

Extract from The Execution Channel

It took him a while to realise why so many military aircraft were airborne. They were being kept off the airfields.

Two calls had come in the middle of the night. The red numbers on his alarm clock read 4.13. On the bedside table his mobile buzzed and jittered, then stopped as he reached for it. Text message, he guessed. Down the hall the landline phone was ringing. Landlines triggered an older reflex of urgency. Travis jumped out of bed, stubbed his toe on the door and stumbled down the hallway in streetlight.

'Yes?'

'Dad, I'm all right.' Roisin didn't sound all right at all.

'What? What's wrong?'

'I'm just ringing to say I'm all right.'

'That's good, that's good.' Travis licked his dry lips with a sticky tongue. 'Why should—?'

'There's been a bomb—'

'Oh, Christ! Are you all right?'

'I just said—'

'Just hang tight and call the cops, OK? Stay where you are, lie low. Whoever attacked you might still be out there.'

'Dad,' said Roisin, in a pitying, patient tone that took him back about five years, 'it wasn't a bomb on the camp. It was a bomb on the base.'

'Shit! What kind of bomb?'

Roisin took a deep, sniffing breath and let it out shakily.

'I think it was a nuke.'

Travis almost dropped the handset. He heard beeps and the sound of coins being shoved in.

'Still there?' Roisin asked.

'Yes, yes – if you run out of money just stay and I'll call

you back. Where are you?’

‘Some wee village gas station. I can’t stay. We’re just going.’

‘Why do you think it was a nuke?’

‘Dad, I’m looking at a fucking mushroom cloud. I saw the flash.’

‘Are you all right?’

‘Yes, I told you. I have to go.’

‘Was the camp—?’

‘We weren’t in the camp. Nobody was, thanks to— Thank God. We’re on the road.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘Wherever.’

Travis paused. Wherever. That word had been agreed between them.

‘I’ll come for you.’

‘Don’t, Dad, please don’t. I have to go. I’m all right. Take care. Bye.’

She’d put the phone down. Travis dialled 1471 and heard a chip voice. ‘You were called . . . today . . . at oh four fourteen hours. The caller withheld—’

He slammed the phone down and ran back to the bedroom. He speed-dialled the number for Roisin’s mobile and got another chip voice, telling him the number was unobtainable. Travis guessed that if there really had been a nuke the mobile might have got fried by the electromagnetic pulse. As he ended the call he saw the flashing envelope symbol and keyed up the text message:  
sell apls buy orngs

Travis stared at it for a moment in blank puzzlement, then recognised it. His hand shook a little. He knew better than to call or text back. It wasn’t even worth memorising the number before he deleted it. After he’d deleted it he ran a soft wipe: it was the best he could do short of trashing the chip. For a while he sat on the side of the bed and stared at the phone’s blank screen. The text

message had left him more disturbed than the phone call. The bomb, assuming it wasn't an opening shot in the big one, would in time become another date that marked a before. Before 9/11. Before the bombing. Before the Iraq war. Before 7/7. Before the Iran war. Before the nukes. Before the flu. Before the Straits. Before Rosyth.

Before . . . and so you could go on, right up to now: 5/5, the first nuke on Britain. Yet another date that changed everything.