

NOT FOR SALE: UNCORRECTED PROOF

# AFTER THE BRIDGE

ANDREW J FIELD

HIT THE NORTH

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THE  
BRIDGE

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Dedicated to Anthony and Janis Field...

‘Nothing is inevitable until it happens.’  
A. J. P. Taylor

*Slava Ukraini! Heroiam Slava!*  
(*Glory to Ukraine, Glory to our Heroes*)

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## BEFORE

### Wednesday 4th May 2022

The clock on the Audi dash said five thirty in the morning. Outside, patchy sea fret wafted across the estuary. One second foggy, the next clear. At eleven, a customer in Hull was going to be disappointed his new second hand car never arrived.

A short walk would take him to the middle of the Humber bridge. He had driven over many times, but never crossed on foot. This would be his first and last time, once he had completed his goodbye morning stroll.

A black leather jacket lay on the passenger seat. He would put it on when he left. Strolling around in black jeans, white tee and deck shoes before sunrise was a jumper red light. On the radio the UK cost of living crisis, the potential supreme court reversal of USA abortion rights and Russian war crimes in Ukraine mirrored his low mood.

He grimaced: life had left him a dried-out shell of the man he had wanted to be. A great idea for a song, but Springsteen had already written it. The Boss knew how to spin the misery coin. Not that he identified with Bruce's liberal-bleeding-heart. His childhood hero was Robert Mitchum. Old Bob boasted he had three expressions when he acted: look left, look right and

look straight ahead. Never whinged about anything. Simply carried on working, smoking and drinking, until lung cancer killed him stone-dead, so the legend went. Never took himself too seriously.

He opened the glove compartment. A Marlboro Red soft-top pack contained two stale tabs. He had stopped smoking the day his wife took everything he owned, including his self-esteem. He fancied one. Except there were rules about chuffing in the motor. He tucked them into his tee sleeve, like white-middle-class people did when they played at working-class-blue-collar cool. Every macho actor had an inner-Brando fighting to be released.

Yesterday, a Scottish TV and film literary agent rejected him. Her automated email said his script didn't have a market. Maybe his work was shit, but he deserved a face-to-face. He wasn't a slush pile gimp. She knew him. They had supped wets, shared laughs and splashed juices when he was almost famous. Perhaps he was getting what he had always deserved. Tomorrow belonged to today, except when it didn't. The future was unwritten, apart from it was. It was what it was, until it wasn't. Huh.

'Come on, don't be a wimp. What would Bob do?' He got out of the car. Forgot to put on the black leather jacket. Soon it would be immaterial what he was wearing. Strode out towards the bridge's centre. Assumed it was the best place to jump. 'March on, dogs of war,' he said to himself, misquoting an ancient Alex Harvey lyric. Anyone watching would think he was the incoherent drunken barfly at chucking out time. Every pub had one. He wasn't going to waste the rest of his life waiting to be that man.

He heard footsteps. He slowed. Saw a woman emerge from the mist. She was wearing a tee and jeans tucked into knee-high black boots. Why was she out so early or up so late? Maybe she was a hooker and lifts back to her Hull Arena pitch weren't part of the sex-for-cash deal?

Who was he kidding?

Sex was the last thing on her mind. She was a jumper, surely. Like him. Interrupting his show. Hard enough to throw himself off a bridge, without an audience scoring him for artistic interpretation.

She smiled as they passed. He walked several steps. Then they both stopped and turned. She was nearly six foot tall. He was six two. She had 'Ziggy Stardust' red hair. Pale skin. Wore a cotton 'CUTE BUT 101% PSYCHO' tee. She resembled the words, stunning, but off her tits. Probably an addict.

'Are you planning the same as me?' she asked. He was too busy catching flies to respond immediately. A beat or two passed. Gulls squawked. The river flowed. The rising sun warmed up the rosy pink sky.

For a moment, he pictured his ex-wife Caroline standing there before pregnancy, motherhood and a religious cult saved her from her own tedious junky soap opera. 'What is it to you, if I am?'

'I was here first.'

'Go on then. I'll follow you in,' he said.

But she didn't go. And nor did he. 'You first,' she said, and politely stepped aside.

'You'll freeze to death. Save you jumping,' he said.

'You're a real comedian,' she quipped back.

'Actually, a part-time actor and sometime comic. I deliver cars to make ends meet,' he joked, and pulled the soft-top pack from his tee sleeve. Shook the pack. Tried and failed to place the accent. 'Smoke? I haven't got a lighter.'

She grabbed a tab. Produced a zip lighter from her jeans. Flicked the gold metal top. A flame danced in front of them. They sparked up. Drew the smoke deep into their lungs. He coughed. She inhaled deeply and slowly exhaled. 'Were you famous?'

A good question. Was he ever really famous? 'In my youth, I was Vic Savage, the lead singer, lead guitarist and chief songwriter for the post-punk band Savaged by Sheep. We had



two hits. Probably best known for playing tough-guy TV cop Billy Whyte in 'Northern Filth'. Bloody bugger typecast me out of a serious acting career. Casting directors never saw me as a romantic or comedic lead. Grew a hipster beard. Nothing changed. You?'

'Crime fiction nobody wants to buy.'

'That's a shame,' he said.

'I'd earn more filming myself masturbating for masturbators.'

'Wanking for wankers? Why didn't I think of that indignity.' He laughed at the post modern irony. There was always money in sex.

She was perfect honey-trapper material. 'More a humiliation in my book. Do you have a name?'

'Owen. Owen Chard. 53. Failed husband and father. There is a long list of people I've disappointed in the sack and everywhere else.'

'Becky. Becky Letts. 27. Recently widowed, failed crime fiction writer, porn slag.'

'Sorry about your husband,' Owen said, without asking how her significant other had died. He didn't want to discover Becky had killed hubby and was about to be arrested.

'Shit happens,' Becky said, and kicked a small stone into the dark water below. 'Here today, gone tomorrow.' She kicked another off the bridge. 'Happy one minute. All alone the next. Well, not alone exactly.'

'Me too,' Owen said, impressed by the way she rolled meaningless clichés off her tongue. Nobody would miss him. That boat sailed when his ex said he had failed as a husband and a father. Several ships had passed in the night since, but none docked for more than a couple of months before heading off for more exciting adventures.

They looked at each other. Two lost souls about to top themselves.

Becky blew smoke rings. Watched them expand and disperse

into the fret. Her impassive face broke briefly into a smile while she toyed with them. Owen was glad she found it funny. He was thinking of ways they could commercialise sex. 'This is horny,' said Becky. 'Extreme heights excite me. Free falling into the unknown is on my bucket-list. Yours?'

Was Becky day release? Had a careless care worker left the door unlocked? She was about to kill herself and she was behaving like she was descending into the Grand Canyon on an adventure holiday. Addicts were irrational once the drugs dominated their lives. He knew from personal experience. From the corner of his eye, Owen saw flashing lights on the north side. 'I'd drive an Aston Martin to Norway's Lofoten archipelago. Drink wine under the midnight sun with a beautiful woman with striking red hair and light blue-green eyes,' he said. He had a plan to delay death and exploit her physical assets.

'Enough bullshit. Empty words.'

'We don't have to jump,' said Owen, and reached for her cold hand. 'Why not make our bucket-lists come true?'

'I am skint. And you can't even afford a coat.'

'You can't afford a bra!' He half smiled and she half grinned and sucked harder on her cigarette. 'We could combine our talents and earn some easy money.'

'How?'

Owen had to make his elevator pitch fast. She was going over as soon as the fag was stubbed out. 'We honey-trap married men in hotels,' he replied. Dull PAYE men would want a girl like her. Would dream about a girl like her. Would want to fuck a girl like her. Until they puffed the dust. Consumed by guilt, they would cough up two grand to save their marriages and keep their pensions. He squeezed Becky's hand. Shuffled his body between her and the barrier. 'We split the cash fifty/fifty after expenses.'

'How's that work? I seduce, you bully?'

'We pretend we're married and they pay for our silence.'

‘After they fuck me?’

‘If we get our timing right just foreplay, a bit of touching, snogging, cock teasing.’

‘Before you burst into the room and scare the shit out of them?’

‘We’ll make a great team,’ said Owen.

‘Are you that hard? That tough? That macho?’

‘I am Billy Whyte. Or Billy Whyte is me. One of the two. I am a convincing nut-job when I put my mind to it.’

‘What happens when we get caught?’

‘Think Butch & Sundance. Thelma & Louise. Bonnie & Clyde.’

‘They all died,’ Becky said. ‘We should join them.’ She had one last puff on the cigarette and flicked the butt over the rails.

‘We have company,’ he said. Honey-trapping was high-risk, but it was a better than the big sleep. Owen hugged her as she lunged. Elbows dug into his ribs. Arms locked around her body.

‘Let me go.’

‘I can’t,’ Owen said, and knew he could. Pretend she had caught him by surprise at the inquest. Sob from the dock.

‘My choice.’

‘My conscience.’ Becky bit into his arm. Pain shot through his body. He retaliated. Pinched her left nipple. ‘They’ll blame me for your death. Owen Chard will be a social outcast.’

‘Nobody cares about us.’ Becky bit him again. Flailed her head into his face. He stayed low, hoping a lucky hit didn’t damage expensive porcelain teeth he could not afford to repair. She grabbed for his testicles. He kicked her legs. She fell to the ground. He landed on top. She lay motionless. ‘Break my neck, please,’ she whispered.

‘Stay down,’ Owen hissed into her left ear, his right exposed. He waited for teeth to bite, but, by some fluke, he had knocked the fight out of her.

A bridge patrol vehicle pulled up. A middle-aged patrol

officer with a comb-over wound down his window. 'What are you two doing?'

'We're celebrating,' Owen said, knowing all good lies have truthful foundations. 'We've just got engaged and heights make her horny.' Owen picked himself up. Grabbed Becky's hand. Lifted her from the cold stone. The adrenaline rush was over. The fight had exhausted him. He wouldn't be able to stop her if she tried again.

'You're bleeding,' said the patrolman.

'Sorry officer,' Becky said, looked at Owen, and rubbed her left breast. 'That really hurt. My boobs are sore enough already without you tearing my bloody nipple off.'

The patrol driver stared at her with sad lustful eyes. 'Where is your car parked? I'll give you a lift.'

'Down by the bridge car park. An Audi with dealer plates,' said Owen.

'Climb in the back,' said the patrolman.

Becky got in first. Owen followed. She whispered for his ears only. 'No stupid questions. No fuck-buddy games. No falling in love.'

'OK,' he said. 'Keep everything skin deep. Nobody gets hurt.'

Becky nodded, reached into the top of her left boot. Pulled out a flick knife. Placed it between her legs. He heard a click. Saw cold steel shoot upwards. 'In case you're wrong and you need to intimidate men, you might need this.'

'What about you?'

'I've got my own.'

Owen took the blade. Closed it. Realised the 'CUTE BUT 101% PSYCHO' could have stabbed him anytime. He was too yellow and weak to kill himself, unlike his TV alter ego, Billy Whyte. Becky was dangerous and unpredictable, like all addicts. One minute up. One minute down. One minute your best friend and lover. The next cutting your throat. Kept you on your toes. Kept you real. Until fate called last orders.



## Wednesday 8th June 2022

Ed Boucher had one eye glued on the pretty young girls walking across Manchester's Piccadilly station's concourse. The other was on the Daily Telegraph cryptic crossword. In his opinion, northern women were a definite step or two down from London girls. Lacked their glamorous grace, sophistication and intelligence.

Same could be said about the two cities. Despite huge digital billboards promoting Saturday's heavyweight boxing bout, million pound skyscraper apartments knocking on heaven's door and Boohoo's super fast online fashion, Manchester was the poor relation.

Officially, Ed was here in his capacity as a Cabinet Office nominations assessor. John Budd, a brain-damaged police hero, was in line for the Queen's highest civilian bravery medal, named after her father, King George. The off-duty Manchester detective was seriously injured a year earlier preventing the kidnapping of a rich Arab's wife. Ed's job was to confirm John Budd satisfied the George Cross's strict awards criteria. He would speak with Greater Manchester's chief constable, Sir Richard Hurst, who had recommended Budd for the gong. He would discuss the chief's personal statement and carry out informal financial and

criminal background checks to make sure neither the Royal family or the government were embarrassed.

Unofficially, Ed was supplementing his civil service pay and army pension with crisis management PR. In his spare time, Ed disappeared sex abuse allegations. Ed's granddaughter and co-conspirator, Alice Lamb-Percy, was active in the online abuse community and regularly befriended victims. Once she gained their trust, she would pass on their gruesome stories to Ed. He would contact the perpetrators and tell them financial compensation for the abused would protect their reputations. This gig was different. Ed and Alice were operating a couple of hundred miles from their Home Counties comfort zone. Ed had a letter saying John Budd was a rapist. If it went public, Budd could kiss his George Cross goodbye. The chief constable had the clout to vanish the sex claims.

Ed checked his watch. Alice was an hour overdue. Being late was not unusual. She was tardy. If she had stayed in the Marines, like Ed had advised, that would have resolved her poor discipline. But Alice wasn't one for listening. Belligerence ran in the Boucher family, alongside a propensity to blackmail people.

Ed drank tepid tea. Took a bite from a smoked salmon cream cheese sandwich. Returned to his crossword. His chest felt tighter than normal. He could hear his failing heart thumping erratically. A dodgy pump and a bloody pacemaker held him to ransom. A lesser man might have blamed his age, diet and alcohol intake. Changed his lifestyle. Not him. Real men didn't worry about their health.

Ed ordered himself to stay calm. Heard a woman's voice ask if the empty chair at his table was free. Ed shook his head, without shifting from his broadsheet. She ignored him. He heard the chair scrape. She plonked herself down. Made herself comfortable. She spoke before he could protest.

'Oh gosh, it's Ed Boucher. What a co-incidence?'

Ed glanced up into the sunlight shining through the glass

roof. 'Sorry. Who are you?' he asked automatically, buying himself reaction time to prevent himself from yelling at her to stop stalking him.

'Samantha Sparrow. Rupert's daughter. I wanted a word with you.'

'Sorry about your father,' said Ed. Even though their families socialised in the same Hampshire circles, her intrusive behaviour annoyed him. Ed wasn't an elected politician or a celebrity. His privacy should be respected. 'I think we sent flowers. I am sure we did. Hope he had a good send off. What brings you to Manchester?'

'Saturday's big fight. PR for the joint sponsors. Presenting a cheque to John Budd's family. Could I ask you a few questions about my father and Alice?'

'Fire away,' said Ed, alarm bells rang, but he hoped he masked his fear.

'His diary said you saw him twice the week before he passed and I was wondering ... you and a girl called Kitty Elms on the same day? Is Kitty Alice?'

Ed admired Samantha's porcelain teeth, bronzed flesh and the light blue cashmere cardigan that showcased pear-shaped breasts. She was the same age as Ed's daughter would have been if Lucy hadn't been hit by a train. The coroner had recorded an open verdict, unable to decide if it was misadventure or suicide. 'Never heard of Kitty Elms. Your late father recommended a colleague for an honour and I was arranging an in-person statement.'

'Can you tell me who?'

'Sadly not. Against the Official Secrets Act,' he said. 'Look out for future honours lists. See if you recognise any of your father's closest friends.' He was lying. He had disappeared a sex allegation for twenty-five thousand pounds. Rupert had thanked him for not reporting it to the police or selling the story to the media. A week later, Rupert was dead. Coincidence or not, Ed



didn't care. If Rupert could not live with the shame, not his problem. His word against a dead man who admitted his guilt by signing a non-disclosure agreement.

'He knows so many people. I wouldn't know where to start,' said Samantha.

'Did he talk about any problems? Financial? Health? Love?'

'Nothing. He did purchase uncut diamonds before he died. There is no trace of them. I've spoken to everyone he saw between buying and dying ... you and Kitty are the only leads left...,' said Samantha.

'I am a dead end too,' Ed smiled, and felt Sparrow's bag of uncut diamonds rub against his wedding tackle. 'I am definitely not allowed to accept wine, holidays, hospitality, and absolutely no diamonds.' In other circumstances, he might have asked her out for dinner, except he didn't want to share a table, or a bed, with her father's wretched ghost. 'I have to go now. Very sorry about Rupert.'

'One more thing,' said Samantha. She handed him a business card with her name, the PR business name, 'Believe', a Kensington address, contact details and a 'refreshingly innovative thinkers' strapline. 'My client, Viktor Andreyev, is coming to Manchester. His company, Baltic Power, is sponsoring Saturday night's boxing. He wants to meet you this weekend.'

'I am very busy,' Ed said, 'You're doing great PR if you are stopping Baltic from being sanctioned by the USA and Europe. Well done.'

'We do our best. I'll cut the crap. I am a blunt operator. Viktor wants your sex-pest list.'

'Sorry. I am playing cricket with the Winchester College Old Boys' third team over the weekend,' Ed said. 'Besides, I don't have a sex-pest list. Would not know what one looked like.'

'It's not really a request as such. Viktor always gets his way,' said Samantha.

‘What are you trying to tell me?’ asked Ed.

‘Viktor doesn’t take no for an answer.’

There was a good reason Ed only blackmailed rapists, paedophiles and perverts. He knew how they thought. He was one of them. Spies were off-limits. Why would you hack off Putin and his mates like this Viktor bloke after Alexander Litvinenko died on TV from radioactive Polonium-210 poisoning? ‘I still don’t understand.’

‘Yes you do,’ said Samantha. ‘You raise your eyebrows slightly when you lie. And your neck blushes red. You can sell us your sex-pest list and make some cash or we can do it another way. I’d hate you to have an accident. Or Alice.’

‘Uncut diamonds?’ asked Ed. ‘You can make me a sparkling offer right now that I cannot refuse. I’d imagine you’ve already got my mobile number.’

‘I am just a messenger. I’ll have to come back to you. Can you ask Alice to call me too.’

‘Why?’

‘Rupert left her a private letter. I want to give it to her, but the lawyers say she needs to sign for it in person,’ said Samantha.

Ed nodded at Samantha, stood up and left his half eaten sandwich on the table. He had to stay cool and not panic. Who else knew he was a blackmailer? If it was an open secret, he was in big trouble. Equally worrying, why was a dead kiddy fiddler writing to Alice from beyond the grave unless they had a secret relationship. No chance. Alice would never cheat on him.

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Although Ed Boucher was a worried man, he strolled away from Samantha Sparrow determined not to look back. He tried to spot her co-conspirators but the station was too busy to assess who, if anyone, was following him. He took his time window shopping and waited for Samantha Sparrow to leave the cafe.

She left a couple of minutes after him. Walked out of the station by the rear entrance. Didn't appear to interact with anyone. Sauntered through the throng like a catwalk model in Milan, Paris or New York. Ed went down the escalator. Spotted Alice. Winked as he passed. He nodded towards the male toilets. He headed towards them and stepped inside.

The tangy smell of stale urine mingled with disinfectant. Reminded him of boarding school and absentee parents. His folks chased diplomatic careers at the expense of their children. Ed had tried to avoid the same mistakes, but failed. Too little love versus too much. Achieving the right balance was next to impossible. He checked the cubicles. The urinals were empty. He stepped inside one. Felt a nudge. He had company. He locked the door. They hugged. Prolonged the embrace. Kissed on the lips. Wanted to get salacious. Sex calmed his nerves. Reluctantly, they broke their hold. Their eyes glistened, their lust mutual. Although it wasn't always.

'Here,' she whispered. An envelope was thrust into Ed's hand. He put it inside his blazer pocket.

'Is the non-disclosure agreement there?' asked Ed. He whispered softly too, his voice like hers competing against the splatter of piss on metal urinals and gushing hand dryers.

'Yes. Why were you talking to Samantha Sparrow?' asked Alice.

'Pure co-incidence. She is sponsoring the boxing in Manchester,' said Ed. Nothing escaped her attention. He didn't tell her about Sparrow's request to get in touch. If Alice and Samantha became friends that would undermine their bond.

'No questions about Rupert's death?'

'No, why would she? He killed himself. Nothing to do with us.'

'You would tell me?' asked Alice. 'We were blackmailing the poor bugger. Where are you staying?'

'The Malmaison. Swinging Vogue suite.'

'Can I join you?'

‘I thought you had a flat in the city,’ said Ed.

‘Not with you in it.’

‘Doesn’t matter where I am staying. Tonight you’re sleeping in another country,’ said Ed.

‘Why?’

‘We’re on a winning streak, but everyone’s luck runs out eventually. We know Hampshire inside out, but Manchester might as well be the moon. We might be putting ourselves at risk,’ said Ed, knowing there was no might about it. He was knee deep in the brown stuff and didn’t want Alice joining him.

‘The scam is a work of art,’ said Alice.

‘Listen to me. Train out of the city,’ said Ed. ‘Fly out on your real passport. Mainland Europe. France. Germany. Spain.’

‘Why?’

‘No time for questions. Change to the Victoria Morant ID when you fly to Thailand,’ said Ed.

‘What about you?’

‘I’ll follow ... shortly. Have you got my new ID?’

Alice unzipped a rucksack pocket and produced a plastic folder. Pulled out two Irish passports, two driving licences and a handful of credit cards. Envelopes thick with cash. UK and European denominations. Handed him his and put hers back. ‘What do we do with our real selves?’ asked Alice.

A good question. Post traumatic stress disorder could trigger depression, anxiety and early retirement. Or the two of them could simply vanish. 170,000 people went missing in the UK every year. The vast majority returned after a few days. A thousand or so didn’t. They stayed disappeared until their bodies were found hanging from a tree, hidden in the undergrowth or washed up on beach or a riverbank. ‘Not our most immediate problem,’ said Ed.

‘Shall we? One for the flight?’ asked Alice.

Her hand gripped him and bashed against uncut diamonds. ‘You’ll shoot afterwards?’ asked Ed.

‘Soon as you have,’ said Alice.

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At 2.00pm, Owen Chard booked into the Malmaison hotel reception. Said they were staying for three days, but might leave early. Becky had wanted to by-pass the city and head south. Said Manchester was morbid. Encapsulated by the doom and gloom music of Joy Division, named after the sex-slave wing of a Nazi concentration camp. She said their lead singer had hung himself. Owen said it was just another city full of lonely men wanting to fuck.

They picked a double in preference to a twin. A nod to the marriage narrative. Separate rooms an unnecessary expense. They unpacked their overnight bags without speaking. Returned downstairs to identify married mugs. They sat near the reception. Eyeballed the front desk and the hotel entrance. Excited tourists in the big city. Maintained their public image. Him older with a beard and expensive teeth, and dyed hair. Her much younger, looking for adventure. She did 'rejected and dejected' without needing to act. Easy, if you were permanently strung out. Throwing up in the mornings. Given her state of mind, he was surprised they had made it this far across the M62. Every sting was a bonus. When she went, he would make sure his next cash cow chick would be free from drug issues. He'd produce a questionnaire.

Occasionally, Owen put down his newspaper, got up and asked questions at the reception. Each time he returned, he gave Becky a name and an online identifying location or business. Although they had four potentials, they could do with a couple more. Most would go out with friends and work colleagues. Only a few would stay in the hotel and be ripe for exploitation.

Becky spotted him first.

Navy blue blazer. White chinos. An old school tie. Strutted around like a peacock. A suitcase in one hand and suit carrier bag

slung across his shoulder. The newcomer registered at reception. Owen followed. Asked about ordering a morning newspaper. Listened to Ed Boucher book dinner for one at 7pm. His room and expenses should be charged to the Cabinet Office. Owen fed the info back to Becky. She looked up Ed online. Found him on LinkedIn. His profile revealed ex-army and currently a civil servant. Becky said it had not been updated for several years. He was not on Facebook or Twitter and hardly registered on the web. He was ideal prey. Ed walked over to the lift. Becky pulled down her beanie. Drifted towards the reception desk. Pretended to ask about her own dinner reservation. Double checked solo Ed's booking.

Owen watched his cold fish banter with the restaurant manager. She was there, but not there. Same as she was on the Humber Bridge when they first met. Friendly, funny and flirty, but a million miles away from betraying any real emotion. She was an elastic band liable to snap anytime.

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Normally Ed would be impressed by his third-floor Swinging Vogue suite. Double the size of a standard double, it was a kitsch celebration of the Swinging Sixties. Unpacking his clothes, Ed stacked them in a wardrobe next to a wooden bookcase. Framed black and white photographs of Twiggy, Shrimpton and Faithful caught his eye. Ed's wife, Irene, had been a looker once, until everything shrank and shrivelled, including her brain.

Alice would be boarding her flight now. Soon as she was out of the country she was safe. His own security was not so healthy. Ed had promised powerful people his silence. He was about to betray them and his country when, not if, he sold his sex-pest database to Putin's Baltic Power pal. According to Google, Viktor was a billionaire energy investor, a former electrician from Ukraine who kept a low profile. How much

were the names of establishment perverts worth to men waging war on the west? He would find out soon enough when Viktor offered him a tax free golden handshake.

Ed read the letter Alice had given him about John Budd. The kinky boomerang cock was inspired. And the cheeky tattoos. He put the letter back in the envelope and placed it on the writing desk. He checked the non-disclosure agreement paperwork. The NDA was impressive, although worthless as a legal document. Would never stand up in court. But they all signed when he produced it at a blackmail gig. Shame his and Alice's efforts had been wasted.

Ed called the dementia home where Irene lived. Said he was settled in his hotel. He moaned that his room was cramped and he would probably order a pizza via room service and then watch television. There were a couple of cooking programmes on TV they liked to watch. He had an early start tomorrow and wanted a good night's sleep. On that note, he closed the conversation and told her he loved her deeply and was already missing her. Said he would call again tomorrow. As he always did. Not that she would remember. He would miss her when he started his new life with Alice in Asia.

He should have a kip. Recharge the batteries. His chest still ached. There was an unpleasant taste in his mouth. But now Alice was away, Ed could play. Let his hair down and unstress himself. Half an hour later, Ed was downstairs lecturing James the barman on how to pour gin and tonic in a wide glass with lots of ice and a twist of lime. James, new to the job, worked in marketing and communications until Covid, a savage war in Eastern Europe and spiralling costs made his skills a luxury businesses could easily afford to ignore.

'Can I have one of those, just like our gin expert has ordered?' An uninvited sex kitten sat herself down next to him and purred. 'Mind if I join you? My table is booked for seven and I always like an aperitif before dinner. I am Becky.'

Ed smiled at her. Said his name was Edward. She could call him Ed. He asked James to fix another of his very special gin and tonics. He was glad he had come prepared. He had GHB and uncut diamonds in his blazer pocket. He knew how to win a girl over. A date rape drug and diamonds were a girl's best friends. They ensured she would be putty in his hands.

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Was Ed Boucher the one? Was Ed going to kill Becky. And the unwanted foetus inside her. A parting gift from a Russian invader who had raped her in Bucha back home in Ukraine and continued to stalk her. Would Ed do what she had failed to do on the Humber bridge when Owen stopped her jumping to her death? What did a murderer and rapist look like when he wasn't wearing a Russian uniform? Did he sport a wig, blazer and a military tie and speak in a posh English voice? Did he have a pencil thin moustache? How did you know he was the one?

You didn't. You lived and died in hope.

Becky hadn't jumped into the Humber estuary. The Mifepristone and Misoprostol abortion pills were untouched in her car, parked underground near the hotel. Ever since the bridge, Owen had been in her face. Keeping her busy. Not giving her termination time. But she was conscious she was close to the legal deadline to end unwanted pregnancies.

She looked at Ed, her murderer-in-waiting, and decided yes, he was the one. Ed suggested as he was dining alone and she was eating by herself, they could free up a table for other guests. A great idea, she said and asked why he was in Manchester. He said he was on business. A civil servant. Becky replied she was here for pleasure. A leisure break. She was a corporate financier working for an international bank. She wrote books in her spare time and had a good reason to celebrate her hobby. Ed asked why. She went all coy. Acted embarrassed. He misread her



modesty. Called her a tease. Becky apologised. Said she was a bit shy. Didn't normally chat up strangers. Ed said a glass of wine would help her relax. Always worked with him and he was a shy boy too. Becky said a bottle was a great idea. Said she had signed a worldwide three-book deal with a major global publisher. Soon she would kiss the corporate world of finance goodbye and hoped Ed wouldn't talk about base interest rates, the pros and cons of ISAs and the consequences of excessive quantitative easing. Ed asked her to name a book of hers he could buy. Becky said she wrote crime fiction under a pseudonym to protect her employer and could not reveal her writer's name. 'Otherwise I would have to kill you.'

'How?'

'I'll tell you when I come back from powdering my nose.' Becky paused by the toilets, out of sight. Watched Ed spike her champagne flute. His sleight of hand barely noticeable. Like he was cleaning the glass. He used a G&T straw to stir the drug into the bubbly. All Becky had to do was drink the spiked fizz. Surrender to a psycho. Like she had done with the Russian rapist Andrei Orlov. She had thought her sacrifice might save her husband Marko and his brother, Borden, and their cousin, Symon.

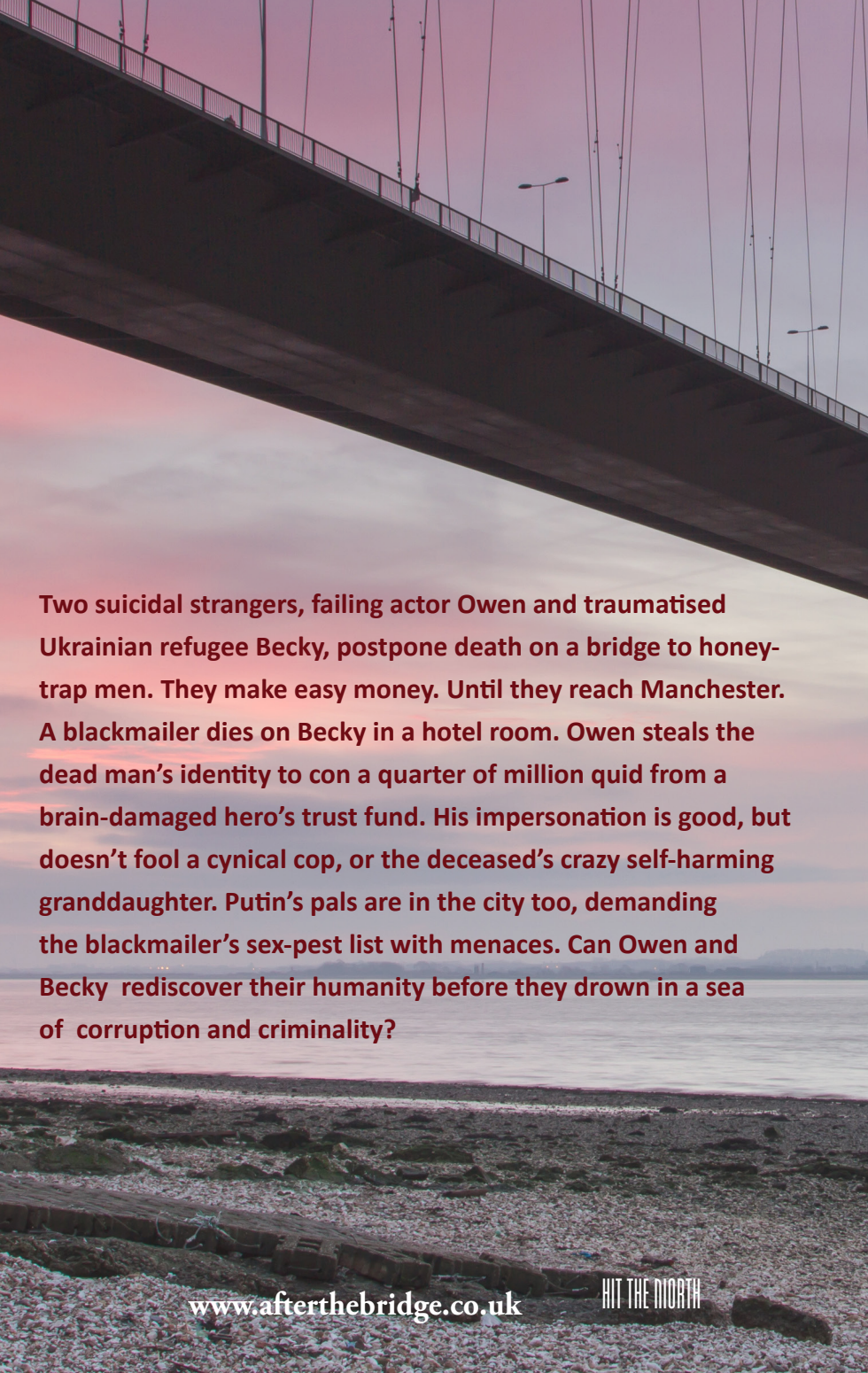
Boucher's drugs would render her death painless, no matter what Ed did to her. She would no longer suffer from the violent invasions of her country and herself. 'I am coming Marko, coming home to you.'

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What did Ed know about this Becky woman? She was by herself. That was a big tick. She had no friends in Manchester otherwise she would have been out with them. Another tick. She had a foreign eastern European accent. Probably here illegally. This was Becky's unlucky night. The GHB in her champagne

*Slava Ukraini! Heroiam Slava!*  
*(Glory to Ukraine, Glory to our Heroes)*

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**Two suicidal strangers, failing actor Owen and traumatised Ukrainian refugee Becky, postpone death on a bridge to honey-trap men. They make easy money. Until they reach Manchester. A blackmailer dies on Becky in a hotel room. Owen steals the dead man's identity to con a quarter of million quid from a brain-damaged hero's trust fund. His impersonation is good, but doesn't fool a cynical cop, or the deceased's crazy self-harming granddaughter. Putin's pals are in the city too, demanding the blackmailer's sex-pest list with menaces. Can Owen and Becky rediscover their humanity before they drown in a sea of corruption and criminality?**