

'R D Ronald pulls out all the stops with this one.
Rich and very dark. A knockout!' *Sheila Quigley*

The **Zombie** Room



R. D.
RONALD

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R. D. Ronald

Book Guild Publishing
Sussex, England

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by
The Book Guild Ltd
Pavilion View
19 New Road
Brighton, BN1 1UF

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Typeset in Baskerville by Ellipsis Digital Ltd, Glasgow

Printed in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

A catalogue record for this book is available from The British Library.

ISBN 978 1 84624 719 4
ePub ISBN 978 1 90971 661 2
Mobi ISBN 978 1 90971 662 9

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Acknowledgments

My heartfelt gratitude for their patience, perseverance, advice and guidance (take whichever are relevant from the list) to the following: Amanda Turner, George Elliott, Nickola Gray, Shahid Rasul, Lynne Miller, Sara Jefferson, Rick Nuthman, Debbie Marsh and Carla Wood.

For the people who grouped together to make a trailer for *The Zombie Room*, the like of which has never been done before in the UK. You all gave tirelessly and have my ongoing respect and admiration: Adam Gerber, Amy Swan, Nickola Gray, Maria Ferrie, Luke Garnham, Josh Rafe Coles, Lucy Richards, Lewis Bonner, Nehir Glean, Neville Glean, Kate Jones, Daniel Middlewood, Kieron Hall, Frazan Hussain, Faye Megan Dixon, William Scott Johnson, Simon Flemming, James Watson, Alexandra Ferrie, Sara-Jayne White, Eve Kristina MacDonald, Kevin Longstaff, Kate Smith, Priyha Mohan, Robby Graham, Stuart Ferrol, Laura Jackets, Ellouise Hempstead, Anthony Lawson, Simon Manley, Shaun Robertson, Petr Stach, Jimmy Guy, Mark Leasley, Kim Brown, Danny Kay and Fran Purdy.

1

Tatiana hated her life. She hated working endless hours in the miserably cold factory with the incessant whir and drone of heavy machinery and the never-ending trundle of conveyor belts. She hated fighting off the advances of her lecherous supervisor in a way that did not offend, as she couldn't afford to be out of work. She hated the stack of chores to do every day when she got back home, and she hated never having time for a social life. Time was passing her by, and her vision of the future was anything other than the simple, pitiable lifestyle of her mother. Yet it was her mother's path that Tatiana continued to tread.

She screwed up her face and struggled to hide her revulsion as Murkov's arm slithered around her waist. He was attempting to educate her on how to operate machinery that she was more adept at using than him. It was as pointless as every other time he had tried to engage with her socially. She'd only been making mistakes because the factory was freezing and she kept losing the feeling in her hands. He kept talking, but Tatiana wasn't listening. She mentally willed him to give up and retreat back to his heated office where he could push papers around his desk and let her and the others get on with doing the real work. Murkov reached for her hand to guide it towards one of the levers. Tatiana allowed this but purposely brushed against his sleeve, transferring a grease smear onto the pristine white cotton. He backed away from Tatiana as if she had a contagious disease, muttering about the cost of his imported shirt.

'Get on with your work, Tatiana. Any more mistakes this week and you'll find your pay packet lighter than you would like.'

Tatiana smiled as Murkov hurried back to his office, dabbing at his sleeve with a handkerchief.

Eventually the 7p.m. whistle sounded, announcing the end of the shift, and Tatiana walked briskly through the chattering procession of workers to find her mother. Murkov watched her through his office window but Tatiana deliberately avoided eye contact. She'd seen the naked hunger in his eyes before.

Through a cloud of steam that hissed up from wheezing pistons, Tatiana saw her mother across the crowded factory floor. Unwrapping a headscarf stained with grime and sweat, she laughed with a grey-haired woman from her section.

'Did you manage to stay away from Murkov today?' her mother asked as she linked arms with Tatiana and began their walk home.

'For the most part, yes.'

Her mother's eyes narrowed but she didn't question her. 'Your father is a good man, but you know how protective he is of you and your brother. Do what you can to put Murkov off and mention nothing of it at home. Now come on, if we don't hurry your father will be home before us.'

'Would it be so much to ask for him to start preparing the meal for once? He isn't the only one who works long hours.'

Her mother's traditional values frustrated Tatiana, but if she were to get permission to attend the party on Friday, Tatiana knew it was crucial she have her mother on side.

'Tatty, you know my views on this,' her mother said with a patient sigh. 'Your generation may choose to go a different route, but I was brought up a certain way.'

Tatiana nodded, vowed to try and reel in her sarcasm and let the matter drop. She'd heard it all before and knew her mother's opinion on gender roles would never change.

'I was thinking,' she began after a few moments had passed, allowing the air between them to clear, 'after the National Day celebrations on Friday, that I would go out with Aina? She and some friends are getting together to hang out and play music. I would really like to go along.'

Her mother's dismissive shaking of her head had begun long before Tatiana had finished speaking. 'Your father wants you home. It is a day to spend as a family, not each of us going our own way.'

'But at this rate I'll never leave home. Aina has a boyfriend and already they have talked of marriage. I want my own family one day, a husband, and children, and a nice house, and ... and ... flowerbeds,' Tatiana said,

gesticulating with her hands. 'I never have time for myself, to go out and have any fun. If you keep me locked away like this I'll end up with a man like Murkov and waste my life at some hole-in-the-ground factory.'

Tatiana could see her words had wounded her mother. 'And you think if you had your own family things would be so different?' her mother deflected with a cynical smile.

'I *would* do things differently,' Tatiana said defiantly. 'I will pick a man who will value me as a person, not treat me like a possession.'

'You are only nineteen, Tatty,' her mother said more softly now, sliding her hand into Tatiana's. 'You have so much to learn about the way things are in the world. Your father and I wish only to keep you safe for as long as we can.'

Tatiana could see her mother's mind was made up, and any further talk would do nothing to change it. Sometimes she wished she could run away, break free from the chains she felt her family bound her by, preventing her from becoming the person she wanted to be.

He checked his watch. At 2.34 a.m. Aura nightclub was full to capacity. Nicholas Garrett, or Mangle as he was affectionately known, looked around unsteadily, trying to remember and then locate whoever it was he'd come out with on that particular night.

His nickname came about from the copious amounts of alcohol and narcotics that he consumed during his nights out clubbing, and his insistence that he'd be fine to drive home afterwards. 'Mangle' being the predictable state his car had been left in on no fewer than three separate occasions.

He had so far managed to avoid being arrested, which given his strict middle-class upbringing was a huge relief. He, and whichever friends dared to accompany him on these drink- and drug-fuelled journeys home, had miraculously managed to stumble away from the scenes of vehicular devastation without injury. The only casualties other than the car they'd been in on each occasion were: a set of traffic lights, a garden wall and cherub ordained water feature, and perhaps most bizarrely an empty ice-cream van on an otherwise deserted stretch of country road.

He checked his watch again, having already forgotten the time: 2.35 a.m. No sign of Ross and Danny. Mangle nodded to himself. Yes, that sounded about right, he was fairly sure that was who he was out with. He made his

way to the bar for another drink. Most of his night had been spent sweating and gyrating on the dance floor, but now his pill was wearing off, time was wearing on, and the possibility of finding female companionship for after club hours was diminishing.

Mangle knew he was no Adonis, but at 27 and just under 6 feet tall, with short fashionably cut brown hair and a physique kept in decent shape by hours on the dance floor, sweating off any extra pounds gained from midweek lethargy, he knew he wasn't such a bad catch. Besides, his crooked smile and cocky demeanour were most often what endeared him to the opposite sex.

Slowly edging his way through the waiting crowd at the bar, he surveyed the scene. An attractive blonde to his right, but the looming shaven-headed gentleman who scowled when Mangle and the girl made eye contact made him decide to look elsewhere. A petite oriental girl pushed back out from the bar, carrying pink cocktails. He flashed his best introductory grin, but she looked away, refusing to acknowledge him. Keep looking, he thought. Most other girls appeared to be obviously partnered up, or at least had hangers-on who were attempting to seal the deal.

'Excuse me.' A woman's voice behind him struggled to be heard over the music.

Mangle half turned and felt the intriguing sensation of smooth skin glide over his forearm as she moved past him. A tingling like bubbles in champagne rose up through him and popped on the top of his head.

She was a slim brunette and had now snaked her way almost to the front of the queue. Mangle stepped up his game and followed, easing through as casually as he could so as not to cause confrontation with any Alpha Male-type boyfriends looking to impress. He could only see her from behind but very much liked what he saw. She was around 5 feet 4, in her early twenties, and dressed in figure-hugging black pants and top. The girl caught the attention of the first barman to pass and ordered a bottle of Becks.

'Make that two,' Mangle said squeezing in beside her and ignoring the grumbles from behind. 'I'll get them.'

'Thanks,' she said, turning to look at him, 'but I'm happy to buy my own.'

'Beautiful and independent,' he said, again employing the grin, this time to greater effect.

She laughed warmly. Her eyes were the pale blue of a cloudless desert sky; they watched him curiously for a moment before she spoke again. 'I'm Vicky,' she said, extending her hand.

Mangle wiped his palm on a leg of his pants then took her hand. 'I'm Mangle,' he said without thinking, 'pleased to meet you.'

Her hand felt warm and soft and curiously magnetic. He didn't want to let it go. His own hand, in contrast, was embarrassingly hot and sweaty, but either she hadn't noticed or she didn't care.

The stern-faced barman placed the bottles down in front of them and held out a hand for payment. Mangle released the girl, plucked a twenty from his depleted wallet and handed it over. 'You get the next ones?' he suggested.

She inclined her head in agreement and after he'd collected his change, led them away from the bar.

'Are you here on your own?' Vicky asked, leaning in towards him to be heard over the thunderous roar from the dance floor.

'No, I'm with a couple of friends. Don't know where they are right now though,' he said, and smiled. 'Your eyes are very blue.'

'Um, OK,' she said, laughing again.

'That's because of a low melanin concentration,' he babbled. 'It's a protein. Having pale blue eyes like that with such dark hair is quite rare.'

'Well Doctor Mangle, I'll take that as a compliment – I think.'

'Ha, by all means, but I'm not a doctor, although my parents no doubt wish I was. I had a private school education where you pick up loads of useless stuff like that.'

'So what do you do with this private school education if you aren't saving lives or diagnosing eye colour?'

'I sell bathroom supplies.'

Vicky laughed until she saw he wasn't joking, and then stopped abruptly. 'I'm sorry. I thought you were pulling my leg.'

'Hey, I do quite well: area sales rep, company car, I'm pretty happy with it,' he said defensively.

Vicky placed a hand on his arm. 'I work in a library,' she said by way of conciliation, and added a shrug.

'That's cool. I'm just touchy about the job thing as my parents are a bit stuck up. They expected I'd go the doctor or lawyer route.'

Vicky nodded. 'You have plans after the club finishes?'

‘I was going to go back and stay at my friend’s place, smoke a few joints and then crash. What about you?’

‘Pretty much the same thing, although my friend doesn’t smoke. You want me to tag along, or is that really forward of me?’

‘It does sound pretty forward,’ he said grinning. ‘That’d be nice though.’

‘It feels kind of weird calling you Mangle. Do you have another name?’ she asked, and took a sip from her beer.

‘Yeah, Nicholas.’

‘Nicholas the bathroom salesman, that’s just perfect,’ she said and laughed.

‘Alright Mangle, who’s this then?’ a voice from behind him asked, as a pale doughy arm reached around and plucked the beer from his hand. ‘Ross, Mangle has been holding out on us again.’

‘Alright boys, this is Vicky,’ Mangle said as his two friends invaded the conversation. ‘This is Danny.’ He indicated the short chubby lad with close-cropped black hair in a peak on his brow, who now stood drinking Mangle’s beer as he winked at her. ‘And this is Ross.’ Ross was about the same height as Mangle but slimmer build; he had receding blonde hair that he swept up into tufts, and eyebrows like humps on a camel.

‘Nice,’ Ross validated with a grin. ‘You still coming back to mine after the club, dude?’

‘Yeah,’ Mangle said. ‘Is it OK if Vicky tags along as well?’

‘Sure, the more the merrier and all that. We’re gonna play Edward Cider-Hands.’

‘You have any friends to bring with?’ Danny asked, hopefully.

‘I did, but I haven’t seen them in a while, I don’t know if they’ve already left,’ Vicky said. ‘Um, you’re going to be playing what?’

‘Still time before closing,’ Danny said, with a glance at his watch. ‘Off you go and find them.’ He made a shooing gesture.

‘OK, come on you,’ Vicky said laughing, as she dragged Mangle along with her. ‘See you later, guys.’

‘A couple of my more delinquent friends from school,’ Mangle explained once they’d got out of earshot. ‘Have your friends really gone home or did you just not fancy setting them up with those two?’

‘They might have gone, but to be honest they’re just girls I went to college with. I got dragged out tonight on one of those reunion things, so

I'm glad of the excuse to avoid them later on,' she said. 'Now what the hell is Edward Cider-something?'

'Edward Cider-Hands. Those two clowns tape a big bottle of cider to each of their hands. The deal is they aren't allowed to take the bottles off until they're both empty. It's hardly highbrow humour but it can be pretty amusing to watch.'

Vicky laughed warmly. 'Sounds like it could get messy.'

The living-room door clicked shut as Ross staggered towards his bedroom. Vicky pulled her legs up alongside Mangle and slid her toes underneath his calves.

'Will they come back out for anything?' she asked, glancing again towards the closed living-room door.

'No, after all that cider that's the last we'll see of them before noon at the earliest.'

Vicky nuzzled her face against his neck. Mangle could feel her heart beating against his chest, slightly elevated, almost in rhythm with his own. He angled his chin down and she tilted her face up towards him. They kissed for only a few seconds but Mangle felt a rush of adrenalin and found himself short of breath. He wasn't used to this effect from a girl he'd only just met. He ran his fingers through her hair, releasing a smell like springtime. Vicky dropped her hands down and began to unbuckle his belt.

'Are you sure you want to do this?' Mangle asked. 'We did only just meet.'

'I suppose that depends on what your intentions are for after.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well you kinda have to go backwards or forwards after sex.'

'I thought that was during sex,' he said without thinking, and quickly grinned so as not to ruin the moment.

'Ha ha, very funny. I mean a friendship between a man and a woman. After you have sex you either have to move on to a relationship, or you go back to having, well, nothing.'

'Is this a "will you still respect me in the morning" kind of thing?'

'Maybe. I'm just asking if this is only for tonight or something more than that.'

This situation he'd been in more times previously than he could count; but when Mangle told her that he very much wanted it to be more than just

tonight, it was perhaps the first time he'd actually meant it.

An alcohol and Ecstasy comedown usually left Mangle with a patchy memory of the previous evening and a feeling like dirt under his skin, but seeing Vicky curled up against him when he awoke filled him with an invigoration akin to the first caffeine hit of the day, and vivid memories of the previous night.

He reached over Vicky and pulled his wallet out of his pants pocket to check how much was left for cab fare home, and winced at what he saw. There was no doubt he wanted to spend time with Vicky, but dates cost, and the last thing he wanted to do at 27 was take her to his place all the time and listen to more of his parents' bullshit. By their reckoning, he should be working for a well-renowned company, with a pension plan, a house and a wife squeezing out grandchild number three by now. He understood that they had sacrificed a lot to pay for his private school tuition, and now expected a return on their investment, but he simply wasn't interested in the idyllic life they had pictured for him, or in being a trophy they could show off among their social circle.

Mangle's usual course of action was to get the latest girl to pay for almost everything, claiming late payment of his wages. After a few weeks the girls would tire of the excuse, but by then Mangle had usually grown tired of them and begun looking around for the next pretty face. But this time he was determined to do it right.

Derek 'Decker' Rankin stood on the corner of Cleethorpe Street, smoking a cigarette and trying his best to look inconspicuous. He'd earned a modest amount of credibility already through various initiations, but if this went smoothly then he reckoned he'd no longer have to live life as a thug and low-level drug dealer. Brian, John and Tony weren't exactly a gang – that just sounded soft. They were a bunch of entrepreneurs who looked out for each other and got things done.

At 18, Decker was a lot younger than the other three, but even as a scruffy kid running around the streets he'd known their reputation as people you just don't mess with. All three had served stretches inside, but so far the law had never been able to put anything worthwhile together to keep them there.

Decker too had served time, in a young offenders' institute, which he'd tell anyone who asked had been like a holiday. In truth it hadn't been

unbearable, and it helped to raise his street profile no end when he got back out. The downside was that it had brought him up onto the police radar and he'd been questioned a few times since for crimes he'd had nothing to do with.

Decker took another drag from the cigarette and flicked the butt against a passing car; it bloomed into a shower of sparks that rained down the side. The brakelights lit up and the car began to slow, but seeing Decker unmoved, the driver had second thoughts and drove on.

Gary Bilaney had wronged the guys in some way. Exactly how, wasn't important. Decker had been told to teach him a lesson. He slid a hand into his coat pocket and ran his fingers over the cold steel of the utility knife, the fresh blade exposed and locked into position to save time. He'd replaced it before he left home, and tested it on a thick sheet of cardboard. Don't kill him, just cause some damage, preferably on the face so people will know. Those were his instructions. He'd been told the spot to wait at and the time to expect Gary to get off the bus, returning from work.

Decker checked his watch. Looking up again he saw the bus making its way slowly around the tight corner at the bottom of the road. A greasy burger wrapper blew against his leg. Decker absently shook it free without taking his eyes off the bus.

The air brakes wheezed as the bus came to a halt, and a few passengers disembarked: an old man in an oversized brown coat mumbled to himself as he walked; a young woman struggled off unassisted with two toddlers and a pushchair. And lastly there was Gary.

He was around 30, reasonably well built, certainly bigger than Decker's more moderate frame. He had on well-worn overalls with work boots and had light brown hair worn in a crew cut. He stopped on the pavement to light a cigarette as the bus juddered uneasily away from the stop, coughing out a cloud of acrid fumes.

Decker strode purposefully across the street towards Gary, forgot to check for traffic and was startled by a car horn that blasted as the driver braked sharply to avoid hitting him. His attention switched back to Gary, who now watched him with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. Decker's hand went back into his pocket, thumb and fingers rubbing intently on the handle of the knife as if it were a lamp about to release a genie and grant him three wishes.

Gary dropped his cigarette onto the ground and his lips moved silently, as if trying to select the right words to get him out of the unfolding situation.

‘N-no,’ was all he managed to stammer. ‘It was a big mistake, I didn’t even mean to do it – you tell them.’

Decker had the knife half out of his pocket now, just a few paces from using it. This was the moment he’d been waiting for. It should be straightforward: just cut him a few times and run. But the rising feeling of nausea inside him was debilitating. His eyes darted left and right, checking no witnesses were close enough to be able to pick him out of a line-up, and then fixed intently on Gary.

Gary had planted his left foot backwards at a 90 degree angle. Was he adopting an aggressive stance to fight back, or was he about to bolt? Decker’s nerve ends sang with tension and he swiped his left cuff across his forehead. He stopped in front of the larger man, whose lips were still moving, but Decker couldn’t make out what he was saying over the rush of blood pumping in his ears.

Even afterwards Decker couldn’t have explained the feeling. It wasn’t physical fear: he’d been in enough street fights to know that even without the knife he could probably handle the guy. There might not have been a lot of Decker but he could take care of himself. It wasn’t fear of getting caught either. There was no one anywhere near now, and after it was done he’d vanish down the twisting maze of alleyways and back streets, and he knew Gary would never talk.

The thought of dragging the cold steel blade across his face, separating warm flesh as easily as he’d slit the cardboard earlier that day, made his stomach turn over again and he had to swallow the surge of bile that rose up in his throat. Decker had twice in the past used a knife on someone, and never felt like this. Both times he’d been the one who was attacked. Was that the difference this time? Attacking a defenceless man, disfiguring him?

Decker held the knife out in front of him, gripped tightly in his shaking palm. He felt hot and his face tingled; a high-pitched almost electric whine was now all he could hear. He pulled his arm back and swung forward in a low arc.

Gary cried out as blood spilled onto the pavement in coinsized drops, like a handful of loose change.

‘Get out of here,’ Decker yelled, or thought he did. He couldn’t be sure over the incessant ringing in his head.

Gary turned, cradling his blood-soaked forearm with his left hand, and fled.

Decker staggered a couple of steps, heard a clatter as the knife fell from his hand onto the pavement. He looked down and saw blood on his hand, on his sleeve, on the pavement and across the blade of the knife. Gathering his wits he stooped to pick it up, and ran.

Tazeem stepped spritely up the three red brick steps and into the Mosque to attend Friday prayers. It was considered a compulsory part of a Muslim man's life, but attendance for Tazeem in recent times had become more sporadic than his elders approved of.

The walls inside the Mosque were painted pale yellow and adorned with plaques of verses from the Qur'an, in Arabic calligraphy. A rack of leaflets and newsletters hung on the right-hand wall, and shelving already holding many pairs of shoes was to the left.

Tazeem quickly removed his shoes and made his way to the male ablutions to perform *wuzu*, the ceremonial washing that took place before prayer. He completed the specific routine and walked through to the prayer hall, picking up a spare head covering as he went in.

The prayer hall was a large wide room almost completely devoid of furniture. The floor was covered by a red carpet designed to provide individual prayer mats for the worshippers. Various other prayer mats and Qur'anic texts hung on the walls. The domed niche or *mihrab* in the wall ahead marked the direction of Mecca, showing worshippers where to face whilst praying. Sitting below it, leading prayers, was the Imam. Because the prayer hall had to face towards Mecca, the Mosque had been built at a different angle to the other buildings on the street outside.

Tazeem found a spot towards the far corner of the room next to his friend Latif, and joined in with prayers. Latif was a short man with a rather square shaped head, whose shifty looking eyes were due to an astigmatism he was too proud to wear glasses for, and in sharp contrast to his affable nature.

Once concluded, the Imam Omar stood and faced the room to begin his sermon or *khutbah*. He paused long enough to take in the faces in

congregation before him. Tazeem felt the expressionless gaze linger on him for barely a second, but knew his presence had been noted.

‘I saw your cousin Ermina with Sadiq again yesterday,’ Latif said quietly as they walked towards the hall after prayers. ‘They looked pretty friendly.’

‘Do you think there is anything in it?’ Tazeem asked, trying not to look concerned.

‘I don’t know, my friend, but she would be wise to steer clear.’

‘What are you two whispering about?’ Sadiq asked in anything but a whisper as he strode confidently between them.

‘Nothing,’ Tazeem answered, as he returned his head covering on the way out.

Tazeem had gone through school with Latif and Sadiq, and for years they had been very close. Now at 23 they all had different pursuits, social groups and seemingly work ethics. But Friday prayer at the Mosque would often see them reunited if only for a brief period.

Latif was currently in the process of buying his second business and looked in no mind to slow down his acquisitions. Tazeem worked long hours in family-run shops and oversaw redevelopment of rental properties, but so far had nothing other than a small house in the suburbs he could class as his own. Sadiq, however, never seemed to work any steady hours but was never short of cash, which he’d splash around on his frequent nights out at casinos and nightclubs.

‘Were you talking about me? My ears should be burning, yeah?’ Sadiq grinned, putting an arm around each of their shoulders.

‘So what if we were?’ Latif said angrily, and shrugged him off.

‘I’m glad to see you made an appearance today, Tazeem. Friday prayer is compulsory for all Muslim men and your absences recently do not meet approval,’ the voice of Imam Omar boomed from behind, taking all three by surprise.

Tazeem considered telling Omar he had been attending other mosques while working away, but lying to the wily Imam was pointless; his eyes

could pierce and shred the fabric of a lie as easily as a pin passing through a balloon.

Tazeem and Latif retrieved their shoes and left the Mosque, while Sadiq lingered in the doorway, talking jovially with some of the others.

‘I don’t know how Sadiq manages to convince old grey-hair of his righteousness without any feeling of compunction,’ Tazeem said, as they walked back to the car park.

‘I know what you mean,’ Latif nodded. ‘Even though I’ve done nothing wrong, standing near Omar brings on a feeling of much guilt. Sadiq is without doubt lacking a social conscience.’

Tazeem let the matter drop. He could identify with Latif’s misplaced guilt around the Imam, but a social conscience was not something that he paid particular attention to. He said goodbye to his friend and climbed into his eight-year-old silver Mercedes, then drove off to one of his family’s stores to put in an afternoon shift.

Tazeem relieved Mavis, a local alcoholic who took shifts at short notice, happy to receive payment in alcohol. He took his place behind the cash register. There were a couple of customers browsing towards the back of the store but no one required immediate service. He took out his wallet and withdrew a number of credit cards bearing different names. Picking two at random, Tazeem reeled off around 30 Lotto scratch cards from their display cases on the counter and rang them up at the till, using the credit cards.

This was a low-risk scam he’d run successfully for a while. He’d fraudulently apply for the credit cards at addresses of properties where he was overseeing repair work, then use the cards a few times to buy large numbers of scratch cards while working at various shops. He was under no illusion that this would bring about great riches or early retirement, but the extra cash made his life a little easier.

Tazeem pulled out the silver *taweez* locket that he wore on a chain around his neck, left to him when his father died. He didn’t believe in superstition, but using the partly serrated edge to scratch away the foil coating revealing the numbers and symbols beneath had become a part of the ritual for him. Mavis waved at Tazeem to attract his attention. She’d retrieved her coat from the stockroom and now stood beside the door holding up two 1 litre bottles of Smirnoff for his approval. He nodded and she left, cradling the payment for her shift.

Before long a scattering of silver shavings had gathered beneath his chair. The winning cards he filled in with false names and addresses, and mixed them in with other cards awaiting collection by the lottery company. He took the amount he'd won from the till; money for old rope.