

CHAPTER ONE

John Burrows guessed the next couple of hours would be mundane, tedious even. He was used to CMEs – or Covert Method of Entries, as they were officially called – from his days in the Serious and Organised Crime Agency. And, although he had retired from the cops before it became the National Crime Agency, he guessed nothing much would have changed.

In truth, he didn't really know what he was doing here, sat in the back of an observation van with a rookie. Even though his boss Frank Briers had said, Burrows' secondment here was at the NCA's request – due to his recent knowledge of their target – the fact that he'd been put in the back of a van with a rookie said it all.

"I've never done one of these sorts of jobs before, do they usually pass off OK?" the Rookie asked.

"Usually," Burrows answered, resisting the temptation to check his watch, yet again, "whilst the surveillance team keep a watch on our target as he is stuffing his fat face in the restaurant, the CME team will approach his flat via the rear, and we'll keep the front covered. Just in case an old girlfriend with a key, or whoever arrives unexpectedly."

"How many are in the CME team?"

Burrows sighed, before answering; this guy really was a rookie, he thought. He'd said his name was Brian, a man in his twenties who'd not been with the agency long. He seemed a nice enough guy and Burrows knew he shouldn't sigh – he felt a twinge of guilt; everyone had been a rookie once. "Depends on what the recce showed up the other night. But I'm guessing in this case, there would be a couple of guys to keep the dog happy, a couple of guys to plant the listening devices and the civilian technician to get them past the locks. That's the tricky bit, getting in quickly and switching off the alarm."

"How good are the technicians?"

"They're usually pretty good, recces and intelligence gathered previously gives them all they need to know about the locks and alarms, and then they practice with copies for days before the actual job."

"Must be a bit different though, doing it for real."

"Yeah, that's when the real pressure is on."

Burrows looked at his watch once more, it was 10.45 p.m. and the autumn rain that had been predicted, arrived. It always wound him up how the weather forecasts were spot on when it was bad news, and intermittent at best, when it was supposed to be fine. Though he'd forgive them tonight: rain was good cover on jobs like this, though it did make it more difficult peering through the viewing ports in the side of the van.

They were parked on a quiet residential avenue with grass-fronted pavements bordering Victorian town houses with high inverted V painted weatherboards. Each painted a different pastel colour; it gave the place a real coastal resort feel, which of course is what it was. The street lighting was poor, but fortunately, there was one lamppost right outside the target address.

He noted it had been five minutes since the CME team, using the call sign Tango One, had announced they were approaching the rear of the premises, and he wondered how they were getting on.

"What sort of lock is it on the back door?" the Rookie asked.

"As far as I'm aware, it's just a standard five-lever mortise, after all this is just a rented flat the target uses from time to time for his meetings with the rest of his gang. It's not like his home address back in Manchester; which will be like Fort Knox."

"More like his weekend Southport retreat, eh?"

"I guess you could call it that."

As if the surveillance team leader had been reading Burrows' mind, his radio earpiece burst into life. "Charlie One to the visual, permission?"

"There's no change at the front aspect," Burrows said into his coat lapel, "permission to speak, granted."

"Charlie One to the whole team, update from the Delta team that the target is still in the restaurant having a meal. Charlie One to Tango One, acknowledge the last, and a situation report from you when poss."

Silence.

“Charlie One to Tango One, acknowledge?”

Silence again.

“Visual to Charlie One,” Burrows butted in, “maybe you’re parked too far away and they aren’t picking you up, I’ll try, we’re only a hundred metres away.”

Charlie One agreed and Burrows tried raising the CME team Tango One, but received no reply. Something was wrong.

Burrows suggested to Charlie One that, as they were the nearest, he would slip out of the van and do a walk-past at the rear to see what was going on. It was a ground floor flat; the property had been converted into several apartments. It had a rear yard accessed from a secluded alley, and intelligence checks reported that the other flats in the building were currently unoccupied. They were summer lets; Southport for all its charm wasn’t the place to hole down for the winter.

Charlie One told Burrows to go ahead. So he asked Brian to stay vigilant whilst he slid out of the side door to the van, the one facing away from the target premises. Glad to be out of the van, Burrows stretched his large frame as he stood up straight. He was in his fifties and getting too old for cramped obs vans, he thought. Though he kept himself in shape, sitting in obs vans had always been a back-killer.

As soon as he was away and heading towards the end of the block, he checked that his own communications were working OK. Brian speaking as the ‘visual’, said he was loud and clear.

The weak street lighting was low and helped Burrows stay unobtrusive as he kept to the shadows, pulling up the collar of his leather jacket as he walked. Once he turned the corner at the end of the row, he felt relief at being out of sight, and quickly made his way down the unlit back alley. He counted the rear gates until he was sure the next one was the target address. The gate was open, and he waited a couple of metres away, catching his breath as he listened intently. Nothing.

He checked his watch; it was now eleven. Fifteen minutes since the Tango team announced their arrival at the rear. Setting his radio to whisper mode – which amplifies quiet speech – he tried to raise them again. No reply.

Something was very wrong, there was no way they wouldn’t be able to hear him from this distance. As stealthily as he could, Burrows tiptoed to the edge of the gate, and slowly peered around its jam. It took a moment in the subdued light for his eyes to adjust. It was even darker than in the alleyway, at least the passage had some ambient light at each end of it.

He took a step in as his vision attuned. Then he saw them.

CHAPTER TWO

Four bodies. All lying on their backs on the concrete floor. They were all trussed up and not moving. The back door to the premises was wide open, but with no sign of life from within. Burrows rushed to the nearest man, and as he leaned over him, he could see gaffer tape over his eyes and mouth. He ripped the tape off and the man's head just lolled from side to side. He didn't react to the removal of the tape.

Burrows quickly checked for a pulse. There was one, albeit slow. He was alive, but unconscious. Thank God. He checked the other three, all the same. All four had their hands tied behind their backs with plastic handcuffs. He couldn't do anything about that now, he'd need a knife to cut them free, so he concentrated on removing the gaffer tape. That done, he caught his breath for a second and crouched down as he whispered into his lapel.

"Burrows to the DI, urgent."

"Charlie One receiving, go ahead, John."

Burrows was just about to speak further when he heard a noise coming from the direction of the back door. He spun around as he jumped to his feet, ignoring Charlie One's repeated attempts to raise him in his earpiece. A golden Labrador trotted towards him, tail wagging. Burrows breathed out heavily.

"Charlie One to Burrows, respond. What's going on?" Burrows' earpiece pleaded.

"Wait one, Charlie One," Burrows replied.

He quickly put the dog back into the ground floor flat and closed the back door.

He then brought Charlie One – Detective Inspector Nigel Crabtree – up to speed on what he had found. There was a long pause after Burrows finished speaking as Crabtree was obviously taking in what Burrows had said. He'd barely taken it in himself. Then Charlie One replied, he told Burrows that he was sending a people carrier down the back alley to get the four men. Then added, "Where's the technician, the locksmith?"

Burrows felt sick, amid the chaotic last few minutes, he'd failed to notice that there was no sign of the technician. "I'm sorry Charlie One. He's not in the yard. Maybe he's legged it."

Charlie One responded with several attempts to raise the technician over the airwaves. No reply.

"Burrows to Charlie One, I'll check the house."

"You'd better be quick, John, we've just heard from the surveillance team's leader – Delta One – the target has finished his meal early and is preparing to leave. He could be on his way back to you."

This was just getting ridiculous, Burrows thought, still not able to comprehend exactly what had taken place here in the last twenty minutes. He rushed to the back door knowing he had no time for stealth now as he opened it and entered. The dog sat in the corner of the kitchen, just raised his head and gave a solitary wag of its tail as Burrows raced inside. He'd seen the layout of the flat during the briefing earlier that evening. A one-bedroomed, ground floor flat with a kitchen and lounge. It only took him a minute to search the place; there was no sign of anyone. He left the way he had entered and closed the kitchen door behind him. The last of the four unconscious CME team was being loaded into the rear of the MPV parked across the rear gate. One of the MPV crew gave Burrows a quick nod as he re-entered the back yard from the kitchen.

He gave Charlie One a quick update over the radio as the MPV drove off.

"The rest of the teams are out searching the adjoining streets for him," Charlie One replied, "but I suggest you get out of there sharpish. Delta One has just confirmed that the target is mobile again and he's headed back your way."

Burrows acknowledged the last transmission as he ran down the back alley the same way as he had entered. It was about a hundred metres to the end where it joined the street. He was halfway down it when his earpiece crackled again.

“The target is confirmed back towards his H.A. approximately two minutes away.”

Burrows' heart rate quickened, as did his pace as he ran and slid on the uneven damp cobbles, made more treacherous by a coating of wet leaves. He skidded to a halt as he reached the end, cursing the sound made with grit underfoot, just as the observation van came into view. Thankfully, Brian must have seen which end of the alleyway Burrows had entered by, and guessed he'd leave the same way. The van pulled to a halt and Burrows jumped onto the front passenger seat.

“Cheers, mate. You timed that well,” Burrows said.

“Had to guess which end, I couldn't get in on the radio to ask. It's gone mental. And to make it worse, the Delta surveillance team have come onto our channel.”

Burrows nodded as he listened to the continuous radio chatter. The target had just entered his street from the opposite end. Time to go.

They spent the next two hours with the rest of Charlie and Delta teams looking for the technician. Ian Townley was his name. A small man in his thirties who had his own locksmith business but was contracted to work part-time, as required, for the National Crime Agency. So, as such, he was not a casehardened operative, but a civvie on an earner. And that was part of the problem. Whatever had happened in that back yard had been quick, unexpected and undoubtedly scary. They were working from an assumption that he had somehow thwarted his assailants and legged it into the night, and was probably cowering in fear in a doorway somewhere. But after two hours, there was still no sign of him. Charlie One had said that his mobile phone kept ringing straight to answer machine, and that there was no sign of life at his home address in Preston. One car had been sent there and told to remain outside until further notice.

Delta team had followed the target back to his flat, he had gone in, and all the lights were now off. Two of their cars had been told by Charlie One to remain static there, and cover both front and rear approaches to the property. The rest of both teams were then stood down by Charlie One and directed to the Liverpool office for a debrief. It would be quicker than going back to their base in Manchester.

At this time of night, it would only be a forty-minute journey to the Liverpool Branch Office of the National Crime Agency. Burrows had been there many times before when it was owned by its predecessor, the Serious and Organised Crime Agency. He'd been a detective sergeant on SOCA at its Lancashire Branch Office before he'd retired about eighteen months ago. That was before he'd joined the secret Special Projects Unit, run by his old SOCA boss, Detective Superintendent Frank Briers. He'd just finished his first job with the SPU and was nearing the end of a month's break when Briers had asked him to act as a liaison officer on this job. But as far as this current team, headed up by DI Nigel Crabtree, were concerned, Burrows was still retired and not working for anyone else.

He'd never met Crabtree before, and got the impression that he didn't really want some ex-DS on his team. Burrows had tried to act circumspect, so as not to upset anyone. But knew he could be of help, due to his recent dealings with their target. It was someone he'd come across on his first SPU job. Jonny Moon was one of Manchester's nastier villains.

He and Brian sat in silence on the short journey into Liverpool, and he spent that time musing as to what had really gone on back in Southport at Moon's flat. It was obvious to him that they'd been expected, but how? And where was the locksmith Townley?