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Soft Target

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The heroin had come a long way. It had started its journey as opium in Afghanistan, carried on the backs of donkeys to Jalalabad where it sold for a hundred US dollars a kilo. Sealed in polythene and wrapped in burlap sacking, it was carried over the border into Pakistan, under the eye of former Taliban fighters, and from there to Uzbekistan, where Chinese technicians converted it into heroin.

Bribes were paid to Customs officers, and it was dispatched by rail in a consignment of flour to Poland. There, it was transferred to hidden compartments in a containerload of tinned plums and driven to Germany. Customs officials in the European Union were harder to bribe than those in the former Soviet Union, but the truck crossed without hindrance. A German truck driver took the container to France, where a Turk drove it on to a cross-Channel ferry. He had a British passport and was a regular on the ferry. Customs at Dover didn't give him a second glance.

Three hours later the heroin was being driven on the M2 towards London and had increased in wholesale value to £30,000 a kilo. There were two hundred

kilos in the container, six million pounds' worth. Once it had been cut, the street value would be around fifteen million.

Twice when the truck drove under footbridges across the motorway it was monitored by spotters, men with mobile phones who checked that it wasn't being followed. Both were satisfied that it was not 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 they were certain that the truck still wasn't being followed he was told where to make his delivery. He went to a warehouse in North London where the plums were unloaded, to be sold on to a legitimate supermarket chain. Four Turkish Cypriots unbolted a metal plate that ran the width of the rear of the container. Behind the plate, steel trays were packed with the white plastic parcels of brown powder, each the size of a small loaf of bread. They checked the purity and weight of the heroin, and sent the driver on his way.

The consignment was divided into four. 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 it on the ferry to Belfast where they were 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 substituted quinine but the dealer who did the mixing used too much and twenty-seven heroin addicts ended up in hospital. Three died.

The Turks sold ten kilos to a Yardie gang in Harlesden. They didn't like doing business with the Jamaicans, but the Yardies were keen to buy for cash. Customs had seized one of their deliveries in the suitcases of a mother of three at Heathrow Airport. Twelve kilos. She had been unlucky: she didn't fit the profile of a mule but an officer had seen her fumbling nervously for her mobile phone as she pushed her trolley through the green channel. The heroin hadn't even been 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. The investigators told her she'd get a lighter sentence if she gave evidence against the gang, but she cried all the harder.

The handover between the Turks and the Yardies took place on a petrol-station forecourt in Wood Lane. A Turkish godfather owned it, so the CCTV cameras were switched off and the Turks had three heavies with submachine pistols hidden in the toilets in case the Yardies tried to take the drugs for free.

The Yardies, too, were armed but they brought three hundred thousand pounds with them, mainly

in fifty-pound notes. The Turks counted the bundles of money and examined three closely. Satisfied, they handed over the drugs. The Yardies had brought a chemical kit and tested two packages, then pronounced themselves satisfied. The deal was done. The Yardies piled into a BMW and drove 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 Bangladeshis every time.' He lit a small cigar and drew the smoke deep into his lungs. 'You know where you are with a Bangladeshi.'

'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 a gold medallion featuring a cannabis plant dangled round his neck. The deal he'd just done was his biggest to date and the adrenaline was still flooding through his veins. He planned to cut the heroin with milk powder and sell it in Harlesden at seventy pounds a gram. Seventy thousand a kilo.

'Yeah, well, they hate us,' said Chas Eaton, the driver. He didn't have a 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. He had left the scene, abandoned

and torched the car, and hadn't suffered a moment's guilt. 'But money's 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 knees were wide apart but still pressed against the front seats. '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 in either the gym or the boxing ring. The duffel bags were stuffed under their legs and they were holding their guns down. 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, an 'everything for a pound' shop, a cut-price supermarket, a minicab company, a betting shop, an off-licence – everything that was necessary for inner-city life. There were two storeys of flats above them. The entrance to Moran's apartment was between the betting shop and the off-licence, both now closed for the night. Three young women were huddled in front of the minicab office. Dyed blondes, short skirts, cheap jewellery. If Moran hadn't been working he'd have gone over and asked 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?' he said. 'Put the car away, yeah?' There was a line of lock-up garages behind the shops and he rented two. He twisted in his seat and nodded at Dexter and Jackson. 'Swift, yeah?'

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

Moran hurried to the front door, jabbed at an intercom on the wall to warn the two men inside the apartment that they were on the way up, and opened the door. A small CCTV camera was pointing down at the doorway and Moran flashed it a grin, then stepped aside to let Dexter and Jackson head up the stairs. The intercom was still buzzing, then went silent, and the door closed before Moran could follow the others. He cursed the two men upstairs. Probably spaced out of their skulls. He stabbed at it again and heard a sleepy voice: 'Yeah?'

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

'Yeah.'

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. It had been reinforced with a metal sheet and the door-frame was lined with strips of metal. It would take the police minutes with their ram even to dent it. Moran exhaled. He was home and dry. Three hundred thousand pounds they'd paid the Turks. Cut and on the street, the heroin was worth almost three-quarters of a million. Easy money.

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Chas Eaton drove the BMW slowly down the road, turned left, 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, but Moran's two had metal shutters, heavy-duty padlocks and alarms. They kept the BMW in one of the garages and 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 glimpsed naked flesh while he parked the car at night. The light in Moran's bathroom was off but Eaton frowned when he saw that the window was half open and a ladder was propped under it against the wall. He cursed. There'd be hell to pay if the flat had been burgled. If there had been a break-in, it wouldn't have been a local. Delroy Moran was feared for miles around.

As Eaton headed for the door he fished the padlock key from his trouser pocket. He heard a muffled footstep behind him and 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.

Moran headed up the stairs, after Dexter and Jackson, to a second door, also reinforced with metal. Above it was a second CCTV camera. The door opened and the two men carried the bags inside. Jackson

stopped on the threshold. Moran pushed him in the small of the back but he seemed reluctant to move. When Moran peered over his shoulder, he saw why.

A man wearing a rubber Alien mask with teardrop-shaped black eyes 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 Alien.

Moran reached for the Glock tucked into the back of his trousers but a second masked man appeared at the side of the gunman, 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 weapon. '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, pulled him into the room and forced him to his knees.

Moran 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 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.

'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,' he said.

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 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

gun at the man's 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 wearing thin,' said Moran.

Alien whipped his gun across Moran's face. Blood spurted and Moran's head spun 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.'

'Open it.'

'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.'

'Fuck you.'

Frankenstein lashed out and whipped the gun barrel 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.

A shot rang out, the noise deafening in the small room. Frankenstein let go of Moran's shirt and whirled round, 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 with pain.

Moran rolled again and slammed up against the sofa. He groped underneath for the loaded sub-machine pistol he kept there. An Ingram MAC 10 with a bulbous silencer and thirty rounds in the clip. His fingers found the butt and he pulled it out.

Frankenstein whirled round as Moran rolled on to his back, ducked low and fired twice, hitting him in the head both times. The Ingram fell from Moran's hand and clattered on to the floor.

'Shit, shit, shit,' cursed Frankenstein.

Another shot rang out and a bullet thudded into the ceiling. Bang! Another. Frankenstein flinched but it was Alien who screamed. 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 lay 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 and he fell to the ground.

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

The intercom buzzed. 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 pressed the button to open the door down below. Footsteps pounded up the stairs and a man in a werewolf mask came in, 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. Another on his knees, pleading not to be killed.

'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 to the side of the road, switched off the engine and 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, lying face down in the lock-up. The van had been stolen: it 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 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 hair was cropped close to his skull and he was balding on top. He had a curving Mexican-style moustache. 'What the hell are we going to do?' He twisted 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 his palms on the steering-wheel. 'We've got to get Andy to a hospital.'

'And 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 hard on the wheel. '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 in Moran's flat that puts Andy at a murder scene – in a gunfight with a Yardie

posse.' He slapped the dashboard with his gloved hand. 'God damn it, we should have slotted them all.'

'Rosie, listen to yourself,' said Werewolf.

Frankenstein stared through the windscreen. 'They're witnesses,' he said. 'They started the bloody fireworks, we should have ended it. They know how many of us there were. 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. 'Before we went into this we knew what the downside was, and 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 pooling around him.

'Let's take this outside,' said Frankenstein. He climbed out of the van and waited for Werewolf to join him. Their breath feathered from their mouths in the cold night air. Somewhere in the distance an owl hooted and high overhead the green and red lights of an airliner were heading for Heathrow.

'Let's look at this logically,' said Frankenstein, 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 round in his guts and done God only knows how much damage.'

'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 the options? We take him to hospital, then 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.'

'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,' said Frankenstein.

'You want to finish him,' said Werewolf flatly. 'You want to put a bullet in his head. 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 there while Andy's bleeding to death,' said Werewolf. 'Look, maybe there's another way. We take him to a doctor instead of a hospital.'

'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 at this time of night.'

'He needs major surgery, not a couple of stitches,' said Frankenstein, 'and 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 I tried,' said Werewolf. 'Let's just get him to the quack and see what the quack says.'

Frankenstein took a deep breath and exhaled. 'Okay. Just don't expect me not to say I told you so when the shit hits the fan.'

'The shit has already hit the fan,' said Werewolf, but Frankenstein was 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 hospital.'

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

'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, gesturing at the two bloodstained 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. And Andy took a bullet in the gut. You want us to go through all that for nothing?'

Werewolf pointed at the MAC 10, which was lying on the floor of the van next to Alien. '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.'