

Prologue

Today

Tom Furey groaned.

Each beat of his heart sent a dart of pain to his head as his brain tried to break through the bone of his skull. His tongue was so swollen and dry his first thought was that he might choke. He was aware of a bright light shining on the other side of closed eyelids. He opened his eyes and blinked, the small movement eliciting another moan.

There was an almost mechanical noise beside him, like a motor with a faulty exhaust. Snoring. He turned his head – more suffering – and saw the woman lying on her back, mouth agape, her bare breasts rising and falling. The tangle of sheets was across her lower legs. Like him, she was naked.

Daylight.

‘Shit!’

He groped on the side table for his watch and mobile phone. It was six am and the bright African sunlight was streaming in through the sliding

glass doors. 'Shit!' he said aloud again. Ignoring the ache behind his eyes he swung out of the king-size bed, grappled his way through the ceiling-to-floor mosquito net and hopped on one leg while he pulled on his shorts. He grabbed the mobile phone and checked it. Not only had the alarm not gone off, it wasn't even set.

Tom buckled his belt and slipped his nine-millimetre Glock 17 into the circular pancake holster above his right hip. He strapped on his watch and checked the time again. Two minutes past six. 'Shit.'

The weight of his pistol was balanced on his left side by an Asp extendable baton, a spare magazine of ammunition and a Surefire torch, all in black leather pouches. He stuffed his remaining two spare magazines in his shorts pocket, along with his Gerber folding knife. Despite the rush he would have felt naked leaving the room without any of his personal kit.

He pulled on a blue polo shirt and left it untucked so that it covered the equipment, then forced his feet into trainers with no socks. Thank god, casual dress was the order of the day.

With nothing more than an angry shake of his head at the sleeping woman, he barged out the door and along the raised walkway of darkly stained wooden logs that wound through the thick thorny bushes behind and between each of the separate luxury suites of the safari lodge. He paused to knock on the door of the unit next to his. 'Bernard?' he called. No answer. Of course there bloody well wouldn't be an answer. The advisor was ex-Royal Navy. He wouldn't be late for duty. Tom jogged on.

The morning air was still cool, but the sun was already hot on his face as he glanced out across the Sabie River, its smattering of granite boulders glowing pink in the dawn's rays. A hippo grunted, mocking him with its deep belly laugh as his shoes pounded the deck.

He slowed to a walk, to catch his breath and maintain some show of dignity as he entered the sumptuous reception area, where early morning tea and coffee and rusks and fruit were laid on a long table beneath the thatched cathedral-style roof.

'What's going on? You're late.' Inspector Sannie van Rensburg looked at her watch and frowned.

The South African minister was talking to an aide, an empty coffee cup in his hand. He looked at Tom and then beyond him, down the walkway.

Tom motioned her aside with a hand on her elbow. She shrugged off his touch. 'Where's Greeves?' he whispered.

'That's what we want to know. Not only are you late, but he hasn't shown up – neither has his policy advisor.'

He saw the naked disapproval on her face, of him as well as of his tardiness. She must have guessed what had gone on the night before. It was no time to think about what she thought of him. 'He must be on the phone to the UK. I'll go and check on him.'

'I already did that,' she said. 'There was no answer.'

'Why didn't you come and find me?' he asked.

'Ag, I've got my own man to look after. I can't be running around after you, Tom.' Her Afrikaans accent, which he'd found appealingly

exotic at first, grated on his ears. He strode back down the walkway to the suite of the UK Minister for Defence Procurement. Tom prayed that he was right, that The Honourable Robert Greeves was on the phone to his immediate superior, the Secretary of State for Defence, or a senior bureaucrat on some urgent matter of State, and that was why he hadn't answered the door and was late.

He felt physically sick, but didn't know why. He'd had only one beer the night before. He came to the third suite, took a deep breath to quell the dizziness and steady himself, and knocked. No answer.

'Sir? It's Tom,' he called.

He waited for exactly a minute and knocked again. Nothing. He pulled out his mobile phone and dialled the minister's private number. It was for emergencies only, but Tom could feel his pulse rate rising. Straight through to voicemail. He tried the policy advisor's mobile. It rang out and he heard Bernard Joyce's cultured voice on the message.

Tom went on to Bernard's suite, even though he had already tried it once, and knocked on the door. 'Bernard?' Nothing again. He thumped harder. 'Bernard!'

He jogged down the decking to his own unit, opened the door, strode in and called Greeves's suite. While he waited he saw, through the haze of mosquito netting, the woman still sprawled there. If she was awake she was hiding it. He cursed himself – his weakness. The landline rang out. No answer. 'Shit,' he said. 'Stay cool.' There was no answer in Bernard's suite. They weren't talking on their room phones.

Tom headed back to reception. He ignored the South African

policewoman's enquiring look and went to the duty manager, a young white guy called Piet. 'I need the key to Greeves's suite.'

'But, Tom, man, that's highly irregular, can't we just -'

'Now.' The man obeyed this time, unquestioning.

Tom forced a smile for the South African Defence Minister, Patrick Dule, who was having a hard time hiding his impatience. Greeves wasn't the kind to go off with Bernard for an impromptu morning stroll. Tom had learned in a very short time that when a schedule was made he stuck to it, and woe betide anyone who was a minute late.

Tom jogged back to Greeves's suite. Instinctively, he raised his polo shirt, so that the butt of his Glock was exposed, and easier to draw. 'Mr Greeves, sir?' he called again.

He heard footsteps and spun around. It was her. Sannie held up a skeleton key of her own. Great minds, he thought to himself, without mirth. 'Go to number four - Bernard Joyce's suite. There was no answer there, either. Let yourself in.'

She nodded. No time for smart-mouthing any more.

He let himself into the minister's luxurious room. It was identical to his in its safari chic décor and opulence. He took in the signs immediately. The fallen lamp stand, the sheets in disarray, the tangle of mosquito netting on the floor, the bloody palm print on the open sliding door. He drew his pistol. A laptop computer was open, but face down. Greeves's wallet and mobile phone, switched off, on the bedside table.

Tom moved quickly through the rest of the suite, checking the bathroom and toilet. No signs of the man, other than his toiletries and

some clothes in the bathroom. He went back outside and saw Sannie running along the boardwalk.

'Joyce,' she panted. 'He's gone. Signs of a struggle. It doesn't look like it was an animal attack.'

Tom shook his head. 'Greeves is gone too. Wallet full of cash and mobile phone are by the bed, so it wasn't money they were after.'

'Oh, dear god,' she said, and it was more prayer than blaspheming.

And Tom Furey needed all the prayers he could get, because he'd just woken to a protection officer's worst nightmare.

Eight days earlier

'I need to piss.'

Tom smiled, even though it was too dark in the back of the transit van to see the young constable's face. He sighed and whispered, 'You should have gone before we left.' He'd been waiting for this – as the boy had been fidgeting for the past hour.

'Yes, Dad.'

'Watch it, Harry,' Tom said. He kept his eye on the house, number fourteen, staring at it through the peephole in the side panel of the van. The light was still on in the front room of the nondescript pebble-dashed semi in the quiet Enfield street. He wondered if the neighbours had any idea what was going on behind that green door. They'd be mostly commuters, he reckoned, with safe jobs. Mid-level office workers, secretaries, tradesmen – and they would have a fit if they knew they were living in the same street as a bunch of people smugglers. Someone must have noticed something, though, or they wouldn't be here.

Londoners had been jolted out of their apathy after seven-seven, the suicide bombings on the tube and the buses, and curtain twitching sometimes paid off.

‘It’s only the truth, Tom. You *are* old enough to be my bleedin’ father.’

‘Perhaps I am. I was in uniform in Islington in the eighties. Your mum ever go to a Bryan Ferry concert?’

‘Now you’re making me sick.’

At the far end of the cramped space, Steve, the civilian information technology expert, looked over the top of his magazine. Unlike Harry, Steve, whom Harry had quietly dubbed ‘the Anorak’ by virtue of his job rather than his expensive overcoat, could keep quiet in an op.

Tom Furey sat on a fold-out canvas and tubular metal camp stool, which he had brought with him along with a Thermos of tea, sleeping bag, sandwiches, *The Times* crossword and a paperback novel. He pointed to the last item he’d brought. ‘What do you think that empty peanut jar in the corner is for? Or did you think there’d be a chemical toilet in here?’ Tom shook his head, but kept his gaze focused on the front door of number fourteen.

‘None of this is what I expected,’ Harry said. ‘It’s hardly like on the telly, is it? No electronic monitoring, no bank of TV sets, no infra-red night vision surveillance camera. Certainly no bleedin’ chemical toilet. Just a naff old van lined with bloody foam and plywood and a peephole. God save us if this is the front line of the high-tech war on terrorism. And I still need to piss.’

‘I got a bladder infection from sharing my piss jar with a bloke during

a surveillance op in '92, watching an IRA safe house in Kilburn, and I'm not going to make that mistake again. Like pissing razorblades, it was.'

'Oh dear... the IRA. Tell us what else you did in the war, Dad.'

The members of the old Metropolitan Police Special Branch – also known as SO12 – had a wide array of skills which were in demand in the new fight against terrorism, and the reason they were sitting in the van was because the word was that the targets inside number fourteen – Pakistani gentlemen – had possible links to al-Qaeda. As well as prostitutes and illegal workers, their clients were believed to include a bomb maker or two.

Tom had joined the Met twenty-one years earlier, at the age of twenty-two. After his sixteen-week training course at Hendon he'd graduated as a police constable and served his probation in Brixton. Three years later, with the IRA's mainland bombing campaign in full swing, he'd applied to join Special Branch. Being the first on the scene after a bomb had severed an army recruiter in two outside his shopfront had galvanised Tom into taking this next step in his career.

After passing a selection board he'd gone back to Hendon for eleven weeks of training as a detective. As a detective constable he'd done time on B Squad – the Irish squad – and on surveillance on S Squad. Working undercover, often dressed in the foul-smelling rags of a vagrant on the cold streets of London, spending time holed up in abandoned buildings and cold, darkened vans, he'd honed his observation skills and learned patience.

'Give us the peanut jar,' Harry said.

‘Quiet.’

After passing his sergeant’s exam Tom had reluctantly gone back into uniform – the obligation came with the promotion. He spent time in his new rank at Enfield – another reason why he was once more on the town’s streets. He knew the area better than most of the others on this hastily cobbled together operation.

Eventually he’d made his way back to Special Branch, where he believed he belonged and would see out his career. After completing firearms training he’d gone to A Squad, where he became a qualified protection officer. Like anyone else in the job he cringed at the term bodyguard, but that was how a civilian or, worse, a newspaper reporter, would have described him.

There had been innumerable wins for Special Branch against the Irish, but it was some high-profile cases of alleged heavy handedness – including one that was made into a movie – which made the politicians want to rein in the Branch and soften its image. Reorganisations after September 11 and the London bombings of 7 July 2005 had created a new unit to deal with terrorism, but had also removed the structure whereby detectives could transfer easily from squad to squad in the Branch, developing and practising new skills while staying under the same command.

The latest round of restructuring had hived off specialist protection – Tom’s specialty – into a new unit, SO1, under the Special Operations umbrella. Police counter-terrorism operations were now handled by SO15.

Tom Furey had provided protection for a plethora of politicians, a former prime minister, a couple of European monarchs, African dictators, and an Arabian prince or two. Visiting dignitaries were assigned British policemen to guard them when in the UK, and Tom, who had no 'principal' of his own to protect these days, was on a roster of unattached protection officers who waited their turn potentially to take a bullet for a foreign VIP. He liked the work – he met interesting people and occasionally travelled abroad – but if he was honest with himself it was no high-minded calling which kept him in this job. It was the money. With shift allowances he made two to three times what he would as a detective elsewhere in the Met. The downside was that divorces were common in his line of work. He and Alex had been able to cope because they'd spent their entire marriage out of sync when it came to working hours. They'd compensated with some wonderfully luxurious overseas holidays, made possible by their combined wages which were nothing to sneeze at.

Occasionally, when SO15 was stretched thin – such as now – Tom was called on to lend a hand with surveillance or other specialist tasks now out of the remit of a protection officer. The threat level against the UK had recently been upped, as a result of an increased troop presence in Afghanistan, and resources were stretched thin.

Harry, too, was a protection officer, though unlike under the old Special Branch structure he was neither experienced in surveillance nor a qualified detective. He'd only been out of uniform six months. It was a sign of the times.

‘Do you expect me to piss my pants, Tom?’

‘Shut it,’ Tom hissed back at Harry. He spoke softly but clearly and slowly into his radio: ‘All call signs, two targets moving. Heading left, towards the high street. Usual clothing. I have eyeball. Four-two, they’re heading your way, over.’ Tom repeated the direction of movement so there could be no confusion among the other call signs in the area – a mix of police and MI5 intelligence service personnel – about where the two young Pakistani men were heading. Four-two was the code name for an undercover policeman on a motorcycle, Detective Constable Paul Davis in this case, who was currently at the end of the suburban side street, where it met Enfield Road.

Harry was quiet now and Tom could almost smell the sudden burst of adrenaline in the dank confines of the surveillance van.

Three hundred metres away, down the end of the road, around the corner from the off-licence, was a kebab shop. It was the habit of the two targets to walk to the eatery between seven-thirty and eight pm each evening to buy their supper and sit down at the laminate-topped tables in the padded booth seating to eat. With kebabs, Cokes and tea and cigarettes to follow, the meal usually took two hours, according to the other watchers.

Tom spoke into the hand-held radio again. ‘Four-two, I’ve lost eyeball, do you have them, over?’

‘Roger. They’re on their way to dinner, over. Heading for the shop,’ Paul said.

Tom radioed the constable who had driven the van on to the plot –

the location of the operation – and told him to come and pick them up. The officer, who had been watching television and drinking numerous cups of tea with an elderly couple who lived ten doors away from the target house, walked up the street. He wore blue tradesman's overalls and carried a canvas tool bag. He climbed into the van without acknowledging the others in the back, started the engine and drove away from the high street, around a bend and out of sight of number fourteen.

'Right, let's go,' Tom said, when the driver switched off the engine.

The back door of the van swung open and Tom, Steve the Anorak and Harry, who seemed to have forgotten his bursting bladder, climbed out.

'Not too fast, now,' Tom said. He looked up and down the street, which was deserted.

Tom wore jeans and a thick black roll-neck jumper, with a duffel coat over the top. It was cold out, a chilly November evening, but the jacket's other purpose was to conceal his weapon. He carried a tool bag, though, like the driver's, it was more for show than anything else. The tools of his trade for this job – his set of lock picks – were in his pocket.

Tom led them back up the street, then along a side path to the semi's back door. Within three minutes they were inside. He didn't need to tell the other two to be quick or quiet, but he reminded Harry, 'You stay here and watch the back. I'll go with our friend.'

The house smelled musty and unloved. He checked the kitchen. Tea bags and a kettle, no plates in the sink or evidence of home cooking. These boys ate out every night and their routine would be their

undoing. With more people, more resources, they could have conducted a detailed search of the house, but tonight they had the Anorak, so the computer was their highest priority, and protecting the information technology expert was Tom's.

He took up position in the front room, peering through a crack in the curtains so he could watch the front street for activity.

The computer was in the front room as well, on a cheap flat-pack desk. Apart from the machine and the second-hand office chair in which the Anorak sat, was a tatty velvet couch and a mismatched armchair.

Tom glanced back over his shoulder and saw Steve's pimply young face bathed in a blue glow as he booted up the computer. Fingers encased in latex gloves tapped furiously at the keyboard. He heard a dog bark and the hairs stood up on the back of his neck. 'Everything okay back there?' he radioed Harry.

'Dunno. Something's spooked the dog in the yard behind us. Should I go take a look?'

'No, stay where you are, but keep watch.'

'Fuck,' the Anorak said. 'You should see this.'

'What is it?' Tom asked, his eyes still on the street.

'Porn!'

Tom shook his head. 'Bloody hell. Just get on with it, will you. You know what we're after – emails, names, message traffic. I shouldn't have to tell you your job.'

'No, but, Jesus, you should see this. It's some sick shit, man.'

Tom was about to say something when Paul Davis's voice hissed in

his ear. 'This is Four-two. Targets are turning back. Just walked into the shop then came straight back out again. There's an argument going on, by the look of it, and one of them is searching his jacket. Looks like he might have forgotten his wallet. Repeat, they're heading back.'

'Shit,' Tom said. He looked over at Steve, who stared fixedly at the screen. Tom noticed, for the first time, the black leather billfold on the computer table.

'Shut it down, we're going.'

'But this is gold!'

'Leave the fucking porn alone and close down. They're on their way back, so we're moving.'

'No way, man, we can't leave this. I'm taking it with me. This is more than just porn.'

Tom shook his head. This was turning into a monumental fuck-up. 'You know as well as I do we can't nick the computer. Can't you save whatever it is onto a disk or something?'

Steve fumbled in the pocket of his overcoat and fished out a USB jump stick.

'Movement!' Tom heard the word in his earpiece and drew the Glock from his holster with practised ease. He kept a spare magazine of bullets in the right-hand pocket of his jacket so that when he reached for his pistol the added weight helped swing the tail of the duffel out of the way.

'What is it?'

'I thought I saw a man's head, moving along number twelve's side

fence, on the other side,' Harry answered.

'Keep a watch. But get ready to move. The targets are on their way back.'

'Shit.' Harry drew his weapon.

A dog barked and Tom's peripheral vision registered lights being turned on in neighbouring homes. A baby screamed in the house next door, through the communal wall. It was a good reminder there were innocents all around them.

'We're going.' Tom reached out and grabbed Steve by the collar of his coat, but the IT expert brushed his hand away with more strength than he'd expected. 'Leave me alone, Furey! This is bloody important.'

'Shit, there's definitely someone moving on the other side of the back fence,' Harry whispered, his voice barely audible in Tom's earpiece. 'I can see him through the fence palings. What should I do?'

'Move now, out the front door. No arguments,' Tom said to the man behind the computer, then repeated the instructions to Harry.

'Two minutes, that's all I need,' the Anorak pleaded.

Tom swore. He looked out the window, down the street, and saw the two targets walking towards them, a hundred metres away.

Harry came in through the back door. 'Lost sight of the geezer.'

'Tell me this is worth blowing the whole operation over,' Tom said to Steve.

Steve looked up at him, his already sun-deprived face ghostly in the wash of illumination. The man swallowed and Tom watched the overly large Adam's apple bob. 'Yes.'

Tom opened the front door and strode onto the pavement, raising his Glock and cross-bracing his firing hand on top of his left wrist. 'Armed police! Get down on the ground, now!' Harry was beside him, mimicking his stance.

The man on the right reached into the pocket of his vinyl bomber jacket and Tom started to squeeze the trigger. Before he pulled it all the way, however, the man was falling, knocked sideways by an invisible sledgehammer. There was no sound of a shot fired, so it wasn't Harry who had downed him. Silencer.

Tom turned and registered a dark shadow moving by the corner of the house. The falling man had drawn not a gun but a set of keys from his pocket. Tom saw he held a small black plastic remote in his hand, the kind used to activate a car alarm, and presumed he pressed the button as he fell. Before he hit the ground his companion was also knocked over. Tom dropped to one knee and looked left. He registered a running man, dressed in black, a pistol in his hand. Harry shifted his aim and opened his mouth to speak.

Before either of them could order the stranger to stop, the house exploded.