

## One

There was something about the American that Max Avery didn't trust.

Something about the jokes and heavy laughter, as he dispensed anecdotes and porter from behind the bar at the back of O'Casey's barbershop, didn't quite ring true. As though the rough good humour were an act that might be replaced in a flash by a fit of unreasonable anger.

Perhaps it was just a question of bad body chemistry between them. Instinctive. But it was an instinct that Avery had learned to trust; it had kept him alive this long.

He lay back in the gloomy alcove seat and reached for the glass of Guinness. From where he sat he could see the entrance as well as his own reflection in the grubby gilt-edged mirror. Christ, he couldn't say he didn't look his age now. Although his hair was still full and dark, the sunken skin around the worried grey-blue eyes seemed to emphasise every one of his forty years. And the shadow of stubble on his chin certainly didn't help.

He sighed inwardly and tried to relax.

Perhaps he was just being bloody-minded.

He didn't want to be in this Irish backwater village,

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scarcely five miles from the border with Ulster. It was foolhardy and he didn't know why he had been summoned.

That made him nervous. Bloody-minded and suspicious.

Suspicious even of a big, jovial Irish-born American who had returned from New York to rediscover his roots. He'd just happened to find them here in rural Monaghan, and it had taken little more than the glimpse of a fat dollar roll to persuade the thriftless O'Casey to allow his back room to be converted into Corrigan's Den.

Not surprisingly, the bald-headed barber was one of only two other customers in the cramped dingy room with its all-pervading smell of malt and sawdust. He sat on a bar stool, chatting with the local farmhand next to him, laughing and drinking away the day's meagre takings. Just occasionally both men would stop talking and glower in the direction of the lone Englishman.

Avery ignored them and unfolded a crumpled newspaper from his jacket pocket. He read the headline but it hardly registered. Something about Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. More troops, more ships. More talk. Another world, another war. It might as well have been another planet.

The brass-faced grandfather clock struck eleven melancholic chimes, forcing conversation to a halt.

The farmhand stood, drained his glass, and bade Lew Corrigan goodnight.

Avery watched, tense. Observation of legal drinking times was not something for which the Irish were known.

O'Casey followed the farmhand into the front barber-

shop. Avery heard them exchange farewells above the hiss of the rain; then came the sound of bolts being shoved home.

O'Casey did not return. Avery shifted his position slightly until he could see the barber relaxing back on one of his own leather-padded chairs from which the stuffing was falling out. Gunmetal glinted on his lap in the light from a nearby street lamp.

The smoke-filled bar seemed suddenly stifling. Claustrophobic. Avery wiped the perspiration from his forehead. Like a rat in a trap. The words rushed around his brain and he felt his heart begin to palpitate.

'How's the room?'

The sound of Lew Corrigan's voice intruded on his thoughts and he spilled his drink. He forced an uneasy smile. 'The room? Oh, it's fine.'

The American came from behind the bar. It was too small for a man his size. Sixteen stone, Avery guessed, with huge shoulders and a powerful chest barely contained within the red lumberjack shirt. The ingrained tan suggested a lifetime under a tropical sun which had doubtless added a few years to his blunt facial features. The greying, close-cropped hair put him at about the same age as Avery. Early forties. Some just wear better than others, he mused.

'We've just the two rooms,' Lew Corrigan said. His accent was a curious mix of Brooklyn with lapses into a softer Irish brogue. 'I'm tryin' to persuade O'Casey to open up another one for next summer's trade.' He lowered his voice. 'But the guy's an asshole.'

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'The room's fine,' Avery repeated.

Corrigan's lips smiled, but the Englishman noticed that the flinty blue eyes didn't. 'You spilled yer drink. I'll top it up.'

'There's no need.'

The American waved aside his protest and returned to the bar with the glass. As he worked the pump he said conversationally: 'The locals can make visiting Brits feel twitchy. Me, I'm lucky; they love us Yanks.'

Avery decided it was pointless to avoid conversation. There was no telling when his contact would turn up. He said: 'I was told you were born here.'

'True,' Corrigan replied, returning with two glasses. 'Lived about twelve miles from here till I was eight and my folks emigrated. I'm a naturalised citizen of the good ol' US of A.' The Brooklyn accent had returned. 'Started coming back here for fishing trips in the eighties. Got comfortable with the old sod. Then what? – eighteen months ago I got divorced. I thought what the shit!' He glanced around the musty room. 'So here I am. Business sucks, but it'll pick up. At least you know an Irishman'll always need a drink. Cheers.'

Their glasses clinked and froth splashed onto the newspaper that was open on the table.

'Whatyathink?' Corrigan asked suddenly.

'Pardon?'

The big hand lifted the paper. 'Ol' Saddam and Kuwait?'

'I haven't given it much thought.'

It was a lie, of course. He'd spent too much time thinking

about it, speculating. Remembering old times and old friends. It had proved distracting. But still the lie came easily. If you told the same lie enough times you began to believe it yourself.

Corrigan laughed. 'You Brits can be so cool. Half the world's goin' to war and you haven't thought about it. And they call Americans insular!'

Avery gave a grudging smile. 'All I know is it's hit the motor trade.'

'That your business? Cars?'

'Import and export, hiring and repairs.'

Another laugh. 'Still, like drink, people always need wheels.'

It was a timely statement. The squeal of tyres in the back-yard was unmistakable. It was followed by the slamming of a car door.

Avery's pulse began to race.

The American was on his feet, moving swiftly for a man of his size. Pushing aside a shabby velvet curtain at the back of the room, he unlocked the door and allowed it to swing open in the wind.

The man stood in the doorway, his lank hair and black trench coat sodden, his face pinched and white. His hunched figure was outlined by the headlights of the car in the yard, steam rising from its bonnet as the rain drummed on the paintwork.

'Inside,' Corrigan said briskly.

The man stepped in, trailing a puddle on the floorboards, and glanced anxiously around the dimly lit room. When

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his eyes settled on Avery the thick red gash of a mouth pulled an expression that was halfway between a smile and a sneer. He turned and waved out to the driver of the car, who then switched off his lights and killed the engine.

Corrigan closed the door and locked it. 'Filthy night.'

The man ignored the pleasantries. 'Anyone else here?'

'Just O'Casey on watch in the front.'

The tense expression on the newcomer's face relaxed and he ran both hands over his head, squeezing out the overlong black hair and leaving it plastered against his scalp. 'I'll take a large Jack Daniels,' he said, shrugging off the wet raincoat. Under it he wore a black shirt and jacket and faded jeans.

He crossed the floor and pulled up a chair to face Avery. 'Long time, Max. Remember me? Danny Grogan.'

'No, should I?'

Another lie. Silken, convincing.

Of course he knew Danny Grogan. He'd met the man casually a couple of times in Irish pubs in London. Casually enough for him not to remember if he had no reason to. And that could raise unwanted suspicions. So he lied.

He knew Danny Grogan because he was a friend of Gerry Fox.

And Avery was interested in anyone who was a friend of Gerry Fox.

But it had been his controller at MI5 who had filled him in on the details. Grogan was Fox's second half. Together they formed a liaison cell of the Provisional IRA. A cut-out unit. Grogan received his instructions from a contact

of the Army Council. He passed them on to Fox who passed them on to contacts in 'active service units' on the British mainland or Europe. Neither Fox nor Grogan knew the other's contacts. At least that was the theory.

'That's good,' Grogan said. 'But I know you, Max.'

Avery ignored the hint of menace. 'It's madness bringing me here.'

Grogan's small dark eyes viewed the Englishman with disdain. 'We'll be the judge of that.'

Avery wasn't about to be intimidated. 'I'm not going to be much use in future if I'm seen associating with you. It was decided at the start I should never come to Ireland.'

Grogan lit a cigarette, cupping the flame with nicotine-stained fingers. 'Priorities change,' he mumbled, and he let the smoke escape with a hiss. 'We're not idiots, Max. So you come here on business and spend one night's bed and breakfast at Corrigan's. Perfectly innocent. The Garda aren't given to hounding tourists. Anyway, O'Casey would swear the three of you drank and played cards to the wee small hours.' He took the offered glass from Corrigan and downed its contents in four rapid gulps. 'No one's going to know about what's going to happen. People round here know better than to ask questions.'

'Happen? And what's going to happen?' Avery didn't like the sound of it and it showed in his voice.

The Irishman belched lightly. 'You're coming with us on a little jaunt, Max. It's been decided it's time you saw a wee bit of action.'

'That's ridiculous,' Avery protested. 'I'm happy to help

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out, supplies and logistics. But strictly arm's-length, we've always agreed that. For Christ's sake, man, don't you have any respect for your own security, let alone mine?'

Grogan was unmoved. 'Like I said, priorities change.' He turned to Corrigan. 'You got the gear, Lew?'

'Sure,' the American replied, placing two brown cardboard boxes on the bar.

Avery was more than mildly surprised as he realised that Corrigan was clearly and wittingly involved in the IRA man's plans.

Grogan said: 'It's time we went.'

It was cramped in the back of the Cavalier, Avery crushed between Corrigan and the Irishman. As they bumped along the narrow country lanes, a fug of condensation gathered on the windows and the wipers struggled to clear the lashing rain.

Avery didn't recognise the youth who was driving, nor the man who sat beside him in the passenger seat. No one offered the information and they weren't the sort of questions you asked. He noted that the courtesy light bulb had been removed and he guessed that it was no accident.

'This is good weather for moving about,' Grogan said after they'd been travelling for some fifteen minutes. 'The Garda don't like standing about in the rain any more than the RUC.'

The driver took a bend too fast, the rear wheels fish-tailing on a carpet of dead leaves. 'Fucken slow down!'

Grogan snapped, his nerves increasingly raw as they neared their destination.

‘Is this car hot?’ Avery asked.

‘No, it belongs to a local doctor. He leaves it in the garage each night with the key in, just in case we have a need for it.’

‘That’s decent of him.’

Grogan ignored the sarcasm. ‘That way he gets to keep his kneecaps.’

They crossed the border into Ulster by one of the myriad narrow lanes that was little more than a dirt track. Soon they entered a built-up area, the dank countryside giving way to the orderly terraces of a council estate with wide, unkempt grass verges. It was one in the morning now, and there were few lights in the windows. At one point they neared a heavily fortified police station, but then the driver turned off, weaving his way deeper into the urban sprawl.

At last they turned into another side street and stopped. A tense silence fell as the driver doused the lights.

Grogan jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. ‘That’s the place.’

It was an ordinary end-of-terrace house. A three-bedroom affair with a neat little front garden behind a white picket fence. A white baker’s van stood on the driveway.

At that moment two men detached themselves from the shadows where they had been keeping watch.

Grogan wound down his window. ‘Well?’

‘No problems,’ the first man answered. ‘His alarm goes off at two. There’s access from the back.’

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'Let's go,' Grogan said, then placed a restraining hand on Avery's arm. 'You'll wear this.'

The Englishman took the woollen balaclava with a growing feeling of unease.

While the lookouts continued their vigil, the driver and his companion left the car first, crossing the road to a pedestrian alleyway that ran alongside the house. Then Grogan followed, ushering Avery and the American in front of him. A five-foot chainlink fence was the only obstacle between the alleyway and the back garden of the house. Once it had been scaled it took only seconds to cross the tiny lawn, with its child's swing, ornamental pond and plastic gnome, to the crazy-paved patio.

The driver was already putting the last strip of plastic parcel tape over the glass of the kitchen door. His companion produced a heavy club hammer, its head swathed in towelling. The eyes in the balaclava looked at Grogan. Somewhere in the wet night two tomcats shrieked in combat.

'Do it.'

One short muffled crack. That was the only sound.

Moments later sufficient glass held in place by the tape had been removed to allow a hand to reach in and turn the key. Then the first two gunmen were in, racing through the darkened kitchen and into the hall.

Avery and Corrigan followed with Grogan close behind. By the time they'd climbed the stairs the light was already on in the front bedroom.

The couple were sitting up in bed shielding their eyes

from the sudden influx of light. Someone had pulled aside the duvet and one of the gunmen had a revolver pointed at the white naked body of the man. His wife, her transparent nylon nightdress rucked around her thighs, began to blubber incoherently.

Grogan stepped forward, grabbed the woman's hair and forced her head back so that her mouth opened with a gasp. He shoved the muzzle of the automatic between her teeth.

'Stow it, missus!' he hissed. She gulped, staring up wide-eyed at her tormentor. 'We just want to borrow your husband. Keep quiet, do what we say, and no one gets hurt. Got it?'

The woman nodded, tears welling in her eyes, and Grogan withdrew the gun.

'Mummy?' The small voice came from the landing where the boy stood clutching a one-eyed teddy bear.

'Come here, boy,' Grogan said abruptly. 'Go to your mother.'

'Darling . . .' the woman wept, holding out her arms. The terrified child scurried past the gunmen and threw himself into her embrace.

Grogan said to the woman: 'I want you to phone the bakery and tell them your husband won't be coming in. He's got the flu. Understand?'

Her voice was quavering a little by the time she finished the call, but Grogan was satisfied. While the husband got dressed at gunpoint, the driver and his companion went downstairs. They opened the garage doors and rolled the

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white van silently inside. Hidden from prying eyes they began to load the fifty-pound Semtex bomb.

Avery watched on with sickened fascination as the gunmen went about their work.

One of them turned to Corrigan: 'Have you got the detector, Lew?'

The American produced one of the cardboard boxes he'd had back at the bar and extracted an oblong plastic module that resembled a car radio.

'What's that?' Avery asked, suppressing the anger in his voice.

Corrigan handed the object to one of the gunmen. 'A digital signal processor,' he replied easily. 'Or radar detector to you Brits. This is a state-of-the-art job. They're illegal here, but we use 'em to pick up the cops' speed traps in the States.'

The gunmen began drilling and screwing the module inside the rear window of the van using an angle bracket.

'And you supplied it?'

Corrigan looked at him curiously, unsure if he detected a hint of disapproval. 'Sure. Like you supply stuff for the boyos on the mainland and Europe, I do my bit for gear that's available Stateside.' He nodded towards the module now being wired into the detonator of the bomb. 'The army here's developed counter-measures against radio-controlled bombs. They can jam frequencies between 27 and 450 megahertz, but they can't do nothing against this beaut. It operates on 10,000 megs and above.'

'The wonders of modern science,' Avery murmured.

He'd heard that there were at least four American nationals helping the Provisional IRA in Ulster and Eire, but it was still an unsettling experience actually to meet one.

'Done,' one of the gunmen announced with a certain pride and slammed closed the doors of the van.

Corrigan called back into the house and a few moments later Grogan appeared with the baker and his sobbing wife and child at gunpoint.

'Right, let's get this clear. There's no need for histrionics. Your husband here simply drives his van to the border checkpoint the same way he does every day. Only this time he isn't carrying bread. At exactly four thirty he leaves the van, taking the key with him, and simply walks away. It's as easy as that.'

'My wife . . . ?' the hapless victim protested.

Grogan's impatience was starting to show. 'Your wife and wee kiddy will be safely tucked up in bed with my men keeping an eye on them until we hear that the bomb's gone off.'

The woman snivelled as her husband gave her a rough hug of reassurance. She clutched at him in desperation until Grogan prised her fingers away.

'What if things go wrong?' the man pleaded. 'What if I'm stopped?'

The muffled voice behind the balaclava said: 'Just make sure you're not. That's if you ever want to see them alive again.'

As soon as the van left the garage, the doors were locked

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behind it; the two gunmen remained with the woman and her child.

Grogan led Avery and Corrigan back to the parked Cavalier. The Irishman took the wheel this time, driving at a steady thirty miles an hour until they had cleared the residential estate and were again in the countryside. Then he hit the accelerator.

He began talking rapidly with a humour in his voice that suggested he was enjoying the flow of adrenalin. 'The van's taking the scenic route. We'll be there in good time before him.'

Avery said: 'I still don't know why you've brought me here. It's bloody stupidity. If I get caught, who'll organise your cars and safe houses?'

Grogan gave a cynical laugh. 'You're not the only quartermaster we have on the mainland, Max. We don't believe in keeping all our eggs in one basket.'

'I know that.' Irritable.

'But you really *don't* know why you're here?'

'Christ!' He checked his exasperation. 'No, I don't.'

'And you don't know about O'Flaherty?'

The air in the enclosed space seemed to freeze.

Eamonn O'Flaherty was the Provisionals' commander for European Operations. An educated, deceptively charming and gregarious man in his early sixties, he was a senior official at the Irish Livestock and Meat Board in London. Snowy-haired and with a fondness for black-cherry pipe tobacco and tweed jackets with leather patches, he was the absolute antithesis of the popular concept of a major

terrorist figure. His position of influence in commerce and minor establishment circles placed him above suspicion.

Avery caught himself just in time. He knew O'Flaherty socially, but his knowledge of the man's secret life had been supplied by his MI5 controller. 'Eamonn? What's happened?'

'He was lifted in London three days ago. Special Branch.'

Avery could scarcely believe what he was hearing. He'd had a long drinking session with the man and his wife only a week earlier. 'You must be joking.'

'Do I sound like a man who's joking?'

If O'Flaherty was going to be arrested, Avery should have been warned about it. It was a basic ground rule. 'Why was he arrested?'

'Why do you think? He was an important man in the organisation.'

'I didn't know that.'

'No?'

'No – and I wouldn't want to know either.' He gathered his thoughts. 'I've seen nothing about the arrest in the papers.'

Grogan was dismissive. 'Of course not. They don't announce that sort of thing straightaway. Like to make us sweat.'

And Avery could see that Grogan was sweating. But not just him. He could imagine the pandemonium that the arrest would be causing in the PIRA hierarchy. The recriminations and the paranoia. He understood now why he had received the cryptic message to drop everything and take the shuttle to Dublin.

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Grogan's next words confirmed it. 'Only a handful of people knew O'Flaherty's real work for the Provies.'

'I wasn't one of them.'

'So *you* say.'

'So I'm under suspicion?'

'We've a new European commander now. The Army Council's orders are to trust nobody.'

The lane was climbing a steep wooded hillside which Avery gauged must be less than a mile from the border with the Republic of Ireland. He was proved right as the vehicle crested the hillside to reveal the stark arc lights of the British Army checkpoint glowing below in the dark distance like a disembodied filmset.

Grogan steered into a lay-by and doused the lights. The rain had reduced to a drizzle and they had an uninterrupted view of the cross-border road with its concrete vehicle traps, blockhouses and protective wire mesh fences. A handful of British soldiers in their familiar DPM smocks stood hunched against the weather, stamping their feet for warmth.

'Five minutes,' Corrigan intoned, consulting his watch.

The Irishman took the second cardboard box from the console and prised open the lid. Inside was a police radar gun which he handed to Corrigan.

'When the van reaches the checkpoint,' the American said laconically, 'we just switch this on. The army's electronic scanners won't pick up the beam, but the detector rigged on the vehicle will. As soon as it registers -'

'Boom!' Grogan interrupted; he seemed to find the idea amusing.

‘What about the driver?’ Avery asked.

Grogan half-smiled and returned his gaze to the border road. ‘What about him? A year ago he passed information about one of ours to the Brits. His own brother-in-law.’

‘So you lied to his wife? He’s not coming back?’

‘Let’s say I was economical with the truth.’

Avery stared at the empty road in silence, drowning in his sense of utter helplessness. Forced to sit and watch as an innocent man drove to his death. A human bomb. A human bomb who would take God only knew how many British servicemen with him.

Avery found himself willing the soldiers to return to the blockhouse for one of their famous brews of tea. Praying that the driver would find the courage to stop his van on the way from his home to telephone the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

Even as Avery’s hopes began to rise, the white van trundled into view, sparkling like a child’s toy under the bright streetlights.

The muscles in Avery’s stomach contracted involuntarily and he found himself holding his breath. Grogan made a little clicking sound of anticipation with his tongue against his teeth. The American raised the radar gun with both hands, lining it up on the rear of the van.

‘Perfect line of sight,’ he murmured.

Below them the vehicle slowed. Avery could almost sense the driver’s reluctance, imagine the terror and confusion that must be racing through his mind.

Grogan said: ‘Give it to Max.’

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Avery turned sharply. 'What?'

'You heard,' the Irishman said evenly. 'Take the gun from Lew. You do it.'

'Are you crazy?'

There was a half-smile on Grogan's face. 'Crazy enough to want to be sure about you, Max. That's what the Army Council wants.' He added: 'That's why you're here.'

Lew Corrigan held out the radar gun. Avery ignored him, instead staring hard at Grogan. 'I went through all this years ago. I shot a Green Jacket in the Falls Road, you know that.'

The van was within a quarter mile of the border-post, its speed reduced to a crawl.

'As you put it yourself,' Grogan said, 'that was years ago. Times change, people change. Just look at this as renewing your subscription.'

'Take it,' Corrigan leered.

Avery glared. Last time he'd had warning. Last time he'd been able to contact his controller to set it up. Told which man to aim for, when and where. As he'd fired, just wide, a soldier fell down. It was as simple as that. The poultry blood, the panic that followed, the armoured cars and the ambulance with its flashing light, it was all window-dressing. Just like the concocted report of the assassination in the press the next day.

This time it was different. This time there was no get-out.

Reluctantly Avery took the offered radar gun, raised it slowly with both hands.

'Wait until the van's at the checkpoint,' Grogan ordered.

The vehicle was within a hundred metres of the post; the troops had seen it and were gathering, ready to do their job. Some were laughing, recognising the van, perhaps anticipating the treat of an oven-warm loaf.

It was blinding. The white-hot core of the explosion seemed to burn into the eyeballs, even at that distance. Momentarily it illuminated the surrounding countryside like sheet lightning. Fifty metres away the mesh fences of the border-post trembled in the shockwave, the on-duty soldiers blown off their feet.

Grogan's gasp of surprise was abruptly drowned out as the noise of the detonation reached them, its quaking power so deep and awesome that it made their hearts jump and set their ears ringing. Beneath their feet the very earth shook.

'Christ,' Grogan breathed, staring at the smouldering crater in the road. The van had vaporised and with it the hapless driver. A whistle blew at the border-post where dazed soldiers were climbing to their feet.

Grogan turned on Avery. 'You bastard, you did that deliberately.'

'No!' It was Corrigan, placing a restraining hand on the Irishman's shoulder. 'Max didn't touch it – his finger's not even on the trigger, look –'

Avery's hands were trembling.

Grogan was angry and bewildered. 'What the fuck?'

'It must be a fault in the mechanism,' the American said. 'I'm sorry. I'll check it out. It won't happen again.'

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The Irishman could scarcely contain his fury, but the frustration quickly gave way to his instinct for self-preservation. He knew from experience that within minutes the army would call up helicopters with powerful Nitesun lamps to search the surrounding area.

‘One fucken baker,’ he seethed as he started the engine and swung the car into a tight turn, creeping blindly back down the hill until it was safe to turn on the headlights.

They drove back in angry silence. But by the time the Cavalier pulled up in the yard behind Corrigan’s Den, Grogan’s temper had subsided. Daylight was starting to break with the promise of another dismal, damp day.

‘Enjoy a hearty breakfast, Max,’ he said. ‘Then drive back to Dublin and catch your plane. We’ll be in touch shortly. Something big’s in the air.’

Avery appeared not to have heard the Irishman’s words. ‘So have I renewed my membership?’

Lew Corrigan laughed at the look of confusion in the Englishman’s eyes. He could almost smell the sweat of fear that glazed the unshaven blue skin of Avery’s chin. He’d seen men break under pressure too many times not to recognise the symptoms. On the streets of Brooklyn, when the Irish gangs stood shoulder to shoulder against the mobs of Puerto Ricans, Italians or blacks from the neighbouring ghettos.

And he’d seen it under fire in Vietnam. Some silent and paralysed with terror. Some wailing like hysterical women. Others like Max Avery. Outwardly in total control. But Lew Corrigan knew when a man had lost his bottle. Knew beyond any doubt when a man was about to crack.

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*Terence Strong*

Grogan shared the American's mirth. 'Put him out of his misery, Lew.'

Corrigan reached inside his jacket and pulled out a .38 Smith and Wesson revolver. His thumb rested on the hammer.

Avery's nostrils flared as he felt the liquid draining from his guts like water emptying down a sink.

'If you hadn't taken that radar gun back there, Max, my orders were to kill you.'