

## AFGHANISTAN 2002

The Chinook cleared a low ridge, dropped to the floor of a plateau and then rose again, following the steep slopes of a round-topped hill. The helicopter came to a hover and landed as the groundwash of the twin rotors stirred up a storm of dust and debris.

Jock McIntyre, Geordie Mitchell, Jimbo Shortt and Lex Harper jumped down and went into positions of all-round defence while Dan 'Spider' Shepherd and Captain Harry Todd unloaded six mopeds that had been lashed to the tailgate of the Chinook. They remained crouched and watchful as the Chinook took off, then took a few more minutes to watch and listen, allowing their hearing to become attuned to the quietness of the night after the din of the helicopter. They scanned the surrounding countryside for any movement or sign that might suggest they had been spotted. All was dark and quiet, and eventually McIntyre signalled to them to move out. He led the column of mopeds down the hill before looping around to make their way to the target.

McIntyre and Shepherd rode at the head of the column, with Harper, Todd and Shortt behind them and Mitchell as "Tail-end Charlie" at the rear of the line. They rode without lights, their Passive Night Goggles allowing them enough vision to avoid potholes and obstacles in their path.

The night was icy, the wind stinging their faces as they cleared the top of a ridge. McIntyre checked his GPS, signalled to the rest of the team, silenced his engine and freewheeled down the slope, towards the dark, indistinct shape of a tall building set into a fold of the hills.

They hid the mopeds in a clump of trees a hundred yards from the target and moved forward on foot, carrying the sections of ladder and the prepared charges, and leaving a faint trail of their boot-prints on the frost-covered ground. Shepherd caught a whiff of woodsmoke on the breeze as they approached from downwind, and a moment later, the tall shape of the target building loomed out of the surrounding darkness, the wall facing them glowing an eerie yellow through the goggles as it caught and reflected the moonlight filtering through the clouds.

There was a straggle of huts and outbuildings surrounding it and a pile of rubble that might once have been another house. While the others kept watch on the main building, Shortt and Mitchell made sure that all the outbuildings were deserted.

They dug in and watched the main building. In the early hours of the night, two small groups of men arrived and left again. Another hour passed and then a solitary figure, shrouded by a black cloak, emerged from the door and disappeared into the darkness. After that, there was no more traffic, and the faint glow of a lantern inside the building was extinguished well before midnight.

Eventually the area was in darkness, the cloud cover masked the starlight. They waited another full hour before assembling the ladder. Shepherd and Todd crept silently towards the building while the others set up a cordon and covered them. Even if any of the Taliban managed to escape before the charges were detonated, they would not avoid the deadly crossfire from the waiting soldiers.

Shepherd and the Captain placed the ladder against the wall and, after listening for any sound from within the building, Shepherd climbed up and began to place shaped charges against the wall on each floor. He allowed the cables of the initiators to trail over his shoulder as he moved up. When he'd finished, he slid back down the ladder without using the rungs, slowing his descent by using his hands and feet on the outside of the uprights as brakes. He glanced at Todd and mimed protecting his ears.

Todd slipped round the corner and Shepherd followed him, pressing his fingers into his ears to protect them from the shock wave as he triggered the charges. The blasts of the three shaped charges came so close together that they could have been a single explosion.

Within seconds of the detonation, Shepherd was on the move, rushing up the ladder with Todd hard on his heels. The two men stormed through the gaping hole that had been blown in the top floor wall. A thick fog of dust and debris still hung in the air as they swung around their AK74s. Four Taliban lay on the floor, killed as they lay sleeping, their internal organs pulverised by the devastating concussive force of the blast wave. They moved slowly through the building, clearing the rooms one at a time.

The top two floors were sleeping areas, littered with Taliban dead, but the ground floor was where the cash was stored and disbursed. As they blew in the walls, the shaped charges had created a blizzard of hundred dollar bills. The cash was all in US dollars, traded for drugs in Pakistan, extorted from businesses in the areas they controlled, or plundered from the avalanches of cash that the Americans had been pouring into the country in their attempts to buy the loyalty of warlords and tribal elders. Stacked on the floor were crates of ammunition, a few rocket-propelled grenades and a rack of AK 47s.

Shepherd looked over at the Captain. 'No point in leaving what's left of the cash and weapons and ammo for any Taliban who turn up later,' he said. 'Flip your goggles up or turn your back while I get a nice fire going for them. The flare in your goggles will blind you for ten minutes if you don't.'

He dragged a few bits of bedding, rags and broken chairs and tables together in the centre of the room, kicked the embers of the fire across the floor and then stacked boxes of the Taliban's ammunition next to the pile. He surveyed his handiwork for a moment, then scooped up a stray \$100 bill and set fire to it. He dropped it onto the pile of debris and waited until it was well alight before murmuring into his throat mic, 'Coming out'.

Todd climbed out through the hole in the wall first. As Shepherd moved to follow him, he heard the whiplash crack of an assault rifle and saw Todd fall backwards. There was a second crack as the Captain dropped to the ground, gouts of blood pumping from his throat. Shepherd had seen no muzzle flash but heard answering fire from the SAS cordon and swung up his own weapon, loosing off a burst, firing blind just to keep the muj heads down before he slid down the ladder and ran over to Todd and crouched next to him.

Todd lay sprawled in the dirt, blood still spouting from his throat. The first round had struck his head, close to the left ear, gouging out a chunk of skull. The second had torn out Todd's larynx. Either wound might have been fatal, the two together

guaranteed it. Shepherd cursed under his breath, took a syrette of morphine and injected him, squeezing the body of the syrette to push out the drug like toothpaste from a tube. He began fixing a trauma dressing over the wounds, even though he knew he was merely going through the motions, because nothing could save the Captain now. Death was seconds away, a minute or so at the most.

Once the dressings were in place he cradled Todd's head against his chest, listening to the wet, sucking sound of the air bubbling through his shattered larynx as blood soaked his shirt.

The Captain grabbed at Shepherd's arm as his body began to shudder. There were more bursts of fire off to the left. Todd was staring at Shepherd, his eyes fearful. 'You did good, Captain,' Shepherd said. 'You did good.'

A fresh spasm shook Todd, his eyes rolled up into his head and he slumped sideways to the ground.

As Shepherd looked up, he saw a movement in the shadows by a pile of rubble at the edge of the compound. A dark shape resolved itself into a crouching figure and Shepherd saw a milky-white eye staring at him, though, seen through his goggles, it glowed an eerie yellow. Shepherd grabbed his weapon and swung it up but in the same instant he saw a double muzzle flash. The first round tugged at his sleeve, but the next smashed into his shoulder, a sledgehammer blow knocking him flat on his back, leaving the burst of fire from his own weapon arcing harmlessly into the sky.

A further burst of fire chewed the ground around him, and his face was needled by cuts from rock splinters, though they were no more than gnat bites compared with the searing pain in his shoulder. From the corner of his eye, Shepherd saw McIntyre swivelling to face the danger and loosing off a controlled burst of double taps, but Ahmad Khan had already ducked into cover behind the rubble.

Shepherd looked down at his shoulder. There was a spreading pool of blood on his jacket, glistening like wet tar in the flickering light of the muzzle flashes as his team kept up a barrage of suppressing fire.

Shortt ran over, pulling a field dressing from his jacket. 'Stay down,' he shouted and slapped the dressing over the bullet wound. Shepherd took slow, deep breaths and fought to stay calm. 'Geordie, get over here!' shouted Shortt. 'Spider's hit!'

Geordie sprinted over, bent double. He looked at Todd but could see without checking that the Captain was already dead. He hurried over to Shepherd. 'You okay?' he asked.

Shepherd shook his head. He was far from okay. He opened his mouth to speak but the words were lost as he coughed and choked and his mouth filled with blood. Helpless, he saw the dark shape of the Taliban killer move away, inching around the rubble heap and then disappearing into the darkness beyond. He tried to point but all the strength had drained from his arms.

'I'm on it,' said Shortt, standing up and firing a burst in the direction of the escaping gunman.

Spider tried to sit up but Mitchell's big, powerful hand pressed him flat again. 'Keep still and let me work on you,' he growled. Mitchell clamped the trauma pad over the wound, compressed it and bound it as tight as he could. 'Oboe! Oboe! All stations minimize,' said Mitchell into his mic, SAS-speak ordering all unnecessary traffic off the radios. Mitchell looked down at Shepherd and slapped him gently across the face. 'Stay with me, Spider. Just stay with me.'

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## LONDON, PRESENT DAY

There were four of them sitting around the table in the corner of the pub, half full pints of lager in front of them. A football match was playing on a television mounted above the door but they paid it no attention. Dennis Weaver was holding court. He was a big man gone to fat, with a gut as large as a full-term pregnancy that bumped the table each time he moved. He was wearing an England football shirt and gleaming white Nike trainers but it had been years since he had taken part in any exercise that hadn't involved lager or cigarettes. Weaver was in full flow, jabbing a nicotine-stained finger in the air to punctuate his angry words. 'Yasir Chaudhry. The guy's taking the piss. Did you see him on TV last week? The council knocked two houses together so that he had a place big enough for him and his wife and eight kids.'

'Bastard,' muttered Gordon Harris, a heavy-set man with a shaved head and a tattoo of a cobweb across the left hand side of his neck. He had the words LOVE and HATE tattooed across his knuckles. Like Weaver, he was wearing a football shirt but his was the claret and blue of West Ham.

'Then one of the papers finds out that he's got another wife living nearby in another council house and she's got four kids. And who's paying for all his little bastards?' Weaver jabbed a finger at his own chest. 'We are,' he said. 'Do you think he pays tax? Does he hell. Benefits, that's what he gets. Benefits and free houses and free health and free schools for his bastard kids.' Flecks of spittle erupted from between his lips and he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before draining his pint. 'Then do you know what the raghead goes and does? Stands in front of his house and tells a group of his raghead mates that they should all go on benefits. Jihad Seekers Allowance, that's what he called it. And you know what he called us? Us Brits? Kuffars, that's what. He hates us, but he's happy enough to take our money.' He banged his hand down on the table. Several heads turned to look at him, but just as quickly turned away. Weaver had a reputation as being a man who didn't like being looked at, in pubs or out of them.

The men at his table all nodded in agreement. 'Bastards,' muttered Harris again. 'Fucking bastards,' he said, louder this time, as if gaining confidence.

'Whose round is it?' said Weaver, pointing at his empty glass.

‘Barry’s up,’ said Harris, gesturing at Barry Connolly, a diminutive Irishman with a straggly moustache and a greying ponytail. He was wearing a battered black leather vest over an Irish rugby shirt and had a pack of cigarette papers and pouch of tobacco on the table in front of him.

‘I got the first round,’ whined Connolly.

‘Bollocks, I got the first one,’ said Harris. ‘You went straight to the shithouse and I got them in. And you were in the shithouse again when Stuart got the second round.’

Connolly rubbed his stomach. ‘I had a bad curry last night, I’ve had the runs all day.’

‘More information than we need,’ said the fourth man at the table. His name was Andy Taylor. Like McDermid he had the words LOVE and HATE on his knuckles. The ink had faded over the years and both Es had all but gone. ‘I’ll get them.’ He headed over to the bar, pulling a nylon wallet from the back pocket of his baggy jeans that were hanging so low his underwear was visible.

‘What’s your problem, Barry?’ Weaver asked Connolly. ‘You’re always ducking your round.’

‘Dennis, mate, I’ll get the next one,’ whined Connolly. ‘Cross my heart.’ He made the sign of the cross on his chest.

‘Make sure you do,’ said Weaver. ‘It’s bad enough with these ragheads sponging off us without you not paying your way.’

‘Short arms and long pockets,’ said Harris. ‘I thought it was the Scots that were tight-fisted, not the Paddys.’

‘I’ll get the next one, swear to God,’ said Connolly. He stared sullenly at the floor. A cheer went up from a group of football supporters standing at the bar and they began jumping up and down and punching the air. The men at the table looked up at the television in time to see the goalkeeper retrieving the ball from the back of the net.

‘Who scored?’ asked Harris.

‘Who cares?’ said Weaver. ‘It’s only the bloody Eyeties. Who gives a toss about the Eyeties?’

Taylor returned with four pints of lager and placed them carefully on the table before sitting down.

‘Anyway, tonight’s the night,’ said Weaver. ‘We’re going to burn the bastard out.’

‘Are you serious?’ asked Harris, his hand suspended in the air as he reached for his pint.

‘Do I look like I’m joking?’ said Weaver.

Taylor leaned forward, his eyes burning with a fierce intensity. ‘Tonight?’

‘Tonight,’ repeated Weaver. ‘I’ve got the address and I’ve got the petrol. We’re going to burn the bastard’s house down with him and his bastard family in it.’

Taylor formed his right hand into a fist and punched the air. 'Yes,' he hissed.

Connolly grinned. 'Woof!' he said. 'Woof, woof, woof!'

Taylor frowned. 'Woof? What do you mean?'

'Woof!' repeated Connolly. 'It's the sound that petrol makes when you set fire to it.' He held up his hands and splayed his fingers as he said 'woof!' again. 'Get it?'

Taylor sneered in contempt. 'Yeah, I get it.' He looked at Weaver. 'What's the plan?'

'First, I need you all to hand over your phones,' said Weaver.

'Why?' said Connolly.

'Because they track phones these days,' said Weaver. 'If we go there with our phones the cops will know.' He grinned. 'But if we leave them here, it'll look like we never left the pub.'

'What, we're just going to leave them on the table?' asked Harris. 'They'll be gone in a minute.'

'Give me some credit, mate,' said Weaver. He reached under the table and pulled out a black Adidas kitbag. 'We'll put them in here. The landlord's a pal, he'll keep them behind the bar. And there's half a dozen guys here who'll swear we never left the place.' He unzipped the bag and held it open. One by one the men put their mobiles in the bag. Connolly switched his off and Weaver glared at him in disgust. 'Didn't you get what I just said? What's the point of switching it off? It has to be on so that it shows up.'

Connolly grimaced, switched the phone back on and dropped it into the bag. Taylor tossed in an iPhone and reached for his pint. 'Don't forget the other one, Andy,' said Weaver.

Taylor frowned as if he didn't understand.

'You've got a Nokia as well.'

'That's a throwaway,' said Weaver. 'I use for stuff I don't want traced. It's not in my name and I change the Simcard every couple of weeks.'

'Didn't realise that selling used cars meant you had to behave like James bloody Bond,' said Harris. His eyes narrowed. 'What do you need a throwaway phone for?'

Taylor took out a battered Nokia and dropped it into Weaver's bag. 'Let's just say that sometimes I might sell a motor that's less than kosher and I wouldn't want an angry buyer turn up on my doorstep,' he said.

Weaver zipped up the bag looked at his watch. It was just after eleven. 'Right, the pub's closing at one this morning and it'll take half an hour to get to the raghead's house. Let's move.' Weaver drained his glass and the rest of his men did the same. He stood up and took the kitbag over to the bar.

The landlord, a balding man in his fifties, nodded and took it from him without a word and put it down behind the bar. He winked at Weaver. 'Be lucky,' he said.

Weaver caught up with the men at the door, buttoning their coats and pulling on leather gloves. 'We need to pick up Colin,' he said.

'Colin's got the flu,' said Connolly.

'Man flu,' said Weaver. 'I spoke to him on the phone this afternoon, he's sniffing a bit but nothing major. We're the five musketeers, all for one and one for all and he's coming along.'

They walked out of the pub and over to Weaver's car, a ten-year-old Jaguar. They climbed in, Taylor sitting in the front passenger seat next to Weaver, with Connolly and Harris in the back.

Weaver drove the short distance to where Colin McDermid lived in a small flat in a terraced street. Both sides of the road were lined with cars so Weaver had to double park while Taylor ran over to the house. He rang the middle of three bells and shortly afterwards disappeared inside. Weaver drummed his gloved hands on the steering wheel as the seconds ticked by. He looked at his watch and then at the clock set into the dashboard and swore under his breath.

'Do you want me to go and get them?' asked Harris.

'Give them a minute,' said Weaver. 'McDermid's probably getting his trousers on.'

'You sure you want him along?' said Harris. 'We hardly know the guy.'

'Colin's sound,' said Weaver. 'And he needs to get bloodied.' He looked at his watch again. He was about to open his mouth to speak when the door opened and Taylor emerged, followed by a gangly man with a greasy comb-over wearing a blue anorak and black tracksuit bottoms. McDermid pulled the door closed and he and Taylor jogged over to the car.

McDermid climbed into the back, forcing Connolly to move closer to Harris. 'What's going on?' asked McDermid, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. Taylor got into the front seat and Weaver drove off.

'Yasir Chaudhry, that raghead who keeps giving speeches about our dead soldiers burning in hell, we're going to give him a taste of his own medicine,' said Weaver.

McDermid sniffed noisily. 'Are you serious?'

'Serious as a can of petrol and a lighter,' said Weaver. 'We're going to burn the bastard's house down.'

'About bloody time,' said McDermid. He banged the roof of the Jag with the flat of his hand. 'He's been due for a while, that one.'

'That's the truth,' agreed Harris.

'Why do I always have to sit in the bitch seat?' whined Connolly.

'Because you've got the smallest arse,' said Weaver. 'And because you're so short I can still see out of the mirror with you sat there.'

Connolly folded his arms and scowled. 'It's not fair.'

‘Life’s not fair,’ said Harris. ‘Get over it. And if you don’t stop bitching we’ll send you back to live with Snow White.’

Taylor laughed out loud and Connolly folded his arms and cursed under his breath.

Weaver twisted around in his seat and looked at McDermid. ‘You left your phone in your flat, yeah?’ he asked.

McDermid jerked a thumb at Taylor. ‘Andy took it off me,’ he said. ‘Said I had to leave it in the flat and switched on.’

‘He’s right,’ said Weaver. ‘If the cops check on you they’ll find your phone was in your flat and you can say you were in all night watching TV or internet porn or whatever you do when you’re in there on your own.’

‘We’re sitting in the Bleeding Heart right now,’ laughed Harris.

McDermid drove at just below the speed limit and all the men in the car kept a look out for police vehicles. They all tensed when they saw a car with fluorescent stripes turn into the road ahead of them but they quickly realised it was a Paramedic and relaxed.

‘So what’s the plan?’ asked McDermid. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and slipped one between his lips.

‘You’ll find out soon enough,’ said Weaver. ‘And don’t even think of lighting that, not with the amount of petrol I’ve got in the boot.’

McDermid put the cigarette back in the packet and the packet back in his jacket pocket and stared sullenly out of the window.

Taylor looked at his watch, a cheap Casio. ‘You sure he’s home?’ he asked.

‘Sure I’m sure,’ said Weaver. ‘Had a guy around there this evening. He sent me a text while I was in the pub.’

‘Texts can be traced,’ said Taylor.

‘I’m not stupid,’ said Weaver. ‘It’s the same as your Nokia, a pay-as-you-go, untraceable.’ He reached into his pocket and held it up. ‘It’s switched off now and I’ll dump it later tonight.’

‘Looks like you’ve thought of everything,’ said Taylor.

‘Andy, when you’ve known me a bit longer you’ll know that planning is what I do best. Planning and burning out ragheads and Pakis.’

‘You’ve done this before?’

Connolly laughed and jiggled up and down. ‘This is my third,’ he said.

‘Sit the fuck down, Barry,’ said Weaver, glancing in the rear-view mirror.

‘Seriously? This is your third?’ Taylor asked Weaver.

Weaver grinned. ‘Barry’s third. I’ve done half a dozen.’

‘Good for you, mate,’ said Taylor. He beat a quick tattoo on the dashboard with his gloved hands. ‘They need showing who’s boss.’

‘Damn right,’ said Weaver.

Taylor sat back, nodding. ‘That Paki family in Southall, was that you?’

‘Bloody right it was,’ said Harris, punching the back of Taylor’s seat. ‘We showed them what for, didn’t we, Dennis?’

‘That we did,’ said Weaver. ‘The trick is waiting until they’re asleep and then doing the front and back door. That way there’s no way out.’

‘Brilliant,’ said Taylor, looking at his watch again.

‘Don’t worry, mate,’ said Weaver. ‘We’ve plenty of time, and Chaudhry and his bastard brood are already tucked up in bed.’

Fifteen minutes later, Weaver pulled up in front of a patch of waste ground. Half the street lamps were off but there was enough light to illuminate a burnt-out car and an old boiler and what looked like the insides of a washing machine next to it. The ground was littered with beer cans, discarded needles and fast food wrappers.

Weaver switched off the engine. ‘Right lads, let’s get this done,’ he said. He popped the boot, climbed out and walked around to the back of the car. The four men joined him. Connolly was bobbing from side to side as if bursting to go to the toilet. There were four red plastic fuel cans with black spouts lined up in the boot. ‘Take one each,’ said Weaver, standing aside so that the men could get to them.

‘Where did you get the petrol from?’ asked Taylor.

‘Why?’ said Weaver.

‘CCTV,’ said Taylor. ‘The cops will ask around to see if anyone bought petrol local. They always do.’

‘They can ask all they want,’ said Weaver. ‘I got this a month ago, took a drive up the M1 and bought it at a couple of service stations. The CCTV will be long gone.’

‘Smart,’ said Taylor.

Weaver grinned. ‘Like I said, this isn’t my first time.’ He slammed the boot shut. ‘Right, here’s the SP. It used to be that they were two semi-detached houses but the council has made it into one house. They knocked down a few walls inside but they left in the front and back doors. Get that? The house has two front doors and two back doors. So to make sure, we need to do all four doors. Right, Stuart, you and Barry head around the back of the house. Pour it all around the door sand get as much inside as you can. Do the windows as well. If there’s an open window, use that.’

Connolly nodded eagerly. He was still switching his weight from leg to leg like an over-excited toddler. ‘Can I light it?’

Weaver ignored the Irishman. ‘Once you’re set, listen for me,’ he said to Harris. ‘As soon as you hear mine go up, drop a couple of matches and leg it back to the car.’ He

patted Harris on the shoulder and then the two men hurried towards the house. It was in the middle of a row of semi-detached houses that had been built of brick but over the years all had been either painted or clad in stone. Several of the houses had been well-maintained and had new roofs and wood and glass porches built around the front doors, but most had fallen into disrepair and had gardens full of children's toys and household rubbish.

'Right lads,' said Weaver. 'Let's get this done and then we can get back to the pub.' He headed down the street with Taylor and McDermid close behind him. Connolly and Harris had already opened the wrought iron gate that led to the garden and were walking around the side of the house. A dog barked down the road but then went quiet.

Weaver held the gate open and Taylor and McDermid walked by him, the only sound the sloshing of the petrol in the cans. A siren burst into life somewhere in the distance and the men tensed, but within seconds it was clear that whatever it was it was moving away from them.

The two gardens had been merged into one and then paved over. There were spindly conifers in earthenware tubs either side of the front doors. Weaver gestured at the letterbox. 'You can be mother,' he said to Harris. 'I'll get the other one.'

All the lights were off in the house and the downstairs curtains were open. As Weaver tiptoed across to the second front door, Taylor looked through the window. There was a large dining table with eight chairs around it and the remains of a meal. There was another table piled high with schoolbooks next to half a dozen backpacks.

Harris grinned and crouched down. He put the can on the ground and unscrewed the cap. The smell of petrol immediately assailed their nostrils.

'Smells like victory,' said Taylor.

Harris frowned and looked up. 'What?'

'That movie. Apocalypse Now. But he was talking about napalm.'

'What is napalm exactly?' asked Harris, screwing the black spout into place. 'I've never understood that.'

'It's petrol mixed with a gel,' said Taylor. 'It makes it sticky so that it burns longer.'

'We should try that one time,' said Harris.

'Nah, it's a bugger to pour and there's less vapour so you don't get that "whoof" that gets Connolly so excited,' said Taylor.

Harris straightened up. 'You know a lot about it,' he said.

'I had an interesting childhood,' said Taylor. 'Had a mate who got a kick out of blowing things up.' He gestured at the house. 'For something like this, petrol is best.'

'Get yours ready, Andy,' said Harris, looking around. 'We need to get it poured quickly, we don't want anyone waking up and smelling the fumes.'

Weaver was already at the second front door, unscrewing the cap of his petrol can. He looked over at Harris and gave him a thumbs up.

‘Right,’ said Harris. ‘Here we go. Open yours and pour it over the window.’

Taylor nodded, bent down and began unscrewing the cap.

Harris shivered in the cold night air and then froze as he saw Connolly appear at the side of the house. ‘What the hell are you doing?’ Harris hissed.

Connolly said nothing. He wasn’t carrying his petrol can and his hands trembled at his sides.

‘What’s the problem?’ hissed Harris.

McDermid appeared behind Connolly, his face as pale as the moon overhead. Something prodded Weaver in the back and he lurched forward and stumbled into Connolly and then Weaver saw the armed cop, dressed in black with a carbine up against his shoulder. ‘Cops!’ he shouted, and turned towards the gate.

Weaver had already begun pouring petrol through the letterbox but he stopped when he heard Harris shout. He pulled the can away from the door. ‘What’s happening?’

‘Cops!’ shouted Harris, sprinting for the garden gate, the petrol can in his hands.

Weaver swore, dropped his can and started running towards the wall. He stopped short when he saw the armed cop standing in the road. The cop was aiming his gun at Weaver’s chest, over the waist-high brick wall. Weaver slowly raised his hands.

Harris reached the gate but as he pulled it open he saw a third armed cop, with silver sergeant’s stripes on the shoulders of his black overalls. Taylor came up behind Harris. ‘Cops?’ he said. ‘Where the hell did the cops come from?’

‘Put down the can!’ shouted the sergeant.

Harris threw petrol at the sergeant and it splattered across the pavement and onto the policeman’s boots.

‘Put down the can!’ shouted the sergeant. He was aiming his gun at Harris but he could see that Harris was unarmed.

Harris grinned and threw more petrol at the policeman. The sergeant took a step back. ‘This is your last warning, put down the can!’

‘You can’t shoot me, I’m not armed!’ shouted Harris.

‘Stuart, mate, he will shoot you,’ said Taylor, raising his hands.

Harris took a cigarette lighter from his pocket and held it up. ‘Come near me and this place goes up!’ he shouted. It was a stainless steel Zippo and he flicked up the cap.

‘The house is empty,’ said the sergeant. ‘We got the family out before you got here.’

‘It’ll still burn!’ said Harris. ‘And you’ll go up with it.’

‘Don’t be a twat, Stuart,’ said Taylor. ‘Burning to death isn’t a pleasant way to go.’

Harris ignored him and brandished the lighter in the air. 'I'm serious,' he said. 'Get away from me or we'll both go up in flames, the house too.' He splashed more petrol across the pavement and it splattered over the sergeant's boots again.

The sergeant looked over at his colleague. 'Arm your Taser, Den!' he shouted.

The cop let his carbine hang on its sling as he pulled his yellow Taser from its holster on his belt.

Taylor looked over his shoulder. The third cop had pushed Connolly and McDermid forward and they were now standing close to the front door. Connolly darted to the side and grabbed the can that Taylor had been carrying and with a loud whoop threw petrol over the cop next to McDermid. Petrol splashed over his bulletproof vest and overalls and the man staggered back, cursing.

'Go on, Stuart, do it!' shouted Connolly. 'Woof, woof!'

'Put the lighter down, Stuart,' said Taylor. He still had his arms in the air.

The cop with the Taser was moving closer to the sergeant.

'I'm warning you. We'll all go up together if you don't put the guns down!' shouted Harris.

Connolly turned around and threw petrol towards the two officers but most of it splashed over Taylor who jumped to the side, swearing. 'Bloody hell, Barry, watch what you're doing.'

There was a crazed look in Connolly's eyes and he threw more petrol at the sergeant.

'Put down the cans!' shouted the cop with the Taser, his finger tightening on the trigger.

'What do you want me to do, Sarge?' asked the cop closest to McDermid.

'We want you to fuck off, that's what we want!' shouted Connolly, whirling around and throwing petrol at him.

'This is your last warning!' shouted the cop with the Taser. 'Put down the can and the lighter.'

'I'd be very wary of firing a Taser at a man soaked in petrol,' said Taylor quietly. He lowered his hands.

'Put down the cigarette lighter,' said the sergeant, but his voice was shaking and lacked conviction. 'No one needs to get hurt.'

'You put the guns down,' said Harris. 'Put the guns down, and move back.'

'That's not going to happen,' said the sergeant.

'Then we'll all burn together,' said Harris. He flicked the lighter once and it sparked but not enough to set it aflame. 'I'm serious, get the hell away.'

'Shall I put him down, Sarge?' asked the officer with the Taser.

‘You really don’t want to be pulling that trigger,’ said Taylor.

The officer scowled and aimed the Taser at Taylor’s chest. ‘You keep quiet,’ he shouted.

‘I’m covered in petrol, too,’ said Taylor quietly. He slowly raised his hands again. ‘I’m just saying, there’s no need for anyone to get hurt here. Least of all, me.’

‘Get the hell away from us now or we’re all going up in flames!’ shouted Harris.

‘Put down the lighter,’ said the sergeant.

‘You put down the gun!’ shouted Harris. He flicked the lighter again and it sparked.

‘Stuart, mate, this isn’t helping anyone,’ said Taylor.

‘I’m not going back to prison!’ shouted Harris.

‘They’re not going to let you walk away,’ said Taylor. ‘They’ve got guns. You’ve got a lighter.’

‘I’ve got fire, that’s what I’ve got,’ said Harris. He waved the lighter around. ‘I’m serious, you move back now or we’re all going up in flames.’

Weaver made a dash for the gate, reached the pavement and began running full pelt away from the house. The cops turned their heads to watch him go but quickly turned their attention back to Harris.

Connolly swung the can and a plume of petrol splattered over the pavement near the sergeant. ‘Come on then, take a shot and we’ll all burn!’ he said. Weaver’s rapid footfall faded into the distance.

‘Drop the can!’ shouted the sergeant.

Connolly laughed and tossed the can in the air. Petrol sprayed out of the spout as the can span towards the policemen. The officers scattered.

‘Let them have it, Stuart!’ shouted Connolly.

Harris roared and flicked the Zippo. A flame flickered and Harris tossed the lighter at the can. The petrol vapour ignited in a loud whoosh and the sergeant disappeared in a fiery orange ball.

McDermid started to run but the cop behind him was too quick and he kicked McDermid’s feet out from underneath him, then planted his foot in the middle of McDermid’s back.

The sergeant dropped to the ground, screaming, and began rolling over to extinguish the flames.

Connolly looked around, his mouth open in shock. The cop with his foot on McDermid’s back pointed his gun at Connolly. ‘I will fucking shoot you!’ he screamed and Connolly raised his arms.

A sheet of flame rippled back from the pavement towards Harris and then his trousers caught fire. He flailed around, screaming as the flames spread up to his coat.

‘Get down on the ground!’ shouted Taylor but Harris either couldn’t hear him or was too panicked to react. Taylor cursed and dashed through the flames, barrelling into the burning man and pushing him away from the flaming petrol. Harris was screaming and flapping his arms around which only made his clothes burn more fiercely. Taylor kicked the man’s legs from underneath him and Harris hit the ground hard. Taylor immediately rolled him over, beating the flaming jeans with his bare hands.

Harris carried on rolling until he hit the wall and lay still. Most of the flames had gone out but the coat was still smouldering.

Taylor stood up, his chest heaving from the exertion. As he turned to face the road, a small red dot danced on his chest. He opened his mouth to shout but before he had even drawn air into his lungs the barbs of a Taser impaled themselves in his shirt. He just had time to see the two wires trailing through the air to the yellow Taser in the hands of the armed policeman but then he was hit by fifty thousand volts and his whole body went into spasm.

\* \* \*

‘Spider? Spider, can you hear me?’ Dan ‘Spider’ Shepherd groaned. He wanted to open his eyes but somehow his brain had forgotten how to do pretty much anything. He couldn’t feel his arms or his legs, in fact the only sensation he had was a burning pain in his chest. ‘Spider, come on, take deep breaths, you’ll be just fine.’

Shepherd took a deep breath but there was a stabbing pain in his chest and he went back to tidal breathing. He tried wriggling his toes but there was no feeling at all below his waist.

Something soft patted him on the cheek and he caught a half-remembered fragrance. ‘Charlie?’

He heard a laugh, and then felt a pat on his shoulder. ‘Thank God for that,’ said Charlotte Button. ‘I thought they’d killed you.’

Shepherd’s eyelids flickered open. ‘I can’t believe they shot me,’ he said, his voice a strained croak. He was lying on a stretcher in an ambulance. The doors were shut. The engine was running, he could feel the vibration through his shoulders.

‘You were Tasered,’ said Button. ‘That’s not quite the same as being shot.’

Shepherd forced a smile. ‘Suddenly you’re an expert on being shot?’ he said. ‘Trust me, I’ve been shot and I’ve been Tasered and they both hurt like hell.’ He took a deep breath. ‘The house is okay, right? It didn’t go up?’

‘We had the Fire Brigade on standby by and they were in with extinguishers as soon as the police had finished. But the family were never in any danger. As soon as I got your text I phoned Mr Chaudhry and got him to get his family out.’

‘And the cop who caught fire, he’s okay?’

‘Their overalls are fire retardant,’ said Button. ‘He’s fine. Just a bit shaken.’

‘Would have nice if there had been enough cops to have put the lid on the situation right away,’ said Shepherd. ‘It got completely out of control because there weren’t enough of them to maintain control, even with guns.’

‘I got straight onto the Met as soon as I got your text but there have been gang shootings in Brixton and Harlesden tonight so armed response vehicles are in short supply.’

‘I saw one,’ said Shepherd. ‘Three guys. Who the hell thought three guys would be enough? There were five of us.’

‘That was all we could get,’ said Button. She looked at her watch. ‘You sent the text less than half an hour ago,’ she said.

‘Best I could do,’ said Shepherd. ‘Weaver took our phones. When I went around to pick up McDermid I managed to use his mobile. I had just enough time to send you a text.’

‘I’m glad you did,’ said Button. ‘Without your warning, Mr Chaudhry and his family would probably have died.’

Shepherd groaned. He could feel his feet again and he wriggled his toes inside his boots.

‘Are you okay?’

‘I’ve just been hit with fifty thousand volts after putting out a fire with my bare hands, so no, I’m not okay.’

‘Your hands are fine,’ she said. ‘A bit singed, but no major burning. Which is more than can be said for Harris. He’s going to be hurting for a few weeks and he’s got months of skin grafts ahead of him. But you saved his life.’

‘Yeah, well I’m sure he’ll be grateful. What about Weaver?’

‘An ARV ran into him at the end of the road,’ said Button. ‘Literally. He ended up on the bonnet.’

‘Better late than never,’ said Shepherd. He tried to sit up and Button helped him. ‘He bought the petrol a week ago, some service station on the M1. They should have CCTV footage.’ He touched his chest and winced. ‘That bloody hurts.’

‘Well don’t touch it,’ admonished Button. ‘And they say it won’t hurt for long and there’ll be no lasting effects.’

I presume by “they” you mean the bastards who shot me,’ said Shepherd. He winced again. ‘Oh, and Weaver and Harris were behind that arson attack on the Pakistani

family in Southall. Connolly knows what's going on and he'll roll over, guaranteed. He's as weak as dishwasher.'

'That's something,' said Button. 'Though frankly this is all a bit of a disappointment. The whole point of penetrating Weaver's nasty little gang was to get close to his fascist German contacts in Frankfurt. They're the ones planning the real atrocities. Weaver is just small time.'

'He was planning on killing a whole family tonight,' said Shepherd.

'I'm not saying we didn't do the right thing in stopping him,' said Button. 'But there were bigger fish to fry and now we're going to have to find another way of catching them. She looked at her watch, a sleek Cartier on a blue leather strap. 'We'll stay in here until the cops have finished,' she said. 'Might as well maintain your cover. The fact you were Tasered means Weaver and his pals won't ever think that you were an inside man. You might even be able to use the Andy Taylor legend again down the line.' She nodded thoughtfully. 'If we play it right, we might be able to use it to our advantage. Use it as a badge of honour with the Germans.'

Shepherd took a slow, deep breath. His chest wasn't burning as much and the feeling had almost returned to his fingers and toes. 'I still can't believe they Tasered me with all that petrol around,' he said.

'It was either that or a bullet,' said Button. 'Be grateful for small mercies. They saw you helping Harris and then you moved towards them.'

'I was unarmed, Charlie. And I was just about to put my hands up.' He ran his hands through his hair. 'Still, you're right. It could have been worse.' He winced as a sudden pain lanced through his chest, just below his hear. He took slow shallow breaths, panting like a dog.

'Are you okay, Spider?' asked Button, putting a hand on his shoulder.

'I just need a shower,' he said. 'I feel dirty.'

'Yeah, they were a nasty bunch,' said Button. 'But they're off the streets now and they'll be going away for a long, long time. Job well done, seriously. Bit scrappy at the end, I can't argue with that, but you saved lives and put the bad guys away. There aren't many men who could have done what you did tonight.'

Shepherd forced a smile, acknowledging the compliment. 'I don't understand how they can set fire to a house with kids and babies inside,' said Shepherd. 'Men hating men, okay I get that, but how can you hate a baby?'

'There's no logic to what they do,' said Button. 'All we can do is try to stop it from happening.'

'Yeah, well we stopped tonight but they've burnt other families in the past,' said Shepherd. 'And what's crazy is that most of them are fathers themselves. Weaver's got three kids, McDermid's wife gave birth a month ago and Connolly's got two daughters with one on the way.' He shook his head. 'I just don't get it.'

'There's no point in looking for an explanation,' said Button. 'They're just racist haters, with no rhyme or reason.'

‘People aren’t born hating,’ said Shepherd. ‘Kids of all races and colours play happily together when they’re toddlers. They have to be taught how to hate.’ He looked at his tattooed knuckles and grimaced. ‘I can’t wait to get these off,’ he said.

‘One laser treatment will do it,’ said Button. ‘Two at the most.’

‘I’ve never liked tattoos,’ said Shepherd. He turned his hands over and examined the reddened palms. They were greasy and he realised that the paramedics must have rubbed some ointment over the burns. Button was right, the damage was only superficial.

‘They were camouflage, and they worked,’ said Button.

‘I want them off tomorrow, first thing,’ said Shepherd.

‘No problem. Go home. Have that shower. I’ll call you first thing and I’ll have a laser clinic fixed up. And take a few days off, you’ve earned it.’