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Opening Extract from...

THE ENGLISHMAN

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THE
ENGLISHMAN
DAVID GILMAN



Bedford Park
London W4
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Bedford Park is a select residential quarter of west London: a designated conservation area with proximity to the nearby Underground station giving easy access into the city, making these tree-lined roads a highly desirable location. Woodstock Road is a leafy street occupied by people in the media – actors, film directors – lawyers and families who are considered ‘old money’, those who have enjoyed the privilege of professional status and wealth for a couple of generations.

Jeremy Carter, a 49-year-old City banker, lived in one such house in Woodstock Road with his wife, his adopted thirteen-year-old son, Steven, and his daughter, five-year-old Melissa. Carter had embraced the boy as his own since marrying Steven’s mother Amanda, and, as on every Saturday since the rugby season began, this

morning he would be accompanying him to his team's rugby fixture across the River Thames at the private St Paul's School in Barnes and urging him on from the touchline.

The persistent ringing of the telephone inside the five-bedroomed house made no impression on the running argument between Carter and his wife. She was a tall woman, several years younger than him with well-cut shoulder-length auburn hair framing a handsome face. Her good bone structure and exercise regimes at the tennis courts and swimming baths made her look even younger than her forty years.

'You said the twenty-seventh was fine,' she insisted.

'And I told you I have to go to Zurich,' he countered with more equanimity than his irritated wife could muster as he followed her through to the utility room where she bundled an armful of bedsheets into the washing machine. Her domestic help had been off sick for a week and the additional household chores added to her bad temper.

'You said that was the seventeenth. I've planned this dinner party. Everyone's accepted.'

'For God's sake, I'm hardly likely to—'

She raised a hand to stop his self-defence and picked up the phone's handset. 'Hello?'

Carter ignored her gesture and continued to fight his corner. '—make a mistake about a business trip. It's been planned for months.'

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Amanda Reeve-Carter flicked an angry glance at him as she pulled a length of hair from her face and spoke into the phone. 'Helen, no, I won't be able to get there before three. Look, can I phone you back? Well... yes...'

Her friend Helen was not an easy woman to silence. Carter shrugged and walked back through the kitchen into the entrance hall. He called up the stairs. 'Steve! Ready?'

A moment later the boy thundered down the staircase carrying a kit bag and a rugby ball tucked under his arm.

Amanda pushed the phone against her chest to smother the chattering as she ruffled her son's hair, wished him luck and glared at her husband. She turned her back and climbed the stairs to remake the bed, putting the phone back to her ear. By the time she reached the front bedroom she had dealt with her friend's demands and looked down across the garden as her husband and son climbed into the car. Steven turned and waved. Carter did not.

She wished she could overcome her irritation. It was unreasonable, she knew. It was only a dinner date that had to be changed. She would make up with her husband. They always did. It was too good a marriage to let pettiness sour it for too long. As the car turned down the street she was distracted by her five-year-old.

'Mummy?'

She picked the child up and immediately felt the tightness around her heart diminish. 'What, my baby?'

‘Daddy went away without kissing me bye bye.’

She stroked the child’s fair hair and kissed her cheek. ‘He was in a hurry so he asked me to give you one instead.’

Carter and his son settled in the back seat of the Jaguar XJ as the driver levered the indicator, checked his mirrors and swung across Woodstock Road into Rupert Road.

‘Ready to give ’em a run for their money then, Stevie?’ said Carter’s long-serving driver, Charlie Lewis. He had been with Carter for six years and watched the young Steven grow into a fine, well-balanced lad, despite his near-constant mobile use: the ubiquitous phone culture endemic in youngsters. In all the years the boy had known his father’s driver, the man had always dressed in a dark suit, white shirt and regimental tie with highly polished shoes – a result of the well-groomed 53-year-old having served twenty years in the Irish Guards. No lilting brogue softened his south London accent, however, and nor was it likely to, given the mix of men who served in the regiment. Once retired, Staff Sergeant Lewis had applied to and was accepted by the Rochester Crawford (Private) Bank as chauffeur to the bank’s Risk and Compliance Director, Mr Jeremy Carter. A bonus for Lewis was that the British-owned bank had foregone the slightly more ostentatious S-Class Mercedes and 7 Series BMW in favour of the British-made Jaguar for

their directors. It was felt that the marque and styling made a more appropriate statement to their client base. And it was a fast, well-balanced car much loved by those who drove them. All in all, Charlie Lewis was more than content with his lot in life.

The hours Lewis worked were long because Carter often worked late at the bank but it was time paid for, as were the Saturday mornings usually spent happily ferrying father and son to various sporting events. In fact, Charlie Lewis barely thought of what he did as employment because the friendliness and mutual respect between the two men made for a comfortable relationship.

Steven barely lifted his head from texting on his phone. ‘Hard and fast, Charlie. Knife through butter. No pain, no gain. There to win not to whimper,’ he said, happily repeating some of the ex-soldier’s clichéd mantras.

‘That’s the spirit,’ said Lewis. ‘Happy for me to wait, Mr Carter, so I can see the game?’

‘Beth’ll know you’re skiving off the Tesco run,’ Carter answered.

It was a conversation that took place virtually every Saturday morning. It cemented their routine. ‘Have to have a bit of relief from the wife after thirty years, Mr Carter. Besides, no point in trying to get back through all this traffic to fetch you.’

‘You’d better stay, Charlie. We need all the support we can get,’ Steven added, finally switching off the screen.

‘One of these days I should bring some of my mates down. A right raucous lot, they are,’ said Lewis.

‘Not a bad idea,’ Carter said. ‘Raise the roof and shout down the opposition.’

The car edged along the narrow street, stopped at the junction with Bath Road and turned right. As Carter chatted to his son about the tactics of the game, Lewis effortlessly took the car into traffic, swung left in Turnham Green Terrace and then soon after left again into Chiswick High Road. The traffic was murder on any day of the week and even though most of the ‘white van man’ tradesmen were elsewhere on a Saturday it was easier to get off the High Road and avoid ending up in the logjam before the Hammersmith roundabout. Carter and his son’s voices murmured quietly behind him. Chit-chat about home, the winter holiday and Melissa’s next birthday. He drew the car to a standstill soon after the High Road merged into King Street and waited in the middle of the road, indicator quietly flicking to turn right as he waited for the approaching cars to present a gap so he could turn into Weltje Road, a short rat run on to the A4 and the quarter-mile drive down before turning off left before the Hammersmith flyover.

Weltje Road is a one-way street with terraced houses on either side. Like many roads in the overcrowded city, parked cars on both sides make it even narrower. There’s usually little pedestrian traffic as it leads only to the residents’ houses and there is no destination beyond the

head of the road other than the fast-moving traffic on the A4 arterial dual carriageway travelling down towards the Hammersmith slip road or the Hammersmith flyover. A centre barrier separates the four-lane traffic. Lewis steered the Jag into the queue of cars that slowed to a halt. Ahead the road twisted in a slight S bend and at the furthest corner on the right-hand side before the road merged on to the A4 stood a box-sided Transit van with the name of a contract company emblazoned on its side beneath the red and yellow chevrons declaring it was for Highway Maintenance. Looking past the stationary cars, Lewis saw two road-construction men in hi-vis jackets working outside a yellow plastic barrier. One of the men was wearing ear defenders and leaning on a jackhammer; a third labourer manned a Stop/Go lollipop board. The first two men were digging out and filling in a pothole with tarmac. Lewis sighed. Was there ever a time that the council wasn't filling potholes? Even on a Saturday. 'Shouldn't be too long, Mr Carter,' Lewis assured him.

Carter's thoughts were elsewhere. The trees in the street were already starting to turn. Autumn beckoned. They would go skiing again this year. Steven sat behind Lewis, giving Carter an unobstructed view of the road ahead. He looked to where one of the men abandoned his tarmac duties and put a hand to his ear. Most likely listening to music on a mobile phone, Carter thought as the second man walked to the van where a fourth

sat on the passenger side, facing away from the waiting cars. The earphone worker looked towards them. Carter glanced behind to see if there was a problem. Perhaps the cars had backed up too far on to the High Street? There was only one small car behind them. Carter looked back and saw the lollipop turn from Stop to Go. A couple of cars got through; the queue edged forward. Lewis pulled up behind it. The Stop/Go board turned again. In the gap between the four cars in front of them, Carter caught sight of the man's boots. His overalls were tucked military style just above the ankle. Black laced-up boots. Thick rubber soles. Military all the way. By now the second man had pulled something from the floor of the van and turned. The face in the Transit's passenger seat turned to look in Carter's direction.

'Charlie! Back, back, back. Get us out of here!' Carter shouted.

Lewis hesitated; then he saw the danger. One of the approaching men lifted a semi-automatic rifle; the other raised a handgun. Lewis pushed the gear lever into reverse and pressed his foot down hard. The Jag slammed into the car behind. Steven fell forward, saved by his seat belt. He looked wide-eyed at his father whose face was pressed close to his. His mouth yelling something at him as he reached across, unbuckling the seat belt. Telling him what to do. Where to go. His urgency frightened the boy. The crash. The fear. More instructions. Did he understand? his father insisted. The

boy nodded, his father's words penetrating the terror. The Jag's power heaved the smaller car metres back, but then it jackknifed, blocking any chance of escape. Carter pushed open the passenger door, forcing his son to run as Lewis, seeing that he could not drive back any further, changed gear and accelerated at the men running at them, weapons aimed and ready to fire. Half a dozen holes punctured the windscreen, followed by the jarring sound of gunfire. Three bullets struck Lewis in the chest, two passed between him and Carter as he threw himself flat, desperately trying to kick open his door, but the parked cars blocked it. The sixth bullet struck Charlie Lewis in the head. Blood and brain splattered across the rear seat. The open door was suddenly filled with the man wielding the assault rifle. He flipped it, struck Carter on the head with its butt, reached in and dragged the unconscious man out into the street. The man was strong enough to haul him to the van. The back doors were already open and they threw him in face down, pulled a sack over his head, bound his ankles and wrists with plastic ties. The van lurched off the kerb and accelerated into the fast-moving traffic.

The assault, murder and kidnap had taken twenty-seven seconds.

Eddie Roman's life of crime had ended twelve years before, when he was nabbed for driving a gang during an armed robbery. It was an old-fashioned smash-and-grab style heist. Simple and stupid. He'd been doing old mates a favour: old cons who thought they could run as fast as they used to but were ignorant of twenty-first-century technology that had them tracked, identified and nicked in record time.

Eddie served his prison sentence and when he was released promised his wife of twenty-eight years that he was on the straight and narrow. It did not last long. Promises were a fluid commitment as far as Eddie was concerned and there was no money in being a regular van driver. Not with zero-hour contracts. He kept the small delivery jobs to himself; the less his wife Shelley knew the better. To her, he was doing the Amazon delivery run most days. It stopped her worrying and if there was one

thing Eddie regretted it was causing so much grief to a woman he had loved since the day he had met her. She was in the same house in Brentford that they had bought soon after they were married and finally, at forty-eight, he was content.

Eddie had had ambition once: youthful aspirations to be a racing car driver. He was fast and proficient but when he realized how much money he'd need to buy into the race game he was persuaded by the local crime families to drive for them instead. His reputation grew and so too did his profile with the Metropolitan Police. Since last being a guest of Her Majesty's Prison Service he had sold his skills to the foreigners who ran the sex and drug business in the West End. He delivered their product and dirty cash from A to B with no diversion in between. He was trusted. He never skimmed. Even if he had wanted to he wouldn't dare. Serbians had controlled much of the trade, until the Albanians, who were even nastier, pushed them aside. Violent bastards, the lot of them. In the old days Eddie had seen men being beaten and coshed, and then the sawn-off shotgun boys had appeared: all that was part of the world he used to live in; but now, these foreigners used violence without a moment's hesitation. Real ugly stuff. In truth, it offended his sensibilities but he had learnt not to make any comment. Head down, do the driving and take the cash. Two weeks ago a Russian club owner had approached him and introduced him to a hard-looking man with a scar that looked permanently

raw across his eyebrow and cheek. The scar-faced man's English was perfect but Eddie couldn't place the accent – maybe French, with a touch of Russian? Whatever – he didn't care. The good thing about Europe having no borders was that it brought high-paying employers into the business. He was to drive the man and his crew around west London. That was easy work for Eddie. His house in Brentford was just off the A4 and he knew Chiswick and Hammersmith blindfold. This crew were a humourless lot. Not a smile among them. Real sullen foreign types. Round and round they went, through all the avenues of the area looking for an ambush site. It was Eddie who showed them the choke hole on Weltje Road and what an easy escape it would be. That did the trick: they liked him for that. And when he showed them where the sub contractor's yard was, stealing the van and equipment was child's play. The money being offered was enough to buy the holiday of a lifetime for him and Shelley.

And then the shooting started.

'Drive!' said the crew's leader. The command was sharp but lacked any sense of panic. Eddie knew where he had to go: the route had been planned in advance. But the killing? He hadn't bargained for that. That wasn't part of the deal. A dead man slaughtered behind the wheel and a bound and gagged hostage in the back of the van. A kid running down the street and Eddie didn't even know whether they had gunned the lad down. The

game had escalated big time. The scare factor was up 100 per cent. The part of the human brain that had controlled man's instinct to survive since Stone Age hunters fought mammoths kicked in. He did what he was paid to do and accelerated fast, expertly getting into the traffic. In less than two minutes he bypassed the slip road to Hammersmith and carried on for the flyover. He shifted the gears, causing no fuss to other drivers by cutting in. He was just another van driver in a hurry. The traffic cameras would pick them up soon enough: in five hundred yards, when Eddie would earn his money. He changed up a gear. No one spoke. No sound came from the injured man. The van stormed across the flyover. His instructions had been to head in the opposite direction to the ambush but he couldn't do that from the ambush site because of the median barrier. The skill to get the van travelling in the opposite direction was what Eddie was being paid for.

The A4 continued over and down the raised roadway and became Talgarth Road. The next junction, in the dip of the road, allowed no right turn to the Barons Court Underground Station, so to go back the way Eddie had come on the opposite side of the dual carriageway would have meant turning left at the traffic lights into Gliddon Road, stopping, turning round and then taking the van back across the junction to legally turn right on to the A4 and drive in the desired direction. That would take time.

As he came over the brow of the flyover he saw the traffic lights flick to amber. Cars sped across the junction not wishing to be caught on a long red light. The amber turned red with no waiting cars on the start line. Eddie's concentration was intense. He slipped into a mental zone where nothing else existed. The men, the ambush, the guns and the fear: none of that mattered any more. He was as steady as a plumb line. The man next to him cast a quick glance to check that the driver was not frozen in apprehension. He wasn't. Eddie had many variables to consider. He needed a few vital seconds to swing the cumbersome van in a tight U-turn and not collide with anyone or anything. He had weighted the back of the van with strapped-down bags of cement to give the rear wheels traction. The men in the rear of the van knew what to expect because he had briefed them. They had strapped themselves to the van's metal struts.

He slowed to forty miles an hour, kicked in the clutch and brought the van down to third gear. Checking his mirrors both sides, he saw there was enough distance from the following cars. Praying the lights would not change now and bring the traffic head-on, with a final smooth drop of the gear lever into second, he pressed his foot flat on the accelerator, pushing the rev counter past the 3,500 mark. With the engine protesting, he gripped the steering wheel with his right hand at the nine o'clock position, swung hard all the way around to six o'clock while at the same time his left hand heaved

up the handbrake. The rear wheels locked and the van tail-ended towards the traffic lights. For a few heart-stopping seconds, it seemed as if the van would roll. As rubber gripped and squealed, Eddie let in the clutch and gave the engine its power. Smoke poured from the tyres but then the van was heading west. Now he put his foot down because traffic cameras would have caught that stunt and there would be calls being placed to traffic police and the one thing a Ford Transit van could not do, even this one with its modified engine, was outrun a BMW police pursuit car.

The man next to him had the good grace to exhale and swear at the same time. The killers in the back laughed and said something in a language Eddie didn't understand. But it felt good nonetheless. For that brief moment, he deluded himself that this tight-knit crew of hardened men had accepted him.

On the other side of the road, the journey's waypoint loomed into view. The star-encrusted blue dome of the Russian Orthodox Church in Chiswick meant he was getting close to his turn. Eddie knew it well. The Cathedral of the Dormition of the Mother of God and the Royal Martyrs was a constant sight on his daily travels to and from the city, and it told him he needed to get across into the left-hand lane. The start of the M4 motorway lay ahead and his instructions were to get down the slip road before it and avoid the next set of cameras. He flipped the indicator, the van slowed into

the tight left-hand bend. It picked up speed once on to the wider A205 road heading towards Kew Bridge and as he approached a railway bridge he swung the van into a narrow lane on the right-hand side. An industrial yard of blue-stacked self-storage containers was set back, its mesh wire fencing obscured by overgrown bushes. The lane was a perfect place to swap vehicles. On the opposite side, an overgrown embankment tumbled down to Kew Bridge Station, which meant no one would see anything untoward because they were below the road. The nondescript white Renault van was parked facing down the lane where it had been left at six o'clock that morning. Eddie swung into the yard's gates and quickly reversed. Two of the men jumped out, opened the rear doors of the Renault and then the three ambushers clambered inside, roughly manhandling their captive, by which time Eddie was in the Renault cab. The Russian gang leader, for that is what Eddie had determined his nationality to be, twisted a timer device on a large plastic container full of petrol, threw it into the Transit and slammed closed its doors. Fifteen seconds later, as the Renault drove out of sight down the lane, they heard the rush of air and explosion as the Transit burst into flames. A shortcut led them back on to the A4 dual carriageway. Eddie's heart skipped a beat. They were passing Brentford and he thought of Shelley who would be putting the kettle on about now and sneaking out the chocolate digestives from the fridge

door. He smiled to himself. Almost home, love. Almost done with this crew. And then they'd be off. There was no rush now. The van glided into the roundabout traffic and turned towards Heathrow Airport. After two and a half miles the second waypoint appeared in the form of the Syon Clinic on his left. Eddie swung into the opposite feeder lane, waited for the lights and then turned the van back in the direction they had come. Two hundred metres further along he turned down a narrow industrial track, so narrow it was barely possible in places to squeeze the van past the big parked trucks that hogged the roadside. It was appropriately named Transport Avenue. Straight ahead was a cement factory and nearby a scrap-metal recycling yard. It was noisy and he suspected that would help mask any sounds the captured man would make. Of one thing he felt certain. That poor bastard had something these men needed and they were going to hurt him to get it. He stopped the van next to some locked gates that, once opened, exposed a boarded-up semi-derelict brick building that was part of a disused industrial area. The large contractor's board declared: 'MALCOLM & SONS DEMOLITION. DANGER – KEEP OUT. CONDEMNED BUILDING UNSAFE'. Alongside the warning was more modest signage stating it had been 'Sold (subject to contract)'. Once the van rolled into the abandoned yard and the gates were closed no one outside would see or hear anything.

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Eddie Roman let the men haul their victim away. He lit a cigarette and noticed that there was a slight tremor in his hand. Home was less than fifteen minutes away. He asked the God he had never believed in to protect him long enough to return there.

Within an hour of Lewis's murder and Jeremy Carter's abduction, the well-rehearsed standard operating procedure for a Major Incident swung into place. Following the pattern established in London and many other world cities that had experienced terrorist attacks, the events in London W6 would, privately at least, until the investigation proved otherwise, be treated as terror-related. Three cordons had been established. The first secured the immediate area surrounding Carter's car in Weltje Road and the crime scene. They established a second cordon extending from the start of the road. The third and outer cordon nudged into the A4 approach lane and at the other end of the ambush site at King Street, where traffic was stopped and forced through a diversionary chicane. The entrance to Weltje Road became the cordon access point. All parked cars on the road were quarantined, no public pedestrian access

was permitted and the residents were confined to their houses. Borough police commanders were briefed as scene-of-crime officers erected a white tent covering Carter's car and the dead man who still lay sprawled in the driver's seat. Empty cartridge cases were identified and marked as evidence. With an efficiency born from years of experience the Forensic Investigation Specialist Crime officers, experts in major incidents such as terrorist attacks, murder and armed robbery, plied their trade while uniform and plainclothes officers conducted door-to-door interviews. The media was herded away behind barriers at the entry point to the ambush road.

An official-looking car passed a police outrider blocking access to Weltje Road from traffic approaching along King Street. The man who sat in the back showed his credentials and was waved closer to the edge of the cordon. The car had barely stopped when an agitated police officer gestured it to move on. The moment the stuttering blue light was flashed behind the car's radiator grill the officer stepped back and, like the policeman before him, checked the passenger's proffered identification. The man in his fifties who alighted from the car had the look of a career politician. His wiry grey hair was groomed, the standard-issue politician's charcoal suit hung well on a slim athletic frame, the similarly coloured overcoat was casually unbuttoned. He strode confidently and with an easy graceful gait towards the borough police commander and investigating officers. At

first they did not recognize him but when he extended his leather-encased identity card the uniformed borough commander's brow furrowed. Such an incident would normally be of immediate interest to MI5, the Security Service, not a suit from MI6, the Secret Intelligence Service.

'Mr Maguire, Commander Pickering is at Bedford Park with a firearms team.'

Maguire nodded; Pickering was the counter-terrorism commander and the two men had already spoken by telephone. Maguire's eyes scanned the scene of police tape cordons, the flood of uniformed officers and the white-suited forensic officers. Photographs were being taken and blue-boiler-suited Met policemen were conducting a fingertip search of the ambush site.

'What information do we have?' said Maguire.

'A van was parked just beyond the curve in the road,' said the senior officer, pointing to the choke point. 'The shooters were dressed as highway maintenance workers. The vehicle and tools were stolen from the company's north London yard two days ago. There are no CCTV cameras on this road but we are checking traffic cameras on the approach along the Chiswick High Road and their escape route down the A4.'

'Is there a CAP?' he asked.

The borough commander extended her arm towards the inner cordon and the common approach path. 'This way.' Like every crime scene, this one had restricted

access allowing only essential personnel to cross the inner cordon. A young female police crime-scene manager nodded as her senior officer approached with Maguire.

‘Ma’am.’

Maguire signed her ledger as she booked the time he entered. When he left she would book him out. Time and personnel control was essential to the effective running of a crime scene. Maguire stepped towards the white-tented area. A forensic officer greeted him.

‘Can you show me?’ said Maguire.

The officer turned his tablet around and swiped long shots and close-up images of the bullet-punctured windscreen, the dead man and the items discovered in the car. A blood-smeared rugby ball and a mobile phone lay in the rear seat well. ‘Given what we could see on the mobile phone it appears to belong to the boy and with the rugby ball it indicates that the child was in the car at the time of the shooting.’

‘Nothing else?’ said Maguire. ‘Any sign of the boy being shot? Any blood down the street?’

‘No. And initial tests indicate we have only the driver’s blood and a smear on the floor of the car behind his seat which might belong to the abducted man.’

Maguire knew that whoever had staged the attack would not have given a second thought to killing a child. Carter’s son had either escaped or been taken.

‘Ballistics?’

‘We’ll know soon enough but 5.56-mm empty cases are everywhere.’

That suggested an assault rifle, and if the rounds were the enhanced variety with a hardened steel core then they had been expecting the car to be bulletproof. They weren’t taking any chances. ‘Enhanced rounds?’ said Maguire.

‘The lab will tell us soon enough,’ the man replied.

Maguire nodded his thanks and turned to the borough commander. ‘No sign of the boy?’

‘Nothing. He must have been terrified. We’ll have his photograph on all the news along with that of his father.’

‘Stepfather,’ Maguire corrected her. He cast an experienced eye over the ambush site. The choke point was as near perfect as you could expect. Blocked cars, narrow street, bend in the road. No way out for the victims. Assault rifles probably meant specialist weapons. Determining what rifles and exact ammunition were used might help to find what country the killers hailed from. Taking his leave of the borough commander he felt one thing was certain. The operation had been carried out with professional expertise. They knew their target and they had taken Carter for a specific reason. It was no random grudge killing of a banker. Jeremy Carter had information his abductors wanted. And that was what worried Maguire.



Maguire's driver retraced the route Carter, his son and Lewis had probably taken from Bedford Park. At the house a strong police presence was obvious. The junction of Woodstock Road and Rupert Road was blocked and a cordon extended three hundred metres in all directions. The threat level had been increased on the orders of the senior officer in charge of the Counter-Terrorism Branch and a half-dozen CTSFO armed officers stood strategically placed. Two of them barred entry to the crossroads as a more lightly armed Met officer checked the identity of the car that drew to a halt. A third officer checked Maguire's credentials. A tall, suited civilian carrying a police phone was standing nearby with three senior uniformed officers as he briefed them on the situation. Commander Tom Pickering saw the car draw to a halt and excused himself from his briefing. He waved the car forward and waited in the driveway to Carter's house. Maguire climbed out of the back of the car and extended his hand in greeting. He needed no special clearance.

'Hello, Tom,' said Maguire affably, glancing at one of the heavily armed CTSFO officers who stood with another at the rear entrance to the house. A quick look upward told him a sniper team was in place on the roof and were he a betting man he'd have put a hefty wager on there being more than one. If this was a concerted terrorist attack and a suicide bomber attempted to break through the cordons at the end of the streets they would

be dead before they made it halfway. There was unlikely to be anything the counter-terrorism commander had failed to cover.

‘Mr Maguire,’ said Pickering in greeting. ‘The commissioner said you were on your way. Everything here is locked down. Five is on the case.’

The Security Service, known as MI5, is the nation’s key counter-intelligence service. Collecting and analysing covert intelligence lies at its heart. Maguire needed them onside because of his own connection with the abducted Carter. He had already spoken to his opposite number at MI5, who’d offered complete co-operation. In the current climate of terrorist threats, inter-agency collaboration was vital, but Maguire was a different breed of intelligence officer. He was the keeper of a treasure trove of secrets and not always as forthcoming as his counterparts would like. However, he had sufficient authority to give them the official version of the two-finger salute. And he didn’t kid himself. Turf wars still existed. But what outsiders did not realize was that the Service was not as bureaucratic as they imagined. In reality it was a collegiate meritocracy. People depended on each other and secrets were hermetically sealed. Maguire was an ex-army officer and his exploits when he served in special forces many years before made him feel at home in MI6, where those responsible for operational territories are still referred to as ‘robber barons’ – an old-fashioned sobriquet that suited Maguire rather well.

He recalled one astute observer of the Service referring to the members of its arcane and layered organization as sorcerers who knew the secrets of its Kabbalistic demonology.

Pickering accompanied him to the entrance. 'Your people are inside with Mrs Reeve-Carter. There's a police family liaison officer with her and her family doctor, and there's a friend from across the road. I insisted, in the gentlest terms, that the civilians leave the area but she is adamant that the friend stays. As far as we can see, sir, there is no immediate threat but given your association with the family I would appreciate it if you could convince her about the friend.'

Maguire nodded. 'Are you giving media interviews yet?'

'They've already blocked the end of the road. We'll get a Noddy to deal with them later.'

Maguire smiled at the patronizing reference to the uniformed police. 'All right, Tom, let me get started in there.'

He took his leave and went into the house, past the policeman at the door who booked him into the house, checking his name off against a list of personnel. The place was locked down. Like a crime scene. Which it might be, Maguire thought to himself. The nagging doubt was that Carter might be the guilty party.

Amanda Reeve-Carter was one of those women who had a knack for creating a beautiful home without it looking like an interior designer's death-wish fulfilment. It was her taste, her imprint and Jeremy Carter had been happy to pay for it. Yet she did not spend money for the sake of splashing out. The artwork hanging on the walls was more likely to be from art college students rather than from overpriced and, to her mind, self-indulgent, pretentious 'names'. Maguire had always liked Amanda's practicality. She had been an army wife before she married Carter and kept her late husband's name as part of the new.

Tony Reeve had been a major in the British Army, awarded the George Cross, the highest award for gallantry below that of the Victoria Cross. Seven years ago, Major Reeve, a bomb-disposal expert, died in Afghanistan defusing several improvised explosive

devices that threatened the lives of a half-dozen wounded men already caught in an ambush. The men were evacuated as Reeve stood out in the open alone, coolly working through the intricate set of wired devices. The booby trap that killed him was triggered by a child probably no older than his own son. Jeremy Carter had insisted that the hero's name live on for the boy and there were plenty of pictures of Steven's father in the house. Maguire paused by the bank of family photographs and wondered whether a double tragedy might be too much for even the strong-willed Amanda to bear. One husband dead, one husband abducted and the possibility that her son had been taken. If there was a God, Maguire thought to himself, He knew how to wreak havoc in someone's life. He glanced up as raised voices reached him from the rear of the house.

He walked through to a bright modern room: a glass-panelled coach-house-roofed extension that housed the kitchen, dining and family day room; beyond glass doors spanning the breadth of the room lay the walled garden. Amanda Reeve-Carter was sitting on a sofa with a much younger woman. Maguire knew she had no other relatives so this had to be the friend from over the road. An older man, who presumably was the doctor, stood in front of them. Amanda held a glass containing what looked to be a generous helping of whisky. She was insisting that she did not need a sedative of any description and that she was not prepared to abandon alcohol. The ever-patient

doctor was equally insistent that by nightfall she would need medication and implored the woman next to Amanda to ensure that she ate a meal as soon as she could be convinced to do so and then took the prescribed sedatives. He placed a small bottle on the table.

Maguire glanced along a corridor to his right where members of his team were systematically searching Carter's study. One of them saw him and stepped outside bearing a handful of files.

'Well?' asked Maguire quietly.

'Nothing yet, boss.'

'It's here somewhere. Find the bloody stuff before we all go down the pan,' Maguire told him. He carried on into the family room as Amanda Carter looked his way. He could see that she was stoically holding down her fear. She had clearly realized that offices of the state were now involved and whatever was going on in her home was procedure. Seated near to her was a woman in her forties. Her lined face suggested to Maguire that she was the police family liaison officer, a woman who had spent too many hours sitting with grieving relatives. She would have been trained to use specific words to try and ease trauma and grief. By the look of her, Maguire guessed she was a mother and wife who probably threw half the counselling advice down the pan. Woman to woman, she would have found the words needed.

The fifth person in the room was one of Maguire's

junior officers, Abnash Khalsa. She wore jeans, trainers and a casual leather jacket over a finely knit mohair sweater. Her hair was cut to the nape of her neck, short enough to be cared for easily and long enough to attractively shape her face, a face that unlike the family officer's was still unblemished by life's vicissitudes. As he stepped closer she gave him a brief smile of greeting and an almost imperceptible shake of her head. Amanda Reeve-Carter had revealed nothing of interest in her general conversation.

'She needs more than booze, Abbie,' said Maguire.

'I'll put the kettle on,' the young woman answered.

'You're not here to serve tea,' he said quietly. 'I need you working in the study.'

She nodded. 'I know, sir, but they'll fetch me if there's anything I need to see in there. I thought a bit of support out here was appropriate.'

'Fair enough,' said Maguire as he walked past her. 'Amanda,' he said in greeting, 'we are doing everything we can.'

She frowned. 'Are you?' she said bluntly. She'd had a drink too many.

'I know this is a difficult time but we should get some food inside you.' He nodded in acknowledgement towards the doctor.

'You don't control me. This is my house. You're supposed to be out there finding my husband and my son.'

‘Of course,’ said Maguire, impervious to her antagonism, which was more than understandable given the circumstances and the fact that she and Maguire had never had an easy relationship, especially not with what he had asked her husband to do in the past. ‘That’s exactly what we are trying to do.’

‘Try harder.’ The edge to her voice bore sufficient pain to make the doctor look concerned.

‘Mrs Reeve-Carter, please let me help you, you are bound to feel increasingly upset.’

She swallowed the last mouthful of whisky. ‘I’m not in the habit of becoming hysterical. I’ve gone through the bloody hoops before.’

The doctor looked perplexed.

‘Thank you for your concern and help but I think it’s time everyone left,’ said Maguire. The moment’s hesitation shown by the doctor and liaison officer was quickly dispelled when he added firmly: ‘Now.’

Amanda’s friend half stood from the shared sofa. ‘Not you, Helen,’ said Amanda, placing a hand on her friend’s arm.

Maguire nodded. He needed to appease the grieving woman – momentarily at least. ‘You can stay. Where is...?’

‘Melissa?’ said friend Helen. ‘She’s at my house with our au pair and my two children. The man outside has some of his men in our garden. I do hope this won’t be for much longer, for everyone’s sake.’

Maguire smiled. His voice softened. 'I'm sorry, I don't know your name.'

Amanda's friend reacted to what was a barely disguised charm offensive. 'Oh. Helen Metcalf. I live across the road at Woodlands.'

'Mrs Metcalf, does Melissa spend much time with your own children?'

Helen Metcalf nodded. 'Oh yes.'

'Then rather than me send one of my officers across to... Woodlands, was it?'

Once again the chatty friend nodded, her head bobbing like a small bird dipping into a water bowl.

'Rather than have one of my officers see that she is not in any distress with everything that is going on here and in the street...' He sensed that she felt calling her upmarket suburban road a street was a slight. '... perhaps you would see that all is well.'

She flourished her mobile phone. 'Oh, I can just...'

'No, Mrs Metcalf. Go and see for yourself, would you?' Maguire's tone of voice left no doubt that it was not a request. Maguire didn't give a damn that the woman looked crestfallen at being dismissed. Amanda Reeve-Carter understood perfectly well that Maguire needed to speak to her in private.

'Go,' she said. 'See she's all right.'

Helen Metcalf hugged her friend and then Abbie escorted her from the room.

Maguire pulled a dining-room chair around and sat

facing the grieving woman. 'He's alive, Amanda. I know that much.'

'And what is it they want then? He is not in the Service any longer. Hasn't been for years, so what dirty little secret is he hiding from his past? Or is it from your past? Is that why your people are taking apart his study?' She crossed an arm over her chest and then one leg over the other, folding in on herself, keeping Maguire at bay, protecting the inner place that resisted the unbearable pain. For the first time, he saw her fight back the tears that welled up. 'And Steven. My boy. Whatever you have done my son is paying the price as well. Damn you and your dirty games, Maguire. I thought we were shot of you and the Service.'

Maguire remained unperturbed. His voice softened again. He needed to soothe her. 'I believe they are both alive and both of them are resilient.'

'He's thirteen, for God's sake.'

Her retort made Maguire realize there was little point in sympathetic platitudes. 'Did Jeremy ever speak of having a safe deposit box anywhere? Would there be anywhere else that he might keep information?'

She frowned as the question took its time to lodge in her scattered thoughts.

'He was with the Service for nigh on twenty-five years. If there were any secrets they were locked away here,' she insisted, touching her temple. 'He's a banker, Maguire. There's nothing hidden here; there are no

safe deposit boxes. If there are problems with the bank look there.'

Maguire's team had already swooped on the bank and raided his offices with the help of the Metropolitan Police. Whatever Jeremy Carter had that others wanted so badly, there was no evidence – so far – of it on his work or personal computer or in any paper files. And Maguire knew in his heart that there wouldn't be. Not from an old pro like Carter. She was right. It was in his head. And that's the safe the killers wanted to crack. There was nothing more to be gained by questioning her. She was superfluous to his investigation and he saw no point in feigning sympathy. He stood abruptly and walked out as Abbie carried a tray towards Amanda.

'Finish up here and get back. I've a job for you,' said Maguire and then made his way back outside.

Amanda stood and watched him approach Commander Pickering in the garden as Abbie placed the tray on the coffee table.

'It's better if you have something,' Abbie said.

Amanda ignored her and kept her gaze on the two men. 'They're talking about Jeremy. Wondering how vulnerable he's made you people.' She looked at the girl who waited patiently. 'Are you married?'

'No.' There had been offers, of course, but the wistful smile on Abbie's face gave rather too much away. She had made the sacrifice because she was at the start of her career and wanted more than a marriage.

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Amanda Reeve-Carter saw it, knew the look, understood immediately. She sat down and allowed the attractive young woman to pour her tea. 'Difficult in this line of work, isn't it?'

'We all make choices,' Abbie said.

'Don't leave it too late,' Amanda said, accepting the mug of tea.

'For?'

'Children.' Amanda watched to see whether that touched a nerve. Abbie showed no sign that it had.

'I want to get ahead,' she answered, seeing Maguire's car pull away.

'Ah. Yes. God, how I hate dedicated soldiers and ambitious spies.' She sipped her tea and looked into space across the rim. 'I've been married to both. My first husband was a bomb-disposal officer, but you probably know all that. And now Jeremy. He and Steven... they're really like father and son. Formative years, I suppose. Male bonding. Insidious, isn't it? Or haven't you noticed yet?'

She had, but she wasn't going to be drawn into the woman's bitterness. Abbie stepped back. 'I'm sorry.'

Amanda tipped what was left of the whisky into her tea. 'So am I.'

7

It had taken two hours flying from London to the pink stone city of Toulouse in southern France and then another hour on the A61 in a hire car to reach the outskirts of Castelnaudary. The journey gave Abbie time to absorb the information that Maguire had given her when she returned to his office after leaving Amanda Reeve-Carter. The MI6 man's desk was bare except for a telephone, his two fountain pens sitting parallel to a desk blotter and a beige file with a double slash of red across one corner that showed its contents were, as the letters indicated, *Top Secret*.

Abbie was security vetted to see its contents, but Maguire had not yet made the final decision about Abbie's suitability for the task. She was not an operational field officer; she was a linguist, and it was that skill that her boss wanted, whether to read documents or hear conversations in the various languages she was expert

in. He had a duty of care towards his staff. Risk was their business but his proposition could make the young woman vulnerable. She waited demurely until he asked whether she was prepared to consider undertaking the task he had in mind. She could not calm the pulse that beat rapidly in her neck but she answered in the affirmative.

His forefinger slid the file towards her with the instruction to not open it yet. There was a man he wanted her to contact whose whereabouts were known only to an intermediary who was a retired legionnaire in Castelnaudary, south of Toulouse, where the Legion's basic training was conducted for new recruits. Many of the old guard retire in the area around the base. The people he was sending her to were men who had been at the sharp end of danger. Was she still prepared to go? Again she nodded her assent. Maguire let her open the file. There was barely any information listed on the sheet of paper stapled to its parent folder. The man's description was missing. There was no photograph. She looked over the file to Maguire.

'Who is he?'

'He doesn't exist as far as we are concerned. Part of the agreement we had with him was that there should be nothing recorded officially. He's done work for us in the past.'

'And we kept to that agreement?' she said, knowing full well that such a concession meant the man was off

the books, unaccountable, which gave Maguire a free hand.

‘We did. And we will continue to do so.’

A brief one-page single-spaced summary listed the basic information about the man she was to find. As she read Maguire gave her further details of the man’s background.

His father had been a military attaché, so he had been exposed to different languages all his young life. British military surgeons are the best in the world when faced with serious battlefield wounds but they aren’t so hot on spotting ovarian cancer; the boy’s mother died when he was eleven. He was sent to a boarding school where he flourished. The teachers at the school channelled his grief into physical sports and he became an accomplished boxer and excellent rugby player. And he was academically bright, earmarked as a future rugby blue. It seemed likely that he would follow in his father’s footsteps and go to the University of Oxford. When he was a teenager, however, his father was killed in a car crash. The second tragedy hit the boy hard and his studies went to the wall as many times as a boxing opponent went to the mat. Basically, he went off the rails. Looked for trouble wherever he could find it. It seemed the more he got physically hurt the more he was determined to fight back even harder. He was getting a reputation with the police as a troublemaker and, for a while, it looked as though the only place he would be

heading was prison. He was saved by his housemaster at school, and his wife, who took him in and treated him like one of their own children. It was risky: their teenage daughter was also still at home, but by all accounts they were soon like brother and sister.

One night the young man was returning home after boxing training when he tried to stop a street gang attacking a black teenager. He beat off two of the five and the teenager escaped but as he grappled with a third the thug produced a knife; the attacker was stabbed and died. The gang members told the police the kid from the nearby boarding school had stabbed their friend to death. His teachers spoke up on his behalf, convincing the police that his father's recent death was still affecting him deeply and he should not be held in custody. When released on bail he must have thought the evidence against him was too great, that they would arrest him eventually and, with his record, not believe him. He ran, taking a cheap flight to Marseilles. At first he worked as a farm labourer. Six months later he walked into the Foreign Legion recruitment office at Aubagne. Meanwhile, CCTV footage and the black teenager's testimony had proved his innocence but by then no one knew where he was.

Despite public misconceptions, the Legion doesn't take wanted criminals, but as there was no warrant issued for his arrest, he was sent to Castelnaudary for basic training after initial assessment. The best recruits got their pick

of regiments within the Foreign Legion. Months later he volunteered for the 2nd Foreign Parachute Regiment. Five years later he was a corporal – the highest rank possible unless he took French citizenship.

His potential was recognized when he passed selection for the Groupement des commandos parachutistes. These commandos were tasked with covert operations against terrorists and enemies of the state. After fifteen years he left the Legion following an incident in Mali and was recruited by the French Counter-Intelligence Service, Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure. His language skills and contacts from God knew how many nationalities from his time in the Legion made him a valuable asset as a freelancer. He and others like him are expert hunters of men.

Two years later he came home when a joint operation in Africa brought him into contact with an MI6 agent he had previously worked with. Maguire used him because the agent had been Jeremy Carter. It was a suitable arrangement that kept British hands clean. Then a job went wrong when a client's family were killed after ignoring the asset's instructions; following that, he disappeared. Cooperation between French and British intelligence services gave Maguire information that tracked him down through an intermediary legionnaire in Castelnaudary, near the Legion's induction training depot. Only he knew where the man was. By the time Maguire finished his account and she closed the dossier,

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Abbie knew she was being sent to a remote place that harboured tribal men whose loyalty to each other could not be challenged by outsiders. To fetch a trained killer.

Abbie swung the car off the main route south, trying to conjure up an image of the man in the skimpy intelligence dossier. There had been no official name, and no address shown, not even a country where he might be residing. Maguire insisted he was in France and when she found him all she had to do was tell him what had happened in London. He would know what to do. Uncertainty and trepidation had mingled within her when she sat opposite Maguire and they persisted now as she switched on the car's windscreen wipers against a rain flurry. How would she recognize him? she had asked.

Maguire had taken the folder back and explained it was likely he had changed his appearance since Maguire had last used him. If she ever got close and he agreed to see her she might be surprised to find that he was no stereotypical shaven-head thug with scarred knuckles. He was intelligent and well read. But, he insisted, she must not let his quiet demeanour fool her. She was to ask only for the Englishman.

The smooth-surfaced road purred beneath the car's wheels as Abbie drove through Castelnaudary heading south-east on the D33, Route de Pexiora. After a couple of miles, she drove on to a slip road signposted 'Quartier Capitaine Danjou'. It would soon be dark and it had been a full-on day since the events in London earlier that morning but she wanted to see the training camp where men with dreams or a desire to escape from their past went to find a new life. She stopped outside the camp gates and the sign denoting that she had arrived at 'Légion Étrangère Quartier Capitaine Danjou'. A hundred metres beyond the open camp gates a concrete sentry box sat between the entrance and exit barriers. There was nothing about the low-rise buildings that suggested the torturous regime that lay waiting for new recruits. Beyond the gates and low buildings, she saw the fringe of the parade ground where squads of

men dressed in pressed khaki with red epaulettes and white kepis were led, six abreast, by a military band marching at an almost hypnotically slow pace. A sentry appeared and began walking towards her stationary car. She smiled and waved at the grim-faced legionnaire and turned the car back towards the town. Before she found the guesthouse and a place to eat she needed to find her contact.

She parked beneath the trees in a nearby parking area and walked down the narrow Rue Gambetta where she found the small *tabac* next to an estate agent's window smothered with photographs detailing properties for sale. The windows above the shopfront were closed with weather-beaten wooden shutters. As she entered the small shop she smelt the pungent scent of tobacco mingling with the tantalizing aroma of confectionary. It brought back childhood memories of a corner shop, long gone since her neighbourhood had been gentrified. A woman behind the counter raised an eyebrow and asked how she might help. Abbie asked to speak to the owner. The less said the better. Abbie presumed the woman was the shop assistant and not the owner's wife as she had no wedding rings on her finger. She muttered for Abbie to wait, went behind a bead curtain and called. A tall muscular man with cropped hair and a beaky nose came through the curtain. He wore a black round-neck sweater over his jeans. Was he the owner? Abbie didn't think he looked like someone who ran a

tabac; he was too cool – as if he didn't give a damn about anything. He seemed to sense that Abbie was not there to buy a packet of Gauloises and dismissed the woman. The bead curtain swished behind her as she left and Abbie saw a tattoo peek out from the man's sweater: two glaring eyes and the open beak of a bird of prey.

'*Oui?*'

Abbie dragged her eyes away from the raptor's glare back to the man. His eyes were as hard as the raptor's. 'I wish to speak to the Englishman.'

The man's gaze snapped past her to the street. It took only a second to see she was alone. He asked where she was staying; she told him the name of her modest lodgings and he nodded: a dip of the head that said the conversation was already over. Awkwardly, Abbie turned at the door. 'It's about London,' she said.

He made no acknowledgement and when she closed the door behind her and looked over her shoulder the hard-looking man had gone and the woman was back behind the counter. By the time she had found her room, showered and eaten at a small bistro, it was eleven o'clock. She slid gratefully beneath the crisp white sheets and blankets. A mere fourteen hours had passed since a man had been murdered, another kidnapped and a boy had gone missing.

Abbie was so tired she fell asleep without turning off the bedside light.



When she awoke and dressed she saw a note had been pushed beneath the door. It gave her instructions to drive north off the A61 towards the Montagne Noire and head for the town of Mazamet on the D road. Five kilometres south of that commune was a small unmarked gravelled road on the right next to a ruined stone barn. That road led into the foothills. Abbie checked the route on her mobile. It was under two hours away. No town or hamlet was named on the instructions as to where she might meet the Englishman. She phoned Maguire and confirmed contact with the intermediary. The man they sought was close.

He had assured her her phone signal would be tracked, but as she turned off the road at the ruined building an hour and a half later and drove through the forests she lost the signal. Driving deeper into the foothills she felt the rugged countryside press in on her. This was a wilderness in which it would be all too easy to disappear. As she turned a corner and saw four rough-looking men loitering next to a parked pickup truck, rifles and shotguns slung on their shoulders, the first real sense of fear overcame the tingle of excitement she'd felt before. The bearded men looked like brigands, reminding her of pictures she had seen of partisans who'd fought in the war. A couple of hunting dogs barked as she slowed the car. The men watched her approach. Then one of

them stepped forward and gestured her to stop in front of him. The wild man bent his face down to the window and tapped gently on the glass with a nicotine-stained finger whose nail hadn't seen soap and water for a while. She lowered the window, feeling the thudding beat of her heart. He grinned.

'Young lady, do not be frightened. You are safe here.' He looked down the road from where she had travelled. 'We like to make sure you were not followed. Please, go ahead. It is not far now.' His gentle voice belied his appearance. She almost gushed her thanks but nodded instead, just a little too vigorously. He smiled again and stepped back.

After a couple of kilometres, the narrow track widened into a hamlet of houses with dwellings scattered either side. There was a bar next to small shop. As Abbie stopped the car, wondering where to park, a woman came out of the shop and strode across to her. 'The man you are looking for is at the end of the village at the school's playing fields.'

Abbie thanked her. The whole village must have known she was coming. There had been no sign naming the village and an unkind thought lurched into her mind. Perhaps these people were the French equivalent of hillbillies or outcasts from society who chose to live a survivalist lifestyle. So what? she told herself. She knew what it meant not to fit into mainstream society. Having a Sikh father and a Scottish mother, schooldays had been

a challenge, and when she became an adult speaking with a south London accent people often didn't know how to place her. She sounded rough, looked beautiful and had a keen questioning mind, which confounded others' preconceived ideas.

Following the woman's directions she passed a small village school. A kilometre on, the road led to where a sports field spread itself across a plateau, a broad expanse between the rising forests. Two groups of young schoolchildren were being coached on the pitch, one group being versed in attack, the other in defence. The two teachers were lean, muscled men, athletic-looking. Scruffier perhaps than the teachers of her childhood, with their stubbled faces. A casually dressed man about the age of the one she was meant to meet sat in a chair next to the old-fashioned wooden pavilion. His mop of hair fell into his face as he bent his head, reading the book in his lap. Abbie glanced around. A whistle blew. The coaches looked her way and then ignored her. The book-reader raised his head as she approached. *He even looks like an Englishman*, she thought.

'Hello,' she said in English.

The man met her gaze but didn't move from the chair. Placing a finger to mark his page, he closed the book and looked up at her. He was handsome, slender, his tanned face glowing in the sunlight. Blue eyes studying her. 'Hello, yourself,' he answered, definitely English,

though she couldn't quite place the accent. She settled for southern England, the inflections altered slightly by living in France.

'I'm so pleased to meet you,' she said, feeling clumsy, over-formal. A bit too *Dr Livingstone, I presume*. 'My name is Abnash Khalsa.'

'Abnash,' he repeated, raising his eyebrows with a questioning look. 'Don't know that one.'

'Everyone calls me Abbie.'

He smiled. 'Then why should I be any different? Abbie it is. You meet the blokes on the road? The ones who look like a bunch of bloody outlaws, which I'd say they are but not to their face. They're tough, not rough.'

'Yes, I... Look,' she said hesitantly. 'I'm not too sure how to go about this...' She faltered. 'I have something very important to discuss.'

She was suddenly aware of one of the coaches from the pitch standing near her. He must have approached from her blind side. He was lean-muscled, about six-three or -four, with a few days' stubble on a weather-beaten face. The loose-sleeved T-shirt did little to disguise his impressive physique. He looked like a trained athlete, one who would feel at home on any field of conflict, whether a rugby pitch or a battle zone. He spoke in French. 'Have you had lunch?' he asked her.

'Er... no. No, I haven't,' she answered, just as fluently. The man bent and with effortless strength gathered

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up the book-reader, lifting him into his arms. 'Come on, Sammy, stop chatting up the hired help,' he said in English. He looked directly at her. 'I'm the man you've come to see,' he said. 'I'm Raglan.'

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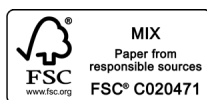
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