



Sam Flint

Writing about thrills & spills

The Box – short story

As doghouses go he had been in worse. The sun was shining and his gentle blip on the throttle of his Ducati 995 had attracted the attention of the gorgeous blonde in the open topped Aston Martin. She smiled at him and received a sour comment from her boyfriend behind the wheel. Alex waved at her and nipped ahead of the Aston as the lights turned green. The boyfriend was tempted to give chase until he saw the queue forming at the next set of lights on the Marylebone Road.

So the boss had made him a messenger boy on this assignment as punishment for his screw up the last time out. In the end they had not needed the secondary evidence dubiously obtained by Alex at great personal risk. The fact that he had contaminated the evidence by accident was known only to Alex and his boss. Alex had hidden this fact from their legal team. He tried to placate the old man by saying that the bad guys didn't know this and the only reason they copped to the initial charges was because they feared what else the prosecution had obtained through Alex. He thought again of the confrontation with his boss. It had felt like he was being reprimanded by a master at prep school. When Alex suggested he might prefer to send lawyers into the field to obtain evidence and release him back to his regiment the old man had blown a fuse. It was only the timely intervention of his spy school supervisor that saved Alex from an official reprimand. So here he was now reduced to the role of motorcycle messenger. The old man had made his point.

Alex had collected the box from a man at the staff entrance of a West End Hotel. No words had been exchanged as both of them had been briefed on what to expect. The nine by four by four inch box was heavier than Alex had expected but it secured easily to the back seat of his bike with an elasticated net. The box seemed a curiously home-made affair, wrapped in brown paper. It reminded Alex of an old-fashioned present his grandparents might have given each other.

Alex suspected this was no more than a training exercise after which he would be taken to task for not spotting the surveillance team, so he was on his toes to look for any pattern in the following traffic. This was not easy to do on a motorbike as he did not want to give himself away by looking behind too frequently. Alex knew it was difficult to follow someone inconspicuously. You fell into an unconscious pattern of behaviour that gave you away to anyone looking for such patterns. That's why surveillance teams usually had several people to observe the suspect passing through their section before handing on to another set of eyes then moving on to a new position. The changeovers were an attempt to create randomness; sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't. Like now.

Alex looked in his right hand mirror and noticed that the black Mercedes E Class that had followed him from Central London was keeping a set distance behind even though he was weaving through the traffic on the elevated section of the Westway. For the first time, he

also noticed a huge American SUV keeping pace 50 yards behind Mercedes in the inside lane. He smiled and thought for a moment that all those movie clichés, must be based on some elements of truth and this was it.

Alex dropped a gear and the engine of his Ducati whined in protest before the front wheel picked up as the power surged through the back. Alex fought the handlebars down and the bike rushed forward sending a thrill of excitement through his guts. He saw the distance from his pursuers grow and he reduced his speed to a more sensible 50 mph as he encountered back markers on the congested Wood Lane flyover. He had no idea who these people were, yet it was clear that they were after him and this package. The Mercedes was stuck in nose to tail traffic backed up to the BBC buildings. Alex smiled and weaved at walking pace between the vans, cars and HGVs making their Friday afternoon exodus from London. He had almost dismissed his pursuers but a final glance behind confirmed something was wrong, very wrong indeed. The big SUV, the name Lincoln Navigator jumped into Alex's head, was still on the slip road almost 300 yards behind. The cars roof was open and a metal tube stuck out at an angle. Moments later a silver and black projectile shot into the air. Alex was horrified that whoever they were had no compunction against launching a mortar attack in the heavy traffic. Especially as the angle was completely wrong if they were aiming for him. Then he watched in fascination as the long tube sprouted two sets of wings like some mechanical butterfly and steadied itself before climbing into the air and levelling out at about 100 feet. Alex opened his visor to clear the perspiration from his eyes. These people whoever they were they had just signed his death warrant.

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Whatever Alex was carrying apparently justified an act of extreme violence with a high probability of collateral damage. He looked up trying to spot where the personal drone killing machine had got to. He knew that the remote pilot back in the SUV would have a clear view of him from the high resolution camera on the nose of the small aircraft. Alex had laughed when he first saw the hand launched aircraft on a briefing film back at headquarters a year ago. But it was no radio controlled toy. It had a turboprop engine mounted on top of the fuselage, making it look more like the original German V1 than its cruise missile successor. It had fuel for a maximum flying time of 20 minutes, more than enough for the close quarters killing for which it was intended. The mini predator was lightly armed with a high velocity, long barrel rifle, which ran the length of the fuselage. It took a nine round clip of 9 mm ammunition just like a Glock. It was very accurate up to 50 metres although this depended on the skill of the remote operator as such a small vehicle could not afford a sophisticated fire targeting system. Alex was equally concerned with the kilogramme of C4 explosives the predator carried. This turned it into a flying bomb when it was armed. In fact, most of the deaths attributed to the small predator had come from its use this way. Cars were particularly vulnerable. What method would they choose against a man on a motorbike?

Alex pulled up at the Western Circus traffic lights wedged between a bus and an HGV hoping he presented an unfavourable target. He caught the reflection of the small plane in the rear window of a Ford Galaxy as it swooped ahead of him. Alex glanced at the window again and for the first time noticed two small kids kneeling on seats and looking at him. The little girl

was smiling and waving while her slightly older brother was giving him a secret V sign. His devilish grin disappeared when his sister grassed him up and his mother leaned back in her seat to slap the back of his leg. Alex was about to mentally admonish the mother for failing to secure the children in their seats. Then he thought about what would happen if his pursuers decided to cut their losses, arm the flying bomb and target him now. He could not face the thought of innocent victims.

The lights changed and Alex's shot forward accelerating to almost 80 miles an hour by the time he reached the next lights. The open road gave the drone its best opportunity and Alex had to weave to present a smaller target. His chin was almost on the tank and this probably saved his life as the tarmac a few feet ahead spat up from the near misses of the predator's gun. The next lights had already turned red for at least five seconds when Alex shot through them. He narrowly missed imprinting himself on the side of the panel van turning across him. His severe swerve almost took him into the railings of the central reservation and he had to lean savagely to his left to pull the bike straight. He could smell the burning plastic on his left knee protector as he fought to turn the bike away from the railings. Sparks shot off the railings as the plane strafed him again. Alex tried to count the shots but the adrenaline and near death experience of the last minute distracted him. They would be running out of options soon and they'd be forced to go for the flying bomb solution. He had to get out of the built-up area if casualties were to be kept to a minimum.

Alex glanced at his right hand mirror and noticed the red dot of a laser sight on the cracked glass. The pilot of the drone was taunting him, letting Alex know he could kill him any time he liked. Alex smiled, his overconfidence might be Alex's only chance. He saw Park Royal Station flash by on his left. He hoped his pursuers did not know what lay over the hill. Alex pushed up his visor and looked up at the drone. He needed to get the pilot's full attention. Alex tapped his chest twice and threw his arm open challenging in the drone pilot to take his best shot. The plane came down to about 12 feet lining up for the kill. Alex opened the throttle fully and the revs raced to 14,000. He squeezed between two cars and saw the back window of one shatter and then there was darkness. He was in the Hangar Lane underpass. The tunnel was short enough to fly the drone through but Alex was hoping the pilot did not know that. He screeched to a halt inside the tunnel narrowly avoiding being hit from behind. He'd heard no explosion and guessed that at the last moment the drone pilot must have seen what he was trying to do and managed to pull up. He wondered how long it would take the pilot to turn the drone around. He hoped it would be quick because he needed it to make another pass before the pursuing Mercedes and SUV reached the tunnel themselves. A gunfight in the tunnel would probably suit the people following him.

Alex looked back and saw that the Mercedes had entered the tunnel and had slowed down in the crawling traffic. Three doors opened and men got out. They spoke with hand movements. They were calm and organised, clearly used to doing this for a living. Alex weighed his options. Certain death at the hands of the kill squad here in the tunnel; or maybe a twenty percent chance against the plane. He knew what he preferred. Alex roared out of the Hangar Lane tunnel. He had maybe a minute before the drone made its final pass. A minute to reduce the body count of the innocents.

A road sign said Northolt 2 miles. Alex smiled. His chances of surviving had just improved but only if the rumours he'd heard were true. Alex weaved through the traffic, the old Hoover building flashed by on his right. Perhaps a mile and a half still to go. He knew he could not outrun the drone. Alex looked in his mirror and saw it no more than a hundred metres away. He was out of options. Then he noticed the smoke coming from its engine. It was flying slowly now having difficulty in keeping up. It must have been damaged avoiding collision with the tunnel. Alex leaned over his handlebars with renewed hope.

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He passed the Polish War Memorial exit and Northolt airport was visible through the chain link fence on his right. The barrier of the central reservation was only a couple of feet high here, and the motorway lighting was stubby 10 foot high concrete posts. Although a casual observer would think nothing of this, these changes were to accommodate the scenario of a plane coming off the runway and crashing through the fence and crossing the A40, something that has almost happened a couple of years before. Alex would not have time to get off the bike and cross the dual carriageway before the predator was upon him. He searched the opposite carriageway for a break in the traffic. What he was planning was suicidal, but he had no choice. Alex dropped two gears and the bike's engine red lined in protest. The front wheel reared up and Alex threw on the power launching the bike at the two foot barrier separating the carriageways. His back wheel clipped the barrier and launched him into the air. The bike flew over a soft-topped Mazda MX5 in the outside lane and landed on the bonnet of a BMW. The coming together of two vehicles, closing on each other at 80 miles an hour each was dramatic. The bike shot up the windscreen and over the BMW like it was a ramp. Alex cleared a Transit van in the inside lane like a Hollywood stunt man. He had a flashing image of the horrified faces of its three occupants before the van was behind him. The bike came down and hit the chain link fence at about 6 feet up. Alex let go moments before allowing him to clear the bike, letting it take the full force of the chain fence. Instinct caused Alex's hands to turn into claws and grip the fence which he still hit at 50 miles an hour. If the wire had not dissipated the energy he would have been dead. His visor cracked and Alex felt as if his body was being forced through a sieve. The chain link fence rebounded like some cartoon rubber band and threw Alex to the ground. He rolled off the pavement finishing with his head in the gutter. Everything hurt and his body would not respond to his commands. Through blurred vision Alex saw the wheels of a Range Rover coming towards his head. He could see the blue smoke from burning rubber as the driver applied his brakes in an emergency stop. The Range Rover ploughed on in a straight line keeping its trajectory true for an appointment with his head. Alex thought his luck really was out. A cheaper car might have swerved under the intense breaking and give him a chance. He closed his eyes to wait for the end and when he opened them again he heard a voice. His head was under the front bumper of the Range Rover and it would not be an exaggeration to say he could have stuck his tongue out and licked the tyre. A surge of adrenaline started his body again and Alex scrambled up and convinced the white faced Range Rover driver that he was okay. He leaned the man against his car as he hyperventilated. Moments later the drivers' side window shattered. They both looked up to see the drone swoop over. "Get out of here now!" Alex screamed at the driver. He tried to open the passenger side door but his left arm would not cooperate. Alex pushed the man out of the way and used his right. He bundled the driver in and forced him to slide over into the driver's seat crunching the

broken glass under him. In spite of everything else Alex smelt the overpowering stench of shit. Alex and the driver looked at each other for a moment as if to say it's not me and then the driver looked in the back. A small Pekinese dog sat trembling on the cream leather seat. The evidence of its fear sat next to it. Alex slammed the door and the driver screeched away pulling the traffic jam with him. Alex looked up and saw the drone banking into its final turn before levelling out for its death run. It was coming for him at 90 degrees to the road. Alex looked left and right. There was nowhere to run for cover. His options had all dried up but at least the blast would go backwards towards the airfield rather than into the traffic on the road.

Alex's left arm would not move so he struggled one-handed to unzip his leather jacket and remove his Glock from its holster. He had to struggle with his right hand and both heels to awkwardly cock the gun. He staggered 20 metres to his left and looked up at one of the CCTV cameras guarding the motorway perimeter of the base. He hoped to God the earlier commotion had been picked up and that an operator would be scanning the screens. He waved his gun at the camera and then looked towards the runway through the chain link fence. A hundred meters away an old twin prop Royal Air Force plane stood on the taxiway. He thought it was one they used to shuttle letters and packages between bases. Alex aimed through the chain link fence and fired a shot towards the plane. He had aimed high missing the plane by miles but that would not be apparent to anyone watching the monitor. All he could do now was hope. He turned back to face the predator, which must have been 200 metres away. Alex saw the red dot on the chest of his leather jacket hardly wavered. The pilot of the drone was telling him that it was all over. Alex aimed at the drone and fired although he could not control his accuracy one-handed. He had to hit the plane early and hope a lucky shot would blow it apart quickly enough to avoid him being showered in deadly shrapnel. The chamber of his gun stayed locked open signifying he was out of ammunition but the predator was still coming. Now Alex prayed that the pilot would be accurate. He wanted there to be no near misses, no opportunity for a well-meaning medic to scrape parts of him together so he would have to endure some sort of half-life. He raised his empty gun at the plane as much to give himself something to do. As he waited for the end he wondered what they would say at his memorial service. At twenty-one he did not have much of a life to eulogise about. He imagined the old man saying something profound and his brother joking that 'Al should have done more shagging in his time' and his mum smiling and being embarrassed through her tears.

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Alex thought he must have gone deaf and missed the noise of the explosion. The sky was bright white. He saw the drone suddenly lurch up and go over his head at about 10 feet. Alex twisted himself towards the airfield and was almost blinded by the extreme brightness. His original prayers had been answered. This was the airport the Royal's flew from. It was also where two Euro fighters had been based during the London 2012 Olympics, their task to shoot down any unidentified aircraft in London airspace. The airport did indeed still have anti-missile defences. From concealed bunkers inverted Christmas tree type structures had risen and were now firing bright white phosphorescent flares designed to confuse any heat seeking missile. It could not have been more than two seconds later, when the middle of the airfield exploded with a ball of flame before a shower of dirt was thrown into the air. The

pilot of the drone had switched on the infrared targeting system to give him a precision kill. Alex alone against the fence had seemed an ideal target. But the flak which appeared at the very last moment had been enough to confuse the missile and draw it towards a more attractive target on the airfield. Another two seconds and it would have been too late. Alex owed his life to a keen eyed radar operator who had picked up the small live missile heading towards the base.

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Traffic on both carriageways was brought to a standstill as drivers distracted by the firework show on the base shunted into one another. Alex scanned the opposite carriageway and could make out the Mercedes and the SUV on the hard shoulder. Men exited both vehicles and were covering both sides of the road, discreetly but thoroughly checking parked cars. They wanted confirmation of their kill or otherwise. Alex staggered away from the fence. He was going to try and run but then he noticed that the bike had miraculously landed on both wheels after hitting the fence and sliding down it. It was heavily scraped on the right side but it seemed undamaged mechanically. The ignition would not start and Alex took a deep breath to avoid panicking. He switched everything off and left it five seconds waiting for the engine management system to reset. He switched on again and with a couple of groans to complain at the abuse it had been put through the bike started. Alex got on and forced his useless left arm onto a handlebar. Pain shot through it as he gripped the lever to change gear. He steered the bike at walking pace in the opposite direction, between the rows of stationary cars on his side of the carriageway. After half a mile he was able to exit the motorway by driving up the down slip road. He stopped in the middle of the overpass and surveyed the scene below. A crater about 20 feet wide and 6 feet deep had been blown into the grassy central section of the airfield. It created a dirty brown mark on the otherwise pristine grass. Both carriageways were scattered with debris from the crater. The grey plane stood no more than ten yards from the crater. Its wings and fuselage were covered in soil and both doors were open testifying to the rapid escape by the pilot and navigator. The motorway looked like a scene from a post-apocalypse film. Rows of cars on either side seemed to be connected to each other in a zigzag of collisions. It was a miracle no one had been killed, especially him.

The sound of sirens, police, ambulance and fire engine, were now filling the air and this spurred Alex to take the roundabout and head along the back roads to the safe house in Buckinghamshire. He would check in with the old man who as usual would be pleased with the result but not how it was obtained. But first he would open that bloody box and discover what had almost cost him his life.

-----The end-----

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