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Walking Dead

Written by Gerald Seymour

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THE WALKING DEAD

Gerald Seymour



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Prologue

To Whom it may Concern: In the event of my death or incapacity, will the finder of this Diary please facilitate its safe delivery to my sister, Miss Enid Darke, 40 Victoria Street, Bermondsey, London, England. Many thanks. Signed: Cecil Darke.

14 September 1936
Well, this is the start. The top of the first blank page. It will not be a literary work because I do not have the intelligence or education for that, but it will be a record – I hope – of my journey. I am going to fight on a foreign field, and I cannot say how many days or weeks or months I will be filling this notebook, or where this journey will lead me.

If the handwriting is poor – and this is a personal testament so, should I survive, it will not be read by any other living soul, except Enid – that is because the train is rocking on the track, and I have little room in which to write as we are all packed tight in our carriage, as tight as sardines in a tin.

I am twenty-one years old, and my clean new passport lists my occupation as 'bank clerk'. I am thinking of the

shock and confusion on the face of my supervisor, Mr Rammage, when I handed in my resignation last Friday, with immediate effect. So predictable, his reaction. Said sternly, 'Why are you leaving us, Darke?' To go abroad, Mr Rammage. 'Oh, going off on a holiday, are we? Don't expect that your desk will be waiting for you. Don't think I'll be holding your place vacant for you – plenty of likely lads to take your position. For employment, these are difficult times, and to walk out on work with prospects and security is – frankly – extraordinarily stupid.' I understand, Mr Rammage. And then, with sarcasm: 'And are you prepared, Darke, to enlighten me as to where – abroad – you intend to travel to?' To Spain, Mr Rammage. 'That is not extraordinarily stupid, that is deluded idiocy. To get involved in that war, Communists and Fascists viciously massacring each other – a war that is none of your business and where you have no cause to be a part – is simple lunacy. I don't believe you have any military experience . . .' There will be people who will teach me what I need to learn. 'I was, Darke, at the Somme and at Passchendaele. It's not like they say, those who sit behind the lines. It is a thousand times worse. To fight modern warfare is beyond imagination. God, please, watch over you . . . Now, clear your desk and be gone.' I cleared my desk, and I was gone, and I swear there was a tear in Mr Rammage's eyes.

Neither Dad nor Mum came to Victoria to see me off, but Enid did. She gave me this notebook and she had had my name stamped in gold on its cover – that was very sweet and loving of her – and with it was a half of a hob loaf and a quarter of cheese. We kissed, and when the train left I leaned through the window and waved back to her. Then the packet boat to Calais, then to Paris by train.

In two days we were at the Gare d'Austerlitz, and were marshalled on to Train No. 77, which they call the Train of

Volunteers. We went south through the afternoon, evening and night, and we left France after Perpignan. Now we are on the line to Barcelona. The mountains of the Pyrenees are behind us. I have spent one pound, three shillings and fourpence in Paris, and have but two pounds ten shillings in my wallet. Yet, because of where I go and why, I feel myself a rich man.

I have started out in my Sunday suit, best shirt, cap, and raincoat, with my boots all shined up, but now I feel over-dressed, so I have taken off cap and tie and loosened the stud on my collar. The stubble is thick on my chin – which would horrify Mr Rammage.

I believe that I am the youngest of the volunteers in this carriage, and I am the only Briton. There is a German, Karl, who speaks a little English, but none of the others do. I am grateful to Karl: without his help I would not be able to communicate with my fellow travellers. They are from Germany and Italy. They are all, through Karl, interested to know about me because I am different from them. They are refugees from their own countries because they are members of the CP – sorry, the Communist Party – and at best they would be locked up by the Fascist regimes in Berlin and Rome. At worst they would be executed. From them, there is surprise that I am not a member of the CPGB, and they say that I have a home to go back to, but they do not, and they are bewildered that I am coming to Spain to fight alongside them.

They have called me 'the idealist', which is flattering. They tell me that it is time Fascism was fought, and that the battlefield is Spain, where democracy must survive or face annihilation all over Europe. Did I know that? I must have or I would still be at my desk with Mr Rammage peering over my shoulder and criticizing untidiness in my ledgers. I suppose I knew it was important to travel to this war and

play my part, but to be told that I am 'the idealist' brings a little glow of pride to my chest. I have told them that Mr Rammage, last Friday, said this conflict was none of my business, and each in turn has shaken my hand and congratulated me for understanding that it was the duty of all principled men to come to Spain and fight for freedom. I feel humble to be with these men, and humble also that I know so little of politics. But I have not told them that beside my 'idealism' as a warrior against Fascism, and the need to drive back the barbarians of militarism, there was another factor in my joining up. I craved adventure . . . I look to find excitement and be a better man for it.

There is no food on the train, but a man comes round with buckets of water for us to drink from, and the queues to reach the lavatories take an age, but in this company the hardships do not seem to matter.

We are now, Karl says, an hour out from Barcelona. I have never before been abroad, and my father has never been out of London, except for annual excursions to the coast at Ramsgate. In London it was cold and wet: autumn was starting. Here, the sun beats on the train windows, and we are slowly cooking because we are squashed so close . . . I have stopped writing for a few minutes and just stared out. There are fields that are yellow and dry, with horses and carts in them, and women are bringing in the last of the harvest. There are only women working. As we go by, they stop their work, stand straight and raise a clenched fist in salute to us – and all the men, in all the carriages, shout back at the top of their voices, in Spanish, 'They shall not pass.' Already, just from sitting in the train, I know that that is the slogan of those I will fight with. It brings a shiver to me – 'They shall not pass' – not of fear but of pride.

Chapter 1: Thursday, Day 1

It was as if he had been brought to a camel market. All of his life since he had gained the first clouded images of memory, he had stood and watched such markets. And now they were thirteen hundred kilometres behind him, separated from him by the wilderness of the Kingdom's deserts and by the knife-edge crests of the Asir mountains. There, between the mountains and the shining sea, was the village that was his home.

The beasts of burden – camels, hobbled at the ankle, and mules lined up, standing listlessly, tethered to a rope running between two posts – were well respected by the travelling Bedouin and the itinerant merchants who came to buy. In the extremities of the desert's temperatures, brutal heat by day and chill air at night, or on the passes through the mountains that led to the Yemen border, a tribesman or trader would suffer death by dehydration or exposure if he had bought unwisely at the market. It was the skill of those men that their experience guided them towards paying only for animals in which they could place total trust. The new wealth of the Kingdom, in the cities beyond

the mountains where there were wide highways and the oil wells with their networks of pipes, had not penetrated the Asir mountains. He came from the part of the Kingdom that had not shared the affluence of the petroleum deposits, and where old ways still continued. Where he had lived, there remained a use for animals that could be trained to fulfil a given purpose, and such animals were chosen and haggled over in the markets.

A good beast was prized and the arguments over its value could last from early morning sunrise to dusk when the market closed. The best beast would see the bidding for its ownership disputed.

Thirteen hundred kilometres distant, Ibrahim Hussein's home was an hour's walk from the town of Jizan by camel or astride a mule, and a five-minute drive in his father's Mercedes saloon. The house was beyond the view of the Corniche and the Old Souk. But from an upper window, from the bedroom that his sisters shared, the highest turrets of the Ottoman Fort could be seen. It was inside the compound of the Interior Police barracks, but he did not believe there was a tagged file about him on their computers. Behind the fort, nestling on low ground alongside the compound's walls, was the market where camels and mules were brought for sale. He was near to completing the twenty-first year of his life, and if his ambition was fulfilled he would not reach his next birthday.

There were a dozen of them. They sat where they could find shade, against the rear wall of a single-storey building constructed of concrete blocks and roofed with corrugated-iron sheeting. Ibrahim had his back against the concrete, and the others made a small, tight circle facing him. With his youth and

inexperience, he had never travelled outside the Kingdom; he could not have said where the rest had started their journey, but some were darker than him, some had sharper features and some had a more sallow, pale skin. They had all been told that they were not to talk among each other, most certainly not to ask for names, but Ibrahim assumed that most came from Yemen and Egypt, Syria and Pakistan. He was not stupid and had good powers of deduction. Two sat awkwardly, shifting continually to be more comfortable. He thought them from Europe, unused to squatting where there was no cushion. The instruction not to talk had been given with curt authority, and they all sat with their heads bowed. Common to them all, the bright light of their Faith burned in their eyes.

They waited.

In front of Ibrahim, but distanced from the group by a few paces, four men stood in a huddle – the potential buyers. At first, as if the market had opened in the relative cool of the early morning, the four had minutely examined each in the group, remarking on them. But that was long past. Now, they talked quietly, but their attention was on the sandscape on the far side of the building. Behind them, two pickups were painted with light and dark yellow camouflage markings. The front cab roof had been cut out of both, and a machine-gun was mounted above the windscreen.

Ibrahim had expected that each of them would be welcomed, that they would pray together. But they had been ordered to sit still and hold their silence.

He saw the men react and, for the first time, smile in anticipation. They were all dressed in drab olive uniforms and their faces were masked by the folds of the *khaffiyehs* wrapped round their heads. Pistols hung

from webbing belts in holsters. He heard a vehicle approaching, its engine straining in the sand where there was no track.

He thought it was the vehicle they had waited for, and that the business of the market could now begin.

Beyond the concrete building, it stopped. The men went to meet it. He heard laughter and shouted greetings.

Ibrahim, and all of those sitting in the faint shade of the wall, was in the state of the living dead. He was between being a young man with a future, two years into his studies in medicine, and a martyr who would be greeted and shown a place at God's table. He knew of the rewards offered to the *shahidas* because they had been listed to him at the mosque in Habalah by the *imam*, who had been his gate-keeper, his recruiter, who had made possible the start of his journey to Paradise.

The man they had waited for was tall and erect and seemed to carry no spare weight on his body. He moved loosely on his feet. His boots were coated with sand, as was the uniform he wore with its intricate camouflage patterns. More sand clung to the straps that came down from his shoulders to his belt. Grenades were festooned from them, and an assault rifle hung from his right shoulder rocking against the pouches on his chest that held spare magazines. The sand caked his balaclava into which slits had been crudely cut. The eyes, fierce and unwavering in the intensity of their stare, fastened on the group, never left them. Ibrahim felt their force bead on his body, and tried to give himself courage. He clasped his hands tightly together, hoping that the shake in his fingers would not be seen. He felt as naked as if a surgeon's knife had cut him open.

A strangely shrill and high-pitched voice – Ibrahim did not recognize the Arabic dialect that was spoken – ordered the group to stand. They did. As he pushed himself upright, he felt the stiffness in his knees. He tried to stand tall. The man moved away from the group, waved aside the other men, and placed himself some fifty paces from the building.

A second order was given. In turn, the living dead were to walk towards him, stop, turn, walk back, then sit. His finger jabbed towards one of those whom Ibrahim believed to have come from Europe.

They were pointed to. They walked forward, stopped, turned, went back and sat. Some hurried, some dawdled, some moved hesitantly, some tried to throw back their shoulders and stride, and some shuffled. Ibrahim's turn came, the last but one. He did not know what was expected of him.

Perhaps he was too deeply exhausted. Perhaps the ache in his legs and hips dulled his thoughts. He started, drifting over the dirt, not feeling the roughness of stones and debris under the soles of his trainers. He walked as if he sought only to be closer to his God, and he could not help the smile that came easily to his lips. He did not know how he should walk, or what the man with the mask of sand-crusted black material, with the twin gems of his eyes, wanted from him. He came close enough to the man to scent the old sweat beneath the tunic, and the smile held. The sun, blisteringly hot, beat on him as he turned. He went back to the shade.

He was about to sink down against the building's wall, when the shout arrowed into his back.

'You! Do not join them. Sit apart from them.'

He watched one young man get to his feet and move

slowly from the wall, confusion settling on the immature mouth, then despair. He thought the young man believed himself rejected. He faced the four older men. Deference was written on their faces. He gestured with his filthy calloused hand towards the hunched-down group. He believed he had found the youth he wanted.

He observed from a distance. The rest of the group was split into four parts. Three would go to Mosul in the north, two to Ar-Ramadi, one to Baquba, and five to Baghdad. Each one, wherever he was taken, would spend between one and three days in transit, then one more day in briefing for his target. The next day they would be in a car weighted down with explosives, or a lorry, or be on foot with a belt or waistcoat against their stomach or chest under a full flowing robe. Within a week, at most, all would be dead and the remains of their corpses would be scattered against the walls and roofs of houses and office blocks, on the pillars of fly-overs and in the courtyards where policemen gathered to be recruited or to draw their pay. The names of some would be known later from videos broadcast on web-sites, and the names of others would be lost in eternity. The enemy called them 'suicide-bombers' and feared their dedication. For himself and his fellow fighters, they were useful tactical weaponry, valued for the exactness with which a chosen target could be destroyed.

He was listened to, as he should have been. It was said now by those who reported to the resistance clandestinely, while holding down positions of importance in the regime of the collaborators, that no photograph of him existed but that already a price lay on his head – dead or alive – of a million American

dollars, that he was identified in files only by the name he had given himself. He was the Scorpion.

His attention roved between the future and the present. The future was the enormity of the mission on which he was now embarking, and it would take him to a continent that was beyond his previous experience; the message had come from the Tribal Areas of Pakistan, from old men who were fugitives. The present was the open expanse of sand grit, where the only mark of human habitation was the single-storey building of concrete blocks, which was thirty kilometres from the mid-point of the road that ran for nine hours of driving between the Saudi desert communities of Hafr Al-Batn, to the south-east, and Arar, which was north-west; where he sat, ate and talked he was not more than a kilometre from the border.

He saw the misery in the face of the young man, saw him blink away tears. He went to him. He squatted beside him. 'What is your name?'

A choked response: 'Ibrahim, Ibrahim Hussein.'

'Where are you from?'

'From Asir Province, the town of Jizan.'

'Do you have work in Jizan?'

'At Jeddah, in the university, I am a student of medicine.'

The sun had started to slip from its zenith. Soon, perhaps, small rats or rabbits would emerge to scurry on the sand having scented the crumbs of the bread they had eaten. Later, maybe, as the greyness of dusk approached, foxes would track them.

'We do not move before darkness. There is danger here, but greater danger if we travel in the light . . . Are you strong?'

'I hope to be. Please, am I rejected?'

'Not rejected, but chosen.'

He saw again the fullness of the smile, and relief broke on the young man's face.

He went to his own vehicle, and lay down full length in the sand, his head against the forward offside tyre. Beneath the balaclava he closed his eyes and slept in the knowledge that the cool of dusk would wake him. More than the present, the images of the future sidled into his mind, and the part in it that a young man would play because he walked well.

'The laws of justice permit a jury to be reduced from twelve persons to ten. With ten of you the trial may still proceed. Regretfully, we have lost two – first, through tragic bereavement, and second, by this sad accident today in which your foreperson has fallen on the way into the building and has, I am informed, suffered a fractured bone in her leg . . . I am sure you will all join me in expressing our sincerest sympathy to your colleague. But now we must move on.'

When he had been told in his chambers of the wretched woman's tumble, Mr Justice Herbert had cursed softly, but to himself, not in the view or hearing of the bailiff.

'We have now been together for a day less than nine weeks and I anticipate that three more weeks, at a maximum, will enable us to reach a conclusion and you to find the defendants guilty or not guilty of the offences with which they are charged.'

He was a careful man. Sitting as judge in court eighteen at Snaresbrook on the eastern extremity of metropolitan London, Wilbur Herbert was renowned for his weighted words . . . He had no intention of

letting the trial, Regina v. Oswald (Ozzie) Curtis and Oliver (Ollie) Curtis, slip from his grip, and no intention that his words now could justify any subsequent appeal by defence counsel for the overturning of a guilty verdict.

'We will adjourn, I hope briefly, so that you may go back to your room and choose a new foreperson. Then we will resume.'

He spoke softly. It was his belief that a lowered voice caused jury members to lean forward the better to hear him and held their attention. They were a run-of-the-mill crowd, neither remarkable nor unremarkable but typical, and he thought the case against the Curtis brothers was unlikely to tax them with complications. Should he tell them to be certain to have a bottle of aspirin conveniently adjacent should any relative show signs of sickness? No, indeed not. A momentary titter from a relaxed jury, valuable as it was, denigrated the majesty of the Bench. He believed that majesty important to the process of justice.

'A few minutes only, I hope, for your choice of a new foreperson, and then we will continue . . . The matter of flowers is in hand.'

He gathered his robes closely against his stomach, rose and left the court. He was damned if this case would slide from under him – and slide it would if court eighteen lost just one more of those jurors.

A bitter little argument had divided the room. Trouble was that both Corenza and Rob had wanted the job, and both had trumpeted their claim. Important, was it, to be foreman, forewoman or *foreperson* of a jury? Both had obviously thought so. What they had in common – Corenza, the toff, and Rob, the pompous idiot – was

the dislike they generated among the remaining eight jurors. Deirdre, Fanny and Ettie had gone with Corenza, as Glenys's successor, while Dwayne, Baz, Peter and Vicky had supported Rob. Himself? Well, he didn't give a damn, and he'd used his casting vote to give Rob, an officious, pedantic prat, the job that the imbecile seemed to yearn for.

They were back in court now, and the whole morning had been given up to the dispute; the judge had looked to be biting his lip to control his irritation at time lost. Jools hadn't given a toss, and had enjoyed another cup of coffee from the machine in their room.

He was 'Jools' to his colleagues of nine weeks. Actually, everyone who knew him well – and the few who loved him, some who despised him, and the many who were casual in his life – called him Jools. Formally, he was Julian Wright: husband of Barbara, father of Kathy. He was Julian to his parents, and Mr Wright, occasionally, to his pupils. He enjoyed the nickname, Jools, and believed it gave him a certain welcome raffishness. Now, because they had all had to move chairs, he sat between Ettie and Vicky; the rearrangement of their places was because Rob had eased into Glenys's seat, extreme left of the lower tier, nearest the judge . . . Ettie had a powerful scent on her, dabbed on her wrists and neck, but the whiff of Vicky's perspiration was richly attractive.

Of course they were guilty.

It was the first time that Jools had sat on a jury. Not bad to have reached the age of thirty-seven and never before received the brown envelope with the demand that he present himself to Snaresbrook Crown Court for duty as a juror on a Monday morning in February. His initial reaction had been, as he realized now,

typical. He hadn't time for it, he was in work, he had responsibilities. He'd telephoned the given number and explained, rather forcibly, that he was deputy head of the geography department at a comprehensive, and had a classroom schedule stretching through the coming term into the summer – but the woman at the far end of the line hadn't taken a blink of interest. She had said that, unless there were more pressing demands on his time, he should pay more attention to his civic responsibilities and be at Snaresbrook on the appointed day.

Jools had gone to his head teacher, believing that there he would find support, that a letter would be written on the school's headed paper stating that he could not be spared from his curriculum obligations. He had been brushed away with a cryptic 'We'll just have to get a temporary replacement in. Personally, I'd give my right ball to be out of this place for a month or two. Consider yourself fortunate, Jools. The education authority will pay your salary, you won't be out of pocket. You'll be envied by each one of us – an escape tunnel from this *stalag* is how I'd regard it. Relax and enjoy the ride. But, please, try not to get one of those long ones.' His retaliation had been, when a milling mass of prospective jurors was gathered in a cold, airless waiting room, to volunteer for any case, regardless of how much time it would take up, and he had said to the bailiff, with an earnest lilt in his voice, that he regarded his obligations to society as of paramount importance. His reward was to be free of a classroom of juvenile yobbery where geography counted only as a route map to the nearest fast-food outlet, or the way to the park where blow-jobs were on offer for peanuts, or the road to . . . On his last Friday afternoon, he'd

turned in the doorway of the staff common room and announced that it might be some time before he met up with them all again. The remark had been greeted with indifference, as if nobody cared whether he was there or not.

Not only was it the first time he had sat on a jury, it was also Jools's induction to the daily working life of a Crown Court. The legal profession hardly stretched themselves – God, they didn't. The hours weren't fierce. With pomp and circumstance the judge entered court eighteen at ten thirty in the morning, broke for lunch at a quarter to one, resumed at two fifteen, and called a halt usually at a quarter past four and certainly not later than half past. At the drop of a wig, the barristers were on their feet and seeking to make legal arguments that necessitated the jury evacuating to their room, sometimes for hours. When the court was in session, with full steam up, the barristers' questioning of witnesses was as slow as paint drying.

If the padding had been cut away, the business of the court could have been completed in a week or less. Herbert, up there in the clouds with angels for company, seemed to have little interest in prodding witnesses and lawyers from a jog to a run. Jools had had much time to ponder on the courtroom pace, nine weeks of it . . . Most of the others took full notes, as Mr Justice Herbert did, in longhand on the lined pages of A4 refill pads. Corenza was on her second, Rob was on his third, and Fanny wrote in short headline bursts on scraps of paper. Jools did not do notes. He could see no reason to.

They were guilty.

He rarely looked at them. The brothers sat away to his right shoulder. They faced the judge, were behind

their legal team and the prosecution's, and were flanked by prison guards. They were in their mid-forties, with wide chests pushing against their suit buttons and muscling bulged in the sleeves. They had clean shirts for each day of the hearing, and the type of quiet tie that a senior civil servant – or a top administrator in the education authority – would have chosen; he assumed that the ties had been nominated, along with the executive suits and daily changed shirts, by their defence people to make a 'good impression' on the jury. There was no way that a suit costing what Jools took home in a month would fool him. On their wrists were heavy gold chains, and he thought that under the laundered shirts and the fall of their ties there would be heavier gold necklaces. When he did look at them, sharp side-of-eye glances, he could see their intimidating bulk, and the cold arrogance of power in their faces. All right, all right, he would admit it – to himself: they frightened him. There were fathers who came to the school to complain when their child was suspended or sent home, fathers who clenched their fists and spat anger. Fathers frightened him, but not as much as the brothers did. The trouble was that each time he stole a look at them – having been drawn to do so, moth to a flame, compulsion – they seemed to sense it: their heads would twist and their eyes would fasten on to him, leech secure. He would turn away fast and look at his hands or shoelaces, the judge or the court reporter. But always, when he looked right, there was the moment when they trapped him and he felt the fear. He knew what they'd done, had heard in crawling detail of their entry into the jewellery shop, had listened to the stumbling recall of witnesses terrorized by the guns and the

certainty of violence if they'd resisted. The fear made him shiver.

He cursed silently. Now he must find a new eyeline, somewhere else in court eighteen, to focus on. The elder brother, with a springy step, was being escorted by twin minders from the dock to the witness box, and from there would face the jury. Jools gazed at Mr Justice Herbert's nose, and the mole on its left side; he did not know where else it was safe to look.

He had never told his wife that eye-contact with the brothers frightened him. He was no hero, and Babs would have told him so. He had never before tasted the sourness of danger, and when this trial was complete he doubted he ever would again.

There were no snow-capped mountain peaks here, no caves above the iceline where hunted men hid. There were no tracks on which sure-footed couriers brought reports for evaluation and took away messages laced with hate that demanded execution. There were no cliffs against which old men would stand, leaning on sticks for support and holding rifles to guarantee their power, to denounce a sprawling society they loathed.

There were no deep-rutted roads along which armoured vehicles edged, and helmeted men, sweating in bulletproof vests, peered over the sights of machine-guns for an unseen enemy.

Nothing of this town showed the possibility that it might become a front-line outpost in the new war. Normality ruled in Luton. That afternoon, the Bedfordshire town, thirty miles due north of central London, had a population of a few hundred short of 170,000 inhabitants. It boasted a major automobile factory and an airport patronized by tourists flying out

on cheap charter flights. The town had been named – and had angrily rejected the title – 'Britain's crappiest', with the 'worst architecture in the country' and 'wrist-slittingly moribund nightclubs'. But front line Luton was not.

In St George's Square, sandwiched between the town hall and the shopping centre, drunks and hooded kids had taken occupancy of the benches and were sprawled over them. They, and the shoppers who skirted them warily, the office workers who came out to smoke in spite of the rain, the council's cleaners emptying overfilled rubbish bins, and the youngsters trooping into the public library off the square to use the computers, did not concern themselves with the war. Why should they? For what reason might they consider themselves threatened and labelled as legitimate targets? All thought themselves safe from terror. Months before, detectives had broken down doors and taken away handcuffed men. A year and a half before a vehicle had been left at the railway-station car park by four men who had taken a train to London to kill themselves and fifty others . . . Too long ago, best forgotten.

To the men and women of the town, the war was confined to television screens, distant beyond comprehension. But confined inside the boundaries of the town resentment simmered in ghettos of Asian immigrants – where a few Muslim radicals awaited the call to *jihad* . . . The town that sprawled on either side of the river Lea did not, could not, know it.

When the girl had first arrived, punctual to the minute, the farmer's wife had thought her pretty. When she had come closer, the woman saw the livid scar on the

girl's forehead, running laterally, and the second shorter one, vertical on her left cheek.

The farmer's wife tried not to stare. She thought the scars were from a car accident, a head striking a windscreen.

'I hope I am not late. Have not kept you?' the girl asked.

'Not at all, no. You're on the dot.'

The girl was probably in her early twenties; the woman glimpsed her hands and saw no wedding ring. Sad for her: with such disfiguring wounds, the girl would have difficulty in finding a husband with whom to raise a family . . . She was Asian, but her accent was local. The farmer's wife hesitated as to whether Oakdene Cottage should be let to an ethnic-minority group, then killed the thought. She would let the cottage to the girl for a month, payment in advance, not to champion racial tolerance but because – the books of Oakdene Farm showed it – she and Bill needed the cash.

'Come on in, my dear, and look round.'

'Thank you, but I am sure it will be very satisfactory.'

'And how many will you be?'

'Eight in all. It is for our family. Some are coming from abroad.'

'Well, it'll be a bit of a squash. Only four bedrooms – did I say that?'

'It is not a problem. I think it will be excellent.'

The farmer's wife said quickly, 'And that will be, for a month, eleven hundred pounds, paid in advance.'

A young man was left sitting in the car that had brought the girl. She would have been pretty, with a good figure under her jeans and light windcheater and

striking dark hair to her shoulders, but for those hideous injuries. They went inside, and the farmer's wife fussed through the details of the kitchen and its appliances, the bathroom hot water, the bedrooms and their linen, the dining room, crockery and cutlery stores, but she thought the girl only vaguely interested, which surprised her.

'It's ideal,' the girl said. She was at the doorway, gazing out over the fields and the emptiness of the Bedfordshire farmland. She would have heard rooks calling and the engine of Bill's distant tractor. 'So quiet, perfect for my family.'

'And if you don't want quiet, Luton's only five miles . . . Either my husband or I will pop down and do the grass, see that you're settled.'

'No need. We'll do it. You can forget we're here. We will enjoy looking after your lovely cottage. We'll see you when we leave.'

'You're sure?' She had enough to be getting on with at the farmhouse, and Bill did on the land, not to come down the quarter of a mile on the side track to cut the grass.

'Absolutely sure, thank you.'

The deal was done. The girl was driven away up the long, bumpy track to the main road.

Only when she had gone, and the farmer's wife had gunned her Land Rover, did she realize that she was ignorant of the girl's name and had no address for her. But she did have a letting for a month when there were no other takers for Oakdene Cottage, and eleven hundred pounds in fifty-pound notes rammed into her trouser hip pocket. She wondered why an Asian family should wish to stage a reunion in such a remote corner of the county, but only for a moment. Then she

was considering how to prioritize eleven hundred pounds in cash, none of it for declaring.

He looked up from his screen. Its content rarely held him after his lunch break. After his two sandwiches and an apple, taken in a plastic box to the park at the back of the building, he was usually enveloped in tiredness. Now he was wondering – as his mind wandered – whether he could slip down to what he called 'the heads', lower himself on to the lavatory seat and get in a ten-minute doze that would help him through the remainder of his working day . . . Dickie Naylor scowled.

The bloody woman was eyeing his territory already. Through the open door of his cubicle, he saw that Mary Reakes was gazing into his space, and he fancied he recognized covetousness in that look. Not that his cubicle had much to offer: a desk with a screen on it, a fishing-line tangle of cables beneath, his upright swivel chair, a lower upholstered seat for a visitor, a floor safe alongside two filing cabinets that each had a padlocked bar running vertically over the drawers, a side-table with a coffee machine and a couple of plastic water bottles. There was precious little else, except wall charts of holidays to be taken by the few staff who answered to him, and the roster for their night-duty obligations, a photograph of a cricket team proudly holding up a pathetically small silver cup and one of his wife in the garden, pictures of sour-faced bearded men were pinned to a board.

She would have to wait. After that evening, at the end of a dreary, damp April day, the cubicle would be the work home of Dickie Naylor for eleven more working days. Then she could have it – was welcome to it.

On that Friday evening, two weeks away, he would carry his few personal items out of the cubicle, swipe his card for the last time at the main door, then hand it to the uniformed staff for shredding. He would walk away along the Embankment – sniff for a last time at the tang of the river – from the building that was officially known as Thames House, occasionally Box 500, and to him was Riverside Villas. The new regime in the carpeted suites of upper-floor offices, grander temples than his cubicle, would have marked down the title 'Riverside Villas' as a sign of an old man's disrespect for the modern world that was shortly to be shot of him. To them, it was a fine block and commensurate with the Service's fledgling importance as a front-line arm of the War on Terror. To Dickie Naylor it was a pretentious edifice.

When he went, closing the door on his cubicle, he was damned sure that Mary Reakes – who was destined to succeed him as head of section – would be on his old ground before he had reached the Underground station. But, until then, he would make her wait, right to the minute of his last departure.

She was half his age. She had sexless bobbed hair, her face was half masked by powerful spectacles, and she dressed in black trouser suits. She had a degree, which he did not, and . . . She did not look away. She held his eyes and challenged him. Her attitude was clear: he was a 'veteran', his shelf-life had expired and the sooner he was gone the better. The word 'veteran' would not have slipped her tongue with either affection or respect. 'Veteran' meant worthless, an impediment to progress . . . He smiled sweetly to her through the open door.

He had never been, and he could recognize it, the brightest star in the heavens. At best he had been conscientious, a dogged plodder, and he had probably risen a grade higher in the hierarchy than his abilities warranted. He had been thought of as a 'safe pair of hands'. In two weeks he would see in his sixty-fifth birthday; then retirement to Suburbville in Worcester Park. There, he was Richard to his neighbours – but at Riverside Villas he was Dickie to all, from the director general on high to the basement garage guards at the bottom of the pecking order. He had long valued the familiarity as a badge of trust from the tribe he belonged to.

In the dog-days of a career that had run since his recruitment to the Service on New Year's Day 1968, he could not look back on those thirty-nine years of fielding the material that crossed his desk and point to any single moment when his intervention had altered the flow of events, which was ample cause for the resentment he harboured as Mary Reakes peered through his wide-open door, raked her eyes over his ground, the clock ticked and his work role ebbed.

He had been given, in the chaotic days after Nine-Eleven, a small department to run that was intended to search for an impending attack on the United Kingdom by foreign-based, overseas-born suicide-bombers. Down the corridor a huge, expanded section dealt with the domestic-based threat, but he presided over a backwater. And after eleven more working days he would preside over nothing.

There had been few in the crematorium chapel. And fewer had come along afterwards to the garden room of the pub. Most of the patients from the nursing-home

who had attended the service had ridden back by minibus in time for lunch.

He was there because his mother had made the arrangements. He had told her that he had an hour free but no longer because after that he was rostered for evening duty. He stood close to her, and, when she moved among the twenty or so who had walked from the chapel after the curtains had closed during the last quick three-verse hymn, he followed her.

His mother was a small, neat woman and David Banks towered over her.

If she had not made the arrangements, the gathering would not have happened; he owed it to her to be there – it was a son's loyalty. But the family had long split, he knew no one, and he had been by far the youngest in the chapel and was now in the garden room. He hovered a half-step behind his mother, as if he needed to guard her and she was his Principal. It was his way, not purposely but from instinct and training, to watch over her; it was unlikely that he realized his gaze played over the faces of the elderly who murmured quietly as though one of them, in a best but now poorly fitting dark suit, might threaten her. She had never remarried after his father had died and he tried to see her as often as work permitted, but it was not often enough. She lived a hundred miles from London on the Somerset and Wiltshire borders and he was locked into a life in the capital. For the last three and a half years men of his professional skills had been larded with overtime requirements and extra duties.

He was a detective constable, an authorized firearms officer, in demand to the extent that most evenings he went back to his bedsit in a west London

attic reeling from exhaustion. But he tried, moving in her wake, to smile with warmth when he was introduced to distant relations of whom he had heard vaguely but never met. He shook hands, was careful not to squeeze hard and heartily on skeletal fingers. The talk drifted around him but he heard little of it. His mind was away, the funeral of Enid Darke subsumed by thoughts of where he would be that evening and the previous day's briefing on the risk to the Principal posed by the man's presence in the capital on a three-day visit.

An old man came to his mother's side – and it was the policeman's reflex that he stiffened because a stranger had approached her. Banks ground his fingernails into the palm of his hand as if that might relax him.

He could not hear them but sensed the earnestness of the man's words to his mother, and she had leaned closer to hear better. Nor could he see what was passed from the jacket pocket into his mother's grasp. The man did not draw breath, and talked with a faint, whistling reediness. And then he was gone, tottering in the direction of the bar and the steward, and Banks saw him grapple shakily with a further schooner of sherry. His mother held what she had been given in both hands, turned to her son and grimaced.

'What was all that about?' He spoke from the side of his mouth, his eyes roving again.

Her voice was low, confidential and conspiratorial. 'Rather interesting, actually. His name's Wilfred Perry. He lived next door to Great-aunt Enid in some ghastly tower block in east London – he's still there. Eight months ago, or whenever she was moved out and taken to the nursing-home, she knocked on his door

early in the morning. She couldn't look after herself any more and needed care. She told him that she had only one item that was precious and she wanted it taken care of, then passed on in the family. She gave it to Mr Perry – why not to one of her family he doesn't know, and I don't. If he'd fallen off the twig before she did, God knows what would have happened to it. Anyway, I've got it. But it's for you – why you? Someone must have told him that you were family, but also that you were a policeman.'

She passed her son a small leather-covered notebook.

He took it. 'What am I supposed to do with it?'

'Read it, I suppose, and keep it. It's family and it's history, so he said – and Great-aunt Enid had made him promise that it would be given to the younger generation of the family. He's done that, fulfilled his obligation.'

The leather had been black once. It had long lost any lustre, was chipped at the edges; across the open side of it a dark stain had smeared down and on to the paper sheets. An elastic band, wound over it twice, held it together. He peered at it and saw the faintness of what had once been gold-embossed lettering. 'So, who was Cecil Darke?'

'According to Mr Perry, Cecil was Great-aunt Enid's elder brother. Sorry, David, I haven't heard of him. She gave it to Mr Perry with that elastic band round it, and he never opened it, never looked to see what was inside.'

Banks saw, across the garden room, that Wilfred Perry – the man who had kept a promise – had set his empty schooner back on the steward's table, and was reaching for another, which was filled. He looked at

his watch. 'I have to go, Mum, in a couple of minutes. You'll get a taxi? It's something I can't be late for.'

'You'd better open it, David. I mean, on her funeral day, you should see what was important to her.'

'Yes, Mum – but I can't hang about.'

He peeled off the elastic band, and the spine of the notebook cracked as he opened it. He saw handwriting, barely legible, on the cover's inside . . . God, but he did have to shift himself . . . and he read aloud but softly so that only his mother shared with him: 'To Whom it may Concern: In the event of my death or incapacity, will the finder of this Diary please facilitate its safe delivery to my sister, Miss Enid Darke, 40 Victoria Street, Bermondsey, London, England. Many thanks. Signed: Cecil Darke.' There was a date on the facing page, then close-set writing. It would take his full concentration to decipher it. He snapped the notebook shut, twisted the elastic band back over it and dropped it into his pocket.

'Got to dash. Good to see you, Mum, and you look after yourself.'

'Thanks for coming. You will read it, won't you? I suppose it's part of us.'

'I will, when I've time.'

He pecked her cheek and was gone. He ran through the thin rain across the car park, and the notebook bounced in his pocket lightly against his hip. Later, when he was working his shift, a Glock 9mm pistol, with a loaded magazine of eleven bullets, would – should he run – be flapping against that hip.