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For AC 

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FORCE THREE

The bomb had been timed to go off at exactly half past three.

Strangely, the man it had been designed to kill probably knew more about bombs and terrorism than anyone else in the world. He had even written books on the subject. *Looking After Number One: Fifty Ways to Protect Yourself at Home and Abroad* might not be the snappiest of titles, but the book had sold half a million copies in America, and it was said that the president himself kept a copy by his bed. The man did not think of himself as a target, but even so he was always careful. As he often joked, it would be bad for business if he was blown up crossing the street.

His name was Max Webber, and he was short and plump with tortoise-shell glasses and jet-black hair that was actually dyed. He told people that he had once been in the SAS, which was true. What he

didn't tell them was that he had been dropped after his first tour of duty. In his forties he had opened a training centre in London, advising rich businessmen on how to look after themselves. He had become a writer and a journalist, frequently appearing on television to discuss international security.

And now he was the guest speaker at the fourth International Security Conference, being held at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on the south bank of the Thames in London. The whole building had been cordoned off. Helicopters had been flying overhead all morning and police with sniffer dogs had been waiting in the foyer. Briefcases, cameras and all electronic devices had been forbidden inside the main hall, and delegates had been made to pass through a rigorous screening system before being allowed in. More than eight hundred men and women from seventeen countries had turned up. Among them were diplomats, businessmen, senior politicians, journalists and members of various security services. They had to feel safe.

Alan Blunt and Mrs Jones were both in the audience. As the head and deputy head of MI6 Special Operations, it was their responsibility to keep up with the latest developments, although as far as Blunt was concerned, the whole thing was a waste of time. There were security conferences all the time in every major city but they never achieved anything. The experts talked. The politicians lied. The press wrote it all down. And then everyone went home and

nothing changed. Alan Blunt was bored. He looked half asleep.

At exactly two fifteen, Max Webber began to speak.

He was dressed in an expensive suit and tie and spoke slowly, his clipped voice full of authority. He had notes in front of him but he referred to them only occasionally, his eyes fixed on the audience, speaking directly to each one of them. In a glass-fronted projection room overlooking the stage, nine translators spoke quietly into microphones, just a second or two behind. Here and there in the audience, men and women could be seen with one hand pressed against their earpiece, concentrating on what was being said.

Webber turned a page. "I am often asked which is the most dangerous terrorist group in the world. The answer is not what you might expect. It is a group that you may not know. But I can assure you that it is one you should fear, and I wish to speak briefly about it now."

He pressed a button on his lectern and two words appeared, projected onto a giant screen behind him.

FORCE THREE

In the fifth row, Blunt opened his eyes and turned to Mrs Jones. He looked puzzled. She shook her head briefly. Both of them were suddenly alert.

"They call themselves Force Three," Webber went on. "The name refers to the fact that the earth is the third planet from the sun. These people wouldn't describe themselves as terrorists. They would probably prefer you to think of them as eco-warriors, fighting to protect the earth from the evils of pollution. Broadly speaking, they're protesting against climate change, the destruction of the rainforests, the use of nuclear power, genetic engineering and the growth of multinational business. All very commendable, you might think. Their agenda is similar to that of Greenpeace. The difference is that these people are fanatics. They will kill anyone who gets in their way; they have already killed many times. They claim to respect the planet but they have no respect at all for human life."

Webber clicked again and a photograph flashed up on the screen. There was a stir in the auditorium as the audience examined it. At first sight, they seemed to be looking at a picture of a globe. Then they saw that it was a globe sitting on a pair of shoulders. Finally they realized it was a man. He had a very round head which was completely shaven – including the eyebrows. And there was a map of the world tattooed on his skin. England and France covered his left eye. Newfoundland poked out over his right. Argentina floated around one side of his neck. A gasp of revulsion spread around the room. The man was a freak.

"This is the commanding officer of Force Three," Webber explained. "As you can see, he cares about the planet so much, he's rather let it go to his head.

"His name – or at least the name that he goes by – is Kaspar. Very little is known about him. It is thought he might be French, but we don't even know for certain where he was born. Nor do we know when he acquired these tattoos. But I can tell you that Kaspar has been very busy in the last six months. He was responsible for the assassination of Marjorie Schultz, a journalist living in Berlin, in June; her only crime was to write an article criticizing Force Three. He planned the kidnapping and murder of two members of the Atomic Energy Commission in Toronto. He has organized explosions in six countries, including Japan and New Zealand. He destroyed a car manufacturing plant in Dakota. And I have to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, he enjoys his work. Whenever possible, Kaspar likes to press the button himself.

"In my view, Kaspar is now the most dangerous man alive, for the simple reason that he believes the whole world is with him. And in a sense he's right. I'm sure there are many people in this room who believe in protecting the environment. The trouble is, he would kill every single one of you if he thought it would help him achieve his aims. That is why I'm issuing this warning.

"Find Kaspar. Find Force Three before they can

do any more harm. Because with every day that passes, I believe they are becoming a more serious and deadly threat."

Webber paused as he turned another page of his notes. When he began speaking again, the subject had changed. Twenty minutes later, at exactly three o'clock, he finished. There was polite applause.

Coffee and biscuits were being served in the foyer after the session ended, but Webber wasn't staying. He shook hands briefly with a diplomat he knew and exchanged a few words with some journalists, then moved on. He was heading towards the auditorium exit when he found his way blocked by a man and a woman.

They were an unlikely pair. There was no way he would have mistaken them for husband and wife, even though they were about the same age. The woman was thin with short black hair. The man was shorter and entirely grey. There was nothing interesting about him at all.

"Alan Blunt!" Webber smiled and nodded. "Mrs Jones!"

Very few people in the world would have recognized these two individuals, but Webber knew them instantly.

"We enjoyed your talk, Mr Webber," Blunt said, although there was little enthusiasm in his voice.

"Thank you."

"We were particularly interested in your comments concerning Force Three."

"You know about them, of course?"

The question was directed at Blunt, but it was Mrs Jones who answered. "We've heard about them, certainly," she replied. "But the fact is, we know very little about them. Six months ago, as far as we can see, they didn't even exist."

"That's right. They were founded very recently."

"You seem to know a lot about them, Mr Webber. We'd be interested to learn where you got your information."

Webber smiled a second time. "You know I can't possibly reveal my sources, Mrs Jones," he said lightly. Suddenly he was serious. "But I find it very worrying that our country's security services should be so ignorant. I thought you were meant to be protecting us."

"That's why we're talking to you now," Mrs Jones countered. "If you know something, I think you should tell us—"

Webber interrupted her. "I think I've told you quite enough. If you want to know more, I suggest you come to my next lecture. I'll be talking in Stockholm a couple of weeks from now, and it may well be that I shall have further information about Force Three then. If so, I'll be happy to share it with you. And now, if you don't mind, I'll wish you good day."

Webber pushed his way between them and

headed towards the cloakroom. He couldn't help smiling to himself. It had gone perfectly – and meeting Alan Blunt and the Jones woman had been an unexpected bonus. He fumbled in his pocket and took out a plastic disc which he handed to the cloakroom attendant. His mobile phone had been taken from him when he went in: a security measure he himself had recommended in his book. Now it was returned to him.

Ninety seconds later he emerged onto the wide pavement in front of the river. It was early October but the weather was still warm, the afternoon sun turning the water a deep blue. There were only a few people around – mainly kids rattling back and forth on their skateboards – but Webber still checked them out, just to make sure that none of them had any interest in him. He decided to walk home instead of taking public transport or hailing a taxi. That was something else he'd written in his book. *In any major city, you're always safer out in the open, on your own two feet.*

He had only taken a few steps when his mobile rang, vibrating in his jacket pocket. He dug it out. Somewhere in the back of his mind he seemed to recall that the phone had been switched off when he handed it to the cloakroom attendant. But he was feeling so pleased with himself, with the way his speech had gone, that he ignored this single whisper of doubt.

It was twenty-nine minutes past three.

"Hello?"

"Mr Webber. I'm ringing to congratulate you. It went very well."

The voice was soft and somehow artificial. It wasn't an Englishman speaking. It was someone who had learnt the language very carefully. The pronunciation was too deliberate, too precise. There was no emotion in the voice at all.

"You heard me?" Max Webber was still walking, speaking at the same time.

"Oh yes. I was in the audience. I am very pleased."

"Did you know that MI6 were there?"

"No."

"I spoke to them afterwards. They were very interested in what I had to say." Webber chuckled quietly. "Maybe I should raise my price."

"I think we'll stick with our original agreement," the voice replied.

Max Webber shrugged. Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds was still a great deal of money. Paid into a secret bank account, it would come tax-free, no questions asked. And it had been such a simple thing to do. A quarter of a million for just ten minutes' work!

The man on the other end spoke again and suddenly his voice was sad. "There is just one thing that concerns me, Mr Webber…"

"What's that?" Webber could hear something else, in the background. Some sort of interference.

He pressed the phone more tightly against his ear.

"In your speech today, you made an enemy of Force Three. And as you yourself pointed out, they are completely ruthless."

"I don't think either of us need worry about Force Three." Webber looked around to make sure he wasn't being overheard. "And I think you should remember, my friend, I served with the SAS. I know how to look after myself."

"Really?"

Was the voice mocking him? For reasons Webber didn't quite understand, he was beginning to feel uneasy. And the interference was getting louder; he could hear it in his mobile phone. Some sort of ticking.

"I'm not afraid of Force Three," he blustered. "I'm not afraid of anyone. Just make sure the money reaches my account."

"Goodbye, Mr Webber," said the voice.

There was a click.

One second of silence.

Then the mobile phone exploded.

Max Webber had been holding it tight against his ear. If he heard the blast, he was dead before it registered. A couple of joggers were approaching from the other direction, and they both screamed as the thing that had just moments before been a man toppled over into their path.

The explosion was surprisingly loud. It was heard in the conference centre where delegates

were still drinking coffee and congratulating one another on their contributions. They also heard the wail of the sirens as the ambulance and police cars arrived shortly afterwards.

Later that afternoon, Force Three called the press and claimed responsibility for the killing. Max Webber had declared war on them, and for that reason he had to die.

In the same phone call they issued a stark warning.

They had already chosen their next target.

And they were planning something the world would not forget.