalaf kept looking at the Tube map by his head. Once he looked over at the other man and nodded. The other man smiled thinly and nodded back. Shepherd was tense, knowing that if at any point they began to mount an attack he would have only seconds to get into the next carriage.

As the train began to slow, signalling its approach to Euston, Khalaf turned to face the doors. So did the other man. They were preparing to get off. Shepherd moved to his door, his heart racing. The train burst out of the tunnel and the platform flashed by. Shepherd peered through the window, looking for the exit. He had to know whether he would be in front of Khalaf and the other man, or behind them.

The train stopped and the doors opened. Shepherd took a quick look across at the next carriage. Khalaf was getting off. The woman behind Shepherd decided he wasn’t moving quickly enough and nudged him in the back with her shopping bag. Shepherd stepped out and onto the platform. The exit was to the left. Khalaf was striding towards it, the bag slung over his shoulder. The other man was about twenty feet ahead.

“Jamie, can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear,” said Brewer.

“They’ve exited at Euston,” said Shepherd.

“There’s an ARU on the way.”

“How far?”

“A few minutes. I’ll update you as soon as I know for sure.”

Khalaf turned into the pedestrian tunnel that led to the escalators. Shepherd hurried after him. “Heading for the escalators now,” said Shepherd.

“What do you think they’re up to?”

“I don’t know, it could just be they’re here to catch a train. Maybe off on a training day. Tell the ARU to approach softly, softly. If they’re just passing through the station

we don't want them to know they've been spotted. The second tango is on CCTV here so make sure you get the feeds."

"I'm on it."

Shepherd turned into the tunnel leading to the escalators. Khalaf was already heading up. He was walking slowly and steadily up. Shepherd followed him. Khalaf was showing no signs of checking for a tail, but then he had never performed any counter-surveillance techniques all the time that he'd been followed.

"Heading up the escalator now," said Shepherd.

"ARU is two minutes away," said Brewer.

Khalaf reached the top of the escalator. He seemed sure of where he was heading and strode purposefully towards the mainline station. Shepherd carried on walking up the stairs. He put his hand over his mouth as he walked past a woman in a fur coat with a Louis Vuitton wheeled bag. "Tango One is heading into the main station. Over."

"Roger that," said Brewer.

Shepherd stepped off the escalator and hurried after Khalaf.

The station concourse was busy. Dozens of travellers were standing around staring up the electronic screens waiting for their platform numbers to be announced. Those lucky enough to know where their trains were hurried towards their platforms. Two British Transport Police officers were standing outside a coffee shop, deep in conversation.

Shepherd looked around but couldn't see the man who had been in the carriage with Khalaf. "I've got eyeball on Tango One but I've lost eyeball on Tango Two," said Shepherd.

"Whisky One and Whisky Three are on the tube heading west," said Brewer.

"Whisky Two is coming your way in his taxi."

"I'm sticking with Tango One," said Shepherd.

Khalaf was heading towards the podium in the middle of the station above which was the massive four-sided sign indicating the exits, platforms and toilets. When he reached it, Khalaf stopped and began to remove his backpack.

"Jamie, he's taking his bag off. I think it's about to kick off."

"ARU is one minute away, and there's another en route," said Brewer.

"I can't wait," said Shepherd, breaking into a run.

"Be careful, Spider," said Brewer.

Khalaf bent down and placed his bag on the floor and unzipped it.

Shepherd ran behind a woman in dark suit and realised too late that she was towing a wheeled cabin bag behind her. He swerved, clipped it with his left leg and stumbled, arms flailing. He managed to recover his balance but narrowly missed colliding with a pensioner with a walking stick who glared at him aggressively, even though he was in his eighties.

Khalaf was tying something around his head. Shepherd sprinted again, his arms pumping like pistons.

Khalaf straightened up. He'd tied a strip of white cloth around his head on which was Arabic writing in black. His eyes were wide and staring and he was muttering to himself. He looked as if he was high on something, amphetamines maybe, taken to give him the energy to do what he was about to do. In his right hand he was holding a machete, at least two feet long with a wooden handle and a strap that he'd wrapped around his wrist so that it wouldn't slip from his grasp. In his left hand he had a combat knife, almost a foot long with a serrated edge on one side.

Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion as the adrenaline surge kicked through Shepherd's system. Khalaf stood up and held his weapons high. No one was paying him any attention. Passengers were either concentrating on the announcement boards, fiddling with their smart phones or were too wrapped up in their own thoughts to be aware of what was going on right under their noses. Two businessmen in suits were so engrossed in their conversation that they walked within feet of Khalaf without noticing him.

Shepherd was about fifty feet away from Khalaf when he threw back his head and screamed "Allahu Akbar!" at the top of his voice. There was an echo from the far left of the station, but Shepherd realised immediately it wasn't an echo, it was Tango Two. And half a second later there was a third yell, then a fourth, and a fifth.

The passengers nearest Khalaf began to scream and run like sheep suddenly startled by a snapping dog. He raised his machete and sliced at a man in a green anorak holding a tennis bag, catching him on the arm. Blood spurted and the man screamed. He tried to run but seemed to have lost all his coordination and his left leg collapsed and he fell. A woman let go of her suitcase and screamed. Her hands flew up to cover her mouth, her eyes wide and staring. Khalaf turned to look at her and raised his machete again. The man on the ground was screaming in pain and clutching at his injured arm.

The woman backed away, still screaming, and Khalaf took a step towards her. “Allahu Akbar!” he yelled.

He was side on to Shepherd. Shepherd sprinted faster, knowing that he had only a second to act. There was no time for anything fancy, no grabbing or kicking or throwing. He ran full pelt at Khalaf, twisting his shoulder and hitting him in the right side at full pelt. They both went flying, the combat knife clattering to the ground. Shepherd hit the floor and immediately went into a roll, down onto his shoulder and up again, using his momentum to carry him back to his feet. Khalaf was less coordinated and hit the ground like a sack of potatoes. The machete slipped from his grasp but stayed tied to his wrist. As Shepherd stood over him, Khalaf cursed and groped for his weapon. The woman finally regained the use of her legs and began to run, still screaming for the exit.

There were more shouts of “Allahu Akbar” off to his left amid all the screaming and crying.

Khalaf had the machete in his hand now and murder in his eyes. His fingers tensed around the handle but Shepherd didn't give him the chance to move, he stepped forward with his left leg and kicked the man hard in the head. The skull snapped to the side and the spine snapped like a dead twig. Shepherd knew from the sound and the angle of the neck that Khalaf was dead. He bent down, picked up the combat knife, and began running across the station concourse.

People were running everywhere, mainly towards the exit, but there were some passengers rooted to the spot and unbelievably some were taking video on their mobile phones.

Shepherd heard frantic screaming off to his left and he started running in that direction, weaving through the panicking crowds. He saw a machete rise and fall followed by the screams of a woman in pain. The attacker was dark-skinned and had a strip of cloth around his forehead. He had the same manic look in his eyes that Khalaf had had, and like Khalaf had a machete in his right hand and a knife on his left. He was bearded and wearing a waistcoat over a traditional shalwar kameez, a long grey shirt and baggy off-white pants. The woman he had just slashed was writhing on the ground, her blouse glistening with blood. She had gone into shock, her mouth opening and closing like a stranded goldfish, her eyes staring up at the station roof.

The man with the machete roared in triumph and started running after a businessman in a long coat and heavy briefcase. The businessman realised he was

being chased and he turned and shrieked as he threw the briefcase towards his attacker. The case hit the man on the knees but he was so drugged up on amphetamines and adrenaline he didn't register any pain. He jumped over the briefcase and stabbed the businessman in the chest. The businessman fell back, his arms flailing. The machete went up and came slashing down, slicing through the businessman's left sleeve. The businessman turned and tried to run but the machete slashed down again, catching him in the shoulder.

Everyone in the vicinity was screaming now and the attacker was chanting "Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar!" at the top of his voice.

The businessman took a couple of steps and then fell to his knees. The attacker raised his machete again, getting ready to separate the head from the body. Shepherd was a dozen or so feet away and moving fast. He yelled "Police!" more to get a reaction than to identify himself, he just wanted to distract the man. It worked, the man turned to look at him, the machete still held high.

Shepherd had the knife in his right hand and he held it low, moving in close before stabbing upwards. The man stumbled back and slashed down with the machete, narrowly missing Shepherd's wrist. Shepherd's left hand managed to grab the man's sleeve and he pulled him towards him as he struck with the knife again. This time he felt the knife penetrate the man's clothing and he pushed harder, feeling the blade separate the ribs. The man's mouth opened but no sound came out, then Shepherd grunted and pushed harder, driving the knife upwards towards the heart.

Off to his right Shepherd was aware of the sound of shots being fired and more screams.

The man began to shake and the knife he had been holding clattered to the floor. His weight pitched forward against Shepherd, forcing himself down on the blade. The machete slipped from the man's fingers and swung free on the strap around his waist. Shepherd felt warm blood gushing over his hand and he gave one final push and the struggling ceased as the blade pierced the heart.

As he pulled out the knife and stepped back, he heard more shots and shouts of "armed police!" The man fell face down at Shepherd's feet and blood pooled around him as Shepherd stood and looked around. He heard more rapid-fire shots to his left and at the far end of the station he saw three armed police officers shoot down a young Pakistani guy in a blue tracksuit. The rounds smacked into the man's chest and for a second or two seemed to have no effect – the man continued to charge at the

officers with his machete held high, murder in his eyes, but then he suddenly collapsed like a stringless marionette and fell to the ground, shuddering for a second or two before going still.

“Spider, what the hell’s happening?” asked Brewer in his ear. “The ARUs are there.”

“I see them,” said Shepherd. “All good.”

“Armed police, drop your weapon now!” The shout came from behind him and Shepherd turned to see two armed policemen dressed all in black walking towards him, their carbines up at the shoulders, fingers inside their trigger guards. “Armed police, drop your weapon!” repeated the one nearest him. The guns were Heckler & Koch G36 assault rifles with 30-round curved magazines, one of the Metropolitan Police’s weapons of choice, but Shepherd had never been a fan. It had a tendency to overheat during firefights, taking a toll on its accuracy with the result that it became pretty much ineffective above a couple of hundred meters.

Announcing they were “armed police” seemed a bit unnecessary considering what they were pointing at him, but Shepherd complied, tossing the knife onto the ground. He knew there was no point in identifying himself, no point claiming that he was one of the good guys, no matter what he said they would have to follow protocol. He sighed and put his hands behind his neck, then knelt down, making no sudden movements.

“Down on the floor!” screamed the second officer.

“I’m already down,” Shepherd muttered under his breath.

“Armed police, down on the floor!” screamed the first officer.

Shepherd realised they meant face down so he sighed, slowly took his hands away from his neck and eased himself down, turning his head so that he could watch them approach. They still had their weapons trained on him and still had their fingers on their triggers.

He heard the pounding of boots and more shouts of “armed police” and Shepherd said a silent prayer that the cops wouldn’t put a bullet in him, just to be on the safe side. It wouldn’t have been the first time that he had been shot by the cavalry.

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