

## **1 SCHEHERAZADE'S BAGHDAD**

Tony was terrified, but he knew that it was his only option. He also knew that in a few minutes' time, there would be hundreds far more terrified than he was right now.

He had his schedule and it was memorised to the second. He could even see the big clock on the wall that he had to work to. He watched the seconds tick down and took deep breaths to calm himself, it was not a particularly hot day, but he was perspiring profusely, so he took his handkerchief from his inside jacket pocket and stopped at a mirror to dab at his face.

He was beginning to calm down, the Valium was working. He had not thought that it would be this easy. He had a hundred metres further to walk and fifteen minutes to do it in. He dawdled, looking at the clothes along the way, and wondered, none of it would matter soon, and he wondered whether it ever should have. Shirts, trousers, suits, men's perfumery... he touched some of them, as you might a flower, then up the escalator to ladies' wear and along the aisles heading for the jewellery department. He knew the way; he had walked the route dozens of times.

Two minutes to go and he felt his heart pick up speed. Wait a few more seconds, don't get too close to the display cabinets, he had been told. In fact, he had been given a line not to cross, and lo and behold, there it was a metre before him. He stood on his mark, the point where two sections of the aisle carpet joined, and pretended to be reading an advertisement

Fifteen seconds to go. He looked around himself, a deep sadness in his eyes.

Ten seconds, he caught a sales assistant's eye and she started to walk towards him, he tried to will her away.

Five seconds, she was speaking to him, but he was not listening.

Four, three, two, one...

Zero.

Boom.

She never heard him say sorry, but then neither she nor Tony existed in this world any longer.

After the deafening explosion, there was complete silence for several seconds and then the screaming started. People were screaming, crying and running for their lives, those who were still able to anyway. There were people and bits of people lying all around and smoke from several fires.

Smoke and cries of agony and smells of fear and Semtex and spatters of Tony and the nice female sales assistant all over the ceiling and clothes and shoppers. The department store's alarm started and so did the sprinkler system seconds later.

Men in black raced in from the emergency staircase, but they were there to help themselves, not the wounded, and they carried sub-machine guns, not medical bags, not that there was any resistance.