

Tiger in the Desert

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extract

CHAPTER 1

Puntland, Somalia – Friday 8th June 2007

The sky was yellow. Not the clear, sharp, citrus yellow that might figure somewhere in the spectrum of colours between the azure of the heavens and the blazing red of sunset, it was more a dull, impenetrable, dense, dirty yellow, that swirled as it advanced across the desert towards the rocky outcrop. The man cursed.

It had developed suddenly, as is often the case, generated by the intense heat of the day and the influence of a sea breeze coming in from the Horn of Africa. Yet another tropical monsoon - it was the season for them - but it would bring only wind. A gusting, strong, dry, dusty wind, already exhausted of what little moisture it might once have carried. If there had been any chance of precipitation, the rain would most probably have fallen to the west, in Eritrea, or even Ethiopia, but not where he was, in one of the hottest and most arid places on earth. All around him the sterile landscape reflected the harshness of the climate. It was barren and parched, with scant vegetation seemingly devoid of wildlife; and what little wildlife there was, was wisely hiding under rocks, or in underground burrows. It was not at all uncommon for the daytime temperature to reach over forty degrees. Even the surface of the rocks in the shade was almost too hot to touch and the heat rising from the ground produced strange, shimmering atmospheric effects that appeared to the inexperienced, or the thirsty, tantalisingly like vast expanses of water. However, water was a commodity in this locality that was singularly lacking in abundance.

The man wiped his sweating brow. Then, unravelling part of his headdress, he wrapped it carefully around his face until only his dark eyes were visible. He adjusted the coarse material, peering through the slit, his eyes half closed. Even in that brief period the man noted that the sand storm was already much closer, swallowing up everything in its path, reducing visibility to no more than a few metres, and sometimes even less. There was no escape from the approaching danger and he knew that he would have to withdraw immediately.

Malik took one last look at the engulfing cloud and once again silently cursed before retreating from the cliff edge, carefully sliding backwards, to avoid any chance of being spotted. Afterwards, when he was lower down the slope and well away from the lip of the cliff, he stood up, turned round and climbed down the rocky outcrop that he had used as an observation post for the past hour.

As he approached the foot of the rocks, the gradient eased and he turned round to run down across an inclined slab. Reluctantly, with a feeling of regret, he abandoned any thought of continuing with his surveillance; his quarry would have already disappeared into the swirling cloud and the storm could easily last several hours. To remain where he was, perched on top of the cliff, would have been sheer folly. Experience of desert storms had taught him that it had been prudent to descend. Now he needed to find shelter quickly.

At the foot of the outcrop, amongst several wind-smoothed sandstone boulders, his camels were grouped together, seated on the ground, patiently waiting for him. They stirred when they saw him and groaned, but Malik understood that their agitation and discomfort was not so much provoked by his arrival; he knew that they would have already sensed the approaching storm. The atmosphere had changed; it was charged with tension. Perhaps his camels could feel the electricity in the air, or maybe it was simply that their hearing was

more acute and they could hear the sound of the storm approaching. Malik did not attempt to move them. Trying to battle through the storm would be hopeless.

Quickly, he removed a blanket from a saddlebag and lay down next to one of the animals pulling the blanket over his head. Like the camels, he had no option but to patiently wait for the sand storm to pass. Afterwards, when it had moved on, he reflected that he might eat a little and consider carefully what his next move should be. Meanwhile, he would try to benefit from this misfortune and attempt to sleep. Putting his head on his hands, which were clasped together as if in prayer holding the blanket tightly between the palms, he pulled his knees up into a foetal position, and closed his eyes.

The sound of the screaming wind preceded its abrupt and brutal arrival. It had been deflected by the main body of rock and was being forced round either side of it. He and the camels were in the lee of the outcrop and protected from the main force of the storm, but still the sand whisked up around him, stirred by eddies induced by the rocky obstructions. Gusts tugged unrelentingly at his blanket, but he clung on to it grimly, nestling ever closer to the camel. For well over an hour, the wind and Malik competed for possession of the inconsequential rag that covered him. Malik was determined to win and finally, as the storm began to abate the wind diminished little by little, only occasionally violently tugging at the cloth, as if to remind Malik that the forces of nature could never be wholly beaten.

As calm began to return, sleep at last overtook Malik whose exhausted grip on the blanket finally relaxed. He didn't sleep for long, twenty minutes maybe half-an-hour at the most, but enough for him to recharge his batteries. When he awoke, the blanket no longer protected him and he, along with his blanket were both half-covered in sand. It was nature's capricious joke; it was nature telling him with no uncertainty that it had finally won.

Malik looked up. Above, the sky was still a murky, dirty yellow colour, charged with a myriad of fine particles of dust. Now and again, there was an indication that the sun was trying to penetrate the cloud, and now and again, there was nothing, only the dulled light of day. It felt cold, much colder than it had before the storm appeared, and the temperature must have dropped over twenty degrees. If the cloud did not dissipate until dusk, there might even be a risk of frost in the early hours of the morning.

Malik stirred. He had to make a decision. The sand fell from the folds in his clothes as he stood up and brushed himself down. First, he found a bag of dried dates in one of the saddlebags. He opened the bag, took one out and popped it into his mouth. As he sucked it, he examined the camels. They groaned, complaining. He smiled - it was a good sign. Malik slapped one of them on its rump, its skin quivered. Then, he stretched over to open another of the packs on its back. He removed an AK47 from it and placed it on the ground beside the camel, whilst he closed the sack again. Then, after slinging the assault rifle over his shoulder, he picked up his water bottle and binoculars from where he had been sleeping and headed back up the ridge to the summit of the rocky outcrop. Whilst he climbed, the luminosity increased, as the remnants of the storm were heading slowly east and the sky was becoming clearer.

Malik moved more cautiously as he approached the summit, stooping to avoid his profile interrupting that of the skyline. Then, he dropped to his knees and spread himself out on the ground before edging further forwards. Lifting his head to peer over the lip, he looked down into the wadi. It was exactly as he had expected. Nevertheless he was disappointed. The wadi was deserted and the group that he had been following had disappeared in the storm. He pulled the binoculars from around his neck and put them to his eyes - the blown sand had seemingly already obliterated their tracks. Once more he cursed. He scanned the horizon carefully with the binoculars, making several passes in both directions. There was nothing, no movement, no trails in the dust, not an inkling of evidence to suggest in which direction they might have gone. He edged back from the lip, ever cautious, and then descended the slope again to his camels.

Less than half-an-hour later, Malik emerged from behind the outcrop leading the small caravan at a slow walking pace. As he walked, he was already contemplating abandoning his mission. It was a pity. Up until then, he had made good progress, but the storm had

arrived at an especially inopportune moment; *Insha'Allah*, it was fate. Nevertheless, Malik, the eternal optimist, reflected that he had probably also been very fortunate.

Before the storm had arrived, he believed that he had already lost contact with the group that he was following and had decided to stop and climb to the top of the rocky outcrop to see if he could see them. It had proved to be a very providential decision. Had he continued, he might have blundered into the group and, whilst his cover story was plausible, he doubted, even if they had believed him that he would have escaped with his life. It was very much in their interest to guard their secret. Regardless of any higher moral values they might have had, and he doubted that they had any, they would have killed him like a goat, cutting his throat and leaving him to bleed to death, staring at the sky and gasping for air through a severed windpipe.

Malik pushed the thought quickly from his head as he entered the wadi. Slowly his caravan moved towards the spot where the group had made their temporary encampment. There was nothing to suggest that they had ever been there, except perhaps something quite unexpected - a phenomenon of nature that he had seen only a few times before. In the late afternoon light, Malik perceived an indistinct dotted line of shadows running away across the desert. Micro dunes of sand had formed in the deep wheel tracks of their trucks and, with the lowering angle of the sun, the shadows that they cast clearly indicated the way ahead. Malik looked up. Across the desert in front of him the shadows headed along the foot of a rocky ridge that extended towards the horizon.

As he quickly searched in his pack, the question nagged him - could it really be the remnants of their track? Then, with his compass in his hand, Malik took a bearing – 130° - southeast. Whilst he was still turning the question over in his head, Malik took out the map and checked the direction. There was only one place that they could be heading for, the oasis at Iskushuban; there was nowhere else in that direction - but why there? Did they have somewhere in the vicinity of the oasis where they could keep their hostages until the ransom had been paid – or was it just a staging post before they moved the hostages nearer to the east coast of Somalia? They were not questions that Malik could answer and he knew that at least for the time being, he would have to commit himself to following them. Perhaps, he concluded, the day had proved to be more fruitful than he had previously thought.

Malik looked at his watch, it was late afternoon. He calculated. If he travelled most of the night, he would arrive in Iskushuban before dawn the following day. Before he left, Malik turned round and looked back at the way he had come. Then, he mounted one of the camels and set off again still heading east and wondering if he might return by this route. Whatever was to happen it was going to be a long and tiring night.

* * *

Malik Khadda was French, although his father was born Algerian and his mother Somalian. Malik's father had served in the French Navy, *La Marine Nationale*, after the Second World War. At first, when he joined, he was posted to the Algerian naval base of Mers-el-Kébir, located on the Mediterranean coast, but when the civil war in Algeria started in 1954, he was transferred to mainland France where, because of his language skills, he began to work with Naval Intelligence. For a while, he was stationed in the Naval Base in Toulon, until he was transferred to Djibouti, on the southern coast of the Red Sea. It was whilst he was there that he met Ayanna, Malik's mother. They were married in 1960.

Malik was born in Marseilles in 1975. He was the third of three sons. His two brothers, who were born within thirteen months of each other, rather despised Malik, who was born four years later. He had to fight to be accepted by them as they largely regarded him as an embarrassment and an unwelcome impediment to their already comfortable fraternity.

Like his brothers, he was brought up to speak both French and Arabic. Not just Maghrebian Arabic, which is common in North Africa along the Mediterranean coast as far as Morocco, and which his father still used to communicate with his friends, but also Assa-Somali, his mother's native tongue, and Yemini Arabic. Malik was a good learner and the

subtleties of the language intrigued him. But sibling rivalry forced him to become fiercely independent. As a result, he grew up to be rather more self-reliant and self-sufficient than his brothers who depended very much on each other. In fact, when Malik was only five, in order to protect himself from his brothers who took delight in fighting him, he started karate lessons. He was unusually quick and within a very short time of starting his training he found that he could rain unexpected blows on his brothers, which although lacking in strength, stung nevertheless. They soon left him alone. By the time he was fifteen, he was a black belt, as well as having acquired other useful fighting skills.

Marseilles was also a challenging city in which to grow up. It harboured a very cosmopolitan and sometimes divided community, in which territorial gangs dominated certain quarters. The city had always tolerated a sub-culture of crime, in which a murderous underground war carried on for well over a hundred years, fighting for the control of prostitutes, protection rackets, and drugs. Unholy alliances had been forged in the past, like that of the CIA with the Corsican Mafia and the French Counter Espionage Service, to stop Marseilles falling into the hands of French communists after the Second World War. It was also a city in which the Maghrebian Muslim community, immigrants from North Africa, from mainly Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, represented nearly a quarter of the total population. It was a city that was eternally vibrant, energetic, and full of adventure. For Malik as a teenager, it was an ideal testing ground for his wit and his skills.

He was already engaged in petty crime by the time he was fourteen. They were unplanned, opportunist misdemeanours of no great consequence, but nevertheless upsetting and hugely annoying for his victims. Why he did it he never really considered; it was the challenge, the excitement of getting away with it, the adrenalin rush. In other circumstances, he might have channelled these urges into extreme sports perhaps, but he was a child of the city and his environment was the savage wildness of the urban jungle, rather than the natural wilderness of the maquis and the mountains.

His teachers found him difficult, wilful, uncooperative, and antisocial. The Gendarmerie and the Municipal Police already had their eye on him, and the criminal community, ever vigilant to their own interests, were concerned that he was beginning to poach on their territory. In almost every respect, most people, including his brothers who still occasionally taunted him, regarded him as an irritating upstart. He lived on his wits, diving and dodging a serious beating up, avoiding arrest by the forces of law and order, scraping by just sufficiently in school to prevent his expulsion and in the process, he became streetwise. What eventually saved him from an inevitable descent into more serious crime was a timely intervention from his father.

Curiously, for several years his father had been comfortably unaware of his youngest son's risky, malevolent ballet with delinquency, street crime, and petty theft. Although his elder brothers had taken delight in decrying the activities of their younger brother, he steadfastly refused to believe them and put their remarks down simply to sibling rivalry. His school reports were bad, but his father preferred to believe that his teachers had misjudged him. A visit from the Municipal Police to warn him also failed to convince him leaving him feeling that the encounter had verged on racial prejudice. Indeed, Malik was the apple of his father's eye; he could do little wrong that wasn't within the bounds of normal youthful exuberance. But, Malik's reputation as well as his notoriety grew to eventually outstrip his apparent innocence, and it was the Imam, who one day took Malik's father to one side, and quietly spoke in his ear.

As he had grown older, Malik's father had also become more devout. Although, in terms of an average life span, Malik's father was still middle-aged, the death of a close friend and the breast cancer that his wife was being treated for made him sense the presence of his Maker more keenly. The Commandments in the Qur'an took on more meaning, and the pursuit of an honest and uncompromised upright life presented a renewed significance. Thus, on learning about his son's misdemeanours in the confines of the mosque and from the mouth of the Imam, whilst certainly depressing, had an immediate and more devastating effect on the naturalised Frenchman. The rage that overtook this normally quiet and peaceful

man was evident as he brusquely left the mosque heading directly to his home, his head down, and his face flushed with anger.

Malik, who should have been at school, was completely unaware of the violence that was about to be visited on him in the privacy of his own bedroom. The earphones, loudly transmitting rock music from the stolen iPod, rendered him oblivious to every other noise. Unfortunately, Malik had his back to the door when his father burst through it, wielding a bamboo cane that he had just 'borrowed' from a now limp looking tomato plant. The sharp, stinging blow across his shoulder, ripped his tee shirt and bit into the flesh. Instinctively, Malik leapt away from the blow and turned quickly to face his adversary. His father was able only to land one more blow on his son's upper arm before the cane was torn from his grasp and a straight-handed blow hit him hard in the windpipe. It was only then that Malik recognised his assailant.

His father coughed and choked, gasping for breath. There were tears in his eyes from the pain and his fury, as he wheezed and fell to his knees. Malik sank to his knees to hold him as he slowly recovered. No words were spoken between them. None were required. Malik already understood the reason for his beating, he knew that he had been living on borrowed time, and tears of remorse welled up in his eyes.

Although he did not appreciate it at the time, it was a key event in his life. Had he continued his criminal activities without check, he would have undoubtedly become a recidivist. If the blow to his father's throat had killed him, his descent into hell would have been finalised. But, he had luck on his side, and he drew gently away from the abyss. With his father's help and encouragement, he followed his example and, as soon as he was old enough, enlisted in the French Navy.

Once he had come to terms with the discipline that life in the military imposed on him, he realised that he had discovered a career that enabled him to succeed in many different ways. His agile mind and resourcefulness was recognised and he progressed. Indeed, he progressed rather further and quite differently than he had ever imagined possible.

CHAPTER 2

Iskushuban, Somalia – Saturday 9th June 2007

‘Get them out!’

Although the voice of the tall, bearded man indicated an element of fatigue, it still commanded attention and obedience.

Neither of the two men sitting in the cab of the lorry replied. The tall man watched them for a moment as they opened the door of the cab and climbed out. Then, after taking the keys from the ignition, he too descended from the clammy, claustrophobic interior, jumping the last step onto the sandy ground. He groaned as the pain shot up his stiff legs. Closing his eyes and slowly stretching, he realised gloomily that the journey had taken more out of him than he had expected. True, it had been long and arduous, but with a sense of despondency he knew that he was also beginning to feel his age; he wasn’t young any more.

He turned away from the lorry and carefully observed the horizon in the direction from which they had come. There were no dust trails to suggest that anyone was following them. On the other side of the lorry, the two men trudged through the soft sand towards the rear. A waft of cool air carried by an evening breeze refreshed their faces momentarily, contrasting markedly with the sudden bubble of heat that followed, rising from the overworked exhaust on the underside of the lorry.

Alongside, the motor of the battered, open backed jeep that had accompanied them across the desert stopped abruptly and an eerie silence ensued. The four men in the jeep hardly stirred; they were equally exhausted and lacked any motivation to move. The tall bearded man turned slowly towards them and glowered. It was enough. His regard had already indicated his displeasure and rather than suffer the consequences of his foul temper, they began to stir, slowly at first and then with more urgency, as the tall man started walking towards them.

‘Unload!’ he shouted, stopping and regarding them for a moment to observe if his instructions were being followed.

Then, satisfied that they were, he turned and headed towards the rear of the lorry that he’d just alighted from. The cool breeze stirred again, whisking up the sand at his feet. The canvas cover hiding the contents of the lorry flapped as it was released by one of his companions. The tall man peered inside and saw the fear in the widening eyes of his precious human cargo. It was as well that they were afraid; they would be easier to deal with, they would be considerably more compliant and less complaining.

Leaving his two companions to their task of untying and disembarking the hostages, he looked up towards the dark gaping mouth of the cave entrance before climbing over a jumble of flat rocks towards the entrance. A figure quickly emerged from the shadows.

‘Suleiman! *Salam aleycum.*’ The man gestured touching his heart and then opening his arms in greeting.

‘Abdiwali, *aleycum Salam,*’ Suleiman replied, mirroring the gesture as he walked. ‘Is everything prepared?’

‘You will be pleased, Suleiman.’

Suleiman stared at him. ‘I have lived eternally in that hope.’ Experience however had taught him that the reverse was more likely. Abdiwali averted his eyes and swallowed hard in the misplaced optimism that what he’d achieved would be acceptable. It was obvious to

Suleiman already however, that Abdiwali was suffering from the guilty, gnawing worry that it would be lacking in some respect.

Suleiman entered the cave and turned to the right, his eyes adjusting slowly to the darkness as his pupils enlarged. In front of him, in the relative obscurity of the interior of the cave there were two men working. He stopped abruptly, trying to control his fury. He clenched his fists. Then he turned, moving back the way he had come roughly grabbing Abdiwali by his elbow and marched him towards the entrance.

‘What are they doing here?’ he hissed, his spittle splattering Abdiwali’s face as he tried in vain to distance himself.

‘They are nearly finished, Suleiman.’

‘So are you, Abdiwali, if you continue like this,’ he said, letting go of his arm and thrusting him to one side. Then, descending the stepped rocky path to the lorry he saw that the first of the hostages was being forcibly removed from the rear of it. He shouted. ‘Put him back in, tie him up, and gag them all.’

‘What about these?’ A man from the other group asked, recognising the ill-tempered humour of his boss and trying to be helpful.

‘What about them?’ Suleiman glared at the man as if he was mad, until he looked away beaten, his question unanswered verbally, but nevertheless efficiently resolved.

It was dark by the time the work inside the cave was finished. The two workers were taken back in the emptied jeep and deposited in a palm grove on the edge of the nearby town. There, they were paid in cash. By local standards, they were well paid for their work and were grateful, but it was implicit, on pain of certain death, that they should talk to nobody about the task that they had just completed.

After the workers had been hurried away, the hostages were quickly disembarked from the covered lorry and then escorted to the newly prepared cells in the cave. The two women in the group of five were separated from the men and locked in the first of the two cells; the men were taken to the next cell. There, much to their relief, they found water, dried fruits, and some cold stewed goat meat. An armed guard squatted on the floor near to the cells whilst the other men grouped together in the entrance to the cave ready to eat and drink themselves.

For the first time that day, Suleiman relaxed. He sensed a feeling of relief and sighed deeply as he sat down on one of the rocks outside the cave. Abdiwali scuttled up to him as soon as he had settled, carrying food and drink. He placed his offering on a rock close to his master and slunk back into the shadows hoping to be unnoticed. Unfortunately, he was not so lucky. Suleiman had noticed him and was already deliberating on how he should punish his servant’s gross inefficiency. It would serve as a lesson for the others. Abdiwali watched him from a distance knowing from experience that his fate was being considered.

Unlike the rest of his men, Suleiman dressed in black flowing robes. Even in the light of the full moon, Suleiman was difficult to distinguish. Around his head and neck, he wore a turbaned headdress like that of a Tuareg. His eyes were bottomless pools of darkness surrounded by a jaundiced sea of bloodshot yellow. His moustache and beard, once jet-black were now streaked with lines of grey and his black, pockmarked skin had the dullness of worn leather. Only his teeth, polished ivory tombstones reflected the light; they flashed as he opened his mouth to eat. For Abdiwali, the indistinct image of the man’s face struck terror in his heart.

Abdiwali, by contrast, was a small skinny individual, maybe in his late twenties, although his lined face suggested that he might be older. His features however, were delicate, almost feminine, a curious mix of genes from East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, and his skin, unlike that of his master, was considerably lighter. He dressed in ragged blue jeans that hung somewhat precariously around his hips. His oversize torn and dirty orange tee shirt descended thankfully nearly to his knees stating boldly in a box on the front the somewhat tasteless message in a country continually ridden by famine ‘*too fat to fly*’. However, the words held no significance for him - he didn’t speak English. He had found it on a yacht and taken possession of it. It had actually been the colour that had attracted him.

Secretly, Abdiwali loathed Suleiman, whom he found humourless, insensitive, oppressively overbearing, and pitifully cruel. But his fear engendered a fawning, creeping sycophancy that only encouraged his master to treat him with disdain. It was a partnership that had no future, but neither knew, or had ever considered how and when it might tragically end. Maybe it was for the best.

Suleiman prayed to Allah, and Abdiwali wondered if Allah gave him strength. Abdiwali wore around his neck a tiger's tooth held on a leather strap; he threw stones in the air to divine his future and engaged in perpetual daily rituals to evade disturbing evil spirits. By comparison, Suleiman was an educated man, but compared to the average third year pupil in a western secondary school, Suleiman knew extraordinarily little about the world and maybe that was why he was so dangerous.

Before he slept that night, Suleiman had one more task to complete. He had a telephone call to make. He knew little about telecommunications, only that he was to call Rasheed as soon as he had reached his destination, and the hostages were securely locked away. He did not know where he could find Rasheed, nor that his call would be relayed halfway across the world by a satellite in geo-stationary orbit some four hundred kilometres above the surface of the earth, he merely followed his instructions. When the telephone rang however, it was in a western city that he had certainly heard of, although he had no precise idea where it was located.

It was early evening in London. Rasheed looked at the screen of the telephone before he answered it and smiled when he saw the name – Suleiman.

CHAPTER 3

Iskushuban, Somalia – Wednesday 13th June 2007

Water poured from an underground river that emerged from a cave in the eroded limestone cliffs that enclosed the end of the lake. In the other direction, and as far as the eye could see, the valley, which ran to the north and then to the west, was resplendent with lush vegetation. The verdant oasis was a welcome and astonishing contrast to the rocky desert that surrounded it and, although Malik Khadda was relieved to be there, he was already beginning to feel that he had made a huge mistake.

It seemed that he had lost contact for good with the group that he had started to follow across the desert. His first nocturnal sortie had been a disappointment. After he had settled his camels, each one having been fed and watered, he left the shelter of the lush oasis to explore the town. His intention was to locate, if at all possible, the jeep and the lorry. He knew that if he could find these, he would probably be close to where the hostages were being held. The path leading to the town passed around the western side of the lake and the cliffs that enclosed it. It crossed a dry wadi and then climbed onto a wide plateau where the town was situated between two arms of the oasis.

The night was clear and although the moon had not yet risen, the absence of light pollution allowed the intensity of the light from the stars in the Milky Way to provide enough illumination for him to follow the track with ease. As a stranger, however, he appreciated that his presence would be treated with great suspicion and wherever he could, he walked in the shadows of boulders, scrub trees, and derelict walls. He took little with him, just the essentials – a semi-automatic pistol – an FN Five-Seven, fitted with a noise suppressor and loaded with high-velocity cartridges, a satellite phone with a camera, a GPS and a compass. He had considered taking the night-vision goggles, but this was to be no more than a preliminary reconnaissance, an opportunity to familiarise himself with the terrain and the buildings unobserved.

Most of the buildings were contained within small courtyards surrounded by mud walls. Between them, rough ground, comprising little more than blown sand and rocks, formed deserted corridors. Malik passed along them, peering in through gates where they existed, or glancing into courtyards, which were for the most part empty. Occasionally a dog barked. When it did, Malik stopped and rested for a moment in the shadows until it became quiet. Then he moved on and examined the next quarter.

It took Malik three hours to visit all parts of the town, the living space for over ten thousand people, and an island in the desert where life was sustained by not much more than a trickle of water. However, the nocturnal excursion was nothing other than disappointing.

He had always expected to find the vehicles somewhere, but he didn't. Perhaps, he reflected, they were hidden in one of the courtyards where newer, heavier, solid wooden gates concealed the interior. Maybe even he had been mistaken in believing that their destination was Iskushuban. It was always possible that they might have stopped in the town only briefly before moving on to the east coast; but why would they go east? They had come south from the coast, south from the Gulf of Aden. What would be the purpose in transferring the hostages by land to a port on the Indian Ocean coast where they would be more difficult to hide? No, despite this setback, he was convinced that the hostages were concealed somewhere close – but where? He needed to ask around, to enquire if anyone had

seen the vehicles, and he would need to be cautious, he could be putting himself quite at risk revealing his interest.

So, the following night, his search spread out further from the town concentrating on the area downstream from the lake. Unfortunately, this excursion had proved to be equally fruitless and the only areas remaining to be investigated were the hills and the cliffs to the north of the oasis. To the west and the south, the land was much flatter, with no habitation and no natural shelter and he had concluded that it was unlikely that the group would be there. Nevertheless, it left him with a dilemma. The area to the north of the oasis would be difficult to investigate at night; the terrain was rugged and if he encountered anyone, it might be difficult to explain what he was doing. So, before undertaking an examination of this area, he sent a message to Djibouti. Three hours later he received three satellite images.

He studied the photographs closely noting that they showed wheel tracks skirting Iskushuban to the north. This was more promising and he wondered why he hadn't asked for the information earlier. The tracks appeared to terminate near an outcrop of rock that projected from the cliffs towards the oasis but there were no vehicles present on the images. He decided to investigate the area that afternoon. If he found nothing, it would probably be time to move on, perhaps towards the eastern coast.

Deciding that it would be safer to approach the cliffs from the east, as if he were travelling towards the town he headed off along the southern edge of the wadi with one of his camels. He had left the rest of his camels in the charge of a boy, saying that he needed to exercise the camel that he took with him. The long cliff face where he was eventually heading was visible over the top of the palms that grew in dense clumps along the fertile sides of the watercourse that formed the core of the oasis. Ahead, the dirt track wound through a plantation of date palms and edged alongside a sinuous low dry-stone wall before crossing a small dry riverbed. After heavy rain, when the run-off was at its greatest, Malik imagined that the route would have probably been impassable. On the opposite bank of the parched wadi, another dry-stone wall indicated a second large enclosure. Inside, serried rows of young palms struggled for existence. The competition for nutrients and water would have been fierce and it was evident by their size, that some were clearly doing better than others. Such is the way of nature, survival of the fittest, if not the success of the more fortunate.

The gravelled track continued downstream following the winding watercourse to the east. In a few places, the riverbed widened, forming more of a narrow, linear lake rather than a river; in other places it disappeared into sand and gravel only to reappear downstream. After an hour's march Malik arrived at a place where he could cross over to the northern side. Once on the other side of the wadi he halted in the shade of a palm, removed a flask from one of the camel bags and drank from it. His camel might be capable of travelling for many days without a drink, but he couldn't. Dehydration was important to be avoided; he needed to remain alert, and to lose concentration through lack of water he knew would have been stupidly irresponsible.

Returning the flask to the bag secured to the camel's back, Malik inadvertently touched the butt of the Kalashnikov. He removed his hand and instinctively searched the bulge under his armpit seeking the reassuring feel of the automatic pistol that was concealed there. Placing his hand over the grip of the weapon, he held it for an instant reflecting on its deadly purpose. Then, dismissing the thought and taking the reins of the camel, he moved on, turning west and heading directly towards the line of cliffs in front of him.

The sun was high in the sky, the temperature soaring, and the air shimmered in the heat haze throwing the view ahead into eerie distortion. Malik moved slowly on, his measured pace taking careful account of the temperature and the nature of the ground. As he guided his camel through the boulder-strewn ground that occupied the space between the foot of the cliffs and the vegetated edge of the oasis, he noted that the track on this side of the oasis was much less frequented. His progress seemed at times to be very slow, and the track hardly discernable, but he remained patient. Ahead, he could see the buttress of shattered rock that projected from the main face of the cliff. To his right, a goatherd ushered a small flock into a walled enclosure. The man looked up and waved at Malik as if he knew

him, Malik waved back, but concerned to maintain his anonymity, he continued slowly onwards towards his goal, sensibly avoiding engaging the man in conversation.

It was near the end of the afternoon when Malik eventually arrived at the foot of the rock buttress. At its base the scattered debris of fallen rocks, ranging from small stones to boulders the size of houses, were strewn around a large area. The track climbed up, meandering between some of the larger blocks first heading south towards the oasis, before turning east again and contouring around the buttress. As yet, there were still no sign of tracks, the vehicles, or any human life apart from the goatherd. Nevertheless, Malik became more cautious, keeping his eyes peeled, observing carefully, looking for anything that might provide a clue to what he was searching for.

Then the path descended, turning southwest, and began to move across more open ground away from the buttress. It was then that he discovered the tracks. There were, as he had seen on the photograph, two sets of tracks. He recognised one as belonging to the long wheel based land rover, the other, the lorry, but neither of the vehicles was in sight. Near to where the tracks terminated there was also evidence of footprints. Much had been obliterated by the wind, but there was enough to convince him that this was what he was looking for. The footprints led back towards the buttress on its west facing side, but Malik resisted turning round to examine them. It was possible that he was being observed and tried to adopt an attitude of disinterest.

He continued to guide his camel away from the cliffs and soon arrived at a more obvious path that appeared to lead back towards the town. In the distance, he could see the tops of some buildings on the edge of the oasis. Then the tracks of the vehicles veered away from the town and headed out into the desert.

Malik was contented with the afternoon's work. Now, he had enough information to confirm that somewhere in the vicinity the hostages were probably being held. There was nothing that he could do on his own to release the hostages and his orders were clear - to relay information to Djibouti as soon as he was certain of the location. It was not much further along the track when he decided to stop and take a drink from his flask. As he put his hand into the bag to withdraw the flask, he saw that a small man leading a donkey was coming towards him. He was wearing a bright orange tee shirt. The man seemed to stumble slightly as he cajoled the animal along the track, but as he regained his balance, Malik could see that he had mistaken his clumsiness for a slight limp that the man suffered from. His disability was not helped by the weight of the Kalashnikov that he carried over his shoulder. Cautiously, as the man approached, Malik moved his hand onto the butt of the pistol under his arm.

Abdiwali tugged at the donkey and then regarded the stranger with the camel with some interest. He slowed down as he approached. Round his neck, held in a silver claw that glittered in the sun was a large canine tooth. Malik had seen others like it. They were reputed to be lion's teeth, or even tiger's, but they were often clever fakes made of resin and powdered bone.

'*Salam aleycum,*' the man greeted, his teeth shining.

'*Aleycum Salam,*' Malik responded, wondering who this man might be and where he was going with the heavily laden donkey.

They had exchanged only a few polite pleasantries before Abdiwali asked if Malik lived in Iskushuban?

'No, I'm on the way to the coast,' Malik replied. 'I have a few camels and some goods for sale. This one was lame. I have walked her this afternoon after resting her for a couple of days, maybe tomorrow I will move on again; *Insha'Allah.*'

'*Insha'Allah,*' Abdiwali repeated.

'Are you from Iskushuban?' Malik asked, noting the bruises on the man's face. Abdiwali did not reply, he simply grinned displaying an irregular row of white shining teeth. Malik changed the subject. 'You appear to have been injured.'

Abdiwali's grin evaporated as he avoided eye contact and stared at the ground. 'My master beat me,' he murmured.

'Your master?'

'I am his slave!' Abdiwali continued to stare at the ground in front.

'Slavery has been abolished,' Malik stated naively.

'Tell that to my master.' Abdiwali looked up. 'I have been his slave for nearly twenty years. He abused me as a boy and now he insults me as a man and, he says that he will kill me if I leave him. I have no choice,' he hesitated, reflecting, then adding, 'for the present.'

Malik would have asked him more if he had not observed the sudden terror in the man's eyes. He turned to see a man dressed in black robes with a large black turban on his head standing on a rock about fifty metres away. He was staring intently in their direction.

'I must go,' the man said, clearly frightened, pulling at the rope around the donkey's head. For an instant the donkey refused to budge and then grudgingly put a hoof forward. '*Nabad gelgo.*'

Malik repeated the farewell and moved on slowly down the track, his camel more willingly following him than the intransigent donkey. He resisted turning round avoiding any kind of confrontation, sensing, even at that distance, the malice in the onlooker.

Abdiwali slowly climbed up to where his master was standing, he was still regarding the stranger that Abdiwali had been taking with as he made his way along the track towards the town.

'Who was he?' Suleiman asked.

'A trader - he said that his camel was lame and that he was exercising it before he moved on.'

'Where?'

'To the coast, he told me.'

'Which coast - north, or south?'

Abdiwali sensed the guilt and his confusion; he looked down at the ground. 'He didn't say.'

'You didn't ask him! The donkey has more brains than you, Abdiwali; did you believe him?'

'No,' the slave replied. He knew his master well and could have predicted his response.

'Then he was probably telling the truth, Abdiwali; he was probably telling the truth.'

However, for some inexplicable reason on that occasion Suleiman was unconvinced by his own statement. He resolved to visit the town the following day just to satisfy his unease and to check if the stranger had indeed moved on as he had said that he would.

As for Malik, he had well appreciated the danger that he might be in and, despite having already walked for several hours that afternoon, he packed his camp that same evening and headed east with his small caravan of camels before turning south in a wide arc to finally head northwest back towards the north coast and Bosasso. If anyone in the town was asked in which direction he had gone, they would say that he was clearly heading towards the Indian Ocean. However, in reality, Malik was now heading for the Gulf of Aden.

CHAPTER 4

London – Thursday 14th June 2007

‘I’m sorry to call you so late, Minister,’ the civil servant had said, ‘but we have news that the hostages have been moved inland.’

‘Interesting.’ There was a pause. ‘Do we have any idea why?’

‘Nothing concrete, Minister.’

‘Any guesses?’

‘Only that they must be preparing to keep the hostages in a more secure environment for as long as is necessary until they receive the ransom.’

‘Have they stated their demands yet?’

‘Not as far as we know, Minister.’

‘I see.’ There was a cough followed by another longer pause. ‘Is the source of this information reliable?’

‘It’s the French, sir; the DGSE, the French Secret Service,’ the civil servant added, just in case the Minister, who was somewhat new to the department, didn’t recognise the acronym. ‘Apparently, they have a man on the ground.’

‘I see.’

‘Do we have anybody on the ground?’

‘We have a naval presence, Minister, operating in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. HMS Cumberland is part of a NATO force. The Russian and Indian Navies also have a presence.’

‘And with all this fire power we are still unable to control piracy in this area.’

‘The present figures do show a slight decline, Minister.’

‘As a result of our influence, or the influence of the weather?’ The minister chuckled.

The civil servant did not join in and chose to decline to answer the question. ‘The pirates present a rather elusive target, Minister.’

‘That is very evident.’

Whether the tetchiness in the minister’s voice was because his joke had not been shared, or because he was genuinely concerned, the civil servant did not know, but she suspected the former. She ignored the comment.

‘Is this a matter for the Joint Intelligence Committee or COBRA?’

‘Not unless there are further, more important developments, Minister.’

‘I see. Good – well - keep me informed.’

‘Yes, of course, Minister.’ The line went dead, leaving the minister still clutching the phone, thinking that he needed to be fully briefed on the political problems besetting the Horn of Africa. He was new to his position and he knew little about the civil war in Somalia, more perhaps on the rise of Islamist fundamentalism and the threat of al-Qaeda, but hardly anything about the emergence of piracy as a steadily growing menace to international shipping. With a politician’s mind he began to consider which of these three aspects conflicted most with British interests and concluded quickly that it was the latter - piracy.

He knew that the Gulf of Aden formed the southern approach to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal and this route channelled most of the shipping between Europe and Asia. Cynically he considered the problem from an economic point of view. How much was the naval presence costing? How much was the average pay-out for a ransom? Wouldn’t it just be more economic to pay the ransom and send the Royal Navy home? But wouldn’t that

simply encourage more piracy? Anyway, the PM had stated that ransoms would not be paid. He put the phone down and thought further.

When the pirates were paid a ransom, what did they do with it? Did they buy fast cars, spend it on luxury goods, or was piracy funding other criminal activities as well as the Fundamentalist cause? If piracy were funding the Fundamentalist cause, then, by hitting piracy, they would also be hitting al-Qaeda, or one of several of its nefarious offshoots. Damaging the Fundamentalists might help also to reduce the suffering and trauma caused by the civil war and enable a stronger, more stable government to develop in the country. The Minister smiled, pleased; perhaps he didn't need to be briefed more fully, he already understood much more than he had presumed.

However, there was one niggling little question that arose out of the conversation with the civil servant that still bothered him. Why did the French have someone on the ground and why didn't they? Wouldn't British interests be better protected if they had a presence *on the ground* in Somalia? He made a mental note to take the matter up with the Head of SIS when they next met. Better still, he reflected, looking at his watch, a meeting was needed. He picked up the phone and told his private secretary to arrange a meeting, at the earliest possible time, with Hilary Weatherby.

* * *

'I'm really not very happy with the idea of sending one of our agents into Somalia, Minister.'

Hilary Weatherby had sat quietly listening to the idea that the minister was expounding, knowing that by denying his request, if his reputation was accurate, he might very well fly into a tantrum. In a way, she was testing him. It was well known in parliamentary circles that he had a temper not unlike that of a spoilt child and was rather accustomed to bullying and getting his own way. He had been known to completely lose it and destroy office equipment to the extent that it needed to be replaced. But, as an experienced and devoted left wing politician who believed intently in social collectivity, he had never been known to put his hand in his own pocket to pay for such kind of damage as he considered it perfectly proper that the taxpayer should pay for his infantile behaviour. On this occasion, however, Hilary Weatherby felt quite disappointed; the minister remained unusually calm. Rather than responding aggressively, as she had half-hoped to her negative reply, he simply smiled.

'Why ever not?'

His tone of voice was condescending and for a moment, she had expected him to add '*my dear*'. In fact, he nearly did but realised that such a patronising remark might send the Head of SIS into a fit that might equal anything that he could do. Hilary Weatherby also had a fierce reputation to live up to.

Hilary Weatherby smiled before replying. 'Because, if they were captured, they would be filmed being brutally executed; the video would be in the public domain within minutes, and you, Minister, would be fighting a rear-guard action all the way to the polling stations.'

The minister laughed. It was a nervous, disbelieving laugh that Hilary Weatherby immediately took advantage of. She had come well prepared. Out of her briefcase, she removed a netbook and placed it on the minister's desk.

'Just have a look at this,' she said, clicking on an icon on the screen. 'It's in Arabic, but there are subtitles.' She sat back in her chair and closed her eyes. In the background, she could hear the words being spoken. The minister peered at the small screen.

'The picture's a bit grainy,' he said, complaining.

You'll be pleased about that, Hilary thought.

'This isn't what I think it is, is it?' he asked, and then moments later, 'oh my God, that's awful!'

'That, I imagine is where the clip shows the captive's head was being cut off,' she said quietly. She remembered with horror the image of the victim's head being pulled back by

the hair, the sawing action of the knife across the neck, the body shaking violently for an instant as blood quickly flowed from the ever widening wound until the executioner with one last slice of his knife finally separated the head from the body. She opened her eyes and looked at the minister. He was still looking at the screen, but he was pale. He continued until the video finished.

‘Ghastly!’ he said, sickened by the shocking scene that he had just witnessed. ‘What century do these people live in? Barbaric!’

‘Isn’t it?’

‘Who are these people who can do such things with such consummate ease?’

‘This group goes by the name of Al-Shabab. Their full name is Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahdeen. It means something like “*the warrior youth movement*”. They purport to represent al-Qaeda in Somalia.’

‘Do they?’

‘There are links, but they are mostly autonomous.’

‘How influential are they?’

‘They control parts of the country south of Puntland, as well as a significant part of the capital, Mogadishu. Like al-Qaeda, and the Taliban, they are particularly radical and quite ruthless. So much so that other local paramilitary organisations, some of which come from the same roots, are now violently opposed to them. They have a substantial power base; they control territory and most of the people within it. However, rather than being a political organisation, they are little more than a terrorist organisation that has a very limited fundamentalist vision of where it is going. It has no political capability for encouraging agriculture, trade, developing the economy of the country; and it has no answer to poverty and famine. Since their emergence, they have only contributed to increasing the need for aid to sustain the local population, as well as increasing the number of people wishing to flee the country.’

‘Are these the people responsible for the piracy and the kidnapping of the hostages?’

‘No, we don’t believe so, but there are conflicting reports. There are suggestions that the organisation might fund the pirate operations taking a cut in the profits. Al-Shabab nevertheless has publicly declared piracy an illegal activity, and this may be because in some areas it conflicts with some of their interests. In the ports under their control, however, they levy a tax on the trading vessels. A reduction in trade would result in a loss of income. A reduction of income would curtail some of their activities.’

‘Do they have much ground roots support?’

‘The simple answer is no. They are powerful and ruthless, but not much liked.’

‘And their principal rivals?’

‘A variety of organisations including the government, as well as anti-government forces.’

‘Other anti-government forces?’

‘Sufi militias, mainly armed by the Ethiopians; the Hizb, a pan-Islamic organisation who hope to unify all Islamic nations in one global caliphate – they are armed by the Eritreans, and several smaller groups whose political aims are unclear but who are profiting from the general mayhem that already exists. Both the Americans and we sell weapons to the government; government officers sell ‘lost’ weapons to arms dealers, and the arms dealers sell the same weapons to al-Shabab.’

‘It sounds like a mess.’

‘It is a mess. Every time one of the warring parties seems on the brink of defeat, their supporters provide them with more weapons and reinforcements to continue with the struggle.’

‘I see.’ The minister paused again collecting his thoughts. The conversation was interesting, but it was taking him away from his main interest. Hilary Weatherby waited. ‘So,’ he resumed, leaning back in his chair and putting his hands together in front of him as if in prayer, ‘just returning to piracy for an instant, how big is the problem, really?’

‘One hundred and twenty four incidents last year alone; some sixty or so incidents in which cargoes and crew were hijacked, and individual ransoms in millions of dollars paid. Overall, we’d say that it’s pretty big.’

‘How useful would it be to have someone on the ground?’

‘Very, but they would need to be focused, mission orientated, very well briefed and well supported. However, your predecessor saw matters differently and, as you’ve just seen, there are very real risks never mind the potential political consequences if matters go pear-shaped.’

‘So, is there a solution?’

‘There might be,’ she replied enigmatically. The minister looked at her patiently waiting for some elaboration. Appearing to ignore him, Hilary Weatherby removed the netbook from the desk and slipped it back into her briefcase.

‘Would you like to expand on your statement?’ the minister asked. She looked up at him as she withdrew a file from the open briefcase.

‘I was about to,’ she said, placing the file on the minister’s desk. ‘It has occurred to us on several occasions that we should attempt to put some kind of clandestine operation in place. One of its prime tasks would be to try to set up a local network that could more or less run remotely. We also considered that there might be some benefits in not trying to go alone on this. The situation is so complex in the region that there may be advantages in mounting an operation with the French and the Americans.’ She had already been in discussion with one of her counterparts in the CIA. Indeed, it was her contact, who had originally muted the idea.

‘The Americans!’

‘Specifically, the CIA.’

‘Would they play ball?’

‘We think so and we believe that they will help to finance the operation.’

The minister raised his eyebrows and dragged the file across the table. He opened it, sitting up in his chair, clearly interested. Inside, on the first page, was a photograph of a middle-aged man. He began to study it and was about to ask a question when Hilary Weatherby started to describe the man.

‘The photograph was taken about five years ago. At that time, he was a member of Sir Elliot Gower’s staff here in London and was concerned with monitoring counter-terrorist activities. He resigned soon after. I’ll explain more about that later. He is ex-military and was a member of the Special Boat Service, in which he saw active service during the First Gulf War. Afterwards, he was posted as a Military Attaché in Peshawar, Pakistan and following that, in the Balkans, during the Yugoslavian Civil War. In Bosnia, he worked closely with the French Special Forces, and in Kosovo he worked with the CIA. He now lives in Switzerland and runs a security business with his wife. We know that the CIA recruited him for a mission in Afghanistan, but other than that, we have few details of that affair. He also has some first hand experience with pirates. He and his wife had a run-in with pirates in the Straits of Malacca whilst voyaging on their private yacht.’

‘I take it that he came out on top of this run-in, otherwise you wouldn’t be telling me about it.’

‘He can be quite resourceful.’

‘He must also have some money to have a private yacht.’

‘He has.’

‘So, why would he work for us?’

‘It’s possible he might not, but I understand that the CIA may have a lever.’

‘Tell me.’

‘It’s a long story, but they helped him rather significantly in the Straits of Malacca and now I’m led to believe that there’s a debt waiting to be collected.’

‘I see,’ he said, looking at the photograph once more. ‘What’s his name?’

‘Marcus Tregay.’

* * *

Earlier that day, across the Thames, on the south side of the river, in a well-appointed penthouse apartment in the middle of a private estate in Putney, a man was patiently waiting for a telephone call. He was dressed in the traditional white flowing robes of a Saudi prince, although any connection with the Royal family was well distant. On his head, he wore a white knitted *tagiyah* skullcap over which his white silk *gutrah* was kept in place by a double black cord. In his right hand, he was quietly counting the ninety-nine polished onyx beads, reciting the names of Allah.

The use of the beads was rejected by many of his kind, followers of Wahhabi, as a modern innovation. For him, however, the beads were more a status symbol. As for his religion, Wahhabism clearly represented a morally solid, conservative form of Islam that was now being more effectively propagated in the world through its financial influence rather than by its militant intervention, and it suited him to describe himself as a devotee. He shunned the terrorist activities of al-Qaeda, deplored the futility of suicide bombers, and wept at the casual carnage they perpetrated. There were better, more effective ways at achieving their goals with much less collateral damage and certain dubious criminal activities were, he had discovered, highly profitable.

Shahid bin Jameel al-Rasheed had been educated at Oxford. He had read law and economics. He had also used his time at the University to establish useful contacts with future bankers, politicians and diplomats, contacts, along with others, that he had developed over the years that he now nurtured with consummate care.

The telephone rang.

‘Ah,’ he said quietly and turned towards his manservant, who was carrying the phone, still ringing, towards him. He placed it gently on the table in front of Rasheed and departed. Rasheed picked up the phone and looked at the small screen – Suleiman.

‘You have some news for me, Suleiman.’

‘The hostages are now secure.’

‘Thank you, this is all that I need to know.’

Their conversation, though short was significant. Now, Rasheed would commence his part of the work, that of negotiating a price for the release of the hostages, as well as their yacht. Experience told him that it would probably take several weeks, if not months, but then, he wasn’t pressed for time. The only slight discomfort arising from a long negotiation would be that suffered by the hostages, but for him, they represented no more than a commodity to be kept reasonably fresh and in good health until payment was made. It was, as he knew, only a matter of time.

However, quite unknown to Rasheed, the conversation, though brief had been recorded. A copy of the recording and a note had been sent to a section head in SIS whose distribution list was quite limited.

CHAPTER 5

Geneva, Switzerland – Friday 15th June 2007

‘They’ve just signed the *compromis* for the SC Schweizer Gruppe Ag contract,’ Sophie said. She was beaming as she burst into Marcus’s office, her eyes sparkling with delight.

‘You thought they’d sign.’

‘I know, I know, but there was always an element of doubt - the question of price. Ours was never the lowest tender.’

‘Did they accept our offer as it stood?’

‘No, they wanted to haggle a bit.’

‘Much?’

‘No, not really, I offered to make some minor adjustments to the day work rates that would reduce costs to them in the case of additional work, and they were happy to accept the revision. It seems like they wanted us after all but they needed to demonstrate that they had successfully negotiated a reduction. I was prepared to offer more. Anne-Marie modified the documents while we continued talking. Then they read them through again and without further discussion, they signed!’ Sophie paused for a moment. ‘I was expecting a longer, more drawn out period of negotiation and we could have offered other cost savings, but it’s brilliant, I’m really delighted, they signed! It’s a five year contract.’

‘So, what now - are they still here?’

‘Yes, of course, I invited them for lunch. Will you join us?’

Marcus hesitated. Facing yet another business lunch was more than he thought he could manage. Making polite conversation had never been his thing at the best of times and lunch would be at least two hours, if not longer. He was already convinced there were more important things to do, even if there weren’t.

‘No, I don’t think so, thanks all the same, Sophie. You go - enjoy yourself.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Take a breather, have a stroll.’

‘Sure I can’t persuade you otherwise?’

‘Absolutely not - I would prefer to take you out this evening and celebrate in private.’

‘Sounds better than a business lunch.’

‘But, we will need to discuss the implications of this contract very soon. We’re running out of space both here and in Meyrin.’

‘Yes, I know,’ she said, turning on her heel and looking over her shoulder. ‘Don’t work too hard,’ she said, and blew a kiss as she closed the door. Marcus stared blankly as it closed, feeling a pang of guilt and thinking that perhaps he really should have gone with her. He pushed his chair back, got up, and walked over to the window.

The sun was shining and the street below was packed with tourists. It was mid-August and Geneva was looking at its best. In the distance, although he could not see them, he knew that the French Alps would be shimmering in the summer heat, there would be a breeze on Lac Lemman, and the snow would be melting on the glaciers around Mont Blanc. Anywhere would be better than being stuck in an office, except he reflected, being stuck in a restaurant with a couple of Swiss German clients.

It was interesting, Marcus reflected, Sophie and he had been in business together for nearly four years. It was a business that she had inherited and broadly offered services under

the heading of International Security. It was Sophie's father who had started Myrmidon SA, Marcus was a relative newcomer, but his military background and his contacts had already proved invaluable. Nevertheless, Marcus found it difficult to settle properly to an office life and they had taken a sabbatical the previous year to try to resolve the matter. They were very privileged, they were rich, and they didn't need to work. It was a choice they could make, and so, after arranging to put two office managers in place, they had bought a yacht and sailed most of the way around the world. It had suited Marcus admirably; he revelled in it. He was used to pitting himself against the elements, as well as relishing the sense of adventure and feeling of utter freedom, which were never far away. It was true that Sophie had enjoyed it, but never with the same passion that Marcus had.

Their adventure had started well, but it had been marred by an encounter with pirates in the Straits of Malacca and not helped by the legal tangle that ensued following the affair. After they left the South China Seas, Sophie was more subdued and it became clear that she was less happy with the arrangement. The isolation of the boat gave her the opportunity to brood and she realised finally that she missed the buzz of running an international business. Cutting a deal gave her more satisfaction than trimming a sail. Indeed, the longer that they were at sea, the more bored she became, and the more disenchanted she felt, the more difficult she was.

It was Marcus who finally suggested calling it a day. He proposed that once they got through the Panama Canal, they would sail to Kingston, Jamaica. It was just over five hundred nautical miles and with a good wind, they would do it easily in two or three days. From there, she could certainly get a flight to London, Heathrow, and a connecting flight to Geneva. He would then sail the yacht back across the Atlantic, single-handed.

At first, Sophie felt guilty at the thought of abandoning him, but he persuaded her that it would not be for long. Crossing the Atlantic would take three or four weeks at the most, depending on the weather. In the meantime, Sophie could organise finding a mooring somewhere, either on the Atlantic Coast, or preferably in the Mediterranean. Once moored, they could decide whether to keep the boat or put it on the market, although privately Marcus would have preferred to hang on to it.

The yacht had been purpose built for them by Wally in Monte Carlo and it sailed like a dream. It wasn't by any means the largest in their range, but Marcus and Sophie had thought long and hard about the design. They were going to live on it for a year, they had intended to sail rather than simply cruise, and they were looking for comfort as well as speed.

Sophie was lucky when she got back to Geneva and surprisingly quickly found a mooring next to the boatyard at the foot of Fort Carré in the harbour at Antibes and so, rather than sailing directly to Antibes, Marcus made a brief port of call in Marseilles, where Sophie re-joined the boat for the final leg. They spent the night on the boat in the port, where it received a lot of interest and attention, and then they sailed it together to Antibes. It took less than a day, but it was good. At least, Marcus was contented to note, it refreshed Sophie's interest in sailing.

'I think we'll keep the boat,' she said while standing at the helm on a broad reach. She was clearly enjoying it.

'Good idea,' Marcus replied, much relieved.

'I don't know when we'll use it though.'

And that's the problem, thought Marcus. Once we get into work again, we won't leave it alone. We never do. That was four months ago; and now they had to think about expanding again.

Businesses either expand or contract, they rarely remain static for very long, and businesses in International Security were generally expanding. Myrmidon SA was no exception. With this new contract, they would have to recruit again, set up new teams, maybe even find new premises in Zurich, or Bern, where most of the work would be, and they still hadn't resolved the issue with premises in Geneva. Their current, rented offices in the centre had always been intended to serve as a temporary measure while they found somewhere larger to replace the office and factory in Meyrin. They had already been in their

temporary offices for over three years and they were bursting at the seams. There was no hope of extending in the same building - it was time that they moved.

There were times when the frustration of running a business seemed to place a heavy burden on Marcus's shoulders. It wasn't so much that it didn't interest him, indeed organisation and logistics were part of his skills, it was more that whatever they did, there was always an army of lawyers and accountants trailing close behind. Sophie was more used to it and was happy to off-load projects like finding new premises to estate agents and lawyers. The problem was that they rarely appeared to perform. In the meantime, some of them were operating on a fat retainer and doing nothing for it. There was no incentive and, the fact that some were also 'old family friends', made changing things all the more difficult. He had to talk to Sophie about it. Normally she was hard-nosed about anything to do with the business, but on this question of premises, she always seemed to put it on the back burner. They needed to get to grips with the problem.

The telephone buzzed. Marcus turned away from the window, went to his desk, and picked it up. It was Anne-Marie, their personal assistant.

'It's Hilary Weatherby on the line, Marcus, she asked if it was convenient to talk to you privately.'

Hilary Weatherby and Marcus had never met and never spoken to each other and it took Marcus a moment to remember who she was. When he did, he was intrigued. Why should Hilary Weatherby want to speak to him? No doubt, he would soon find out.

'Yes, put her through, please, Anne-Marie.'

'Marcus Tregay,' he announced.

'I hope I haven't caught you at an inopportune time?'

'The sun's shining and I was just thinking of going to lunch, but that can wait, so, no.'

'If it's any consolation it's raining in London.'

'It does, they tell me, frequently.'

'I know that we haven't met but would you mind if I called you Marcus?'

It seemed an odd way to start a conversation, but Marcus didn't object.

'No, I don't mind.'

'Marcus, we have a project that might interest you and your company.'

'I imagined that you didn't call to discuss the weather, so interest me.'

'It's rather sensitive and not one that we can properly discuss on the phone.'

'I thought that might probably be the case, but broadly, without divulging any state secrets, why do you think it might interest us?'

'Because, most likely, it will be a joint project with the French and the Americans and you have experience of working with both.'

'What else can you tell me?'

'It's not in Europe.'

'Anything else?'

'It's not going to be easy and it's likely to be dangerous.'

There was a pause whilst Marcus considered the implications of the last statements and wondered what Sophie would have to say.

Hilary Weatherby continued. 'I wonder if you might be interested in coming over to London to discuss the project? We will of course pay your reasonable fees and expenses.'

'That might be possible.' A small, unexpected frisson of delight ran through his system - at least he would get out of the office for a day or two. 'When were you thinking of?'

'This Friday?'

No urgency then, Marcus thought, as he moved the computer cursor onto the calendar icon, clicked the mouse and studied the screen. 'That certainly looks possible. What sort of time did you have in mind?'

'Mid-morning, say ten-thirty,' she said, her voice noticeably more relaxed; at least she would get him to London. Where it went from there would be dependent on others.

'Where?'

‘We have a small, satellite office in Pimlico, but if you let me know where you’re staying, I presume that you’ll come over on Thursday evening...’

‘Probably...’

‘... Then, I’ll arrange for a car to pick you up.’

‘You’d better give me a contact number and an e-mail address.’

‘I’ll e-mail the details to you immediately.’

Soon after Hilary Weatherby rang off, an e-mail arrived with all the information. Marcus called Anne-Marie and asked her to check flight times from Geneva to London City on Thursday afternoon and Friday morning. He would wait until Sophie returned to see if she would like to go with him. They could always make a weekend of it in London and maybe take in a show or something.

* * *

Such rich pleasures were beyond the wildest imagination of Abdiwali whose simple desire was to be able to move without hurting.

The previous evening, just at the point when he had believed himself safe from the vengeful wrath of his master, he had received such a beating with a stick that he had bruises all over his body. All the muscles of his legs and arms had been touched at least once or twice by the heavy stick and felt especially tender. His back and buttocks had not been neglected and finding a position where he could rest in relative comfort was not easy. He had been cuffed about the head and dried blood from a split to his ear had congealed on one side of his neck. His screams still echoed in his mind as he remembered that the torture was seemingly without end.

However, Suleiman’s object in subjecting his slave to such a violent and humiliating treatment was two-fold. The first and most obvious aim was to punish him. The second objective was to use him as a vehicle to terrify his captives. From the inside of their dark cells, the sound of Abdiwali’s screams conjured vivid pictures in their minds of a fate that perhaps also awaited them.

Rasheed’s orders were to keep the hostages reasonably fit and well, and not, under any circumstances, to mistreat them. It had been impressed upon Suleiman that his prisoners represented a very valuable commodity and he knew from experience that a handsome ransom would be paid for their safe return. Nevertheless, Suleiman despised his prisoners who were certainly non-believers, and just a little violence might help to keep them in order. In other circumstances, he would without compunction have robbed and murdered the male captives and raped the women. If the women had pleased him, he might have kept them for a while before he discarded them as playthings for his men. Instead, he was obliged to look after them, to nursemaid them, and ensure that they came to no harm. He was well aware that his employers would not be pleased with him if he failed in this task. Thus, the duty was performed begrudgingly and, in some small compensation for his irritation, provoking a little mental suffering seemed reasonable under the circumstances.

Abdiwali moved slowly and carefully from his half recumbent position against the wall of the cave. He eased himself awkwardly into a different position. It was a few days since he had received the beating and in his mind, a plan for revenge quietly festered while he planned how he could please his master until he was able to carry it out. However, Abdiwali was also a coward and would have been the first to acknowledge it. He was afraid of his master and knew that any display of resistance towards him would end quite abruptly and very violently in his own death. Obligated therefore to wait patiently for a suitable moment, he planned how he might also frustrate Suleiman’s plans in the meantime, without putting his life at risk. He realised that he lacked ideas and he had no weapons, but whatever he lacked was more than compensated by motivation. One day, he swore, he would rip out his master’s black heart and eat it.

And, recently, not far from the entrance to the cave, on the southern outskirts of the town of Iskushuban, although Abdiwali did not know it at the time, there was already a man whom he had met who might be willing to help him with his plans. Malik Khadda had

departed with his camels leaving the shore of a small sparkling lake set in a deep valley to south of the town.

Now, he was well on the way to his final destination.

CHAPTER 6

London – Monday 18th June 2007

‘I have a Herr von Korfffen on the phone for you.’ Shahid Rasheed’s manservant said, bowing slightly at the waist and holding out the phone in his right hand. Rasheed took it from him. And now the game begins, he thought. He put the phone to his ear and indicated that his manservant should withdraw.

‘Herr von Korfffen, Shahid bin Jameel al-Rasheed, so pleased that we are able to talk.’

The diplomat tried to ignore the rather irritating, fawning tone and went straight to the point. ‘I am instructed by my government to open negotiations for the release of the crew of the yacht *Minerva*, as well as for the return of the boat to its proper owners.’

Karl von Korfffen had been posted as a trade secretary with the German Embassy in London and this recent extension to his duties represented an unusual departure from his normal work. Although coming from a family that was part of the former German aristocracy, he generally avoided using his proper title *Frei Herr*, as it left him feeling uncomfortable and at odds with his more socialist conscience. Von Korfffen was a young man not lacking in confidence, qualifications, or tact, but he was uncertain how he should act in his dealings with Rasheed. There was some slight anxiety in the German’s voice that Rasheed noticed immediately and he concluded with some conviction that he was dealing with an amateur. It was disappointing; they should get a professional negotiator in to help them. No doubt his contact would feel the need to consult on each minor issue and that would inevitably both lengthen the process, which would be frustrating, as well as increasing the risk that something could go wrong.

‘My dear von Korfffen, it is most kind of you to call me so promptly.’ Von Korfffen started to reply but Rasheed interrupted him before he had hardly said a word. ‘I had expected a delay of at least a few days, so I am really very grateful to you. Let me tell you straight away, in order to reassure you that your fellow countrymen, of course I am including the ladies in the statement, are being looked after very well.’

‘May I ask where they’re being held?’

‘Unfortunately, I am not privy to that information. However, I have been informed that they have been moved very recently to more comfortable accommodation where they will be looked after for the time being.’

‘Still in Somalia?’

‘I’m really not at liberty to say, Herr von Korfffen, although I am led to believe so. As I mentioned to you, this is not information that I have.’

‘And the yacht?’

‘Ah, the yacht - that, I believe, is still moored in Bosasso.’

‘Thank you; and the crucial question - the amount of the ransom, if we can move straight on to that, Rasheed?’

‘My clients are suggesting fifteen million dollars.’

‘Fifteen million dollars?’ The diplomat’s voice rose as he repeated the sum.

‘That is quite correct.’

‘This is not a super tanker that we’re talking about, Herr Rasheed.’

‘True, but one of the women is the daughter of one of your leading industrialists, who is by no means a poor man.’

‘That may be the case, but you must appreciate that your clients are asking for a most ridiculous amount.’

‘Herr von Korffen, it is not for me to comment on whether my client’s demands are reasonable, unreasonable, or indeed in the realms of fantasy, I act simply as their agent to convey their requirements.’

The diplomat sighed. ‘Are we talking government bonds or currency, Herr Rasheed?’

Rasheed smiled to himself. ‘US dollars paid into a numbered Swiss bank account.’

‘I see – I’m sure that you will appreciate that I am not authorised to agree such a large sum of money.’ Von Korffen already sounded weary.

‘Of course, I have had some extensive experience in these kind of matters, Herr Korffen, and I do most sincerely appreciate your position. However, may I impress upon you that there is some urgency in this matter. If they are being held in Somalia, the political and military situation is, shall we say, especially fragile and at times quite finely balanced. If circumstances were to change suddenly, the safety of your people could not be guaranteed. As it is, and as you know already, they are being held hostage by pirates who are not renowned to be the most reliable, or kindly sort of people.’

The threat, although delicately stated, was hardly veiled. Rasheed waited an instant for a response.

‘I will do my best to get back to you as quickly as possible, Rasheed,’ the diplomat said.

‘I’m certain that it is in all our interests to deal as expeditiously as possible with this matter. I look forward to hearing from you soon, then.’

Rasheed put the phone down on the intricately carved sandalwood table in front of him; he considered any further polite formalities to be wholly unnecessary. He was satisfied with this first contact and whilst it had been inconclusive, he already knew that a deal could be struck. How long it would take, however, he keenly appreciated would be in the hands of God. Automatically, Rasheed picked up the prayer beads from the table, closed his eyes, and began to work the beads with the practised dexterity of the fingers of his right hand.

‘InchAllah,’ he murmured and then repeated the phrase, counting one more bead.

* * *

Sophie had taken her clients to the restaurant in the Grand Hotel Kempinski, on the Quai du Mont Blanc, next to the lake. It was ideal – it was only ten minutes walk from the office, the food was good, and the restaurant was well located on the third floor of the hotel with a broad terrace overlooking Lac Lemman. Lunch went on longer than she had originally intended, but then, they weren’t pressed for time. They had done the deal and now felt it legitimate not only to celebrate but also to be a little self-indulgent. It was the culmination of several months work for both of the parties and the sense of relief, as well as satisfaction, was evident.

At the end of the lunch, Sophie’s clients took a taxi to the airport and then a private jet back to Zurich. When Sophie returned to the office it was clear that she was in a good mood and Marcus wisely decided to take advantage of it.

‘I had an interesting call just before lunch,’ he started, as Sophie dropped into the leather armchair in his office.

‘Tell me,’ Sophie said smiling like a Cheshire cat, kicking off her shoes and sliding her legs up underneath her.

‘How would you like a weekend in London?’

‘I’d like a weekend with you anywhere, Marcus, but London sounds fun for a change. So, what’s the catch.’ Marcus might have thought that she was ready for the picking but she knew there was something more to the question.

He smiled. ‘I don’t know if there is a catch, but I’ve been invited to a meeting in my old department on Friday morning. After that I imagine that we’ll be free to do whatever you fancy.’

‘Sounds good to me; what’s the meeting about?’

‘Possible project for us.’

‘Even better - expenses paid?’

‘Of course; Anne-Marie is looking at flights.’

‘We haven’t been to London for some time; it will be interesting to go back. What’s the weather going to be like?’

‘No idea, it was raining when I spoke to them.’

‘Whom did you speak to?’

‘Hilary Weatherby.’

‘The boss – I wonder what she wants? Have you ever met her?’

‘Not that I know of.’

‘She has quite a reputation for being a rather tough cookie. Do you think I should come to the meeting with you and hold your hand?’ Marcus laughed, but Sophie wasn’t joking. Marcus might have been someone quite capable of fighting his way out of an armed conflict but when it came to confronting a powerful woman, he was a pushover.

‘What do you think?’

‘We’ll see what the weather is like. If it’s nice, I might go shopping; if it’s raining, I might just come with you.’ Sophie put her head back and closed her eyes. Marcus shook his head.

‘I think I’d better take you home, you’re not going to be any use here this afternoon.’

‘I think you’re right,’ she said, snuggling deeper into the armchair.

CHAPTER 7

Geneva, Switzerland – Thursday 21st June 2007

The early evening flight from Geneva to London City left Switzerland bathed in sunshine. From the window seat, Sophie could see a myriad of small white sails scattered across Lac Lemman. Further to the south, dominating the skyline, Mont Blanc rose majestically above the neighbouring peaks. As the aeroplane banked, heading north away from the lake, Sophie turned towards Marcus, put her head on his shoulder, and closed her eyes.

The flight was late arriving in London. The pilot explained that intense air traffic was causing some congestion around the capital city. Then the plane descended through thick cloud, which Marcus had already noticed extending like an impenetrable woolly blanket across the whole of southern Britain from the moment they had left the French coast to cross the English Channel. London was significantly cooler and damper than Switzerland and Sophie admitted that she should have been more prepared for the disappointment. Nevertheless, it was summer, and it wasn't unreasonable to expect better weather.

They took a taxi from the airport to the Dorchester where Anne-Marie had booked them into a suite for three nights. Sophie and Marcus planned to spend the weekend in London before flying back to Geneva on Sunday evening. Sophie was delighted with the accommodation that Anne-Marie had organised. Their suite was tastefully decorated in the art-deco style. It overlooked Park Lane and beyond, although partially hidden by the trees, was Hyde Park. However, the view that evening, looking west towards the park, was somewhat grey and uninspiring.

Marcus couldn't help thinking that the rooms looked like a set from an Agatha Christie novel, but had to admit that it was so much better than the hotels that he normally stayed in on business trips. And so it ought to be, he reflected parsimoniously, if the cost was anything to go by. The fact that he was now a multi-millionaire hadn't much changed his perspective on life. Indeed, apart from their yacht, neither of them were big spenders. They still lived in a small apartment in the old quarter of Geneva, and, although they had discussed buying somewhere bigger, possibly with a mooring, on the north side of the lake, that project, rather like that of their office premises, was continuously on the back-burner.

Sophie threw herself onto the king-sized double bed, put her head back onto the pillow, and sighed with relief.

'A long week-end!'

'Sort of,' Marcus replied, 'I have a meeting tomorrow, don't forget.'

'So you do,' Sophie said, opening her eyes. 'And if the weather doesn't improve, I shall be coming with you. You know, anyway, I would quite like to meet this Ms Weatherby.'

'Do you think she's going to be happy picking up the tab for this place?'

'Frankly, I don't really care and I'm sure that if she's not entirely happy, we will be able to come to some sort of arrangement. Anyway, she knows where we're staying; Anne-Marie e-mailed the details to her. I imagine that we won't even see the tab.'

When Marcus had first met Sophie, she had short spiky hair that appeared almost punk. Now, in her late thirties, whilst she still retained a sort of adolescent, impish manner, her dark hair was longer, she dressed more classically, and the air that she had developed of smooth sophistication, was carried off with great confidence. Married life suited her and

some of the stress of running the business that she had inherited from her father had fallen away since Marcus had joined her.

‘Are we going to eat here, or explore London?’ she asked, rolling over on the bed.

‘We could just order a little something, a bottle of Champagne, have an early night, and make mad passionate love.’

‘Now that sounds more like the Marcus I know and love,’ Sophie said with a glint in her eye. ‘I’m rather intrigued though.’ Evidently she was still distracted by why Ms Weatherby had invited Marcus to a meeting in London. ‘I wonder what it is that they are interested in.’

‘As I said, we’ll find out soon enough. Now shall we drop work?’

Sophie nodded, smiled wickedly, rolled off the bed, kicked her shoes off, and made for the bathroom. Marcus presumed that she had agreed to his suggestion, picked up the phone, and called room service.

* * *

After breakfast the following day, as had been arranged, a car arrived at the hotel to pick up Marcus. There was some polite confusion when Sophie got in with him. The driver had thought that he had only one passenger. He immediately phoned to request instructions. He was advised that he was to bring both of them. The journey from the Dorchester was short, along Grosvenor Place around the back of Buckingham Palace, to Vauxhall Bridge Road, going in the direction of the Thames and then right into Lupus Street. The car turned left into St. Georges Square and pulled up outside an elegant neo-classical building with an imposing portico. As the car slowed down, a man in a dark uniform emerged from the portico. He was wearing a cap and carrying an umbrella under his arm. Quickly, he moved a couple of traffic cones to allow the car to park next to the kerb and then, when the car was stationary he opened the door whilst simultaneously inflating the umbrella.

‘Sorry about the weather, Miss,’ he said, as Sophie got out. ‘Been rainin’ cats an’ dogs like this all week, Miss.’

‘Thank you,’ Sophie said, waiting for Marcus to join her.

‘This way, if you please,’ the man said, indicating the direction with his free hand. As they reached the door, a young woman opened it from the inside and smiled warmly as they entered.

‘Welcome to St. Georges,’ she said. ‘If you would like to follow me, we’ll sign you in and give you a pass, and then I’ll escort you to the meeting room.’

‘Thank you,’ they said in unison and followed the young woman down a long corridor with a low suspended ceiling punctuated by lighting panels, fire extinguisher outlets, and transparent hemispheres which Marcus imagined were probably surveillance cameras. It was likely that the corridor was capable of being instantly isolated in the case of an attack.

‘Have you ever been here before, Marcus?’ Sophie asked as they walked side by side.

‘No, never, but then these places are often quite temporary. There will already be another office in the process of being prepared to take the place of this as soon as it is decided to decommission it.’

At the end of the corridor, the woman placed her thumb on a pad and a heavy steel door slid open to reveal a small office. Once inside they were photographed and soon afterwards presented with their passes.

‘There are facilities on the right if you want to use them,’ the woman said. They looked at each other and shook their heads. ‘Then I’ll take you straight to the meeting room.’

As they penetrated the building, it became clear that it had been designed as a labyrinth, capable of being defended in sections. Without plans, it would have been quite impossible for attackers to orient themselves. The areas that they passed through were plain and utilitarian and it seemed that each area also had a secure means of escape. By stark contrast, when they eventually reached the meeting room it was elegantly furnished with a large mahogany table and matching chairs. The table was large enough to seat twelve

comfortably and the room, double that number. At one end of the table sat a woman. She was seated in front of a laptop and had a mobile phone to her ear. As they entered, she looked up. She terminated her conversation immediately, automatically closed the lid of her laptop, and got up. She walked over to meet them extending her hand towards Sophie as she approached them. The door closed quietly behind them.

‘I’m Hilary Weatherby,’ she said. She exuded an air of self-confidence and authority. ‘Thank you for agreeing to this meeting.’

‘Sophie Tregay,’ Sophie said, noticing that her hand was being held in a tight grip, whilst the steely blue eyes regarded her intensely.

‘Marcus Tregay,’ Marcus said, as she transferred her attention to his hand.

Hilary Weatherby was shorter than he was, a little taller than Sophie, and a lot stockier. She had a strong athletic build and looked like someone who took a pride in remaining reasonably fit. Marcus estimated her to be in her mid-fifties, only a few years older than him in fact. She was wearing a silver grey shift dress with a matching long jacket. The only adornment that she seemed to have allowed herself was a simple pearl necklace – no other jewellery, no makeup. Her short dark hair had been cut stylishly in a lop-sided bob, which gave her the appearance of being slightly younger than she probably was.

‘Perhaps I could offer you some coffee whilst we wait for the others to arrive. I’m afraid it won’t be what you’re used to, but they do assure me that it is coffee.’ She moved towards a large mahogany sideboard where two flasks were placed next to a few cups and saucers, spoons, milk and sugar.

‘How many are attending this meeting?’ Marcus asked, pumping some coffee into a cup. Sophie smelt the coffee, wrinkled her nose, and decided on the bottled water.

‘Only two others,’ Hilary Weatherby replied, looking at Sophie. ‘Decided against the coffee? Very wise – I think I’ll do the same.’

‘I don’t believe that this building was in use when I worked for the Department,’ Marcus said, making polite conversation.

‘It wasn’t,’ Hilary Weatherby replied, ‘but then the Department, as you call it, has grown hugely in the last few years. You were here when Sir Elliot Gower had just been appointed to start the process of expansion. By the way, did you ever meet his successor, Sir Gerald Cooke?’

‘No, but I heard reports.’

‘Not all good, I imagine.’

‘One could say that.’

‘His was a political appointment.’

‘And yours?’ Marcus asked, looking straight into her eyes.

‘Purely on merit,’ she laughed. ‘Could hardly be otherwise, could it?’

Marcus declined to answer, but grinned and warmed to her immediately, appreciating that she was someone who was prepared to have a joke at her own expense.

‘So, Madame Tregay...’

‘Call me Sophie, please, it will be easier,’ Sophie interjected.

‘Thank you, Sophie, and you’d better call me Hilary. I was going to ask why you decided to come along to the meeting?’

‘The rain,’ Sophie replied, hesitating briefly before adding, ‘and curiosity. I must admit I was intrigued by your invitation.’

‘Were you afraid that we might try and kidnap your husband?’

‘It’s been done before,’ she smiled. ‘And, as his business partner, I’m here to protect our interests. I generally negotiate all our contracts.’

‘So I’ve heard.’

‘Oh?’

They were interrupted by a quiet knock on the door and the young woman entered again, this time accompanied by single man. ‘Monsieur Duvall,’ she announced.

Hilary Weatherby immediately went over to welcome him.

‘Good to see you again Maurice - thank you for coming over. Can I introduce you to Sophie and Marcus Tregay of Myrmidon.’

‘Delighted,’ Maurice said.

‘Maurice is our liaison in London with the DGSE, French Intelligence,’ Hilary Weatherby explained. ‘His base is the Embassy. We meet quite regularly.’

‘We’ve both had contact with the DGSE,’ Sophie said, as she shook hands with him. ‘But I expect you know that already.’

‘I do,’ Maurice admitted turning to Marcus. ‘I have been fully briefed. Incidentally, Jean-Luc sends his regards to you and asked why you have neglected him?’

Jean-Luc Lepelletier, whose military responsibility was for the French Special Forces, had worked with Marcus in Bosnia and had kept in contact for well over ten years. Marcus laughed. ‘I’m surprised that he hasn’t retired yet. Tell him he should come and visit us, he’s had enough invitations.’

‘You may have an opportunity to meet up with him again soon, if this thing comes off.’

Hilary Weatherby interjected quickly. ‘Marcus isn’t yet aware of the plans we have in mind for him and his company.’

‘Oh! Apologies if I’m a little premature,’ the Frenchman said. His English was impeccable, with hardly a trace of any accent.

They continued to chat for a short whilst they waited for the last person to arrive. Finally, Hilary Weatherby, clearly frustrated and looking somewhat peeved, proposed that they should sit down - she would begin the briefing. They moved over to the table where she had been working on her laptop when they first arrived, and sat down.

‘First of all, thank you for coming Marcus, and you also, Sophie. As you will be aware, Marcus, from the time that you worked with us, it is not generally our policy to outsource much of our work. We work in an environment where security is an essential prerequisite, and so, bringing in assistance from outside, especially for core activities, goes rather against the grain. Nevertheless, you, Marcus, are recognised as something of an exception. Your company, Myrmidon,’ Hilary turned her gaze to Sophie, ‘may be exactly what we are looking for in this instance and that is why you are here. We know your capabilities, especially in terms of organisation, and your company is neither too big, nor too small, to handle what we have in mind.’

Sophie and Marcus waited patiently, their curiosity mounting, as Hilary Weatherby deftly avoided the crux of the matter. She was just about to continue when there was a quiet knock on the door and the young woman entered again followed by a man.

‘Oh no!’ Marcus said quietly.

‘Walter Lewenski,’ Sophie hissed, a feeling of gloom quickly affecting her as well as a sinking feeling of *déjà vu*. ‘I’ve been here before, Marcus, I think we should slip out now,’ she whispered as they looked over towards the door.

‘Hi Marcus, Hi Sophie, good to see you Hilary, Maurice. Sorry I’m late. Bad flight – hate flying; really knocks me about.’

Walter Lewenski had flown in from the States. He was the Director of Special Operations – Middle East, and normally operated from his base in CIA Headquarters, Langley, Virginia. He was a small man with weasel like features, he was a Methodist, he didn’t drink, he didn’t smoke, and he hardly ever swore. Marcus knew him well; too well. He had first met him when he was posted...

Read on.....