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# Still Midnight

## Denise Mina

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Extract

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# STILL MIDNIGHT

Denise Mina



# I

An orange Sainsbury's plastic bag in full sail floated along the dark pavement. Belly bowed, handles erect, it sashayed like a Victorian gentleman on a Sunday stroll, passed a garden gate and followed the line of the low rockery wall until a sudden breeze buffeted it, lifting the fat bag off its heels, slamming it into the side of a large white van.

Air knocked from it, the bag crumpled to the floor, settling softly under the van's back wheel.

The van was barely three weeks old, had already been stolen and bore false number plates. It was parked carefully at the kerb, still warm from the heat of the engine, and in six hours' time it would be found smouldering in woodland, all forensic traces of the men inside obliterated.

Three men sat in the cabin, faces turned in chorus, watching the bungalow across the road.

The driver, Malki, leaned over the steering wheel. He was junkie-thin. From deep inside the dark hood of his tracksuit his sunken eyes darted around the street like a cat hunting a fly.

The two men next to him moved as one animal. Eddy in the middle and Pat sitting by the far door. Both in their late twenties, they'd worked for seven years as a two-man door crew on the graveyard shift. They'd watched films together, met and dumped women together, went to the gym together and, in the manner of married couples, their style had harmonised. Both were meaty, dressed identically in brand new black camouflage trousers, high lace boots, flack waistcoats and balaclavas rolled up to their

foreheads. All the gear was fresh from the packet, the display creases still discernable.

A longer look would identify the differences between them. Eddy in the middle drank too much since the wife and kids left. He ate greasy takeaways late at night when he got in from work, undoing all the good he'd done himself in the weights room, and had become bloated and bitter. His eye was forever fixed on what he didn't have.

It had long been a bone of contention between them that Pat was handsome. Worse, he looked younger than Eddy. More moderate in his character, he didn't eat or drink as much and fumed less. He was blessed with a head of lush yellow hair, appealingly regular features, and had a stillness about him that made women feel safe. His nose had been broken but even that only served to make his face look vulnerable.

It was Eddy who had come up with the scheme and he had bought the kit. Belligerently, he had bought both sets in the same size, in his size. As they'd dressed together in Eddy's messy bedsit he'd brought out a tin of black camouflage make-up for them to smear on their faces, like they did when they went paintballing. Softly, almost tenderly, Pat said no and made him put it away. They'd be wearing balaclavas; it wasn't necessary and that stuff dried out and made Pat's skin itchy. The glee with which Eddy had produced it worried Pat. It was as if they were putting the final touches to a surprising Halloween costume instead of planning a home invasion that could lead to a twenty-year stretch. Pat had never even done an overnight. Now he fingered the flattened bridge of his nose, covering his face with his hand, hiding his doubt.

He looked down at the gun in his lap. It was heavier than he would have thought, he was worried about being able to hold it up with one hand. He glanced at Eddy and found him glaring at the bungalow as if it had insulted him.

Pat shouldn't be here. He shouldn't have volunteered Malki

to be here either. This wasn't about trying to cheer Eddy up any more. This was dangerous, this felt like a mistake. He looked away. Eddy had been through too much recently. Not big stuff but sore stuff, and Pat felt as if a single reproachful glance might snap him in half. Still, he looked up at the neat little garden path, at the quiet glowing house and thought that a twenty-year stretch was an awful lot of sorry-about-your-wife.

It was a nice family bungalow, well proportioned, with a shallow garden stretching all the way around the corner into the next street. The current owner, pragmatic, without thought for aesthetics, had bricked over the lawn and flower beds to create a car park. A blue television tinge flickered in the living-room window and a warm pink shone through the glass front door into the hall.

'See?' Eddy said softly, keeping his eyes on the house. 'Single hostile in living room. Small, possibly female.'

A woman in her own home. Nothing hostile about that. Instead of saying it Pat nodded and said, 'Check.'

'We're going in along the back wall, 'member to stay in the dark, until we get to the front door.'

'Check.' Pat didn't really know the military patter and was wary of straying from that one word. Eddy was enjoying it, the whole special ops thing, and Pat didn't want to spoil it for him.

'Then—' Eddy broke off into quasi-militaristic signs. He pointed at Pat, indicated forwards, touched his own chest and swivelled his head to show he'd be on lookout. He mimed Pat knocking on the front door, his eyes widened with warning as an imaginary hostile opened it, and his hand chopped a Go! Go! Go! through the air. His hand got into the house and then, zig-zagging like a fish through reeds, looked into all the rooms off the hall, circling all the hostiles they had gathered in the hallway.

'*Then* we ask for Bob. Not before. *Not before*. Don't give the cunt warning while he could still be concealed. And no names once we get in. Clear?'

'Check.'

Eddy turned and slapped the jittery driver's arm with the back of his hand. 'When the door opens for the second time, we're coming out. You start the engine, pull up over there.' He pointed to the garden gate. 'Got it?'

Malki stared steadily into the street, his face slack, his eyes glazed over.

'Malki.' Pat leaned across Eddy and touched Malki's forearm gently. 'Hey, Malki-man, d'ye hear Eddy just then?'

Malki came alive. 'Aye, no worries, man, like, soon as I see the light – doof! Up there, right? Straight there, man.' He held the steering wheel tight and nodded adamantly, half affirmation, half wired-junkie tremor. His eyelashes were as ginger as his hair, straight and long as a cow's.

Pat bit his lip and sat back, looking out of the side window. He could feel Eddy's reproachful glance burning his cheek. Malki was there because he was Pat's young cousin. Malki needed the dosh, he always needed dosh, but he wasn't fit for it. Neither was Pat, if he was honest.

For a moment all three looked back at the bungalow, Pat chewing the inside of his cheek, Eddy angry and frowning, Malki nodding and nodding and nodding.

The wind picked up.

Below the van's back wheel the stunned plastic bag was waking up. As the breeze streamed below the car the bag filled up at one corner and began tugging its feet free until it slid out from the undercarriage.

In the wide, still street the bag rose to its feet, performed an elegant cartwheel across the road, towards the house and took flight in a sharp cross draft at the corner. It parasailed ten feet into the air, an orange moon, up and up, drifting out of sight of the van, around the corner to the other side of the bungalow and over the roof of a blue Vauxhall Vectra.

The Vauxhall's headlights were off but two men sat inside,

slumped in the front seats, arms folded, waiting.

They were a scant five years younger than the pretend soldiers in the van around the corner but were better fed, better groomed, altogether more shiny and hopeful.

Omar was spindly and awkward, a walking elbow-jab. He still had the sort of ethereal thinness young men have before they fill out; everything about him was elongated: his nose was long, his jaw pointed, his fingers so long and thin they seemed to have extra joints on them. Mo, in the driver's seat, was round faced, with a bulbous end to his nose that would worsen as he aged.

They had been waiting for twenty minutes, talking sometimes to fill the time, but mostly silent. The radio rumbled in the background and the soft yellow light lit their chins. Ramadan AM broadcast locally for only one month a year. It filled its schedules with young Glaswegians clumsily rehashing opinions they'd heard at Mosque or on tapes. Mo and Omar weren't listening for moral instruction; it was a small community and sometimes they knew the speakers and got a laugh when they sounded nervous or said stupid things. The debates were best early in the evening, when everyone was hungry. Mo and Omar would chant over the rancour: 'Give us a biscuit, give us a biscuit.'

Mo sat in the driver's seat resting his eye on a magazine with a double page spread about Lamborghinis.

'Fuck, man,' he said almost to himself, 'couldn't pay me to take that car.'

Omar didn't answer.

'I mean park that car *anywhere* and it'll get keyed to fucking ribbons.'

'It's not for going messages for your mum.' Omar's voice was surprisingly high. ''S for cruising up the neighbourhood, being seen in.'

Mo looked at him. 'Impressing fit birds and that?'

'Aye.'

Mo looked back at the pictures. 'Aye, well, you'd know, being a noted ladies' man.'

Omar rubbed hard at his right eye with spidery fingers. 'Listen, man women are fighting to get at me. Just, like, when you're there they lay off, because, ye know, might make ye feel inadequate and that.'

'Course they do.' Mo nodded at the magazine. 'You're a good tipper.'

Omar yawned and stretched, drawling when he spoke. 'I'm an international lady magnet.'

Mo jabbed an animated finger at an action photo of a yellow Lamborghini taking a corner on a sunny mountain side. 'It looks like a speed bump. Folk won't know whether to be impressed or slow down, man.'

The pundit on Radio Ramadan gave a time check – 10.23 – and both did the mental calculation.

Mo spoke first. 'Give it five minutes or so.'

'Aye.' Omar yawned luxuriously again, juddering on the comedown, 'Bloody knackered . . . Can't have a smoke in here, can I?'

'Nah, man, it'll stink the motor out.'

'Put my window down, then.'

Mo huffed and pressed the button on his door to lower Omar's window. Then he twitched a smile and lowered his own. Tutting, Omar took out his packet, handed a cigarette to Mo and took one himself before lighting them both up.

They sat, puffing shallow breaths, blowing white streams of smoke that flattened over the windscreen. The October breeze outside tugged thin tendrils of smoke out, over the roof of the car and into the quiet street.

Back around the corner, in the front seat of the stolen van, Eddy and Pat were pulling their balaclavas down, adjusting the eyeholes. Eddy picked up his gun and he and Pat looked at it. The barrel was vibrating, amplifying the shakes in his hand. Suddenly angry, Eddy nodded a 'go'.

Pat hesitated for only a moment before loyalty propelled him out of the van. By the time both his feet were on the street he was already rueing it.

Behind him Eddy slithered down, shut the door and thumped Pat on the back, knocking him towards the gate.

Pat turned and squared up to him, ready to say his piece, but Eddy didn't notice. Keeping his gun flush to his side, he ran in a low crouch across the road to the gate and up the dark path.

The wind in the street made Pat's eyes stream and through the tears he watched Eddy running up the path, fast and low, enjoying himself. Pat chased after him, aping him, his head down, back straight, a human battering ram. They took the steep garden path in single file, Eddy heading towards the pink glow at the front door, Pat running after Eddy to say no. Suddenly Eddy veered off the path, standing in the shadow of the fence.

Pat caught up to him. 'Eddy—'

But Eddy swung his gun up parallel to his cheek and flicked the safety catch off. His chest was heaving with excitement as he wrapped both hands around the butt and scampered over to the front door.

Pat watched Eddy, noting quietly that he was running too fast across the short space. Eddy arrived before he expected to, spun awkwardly and slammed his back flush against the wall, his head jerking back on his neck, his skull cracking loudly off the brickwork.

Eddy's eyes snapped shut at the pain. He bent forward from the waist slightly, panted, waggled the barrel of his gun at Pat to tell him to move.

Pat wondered suddenly if he could grab Eddy's arm, pull him back to the van. Or just turn and walk himself, get in the van with Malki, refuse to move, but they had shelled out for the van already, bought the guns, and anyway Malki needed to be paid. Malki really needed to be paid.

Pat took a breath and, against his own best counsel, sauntered casually out of the dark, up to the front door.

He pressed the bell.

A cosy three-tone chime rang out in the hallway and a moment later, behind the mottled glass panel, two shadows materialised, one far away down the hall, the other close, coming from the left, just feet away inside the door.

The faraway figure had set his shoulders in a huff, spoke indistinctly, sounded annoyed. The second figure answered him, drawling, insolent. She was close, had come from the living room to the left of the door. It was the hostile they had spotted from the van. Definitely female, she was slim, dressed in jeans and a grey T-shirt with long black hair loose down her back.

Graceful as water she reached for the handle.

The door fell open and a puff of warmth billowed out to meet Pat's nose – the smell of toast.

Pink carpet and walls. To his left was a small black telephone table between the living room door and another. Above it, on the wall, a cheap-looking black velvet clock ticked loudly, a picture on the back of it, a gold line drawing of a mosque or something. Pat mapped the room: six doors leading off. Paki music coming from a back room, at least one other person in the house.

Pat looked at the hostile who had answered the door. She wasn't obviously beautiful; her nose was long and pointy and she had an angry red spot on her cheek. He could never explain, then or afterwards, why the sight of her struck him so, or why he froze, gun limp by his side, drinking in the flawless 's' of black hair resting on her shoulder. 'Hello Monkey,' said her T-shirt, a green slogan on faded soft grey, the line of the letters cracked and broken from the washing machine.

Aleesha looked back at him, quizzical, eyes snaking across his face as if she was trying to make sense of the black woollen canvas. A strand of blue-black hair slipped softly from her shoulder, coming to rest across her small apple-round breast.

She was wearing western clothes and didn't seem to have a bra on under her T-shirt, which was odd because she was definitely the man's daughter; she looked like him, and Pat always thought those old Asian guys had a firm hold over their daughters.

'Who in the hell are you . . .' called the man at the back of the hall. He was small, sixty or seventy, had an Amish-looking neat little curtain-hanging of a beard and wore pale blue nylon pyjamas, perfectly ironed, 'coming in here . . .' his voice faded, the danger occurring to him, 'so late . . . ?'

Ironed pyjamas and warmth and toast. Pat began to salivate. He wanted to walk in, shed his jacket and stay, but a sharp shoulder hit him from behind, shoving him into the house. Eddy barged in, stumbled over the door mat and staggered sideways up the pink hall, his crazy crab dance watched by everyone, until, bandy-legged, he regained his balance. His balaclava had slipped off-centre, blinding him until he tugged at it, remembered his gun, raised it, seemed surprised at the sight of it in his hand.

Watching from the other end of the hall, Pat could sense his embarrassment. Eddy took a deep breath, tipped his head back and shouted through the mouth of the balaclava, 'BOB! *BOB*!'

His entrance, dress and manner were so distracting that no one really heard what he said. The pyjama'd man looked anxiously back at the door to see if anyone else was coming in. The girl next to Pat bristled. Fear settled like smog in the hallway.

Pat looked at the girl again. The colour had drained from her cheeks, her eyes were wide, watchful of Eddy, looking out for her father. He was struck by her again, felt his heart slow and the hairs on his skin rise as if reaching towards her. She saw him look, his pale blue eyes pleading and wondering.

Aleesha was a teenager and therefore only interested in the world as it spoke about her. She saw Pat like her, long for her to like him back and despite her bewilderment and terror, his frank admiration warmed her. Still, she was young and in the presence of her father and felt suddenly terribly embarrassed. Dropping

her head forwards so that a curtain of black hair fell across her face, she rolled a shy step back towards the living room door.

The movement made Eddy jump. He pounced towards her, snatched her arm, yanked her back towards Pat. 'DON'T FUCKING TRY. GET OUT HERE. STAY OUT *HERE*.'

Having thrown her off balance he let go and skipped back down to the pyjama'd man, leaving Aleesha bent over to the side. She glared at the arm Eddy had dared to touch. Ballsy as fuck. Pat smiled beneath his woolly mask. When she stood up straight her face was an inch from Pat's chest and she looked up at him, her plump lips parting, her fear superseded for a moment by anger.

In that moment, when she was no longer terrified, Pat's wool-framed eyes asked her a wordless question. Aleesha arched her back, stood tall, looking down her long nose and answered with a slow, proud blink.

Each smiled and looked away.

The sight of the unfamiliar pink carpet brought Pat to his senses. He raised his heavy gun at the ceiling, half heartedly, as if he was showing it to her, and Aleesha smothered a panicky giggle.

A sharp click drew every eye to a door across the hall. It opened slowly and a big square man looked out into the hall. Billal took after his uncles, not his wee daddy, and his hugeness was unexpected and alarming.

Though only a few feet away, Eddy screamed at him, 'BOB? Are you Bob?'

Eyes wide, shoulders stiff, Billal stepped out of the room, shutting the door behind him. His hands stayed behind his back, holding the door handle firmly.

'BOB?'

'No,' said Billal quietly. 'I'm not … no one called Bob here, mate.'

'OPEN IT!' shouted Eddy, jabbing the barrel of the gun at him. 'OPEN THAT DOOR!'

Billal glanced at his feet and swallowed awkwardly. 'Um, no, actually, I won't.'

At this Aleesha snorted, giving Pat an excuse to look at her again. Her hand was over her mouth, fingers glittering prettily with small cheap rings, false nails glued on badly, the index finger nail squinty. She couldn't be over seventeen. He shouldn't think those things about a seventeen-year-old. He had nieces that age.

Eddy stepped purposefully over to Billal, pointing his gun at his nose. 'MOVE IT!'

Hypnotised by the gun barrel, the big man stepped slowly to the side. Eddy raised his foot and kicked at the door with his heel.

The room was dimly lit. Straight across from the door was an old-fashioned double divan bed, high, with a dark wood headboard, much marked. Sitting in the bed was a wild-haired, bloated woman, two fingers of her right hand scissored around a hugely swollen brown nipple. In her other hand she cradled the bald head of a tiny baby.

She stared at the gun barrel and clutched the baby to her breast, covering herself with it.

Eddy was still staring at the place where the exposed nipple had been. 'Out,' he said. 'Get out here.'

Billal stepped between them, his palms forming a wall in front of the gun barrel. 'Careful with that, mate.'

Eddy panicked. 'DONT TOUCH MY GUN! NOB'DY TOUCH MY GUN.'

'OK, OK.' Billal raised his hands high in surrender, 'No worries, no bother.'

'AND YOU,' Eddy stepped aside to shout at the woman in the bed, 'OUT HERE.'

'Oh. But I've not to get up,' she said, looking at the big man for backup. 'I could haemorrhage.'

Eddy glanced at Pat, saw him stealing a lingering look at Aleesha's hair, and screamed across the hall, 'LIFT YOUR FUCKING GUN, PAT.'

Everyone in the hall realised his mistake before Eddy did. He should never have said Pat's name. Billal look away, the daddy flinched and Aleesha snorted and suppressed a panicked laugh.

Eddy bit his lower lip and began to tremble with panic. It wasn't going well. It wasn't going well at all. Feeling himself without an ally in the hall, Eddy spun back to Billal. 'FUCKER! YOU FUCKING FUCK! BOB! WHERE'S BOB?'

Billal raised his hands in surrender. 'Mate, there's no one called Bob here. There's no one else in the house. We've got a wee baby here. Just go.' He gestured to the front door. 'You just go and we'll say nothing, right? Just you go on out and there'll be no problem, eh?'

'*Who's shouting*?' A mother's command. Everyone stiffened and turned to look at the back of the hall.

Sadiqa was wide as she was tall, which wasn't very. She didn't have her glasses on and so peered down at the two black shadows. 'Omar? What are you boys doing?'

With the incongruous grace of a fat boxer, Eddy skipped down the hall, grabbed both her and the old man by the forearm, dragging them up to Billal's side. He stood them in a line, pointing his gun at each in turn, shouting so loud his voice cracked. To Aamir, 'WHO,' to Sadiqa, 'IS,' to Billal, 'BOB?'

Sadiqa was the only one who answered. 'A gun . . . ?'

Eddy's attention was on her now and Aamir stepped forward to distract him. His hands were up, his eyes down, and he wobbled his head, obsequious as an old country boy. 'Son, we's all Indians here. There's no Bobs here. No Bobs, wrong house.'

Sadiqa looked at the back of Aamir's head and sucked her teeth disapprovingly.

But Aamir ignored her and continued to beg. 'No Bobs, mate. Wrong. You go. No problem.'

The black velvet clock ticked loudly.

No one knew what to do. Except Aleesha. Addled with fear and the bold compliment of Pat's gaze, she was sure that the whole thing would be OK, that coming in with a gun was somehow a benign misunderstanding. She wanted it to stop. Looking at the side of Pat's head, she smiled and reached her left hand forward to the woollen rim, intending to whip the balaclava off with a cheerful 'Ta-da', put an end to the awkwardness.

Unexpected fingernails scratching the back of his neck shocked Pat into a spin.

He hadn't meant to pull the trigger.

Omar and Mo jumped when they heard the muffled 'whoomph' coming from the house and saw the flash of white light in Billal and Aleesha's bedroom window.

They turned to each other for confirmation of what they had seen, read the shock on one another's faces and threw their car doors open in unison, dropping their cigarettes in the street, leaving the doors wide as they bolted over the pavement. One after the other they leapt over the low garden wall, scrambling around the corner to the front door. Omar kicked it open.

Malki felt calm now, cool, OK. A flash of pink light caught the corner of his eye as the front door opened. He remembered his instructions and snapped into action.

Crumpling the still warm tinfoil in his hand into a ball, he went to throw it over his shoulder but stopped, thinking to himself that it would be unwise to do so. He smiled at his own lucidity, and brought his hand down, tucking the foil deep into the corner of his hoodie pocket and then, with mechanical precision, twisted the van key, slid the handbrake off, engaged

the clutch and drove slowly forwards, straight across the road to the rendezvous point.

He was congratulating himself on having remembered the instructions but forgot to stop and crashed the front of the van into the low garden wall, smashing the left headlight.

Glass tinkled cheerfully onto the pavement. Malki bit his lip.

Omar kicked the door open and found everyone frozen still in the hall. Two strange men were there, dressed in army fatigues. The air smelled odd, smoky, sulphurous. Everyone was staring at Aleesha and for a moment neither Mo nor Omar could work out why.

She was standing with her arm up, as if she was pointing at the wall clock, looking over her shoulder. Omar followed her eyes to her hand. A blur of black red, violent red, fingers jumbled like a scattered jigsaw.

A sudden red snake raced down her arm.

Wild eyed, she turned to face the stranger in front of her. 'My fucking hand!' she said, using both accent and words that were forbidden in the house.

The gunman whimpered a sorry.

A fatter gunman leapt across the hall to Omar and Mo, pointing his gun in each of their faces and back again. 'ONE OF YOU FUCKERS IS BOB.'

Neither spoke.

'YOU.' He poked the gun at Mo's chest. 'You're Bob.'

But Mo had a different nose than the rest of them. Omar had the family features, Aamir's long nose and Sadiqa's narrow jaw. Without waiting for Mo to answer he turned his gun on Omar and said quietly, 'You're Bob.'

Sadiqa couldn't contain herself any longer. She reached for her favourite child and shouted, 'Not Omar! Not my Omar!'

At this Eddy became confused. In the silence, through the open front door, came the sound of shattered glass falling from

the lights as Malki backed the van away from the wall's embrace.

'Fuck yees,' said Eddy spitefully. He reached over and wrapped a hand tight around Aamir's throat. The small man didn't object or raise a hand; he kept his eyes down, implicating no one.

Eddie squeezed, saw that the old man was not going to resist or defend himself and was suddenly calm. 'Yous can tell Bob this: I want two million quid, used notes, by tomorrow night. Call the polis and this fucker dies. Fucking payback. For Afghanistan.'

'Afghanistan?' spat Sadiqa. 'I'm from Coatbridge, what's that . . .' She caught her indignantion, dropped her chin to her chest, shutting up.

Aleesha's hand was slowly coming down and she watched the blood pulse from the messy end of it. 'My fucking hand,' she whispered.

Letting go of Aamir's throat, Eddy skipped behind him, wrapping his forearm around the old man's chest, holding him along the Empire line.

Everyone in the hall braced themselves for a gun to Aamir's head, more shouting, but Eddy did neither. Instead he tipped his weight back, easily lifting the old man off his feet and carried him backwards out of the front door like a heavy lamp.

Sheepish, Pat broke eye contact with Aleesha, muttered another sorry and followed him outside.

The hall suddenly came alive: Sadiqa lumbered across the hall to catch Aleesha, whose knees were giving way. Holding her daughter's arm above her head to stem the bleeding, she knocked the phone from its cradle and stabbed 999 on the keypad. Billal blocked the bedroom door with his body as he pulled his mobile from his pocket, punching the number in with his thumb. Even in the bed, the baby thrashing at her breast, Meeshra lunged for the mobile on the side table and called the emergency services.

Omar and Mo chased after the gunmen, out into the street.

The van had one headlight gleaming extra bright from the

smashed casing. As it drove off along the street the back door was shutting, a chubby hand pulling at it, and Omar gave a plaintive little cry. 'Nugget . . .'

Mo grabbed his shoulder and tugged him towards the Vauxhall. The boys bolted for the car.

Mo drove as Omar watched for the van. It was a dark road. On the left was a golf course, on the right a dark stretch of balding bushes and shrubs leading up to a blank wall. Though the road was broad and straight, though the streets were quiet, they'd lost a massive white van, the only other car on the fucking road.

They had it at one point, they were sure: Mo had spotted tail lights ahead, high enough off the road to be a van. He saw a glimpse of white door creep cautiously around a corner, defying a red light.

As they came up to the road over the M8 motorway Mo slowed for a red light and Omar suddenly swung his arm over Mo's face, hitting his chin. 'Stop!' he shouted. 'Stop!'

Mo stamped on the brake, bringing the Vauxhall to an abrupt skidding standstill. Beltless, Omar slid like a comedy drunk into the footwell, his cheek smacking off the dashboard.

'Police!' shouted Omar from the footwell, pointing past Mo to the door. ''S police car!'

A squad car was tucked neatly into a small cut-off, lights dark, poised to catch speeding motorists. The two police officers inside had been watching the Vauxhall battering down the empty road towards them, had expected to follow it onto the motorway, pull it over and practise their sarcasm, but the emergency stop surprised them. They watched as Omar jumped out of the car, leaving his door swinging wide as he ran over to them.

'Police! Please . . .' A rude pink bruise was forming on his cheek from the collision with the dashboard.

Wary, the officers unclipped their belts, opened the doors and

stepped out to meet him. 'Were you wearing a seat belt just then, sir?'

'Sorry, no, but listen, my dad, my dad's been taken away in a van.'

But they weren't listening to him. The policemen were looking at his clothes.

Both the boys were wearing traditional white baggy trousers and shirts. They had just come from Mosque and so appeared to the officers as particularly clean and strange looking. Omar had a zip-up Adidas hoody over his kameez and trainers, but Mo had a cardigan on and loafers and his scraggy beard was untrimmed.

Suddenly aware of how alien they looked, Mo attempted a friendly smile. 'All right, mate?' he said cheerfully to the nearest policeman but tension and fright distorted his voice and his face. Both officers' hands strayed to their belts. A lorry rumbled along the motorway below them.

'No,' Omar said helplessly. 'Please help us, men took my dad away in a van. They had guns.'

The police examined them in silence. From the open Vauxhall doors the sounds of Radio Ramadan floated out over the still suburban midnight: some guy, young, talking in a phoney Arab accent, arguing about the Qur'an.

Both boys suddenly realised how foreign this whole thing was going to look to the police

Taking this as a cue, the officer standing nearest Omar opened his notebook and spoke slowly. 'Could you tell me your name, sir?'

'Omar Anwar.' He carried on talking as the officer wrote it down. 'Look, men with guns came to our house and stole my dad, took him, they'd guns.'

The officer refused to look up from his notebook. 'How are you spelling that, sir?'

'He's been kidnapped.'

'I see. O – M- A- R, A – N- W- A- R?'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah. Look, we followed the van as far as the last set of lights but we lost them then and I think they're headed for the motorway. They could go anywhere . . .'

The officer taking the notes glanced up at the car, at the voices, at Mo's beard. Omar let out a weak laugh. 'No, look, my dad's just a wee guy that runs a shop, it's not a security matter, it's just guys with guns. They wanted money. Afghanistan, they said it was, something about Afghanistan.'

'Turn around and put your hands on the roof of the car please, sir.'

'They're criminals!'

'Just put your hands on the car please, sir.' He said it more firmly this time. Omar did as he was asked.

The other officer moved round to the other side of the car and motioned for Mo to come and copy Omar's example. With the boys arranged on either side of the car, the officers took a man each, patting them down.

Mo knew he looked the most alien because of his beard and so he started talking quietly to the officers searching him, thickening his accent to its private school best. 'Officer, we really appreciate that you have to do this, really, we do, but my friend's dad is just a very ordinary member of the public. He's Scottish.'

Omar watched across the roof of the car and saw the officer's eyes narrow spitefully at the back of Mo's neck. He knew, suddenly, that sounding posh was not the way to invite sympathy and he tried to signal to Mo, but Mo wasn't looking at him.

'You see,' continued Mo, 'my friend's dad was taken from his home by gunmen, they've injured his sixteen-year-old sister.'

''S that right?'

'Yes. They bundled him into a van and we ran after them, following the van, but we seem to have lost it.'

'Why didn't you call the police, *sir*?'

'Well, we went after them.'

'D'yees not have a mobile? One can drive, one can call.'

'I suppose . . . we didn't think . . . It's a big white van, possibly a Merc, a panel van, the left light at the front's broken, it's brighter, because they went into the wall near the house—'

'Right? Really?' The officer's pace was slow. He stopped searching Mo, half smirked, pressed the end of his automatic pencil.

Just then, looking over Mo's shoulder at the motorway below, Omar saw the van with one bright light coming out of the empty motorway towards them. He screamed, 'Hoi!' put two hands on the Vauxhall's bonnet and skimmed across it, sprinting to the crash barrier just as the van shot underneath the bridge. Omar hung over the railing, shouted after it, 'Nugget! Nugget!'

A blinding whoosh of pain stabbed his shoulder, swept up his neck and circled his ribcage, making his knees buckle. He twisted as he slid to the ground, trying to turn into the painful hold that the policeman had locked him in.

Holding him by the wrist, the officer lifted Omar to his feet as easily as a hollow stick, guiding him back across the road to the squad car. Omar saw the white van through the far railings, trundling off along the motorway, headed for the city.