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The Dealer and the Dead

Written by Gerald Seymour

Published by Hodder & Stoughton

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GERALD SEYMOUR

The Dealer
and the Dead



HODDER &
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First published in Great Britain in 2010 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title
is available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN 978 0 340 91890 6
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 0 340 91891 3

Typeset in Plantin Light by
Ellipsis Books Limited, Glasgow

Printed and bound by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.hodder.co.uk

PROLOGUE

They were right, and he knew it . . . but he could not admit it to them.

Petar's boy had started, had nagged at it, then Tomislav's son had taken it up, and now it was Andrija's cousin who voiced the obvious. 'We are here too long, sir . . . We should have been well gone . . . Sir, we have to accept it. It is in our faces and an idiot could see it.'

The respect they showed him waned with each minute they stayed huddled and bent low, trying to find some minimal shelter from the rain. The corn, which had ripened two months before and had not, of course, been harvested, offered no refuge from the cold and wet that engulfed them. They respected him because he had taught them basic lessons at the village's school, adding and subtracting, writing and reading, with a degree of discipline. He sensed that their respect had almost run its course – but he would not admit to them that they were right and he was wrong.

'We stay,' he said. 'They will come. They promised they would. I have their word.'

As the schoolteacher in the village, Zoran was a person of status. If there had been a resident priest, the teacher would have had second place, but they shared a priest with other small communities. If the land around their village had been administered and worked by a collective, Zoran would have lagged behind its manager, but the strip fields had escaped the centralisation of the old regime and were farmed by individuals. They waited on a path between Petar's crops, near to the Vuka river.

Zoran was wrong because now he could see the men who challenged his authority – not clearly, in detail, but he recognised

their shapes and shadow movements. He knew which was Petar's son, and Tomislav's, and which was Andrija's cousin. He could see them because the dawn was coming – slowly because of the deluge of rain. They should not be on the path after first light. They called it the *Kukuruzni Put*, and knew it was an act of suicide to be moving on the Cornfield Road without the cover of darkness.

But he demanded that they wait.

If anyone stood at full height and peered to the west, through the drooping tips of the corn, they would have seen the constant light over the town that was, perhaps, five kilometres down the Cornfield Road. The brightness was from the many fires that the incendiary shells had lit. If they stayed crouched, with their faces a few centimetres from the mud, and cupped their self-rolled cigarettes in their palms, they still could not escape the rumble of the big howitzer guns. The explosions – intensifying because a new day always started with a barrage of destruction – were muffled if the firing came from across the Danube and aimed at the heart of the town, loud if the targets were the villages of Marinci and Bogdanovci, and shatteringly clear if the shells came down on their own homes. When the closest shells detonated, each man shuddered or winced. Zoran thought of his wife, and the young men of their fathers, Petar and Tomislav; Andrija's cousin thought of Maria and Andrija, in their cellar.

For almost three months the Cornfield Road had been the lifeline for the town and three villages that straddled it. The men and women who defended them accepted that when this last route was cut the siege would end and resistance would collapse. Zoran could have berated them for smoking, for allowing the smell of burned tobacco to waft in the wind, but did not.

It was hard for him to believe they would not come. He strained his eyes to search for the tiny torch beam that would show his trust had been well placed. He tried to shut out the murmurs of the men with him and listen for the squelch of boots among the collapsed corn. He saw nothing but the vivid brightness of the fires in the town and heard only the complaints of those he had brought with him.

‘Listen, old man, are you wanting us all dead? They aren’t coming. They would have been here by now if they were.’

Twenty-four days ago he had walked fast down that path. Then the Cetniks – the Yugoslav military and Arkan’s scum – had been further back. Now they were closer and had snipers with night-vision gear who watched the gaps where the crop had failed. Artillery and mortars were used at random, and it was only possible to cross the fields at night.

‘Wait a little longer. They promised they’d come. He gave me his word.’

Twenty-four days earlier, clutching a weighted briefcase, Zoran had negotiated the path through the corn and travelled with the hope and sacrifice of the village stuffed into the frayed leather case that had once held classroom notes and textbooks. Telephone lines were long cut, and the enemy listened routinely to the Motorola radios. He had left the village and gone through the lines and into the comparative safety of Vinkovci, then had taken a taxi to the embryo capital of his country. In Zagreb, a city of bright streetlights, restaurants serving hot food, and bars where beer was drunk, he had met a nephew who worked in the fledgling Ministry of Defence. He had been told it was inconceivable that an arms shipment would be sent for his village alone and not the town on the bend of the great river.

Then his nephew had sat forward, eyes darting from side to side, checking they would not be overheard, and had murmured that reinforcements and resources would be directed to the front line nearer to the city; the price of a ceasefire on all sectors was the fall of the town and their part of eastern Slavonia. His nephew had slipped a piece of folded paper into his hand, saying that Zoran was in his prayers.

When his nephew had gone Zoran saw a kind of normality around him, but the people in the café had no comprehension of the lives of their fellow countrymen beyond Vinkovci, in the town and the villages. He opened the paper, to find a name and a telephone number with an international code. He had gone to the telephone booth, by the door to the toilets, and dialled. His call was answered.

He had lingered in the city for two days, unable to learn anything about the siege on the Danube. He had hated the place, had felt a stranger among his own. The bombardment of Dubrovnik had attracted international headlines but not the struggle for his village, the others and the town. He believed his nephew from the Ministry of Defence: they had been abandoned.

He had met a man. He had placed an order, spelled it out, and had half expected a croak of derision. The answer: 'No problem.'

Bolder, he had said when the order must be delivered and to where. The response: 'No problem.'

Last, he had unfastened the briefcase, shown the man its contents and explained that this represented the total wealth of the village. The reply: 'You have nothing to worry about, and that's a promise.'

He had watched the man go away down the street, past the big statue in the square and towards a taxi rank. He had bent to get into the back seat, then looked back. When he saw that Zoran was still watching him he had waved, then was lost in the traffic.

Zoran had gone home, on the bus to Vinkovci, on foot along the Cornfield Road to the village. That had been the last time the path was used in daylight. An hour after he had passed, a sniper had killed two men, walking wounded, from the town, and had wounded a medical orderly who had volunteered to work in the town's hospital. In the command bunker, a concrete pit with a kerosene lamp, he had told them what was coming, in what quantity and when. He had seen scepticism, doubt, disbelief, and had sought to suffocate it. 'He promised. He shook my hand.'

He had been back for three weeks. The reserve ammunition stocks – in the command bunker – amounted to a thousand rounds, maybe ten bullets for each fighter, and a box of a hundred fragmentation grenades. They had brought with them two wheelbarrows, a large upright pram's chassis and a handcart from Petar's farm. He had wondered how many boxes they could move in one trip, whether they would need to return the next evening. Even the ferocity of the rain could not disguise the light to the east where the enemy's howitzers fired.

‘Get it into your head! They’re not coming. We’ve been here too long already, should have been gone a quarter of an hour ago. Mother of God, you want to stay, Zoran, you stay, but I’m off.’

Until then he had been the undisputed leader of the village and its defence. Now his authority was stripped from him. He attempted to reason with them one last time: ‘A few more minutes. He shook my hand. He took as payment what I brought him. Without them, we’re defeated and dead—’

A clear whistle pierced his skull – the sound of an incoming tank 125mm shell, an artillery 152mm shell and an 82mm mortar. They were all rooted to the spot. A flare lit them. The whistle became a symphony because three or four shells were in the air when the illumination flare burst. The dawn had trapped them. A machine-gunner fired. In the moment before the first shell came down, the machine-gunner laced the corn with bullets. The flare hung, poured white light on them. Zoran saw that Tomislav’s son and Andrija’s cousin had crumpled. Their faces showed shock, surprise, and then the blandness of death.

The first mortar detonated. Zoran dropped and felt the mud ooze against his face. Since the fight for the town and its satellite villages had started nearly three months before, he had seen several men die: on the front line in the slit trenches that were reinforced with felled tree-trunks, two had been speared by timber splinters; in the command bunker, where there was an area for the wounded, men had slipped away with neither fuss nor rancour. A Cetnik with an unkempt beard had thrown down a jammed rifle as he sprinted towards a strongpoint and had collapsed at the single shot to his chest.

Zoran was on the ground and his breath came hard. Petar’s boy – who had been slow to learn arithmetic, quick to read and a star at football – towered over him. ‘You fucking obstinate old fool. You’ve killed us.’

It would have been the shards from the fourth mortar bomb that cut him down. Zoran was trying to assemble an answer that had dignity and logic when the metal shards hit him.

Zoran was alone.

The flare had died but it was getting light. Rain dribbled on his face, on the blood from his chest, stomach and hip. The pain, in spasms, was coming. He wished then that he was dead. That night he had carried neither a grenade nor a loaded pistol and could not end his life. He saw movements in the corn and, between his gasps, heard stems bent and broken.

Four men. They were not regular soldiers but Arkan's people, whom the Serbs called the Tigers and the Croats called the scum. The blades of their knives caught the light. It was bright enough for them to see that he was alive, so he would be kept until last. He heard chuckles from the four, their knives cutting into flesh and ripping of clothing. The Tigers always mutilated the dead . . . and the living. He heard them cut out the eyeballs, then tear trousers to expose the genitalia of the two sons and the cousin. Then came the castration, the forcing open of mouths and the placing of bloodied gristle down the throats. He remembered what the young man he had met in Zagreb had said: 'You have nothing to worry about, and that's a promise.' A young face and a fresh smile had won his confidence.

The hands had found him, and his ears were filled with the Tigers' oaths. Without the weapons he had believed he had bought, the village would not survive. When its defences fell, the Cornfield Road would be cut and all links to the town in the west broken.

He screamed. The knife went into his eye. A promise had been broken. He prayed, a few silent, jumbled words, for the release of death. At the last he called his wife's name and his second eye was taken out. The cold and the rain were on his lower stomach and groin, and he had no more cries for his God, only her name, then a ratcheting scream, and a curse on a man who had broken a trust.

The rain fell hard on the wasted corn crop, as the mutilated bodies were dragged towards the river, and washed away the blood. The wheelbarrows, the pram chassis and the handcart were pulled from the path as spoils of war.

A new day broke, and the stranglehold on the town and villages had tightened. It choked the defenders and condemned them.

I

‘Have a good day, Mr Gillot.’ The girl at the check-in desk handed him his ticket and boarding card.

‘Thank you,’ he answered, and smiled.

‘And I hope you’ve enjoyed your visit.’

The queue snaked back, and the flight was about to be called, but his smile caused her to ignore the men and women behind him, coughing irritably. Its understated charm usually made people forget what they were supposed to be doing. She was quite a pretty girl so he smiled again. Everyone who knew him said it was bankable. ‘I’ve had an excellent two days in your lovely city, and I hope to be back.’

She pushed his passport towards him and made certain that her fingertips brushed his as he took it. He liked that, and her wide-eyed, penetrating gaze, which was characteristic of the city’s girls. He left the counter and immediately forgot her.

Harvey Gillot walked across the marble surface, newly laid, of the concourse where the general waited for him. There would be time for coffee and a biscuit, and then he would shake the older man’s cancer-scarred hand, perhaps hug him at the gate, maybe even kiss his cheeks, and then be on his way. None of that would indicate any fondness for the man, whose last command had been to oversee the country’s storage depots and hold the inventory of the stocks kept by the Bulgarian military. The parting gestures would suggest that the last forty-eight hours had not been wasted but were of financial benefit to both men.

He reached the general and smiled. A hand slipped to his elbow and he was taken to an exclusive lounge. There a hand slapped his back. Gillot’s smile was important to him, far more so than

presence. Twenty-five years ago, Solly Lieberman had identified it: 'Young man, your smile makes me, old Solly Lieberman who's been everywhere, seen everything and met everyone, want to trust you. It's priceless. Trust, young man, is the greatest weapon in a broker's arsenal, and your smile tells me to trust you. I'm suspicious, wary, a sceptic and cautious, but I'm disposed to trust you.' Solly Lieberman, long gone, had shaped Harvey Gillot, had taught him that trust was paramount and that his smile clinched the deals that mattered, the ones that paid big.

He wasn't a broker of second-hand cars. He didn't buy and sell holidays or property. He had no interest in Bulgaria's agricultural products, its burgeoning wine industry or prostituting its girls. Instead Harvey Gillot trafficked small arms and ammunition, machine-guns, mortars, artillery pieces and the many types of man-portable missiles that could be used against buildings, armoured vehicles or low-flying fixed-wing aircraft or helicopters. He bought and sold secure and encrypted communications equipment, main battle tanks, the lighter reconnaissance types and personnel carriers. He was a broker of weapons and the matériel of war. Not too many people knew of his trade. His profile was low and he practised anonymity as an art form.

The general spoke a little English and fluent Russian. Gillot used some English and a smattering of technical Russian, but had no Bulgarian. For the more detailed negotiations of the previous evening, at the Mirage Hotel, the general's nephew had interpreted. It was, still, a treasure trove. Before the dinner, the general had taken Gillot, in a cream Mercedes saloon, to a depot seventy-five kilometres north-west of the coastal city of Burgas. During his years in the service of his country he had once governed it. Many of the men and women now posted to the depot had seemed unaware that he was no longer on Bulgaria's payroll – instead was flogging off the country's tanks, howitzers, missiles, small arms, shells and ammunition.

He and Gillot had toured four great warehouses with a uniformed escort, and Gillot had realised that little had changed

from his previous visit two years before. Every man he saw – from general down to bottle-washer, second class – was on a cut from the action. Good quality stuff. Well kept and stored. Temperature control to ensure that the warehouses did not overheat the systems in summer or freeze them in winter. A good meal, served in a corner of number-three warehouse (artillery, static and mechanised), and a decent wine. Gillot had drunk little, the minimum for politeness' sake, had kept a clear head and reckoned he'd done a good deal. It would be cash up front. Onto covered lorries, hidden from view, would be loaded one thousand rifles, five hundred thousand 7.62mm bullets, two hundred PKMB machine-guns, a hundred AGS-17 automatic grenade launchers and fifteen hundred 30mm grenades, twenty-five SVD Dragunov sniper rifles, ten S-23 180mm artillery pieces, odds and sods, and five hundred POMZ-2 anti-personnel stake mines. The figures had been worked and reworked, disputed and agreed on a host of paper napkins.

The general had leaned across the table, grasped Gillot's hand and held it in a vice-grip of trust. Gillot had said, 'You have nothing to worry about, and that's a promise.' Translation was unnecessary. The lorries would go from the depot to the Burgas docks for loading, and before dawn the freighter would edge out of the port, head south towards the Turkish coast and chug across the Black Sea, the more sensitive cargo buried beneath sacks of vegetables, cement or crated furniture parts.

In the shadowed corner of the world inhabited by Harvey Gillot – where light seldom intruded and was at all times unwelcome – trust was the most valued currency.

He trusted the general about as far as he could have kicked a discarded Coke tin, and the general trusted him implicitly, which was comforting and made for a satisfactory commercial relationship.

They had drunk their coffee, nibbled a biscuit, and the flight was called. He would return to civilisation with an independent French airline that would take him into Lyons.

They did the hug at the gate, and an approximation of a cheek kiss.

‘It’s a pleasure to do business with you, General.’

‘And I like to do business with you. You make me laugh, you have good stories, you are the best company. Maybe that is as important as your honesty. If I did not think you were honest you would be in a river’s silt, buried. A Lebanese is there because he was not honest with me. It is good to laugh and to have honesty.’

He went through the gate.

Other than the warmth of his smile, there was little to point out Harvey Gillot as a man of wealth, of business acumen, of anything remarkable. He was in his forty-seventh year, he carried a few pounds too many at his waist and his stomach bulged a little over his trouser belt. His hair had lost the fresh colour of his youth and there was grey above his ears. He walked with a purposeful stride, but without the swagger of success that would have attracted the attention of strangers, cameras or officials. His hair was tidy, his shirt clean, his suit pressed and his tie subdued. He had a full face, but not the jowls of excess or the gauntness of abstinence. Unless he smiled, people did not notice him.

A leather satchel was hooked on his shoulder. In it were his electronic notepad, a mobile phone and three pairs of socks he had washed for himself in his hotel bathroom, two crumpled shirts, a set of used underwear, an iPod loaded with easy-listening light classical, a pair of cotton pyjamas and his washbag. That was how he travelled. He had no need of a paperwork mountain, assistants or brochures. Travelling with a Spartan load was compatible with his occupation and did not obstruct his ability to initiate a deal that would cost the purchaser in excess of three million American dollars.

‘Trust rules,’ was his motto, handed down to him by his mentor. ‘Lose the trust of those you do business with, young man, and you might as well quit the work and go back to what you were doing because you’ll be dead in the water.’ Solly Lieberman had delivered the lecture to Gillot on 7 June 1984. It had marked the defining moment in his life. He had known that Mr Lieberman was about to alter his life, make an offer that could not be refused,

and Gillot, aged twenty-one, had stood damn near at attention in front of the scratched desk behind which the wizened old guy had sat. He had heard the lecture in a gravel-coarse American east coast accent, and had not laughed at the advice.

Trust was Harvey Gillot's lifeblood.

Trust would liberate several tonnes of surplus-to-requirements munitions and weapons from a Bulgarian military depot, and trust would ensure a purchaser handed him a healthy deposit as down payment on acceptance of terms. He needed, too, the trust of the shipping company, and of Customs officials at both ends of the transaction. Trust was as good a weapon as any in the global economic climate and – bless the Lord – in hard times the price of conflict didn't much matter. Money could be found, if there was trust.

Many trusted Harvey Gillot, and he had worked hard to earn that trust. He could have called home as he walked out into the blast of the sun that reflected up from the concrete, but didn't think the effort worthwhile and left his mobile in the satchel. If he lost that trust, and word spread, he would be back to selling office equipment and stationery.

His eyes smarted in the glare so he tugged his Polaroids from an inner pocket and hooked them on. The aircraft was in front of him. Above, the sun burgeoned from a cloudless sky, clear and blue.

The dog did well. From the table, it was given cheese cubes, slices of cold sausage, cake and biscuits. It sat on its haunches, its tongue hung out and its eyes showed unrestrained happiness.

The dog was a centre of attention. It was named King. It had been trained in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the fields near to the ravaged town of Mostar, had received certificates and been sold by its Austrian-born handler to Canadians who had shipped it first to Rwanda, in central Africa, then west to Angola. Now, in its eighth year, the German shepherd was in the last stages of a career that many called 'distinguished'. Its final handler, a taciturn Croat from a hill village near to the Slovenian border, permitted

the indulgence, seemed indifferent to it. He owed his life to that dog. Every day they worked, the handler could assume that if the animal's senses and nose failed they would be dead. They could be killed by the cloud of razor slivers from the mines that severed limbs and cut arteries, leaving man and animal beyond help. He was used to this sort of occasion, where food and drink were laid out and local people pleaded their gratitude.

The noise around him grew and he saw empty bottles – plum, apple and pear brandy, all home distilled – taken out and fresh ones brought from the cellar.

If they had worked together for an extra hour the previous evening they might have finished the clearance before dusk made it too dangerous to go on. But he had been with these people for seven weeks and he would have reckoned it ungracious to slip away before their celebration, with himself and his dog as the honoured guests. Soon he would drive the dog back to his home on the outskirts of Osijek, where it would go into its pen, and he would sit at a desk, read papers, study maps and learn the detail of the next site he was to be assigned to.

There was no shortage of work. The government said that a quarter of a million mines had been laid during the war, but more realistic studies put the figure at close to a million. They had been in the ground now for seventeen, eighteen or nineteen years and had lost none of their lethal potential, were as deadly as the day when the spades had made the holes in the fields, the mines had been dropped into them and covered with earth. When the dog's working life was over, it would go to his father and live out its last years as a pampered pet, and he would take on another dog, a two-year-old with its training just completed. When that dog was ready to finish there would still be the seeded fields all over his country where the conflict line had been.

The day he had started to work on strips of land at the edge of the cornfields round the village, close to where the Vuka river flowed, he had explained his tactic to the farmer on whose land he would be. He had said that mechanical flails mounted on an armoured bulldozer were acceptable on flat fields, but useless

and dangerous on the steep-sloped riverbanks. He said, too, that if the clearance were to be done by hand, men on their knees with fine probes, it would take for ever, and this area did not warrant priority, so it was him and the dog. They worked along yellow tape lines, King a few metres ahead, on a long, loose lead, finding them; there were at least twenty, all primed, all killing agents. The dog could smell explosive chemicals, could smell also the fine metal filament wires that would trip the unwary and detonate a device. He had talked of the acoustic signature that the wires gave off, which the dog could hear when a man could not. He had thought the farmer cared only for another hectare made available to plant more corn or sunflowers.

He was called forward.

The handler knew what was required of him. From under his dusty overalls, he produced the certificate of clearance. Boldly, he signed it. Glasses were filled, raised and downed. The drink ran in dribbles from their mouths. He rarely drank. The telephone could ring at any hour, day or night, to tell him of a child mortally injured in a field that had once been a battle zone, a farmer blown up and lying injured with a leg held at the knee only by cartilage, and if he was drunk he could do nothing. People believed in his skill and the dog's. He had done his best. He had lifted twenty anti-personnel mines from the wilderness ground at the perimeter of the field, then had gone down the bank. The strip he had cleared was at least two hundred metres long and forty wide. A very brave man, or a very stupid man, would declare that ground now free of mines. He knew the history of this village, of its fight and its courage, and knew, too, of its fall.

The dog slumped, satiated, and its tongue lolled with the heat.

He thought it was not often that these people had something to celebrate.

With the paper presented to the farmer, he believed it was a suitable moment for him to go, to move out of the lives he had shared these several weeks, to leave them free of the crack of the mines he had detonated. He assumed that after he had gone the music would be turned up, the dancing would start, more food

would be eaten and the pile of bottles outside the back door would grow higher. He was wrong.

He knew the farmer as Petar, and knew the man's wife but could not communicate with her because of her acute deafness – King was fond of her. He knew Mladen, who was most likely to be listened to in the village, and Tomislav, and Andrija, who was married to Maria and was her lapdog. He knew Josip, and . . . he knew such people in every village where he had worked since the land had been taken back from the Cetniks. He started for the door.

He had imagined that when he announced he must leave with his dog there would be protests. There were not. Everyone gazed out of the window. Over their shoulders, he could see across a lawn, over a wicket fence and on to the road that ran down through the village to the crossroads in its centre. An old woman, dressed in black as if to commemorate recent bereavement, was walking along it, leaving heavily on a stick.

He left the certificate on the table among the food, bottles and glasses. He made excuses, but received no response. They watched her advance towards Petar's house. He had not seen her before but he recognised authority. The handler went into the bright light of early afternoon and the heat hit him. She came up to him, stared into his face. He noticed – always had sharp eyes for what was different, a gift that kept him alive in the fields – that she wore no wedding ring, or any other jewellery. She had no ring, but neither did Petar's wife, nor Andrija's. His puzzlement was cut short.

She had a harsh, reedy voice. 'Have you finished?'

'Yes, I have done that section of the field as far as the riverbank.'

'It is clear?'

'Yes.'

'Did you find bodies?'

'The dog would not be concerned with bodies if they were buried. We found none on the ground.'

She left him and went up the steps to the front door.

The handler walked to the four-wheel drive. The dog made a

laboured jump into the back. Not a cloud above him, no wind, a sky of brilliant blue.

There was an estate of tower blocks across the road and to his right. If any man or woman had been out on their balcony, enjoying a cigarette or hanging washing on a frame and had seen him, and the man in front of him, they might have thought of a feral cat that lived behind the fifteen-floor towers and stalked rats. As the cat would, he valued the time he spent learning the movements, habits and styles of the target. If any man or woman in the café he passed, the launderette, the small gaming arcade or the kebab restaurant had seen him and *noticed* him, then let their eyes fasten on the back of the target ahead, a similar image might have locked in their minds: hunter and hunted in the tight alleyways between the blocks, where the bins were stored and the vermin found food. A cat did not hurry when it stalked prey. It attacked on its own terms and at the time of its choosing. Before it surged forward, it would feign indifference to a scurrying rat. He might have been seen, but he was not noticed, and that was a skill he shared with the cat, the killer.

The man in front of him had come out of a good-sized house, four bedrooms and a brick-paved driveway to a double garage, had turned in the doorway and kissed the face of a woman in a silky robe. He had used a code at the gatepost to pass through electronically controlled gates, then walked briskly up the pavement and past the first tower block. He had gone into a newsagent to buy a tabloid, some chewing gum and a plastic bottle of milk, then had stopped at a café to linger for ten minutes over a pot of tea. Now he was on the move again, going back to the house.

The cat on the street was Robbie Cairns. He knew that the rat he stalked was Johnny ‘Cross Lamps’ Wilson. The name was of little importance to him. He assumed that the nickname related to an eye problem. Before that morning he had had little idea of what Johnny ‘Cross Lamps’ Wilson would look like. He had not been given a photograph – never had been since he’d started out in his line of work – or a description other than that the man

was balding and wore big spectacles, but he had been provided with the address. Didn't need much else, except a sense of the location and any personal security the target kept around him. Robbie Cairns had not seen an escort. On familiar ground, where he ruled and was respected, Johnny 'Cross Lamps' Wilson would not have reckoned he needed one. Different if he was on a stranger's ground.

He did not know why the life of the man ahead was on offer for ten thousand pounds. He did not know who had agreed to pay, after a brief negotiation with his grandfather, for the taking of a life. He did not know when the first approach had been made to his father, or when his grandfather had been brought into the deal. He did know that his reputation was strong, and that his father and grandfather would not have considered a cheapskate hit. Robbie Cairns walked with confidence, knew he was top of the range.

Only an idiot or a cowboy went in too fast. Robbie Cairns was self-taught. He had never had a mentor, never been on a day's firearms course, never read a book on the procedures of foot and vehicle surveillance. The talents were in the blood. He had learned well at his father's knee – when Jerry Cairns was not on enforced absence from the family home – and when he'd sat close to his grandfather in a second-floor flat on the Albion Estate. He had gained more of the tactical skills on a six-month sentence at Feltham Young Offenders, aged seventeen, and more on a twelve-month sentence handed down a week after his eighteenth birthday.

An older officer at the prison – perhaps he'd taken a fancy to him – had said, 'Robbie, lad, it doesn't have to be like this for you. You don't have to spend half your adult life traipsing into court, being driven from one gaol to another.' He had taken that advice. Robbie Cairns had not been before a magistrate or judge since 2003, had not been in court or prison. He had been in police cells and interview rooms, then kicked out on to the streets when the holding time was up. He listened also to his father: 'Always do ground work, Robbie. Always put the hours in.' He'd

listened to his grandfather: 'Will it all be there tomorrow? Will it be the same? You'll know more about where you're going and what you're going to do when you get there.' He saw Johnny 'Cross Lamps' Wilson edge into the doorway of an estate agent's premises and do the old one of checking reflections in the window glass. He kept walking.

He wore no weapon. Robbie Cairns never took one with him unless he was about to use it. Another of the small ways – from a long checklist – in which he protected his liberty and stayed out of reach of the Flying Squad, the families and associates of those he'd done a contract on. He never passed on the chores of reconnaissance to others. He did it himself.

He was level with the man. He ducked his head, mild and apologetic, seeming to apologise for crowding the man, then reached past him to the open top box by the agent's door and took out a brochure of properties. His man had gone, satisfied he had no tail. Robbie Cairns had been so close to him he could smell the aftershave on the man's face, and the toothpaste. He could see the shaving nick on the throat, the small birthmark on the chin and, through the the spectacles, the man's squint. He stayed a moment in the recess, but he wouldn't go into the estate agent's because he would be picked up on internal security cameras. Couldn't miss them all, but could miss a hell of a number of them. For the ones on the street he depended on frequent changes of outer clothing, the big-brimmed baseball cap he wore and the shades.

He was pleased with himself. An estate agent's brochure was good cover. Robbie Cairns's head was down in the pages when the man did a last spin turn at his gate, before concentrating on the pad screwed to the outside of the gatepost. Then he was inside and the gate clanged shut. What would he have seen before he pumped the digits into the pad? Not much. Someone of average size, who wore nothing distinctive, carried nothing memorable, looked at ease on the street and wasn't a stranger. Robbie Cairns was twenty-five years old.

He was a fraction less than five feet ten, but hadn't been

measured since he'd stood in his boxers in the induction hall at Feltham, and had no major distinguishing marks on his face. His hands did not carry scars from fist fights or from when he had protected his eyes from a knife slash. Under his cap his hair was short, tidy, like a clerk's. He wore dark jeans, dark trainers, a drab T-shirt without a logo, and a lightweight jacket. He had no tattoos on his body. He saw Johnny 'Cross Lamps' Wilson cross his driveway and slip a key into the front door.

He turned away, had seen enough.

He walked a full quarter of a mile, the sun beating on him, his shadow minimal at his feet. He had crossed the main road, then gone through the centre of the estate, where there was a little shade from the towers, to a central car-parking area in front of a line of shops. Robbie Cairns could not know where all the high cameras were but the cap was down on his forehead and little of his face was exposed. As he approached, a Mondeo – ten years old from the registration plates – eased from a bay and came to idle in front of him. A door was pushed open. He slipped into the front passenger seat and was driven away by his brother.

'How did it go?'

'All right.'

He eased back in the seat. The car had once been grey but most of that anonymous colour was now covered with a light coating of dust and dirt. All that was remarkable about the car was the engine, the pride and joy of Robbie Cairns's elder brother.

'When you going to go for it?'

'When I'm ready.'

He was driven away from north London, where he was a stranger, towards the bridges over the river and the ground where he had roots, Cairns family territory. He would do one more trip to the north London patch, and watch again. If nothing showed to concern him, he would fulfil the contract in two days or three.

The sun cooked them in the car.

'Ready, Delta Four?'

It was one of the moments Mark Roscoe lived for, why he

had joined the police service. They didn't come often enough and had to be savoured. Yesterday he had endured his regular duties and yearned for the raw excitement he felt now. Yesterday he had examined the hot-water boiler of a housing-authority maisonette and decided that it needed a plumber. The property was a safe-house and was occupied by a low-life villain and his mistress, moved there by Roscoe's unit. It was hoped he was beyond the reach of a hitman. A prison cell would have been more appropriate for the villain, but there was insufficient evidence to put him away so he was under protection because he was owed the same degree of security as any other citizen. Yesterday Roscoe had realised the villain regarded him as a friend, would probably have made the mistress available, and was seriously grateful for the care taken to keep him alive. He had fallen out with a former partner and the hit had been paid for. Yesterday had been slow and frustrating, and the detail of it stuck in his throat. Today had the prospect of being special.

'Ready, Bravo One.'

He had always felt the call-sign stuff was 'cavalry and Indians', what he might have been doing as a ten-year-old in the park close to where he had lived, but in the service it was the drill, the form, and damn near a capital offence to ignore it.

The command was shrieked in the earpiece: 'Go! Go! Go!'

He was first out of the back of the van – fit and well capable of athleticism even after four hours and nine minutes inside the back of the steel-sided, windowless vehicle. As his shoes hit the concrete he regretted that he hadn't crawled behind the curtain to use the bucket. He was armed but his Glock stayed in the pancake holster at his waist and there would be guys from the CO19 crowd – firearms specialists, the prima donna blokes and birds who strutted the walk when they'd a machine pistol or a handgun readied – out in front by a few paces, two big men carrying the short-arm battering-ram that delivered some ten tonnes of kinetic energy when swung by an expert. Amazing thing, science, and Serious Crime Directorate 7 was issued with most of the high-fly kit.

Forgetting his need for the bucket, feeling the blast of heated air, hearing the wood of the front door splintering and groaning, Roscoe was almost deafened by the shouting of the rammers, the marksmen and a big dog barking fit to bust inside – the handler alongside the lead guns wore a padded jacket and mask as if he were bomb disposal. It was good clean fun, and what Mark Roscoe had joined for.

He was now a detective sergeant. He had little interest in community policing, less in administration and the policy/analysis papers, and none in involvement with community associations or schools liaison. He had consistently sidelined himself from the broad avenues to promotion. So, again needing a leak, but with his adrenalin surging, Roscoe joined the charge on the doorway of a pleasant-enough property in the suburbs to the south-west of London.

He could live with the crap of being Delta Four: the adrenalin was addictive.

Problem. The three-bedroom semi-detached mock-Tudor 1930s property was unoccupied but for a dog. Cause of problem: the unit of SCD7 had brilliant kit but had been unable to stitch together the necessary surveillance resources for full cover, and the watchers had not been in place for the previous eighteen hours. Result of problem: one hungry dog to confront, but no bad guys. He went inside, squeezed into the hallway, had to work his way past an armour-plated marksman. Roscoe could see into the kitchen and the dog, could have been a Rottweiler cross, was on its back. The first men in might have shot it, and had not. Instead they seemed to queue up to scratch its stomach. Roscoe had two people with him – Bill, from Yorkshire, and Suzie, from a floodplain in south-western Bangladesh via east London. He led them into the back room. He could live with the problem of failing to get his hands on the bad guys if the search turned up platinum-scale material.

It was a house where gear was stored and had been fingered by a 'chis'. Nobody liked a chis. A chis was bottom of the heap, but if the information of the Covert Human Intelligence Source delivered he would be tolerated. The chis had been about as specific as was possible. A cupboard in the back room alongside the bricked-up

fireplace. A wood panel inside the cupboard that could be removed. Missing bricks in the party wall behind the panel. The room hadn't any art on the walls, just a pair of Tenerife posters. The smell of dog mess was coming from the kitchen and the sound of the kettle. He, Bill and Suzie had on see-through gloves and the cupboard – where the chis had said it was – was open. The girl, inordinately proud to be a detective constable in SCD7, looked as though the weight of the hammer might snap her skeletal arm, but she insinuated herself past him, expelled him from the space and had the claw into the crack at the top edge of the panel. She grunted with the effort, and when the panel came away she cannoned back into Roscoe and he felt all of her against him – the bones and bumps – and Bill had a torch with the beam aimed into the recess.

It was bloody empty.

Mark Roscoe, detective sergeant of the Flying Squad – thief-takers with a reputation to sustain and a heritage of legendary successes – had called out a six-strong firearms team, who were a precious commodity and knew it, and had two of his own with him, plus uniforms in the street from the local station and the two with the battering-ram. He, Bill and Suzie had their heads crammed into a cupboard and a torch beam lit a hole in which a few spiders milled.

It had been his chis, Roscoe's call. He was answerable to superiors when a foul-up smacked into his face. He could smell the understated scent that the girl had chosen to wear that morning, and he heard the Yorkshireman's obscenity – no apology. There would be an inquest. The floorboard creaked under their combined weight as they manoeuvred clear. A meeting would be convened at which the reliability of the chis would be shredded, the absence of surveillance analysed and the bloody time and motion people would earn their corn. He pushed himself up. His own people were watching him, looking for leadership, and wore the solemn expressions that meant they had no wish to intrude into his grief. The firearms officers were at the door and in the hallway; most seemed to chew gum and had the look of men, women, whose burden was to walk alongside idiots.

He stood. He took his mobile from his pocket and was about to hit the keys. The board was below his feet and under the thin carpeting. Suzie's tiny feet were on the same board, and Bill's massive shoes. She started, Bill followed, like a shuffle dance. They eased weight from toes to heels and were looking at him. Was he an idiot? Slow on the uptake? He bent down, took a corner of the carpet and dragged it clear. It came too easily, and his heart was doing big drumbeats. The board had little scrape marks at the edges. She used the claw hammer, was crouched over the board, and heaved. It came up. Her eyes were wide with excitement, Bill's tongue wetted his lips, and Mark Roscoe let loose a gasp. He waved one of the firearms crowd over to them and stood back.

Not an entirely wasted day. The weapons were individually checked for safe handling and the evidence bags spread out on the kitchen table. The expert reeled off a monotone identification of what they had. 'One Beretta 9mm calibre automatic, one Ingram sub-machine pistol with silencer attached, one Colt .25 pistol with silencer attached, one Walther PPK . . . An estimate, one hundred rounds for the Colt, one filled magazine for the Beretta, some fifty rounds for the Ingram. Two balaclava face masks. That's about it, boss.'

Rather shyly, Suzie congratulated him. With a great clap on the back, Bill told him it was a 'bloody top grade' result, and he could see that he had won the respect of the firearms officer. Ridiculous, but it seemed to matter. The uniforms were told to get a roll of crime-scene tape round the front garden and down the shared drive to the garage. So, the Covert Human Intelligence Source had come up, bar a location error of a few miserable inches, as a star. Mark Roscoe would have the plaudits of his peers, and the chance of the house owner staying out of custody for more than a few hours was remote. A contract killer's kit was bagged and would be photographed, and the rifling in the barrels of each weapon would go to the National Ballistics Intelligence System to be tracked against bullets gouged out of cadavers' bodies. It was, indeed, a hell of a good result.

The unit that Mark Roscoe served with was one of the most

secretive in the Metropolitan Police. It was charged with targeting the increasing threat in the capital city posed by well-rewarded and capable hired hitmen. He found a toilet upstairs, used it, flushed.

And the result would get better. In the garage they found a performance motorcycle, crash helmets and boiler suits that would, with the balaclavas, offer DNA traces. He called in, told his operational commander what they had found.

Another day done. It wasn't about driving contract killers, hitmen, off the streets – or about destroying that culture of cheap killings. It was about holding a line.

They stopped at a fast-food joint and took away chicken pieces, fries and Coke. That part of the Flying Squad, his team, was on call twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week, when overtime allowed, and each of them knew the McDonald's, Burger Kings and Kentuckys better than they knew their own kitchens. It was a life, of a sort.

Suzie drove. He took the back seat. The heat in the car emphasised the failure of the cooling system and sweat from his forehead mixed with the sauce on his lips. He cursed.

Bill said, 'Come on, boss. It's wonderful – blue skies and no clouds, we have a result and the world's at peace, you know what I mean.'

She turned to all of them, faced them from the door. 'You will do it. You will find them. You have to.'

She was the Widow: not a name she had sought but one that had been given. There were others in the village community who were widows and some who were widowers, and there were three sets of orphans, but she alone had been awarded that title. Almost, she wore the given name as if it were a medal of honour . . . and authority.

'Instead of drinking, eating, pretending a corner of a cleared field is a cause for celebration, you should be out there, searching.'

Her man had been a self-proclaimed patriarch in the village. He had gone out into the early-evening failing light and had not come back. With him had been Petar's boy, Tomislav's and the

young cousin of Andrija. For the last days of the defence of the village she had tried to step into her husband's boots. He had commanded the irregulars who fought to hold their homes and keep open the Cornfield Road, but she had been elbowed aside – not just verbally but physically – by Mladen. They had not come back. She had been pushed out of the command bunker and sent to the deep cellar, a crypt, below the church where the wounded were, and had not felt the cold November air on her face for four days. She had stayed, buried like an animal, in the carnage hole that was a useless imitation of a field hospital, until Mladen had come to her. He had had to stoop to pass through the cellar and only fading torches had identified for him those she tended, who had suffered horrific injuries. Now the painkillers and morphine were finished.

He had groped towards her, past the radio that played the live broadcast of Sinisa Glavasevic, who was trapped in the town further down the Cornfield Road. Mladen had knelt in front of her and taken her hands, bloodstained, in his; he had begged forgiveness for her expulsion from the command bunker and had told her the resistance was over. That evening all those who had the strength to run, walk or crawl would go into the corn and try to reach the defence lines at Nustar and Vinkovci. They could not take the wounded. She was told that further defence was suicidal, would achieve nothing, and that the village, with no anti-tank missiles, could not be held. It would be her decision as to whether she stayed with the wounded or went into the cornfields. She had stayed, of course.

She did not talk about what had happened in the hours after the men and other women had fled under cover of darkness. She did not speak about the arrival of tanks in the heart of the village, and the torches beaming down the steps. She had never discussed the actions of the Chetniks as the wounded – with herself and two other women who had remained – were dragged crudely up the steps from the cellar into the nave of the wrecked church. Catheters, bandages and drip tubes had been wrenched loose, and clothing ripped from bosoms and stomachs. She had kept

silent about what had happened. Forty hours later, a Red Cross convoy had been permitted to evacuate the handful of survivors. They lived as if they were dead. Minds worked, ears listened, eyes saw and feet moved, but souls had been killed. When, seven years later, the Widow had left a prefabricated wooden home outside Zagreb and returned to the devastated village, she had been elevated to matriarch, mother to them all. Nothing passed in the village unless she endorsed it.

‘You search for him. You know where to find him. Do I have to take up a spade? Is that woman’s work?’

As teacher in the village school, her husband had been a man of books. There were more books in their home than in all the others in the village. She had qualifications in nursing. He had been undisputed in his leadership: no bank managers lived there, no agricultural co-operative managers and no priest. His authority had been handed on to the Widow.

She had stood for an hour in that kitchen, had drunk only water and refused the open sandwiches, cake and fruit.

An electrician before the war, Mladen lived off a good pension payable to the surviving commander of the village and responsible for its ‘heroic defence’; he had the additional status of widower. Behind him – she thought the boy uninteresting – was the son, Simun, who had been born in the church crypt on a day of fierce shelling, and whose birth had killed his mother. Mladen was a big, bull-shaped man but had knelt before her and she had accepted his guilt.

The farmer was Petar. His wife had survived the capture of the village and the loss of her son, and lived in a lonely, soundless world. And there was Tomislav, whose elder son was dead, missing, disappeared, whose wife and younger children had fled. He was the one who had known how to use the weapons that should have come through the cornfields that night. There was Andrija, the sniper, who had escaped, his wife Maria, who had been captured and violated, and Josip, the clever one and the coward, the one they needed and the one they despised. She saw them all in Petar’s wide new kitchen, which the government had paid for.

There were others. She knew each one. She had treated them, ushered them into the world. She dominated them.

‘Find them – you owe them that.’

What hurt as much as the loss of her man – stupid, obstinate, pompous – was that he had not shared with her the detail of the purchase. Who had Zoran met? Who had been given the money and valuables collected in the village? He had spoken only of seeing his nephew from the ministry, but the nephew had been killed by a shrapnel burst at the bridge over the river at Karlovacs. She knew nothing, and it was a cut to her self-esteem.

She looked each of them in the face, was given mumbled promises that the search for her husband’s body and the three others would start the next day. She snorted.

The Widow went through the door and the boy, Simun, pushed forward to take her arm and steady her down the steps, but she shrugged him away.

The sun had dipped. Her shadow was thrown long and sharply angular on the road. She went by the church, most of it rebuilt, and took a lane leading out of the village to the north. She passed one house where Serbs had lived and where the pram chassis had been found, and another where the handcart had been dumped, but there had been no word of what had happened to her husband and the younger men. It was a long walk for her but the sun’s strength had slackened and she had her stick. She hobbled forward on a worn path of packed earth and the corn rose high on either side of her, dwarfing her. Far in the distance there was the tree-line and the river. She went as far as the corn and stopped where the planted strip gave way to verdant weed. At the point where she stood, there would have been, until that morning, a metal sign, a little rusted after thirteen years, that warned of the dangers of going on to mined ground. Birds sang and flipped between the corn stems. A buzzard wheeled. She could imagine how it had been, and that fuelled the hatred.

To the north, the town fronted on to the great and historic waterway, the Danube river, a winding, sprawling snake with a

slow, endless slither. The other three boundaries of the town were formed by cultivated fields that stretched away, that summer of devastating heat, with long strips of corn, sunflowers and vines. Alongside the crops were planted the speciality of that region of central Europe: mines had been rooted in fertile ground, beside the mass graves of civilians and soldiers. That year promised a good harvest – trailer-loads of grain, vats of oil, casks of wine and, as happened every year, the fields would give up more of the maiming devices. More of the graves would be uncovered where the dead had been dumped but never forgotten. The agricultural land on the plateau high above the Danube had always held graves, had always been on a fault line of violence. It was far from the great cities of Europe, remote from the councils of hurrying leaders. Who cared? Life moved on.

The town surrounded by minefields and mass graves was Vukovar. It had lived, barely, in the eye of a media storm for a few days as winter had set in during an atrocity nineteen years before. Vukovar had been an image of dead cornfields, distant columns of smoke rising to gunmetal skies, of mud, misery and murder . . . but it was all far away from London, Paris, Berlin and Rome. It was even further from Washington. Who cared if savages butchered each other in a distant corner? Not many. Did it matter? Not a lot. Now most memories had wiped away the name of a small town on a fine river. Vukovar.

But a minefield had been cleared, and a farmer would drive his tractor, the next day, over the ground that an old German shepherd dog had found to be safe. He would have confidence in the dog's nose, and those who had not forgotten – would never forget – would watch the plough turn fresh furrows. A new strip would be prepared for sowing . . . old grievances awakened and hatreds reborn.

That evening there was a fine sunset over the river, and cranes tracked the barges that plied upstream drawn by tugboats. A mist gathered, and the sun's colour was diffused: it had been gold and became blood red.