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Opening extract from

The Snake Trap
Travis Delaney Investigates

Written by

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1

The M84 stun grenade is a non-lethal explosive device designed to disorientate and incapacitate enemy personnel in enclosed spaces. Upon detonation it produces an intense flash of light and a thunderous blast of up to 180 decibels. Anyone within two to three metres of the explosion will experience temporary blindness and deafness, possible concussion, and a loss of balance and coordination.

The man with the M84 in his hand was standing on the pavement outside the offices of Delaney & Co, a small private investigation agency in Barton, Essex. It was 9.07 p.m., Saturday 23 November. The night was cold, the street relatively quiet. The muffled beat of distant music drifted in the air from the pubs and clubs of the nearby town centre, and the pavements echoed with the footsteps of a few passers-by heading out into the night – a group of rowdy young men, coatless despite the cold; a teenage couple walking hand in hand; a middle-aged woman tottering along in high heels. The man with the M84 in his hand was perfectly aware that he was in plain sight of these people, and that some of them would probably remember him – and quite possibly be able to describe him – but that was of no concern to him. His one and only concern

was the operation that was about to go down.

He looked at his digital watch. Ten seconds to go.

He shifted his feet slightly, bracing himself for action. He was standing just to the right of the office window, leaning casually against the wall. A pale light glowed behind the closed Venetian blinds in the window. The blinds meant that he couldn't see into the office, but that didn't make any difference to him. He knew they were in there.

As he glanced at his watch again, another man was also checking the time on an identical digital watch. This man was inside the building, waiting with three other men in a corridor outside the door to the offices. They were all armed with automatic pistols fitted with silencers and high-powered torches, and they were all wearing dark clothing and gloves. As the first man held up five fingers, indicating that there were five seconds to go, the other three nodded silently and got ready to move.

The man outside pulled the safety pin from the stun grenade.

He looked at his watch once more.

Three seconds to go . . .

Two seconds . . .

One.

In a single swift movement, he swung his left elbow into the window, smashing the glass, then he ripped down the Venetian blinds and threw the stun grenade into the office.

2

Delaney & Co's offices consist of a main reception/administration area, with a small kitchen and staff toilets at the back, and a private office with a connecting door through to the reception area. There were six people in the private office when the window smashed and the M84 came flying in – three men, two women, and a fourteen-year-old boy.

The fourteen-year-old boy was me.

I had no idea that the missile was a grenade, I just thought someone had thrown a stone or something through the window. But two of the men in the room with me realised what it was almost instantly. Despite their lightning-fast reactions though, there wasn't much they could do. One of them – a grey-eyed man in his mid-fifties known only as Winston – got as far as yelling out '*GRENADE!*', while the other one, a mercenary called Lance Borstlap, who was sitting in a chair in the far corner of the room, instinctively turned his head away and covered his ears with his hands. A fraction of a second later the grenade hit the floor and detonated, rocking the office with a deafening *BOOM!* and a blinding flash of light that felt like the world was exploding.

The only one of us who wasn't completely incapacitated was Lance Borstlap, so when the four armed men who'd

been waiting in the corridor outside came bursting into the office, Borstlap was the only one to react. It was more of an instinctive reaction than anything else, because despite his protective measures, he was still only semi-conscious at best, so all he was really aware of was that the office was under attack. He had no idea why, or who the attackers were. But he was a professional soldier, and as such his instincts were primed to defend himself and his colleagues whatever state he was in. So he didn't have to think about reaching for the pistol in his pocket, it was an automatic response. Unfortunately for him, the physical effects of the stun grenade had slowed his normally rapid reactions, and the explosion had blown out the lights, plunging the office into darkness, so all Borstlap could see was the laser-like torch beams of the attackers' weapons dazzling through the smoke-filled blackness of the room. By the time he'd managed to fumble his pistol from his pocket and shield his half-blinded eyes from the lights, it was already too late. The four men were soldiers too, and they'd realised almost immediately that Borstlap was the only one who posed a threat. They didn't hesitate for a second. The first one through the door rushed his shots slightly, hitting Borstlap in the arm and the shoulder, but the second one was calmer and more accurate. Taking a moment to aim his silenced pistol, he shot Borstlap straight through the heart, killing him instantly.

With the threat resolved, the four men set about their business.

Sweeping their torch beams around the darkened room, they quickly picked out the two occupants they were after. One of them was Winston, the grey-eyed man who'd yelled out '*GRENADE!*' He was slumped in a chair over by the window, and because he'd been closest to the blast, he'd suffered the most damage. He was unconscious, his face blackened and scorched, and blood was running from his nose and his ears.

The attackers' other target was me.

I'd been blown out of my chair by the blast and was lying on the floor against the wall. I was still conscious, but only just.

As one of the men barked out an instruction, the four of them split up and went to work. Two of them headed over to Winston, the other two came over to me. One of each pair was carrying a small metal case, and as they approached Winston and me, they both opened their cases and carefully took out pre-loaded hypodermic syringes.

Winston offered no resistance at all when one of the men knelt down beside him and plunged the syringe into his arm. He probably didn't even feel the needle going in.

I was only vaguely aware of what was happening at the time – it wasn't until later that I managed to piece most of it together – and I was still in a state of shock and utter confusion. My head was reeling, I was half blind and deaf, and my entire body felt battered and numb. But when the second man squatted down beside me with

his syringe, I was at least conscious enough to sense his presence, and although I didn't know who he was, or what his intentions were, I instinctively knew he posed a danger to me and that I had to do something about it. I knew that I had to *try* to fight him off.

He was crouched down to the left of me, and I was just lying there, my eyes half closed, groaning incoherently, letting him think that I was a lot more out of it than I actually was. He didn't do anything for a moment or two – I guess he was double-checking the syringe or something – but then suddenly I felt him take hold of my left arm. And that's when I made my move. As quickly as I could, and with all my strength, I pulled him towards me with my left arm and simultaneously launched a swinging right-hand punch at his head. I'm a pretty decent boxer, and under normal circumstances, if I'd caught him just right, I probably could have knocked him out. But these were far from normal circumstances, and although I put everything I had into the blow, and it caught him square on the chin, I'd completely underestimated how weak I was. Even before the punch had landed, I knew it wasn't going to do any damage. My entire body felt slow and ponderous, as if I was underwater, and if it hadn't been for the fact that I'd caught him off guard, I'm pretty sure the man would have swatted away my pathetic attempt at a punch with ease. As it was, I doubt if he even felt the blow, and it certainly didn't do anything to stop him. He simply slammed me back to the floor, pinned me down,

and an instant later I felt a sharp stinging pain in my left arm.

I struggled in vain for a moment or two – twisting and writhing, trying to kick out at him – but whatever it was he'd injected me with, it didn't take long to work. Within a couple of seconds I began to feel really weird, kind of floaty and distant and disconnected from my own mind and body . . . and the next thing I knew – or didn't know – I was drifting around in a senseless void, wondering dreamily if this was it . . . the end . . . the end of me . . . the death of Travis Delaney. The strange thing was, I didn't feel frightened at all, just intensely curious as to whether or not there was some kind of life after death . . . and what it might be like . . . and who might be there . . . or was this really *the* absolute end of it all, for ever and ever and ever . . . ?

And that was the last thing I remember before everything faded away and I sank down into nothingness.