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Rat Run

Written by Gerald Seymour

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RAT RUN

Gerald Seymour



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Prologue

The life of Malachy Kitchen moved on, and he neither knew in what direction nor cared.

He sat bolt upright in the passenger seat, rigid. The radio played a pirate station, the driver's choice of music, but the voice boomed in his ear and could not be escaped.

'It was your shoes. I reckoned them as a toff's shoes. Don't get the wrong idea. I'm not a man who draws lines under people, those that should get the bestest treatment. What your shoes did, they sort of interested me. I get to see all sorts, and some tickle me and some don't.'

Malachy had slept the last night in a dossers' hostel behind the great canopy of Waterloo station, not well because of the coughing, moaning and snoring in the dormitory. Home for that week had been the rows of close-packed beds, the smell of the disinfectant and the stink of the fried food in the canteen, the stench of the bodies, the sound of fights and yelled arguments. Each morning he and the others had been turned out on to the street after breakfast, and the rest had

shuffled off up the pavements towards the river. He had sat on the steps between the pavement and the shut door and had waited all day for the scrape of the lock being turned, the bolt drawn down and the creak of the hinges as the door swung open.

'Lighten up, that's what I'm telling you. I saw you, found you, and the shoes hit my eyes, and I thought you were worth giving a lift up to. I see derelicts, vagrants, addicts of alcohol and narcotics, see them all the time, and I have an opinion and I make a judgement. A few times, not often, I get the feeling in my water that a man is worth a few hours of my day. You want to know what gets worst up my nose? Well, I shall take the liberty of telling you. When I make the effort, and the customer does not, that sticks in my nose and it itches bad. Are you hearing me? God, man, what does it take you to talk? Don't you understand when you're being helped? Did you fall that far?'

Before the hostel, he had been at the cardboard city in the underpasses of the Elephant and Castle junction. His own space had been a carton in which a twenty-eight-inch widescreen colour television had been packaged, and another that had held a stand-up fridge/freezer. He had begged during the day and drunk at night before sleeping, wrapped in the blanket of a man who had not woken one morning, had been dead when the first commuters had tripped past. Malachy had fallen that far. He had queued for soup; he had shied away from the young policemen who patrolled at night; he had stayed clear of the junkies. Some days he had walked on the bridge beyond the station and had looked down into the muddy swirl of the river, but had not had the courage

to lever himself up on to the wall. If he had, and his thin, fleshless fingers had not been able to take the weight, it would have ended.

'When I saw those shoes, stuck out from under your blanket, half covered over with the cardboard, I said, "Sure as God walks this earth, Ivanhoe Manners, this man can be given a hand up." With me, my friend, you get one chance, one chance alone. You fuck that chance and you don't see me back. Plenty of others to spend my time on. You live under the cardboard, you beg and you drink, and your future is an ambulance in the morning and a space left in an underpass. You want that, you can have it, but the warden told me that since you went into the hostel, there was no smell of drink on you – but it's still one chance with me, one chance alone. I can't do it for you.'

What he possessed were the empty olive-green rucksack, which had been filled with old newspapers to make a pillow in the underpass, the fibre dog-tags that listed his name, number, religion and blood group, the clothes on his back, and the shoes. They were all from time gone by, yet he had clung to them. The rucksack had the grime of the streets on it, tears in the front pouches, and two of the fastening buckles were broken. The dog-tags were from Basic Training, always hidden by his fist when he was in the hostel showers, because they were the proof of who and what he had been before. The clothes, almost unrecognizable now, were those of a civilian who dressed well. The trousers had rips at the knees and were coated with dirt, and the jacket was frayed at the cuffs and elbows. It was held across his chest with string. His pullover had unravelled. His shirt collar was part disintegrated. His socks were

holed at the toes and heels and were damp from last night's scrub in the hostel's washhouse. His shoes were brogues. Smart when his mother had bought them for him before he had gone away on the last posting, before he had fallen. When he had been dropped off at wherever this journey was taking him, he thought that the grossly large West Indian social worker would take a stiff brush, a bucket of soapy water and an aerosol spray to the car to clean it. The smell, not commented on, curled the man's nostrils.

'If you don't care to communicate, that's your problem. See if I give a damn. It's in your hands, whether you want to climb out of the shit or whether you want to drop back into it. Folk can feel sorry for themselves and reckon the world's done them wrong, or they can pick themselves up. Doesn't mean I'm confident about you. Satisfaction in my job doesn't come frequent - but I just don't know whether you're crap, useless, or not.'

The car edged out of the traffic flow into a tight gap and parked. He knew the road and had begged in it. The driver hoisted his rucksack and walked across the pavement.

Malachy followed him into the charity shop. He stood inside the door, nervous and clutching his hands together. He was ignored, except when estimates were made of his chest size, waist measurement and inner leg. He was not asked what he wanted and the banter between the staff and the social worker did not include him. The clothes were from house clearances, or from the dead. They were chosen for warmth, because autumn was closing in and the air carried a spit of rain. Two pairs of trousers, three

shirts, underclothes, socks, a brown-flecked overcoat that a stooping old man might have worn, an anorak, a sports jacket and a pair of bulging trainers were piled on the counter, paid for, then forced into the mouth of the rucksack.

They stopped at a supermarket. Milk, bread, margarine, a jar of coffee, a packet of teabags and a pile of chilled meals for one person were dropped into the basket. He had nothing to decide: the food was chosen for him, and the dusters, the toothpaste, the disposable razor blades and the shoe polish.

He was driven on.

He saw the wide smile, the flash of the teeth.

'Oh, don't thank me, don't bother to. Don't think of thanking me because you don't know yet where I'm taking you . . . There's a cop I know at Walworth Road who says, where I'm taking you, it's best not to go there unless you're inside a battle tank. It's what he says.'

Behind them was the street market that he was told was a den for pickpockets, and the little corner shop that had been robbed twelve times in the last twenty-four months, and then the estate loomed.

'Welcome to the Amersham. The contract architect came back five years after it was finished, walked round and saw what he had created. Then he drove home and topped himself, that's what they say. Welcome to the Amersham estate.'

A concrete edifice, his guide remarked, that was home to eleven thousand souls, and now him, towered through the windscreen on which the wipers worked hard. He could have asked his driver to stop, could have pushed himself up out of the car, taken the rucksack and emptied it out on to the back seat, could

have walked away into the thickening rain. They came into the forest of the blocks from which high walkways branched. On the begging pitches, in the underpass and the dormitory of the hostel, there had been a clinging sense of camaraderie, and he knew that if he came on to the estate he would be without that comfort.

Little clusters of youths watched. An old woman hurried past them as they left the car in front of the entrance to the bunker that was the housing allocation office. A man, as sparse built as a scarecrow, gazed at them and dragged on a needle-thin cigarette. A woman screamed at a clutch of children. They went inside the bunker and he was told it had once been a car-parking area, but was given up by residents as unsafe from vehicle thieves and vandals. Walls had been put in, the conversion made to office space. He thought of the command and control posts he had known, long ago, barricaded and reinforced against incoming hostiles and dark, and there was the gleam of light from computer screens.

He was led to a desk. He could not hear what the social worker said to the housing-allocation officer, then her voice rapped at him.

What was his name? 'Malachy David Kitchen.'

Date of birth? 'Twenty-fifth of May, 1973.'

Occupation? He hesitated, then spat it: 'None.'

Had he never had an occupation? He clamped his lips.

What was the name and address of his next of kin? He paused, then shook his head, and saw the grim smile of the housing-allocation officer and knew she thought him one more wretch running from the world.

Social security or national insurance numbers? He shrugged.

He was given two keys and barely heard the trilled 'And good luck to you, Mr Kitchen.'

They went up the staircase of block nine because the lift had an out-of-order sign slung across the door, and tramped to level three. He stepped over discarded syringes and scorched concrete where fires had been lit. He kept his eyes down so that he saw the least. In the low light of the afternoon on level three, the rain cut over the wall and splattered on his face but he did not feel it. The majority of the entrances, two out of three, had closed grille gates on the entrances, as if it were valuable to have the further protection of the barricades. The plastic numbers of flat thirteen were askew on the door. He waited for it to be opened but was told it was his, his place, and he could goddamn do it himself. He went into the one-bedroom unit, his home, his refuge. For a moment, like sun on his face, he felt the relief as if, through the door, he would be safe from the sneers and the jibes, the fraudulent compassion . . . There was a living room, a bathroom, a bedroom and a kitchen, and a door that could be closed against the world. His rucksack and the plastic bags from the supermarket were on the floor.

'Well, that's it. That's what you get from Ivanhoe Manners, something or nothing. Depends on your opinion. I say it again - it's your choice. You can blow it or you can make it work. If I hadn't seen you then you were dead, finished, a heap of rubbish . . . but I did see you, and knew you were worth helping, and I saw your shoes . . . and I needed the bed at the hostel.'

There was no handshake. He was given a brown

envelope, felt the coins and the folded banknotes in it and was told it would tide him over until he was back in the system. Ivanhoe Manners was gone out through the door, didn't bother to close it behind him.

He looked around the room, seemed to see nothing but the bulk of the big West Indian striding away down level three, and the tears ran down his face.

The voice ripped into him: 'Just a few words, friend, so we get off to the right start and understand each other . . . Heh, I'm speaking to you.'

Behind him, by the door to flat fourteen, was a short, pudgy man, mid-forties, in a tight suit, shirt collar straining round a reddened neck and a tie that had slipped. He swiped away the tears and blinked to clear them. Half hidden, masked by the shoulder, he saw a sparrow of a woman, seventy at least, might have been older.

'When I talk to you, you damn well listen. Listening? That's good. This is my aunt. Mildred Johnson - Mrs Johnson to you. Anyone who lives alongside her, I find out who they are. If I don't like what I learn then you're out on your neck. You look after that lady. If you don't, you mess with her, I'll break your fucking back. That's pretty simple, isn't it? I'm a good friend, but a lousy enemy . . . Watch out for her.'

He stared back at the man and saw the veins swell in the neck.

'I'll see you, Millie, you take care.'

He watched the man stamp away. Long after he'd gone, and the grille gate had been locked, he stood at the edge of the level three balcony. He heard the TV start up in flat fourteen. The mist sat over

the flat roofs of the towers and darkened the concrete. He rubbed hard at the stubble on his cheeks. The light was failing and he saw below him the way that people hurried to be back inside their homes before the dusk closed on them, and the groups of kids grew in size. He sensed the fear around him. Slinking towards the youths were the shadows of vagrants, dressed like him, dressed rough. Another hour he stood there, and he heard the first of the joy-riders' cars, and saw the first trading done in fast, furtive contacts, and the first fire lit in a stairwell across the plaza and . . .

A key turned.

Her voice was brisk and reed-sharp. 'You'll catch your death out there. Do you have a name?'

'I'm Malachy.'

'He's all bark and no bite, my nephew. Don't worry about him. He's police . . . Do you drink tea, Malachy?'

'Thank you, I always like a cup of tea.'

It was brought to him. A mug with painted flowers and a chip at the rim was passed through the grille gate, then the door was locked again. He cradled the mug and the heat from it seeped into his hands.

Later, a woman screamed and the noise was like a rabbit with a cat at its throat, and echoed between the blocks. It frightened him, unsettled him, and he swallowed the last of the tea, put the mug down behind her grille gate and went inside flat thirteen, his place, locked the door and pushed up the bolt.

That night he slept on the floor, dressed, hungry, his shoes still laced on his feet. He did not know where his journey took him, or care. He had fallen so far. The sleep was deep, from exhaustion, and his mind was

black, blank, and he did not dream – small mercy – of whom he had been and where he had once walked and what had been said of him. On the worn, stained carpet that was pocked with cigarette burns he slept away the night, and he did not know of the road that now stretched in front of him.

Chapter One

Malachy Kitchen lived behind the locked and bolted door.

The autumn days had come and gone from the Amersham. The winter weeks had visited the estate, freezing the rainwater pools on the level three walkway, with chilled winds funnelled up the stairs, and round the flaking concrete corners of the blocks. Spring beckoned and in the window-boxes of a few ground-floor units daffodils bloomed, and where there had once been gardens, now used as short-cut paths, there were a few battered crocuses. The seasons had changed but the torment in his mind had not calmed.

For all the hours, days, weeks and months he could, Malachy stayed inside the cell that was flat thirteen on level three in block nine. The doctors from his past, and the psychiatrist, had had trite names for his condition and explanations; they had not allayed his feeling of disgust for himself and the shame that had come with his actions – all a long way back. Inside the flat, behind the locked door and with the bolt pushed

home, he felt secure. Everything that had gone before – childhood in married quarters, boarding-school, the teenage home in a Devon village, the inevitability of following his father's career – was erased from his thoughts in waking hours, but came stabbing at him during the night so that he would wake and find the perspiration dripping from him and not know whether, in the last moments of sleep, he had screamed at the darkened walls.

He existed. Through the autumn his salvation had been the heavy, thudded knock of the big West Indian's fist on his door. Less often in the winter. Now he never came, as if Ivanhoe Manners's life had gone on, as if he had found new destitutes to throw his time at. Through Manners he had learned of the estate's pulsebeat. He could stand now at the back window of the unit and look down on the square below, where the kids' playground apparatus was broken, where the grass was worn away, where many windows had plywood hammered over them, where graffiti were spray-painted on the walls, and watch the rule of the youth gangs. Some days he would unlock the door, draw down the bolt and go out on to the walkway to stare across the estate's inner roads, but only when he knew the door behind him was open and there for fast retreat, the key in the door for turning.

In the early days of life on the Amersham, Manners had come, thrown the charity-shop overcoat at him and made him walk, had bullied him as if that were the therapy he required.

So, Malachy knew where the crack-houses were on the estate; ground-floor units with heavy bars on the windows and steel plates on the inside of the doors

where rocks of cocaine were sold and consumed.

'Fortresses, man. They seem to know when the police are coming and can spot the surveillance. They have a nose for the raid that's on its way, and nothing's ever found.'

He knew where the vagrants lived, in which dis-used garages they slept. He recognized some from the pitches where they begged in the underpass at the Elephant and Castle.

'You'll know this yourself, Malachy. You're in the underpass and we'll say that four hundred people pass you in an hour, four thousand in a ten-hour begging shift, and fifty people drop a pound coin in your cap in the ten hours and think it's for dog food, or for your cup of tea. Fifty pounds in a day, that's good work, and good people have massaged their consciences as they hurry by. And you'll know that dossers empty the cap so often because it's bad for trade if people see what's actually given them. It's all for drugs, and the dog goes hungry.'

Ivanhoe Manners had walked him round the worst dark corners of the estate, where he was safe only because he had the massive prize-fighter build of the social worker with him, where the ceiling lights of the inner tunnels were smashed, where the one-time shopping arcades were wrecked, scorched - where the vagrants hunted.

'They need wraps of "brown". They have to jack up at least every twenty-four hours. You know that, you've seen it when you were under the cardboard. They're scum when they're on heroin. The brown destroys them. They'll steal from their only friend to get the hit, think nothing of stealing from family. They inject, and they chuck the syringes away even when

there's a council-provided needle exchange – and kids find them. They got hepatitis A or B or C. They got tuberculosis, they're going to get thrombosis. They thief – anything they can sell on, but best is a purse or a wallet. The cops all wear stab-proof vests because a used needle is a weapon for the vagrants. They are dangerous, and don't ever forget it, and you go carefully when it's dark on the Amersham.'

Back in the autumn, Ivanhoe Manners had walked him by the shoebox-shaped flat-roofed public toilets.

'They had to close them, the council did. A pensioner, male, goes inside, and a girl follows him. She's offering a blow for fifty pence. He's in the cubicle, panting, gasping, she's doing it. What else is she doing? Doesn't need her hands for a blow, her hands are on his wallet, inside his coat. She's got it, she's off and running, and his trousers and his pants are down round his ankles. He's too embarrassed, poor sod, to come charging out and chase her – if he could. The council closed the toilets.'

And after they'd done their walking, Ivanhoe Manners would come back with him to flat thirteen on level three and they'd use the chess set that the social worker had given him. And with the chess games came the monologues that Malachy seldom interrupted.

'This is where the real war is, a war worth fighting. I never been to Afghanistan and I'm not going to Iraq. But they don't seem to me as places that matter, not to me. Maybe, just possible, we can win a war in Afghanistan or in Iraq, but sure as hell we're losing the war at our doorstep. You go up to the top of block nine and look all around you. From that roof, you'll see wealth and power and Parliament, you'll see

where all the big people make their money. You'll see the City – banks and insurance, you'll see the ministries, fat cats running your life – but if you look down by your feet, you'll see where the war is. The Amersham is a dump ground for dysfunctionals. You shouldn't be here, Malachy. No, you shouldn't.'

It was seven weeks now since Ivanhoe Manners had last called by.

Days slipped away in which Malachy went nowhere, spoke to no one. What drove him from flat thirteen most often was that the fridge was empty – no bread, no milk, no coffee, no meals for one. But every fourteen days, regular, the first and third Thursday of each month, he was invited next door for tea.

That Thursday morning, Malachy Kitchen dressed in the best of the clothes bought for him at the charity shop seven months earlier, kicked off the trainers and wiped the brogues with a cloth so that their old brightness returned. He would while away the hours, lost in thoughts and pitying himself, till he heard the faint knock on the common wall. He had little else to live for.

He washed himself. In the shower, piping-hot water cascaded down on him. Ricky Capel always had the lever turned high in the hot sector when he sluiced his body, always washed well, and the suds of liquid soap rolled from his face and chest and down his groin. His short dark hair plastered his scalp. Joanne never had the shower water turned that high: it scalded his skin, reddened it, but he had no fear of pain. Each time he took a shower, it was as if he needed to test his ability to withstand pain . . . That morning he had seen pain, another man's, and it mattered little to him. Above the

shower's hiss, he heard Joanne's shout: when was he going to be ready? He did not answer. He would be ready when he cared to be ready.

The overalls he had worn that morning, and Davey's, had gone into the petrol drum at the back of the warehouse, where the fire was lit so that no trace of his visit to the cavernous, derelict unit remained. But he always washed afterwards, and so thoroughly, because he knew of the skills of the forensic experts. With a towel loose round him and water dripping down, he stood in front of the full-length mirror beside the cubicle. He glowed and that brought a smirk to his rounded, child-like face. No one, not any of them in his circle, would have dared to suggest it was a baby's face, but it was untouched by lines of worry, anxiety, stress. Self-respect was everything to Ricky Capel, and respect was what he demanded. He had burned his overalls because a man had denied him respect. The man who had made that mistake was now on the road south of the capital and heading for the coast.

He was thirty-four years old, though his complexion put him younger. He had married Joanne in 1996, and had the one child – Wayne. One of the few decisions he had allowed her was to give him that name. The boy was now seven and an overfed lump, without his father's sleek stomach line. The man who'd denied him respect was the eighth to have died under the supervision of Ricky Capel. At that young age, he controlled an area of the capital running from Bermondsey and Woolwich in the north, Eltham in the east, Catford in the south and Lambeth in the west. Inside that box he had authority over all matters of business he chased after. But, on Benji's advice, he had

gone into the City of London at the start of the year. Across the river big money was to be made from the kids who worked in front of the banks' computers, who traded the high numbers and who snorted 'white' to keep themselves alive, alert and awake.

The man who was now bumping in the back of a van and going south towards the cliffs had done the trade in the City, had taken the white, and had pleaded a cash-flow crisis. He had promised that last week an outstanding payment would be made. The promise was not kept. Cocaine to a street value of five hundred and sixty thousand pounds had been given over on trust, and had not been paid for. That was a denial of respect for Ricky Capel. Go soft on one, and word would spread, like the smell of old shit.

Every last trace of the warehouse was gone by the time he was dressed, and little memory of it remained in his mind. The man had been blindfolded when he was brought to the warehouse, still in his pyjamas, and he'd been alternately blustering protests at this 'fucking liberty' and whimpering certainties of finding what was owed by that night, 'on my mum's life, I swear it'. Too late, friend, too bloody late. The bluster and the whimper had gone on right through the moments that the man had been tied down on to a chair, with wide sheets of plastic under it.

'Right, boys, get on with it,' Ricky had said. He needn't have spoken, needn't have declared he was there and, lounging against a rusted pillar, need not have identified his presence. He had spoken so that the man would know who had had him brought to the warehouse, and his voice would have been recognized. In those seconds the man would have realized he was condemned. Suddenly, there was a stain on the

pyjamas and the stink of him, because he knew he was dead. Ricky's life was all about sending messages. It would go clear through the rumour mill that a big boss had been cheated, and the message of the penalty for that would run crystal sharp to others who did business with him.

The Merks, that was what Benji called the guys with the pickaxe handles. They were small, muscled, swarthy, had the faces of gypsies, and were hard little bastards. They'd brought cheap sports bags with them so that afterwards they'd have clean clothes to change into. They wore plastic gloves, like a butcher would use, and stockings over their faces so that the drops of blood couldn't mark them. The man had kicked with his tied feet and the chair had toppled. He'd tried to heave himself away, frantic, his bare feet slithering on the plastic sheets, and then he'd screamed. The first blow from a pickaxe handle had battered across his lower face. Blood and teeth had spewed out. The blows broke his legs, arms and ribs, then fractured his skull. He was hit until he died and then some more.

Afterwards, while Ricky watched the man's body trussed up in the plastic sheeting, Davey lit the fire for the clothing. Charlie checked the floor, went down on his hands and knees to be certain that nothing remained.

Ricky Capel liked to keep business inside the family. He had three cousins: Davey was the enforcer and did security, Benji did thinking and what he liked to call 'strategy', and Charlie had the books, the organized mind and knew how to move money. He'd have trusted each of them with his life. The Merks were no problem, good as gold, reliable as the watch on Ricky's wrist. Charlie drove him back from the

warehouse to Bevin Close and dropped him off for his shower. It had all gone well, and he would not be late for lunch.

He put on a clean white shirt, well ironed by Joanne, and a sober tie. It was right to dress smart for a birthday celebration.

While he dressed, and selected well-polished shoes, the body was in a plain white van, driven by Davey who had Benji with him. They'd get near to the coast, park up till it was dark, then drive on to Beachy Head. From the cliffs there, which fell 530 feet to the seashore, they would tip the body over. The tide, Benji had said, would carry it out to sea, but in a couple of days or a week, the plastic-wrapped bundle would be washed up on the rocks, as intended, the police would be called, statements made, and then the rumours would eddy round the pubs and clubs that a man who supplied cocaine in the City had been mercilessly, brutally, viciously put to death. It would be assumed he had failed to make a payment and that this was retribution. The name of Ricky Capel might figure in the rumours – loud enough to make certain that no other bastard was late with payments.

Scented with talc and aftershave, Ricky led Joanne and Wayne, who carried the present, next door to celebrate his grandfather's birthday, the eighty-second.

Bevin Close was where he had spent his whole life.

In early 1945, a V2 flying bomb had destroyed the lower end of a Lewisham street, between Loampit Vale and Ladywell Road. After the war, the gap had been filled with a cul-de-sac of council-built houses. Grandfather Percy lived with his son and daughter-in-law, Mikey and Sharon, in number eight, while Ricky,

Joanne and Wayne were next door in number nine. Eighteen years back, Mikey had bought his council house, freehold, and been able – after a choice day's work with a wages delivery truck – to buy the property alongside it. Ricky liked Bevin Close. He could have bought the whole cul-de-sac, or a penthouse overlooking the river, or a bloody manor house down in Kent, but Bevin Close suited him. Only what Ricky called the 'fucking idiots' went for penthouses and manor houses. Everything about him was discreet.

Rumour would spread, but rumour was not evidence.

He breezed in next door. Wayne ran past him with Grandfather Percy's present.

He called, 'Happy birthday, Granddad . . . How you doing, Dad? Hi, Mum, what we got?'

The voice came from the kitchen: 'Your favourite, what else? Lamb and three veg, and then the lemon gâteau . . . Oh, Harry's missus rang – he can't make it.'

'Expect he's out pulling cod up – what a way to earn a living. Poor old Harry.'

He would never let on to his mum, Sharon, that her brother was important to him. Uncle Harry was integral to his network of power and wealth.

They were making good time, more than eight knots. Against them was a gathering south-westerly, but they would be in an hour after dusk and before the swell came up.

March always brought unpredictable weather and poor fishing, but on board the *Annaliese Royal* was a good catch, as good as it ever was.

Harry Rogers was in the wheelhouse of the beam

trawler, and about as far from his mind as it could get, wiped to extinction, was the thought that he had missed the birthday lunch of his sister's father-in-law. The family that Sharon had married into was, in his opinion – and he would never have said it to her – a snake's nest . . . but they owned him. Ricky Capel had him by the balls: any moment he wanted, Ricky Capel could squeeze and twist, and Harry would dance.

Ahead, the cloud line settled on a darker seam, the division between sky and sea. The deeper grey strip was the Norfolk coast, and the town of Lowestoft where the Ness marked Britain's most easterly point in the North Sea. The *Annaliese Royal* was listed as coming from Dartmouth, on the south Devon coast, but she worked the North Sea. She could have fished in the Western Approaches of the Channel or in the Irish Sea or around Rockall off Ulster's coast, and had the navigation equipment to go up off Scandinavia or towards Scotland's waters, or the Faroe Islands – but the catches for which he was a prisoner were in the north, off the German port of Cuxhaven and the island of Helgoland. He had no choice.

He had been a freelance skipper, sometimes out of Brixham, more often out of Penzance, in truth out of anywhere that he could find a desperate owner with a mortgage on a boat and a regular skipper laid low with illness. He would work a deep-sea trawler heading for the Atlantic, a beam trawler in the North Sea, even a crabber off the south Devon coast. The sea was in his mind, body and heritage – but it was damn hard to get employment from it. Then had come the offer . . . He'd talked often to Sharon on the phone, kept in touch even when she had married into that family, and had stayed in contact when the husband, Mikey,

was 'away': she always called his time – three years, five, a maximum of eight – 'away', didn't seem able to say down the telephone that her man had been sent to gaol. It was the summer of '98, and if there had been work on a construction site in Plymouth, and his boy Billy worked on one, installing central-heating systems, then he would have chucked in the sea as a life, closed it down as a profession and learned to be a labourer. He'd poured it out to Sharon. In an hour on the phone, he had told her more about the dark moods than he would have spoken of to his own Annie, and also that the dream of his retirement was wrecked. Got it off his chest, like a man had to and could do best on a telephone. Two days later, his phone had rung.

He couldn't have said, back then, that he knew much of Sharon's son, Ricky. What little he did know made bad listening. Now, the girls were grand and they'd gone as soon as they were old enough to quit, but what he knew of Ricky was poison.

Ricky on the phone. All sweetness. 'I think I might be able to help you, Uncle Harry. Always best to keep money in the family. I've been lucky with business, and I'd like to share that luck. What I understand from Mum is that you're short of a boat. I've this cousin, Charlie – you probably don't know him because he's Dad's side of the family. Well, Charlie did some work on it – would it be a beam trawler you need? There's one for sale in Jersey. Doesn't seem a bad price, a hundred and fifty tons, eight years old, and they're looking for a cash sale. I think we can do that for you. Don't go worrying about the finance, just get yourself over there next week and meet up with Charlie. That going to be all right, Uncle Harry?' Charlie had called

him and they'd arranged to fly to the Channel Islands. At £275,000, the boat was dirt cheap and when he'd met Charlie at the airport, the cousin had been lugging a suitcase ... and he didn't need that many clothes for a twenty-four-hour stopover.

He'd named her, with Annie's input and her blushes, the *Anneliese Royal*, and she was best quality from a renowned Dutch yard. His dream of life after retirement was reborn. Billy, his boy, came off the building sites and with his knowledge of central-heat-ing systems was able to learn the engineering. His grandson, Paul, left school, and had started eighteen months back to sail with them. He had a year of happiness and dumb innocence. Then ...

'Hello, Uncle Harry, it's Ricky here. I'd like to come down and see *your* boat. When do you suggest? Like, tomorrow.'

One sailing in three, he would receive a short, coded note. Where, when, a GPS number, and the port he was to return to with the catch. Sometimes he had a hold full of plaice and sole to bring ashore, and sometimes the hold was bloody near empty. The big catch, from one sailing in three, was off the north German coast. He'd be guided on to a buoy by a GPS reference and, attached to the buoy's anchoring chain, the package would be wrapped in tight oilskin. This one, which he was now bringing towards the fishing harbour of Lowestoft, had weighed real heavy. Billy and he had struggled to drag it up over the gunwale on the port side. He reckoned it twenty-five kilos in weight. Harry read the papers, and could do sums. At street value, he'd read that heroin sold at sixty thousand pounds a kilo. Arithmetic told him that down below, stashed in the fish hold, he

had a package valued at £1.5 million, give or take.

He was brought his mug of tea, and snapped at his grandson, who fled below.

Always a foul temper when they came into port, because that was where he'd see the police wagon or the Customs Land-Rover parked and waiting. They used five of the North Sea ports, varied it, never regular enough for the law and the harbour masters to know too much about them, never infrequent enough for them to stand out and attract suspicion. In two years he would retire, he had Ricky Capel's promise, and then he could live his dream . . . but not yet.

He didn't talk about it to Billy, just gave him his cut and turned away. He thought he might be destroying the life of Paul, his grandson, but there had never been a right time to jump off the treadmill.

In the middle afternoon, as the wind force grew, the shoreline came clearer.

Billy would have finished gutting, would be breaking up the package and dividing it between rubbish sacks and their own kitbags. They would take it onshore, then in his car he would reassemble the twenty-five kilos and drive it, alone, to the drop-off point. Afterwards Harry would take himself to the Long Bar in town, drink till he staggered off to the B-and-B where he had a front-door key. By midnight, Ricky's cousin would have done the collection and Harry would be snoring drunk and asleep.

He was ashamed that he had shouted at his grandson, but the tension was always bad when they were within sight of shore and had a package on board.

The trail started in the foothills of northern Afghanistan.