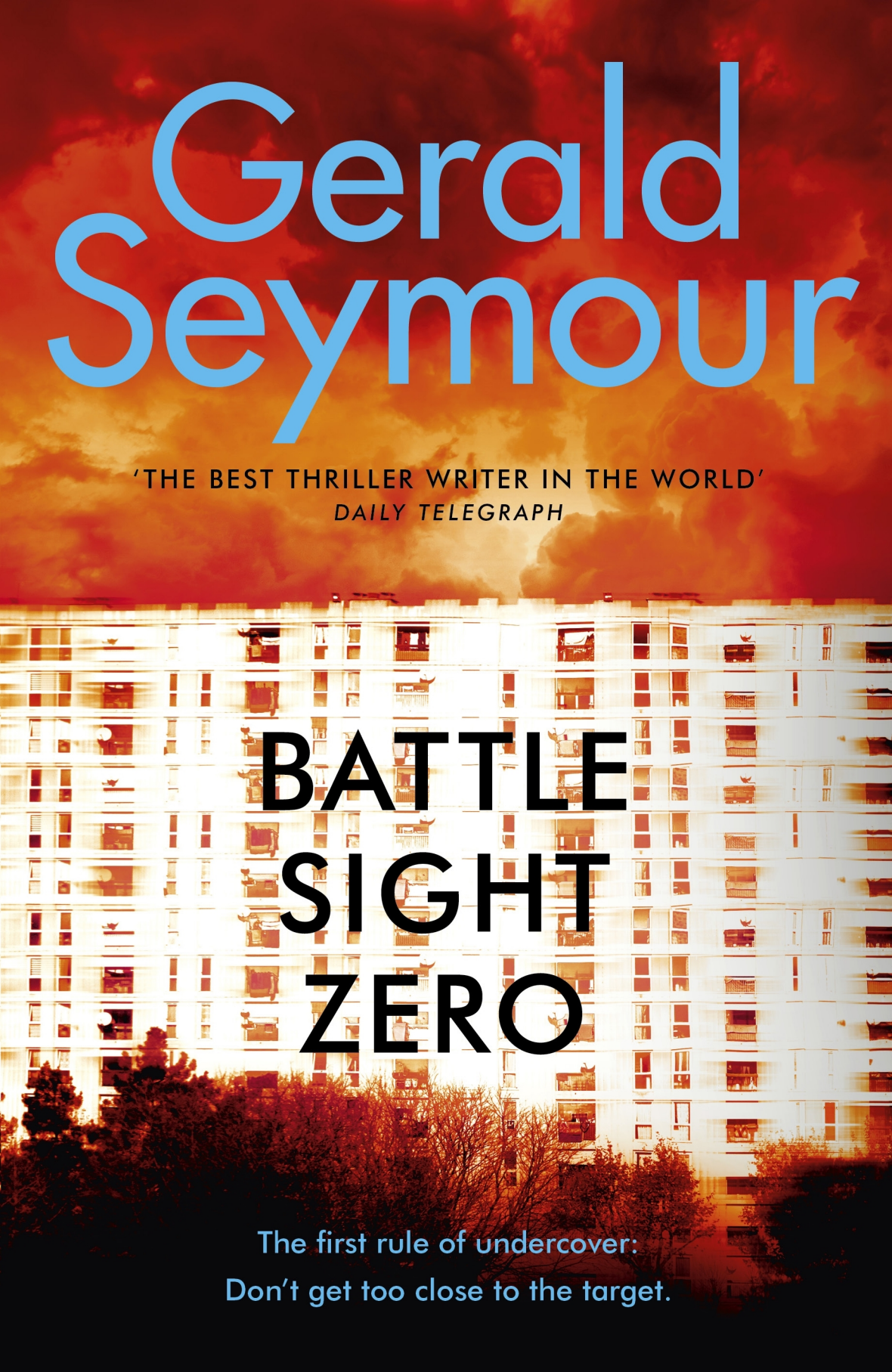
Gerald Seymour
'THE BEST THRILLER WRITER IN THE WORLD'
DAILY TELEGRAPH
BATTLE SIGHT ZERO
The first rule of undercover:
Don't get too close to the target.

BATTLE SIGHT ZERO

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About the Author

Gerald Seymour spent fifteen years as an international television news reporter with ITN, covering Vietnam and the Middle East, and specialising in the subject of terrorism across the world. Seymour was on the streets of Londonderry on the afternoon of Bloody Sunday, and was a witness to the massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics.

Gerald Seymour exploded onto the literary scene with the massive bestseller *Harry's Game*. He has been a full-time writer since 1975, and six of his novels have been filmed for television in the UK and US. *Battle Sight Zero* is his thirty-fifth novel.

Also by Gerald Seymour

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In Honour Bound
Field of Blood
A Song in the Morning
At Close Quarters
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The Outsiders
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BATTLE SIGHT ZERO

Gerald Seymour

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For Gillian

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PROLOGUE

February 1956

Near to the end of a ten-hour shift, his tiredness nagged and his concentration waned, and they kept coming towards him on the conveyer belt. Outside the factory more snow had fallen, another ten centimetres settling on the half-metre already on the ground. He was Josef, from the far south, drafted to the project at Izhevsk. His chance of returning to the warmth of his village overlooking the Black Sea was less than minimal. The heating had failed, although the factory was newly built, and he could not wear thick gloves for the work he did. His fingers were numbed, he needed to piss, and his stomach growled.

His hand was heavy as he reached out to lift it off the slow-moving supply line, and when the belt suddenly stopped, it was jerked up and his fingers had no grip, and it fell. And seemed to shriek.

Martial music had blared from the amplified speakers, a military choir singing the marching songs of the Red Army, to help him and the scores of others on the vast, stinking, echoing factory floor keep their composure and maintain their enthusiasm for their work. Now there was a broadcast from the sergeant who liked to call himself Misha, who told the story again – and again, and again – of how he had led the team that developed the thing that had moved towards Josef on the belt, then had slipped from his grip and fallen. The shriek was the bayonet lug catching the metal rim of Josef's work area. Then there was a clatter as the assault rifle hit the concrete floor by his boots, then a squeal.

Because he was at the end of the line, where assembly of the weapon was completed, Josef was not overlooked. The supervisor

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in charge of quality control, able, anywhere, to find fault, was lurking close to the area where they fastened the wooden stock to the body of the weapon. Misha's voice droned. Josef, and a thousand other men and women inside the huge factory were supposed to be enthused by the sergeant who had achieved such fame and had performed so valuable a service to the Motherland. Because Josef recognised propaganda, the diet of shit served up to them, he showed little enthusiasm for his work. He would never be recommended for advancement, nor for a transfer to the heat of the coast where his family came from. Home for him was a hastily built four-storey block, one of many erected within walking distance of the factory. They were near to a polluted lake, close to dark pine forests that ringed the complex and were now burdened with snow, and they were under the constant pall of dark smoke that simpered from the chimneys of the foundry where the iron was manufactured for the working parts. It was said that the rifles were revolutionary, a triumph of Soviet engineering, because of the practicality of the sergeant's design: 'complexity is simple, simplicity is difficult'.

After the shriek came the clatter and after the clatter came the squeal. By Josef's left boot lay a splinter of wood from the rifle's stock. It was varnished, barely dry, but it had left a jagged pale strip five centimetres in length, a half-centimetre wide and a little less deep. He bent and reached for the weapon and the torn-off piece of wood.

They had a joke: a woman works in a factory that makes steel-framed beds which are sent to the army, to universities, to hospitals. But she has no bed of her own. The factory operates on three shifts in every 24 hours. She and her fellow workers all sleep on the floor of their homes. Her sister comes to visit from Leningrad. The sister's advice: each day they should steal a piece from the production line, then, eventually, put all the pieces together, and build a bed. She replies they have tried that many times, brought the parts home and assembled them, then discovered that 'instead of having a bed we have an automatic Kalashnikov' . . . Always a grim smile from Josef's friends.

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Josef's job was to check the basic mechanism of the weapon, carry out the procedure for arming it which was the equivalent of raising a round into the breech, then pulling the trigger. He had to activate the selection lever that dictated whether the weapon was on 'automatic' or 'semi-automatic', then it would move on down the line to the man who took it from the belt and dropped it, carelessly, into the crate. Forty for each crate. Josef pushed the splinter into the cavity, forced it with his thumb, spat on it to make it stick. He did not think the repair would be seen; it would hold fast as it went with the others into the box for shipment; if it were spotted, the bastard at the end of the line would likely call the supervisor and take pleasure from the reprimand given to Josef.

The sergeant was still talking. He was visiting Factory Number 74 of the Izhevsk Machine Engineering Plant, known to them all as IZMASH – secret, isolated and marked on no maps – because he was credited with designing the rifle. And had been rewarded. Josef and his wife lived humbly. No holidays, no luxuries and a damp apartment although it was only four years old. Mikhail Kalashnikov, or Misha, had been awarded 150,000 roubles four years before, which was precisely thirteen years of salary for Josef. Misha had been allowed to buy the first kitchen refrigerator to reach this outpost of manufacturing, and a vacuum cleaner, so that his wife did not have to risk dirtying her fur coat by sweeping floors. He would have driven to Number 74 that evening in his Pobeda car that would have cost 16,000 roubles to any of the few able to get their name on the waiting list, and he was now a deputy in the Supreme Soviet. Josef flushed with anger, and his heartbeat accelerated with jealousy.

Another one arrived. Armed, checked, trigger depressed. Then the selector moved down, then up, and passed on.

And another.

First it had been fewer than a hundred a day. Then it had been many hundreds. More clouds of choking smoke rose from the nearby chimneys. Now it was near to a thousand for each of the shifts. Over the loudspeakers, Sergeant Mikhail Kalashnikov spoke of his determination to design a rifle that could better

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defend the Motherland against the Fascist aggressors to the west. And spoke of the privilege of being in a hall, as large as the factory floor, and seeing the inspirational figure of their leader, Josef Stalin. Said that, soon, there would be more workshops, more lines and more belts. Then quiet, and only the throb of the generators and the soft whine of lathes and files and grinders. They were all supposed to applaud when the sergeant graced them with a visit, but on that occasion it was desultory. Josef could have shouted that it was said, at least was *rumoured*, that the design owed much to a considerable team of engineers, and in particular to the German prisoner from the war, Hugo Schmeisser,

And another came. The martial music returned. Josef had no car to take him home, no vacuum cleaner and no refrigerator, but his wife could always put butter and watery milk in a plastic box on the window sill. And another rifle was placed in the crate and the worker at the end of the line turned and shouted that it was now filled.

The top was placed on it, and an empty crate replaced it, fourth filled that day from his line. The top was stamped *7.62 Avtomat Kalashnikova obraztsa 1947 goda*. Josef worked on the belt that brought him the 7.62 Automatic Kalashnikov Model 1947, but had never handled one with an attached and filled magazine, had never armed one of them and raised it to his shoulder and peered down the length of the barrel with the range of it set at Battle Sight Zero, had never pulled the trigger, and probably never would. The filled box was screwed down, fastened tight, levered on to a trolley, and wheeled away. No ceremony, no trumpets, and no celebration yelled over the speakers. He assumed that the splinter of wood from the stock would now be wedged in place and held there by the weight of the weapons stacked above and beside it. It might stay in place until the crate was jemmied open and the rifles allocated to an armoury, or it might detach during its journey. When Josef and his trusted few did not tell jokes, they grunted sour complaints out of the side of their mouth: the Motherland could not produce decent toilets or safe elevators or quality cameras, could not grow wheat or potatoes that would flourish, could not

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turn out toothpaste without a foul taste, but could make – it was said – a rifle. A brilliant rifle, it was claimed, the best.

He heard the rumble of a door being pushed open and felt the blast of frozen air tunnel through the gap. The box would be lifted by four men and heaved on to a lorry's flatbed. He could do the work required of him if he dreamed, bowed with tiredness, cold. He could perform his tasks and could imagine. He was permitted to imagine because the supervisors and the commissars, always close, listening for subversion, could not read words that he imagined or see what he saw . . . The crate was on the lorry.

Josef imagined . . . The rifle came out from the crate, was stored, then issued to a shivering conscript. An officer, a veteran of the Leningrad siege or the victory at Kursk or the advance into Berlin, would see the damage to the wooden stock and would beat the kid, thrash him for carelessness. And imagined . . . The rifle was buried in permafrost ground, or in sand or in the jungles of the east, or was doused in sea water, and was retrieved and would still operate. Would never degrade or be destroyed, would live for ever, and would kill for ever. And imagined . . . Production increased, the belt going faster until it raced, covered with a squirming oily mess of rifles that were spewed out of a machine that could not be slowed, more and more; great underground bunkers filled to overflowing with them, thousands and tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands, and millions and tens of millions and all the same and all deadly. It was boasted that the simplicity of its design made it a suitable weapon for conscript troops, many with poor education. That children – like the ones at the schools in Izhvesk – would easily learn to handle it, and fire it and kill with it. And imagined . . . Rows of graves stretching further than those at the Piskaryovskoye military cemetery in Leningrad or the Rossoschka military cemetery outside Stalingrad, in the steppes. Stones and posts and mounds of earth and swarms of flies and packs of hunting dogs looking for food. It could be that each year, every year, a quarter of a million people – men and women and children – would lose their lives after being hit by the bullet fired from such a rifle. And imagined . . . the end of the day's work. Not a special

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day, not exceptional, different from the one before or the one after, when he stood almost at the end of the production line and checked another of them, the AK-47. And imagined . . .

The hooter went. A noise like a beast in pain. Work stopped. Men and women did not finish their tasks, tidy what was in front of them, make good what they had started. The line ground to a halt. Pieces were abandoned, left until the next morning when the factory would again come to life and the music start up. The rifle parts would stay there, untouched. The heating went off and all but skeleton lighting was doused. The trigger, the hammer, the magazine catch, the bayonet lug, the muzzle compensator, the operating rod, and the bolt and firing pin. They would stay where they were all night. The place emptied.

The lorry had gone. Josef walked through the low pall of cigarette smoke that the loaders had left behind them, huddled against the drive of the weather, and imagined his supper: a bit of bacon, with cabbage, and perhaps a glass of weak beer – not as good as Sergeant Mikhail Kalashnikov would enjoy – and the radio, and a magazine that highlighted football. It had seemed important to him that he had dropped a weapon, that it had shrieked – the cry of a whore in pain, he had briefly thought – and a piece of the stock had broken clear. And that particular weapon, with its individual serial number, and the scar on the stock close to where it would nestle on a soldier's cheek, now moved at slow speed on an ice-covered road, out of Josef's life.

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I

'You all right, Andy?'

'I'm fine, doing well.'

'Have a good day.'

'Why not?'

A smirk on the face of the security guard at the yard's gate. 'Anything decent at the end of it?'

'Decent enough for what I need.' A smile and a wave, and a little whack on the horn, and Andy manoeuvred the big flatbed out and on to the main drag. He had the radio turned on, not obtrusive, but loud enough to pick up traffic reports for his route.

He set his concentration on the road ahead and the cars and vans and lorries around him and kept up the necessary checks for cyclists. Not a good morning to be shifting close to 40 tonnes in and out of hazards. It had rained in the night, and had been drizzling since he had crawled out of his bed, still dark outside and the only light from the street lamps, outside the bedsit's window. He'd showered, tepid water because the landlord was a creep and exploited his tenants, keeping the temperature low. Glanced at a text that had come on his phone. Grabbed a couple of slices of toast, smeared jam and wolfed them, and sluiced down a mug of instant coffee. He dressed for work: no comfort and no style, needed neither to put a lorry with its load on to the road and guide it across the western outskirts of Manchester. He would end up between Chadderton and Milnrow at a site waiting for him. His wipers worked well and cleaned the windscreen of the filth that came up from the tyres ahead.

He would have appeared to anyone who looked up from their own vehicles – as he sat high in his cab – an ordinary young man.

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Difficult to pick out anything in his appearance that made him stand out. Narrow shoulders under his lightweight company anorak, no tattoos on his neck, anyway none that showed above the collar; might have needed a haircut by next week or the one after. He wore a pair of tinted glasses, obstructing his eyes, as he intended.

He drove carefully because – as he would have told the security man at the yard gate – there were some right idiots about at that time in the morning. The lorry cab had been faultlessly clean when he had taken it from the depot, near Oldham, and driven it to the yard where the team had loaded him up with the clean timber A-frames that he would drive to the building site. But, already the doors and hubs of the cab were covered in a layer of wet slime, a skim of dirt.

He told people what they wanted to hear, some of it true and some of it pretend . . . he was good at that. The security guard on the yard gate would have wanted to know. He was fine, he was good, and he'd have a decent enough day. Men, in his experience, liked to know that all was well with the world, and things negative would nag at them and lie heavier in the memory, but if life was liveable then a few quips would easily pass out of the memory chain. He aimed to make the fewest waves . . . and, yes, not a lie, at the end of the day there *was* something 'decent enough for what I need'. A girl. Unseen of course, sitting behind his wheel and steering the beast towards Shaw, in the direction of Milnrow, but a short sharp snap of a smile slid across his mouth. He would meet his girl that evening. He could think of her, not for long and not putting detail on the outlines because there were too many cyclists and motorbikes and general road users around him, and the buses would not give ground unless it were forced on them . . . There had been talk on the radio that it would rain pretty much through the day, then when the light fell the temperature could drop – might even be a sprinkling of snow on the road by the evening. He could look forward to it, seeing the girl, allowed himself only a moment of dreaming, a quick glimpse of her face, and that serious frown she usually wore, and the almond of her

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eyes, and . . . A supermarket delivery truck came across him and he backed off and gave it space and did not blast his horn or wind down his window and bawl. He liked seeing the girl.

It was one of Andy's qualities that he could compartmentalise what was important in his life. The girl had had a moment, and the man on the yard gate, and the team who had driven the fork-lifts and loaded his flatbed, and so would the men and women on the site out towards Milnrow who were building three-bedroom and two-bedroom houses, and one-bedroom maisonettes. There were one or two individuals who had an understanding of who he was, but more people were awarded the box in which they could sit, stand or stare, and as long as folks were happy to stay inside their compartments, then all was well: which was what Andy attempted to achieve.

School kids were streaming across roads and waving down buses, and a crowd of mostly women was spilling in front of him to get into a bread-making factory before their shifts started and, farther back, the works that made privacy blinds was sucking in its employees, and farther along there would be delays in front of the place that turned out garden furniture. He was Andy Knight. He had been Andy Knight last week, last month and most of last year. It was the name he was currently locked into. He was Andy Knight to his landlord and to the management at the depot, and he was Andy Knight to the girl he'd be meeting at the finish of the working day: later than expected. That had been the text message: *Hi A, looking forward to tonite, but am delayed, Make it 9 at the Hall, Zed xx*. He'd be there. A name was always a problem, the present one and the past one and the one before that. Each name had a history that had to be kept behind a necessary firewall. With anyone he met, he took as much care, exercised the same concentration, as when he was propelling the lorry down the road towards the site.

She was a pleasant girl, and almost pretty. She did not hold his hand when they walked together, but she'd tuck her wrist in his elbow, rather formal, and walked well, with a natural swing. But too often, she wore a frown on her forehead, just below where her hair was dragged back over her scalp. He had known her for three

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months. She was young and seemed immature, innocent and intelligent, and he was – so the ticked boxes said – older than her, and drove a lorry for a living and wafted building supplies round the city. Chalk and cheese, he thought he might have been the first boyfriend she'd had – if that's what he was, her boyfriend.

He flashed his headlights. A couple of guys in high visibility vests, and with plastic helmets askew on their skulls, were manhandling a makeshift gate aside and then waving him in. A big building site was taking shape in a sea of mud. This was Andy's first load of the day, and there would be three more before he ran short of hours.

'Hi, Andy, how you doing?'

'Doing fine, doing good.'

'Hold-ups getting over here?'

'Piece of cake – thanks, guys.'

It was what people wanted, a bit of cheerfulness; that way he was noticed but quickly forgotten, and the compartments stayed in place and he could remember more easily who he was. And in the evening he would be with the girl. A pretty normal sort of day was ahead, as normal as any.

Most of the night they had taken it in turns to yell at him.

Sometimes they'd started up the chain-saw and revved the engine and brought it close to his face so that he would have seen the power of the racing chain and smelled the stale two-stroke going through its engine – and they'd yelled some more.

The boy on the chair would have seen all the kit they had collected for the session, anything that might be of use in interrogation. Apart from the chain-saw there were pliers with which his nails could have been extracted, a Stanley knife that was not there to slice linoleum, and lengths of wire with clips on them that would have been marketed to jump-start power into any flat battery, and there was a baseball bat. They would have imagined that the boy, faced with such an array of weapons, would have quickly given every indication he wished to speak, tell what truths he knew. The boy was attached with masking tape to a heavy wooden chair.

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More tape was wound tightly across his mouth, and he was nominally blindfolded but the material had slipped enough for him to see the implements they had. The place where they held the boy was carefully erected. He was inside a tent of transparent heavy-duty plastic which also covered the flooring. He could not speak so could not have answered any of the yelled questions but he had been told at the start of the questioning that all he had to do was nod, and then the tape covering his lips would have been torn clear.

They had yelled at him, they had started up the chain-saw, had thrust the plug of the cables into a socket, and had smacked the baseball bat into the flooring, but the boy's head had stayed obstinately down, his chin on his chest.

Now, the three of them were uncertain how to go forward. It was past dawn. The traffic beyond the old warehouse was heavy. Rain dripped through a long broken skylight . . . One of them frequently checked his watch as if the passing of time were a lame enough excuse for the failure of his night's work . . . They were certain of his guilt but did not know what target he was launched against nor to whom he reported. The boy was an informer, sent to infiltrate them. They should have handed him over to older men, who'd have claimed greater practical experience, then stood aside and seen their fledgling independence snatched. The boy stank because his bowels had burst and dark stains marked his groin, and earlier in the night steam had risen from his trousers, and they had thought that amusing. But now day had arrived and they were unsure what to do . . . They had a microphone ready, plugged into a tape recorder, and if there was a full confession then the salient parts would be held.

What did he know?

The three stood away from the wall of plastic sheeting and tried rationally to go back over the brief history of the boy as they knew it: where he had come from in Savile Town, who he would have known at school at the big mosque, who his parents would have been friendly with or related to. Since he had pushed himself close to them, where had he been and what opportunity to overhear a call, and who he might have noticed them with, and what did he

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know of the girl? They argued, were confused, tired enough for logic to fail them, and increasingly frustrated that the boy had failed to submit to the questions.

Perhaps, all three concluded, they had shown too great a degree of squeamishness. Should have taken off limbs with the chain-saw, sliced off fingers with the Stanley knife, and made the clips live on the charger. Of course, once they had what they wished for – the boy's confession – they would kill him. Not a point of debate. Maybe hang him, maybe drown him.

All three were hungry, and all three wanted coffee, and all three knew they needed to sanitise the interrogation area. Too much time already wasted.

One had the knife and another had the pliers and a third dragged at the firing cord on the chain-saw . . . He probably did not know the name of the girl, nor her use, probably did know *their* names and the broad-brush strokes of the conspiracy, probably did know that each of them faced – on the informer's word – a minimum sentence of twenty years.

All three were advancing on the plastic sheeting, and all were yelling their questions and the chain-saw's engine rumbled to life, coughed, then ran smooth. They expected to see him flinch, as he had done previously, and try to flail with his legs and to writhe in the chair, but he did not. His face had achieved the quality of an old candle, without lustre, and the eyes above the drooping blindfold were wide but did not blink, and the head lolled unmoving on the chest where no breath stirred.

One of them called out, 'Fuck . . . fuck, he's dead.'

August 1956

The closed fist of the sergeant's hand, from a short swing, belted the conscript's ear.

It was not a slap, but it was intended to create fear, and humiliation, and pain.

The senior non-commissioned officers of that unit of mechanised infantry rarely failed in their prioritised aims. They needed,

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constantly, to dominate the youths who were shipped into the ranks – no understanding of discipline – if they were to build companies and battalions and brigades capable of advancing in support of the tanks and through a chaos of smoke and explosions, and the screams of the wounded, and incoming fire. This particular sergeant who had been at the Leningrad battle and also on the final push down the length of the Unter den Linden and the approach to the Reichstag in Berlin, was regarded as a martinet for inflicting hurt.

The conscript crumpled.

They were on a parade ground at a barracks on the outskirts of a town almost at a direct central point in Ukrainian territory. The conscript had never heard of Pervomaisk astride the Pivdennyi Buh river before the train had brought him here from the east, crushed in a stifling cattle-truck, and had dumped him along with hundreds of other teenage soldiers. From the rough concrete of the parade area they would go on to a flat expanse of open field where crops were growing, and there they would simulate warfare, and they were supposed to use live ammunition. In the distance, in front of them, were plumes of smoke from the tanks as their engines started up and belched out fumes. Although the conscript reeled from the ferocity of the blow, he clung to his rifle. They had been taught from the first day of arriving at the barracks and being issued with a personal weapon that they must guard it with their lives, that it was a betrayal of the Motherland to lose it, treason to throw it away in combat, that it must be cherished and safeguarded. Amongst a welter of force-fed information, was the importance of remembering the serial number stamped on to the pressed steel body of the weapon. They could ignore the first three digits but had to recall the next three, 260, and then shout out the final five, 16751. Each was different, but the conscript knew his, what was personal to him. In a sprawled hand, barely legible, he had written his name, as best as he was able, next to that number, had taken the rifle. They had been taught to clean them, to strip and then reassemble them, to load a magazine, fast, into the slot underneath. He had been surprised at how quickly

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he had mastered these basic skills, and the use of the fore-sight and rear-sight and the elevation that was set for them at a minimum range: what the instructor called Battle Sight Zero. Along with the other youths, the conscript had worked hard on his rifle, had felt a sense of pride that such a piece of complex machinery had been issued to him. They had slapped and stamped through formal drill, and the sergeant had yelled at them. The conscript was in the front rank. With some confidence, as the drill required, he had slapped the rifle's wooden stock with his right hand and done it so that the sound echoed away into the air, had done it smartly, as had scores of others. The sergeant had approached him, then had hit him.

The sliver of wood lay in front of him. He bent towards it, the rifle supporting him so that he did not have to kneel. Had he done so he knew it was likely that he'd have been kicked in the stomach or the chest or the head, by the sergeant's polished boots. He pushed himself upright, then tried to straighten his back. He was accused of an act of vandalism, something that was on the 'fucking edge' of sabotage. He had damaged the rifle given him by the state. It was there to see . . . the piece of wood was five or six centimetres long and there was a raw mark on the stock where it had been. He tried to recall each moment that the rifle had been in his possession since being allocated it in the armoury. He could not remember any moment when he had dropped it, banged it, collided with anything while holding it. Probably it was because the blood had spurted in his face – from embarrassment, from shame, from the blows inflicted on him – that, giving it no thought, the conscript attempted to mitigate his guilt. It was a stammered denial of any guilt.

The sunlight caught the wood on the dull concrete, highlighting the groove from which it had fallen. He heard a tittering around him, alongside and behind. He had done nothing to break the stock of the weapon. The conscript was not yet old enough, experienced in the ways of the army systems, to appreciate that avoiding blame would seldom be successful, but he tried. He had done nothing. His voice was shrill. None of the teenagers who shared

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the barracks hut with him were prepared to pipe up, in a barely broken voice, that they were 'pretty certain, almost sure' that he had not done the damage, and that the fault must have been in the consignment. Nobody supported him, but he said it: not his fault, but somebody else's.

He was hit again, and harder. He went down. Was hit again, but had time to squirm away as the sergeant's boot was drawn back – and there was an officer's voice in the distance. They were called to attention. He stood, brushed the dirt off the front of his uniform and from his knees. The sergeant strode briskly towards the officer, and the conscript was forgotten. He reached out with his own boot and slashed a kick at the splinter from the stock, and caught it hard enough to break it, then stamped on the two pieces. He spat into the cavity, wiped his tunic sleeve across the wet, and was satisfied that the mark was less obvious. He hated the rifle, designated AK-47, *Avtomat Kalashnikova*, its last five digits of the serial 16751, with the magazine attached to its slot and filled with 7.62 x 39 grain ammunition. Hated it.

They marched off the parade area and into the maize fields and were told to run, and jogged in new attack formations through the sun-blessed crops, and the tanks ahead were beginning to roll forward and there was smoke, and flares arced in the sky, and quite soon the crackle of gunfire surrounded the conscript. He hated his rifle for the beating he had taken from the sergeant, but felt the power of the beast when it thudded against his shoulder, the scar on the stock against his cheek, pricking the skin and making his face bleed.

He charged, as they all did, and felt now that he was indestructible because of the weapon in his fist, hated it, but realised its power, and ran and felt no exhaustion and chased after the tanks. But hated it because of what had been done to him – and had never before felt hatred so strong.

The girl was the last off the train.

She looked around her, scanning for faces that she might recognise, or those of anyone who might indicate they knew her. It was

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dusk and the rain spat and none of the other passengers getting off at the small station of Dewsbury hung around. The line was the main link between what politicians, local and far away in London, liked to call the 'twin powerhouses of the north' Manchester and Leeds. This halt was east of the Pennine spine of hills and wilderness. Its industries had curled over and died, and anyone anxious for work and a distant promise of prosperity took the train out each morning and came back each evening. The girl was a student, second year Social Sciences at Manchester Metropolitan University. She allowed the platform to clear, the passengers either using the exit on that side of the twin tracks or taking the lift up to the bridge that crossed over to the main part of the station, where she was heading and where there were female toilets. This was her home town; she had come for a fleeting visit to her parents. She had been careful on the train, had seen nobody familiar, was satisfied that she was not recognised on the platform. The train had left, the platform was empty, and the lift returned for her alone. She wore jeans with regulation frayed tears at the knees and with the colour washed out of the thighs, and light-weight trainers, and a sweater hanging loose over a T-shirt and an anorak that enveloped her, and her hair straggled out from under a toggle hat. Slung on one shoulder was a rucksack. In the privacy of the lift, she ran her tongue hard over her lips, worked it hard enough to remove most of the thin trace of lipstick. She was 'Zed' to her boyfriend, Zeinab to her tutors and to her parents, and was in her 23rd year. There was a sort of deal: she came home regularly and, in return, her mother and father, her uncles and aunts and her cousins, did not come over the moorland to Manchester to visit her. They did not and would not know of the new life enveloping her when she was away from the rigid, devout, disciplined life in the quarter of Dewsbury where she had been reared. She went into the toilet, took a cubicle, locked herself inside.

Her jeans and trainers and sweater and T-shirt came off, and she barely took the time to feel the cold: one stifled shiver only. She opened the rucksack, and took out a black *jilbab*, heaved it up over her head, wriggled her arms into it, and felt it slide down over

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her skin, and the cold seemed to snatch her again. All that she had discarded was screwed up and stuffed into the bottom of the rucksack. The outer door opened. A woman coughed, announcing her arrival. Next on was the *niqab*. She flushed the toilet and checked the floor, hoisted the rucksack, and unlocked the door. A white-skinned woman with bottle-blonde hair and a rolling stomach and tight multi-coloured trousers gave her a look of withering contempt, and the mutual contempt she felt for this sad creature was hidden because only her eyes could be seen through the *niqab*'s eye slit. Even if provoked, the girl would not have risen to a challenge. It had been drilled into her by those who now shaped her life that she should not indulge the temptation to retaliate. She ducked her head, a servile gesture, and left the toilet, walked across the platform, gave her ticket to the machine, and went out into the dark.

She was from the Savile Town district, lived in the shadow of the Merkazi mosque, was a former pupil of the Madni Muslim High School for Girls on Scarborough Street, and her father made a minimal living doing car repairs – increasingly hard with the new electronic functions – and her mother stayed at home and had few relations and fewer friends. Zeinab was their only child, had been pushed by her teachers as a possible university entrant (the school benefited from such an accolade) and others, also, had urged that route on her. She went down the hill into the town and past the Poundland Store and the businesses offering Big Discounts, and the lights blazed to welcome late shoppers.

Near to the bus station, in a shadowed street where the boys usually met her and where there were no elevated cameras, she would wait for them. Always, when she came back to the town and knew they would be in the car and there to meet her, she felt a cold chill on her skin, whatever clothing she wore, not fear but excitement, and she would know that the blood coursed in her veins. She lived a lie, and relished it . . . and later would be back in Manchester and with the boyfriend, and to herself, and soundlessly, she chuckled, the noise from her throat swallowed by the material drawn tight across her face. She was always early; the

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boys said it was a crime to be late for a meeting they had fixed. She was satisfied with her precautions, what the boys called 'tradecraft'; they lectured her that danger was always close by, that around all of them was extreme threat. She waited.

'Have you done him before?' He had asked her the same question eighteen minutes earlier and fifteen minutes before that.

She gave him the same answer. 'I've not done him before.'

'So, we don't know whether he's a punctual little creature.'

Both were from the North West Counter Terrorist Unit. Both were detective constables and both would have said there were better things to be done at the desk screens where they worked in the city of Manchester than being parked up in a place used by bird-watchers and dog-walkers in daylight, and assorted perverts after dark.

'No, don't know.'

'He's an hour late.'

They were out of the city towards Greenfield, just short of the moor at Saddleworth. Both were well beyond the first flushes of enthusiasm, both would have said that experience had taught them when a rendezvous would not be kept.

'Don't want to labour it, but I can read the time.'

'He's late and I'm not happy sat here.'

They had been half an hour early, and they had sat in the car, kept the engine ticking over and the windows were misted; he had left the car once to head off to a corner to piss, and she had been out twice to steal a cigarette. The CHIS had stood them up. Not that they knew much about him. This particular Covert Human Intelligence Source was newly recruited and not yet bedded down into the system. He should have been at a meeting point the previous evening farther south on the Glossop road where there was a late evening coffee and snack truck, but had not shown and they were tasked for the fall-back option, this car park out by Saddleworth. They had been told that he'd come in an old blue Vauxhall saloon, and they'd waited, had waited some more, and each had risen in their seats when a vehicle had turned into the car

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park. A guy had come with three plastic bags of stripped off wallpaper that he dumped by a filled bin; another had pulled in and eaten a sandwich and drank from a thermos and then taken ten minutes' doze. Two men together, in the unmarked police car, would have stood out, but the man and the woman would have seemed just like any other couple and there for a few minutes of squeeze on the way home from the office. It went unsaid, but was mutual between them: it was a rotten old life being a 'CHIS' and on the books of NWCTU: Christmas came round rarely and a goody bag was hard to come by, and likely also that the individuals they targeted would not take well to the intrusion. Enough, for these two detectives, to feel a frisson of anxiety for the wellbeing of the source.

'Time to call it?'

'Call it a day, yes. We'll catch the traffic all the way back . . . expect he'll get a serious bollocking whoever sees him next.'

'Yes, a serious one.'

She drove. He reported in . . . Twice an informant had failed to show.

They did it turn and turn about at that time in the afternoon. Their office was in the London district of Vauxhall, not on the river but close to it. The building was off a narrow street and hemmed in by offices and yards. There was the civilisation of one public house and not much else. It was an address that a stranger would have needed exact directions for, or would have had no chance of finding it. Discreet, sensibly located. It had been Gough's duty to slip out to the nearest café, old fashioned and treasured, to collect two beakers of tea, his with sugar but not hers, and excessively large slices – that day – of carrot cake. The cake and the tea were an improvement to what came round on the trolley, and both would have indignantly claimed it was deserved because of the long hours they worked. Most in that office were there early at the start of a day, and would not shrug into coats and go out to face the evening until well after the streets had cleared of the conventional rush-hour. Gough had to do the full rigmarole of his ID at the

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outer door. Short cuts were not tolerated. Janice who sat there in a cubicle, and Baz who was perched behind her, had known Gough in excess of nineteen years, and had known his assistant – Pegs – for fifteen years, but they showed their ID and would not have taken a liberty . . . Not actually ever mentioned, but Gough assumed that Baz wore a jacket every day, warm or cold and sometimes with a cooling fan and often with a two-bar heater, because it would better obscure a shoulder holster and a Glock 9mm. The security was necessary because of their work, all that messy sort of stuff that dealt with agents who needed handling and informants who needed comforting. The work area contained a few of the juniors at a central octagonal table at the centre of the first floor but off to the side were four cubicles with walls of misted glass.

Gough crossed the room, edged around the main table and chairs, was confronted with his own closed door and slopped some of the tea in contorting to open it, and went in, shutting the door with a kick from his heel. He could not have remembered which was his and which was hers but the counter staff had sussed him years back and the beaker with the inked tick would be for Pegs. He was a veteran, never used his rank, but was senior. Had he gone higher, he would have of necessity given up fieldwork, so he had stayed on the plateau. It would see him out, another two years or three . . . But the threat was worse, had steadily racheted while he had been in the office off Wyvill Road. Worse now that the kids were drifting back from having their arses kicked in Syria and Iraq, and then there was the home-grown crowd who had not made it abroad and were looking to catch up, climb the ladder fast, do their bit for the cause. Gough would have said, deadpan and serious, that life in an anti-terror environment was only tolerable if there was a generous slice of carrot cake on offer in the late afternoon.

The office was shared with Pegs. She was not a serving policewoman but a civilian enhancer. She did logistics, ran a system, kept Gough and a few others where they needed to be, which was with information pouring out of their skulls and organisation wrapped tight round them. She had a phone wedged against her head, and

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was belting her keyboard. He would never interrupt when her face was screwed up and the breath came hissing from between her teeth. He put down the tea in front of her and had a small cardboard plate for her portion of carrot cake and the usual plastic knife. He went to his own place and shrugged out of his coat, shook it to get some of the rain off, slung it behind the door, and sat and waited. He would be told when she was good and ready. In Gough's experience very little that came down the phone lines, or that popped up on the screens, slotted into the 'good news' category. Most was right for the pigeon-hole of what he did not want to know, but would have to. He began to nibble at his cake. If it were not for Pegs running his office, and the relationship, then he might well have jacked the job and made things a little warmer with Clare and gone down to the south coast, and hit a golf ball and walked a dog.

She said, 'It's not Armageddon, but it's not nice.'

They called him Tommy when they talked among themselves. Most of the CHIS people had a CHIS name. He was T for Tommy, Tommy Ahmed, and was a new recruit, and had seemed keen, and committed; some were there for the long haul and some were short-term expedient, and it would have been rare indeed for Gough to have said into which box Tommy was squashed.

'What is not nice?' asked Gough, eating his cake.

'Should have been a meeting yesterday, with the locals, but didn't show. Simple enough, then they went for the secondary process, and he didn't show for that either. He's skipped two schedules. No trace on his phone. That's where we are.'

He went on with his cake, and she started hers. Could, of course, be that little Tommy had suffered a puncture, and then another, and in between had switched off his phone, and lost it, or could be something different. They both remarked that the carrot cake was good, and said nothing about an informant gone missing, and where the poor beggar might be, and the implications.

Clean jeans, and a clean shirt, and a brush run over his hair. A glance in the mirror. A grin from Andy Knight. Looked good enough.

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He checked his wallet, was satisfied he had sufficient cash, not too much.

It had been a hard day, and the roof spars were all in place on the site, and he was tasked with different deliveries the next morning: pallet loads of concrete building blocks were going across to another quarter of the city. Nothing about his work was particularly varied, day in and day out, but others would have said work was hard enough to find that paid above the minimum, and he never complained or grumbled, in company, but kept the basics of cheerfulness clamped in place.

He looked around him, shrugged. The same as every day and every night since he had moved into the bedsit. It was sparsely furnished: what the landlord would have been able to flog as 'furnished' but without frills. It would have been expected that a tenant would bring with him the keepsakes and mementoes and pictures and ornaments that anyone collected, the debris of life. Andy had not brought such baggage with him, had come only with a sack, and a basic clock radio, and his one book had been a bound street map of the city of Manchester with environs. He had not taken the girlfriend through the front door, and up the staircase that led to the bedsit on the first floor. He had not brought her here, nor had he tried to. The room might have confused her . . . it represented nothing, was as anonymous as a hotel of boxrooms beside a busy rail terminal where men and women did their sleeping, cared not a fig for decoration or anything sparking homeliness. No pictures on the walls, not even a fading print of a Lake District view, or a cheap Lowry reproduction. No fruit bowl in the middle of the table that served for eating meals from or writing out reports at and doing his time sheets. He washed up in a sink that was separate from the basin and small shower cubicle in another corner, and beside the sink there was no towel that might have given a clue of a previous holiday destination. The room seemed to show a conscious effort had been made to eradicate any history of the current occupant. Nothing about the room, to Andy, was strange; all was as intended.

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He sat on the bed, hitched his feet up, and stretched himself out. He triggered the alarm on the clock radio, had enough time to sleep, at least a doze. It was a part of Andy Knight's discipline that he took rest when the chance was offered it. He was tired from a long day and had another starting at dawn the next morning. He always reckoned that when he met someone who was outside his immediate circle of confidants – as Zed was – that rest helped to steel his focus.

He had not brought her here. He'd reckoned there had been a few evenings since they had met when her control might have dipped, and she might have come. He had not invited her, had not tugged at her wrist, had not played a trick and told her there was something back in his room that he wanted to show her. He thought that if he had pushed her, gone heavy, then he might have induced her to come through the front door, and held tight on her waist as he'd steered her up the stairs, but he had not tried to.

His eyes were closed. Always he needed to rest, and always he must hold the focus . . .

Car headlights flashed in the darkened street.

Zeinab was sheltered by a shop window overhang. In the last half hour the rain had switched from light drizzle to blustered snowflakes. She was dutiful. She had waited, had not cursed, had controlled her impatience. Some of the snow crusted on her shoulders. The light came on inside the car as a door was opened. She gazed right, left, made certain she was not watched, then hurried with a skipping step across the pavement and into the warmth of the car.

They talked and she listened. There was no apology for having left her to wait for their arrival in the street close to the bus station. She was not expected to contribute, but it was explained to her. The passenger, who was younger, talked most, and the driver chipped in with greater detail. It was what had been decided by the group they were part of: she had been chosen for a defining role. The talk was of fire power, of a strike that would seize the attention of the whole of the country. She heard the two voices;

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one was wheezy from a chest cold and the other was shrill with excitement, and neither had a poet's language or a leader's call, but the message was clear. They drove down narrow streets, did not crawl and therefore attract attention, did not push at traffic lights. She had known that a time would come when they would want her, would value her . . . They had crossed the bridge over the Calder river and then up the long hill past Savile Town and at the top they had turned towards the Teaching Centre and then the old factory where blankets had been made when Dewsbury promised high employment and the immigrants had been rushed in from Pakistan and a new life had seemed rose-tinted. The factory was shut, the mines were closed, the quarries went unworked; a sullen anger had replaced the optimism, and the mood had changed. Where was the greatest anger? In the area to which this girl, Zeinab, had been recruited. It was about an attack and about a supply line . . . One voice was interspersed with hacked coughing and the other with brief moments of giggling as if stress were gripping him. The more they talked, the longer, and the farther, the car was driven, and she sensed a growing anxiety among them.

'Why me, why am I chosen for this?'

She was chosen because she was a clean skin.

'There are many who are not monitored. Why me?'

Because of who she was, what she was.

'Who am I, what am I?'

Their breath reeking of the scent of cooking spices, both spat back the answer: she was a woman. So few in the struggle were female. They did not look for women, the detectives in the North West and North East Counter Terrorist Unit. They looked for boys. She was not listed, was not under surveillance . . .

'And that is enough?'

And she had a friend, and the remark was left to hang.

A hesitation. 'I don't know whether he would . . .'

One said she should make him, and the other said that she should manipulate him. They came into the long street where her parents lived, where the small back bedroom was hers. The driver pulled over, and the two men whispered to each other. It was usual

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for them to contact her, and although she had been given what they called a dead letter drop address, it was to be used in extreme emergency, not as routine. To reach her they used occasional email links from internet shops, or there would be a folded piece of cigarette paper, covered in minute handwriting and fastened with an adhesive into a deep corner of a locker in the Students' Union: two keys, one for her. Street lamps lit a part of the road but they had chosen shadow. She was told to get out. It would be a five-minute walk to her home. She stood and the snow swirled close to her and she struggled to open her umbrella. Both of them were out. One took her arm and propelled her towards the car's rear. She sensed the change in their breathing. She was pushed. A zapper opened the boot, and a dull light came on inside.

She saw the face.

The light pierced the clear plastic that wrapped the head and it reflected back from the pallor of the skin which had no lustre to it, and the eyes stared wide open and the mouth gaped as if the final motion had been a gasp or a cry, and there were marks across the cheeks where sticky tape had been pulled off and a sparse moustache ripped away. Blood had run from the nose and the mouth and had congealed and there was bruising round the eyes. There was a stink, the same as when a dog had done its business on the pavement and she had stepped in it and it was on her shoe. Zeinab was sick. Never in her life had she been sick in a street. There was a neatly trimmed hedge separating a small garden from the pavement, and she vomited into it.

Did she know the face?

She retched phlegm from deep in her throat, and coughed and spat . . . She did not know the face. She was told he was an informer. She repeated that she did not know him. He was a police informer and had started recently to try to get close to the boys, had asked too much and too often, and had been questioned, and had been . . . and had died. He was an informer. She said again that she had not known him, not seen him.

And she was lectured in hissed whispers. She should understand that the death of an informer was inevitable. A betrayer, a

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traitor. An informer could not extricate himself with untruths. This was how an informer died. She heard them out. She supposed it was a warning. The boot was slammed shut. She was told where she would next see them, what response was expected from her, and for a moment, unexpectedly, the face of the boyfriend, the lorry driver, flickered in her memory. She walked away from them. All she knew of them were their code names: Krait and Scorpion. She heard the car start up, and the lights spun as it turned sharply in the width of the street. She went on down the sloping road and could see a light by the door of her home – her father would have switched it on as a welcome to her. She spat once more and cleared a little more of the taste of vomit from behind her teeth. For a moment she trembled, seemed to feel danger and weakness – spat again, then walked more briskly towards her home. There, nothing was known of her secondary life, with whom she mixed, and what she sought to achieve.

She rang the bell, and the lie Zeinab lived was total. She was brought inside and was hugged and saw the affection in the eyes of her mother and father, and their innocence, and she gave them no sympathy for her deceit. The eyes of the dead boy, wide but dulled, had been the worst of it. It was right that it should have happened to an informer.

A makeshift incinerator reeked of the last fumes of burned plastic. Crab stood at the door, sniffed, waved the beam of his torch. His driver and minder, Gary, held another torch and was a pace behind Crab.

He had been born Oswald Frith . . . He thought, what he could see in the torchlight, that the kids had done a decent enough job with the sanitising of the area. All of the plastic had been taken down, and all of the string lengths that had attached it to the frame untied and removed, and everything off the concrete flooring and that area swilled with bleach . . . Born Oswald Frith, aged twenty, and living in the shadow of the Old Trafford football stadium, and setting up his own minor protection business, just a few shops and a couple of pubs, starting to make a name for himself. He had

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fallen foul of a bigger man who reckoned to have that area tightly sewn, and had come with an iron angle bar to sort out the intruder on his patch. He'd done six month in hospital while surgeons had put together the bones in his right leg, had eventually been discharged, had limped away from the Wythenshawe wards and had gone to visit the man who had belted him with the bar. With his crab-like walk he had walked into the guy's house . . . The man did not walk again, crab-like or otherwise, and was buried a week later. Oswald Frith, because of his impediment, was from that day known as Crab. No evidence left behind, and the widow had been sensible and not testified, and the business had been seamlessly transferred. Crab liked to joke that, although reared near to Manchester United's stadium, the only season ticket he'd had was to Her Majesty's Prison, Strangeways, and most tended to laugh at his joke. He moved awkwardly and, in the winter, felt bad pain in the injured limb, but never winced and never complained. He was satisfied with what he saw. He liked to work with professional people, could not abide laziness or carelessness. The place, his building, seemed to have been well cleaned. The loaning of it had been facilitated through an old contact between one of his sons and these Asians, and they were friends after a year on the same landing in gaol. First there was an approach, the usual circuitous routes and an offer, and he had not turned his back on it but had dug into his own wad of associates, and had rather liked the taste of what was on offer . . . Then the request, only 48 hours previously, that a bit of floor space was needed. He did not know these new people, the Asians, but the little that had been run by him had seemed effective and planned with thoroughness. He had no complaint. The torch beams flickered over the flooring and up the walls and came down to rest on an old chair, heavy wood – could have been a half century since a joiner had put it together – and there were no stains, no signs of damage. And he liked the way it had been put to him, that these people – the Asians – had a powerful way of dealing with a tout, someone who snitched. He liked it to be robust because that way a message was passed and there'd be fewer volunteers for going up the same road. In the

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morning they'd have a second check to be certain that any traces were obliterated. The oil drum used as an incinerator still smouldered. Crab hobbled out, and Gary was close to his shoulder . . .

There had been a time in Manchester when the newspapers had referred to him – not by name – as a 'Mister Big' of the criminal underworld, and there had been cheap headlines at the expense of the mystery man, but no longer. He was choosy what he involved himself in, and with whom. Had not been inside prison for seventeen years, had no wish to renew the experience, but a deal had been offered him, and might lead beyond the boundaries of his comfort area. An attractive deal, and a chance to do business with an old friend, one of the best. He had never been into this sort of trade – could do rackets and girls and Class A stuff – never this. But the deal intrigued him. Crab could never resist an attractive deal, and never had been able to . . . and all in place, and all starting to run and the pace of it quickening. Was a sucker for it, a decent deal.

She had seemed withdrawn that evening, not at ease.

Until he had met her, Andy had never been in the company of an Asian girl, and especially one from a conservative Muslim upbringing. What he had learned of Zeinab was that she usually held herself in the shelter of reserve and seldom voiced any opinion remotely provocative, but could also muster up a degree of flirtatiousness. She could raise her eyebrows, pout a little, blink at him, even run a tongue over her lips, and do little quips of joshing with him, as if they understood each other well, and were close. Not often, but sometimes, and the relationship was now in its fourth month, and moved forward at a steady unremarkable pace, and intimacies were becoming more advanced. Neither seemed prepared to go on to a charge, though Andy had begun to think that the time approached when she would make a move, decisive, towards pushing them closer.

Not that evening. Was not going to happen as they shared a pizza in a place round the corner from her Hall of Residence. She was distracted. Not for Andy to pry. If she needed to cry, confess,

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unveil, he was available. They ate, and sipped cokes because she did not drink alcohol and he could do without, and would be driving in the morning. He thought she realised she was poor company . . . she had been late, the trains were fouled up and the timetable a car crash, and her mother and father unwilling to let her go and having neighbours call round to quiz her on life away as a student. Andy Knight had a good eye for reading people and reckoned her mood reflected more than a late train schedule and parents dragging out a brief visit. They had hardly spoken; he had given a short résumé on his day, trips from the depot to the materials yard, and then to the site where the houses were going up and the roof spars being hoisted off by crane, pretty boring, and where he was headed in the morning, and how many pallets of concrete blocks he'd be shifting. She had the chance, in his long pauses, to contribute, but hadn't. Sometimes they went to the cinema and there had been a couple of dates at small concerts, rhythm and blues, and they did pizzas and anything pasta based, and sometimes they just walked and window-shopped in the city centre. They had a bond, what had brought them together, but each treated it as something in the past. Usually she told him about her classes and what essay she was working on, and it was understood that she was on a university course and he was only a lorry driver. Andy allowed it, didn't set her right. Probably the best times between them were when they tramped the pavements, and sometimes she would nestle her head against his shoulder, and sometimes his arm was close round her waist and holding her there. Once she had been talking about the essay for next week and she had alluded to a problem in the construction of her response, and the solution had seemed clear enough to him but he had stayed quiet, not intruding into that part of her world. Andy Knight merely drove a lorry. Well mannered, yes, polite and correct. Her intellectual equal, no . . . Opposite him, toying with the pizza pieces, she had her head ducked, and seemed irritated when her hair – deep brown, almost black – slipped across her face, and her eyes stayed low. She had no make-up on. How should he respond? Question her or let it slide? Be concerned or be

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indifferent? He reached out, touched her hand. Normally she'd respond. Take his, squeeze it, then grimace, then lighten. She was burdened, and he recognised it. There would not be an argument. He would not challenge her, not burn boats.

Andy murmured to her, 'Tomorrow, Zed, whatever it is will be better. Always better on another day.'

'If you say so.'

'Yes, tomorrow is always better.'

She tried a ghost smile, made a poor job of it, then reached forward and took his hand, and pushed the fork out of it. Held his hand, fingers entwined. The look on her face was to indicate that she could not share, that he would not understand. A shrug, a tightening of the fingers, a couple of blinks like a mood needed changing. The life was back in her voice.

'What do you do for holidays, Andy?'

He grinned. 'Don't get a chance to think about that, not too much.'

'You have statutory holidays, of course you do.'

'Suppose so.'

'Doing what you do, it builds stress?'

'Just getting a lorry back and forward across town. Plenty have it worse.'

'We all need a holiday.'

'What, Zed, you needing a holiday? Term's another month, isn't it?'

The grip was firmer. He leaned forward, and allowed a finger to run across her lips and the movement dislodged a crumb, or a smear of cheese. A little gesture to loosen her. What she wanted to say was important to her, but he gave no sign of recognising that.

'They'd give you a holiday?'

Andy played dumb. 'Don't know, haven't put in for one.'

'If I asked you.'

'Asked me what?'

'Whether you could take a holiday?'

'I suppose, suppose I could try – but you can't. Term-time, not holidays.'

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'I just wanted to know.'

'Whether I can take a holiday? I can find out.'

'Do that.'

'Would depend on what cover they need, for how long, what sort of time-frame.'

'You'd like that? A holiday, us?'

'I would, you and me, I'd like that . . . Should we take your mother along as well?'

She kicked him under the table, and was laughing. First time that evening. He thought that typified his value to her. He doubted anyone else would have made her face crack with an open grin. Then the giggle was in her throat, and she reached into her bag for her purse. Sometimes he paid, sometimes she did. It might have been her turn, might not. She took the bank note out and left it on the table, and stood. A kid came hurrying over, and the gesture was for him to keep the change. She asked it of him again, and he said he would. They stood and heaved on their coats and there was slush on the pavements where the wet snow had failed to get a grip. He always walked her back to the door of the Hall. She held his hand and twice she twisted her head and kissed him on the lips, which was good, encouraging. He thought she had had a bad day but that he'd made it better, softened it. At the door they kissed again. Most of the girls in the Hall, he assumed, did not regard it as a big deal if they led their guy inside and shoved him towards the lift. Andy would not push Zeinab, was happy enough to leave it at a gentle and long kiss in the shadows away to the side of the door, and he sensed she went further than was usual, and that her day had been difficult and had taken her to the edge.

They parted. She said something about her essay and hurried inside. He thought it had been a good evening, useful. At the lift door she turned and would have seen him still standing there, and gave him a little wave, which was the flirty bit. Andy blew a kiss back. The doors closed on her. Perhaps better than a useful evening.

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