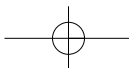
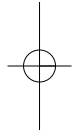
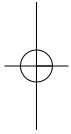




BLUE KNIGHT, WHITE CROSS

Colin Campbell



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The buzz went around A&E long before the ambulance cut through the night towards Bradford Royal Infirmary, blue lights flashing and trailing a line of police cars fit for a presidential motorcade. 'Officer down.' 'Line of duty.' 'Severe head injuries.' The Chinese whispers had built up such momentum, that by the time the ambulance swung into the delivery bay there was a welcome party eager to rush the fallen warrior into Resus. Concerned colleagues swarmed past the Triage desk only to be held at bay by a staff nurse who looked as if she could take them all on single-handed. The traditional Hollywood beauty she wasn't; the all-business-no-nonsense professional she most definitely was.

'Take a seat gentlemen. It'll be a while before we've anything to tell you.'

Curains swished across the cubicle, cutting off friends and comrades. Outside, in the cold Yorkshire night, it began to rain and a burly sergeant took it personally. He watched water stream down the windows as if it was about to wash away his children.

'Jesus Christ. That's all we need.'

Sgt Ballhaus was pushing fifty and tipped the scales at almost twenty-three stone. That wouldn't be too bad for a six foot copper but Ballhaus was only five foot six. He didn't so much consider himself overweight as short for his height. Anyway, the beer belly and double chin were bought and paid for. Good old-fashioned northern ale. The grey-flecked temples and bags under his eyes were free. A side effect of too many nights like this.

He walked up the corridor back to the Triage desk. Rows of uncomfortable plastic chairs held the unwashed masses in line; Saturday night debris of a rundown mill town renowned for its Saturday night fever. Only this Saturday

had produced something he had never expected but always dreaded; the sergeant's nightmare, one of his team brought down in the line of duty. He looked at the handful of sad-sacks, no-marks and lame-heads who were nursing bruised fists, cut lips and swollen eyes and wondered which of them had caused what injuries to the others. As his good friend, Mick Habergham, had been fond of saying, 'Beer in, brains out.' A typical Saturday on the farm.

An old lady being comforted by her daughter in the corner reminded him that not everyone deserved what they got. Her ankle was heavily taped but the bruised head was clearly visible. A household fall? A trip getting off the bus? Whatever it was she was in the minority; an innocent victim of God's little theatre. The rain suddenly became heavier, drumming against the windows of the A&E reception. Sgt Ballhaus went outside anyway for privacy, sheltering as best he could beneath the glass and chrome awning. Pulling his collar up he thumbed the transmit button on his radio.

'Alpha Five-One to XW. Get hold of Chief's reserve. Have them take the scene tent in the van. This rain's going to wash everything away if we don't get it covered.'

The radio operator replied with practised nonchalance that belied her own concern for a colleague she would have been talking to on the radio only hours before.

'Tent's already on its way. The SIO will be at the command bunker in twenty minutes. And the night detective and the inspector are at the scene now.'

Senior Investigating Officer. Bringing in the on-call Detective Chief Superintendent told its own story. You didn't call them out unless it was big. The last time had been for the constable shot on a routine traffic stop in Leeds two Christmases ago. Ballhaus hoped this one didn't have the same result. He hadn't known that officer but the force felt his loss as if he were family, which of course he was. A family dipped in blood and bathed in blue, the blue serge of a uniform that was no longer blue and hadn't been serge for twenty years. But the boys in blue they remained, a bond forged on the streets. The radio crackled into life.

'How is Steve?'

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Breaking protocol, Ballhaus knew Jane Archer couldn't help but ask. It was the question on everyone's lips back at control as much as at the station. The sooner good news could be passed down the line, the sooner tensions could relax. There was no good news yet though.

'We don't know, Jane. I'll keep you posted. Give the SIO the Triage number. He can get me there.'

Rain bounced off the ambulance roof out front, not the one that brought Steve Decker, but the next one down the line, sluiced out and cleaned up ready for the next emergency. A paramedic in green overalls leaned on the steering wheel and glanced across at Ballhaus. The nod of sympathy acknowledged a wider brotherhood, the clan of the emergency services, be it Police, Fire or Ambulance. They each bitched about the others and they each fought for their own, but when push came to shove, they all worked the same streets and bled the same blood. Ballhaus nodded back and then went inside.

'Sergeant Ballhaus? Is there a Sergeant Ballhaus?'

The Triage nurse waved a telephone at a gaggle of policemen from behind her desk. They pointed collectively at the sergeant coming back into casualty.

'I'm Ballhaus.'

The nurse pursed her lips like she was sucking lemons and handed him the phone. The brotherhood obviously didn't extend to the Triage staff.

'Well, mister Ballhaus. I am the Triage nurse, not your personal secretary. Resus have a bereaved relatives' suite. Use that phone if you need to talk to anyone else. Extension two-three-zero-nine.'

Ballhaus gritted his teeth. It was tempting to bawl her out but he had to remember she had a job to do as well, and it didn't include fielding calls from the SIO. Somehow she had to keep the line of self-inflicted injuries moving, because you could bet a pound to a pinch of shit there'd be more coming in as the night wore on. He nodded his thanks and took the receiver.

'Ballhaus.'

Muffled words down the phone. He ticked off the questions in his mind before replying.

‘All we know is it was a Code Zero at White Cross.’
More words.

‘No. Paving stone is all we know. It’s being preserved but most of the blood on it’s likely PC Decker’s.’

Ballhaus bristled at the response.

‘There isn’t going to be a dying declaration. Steve’s strong as an ox.’

Heated words from the SIO.

‘Look. Go bollocks. I’ve been in the job long enough to know what to do and I’ve known Steve long enough to know what he’ll say. And as soon as he says it we’ll lock the bastard up who did this. There’ll be someone with him as long as it takes.’

Back-peddling down the phone, but no less heated.

‘Yes, on whichever ward they put him in. For now the doctors need to work on him. He’s not going to say much while they’re cutting him open.’

Ballhaus reached over the counter and slammed the phone down. The lemon-sucking nurse unsucked a little, a hint of understanding entering her eyes. She nodded at the uniforms behind Ballhaus, her voice less sharp.

‘They will only let one of you wait in Resus, but there’s a kettle in the relatives’ suite. Any more calls and I’ll transfer them there.’

‘Thanks.’

And he meant it. Having let off steam at the SIO he felt deflated, and less optimistic than he’d sounded over the phone, but he had his boys to think about. Being a shift sergeant was as much about fielding the crap that came down from the Senior Management Team as it was cracking the whip. Right now it was also about putting a brave face on things until they knew better. He marched across to the half dozen officers and waved them down the corridor.

‘Jill. You wait outside Resus for any news.’

Jill Treidman, the most senior constable among the group at thirty-five, split off and stood at the emergency room desk. The others, a mixture of youth and experience, followed Sgt Ballhaus into the relatives’ suite. This would be his command centre for now. The calming, nondescript

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paintings on the wall and pastel colour scheme did nothing to take the edge off the evening, and he doubted if it ever helped any grieving relatives either. He rallied his troops.

‘Right. Rest of you back to the scene. We’re going to need house-to-house at all the flats. The footpath crossing between each block has been taped off. No one crosses the line until SOCO have finished, and that includes the SIO. He kicks up a fuss, refer him to me. Preserve the scene. Naylor’s can recover the car once the photos are done.’

The group seemed reluctant to leave. PC Oliver, the youngest, spoke for all of them, his cheeks blushing as if he’d just had his first kiss.

‘Sarge. Is he going to be all right?’

Ballhaus sighed.

‘Rick. I have absolutely no fucking idea. But if anyone can take a concrete slab to the head it’s Steve. You know, where there’s no sense there’s no feeling.’

That got a laugh, the policeman’s antidote to the stress of the job.

‘Now be on your way. Any news and I’ll pass it on to Jane.’

The first news came two hours later. Jill had been fielding calls at the desk outside Resus from everyone – from the SIO, right down to the beat bobbies at the scene. Steve Decker had been in the job a long time and had built up a body of friends that included just about anyone he had spoken to during the last eighteen years. If the cleaner had been working at that time of night, even she would be calling the hospital. Six foot two of solid muscle, skinhead buzz-cut – hard as nails he might be, but he also possessed a grin like a Cheshire cat. He smiled at anyone and everyone, even those he was locking up, just before he locked them up. If you got arrested by PC Decker you stayed arrested, and if he lost his smile you knew you were in deep shit.

Behind the curtains of cubicle Number One he had lost that smile, but it was Steve that was in deep shit, not the doctors who were working tirelessly to remove the piece of bone that was pressing on his brain. His fingers twitched

but he wasn't conscious. The sucking noises made Jill feel sick. The bone cutting made her feel even worse. She was a hardened officer with twelve years' service, built for strength not speed, and with a pair of love-cushions that she wasn't embarrassed to display after a few drinks on post-shift piss-ups. Her friendly personality and twinkling eyes diffused many situations but this wasn't one of them. She gagged at the harsh rasping noise. The last time she'd heard that sound was at a post-mortem where the sight of the circular saw taking the top off the skull, like a boiled egg waiting for dipping, made her retch. It did nothing for the positive thoughts that she was trying to hold on to. Lights blinked through the curtains. Monitors beeped. And Jill fielded another call at the desk.

Then the curtain flicked open and a doctor came out. Jill caught a brief glimpse of the war zone that Steve Decker had become, tubes sticking out of everywhere, needles taped to his arms and pulse monitors clamped to his fingertips. There wasn't a lot of blood but what little there was showed bright red against the white sheets and pastel green hospital gown. Steve's uniform coat and utility belt hung over a plastic chair beside the gurney, the only reminder that this was a police officer and not some drunken numpty laid low by his own excesses.

The curtain swung closed and Jill was glad. It was easier to be positive if you didn't have to confront the evidence of your own eyes. The doctor pulled his facemask down but kept his latex gloves on. The tips of three fingers looked as if they'd been dipped in red ink but the rest were spotless.

'He's out of danger. Most of the bone fragments have been dealt with. I just need to clean him up; then we will be transferring him to Ward Nineteen.'

'How long?'

'Half an hour or so.'

'No. I mean how long will he be staying?'

'Hard to say just now. But it could be quite a while.'

He pulled the curtain to step inside but paused.

'Thickest skull I've ever seen. But a paving stone? Yes. Quite a while.'

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Jill snorted a laugh that was all tension and no humour. 'Thick head. Yeah. Safest place to hit him.'

The curtain swished closed and the doctor was gone. Jill waited a beat while she absorbed the news; then she rang Jane at the control room. Sod the SIO. He could wait.

'Control to all units. Word from the hospital is that Steve's out of danger.'

The 'All units' Jane was talking to were scattered around the four blocks of flats known as White Cross on Allerton Estate. The council estate was a sprawling mess of old-fashioned semi-detached houses, newer maisonettes, and collections of high-rise flats and nursing homes, which were built on the rolling hillsides four miles outside of the city centre. Thornton Road cut a straight line out of town across the bottom of the hills, while Allerton Road snaked around the peaks and troughs towards the top. In between the two were shops and pubs and social clubs that catered for the poor unfortunates who lived there. A last piece of civilization between the rundown mill town and the moors of Howarth and Brontë country.

There wasn't much civilization to it.

Just about everybody on the shift was at White Cross except one double-crewed car that was covering the division. This was one of those all-hands-to-the-pumps sort of scenarios and the calls were already going out for the night shift to come on early and for anyone on rest days to come in on overtime. There was a lot of scene to guard and a lot of door knocking to do. As the rain slanted out of an angry night sky, collars were pulled up and heads bowed.

Blue and white crime scene tape flapped in the wind, sealing off an area of waste ground half the size of a football pitch. Alpha Two had to use two rolls and pass it around the nearest lampposts in a square, but somehow they'd managed to protect the crime scene. It was a pity that only two of the streetlamps were working but, nevertheless, there was enough light to see the stolen Astra chassis deep in mud on the green. The grass had been a sight less muddy before the rain, and a sight less churned up before the joy

riders had used it as a racetrack. Now the car that sparked the incident stood testament to the futility of neighbourhood policing on the worst estate in Bradford.

Half past eight. Most of the curtains were closed on Northside House, the first block of flats coming out of town, but enough twitched to prove that either real life drama triumphed over canned soap operas or that tonight the soap operas had finished. Knowing the residents of Northside House, it was probably the latter. Armageddon could be visited on Allerton Estate and you couldn't drag some of them away from *Coronation Street*. The same applied to Eastside, Westside and Southside, the aptly named blocks of flats that neither corresponded to the points of the compass, nor even formed a proper square. The architect, in his wisdom, had decided on a rather liberal approach to geometry, creating a kind of rhomboid instead of a rectangle and a mess instead of a cosy homestead. Troops of uniformed police entered each block and began knocking on doors.

The magic hour. The time when most cases were won or lost. The first hour after the discovery of a crime when evidence should be gathered and the scene preserved. Witnesses remembered most vividly within that first hour. And footprints, fingerprints and forensic samples were most in danger of being lost if they were not protected by the end of it. Four police cars blocked the four entrances to the footpath that separated the flats. A SOCO van stood off to one side, its back doors open, and flashes of light came from within the huge white scene tent that covered the paved intersection. Any blood at the scene was beneath that tent. Any trace of the attacker anywhere but.

The wind was strengthening and the heavy thwup, thwup, thwup of the police helicopter pulled back. It had done an infrared sweep of the bushes and surrounding area but there was no one hiding there. With so many officers on the ground, calling the dog was pointless. It was looking increasingly like they would have to rely on the recollections of a stricken officer in Bradford Royal Infirmary. The helicopter climbed further into the night sky, its searchlight



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growing to encompass the tent and the footpath it covered. Slowly the footpath became a cross, the white cross that the area was named after. And somewhere in the middle of that cross, an officer's blood stained the concrete.

