

NanoStrike

Pete Barber

Chapter 1

In his makeshift laboratory in a bombed-out Israeli medical facility, Dawud dipped his hand into a small glass vivarium and selected a white rat with an orange stripe spray-painted on its back. He held the wriggling rodent by the tail, swung it away from the cage, and squirted two puffs from an asthma inhaler into its snout. When he was satisfied that the mist had dissipated, he returned the rat to the vivarium, setting it next to its brother. The rats touched noses and sniffed each other before recommencing their search for escape.

“Was that enough?” Firman asked. He spoke English with a slight French accent.

Dawud looked up at the tall, dark assassin—an infidel, yes, but also a useful tool for Allah. “Even a trace of inhibitor in the airway is sufficient to provide immunity from the weapon.” Dawud took a puff from the inhaler and passed it to Firman, who sucked in a dose before moving to the end of the table, next to the rats.

Dawud sealed a lid on the vivarium, opened the valve on a straw-sized plastic tube connected to a compressed-air cylinder, and released the nanoweapon into the rats’ habitat.

The untreated rat shuddered as if shot through with an electric current. Then it charged and slammed and bounced off the glass walls, legs pumping in a futile attempt to flee. Black-bead eyes sprung wide. Lips snarled back, baring pink gums and white teeth. The rodent flipped on its side, jerked and spasmed for five seconds, and then became still.

The orange-marked rat edged forward and inspected a hard black column of charcoal that protruded one inch from the dead rat’s throat, distending its jaws.

Firman’s eyes stretched wide and a slow smile spread across his thin lips. “Damn! That was fast,” he said.



Two weeks later, sixteen hundred strangers barreled through dark tunnels beneath London's nightly bustle. Brought together by chance and circumstance, homeward-bound workers, uneasy tourists, uniformed schoolchildren, and sated shoppers rocked and bobbed like marionettes with the motion of the train.

The tube train was well named: eight metal cylinders, each sixty feet long and eight feet wide, linked together in a chain.

At the center of the fifth car, holding a chrome rail, Firman peered between crammed bodies at the fortunate few with seats, lost in their books, smart phones, and tablet computers. His hands were damp with sweat inside thin, transparent latex gloves.

Firman pulled an inhaler from his inside pocket. Three times he sprayed the inhibitor, held, and then exhaled through his nose, coating his airways with immunity. His reserved English neighbors averted their eyes.

He lifted a black shoulder bag above his head and depressed a button embedded in the base. A high-pitched hiss signaled the release of compressed death from the canister within. Lethal molecules streamed into the car. Their unique, seeking nature found fuel in abundance: tongue and throat and lung.

It was a feeding frenzy.

Passengers, eyes stretched wide with terror, gasped and flailed before flopping to the ground, mouths gaped wide and crammed full of black charcoal.

In seconds, corpses surrounded him. A tragic barrier of unwitting protectors in case the car contained a hero.

It didn't.

Cheeks flushed with excitement, he pulled a video camera from his pocket and held it high, panning the scene.

When Firman's car burst into the stark light of Oxford Circus, central London's busiest Underground train station, he stayed below the window line, face hidden now in the shadow of a gray sweatshirt hood. Back pressed hard against the sliding doors, he knelt on a young woman's chest. The thin beat from her iPod was audible in the deathly silent carriage. Firman pulled an envelope from his side pocket, exposed an adhesive strip, and pressed the sticky message over the acne spots on her forehead, covering her stone-dead eyes.

At 5:09 p.m., rush-hour passengers stood six deep on the Central Line platform. They blinked away the rush of warm, stale air pushed from the tunnel by the slowing train. Tired eyes hunted for signs of space, and the death-car's windows showed empty. Hopefuls at the rear shuffled forward, sensing the possibility of an early escape.

The train stopped, doors hissed open, and Firman sprang backward, merging with the pressing crowd as it surged into the seemingly empty carriage.

A silent beat of awareness preceded screaming chaos when the potential riders nearest the train pushed and fought against the press of the crowd behind them, desperate to escape the macabre scene of bodies strewn like discarded laundry, frozen eyes crazed with terror and gaping mouths crammed with charcoal.

"They're all dead."

"Oh, my God!"

"What's happening?"

"Out of my way!"

Firman blended with the crowd, crouching low to avoid the station's closed-circuit TV

cameras, digital witnesses to his work, the worst train disaster in London's storied history, the most callous terrorist act since that terrible September day in New York.

The crowd surged along the platform toward the exit stairs. In front of him, an elderly woman lost her footing. The frantic mob parted and washed around her prone body like a stream skirting a rock.

His section of the crowd squeezed up the final twenty steps and spilled onto Oxford Street's broad sidewalk. He sucked in a deep breath. The street was jammed with vehicles. Low-hanging exhaust fumes stung his nose.

After peeling off the gloves, Firman slipped them in the pocket of his hoodie, and walked three blocks. He stepped into a souvenir shop, slid hangers along their circular rail and selected an extra-large "Mind the Gap" T-shirt. He snapped off the price tag, removed his hoodie, and pulled on the shirt. The clerk watched him on a TV monitor.

Firman handed him a bill. "I'll wear it if you don't mind."

The shopkeeper wore a white turban. He smiled. "You American?"

"Yes."

He nodded his acceptance of Firman's lie and handed over the change.

"Could I have a bag for my old clothes?"

"Ten pence, please."

Firman grinned at the ludicrous request and passed over the coin. He stuffed his shoulder bag and hoodie in the plastic carrier.

"Have a nice day," he said as he left.

In two blocks, he turned down an alley and tossed the bag into a stinking Dumpster.

At 5:30 p.m., he crossed the road to a corner pub packed with white-collar workers.

Instead of the welcoming harmonics of an after-office crowd, a church-like quiet prevailed. The congregation stared openmouthed at a wall-mounted flat-screen that displayed a repeating loop of the train as it entered the station and its doors slid back to reveal a carriage full of corpses. They had all traveled on underground rail. There, but for the grace of God . . .

Firman laid a hand on the bar. "Pint of lager, please."

The bartender dragged his eyes from the TV. He poured, and pushed the glass across the counter. "Fuckin' Arabs."

Firman nodded, paid, and settled in at the end of the bar, an incognito star reveling in the impact of his triumphant opening-night performance.

Chapter 2

The next day . . .

Detective Chief Inspector Steven Quinnborne of Metropolitan Police's Murder Division and Frank Browning—point man for the British Special Branch Terrorism Response Team—stood on either side of a pasty-faced young computer operator in the London Transport Control Center. The technician had access to the largest dynamic network management system in the world, but Quinn couldn't get what he wanted.

Quinn's shoulders stretched his shirt tightly across his back as he hunched forward and peered over the operator's shoulder at the computer screen. Clenching his jaw in frustration, he spat out his words. "Run it again, and keep the camera on the doors." He'd viewed the footage a half-dozen times. Every time the train doors opened, the camera viewpoint shifted to another part of the platform.

"It's not that simple," the operator said. "You asked for the program to lock on the doors from the minute they exit the tunnel. The doors aren't always in shot, so the software loses track."

Quinn sounded out his words as if he were speaking to a child. "I . . . need . . . to . . . see . . . as much footage of the fifth carriage and its central doors as possible. I don't care about your program."

"Okay, why didn't you say? Damned pushy Yank." This was spoken under the technician's breath.

Quinn heard. Anger always made his accent more pronounced, but the kid just wasn't getting it.

The operator tapped at the keyboard, and again the screen showed commuters crowded along the platform, necks craning, focused on the lights of the approaching train as they grew larger in the dark tunnel.

When the train entered the station, the driver's face was a mask of concentration. Quinn knew he'd be watching for jumpers and making sure to hit his marks so the doors would align with the exits.

"Can you slow it down?" Quinn asked.

The operator tapped at a key. "Tell me when."

The train slowed to a crawl. "Like that, good." He leaned in closer, his earlier annoyance replaced by intense concentration. The footage switched, smoothly this time, to the key camera mounted at the center of the platform and looking down from behind the heads of the waiting crowd. The fourth car rolled past, crammed with passengers. The fifth came into the shot. From this angle, the screen showed bodies two and three deep across the floor, some draped over seat backs like discarded coats.

Quinn's gut clenched at the sight. He straightened slightly.

The train stopped. This time, the camera remained on the doors as they slid open and the crowd surged forward.

"Can you rewind to before the doors open? Then go as slowly as possible?"

The operator's fingers flicked across the keyboard, and the doors were closed again. They began to inch open.

"That's as slow as I can go. Any less and we'll be looking at a series of stills."

For the first time since he'd arrived, Quinn looked at the operator. "You can do that?"

"Sure, you want?"

Quinn rested a hand on the operator's shoulder. "Not yet, thanks."

The doors slid open, five inches, six, seven. The passengers waiting on the platform closed in, blocking the camera's view of the interior. Then, as if a bomb had detonated, the front row recoiled, a dramatic response even in slow motion.

Quinn's finger leaped forward and indented the computer's flexible screen. "There!"

The technician knocked Quinn's hand away.

Quinn ignored the move. "Okay, once more? Begin when the doors start to open and continue until that guy . . ." Without touching the screen this time, Quinn pointed to a bald businessman in a blue suit standing at the platform's edge, ". . . falls back into the woman in the green jacket."

The technician worked his magic. "Ready, should I run?"

"Yes, please. What's your name, by the way?"

They had been introduced forty minutes earlier when he and Frank arrived at the Operations Center, but Quinn hadn't paid attention.

"Austin, most folk call me Aussie."

"Okay, Aussie. Let's go."

The doors opened. The crowd pushed in. They lurched back. The bald man lost his balance and started to fall.

Quinn didn't blink, but it happened so fast he couldn't be sure. He turned to his right.

"Frank, are you seeing this?"

Frank nodded. "Someone dived out of the train."

"Aussie, can you enhance it?" Quinn asked.

The screen split in two. On the right, the action replayed again frame by frame, but all

they saw was a gray blur. Aussie shook his head. “Too fast. Not enough definition.”

On the left, the next camera showed a mass of heads crammed together on the narrow platform and moving as one. Quinn leaned over Aussie’s shoulder, straining to catch a glimpse of the lone survivor, but it was impossible in the dense crowd.

“Perhaps we can track his group,” Aussie said. “I’ll set markers to circle twenty or thirty people.” Aussie tapped away as he spoke. “The man in the blue suit’s behind him. The blond woman will stand out.”

Quinn got the idea. “Use the tall kid with the baseball cap?”

Aussie clicked the target. A red arrow appeared above the kid and, along with another five arrows, moved across the screen, floating above the crowd. The pinpointed group reached the top of the stairs leading out of the platform and started to break apart.

Quinn pointed at the screen, careful not to touch now he considered Aussie a colleague rather than a smart-ass. “What’s happening? What’s that?”

“Someone’s fallen. They’re going around,” Aussie said. The arrows flowed past the obstacle and reformed into a group.

“What’s ahead?” Quinn asked.

“The ticket barriers; once they pass through they’ll have to pick an exit.”

The gates had been swung aside so the panicked crowd could get out as fast as possible.

Quinn kept his eyes on the screen. “Frank, if you were the perp, which exit would you choose?”

“The first I could.”

Quinn smiled. “Me, too. Aussie, let’s work on that assumption.”

Aussie split the screen again.

On the left, the group passed through the barriers and scattered. On the right, Aussie displayed video from a camera mounted outside, high on a pole and trained on the Oxford Street south exit. Commuters streamed out of the stairwell. Many stopped a few feet after reaching the pavement, blinking in the sunlight, and causing a backup.

“God, people are stupid. Can’t they get out of the way?” Frank said.

Two red-arrowed passengers emerged. Behind them, someone wearing a gray sweatshirt, face obscured by a hood, pulled off his gloves and strode along Oxford Street and out of camera shot.

“There! The gray hoodie. Male!” Quinn said, stating the obvious. “Only one reason to wear a hood and gloves in July.”

Aussie backed the footage up, tapped at his keyboard, and a blue arrow hovered above the hoodie’s head. “We can’t see his face, but the software will map his body shape. The longer he’s in the shot, the more attributes to scan. Give me enough time and I’ll be able to spot him anywhere.”

“Clever,” Quinn said. “Where’s the next camera?”

“A hundred yards along Oxford Street.”

Quinn rubbed at his cheek, as though he was trying to erase a mark. “With eleven thousand cameras in London, they should have this area blanketed, not one every hundred bloody yards.”

Between cameras, they lost the killer for over a minute. When he reappeared, the hood still shadowed his face. He walked left to right across the screen.

“Big man, fit-lookin’ bugger, too,” Frank said.

“Two hundred yards to the next camera,” Aussie said, anticipating Quinn’s question.

The detective glared at the back of the technician's head as if he were to blame for the camera locations. Time clicked away at the bottom of the screen.

"He should be here by now," Quinn said.

They waited two minutes, three, still nothing. A few business types passed, but no hooded terrorist.

Frank straightened and rubbed the small of his back. "Lost him."

"Let's wait," Quinn remained bent forward, staring at the screen, willing the man to show. The timer showed five minutes, fourteen seconds when a tall tourist in a T-shirt strode along the sidewalk.

He had a blue arrow over his head.

"Come on, you prick, smile for the camera," Quinn said.

As if he had heard, the man looked up. Aussie tapped a key. The screen split, and a face appeared on the left. Dark hair and eyes, well groomed, tanned, and clean-shaven.

"Handsome bastard," Frank said.

"Check his physique, the way he holds himself, the way he walks," Quinn said as the killer strode out of the shot. "That's no brainwashed Arab fanatic. He's a pro."

Their quarry didn't show at the next camera. After ten minutes staring at the screen, Quinn straightened, and rolled and cricked his back.

"Good job, Aussie. Can you extract the piece we viewed and send it to my desk along with the cleanest mug shot you can manage?" Quinn handed him a business card.

"Send it here as well." Frank produced his card.

"Be glad to."

"Thanks," Quinn said. "If you see anything else, call my cell." Out of the corner of his

eye, he saw Frank glaring at him and about to speak. Quinn's phone rang and postponed the confrontation.

"It's Mike Mitchell, Quinn. Can you come to the staging area and look at something?"

"What?"

"It's . . . you need to see this for yourself."

"Give me thirty minutes." Quinn closed his phone and turned to Frank. "That was Mike Mitchell."

"The City Coroner, has he got something for me?"

"Dunno, let's go find out."

Frank pulled into traffic. His face was hard and set. "Quinn, this is my jurisdiction."

"We both want to catch the bastard, Frank."

"I know you were first responder, Quinn, but terrorism is my patch. Back off, or I'll make you."

Frank Browning had been Quinn's partner in the Met's Murder Division before his recent move to Special Branch. He knew Frank's limitations, and watching him pissing on a pole to mark his territory was all the proof Quinn needed—Frank wasn't up for a job this big.

Uncomfortable silence settled over the remainder of their journey.

Processing two hundred and four bodies was far beyond the resources of the City of London Coroner's Office. The Met had commandeered a local school as a temporary mortuary.

Once they'd passed through the rigorous security procedures at the entrance to the school's gymnasium, Quinn spotted Mike Mitchell observing a pathologist who was bent over a gurney, working on a corpse. Mike had been City of London coroner for twelve years. He and

Quinn first met professionally, but their relationship had morphed into friendship, and they got together at least once a month for a beer. Mike joked that he felt obligated to buy for his best customer.

Quinn scanned the room. Sixty or more white-sheeted gurneys were double-parked along the walls. Quinn couldn't tell whether they'd been autopsied or still waited. It brought home the human tragedy of what, until now, he'd been dealing with as hunt-the-hoodie. These people had families and jobs and lives. But now, all they were was dead. Anger surged through him. He forced it down. To catch this murderer he needed focus, not fury.

Quinn tapped the tall, thin doctor on the shoulder. "So what's the big secret, Mike?"

Mike spoke without looking around. "Give me a minute, Quinn." The female pathologist he was observing was bent over a corpse, and speaking in a low, fast voice into a handheld Dictaphone. Once finished, she stepped back, revealing a woman's body. Quinn checked the corpse's face: thirty maybe, no more. No rings, perhaps they'd already been sealed in her personal baggie.

"Damned shame," Quinn said.

"Tell me about it. We've pulled in staff from five counties, and it'll still take us three or four days to process them all. Anyway, thanks for coming, Quinn." Mike nodded to Quinn's partner. "Hi, Frank. I thought you two had a lover's tiff and split up?"

"This is a Special Branch investigation," Frank said and handed Mike his card.

Mike turned to Quinn, who rolled his eyes.

"Oh. Right. Um, come with me." The Coroner led them past the gurneys to a small, windowless office. He closed the door behind them.

"What do you make of that?" Mike pointed to a three-foot-tall, black, headless, armless

torso perched at the center of a battered, old metal desk.

“Don’t tell me you brought me here to admire a new work of art,” Quinn said.

“No, Dummy. What do you think it is?” He waited.

Frank laughed. “Did someone chop off ET’s head and legs and leave him here?”

Quinn glared at his ex-partner. This was no time for jokes. “I’m not sure, but the ribs aren’t sculpted correctly.”

“Close, but no cigar.” Mike stepped toward the bust and ran a gloved hand down the front of its neck as if the contact might give him inspiration, provide an explanation of how the object had come to be. “Not sculpted, molded,” he said. As though someone poured quick-setting concrete down their throats . . . or, you know, the foam-in-a-can stuff that you squirt into gaps and it expands to fill them? Something entered through the airway, filled the lungs, expanded, and hardened to this black compound. Look here.”

He ran his finger along the corrugated neck of the bust. “This is an exact impression of her trachea.”

“That’s why the ribs are indented. It’s molded from the inside,” Quinn said.

“Exactly, and that’s not all. With this muck in their lungs you’d expect them to die of asphyxiation, right?”

Quinn and Frank nodded.

“Wrong again. See that?” The coroner pointed to a grapefruit-sized indentation midway down the left front of the casting.

“This stuff expanded so fast that her heart was crushed to a stop. I have two hundred and four heart-attack victims in my lab.”

The coroner moved back from the bust to allow them an unobstructed view. He held out a

box of latex gloves.

“Pick it up. Go ahead.”

Quinn started to move but checked himself and let Frank take the lead. Frank pulled on gloves, put his hands either side of the ribcage, and raised the torso a few inches off the desk.

“Solid, but lighter than I expected.” He rapped with his knuckles and rubbed the surface.

“Feels like those charcoal briquettes you buy for the barbeque.”

When Frank finished, Quinn also lifted and felt the material. He checked his hands. They were black. “Soot?”

“Have you seen anything like this before?” Quinn asked the coroner.

“Come on, Quinn . . . no one’s seen anything like this before.”

