

THE LEGEND

JACK HIGGINS

EDGE OF DANGER



A SEAN DILLON THRILLER

JACK
HIGGINS

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HARPER

Published by HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd

1 London Bridge Street

London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published in Great Britain by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2001

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Cover layout design © HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd 2015

Cover photograph © Nick Meers/Images Colour Library

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Source ISBN: 9780008124908

Ebook Edition © August 2015 ISBN: 9780008159115

Version: 2015-07-30

To Tess, who thinks it's about time...

Contents

[Cover](#)
[Title Page](#)
[Copyright](#)
[Dedication](#)

[IN THE BEGINNING](#)

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)

[LONDON COUNTY DOWN, NORTHERN IRELAND](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[MANHATTAN LONDON WEST SUSSEX WHITE HOUSE](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[NANTUCKET](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[LONDON](#)

[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)

[HAZAR](#)

[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)

[LONDON THE THAMES](#)

[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)

[DAUNCEY PLACE](#)

[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)

[EPILOGUE LONDON](#)

[About the Author](#)

[ALSO BY JACK HIGGINS](#)

[Further Reading](#)

IN THE BEGINNING

1

Paul Rashid was one of the richest Englishmen in the world. He was also half Arab, and few people could tell you which influence most ruled his heart.

Paul's father had been the leader of the Rashid Bedouin in the province of Hazar, in the Persian Gulf, and a soldier by both birth and tradition. Sent as a young man to the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, he had met Lady Kate Dauncey, the Earl of Loch Dhu's daughter, at a formal dance there. He was wealthy and handsome and, despite the obvious problems, it was a love match, and so, despite the initial misgivings of both sets of parents, they had married, Paul's father travelling back and forth between England and the Gulf as necessary. Over the years they had produced four children: Paul, the eldest, Michael, George and Kate.

The children were intensely proud of both sides of their family. In deference to their illustrious Omani past, they all spoke fluent Arabic and were Bedouin to the heart, but as Paul Rashid would say, their English half was just as important, and they fiercely guarded the Dauncey name and the heritage as one of England's oldest families.

The two traditions flowed together in their blood, the medieval British and the Bedouin, producing a general fierceness that was most remarked upon in Paul, and was perhaps best epitomized by an extraordinary incident that occurred when Paul was himself about to pass out of Sandhurst. He'd just gone home for a few days' leave. Michael was eighteen at the time, George seventeen and Kate twelve.

The Earl was away in London and Paul had gone down to Hampshire and found his mother in the library of Dauncey Place with a badly bruised face. She had reached to hug him and it was Kate who said, 'He *punched* her, Paul. That awful man punched Mummy!'

Paul turned to Michael and said carefully, 'Explain.'

'Travellers,' his brother told him. 'A bunch of them moved into Roundhay Spinney with four caravans and some horses. Their dogs killed our ducks and Mother went to speak to them.'

'You let her go alone?'

'No, we all went, even Kate. The men laughed at us, and then when Mother started shouting at them their leader, a large man, very tall, very aggressive, punched her in the face.'

Paul Rashid's own face was very pale, the eyes dark, as he stared at Michael and George. 'So, the animal laid hands on our mother and you let it *happen*?' He slapped them both. 'You have two hearts. A Rashid's and a Dauncey's. Now, I will show you how to be true to both.'

His mother grabbed his sleeve. 'Please, Paul, no more trouble, it's not worth it.'

'Not worth it?' His smile was terrible. 'There is a dog here who needs a lesson. I intend to give him one,' and he turned and led the way out.

They drove to Roundhay Spinney in a Land Rover, the three boys. Paul had forbidden Kate to come but after they left, she saddled her favourite mare and followed anyway, galloping across country.

They found the caravans parked in a circle, with a large wood fire in the centre, and a dozen or so men and women grouped around it, along with several children, four horses and dogs.

The large man described by the two younger boys sat on a box by the fire drinking tea. He looked up as the three young men approached.

‘And who might you be?’

‘My family owns Dauncey Place.’

‘Oh, dear, Mr High-and-Mighty, is it?’ He laughed at the others. ‘Looks more like a prick to me.’

‘At least I don’t punch women in the face. I try to act like a man, which is more than anyone can say

about you. You made a mistake, you piece of dung. That lady was my mother.’

‘Why, you little shite...’ the large man started, and never finished.

Paul Rashid’s hand went into the deep pocket of his Barbour, and pulled out a *jambiya*, the curved knife of the Bedu. His brothers followed suit.

As the other men moved in, Paul slashed with the *jambiya* down the left side of the large man’s skull, slicing off the ear. One of the other men pulled a knife from his pocket, and Michael Rashid, filled with energy he had never known, slashed sideways with his own *jambiya*, cutting open the man’s cheek, sending him howling with pain.

One of the others picked up a branch and used it as a club to strike at George, but Kate Rashid ran from where she’d been hiding, picked up a rock and hurled it into his face with a shrill cry in Arabic.

As quickly as it had begun, it was over. The rest of the group stood warily, in silence, not even the women and children crying out, and suddenly the skies opened and rain poured down. The leader held a soiled handkerchief to his ear, or what was left of it, and groaned, ‘I’ll get you for this.’

‘No, you won’t,’ Paul Rashid said. ‘Because if you ever come near this estate or my mother again, you won’t be your other ear you’ll lose. It will be your private parts.’

He wiped his *jambiya* on the man’s coat, then produced a Walther pistol from his pocket and fired twice into the side of the kettle over the fire. Water poured out and the flames began to subside.

‘I’ll give you one hour to clear out. I believe the National Health Hospital in Maudsley covers even scum like you. But do take me seriously.’ He paused. ‘If you and your friends ever bother my mother again, I will kill you. Nothing is more certain.’

The three young men drove away through the rain, Kate following on her horse. The rain was as relentless as they entered the village of Dauncey and drove up to the pub named the Dauncey Arms. Paul braked outside, they got out and Kate slid off her mare and tied her to a small tree.

She stood looking at them in the rain, her face troubled. ‘I’m sorry that I disobeyed you, brother.’

But Paul kissed her on both cheeks and said, ‘You were wonderful, little sister.’ He held her for a moment as his brothers looked on, then released her. ‘And it’s high time you had your first glass of champagne.’

Inside the pub were beamed ceilings, a marvellous old mahogany bar ranged with bottles and a huge log fire in the grate. Half a dozen local men at the bar turned, then took off their caps. The landlady Betty Moody, who’d been polishing glasses, looked up and said, ‘Why, Paul.’ Her familiarity was unexpected. She had known all of them since childhood, had even been Paul’s nurse for a time. ‘I didn’t know you were home.’

‘An unexpected visit, Betty. There were some things I needed to take care of.’

Her eyes were hard. ‘Like those bastards at Roundhay Spinney?’

‘How on earth do you know about them?’

‘Not much gets by me, not here at the Arms. They’ve been bothering people in the neighbourhood for weeks.’

‘Well, they won’t be a problem to anybody, Betty, not any more.’ He placed his *jambiya* on the bar.

There was a sound of vehicles passing outside, and one of the men went to the window. He turned back. ‘Well, I’ll be damned. All they shites be on their way out.’

‘Yes, well, they would be,’ Michael said.

Betty put down a glass. ‘No one loves you more than I, Paul Rashid, no one except your blessed mother, but I do recall your temper. Have you been a naughty boy again?’

Kate said, ‘The awful man attacked Mummy, he beat her.’

The bar was silent and Betty Moody said, ‘He what?’

‘It’s all right. Paul cut his ear off, so they’ve gone away.’ Kate smiled. ‘He was wonderful.’

The silence in the bar was intense. ‘She wasn’t too bad herself,’ Paul Rashid said. ‘As it turns out our little Kate is very handy with a rock. So, Betty, love, let’s open a bottle of champagne. I think copious helpings of shepherd’s pie wouldn’t come amiss, either.’

She reached over and touched his face. ‘Ah, Paul, I should have known. Anything else?’

‘Yes, I’m going back to Sandhurst tomorrow. Could you find time to see if Mother needs any help? Oh, and excuse the fact that the child here is too young to be in the bar?’

‘Of course on both counts.’ She opened the fridge and took out a bottle of Bollinger. She patted Kate on the head. ‘Get behind the bar with me, girl. That makes it legitimate.’ As she thumbed off the cork, she smiled at Paul. ‘All in the family, eh, Paul?’

‘Always,’ he said.

Later, after the meal and the champagne, he led the way across the road and through the graveyard to the porched entrance of the Dauncey parish church, which dated from the twelfth century.

It was very beautiful, with an arched ceiling and, the rain having stopped, a wonderful light coming in through the stained glass windows and falling across the pews and the marble gravestones and carved figures that were the memorials of the Dauncey family across the centuries.

Their peerage was a Scottish one. Sir Paul Dauncey it had been until the death of Queen Elizabeth and then when King James VI of Scotland became James I of England, his good friend Sir Paul Dauncey was one of those who galloped from London to Edinburgh to tell him. James I had made him Earl of Loch Dhu – the black loch or the place of dark waters – in the Western Highlands. As it usually rained six days out of seven, though, the Daunceys had understandably remained at Dauncey Place leaving only a small, broken-down castle and estate at Loch Dhu.

The one signal difference between Scottish and English peerages was that the Scottish title did not die with the male heirs. If there were none, it could be passed through the female line. Thus, when the Earl died, his mother would become Countess. He himself would receive the courtesy title of Viscount Dauncey, the other boys would be Honourables and young Kate would become Lady Kate. And one day, Paul, too, would be Earl of Loch Dhu.

Their footsteps echoed as they walked along the aisle. Paul paused beside a lovely piece of carving of a knight in armour and his lady. ‘I think he would have been pleased today, don’t you?’ He recited part of the family catechism, familiar to all of them: ‘Sir Paul Dauncey, who fought for Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth Field, then cut his way out and escaped to France.’

‘And later, Henry Tudor allowed him back,’ young Kate said. ‘And restored his estates.’

‘Which inspired our family motto,’ Michael added. ‘*I always return.*’

‘And always have.’ Paul pulled Kate close and put his arm about his brothers. ‘Always together. We are Rashid, and we are Dauncey. Always together.’

He hugged them fiercely and Kate cried a little and held him tight.

After Sandhurst, Paul was commissioned into the Grenadier Guards, did a tour in Ireland and then ninety-one was pulled into the Gulf War by the SAS.

This was ironic, because his father was an Omani general, a friend of Saddam Hussein's, who had been seconded to the Iraqi Army for training purposes and found himself caught up in the war as well on the other side. No one questioned Paul's loyalty, however. For the SAS behind the Iraqi lines, Paul Rashid was a priceless asset, and when the war ended, he was decorated. His father, however, died in action.

For his part, Paul accepted the situation. 'Father was a soldier and he took a soldier's risks,' he told his two brothers and sister. 'I am a soldier and do the same.'

Michael and George also went to Sandhurst. Afterwards, Michael went to Harvard Business School and George into the Parachute Regiment, where he did his own tour in Ireland. One year was enough, however. He left the army and joined a course in estate management.

As for young Kate, after St Paul's Girls' School she went to St Hugh's College, Oxford, then moved into her wild period, carving her way through London society like a tornado.

When the Earl died in 1993, it was totally unexpected, the kind of heart attack that strikes without warning and kills in seconds. Lady Kate was now the Countess of Loch Dhu, and they laid the old man to rest in the family mausoleum in Dauncey churchyard. The entire village turned up and many outsiders, people Paul had never met.

In the Great Hall at Dauncey Place where the reception was held, Paul went in search of his mother and found one such person leaning over her, a man in his late middle age. Paul stood close by as his mother glanced up.

'Paul, dear, I'd like you to meet one of my oldest friends, Brigadier Charles Ferguson.'

Ferguson took his hand. 'I know all about you. I'm Grenadier Guards myself. That job you did behind Iraqi lines with Colonel Tony Villiers was fantastic. A Military Cross wasn't enough.'

'You know Colonel Villiers?' Paul asked.

'We go back a long way.'

'You seem to know a lot, Brigadier. That SAS operation was classified.'

His mother said, 'Charles and your grandfather soldiered together. Funny places. Aden, the Oman, Borneo, Malaya. Now he runs a special intelligence outfit for the Prime Minister.'

'Kate, you shouldn't say that,' Ferguson told her.

'Nonsense,' she said. 'Everyone who is anyone knows.' She took his hand. 'He saved your grandfather's life in Borneo.'

'He saved mine twice.' Ferguson kissed her on the forehead, then turned to Paul. 'If there's anything I can do for you, here's my card.'

Paul Rashid held his hand firmly. 'You never know, Brigadier. I may take you up on that some day.'

Being the eldest, Paul was selected to go to London to consult with the family lawyer about the late Earl's will, and when he returned late in the evening he found the family seated by the fire in the Great Hall. They all looked up expectantly.

'So what happened?' Michael asked.

'Ah, as you are the one who's been to Harvard Business School, you mean how much?' He leaned down and kissed his mother on the cheek. 'Mother, as usual, has been very naughty and did not prepare me.'

'For what?' Michael asked.

'The extent of grandfather's position. I never knew that he owned large portions of Mayfair. About half of Park Lane, for starters.'

George whispered, 'What are we talking about?'

'Three hundred and fifty million.'

There was a gasp from his sister. His mother simply smiled.

'And it gives me an idea,' Paul said. 'A way to put this money to good use.'

'What are you suggesting?' Michael asked.

'I did Irish time after Sandhurst,' Paul said. 'Then the Gulf with the SAS. My right shoulder still aches on a bad day from the Armalite bullet that drove through it. You did Sandhurst, Michael, and Harvard Business School; George a year in Ireland with One Para. Kate has yet to make her bones, but I think we can count on her.'

Michael said, 'You still haven't told us your idea.'

'It's this. It's time we banded together, made ourselves a family business, a force to be reckoned with. Who are we? We are Dauncey – and we are also Rashid. Nobody has more influence in the Gulf than we do, and what does the world want most from the Gulf right now? Oil. The Americans and Russians in particular have been nosing around the Gulf for months, trying to buy up exploration leases. But to get to that oil, they have to acquire the goodwill of the Bedu. And to get to the Bedu they have to get through us. They must come to us, my family.'

George said, 'What are we talking about here?'

Their mother laughed. 'I think I know.'

Paul said, 'Tell them.'

'Two billion?'

'Three,' he said. 'Sterling, of course, not dollars.' He picked up a bottle of champagne. 'I am, after all, a very British Arab.'

With shrewd investment and the muscle of the Bedu behind them, the Rashids pushed the development of new oilfields north of the Dhofar. Money poured in, unbelievable amounts. The Americans and Russians did indeed have to deal with them, albeit unwillingly, and the Rashids helped Iraq restore its oil industry as well.

The first billion was realized in three years, the second in two, and they were well on their way to the third. George and Michael were named joint managing directors of Rashid Investments, and young Kate Rashid, now with her Oxford MA, became Executive Chairman. Any businessman who thought of her simply a lovely young woman in an Armani suit and Manolo Blahnik shoes was swiftly disabused of the notion.

Paul himself preferred to remain a shadowy figure, behind the scenes. He spent much time in Hazar with the Bedu. To the Rashid, he was a great warrior, who would appear every so often to roam the desert by camel; to live in the old Bedu way in the Empty Quarter, guarded by fellow tribesmen; to be burned by the fierce sun; to eat dates and dried meat with them.

Often he was accompanied by his brothers, or by Kate, who scandalized the locals with her Western ways, but no one could deny her, for by now her brother was a legend with more power than even the Sultan in Hazar, to whom he was a second cousin. It was whispered that some day he would be voted Sultan himself by the Council of Elders, but for now the old Sultan still held power, his chief strength the Hazar Scouts, a contingent of soldiers officered by British volunteers.

And then came the night when at an encampment at the Oasis of Shabwa as he was seated by a blazing fire, a Hawk helicopter came roaring in and settled in a cloud of sand.

Camels and donkeys milled around, children cried out in delight and women scolded them. Michael, George and Kate emerged in Arab dress, and Paul greeted them.

‘What is this, a family reunion?’

Kate said, ‘We’ve got trouble.’

He took her hand, led her to the fire and waved to one of the women to bring coffee.

Kate nodded to Michael. ‘Tell him your bit first.’

Michael said, ‘We’ve cracked three billion.’

‘So we finally made it.’ Paul turned. ‘I’d be happier about it if I wasn’t waiting for the bad news.’

Go on, Kate. I only have to look at your face to know if the weather is bad, and I’d say it’s raining.’

‘Have you seen the Sultan recently?’

‘No, he’s been on a pilgrimage to the Holy Wells.’

‘The Holy Wells? That’s a laugh. His only pilgrimage was to Dubai to meet with American and

Russian government and businessmen. They’ve agreed on joint exploration rights in Hazar – without us.’

Paul said, ‘But they couldn’t possibly do it without Bedu cooperation. And they can’t get that without us.’

‘Paul,’ Kate said, ‘they can and they have. The Sultan’s sold us out. You know how much the Americans and Russians have disliked dealing with us. Well, now they’ve cut us out. They’re going to walk all over us – and walk all over the Bedu in the process. Without us, those damned oilmen are going to drill wherever they please, and the Arabs can go to hell.’

Paul said, ‘Is this true, Michael?’

Michael nodded. ‘They are going to rape the desert, Paul. And there’s not a damned thing we can do about it.’

Paul nodded thoughtfully and stirred the fire. ‘Do not speak in haste, Michael. There are always things that can be done – if one has the will.’

‘What do you mean?’ George asked.

‘Not now,’ said Paul. He turned to Kate. ‘Do you have the Gulfstream at the Air Force base in Haman?’

‘Yes,’ Kate said.

He drew her up and kissed her on the forehead. ‘Have a good night. Tomorrow we will speak.’

He nodded to his brothers, and they all rose. Kate turned and began to walk away, and it was then that it happened. Beyond, from the shadows, a Bedu emerged screaming, a curved *jambiya* raised above his head, running straight at them, with Kate in his way. Paul’s guards were caught momentarily unaware, their AK-47s at their feet, coffee cups in their hands, and it was Paul Rashid who flung himself forward, knocked his sister to the ground and pulled a Browning from his waistband. He fired four times quickly and the assassin was driven to the sand.

There was another shrill cry and a second man, *jambiya* raised, emerged from the darkness, but the time he was instantly overwhelmed by the guards.

‘Alive!’ Paul called in Arabic. ‘Alive!’ He turned to George. ‘Who is he, where does he come from – find out.’

George ran to the struggling group as they held the man down, and Paul helped Kate up. ‘Are you all right? You’re not harmed?’

She held him close and spoke in Arabic. ‘No, my brother, thanks to you.’

He embraced her. ‘Leave this to me. Go to bed.’

She turned reluctantly and Paul Rashid went into the shadows and squatted beside the second assassin, now pegged out on the ground. The man’s face was lined and drawn. The pupils of his eyes were like pinpricks and there was foam around his mouth.

‘A hired assassin drugged with *quat*,’ George said.

Paul Rashid lit a cigarette and nodded. *Quat* was a narcotic found in the leaves of shrubs in Hazar.

Many of his people were addicted to it. For some, it lent false courage.

For this man, it would lend only death.

‘Do what you have to do,’ he said to George.

He went back and sat by the fire, drank more coffee, and Kate appeared and sat at his side. A cry of pain came from the shadows, a sudden scream, then silence. George and Michael appeared.

‘So?’ Paul asked.

‘The Sultan arranged it for the Americans and Russians. They couldn’t afford us staying alive.’

‘What a pity for them,’ Paul Rashid said, ‘that they failed.’

There was a pause. Michael and George sat down. ‘What happens now?’ George asked.

‘First, I think it’s time for a new sultan. Your speciality is working with our people in Hazar,’ Paul told him. ‘See to it. But there’s a larger issue at stake. Do we let these mighty powers do this to our people? Do we let them destroy our land? Do we let them strike at *us*? No, I think we must strike at them.’

At that moment, his mobile phone rang. He took it from his robe. ‘Rashid.’

He sat there in the firelight and his face changed before them, his eyes turning to bleak holes.

He said, ‘We’ll be there as soon as possible.’

He switched off the phone and handed it to Kate. ‘Call Haman. Tell them to have the Gulfstream ready for immediate departure. We’re leaving in the helicopter now.’

‘But Paul, why? What happened?’ Kate demanded.

‘That was Betty Moody. Something terrible has happened to Mother.’

Something terrible indeed. Driving home to Dauncey Place, Lady Kate had been involved in a head-on collision with a car driving on the wrong side of the road. The Rashids made it to the hospital ten minutes before she died, time enough only to stand, the four of them, and hold her hands.

‘My lovely boys,’ Lady Kate said in her bad Arabic, always the family joke. ‘My gorgeous girls. Always love each other.’ And she was gone.

Michael and George broke into a storm of weeping, but not Kate. She clutched Paul’s hand as he leaned down to kiss his mother’s forehead and her eyes burned, but there were no tears. Those would come later – after she discovered the man responsible for this.

But when the name came, there was only more bad news. A chief inspector of the Hampshire Police told them that, yes, the other driver, one Igor Gatov, had been driving on the wrong side of the road on his way to London from Knotsley Hall, which was owned by the Russian Embassy. And, yes, he had most certainly been drunk, and miraculously had been able to walk away from the crash with only minor injuries. But unfortunately, he was also a commercial attaché at the Russian Embassy in London, which meant that he had diplomatic immunity. Their mother’s killer could not be tried in an English court.

In deference to their mother’s Christianity, they buried her in the mausoleum at Dauncey village church on a March afternoon. One of the most important imams in London graced the proceedings with his presence and, standing there, the three Rashid brothers and young Kate had never felt closer.

Later, at the reception in the Great Hall at Dauncey Place, Paul Rashid was approached by Charles Ferguson. The Brigadier said, ‘This is a rotten business, Paul. I’m so sorry. She was a great lady.’

Kate said, ‘Do you know something you’re not telling us, Brigadier?’

Ferguson looked at her. ‘Give me a call sometime.’

He walked away. Kate said, ‘Paul?’

‘As soon as we’re done here,’ her brother said, ‘we’ll go and see him.’

Two days later, Paul and Kate Rashid arrived at Charles Ferguson’s Georgian flat in Cavendish Place, London. They were admitted by Ferguson’s Gurkha manservant, Kim, and found that Ferguson was not alone. Two other people were there, one of them a small man, his hair so fair that it was almost white.

‘Lady Kate, this is Sean Dillon, who works for my department,’ Ferguson said, then introduced the other, a red-haired woman. ‘Detective Superintendent Hannah Bernstein from Special Branch. Loch Dhu, how can I help? May we offer you a glass of champagne?’

‘No, thank you. My sister perhaps, but I would prefer a Bushmills Irish whiskey like the one Mr Dillon is pouring.’

‘Good man yourself,’ Dillon told him, ‘but first, the ladies,’ and he poured champagne.

Hannah Bernstein said to Kate, ‘You went to Oxford, I believe? I was at Cambridge myself.’

‘Well, that’s not your fault,’ Kate said and gave a small smile.

Her brother said, ‘I did Irish time, with the Grenadier Guards and the SAS. I heard many things about Sean Dillon there.’

‘Probably all true,’ Hannah Bernstein told him, with an undertone Rashid could not decipher.

‘Don’t listen to her,’ Dillon said. ‘I’ll always be the man in the black hat to her, but to you and my Major, to soldiers everywhere, we’re the men who handle the crap the general public can’t. That’s a showstopper,’ Dillon added and turned to Kate. ‘Wouldn’t you agree that’s a showstopper?’

She wasn’t in the least offended. ‘Absolutely.’

‘So,’ Paul Rashid said, ‘Igor Gatov, a commercial attaché at the Russian Embassy, kills my mother while driving on the wrong side of the road, drunk. The police say he has diplomatic immunity.’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘And he’s gone back to Moscow?’

‘No, he’s needed here,’ Ferguson told him.

‘Needed?’ Rashid asked.

‘The Secret Security Services would not thank me for telling you this, but they’re not my best friends. Tell him, Superintendent.’

‘But how far do I go?’ she asked.

‘As far as it takes,’ Dillon said. ‘This Russian shite takes out a great lady and walks away.’ Hannah poured another Bushmills, toasted young Kate, turned to Paul Rashid, and said in good Arabic, ‘Gatov is a dog of the first water. If the Superintendent hesitates, don’t hold it against her. She has delicate sensibilities. Her grandfather is a rabbi.’

‘And my father was a sheik,’ Paul Rashid said to her in Hebrew. ‘Perhaps we have much in common.’

Her surprise was obvious. ‘I’m not sure what to say,’ she replied in the same.

‘Well, I am,’ Dillon cut between them in English. ‘It’s not just the Russian Embassy that’s keeping Gatov from justice. There’s the American connection.’

There was a pause. ‘What would that be?’ Paul Rashid asked.

Hannah said to Rashid, ‘As you know, the Americans and Russians are great rivals in southern Arabia, but they will work together if it suits them.’

Paul said, ‘I know all this, but what has it to do with my mother’s death?’

It was Dillon who told him, and in Arabic. ‘This piece of dung is a double agent. He worked for the Americans on the other side of the coin. It’s not only the Russians who don’t want him in court, but the Yanks as well. He’s too important.’

‘Too important for what?’ Paul Rashid asked.

It was Ferguson who said, ‘The Americans and Russians are working on some kind of oil deal – and Gatov was brokering it. He’s right in the middle. There are billions to be made down there.’

Dillon said, ‘He’s right. Arabia Felix, Happy Arabia, that’s what they called it in the old days.’

Kate Rashid, who had listened in silence, said, ‘So we’re talking about money here?’

‘I’d say so,’ Dillon said.

‘And to facilitate their wheeler-dealing, both the Americans and Russians look upon my mother’s death simply as an inconvenience?’

‘A severe one.’

She paused and glanced at her brother, who nodded. She said, ‘Some days ago, at the Oasis of Shabwa, an interesting event took place. Were you aware, Brigadier, that the Sultan of Hazar had allied himself not only with a major American oil company but also a Russian one?’

Ferguson frowned. ‘No, that’s news to me.’

‘Two assassins attempted to kill my brother on the night we received news of my mother’s accident.’ She nodded to Dillon. ‘One tried to kill me. My brother saved my life and shot him dead.’

‘The important thing is that we discovered from the second assassin that I was targeted by the Sultan himself on behalf of the Americans and Russians,’ Paul Rashid told them.

Ferguson nodded. ‘He told you everything?’

‘Of course,’ Dillon put in.

Ferguson said, ‘Are you suggesting that your mother’s death was deliberate?’

‘No,’ Paul said. ‘The police have gone over the evidence with us, and I see nothing these dogs could have gained by murdering my mother. But what is clear to me is that, for them, life is cheap. And they plan to make it very expensive.’

He stood up and held out his hand. ‘Thank you very much for your information, Brigadier.’ He turned to Dillon. ‘In the Guards in South Armagh, a Loyalist politician told me once that Wyatt Earp could account for the deaths of twenty men, but that Sean Dillon didn’t even know his total.’

‘A slight exaggeration,’ Dillon told him. ‘I think.’

Rashid smiled at each of them and turned to follow Kim. Kate held out a hand to Dillon. ‘You’re a very interesting man.’

‘Oh, you have a way with the words, girl dear.’ He kissed her hand. ‘And a face to thank God for.’

‘That’s my sister, Mr Dillon,’ Rashid said.

‘And how could I forget it?’

They left, and before Ferguson could say anything, his red phone rang. He picked it up, listened, had a brief conversation, then replaced the receiver, his face grave.

‘It would seem the Sultan of Hazar has just been assassinated.’ He turned to Dillon. ‘A remarkable coincidence, don’t you think?’

The Irishman lit a cigarette. ‘Oh, yes, remarkable.’ He blew out smoke. ‘I know one thing. I feel sorry for Igor Gatov.’

That evening, there was a function at the Dorchester, a political affair attended by the Prime Minister and Ferguson, Bernstein and Dillon had been drafted for security, not without a little grumbling.

Dillon and the Superintendent moved in from the Park Lane entrance to the ballroom, checked the arrangements and, satisfied, followed Ferguson through. And there at the bar was the Earl of Londonderry and his sister.

Ferguson said, ‘Talk about a bad penny. Hannah and I will continue with the security. See if there’s anything more you can find out, Dillon.’

Kate and Paul Rashid stood together, watching the crowd, as Dillon approached and said, ‘What a coincidence.’

‘I’ve never believed in coincidences, Mr Dillon,’ Paul Rashid told him. ‘Have you?’

‘Funny you should say that. Like you, I’m a cynic, but today –’

Just then, a young man interrupted. ‘My Lord, the Prime Minister would like a word.’

Rashid said to the Irishman, ‘I’m so sorry, Mr Dillon, our conversation will have to wait. However, I’d appreciate it if you’d see to my sister for me.’

‘It’d be an honour.’

Rashid walked away and Kate turned to Dillon. ‘Well, as long as you’re seeing to me, how about a fresh drink?’

Dillon was just turning to hand her a glass when a rather large man with a florid face appeared, and gave her a squeeze from behind. ‘Kate, my darling,’ he said in a booming voice.

Seeing he would have no chance to talk to her now, Dillon decided to leave – but managed to step on the man’s right foot as he moved away. The man let her go. ‘Damn you, you clumsy oaf.’

Dillon smiled. 'So sorry.' He bowed to Kate. 'I'll be in the Piano Bar.'

~~He walked through the main hotel to the Dorchester's Piano Bar, where, since it was still early evening, it was quiet. Guiliano, the manager, greeted him warmly, for they were old friends.~~

'Glass of champagne?'

'Why not?' Dillon said. 'And I'll give you a tune on the piano while you're waiting for your man to turn up.'

He was well into a Gershwin melody when Kate Rashid appeared.

'I see you're a man of many talents.'

'Good barroom piano is all it is, ma'am. What happened to the gentleman?'

'The gentleman – and I use the term loosely – is Lord Gravely, a life peer who inhabits the House of Lords and does little good there.'

'I wouldn't think your brother would welcome his attention to you.'

'That's an understatement. Did you really need to stand on his foot?'

'Absolutely.'

'Well, I'm glad. The man is an absolute pig. He's always grabbing at me, groping me. The man just won't take no for an answer. He deserves a sore foot, and a lot more besides.'

She picked up his glass of champagne and finished it off. 'Anyway, I just came by to say thank you. Now I'd better be off. I asked for my car at seven.'

Seeing that there was to be no further conversation, Dillon smiled. 'It's been a sincere sensation.'

She walked out and Dillon came to the end of his tune and decided to follow her. He didn't know why exactly, but there just seemed to be unfinished business.

He went out of the main door, turned right into Park Lane and found limousines picking up people from the reception at the ballroom entrance. Lady Kate Rashid was standing on the pavement, a shadow about her shoulders, and there, suddenly, was Lord Gravely again. He put his arm around her and pulled her close, whispering in her ear. She struggled and two things happened simultaneously. Paul Rashid's Daimler coasted in to the kerb, with Rashid in the back, and as he scrambled out Dillon moved in on Gravely and screwed both fists into his kidneys. Gravely cried out and released Kate, and her brother pulled her away into the car. Gravely turned on Dillon in a fury and, pivoting, Dillon gave Gravely a reverse elbow strike to the mouth, whereupon his lordship slid down to the pavement.

As they were driven away, Rashid looked out of the rear window and saw Dillon melt into the crowd and a policeman approach Gravely. 'A remarkable man, Dillon. I owe him one. Are you all right?'

'I'm fine, brother, and I'm the one who owes him.'

'You like him?'

'Very much.'

'I'll have him checked out thoroughly.'

'No, Paul, that I'll do for myself.'

After a lawyers' meeting the following morning, the two of them drove down to Dauncey Place. Paul had phoned ahead, so his brothers were there as well, and they'd given photos of Gatov to Betty Moody. Betty in turn had spoken to the locals.

When he saw her in the bar that evening, she gave him his usual glass of champagne and spoke in a low voice.

'He's in the village, Paul; arrived at lunchtime with a party from the Russian Embassy.'

'Good.' He savoured the champagne.

'What are you going to do?' she asked.

'I'm going to execute him, Betty,' he told her and smiled over her sharp intake of breath.

Later that night, he spoke to his brothers in the Great Hall. Betty was there as well – she'd come up from the pub with last-minute information overheard from the local staff at Knotsley Hall: Gatov was leaving at eleven to drive overnight to London.

Paul Rashid told his brothers what he intended to do, but he'd purposely excluded Kate. 'I don't want her involved,' he said. 'This is men's work.'

What he did not know was that Kate was on the minstrel gallery above, and listening. Furious, she was about to call out, but Betty appeared behind her and fastened a hand on her shoulder. 'You mind your manners, girl. Your brothers are going in harm's way. They don't need you making it difficult for them.'

And Lady Kate Rashid, for the moment a child again, did as she was told.

That night, Igor Gatov drove around a corner of a narrow country lane and found a van tilted into a ditch and someone lying in the middle of the road. He got out of his BMW, walked forward and leaned over the figure on the ground. It was Paul Rashid, and he struck him across the neck.

He and his brothers wore black Special Forces overalls. Michael and Paul carried the semiconscious Gatov to the BMW and pushed him behind the wheel.

George went to the van, got in and reversed it out of the ditch. Paul Rashid took a bottle from his overalls and doused Gatov in petrol.

'Fire purifies, so the Koran tells us,' he said, then switched on the engine of the BMW and slipped off the handbrake. 'It's not much of an exchange for my mother, but it's better than nothing.'

He flicked his lighter, touching the edge of Gatov's petrol-soaked jacket, which immediately started to burn. Then George and Michael pushed, and the BMW rushed down the hill and hit the end of an old stone bridge, where it fireballed.

The next morning, at the Ministry of Defence, Hannah Bernstein took a signal flimsy to Ferguson in his office. It detailed the terrible accident that had burned Igor Gatov to death.

'Dear me,' Ferguson said. 'Another remarkable coincidence.'

Sean Dillon leaned against the door and lit a cigarette. 'The question is – what coincidence is going to be next?'

Sitting in the drawing room of Kate's house in South Audley Street, Paul Rashid said, 'Gatov is dead. The Sultan is dead. Such executions are right and just. But they are not enough.'

Michael said, 'What do you mean, brother?'

'I mean it is not enough simply to have eliminated two small men. Their deaths will quickly be swallowed up and the great powers will continue to swagger arrogantly around the world as if nothing has happened. America and Russia, the two Great Satans, have attacked Arab culture, they have walked over the Bedu, they have screwed Arabia and Hazar out of what is rightfully theirs – and our. We must teach them a lesson they will never forget.'

'What do you have in mind?' asked George.

'First: Kate. I want you to contact our friends in the Army of Allah, the Sword of God, Hezbollah, and everyone. I want them screaming about the US and Russia trying to plunder Arabia. I want them creating havoc whenever and wherever possible.'

'Then what?' said Michael.

'Then we assassinate the President of the United States.'

There was a stunned silence. Michael said in a whisper, 'But why, Paul?'

~~'Because Gatov was just a servant. Because the Sultan was just a pawn. Because it is no good killing~~
just the little people. If we don't make a statement – and I mean a *big* statement – the great powers
will never understand. They will never leave us alone. Properly orchestrated, the killing of President
Jake Cazalet will tell the world once and for all that Arabia is for the Arabs. For Cazalet, the buck
stops here – isn't that what they say? Oh, we could kill the Russian Premier instead – he's just
culpable – but Cazalet will make a much bigger impact.'

There was more silence. Michael said, 'You're serious about this?'

'Yes, Michael. Never more serious. It is time to take a stand.' He looked hard at him. 'This is for
the Bedu.' He shifted his eyes to George. 'This is for Hazar.' He rested his gaze on Kate, and they saw
their eyes locked, for what seemed like minutes. Finally, 'This is for Mother.' The harsh whisper
seemed to fill the room.

After a moment, Kate said, 'But who will attempt this thing?'

'A mercenary. With the peace process taking over Northern Ireland, there are many expert IR
killers at loose ends.' He produced an envelope and passed it to her. 'This man, one Aidan Bell, comes
highly recommended. He is to be found in County Down. It seems he shot a Russian general for the
Chechens, and blew up his staff. A man willing to take risks. Go and see him, Kate. Take George with
you. He's soldiered over there and knows the ropes.'

There was no longer any hesitation. A decision had been reached. 'Of course, brother.'

'One other thing.' He lit a cigarette. 'You liked Sean Dillon?'

'I told you.'

'Go and see him. Arrange an accidental meeting. Concoct a story. See what he knows of Aidan
Bell.'

She smiled. 'It'll be a pleasure.'

'Well, don't make it too much of one.' He smiled back at her.

LONDON

COUNTY DOWN,

NORTHERN IRELAND

Kate Rashid went through the information her brother had supplied and it was good, detailed stuff. Aidan Bell was forty-eight years of age, had been a member of the IRA since the age of twenty, and had never served a day in prison. For years, he'd been a member of the Irish National Liberation Army, a very extremist organization. He had often been at loggerheads with the Provisional IRA but was responsible for some important hits.

The most interesting fact was that over the years, he had also worked as a mercenary, cash on the nail, for many foreign revolutionary movements.

Kate put the matter into the hands of her head of security at Rashid Investments, a trusted man and ex-paratrooper named Frank Kelly. Not in complete detail, however. She didn't trust any employee that much. At this stage, all she wanted was a chance to meet Dillon as if by chance, and it came on the following Monday night.

Kelly phoned her at the South Audley Street house, which was only five minutes up the road from the Dorchester. 'Dillon has just gone into the Piano Bar. He seems dressed for a night out, got a dark blue suit on and a Guards tie.'

'But he wasn't in the Guards.'

'Probably taking the piss, if you'll excuse my language, ma'am. I did a lot of Irish time in One Para. I know about this guy.'

'I didn't realize you were in One Para, Kelly. Did you know my brother George?'

'Yes, ma'am, though he was way above me. He was a Second Lieutenant, and I was just a Sergeant in my day.'

'Fine. Have you a car there?'

'One of the company Mercs.'

'Drive up and get me. You can come to the Dorchester and wait. You personally, Kelly. I don't want anyone else.'

'Lady Kate, I wouldn't dream of making it anyone else,' Kelly told her.

He picked her up, a well-dressed man no more than five foot eight, with a good, hard face and hair close-cropped, the Army bit that wouldn't go away. In no time, he had dropped her at the Dorchester and parked in one of the privileged spaces.

She went through the swinging doors, trim in a black trouser suit. As she walked into the bar, there was music, and there was Dillon playing the piano again.

Guiliano turned up. 'Lady Kate, what a pleasure. The usual table?'

'No, the bottom left by the piano. I'd like to speak to the pianist.'

'Ah, Mr Dillon. He's good, isn't he? Sits in before our regular comes, only now and then. Lord knows what he does the rest of the time. You know him?'

'You could say that.'

He escorted her to the table. She nodded to Dillon, ordered a glass of Krug champagne, sat down and took out her mobile phone, which was strictly against bar rules. She called her brother George and his apartment not too far away.

When he answered, she said, 'I'm in the Piano Bar at the Dorchester. Dillon is here and Frank Kel'

is outside. Call him on his mobile, and tell him to pick you up. I want you.'

'Of course,' George said. 'See you soon.'

Dillon was really very good, she decided. He was playing the old standards, the kind of things she liked. A cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth and he suddenly moved into 'Our Love Is Here to Stay', a slightly crooked grin on his face. As he came to the end, the regular pianist appeared. Dillon smiled and slid off the piano bench, and the other man took over.

The Irishman came across to her. 'Serendipity, isn't that the word? This is a total and unexpected pleasure.'

'Why, Mr Dillon, you're a man of erudition.'

'Well, unlike you, I didn't go to Oxford. I had to make do with the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.'

'You were an actor?'

'Oh, come off it, Kate Rashid, you know damn well what I was, all of it.'

She smiled, and as Guiliano came up she said, 'His personal preference used to be Krug, but I understand he's switched to Louis Roederer Cristal. We'll have a bottle.'

Dillon produced a silver cigarette case, opened it and took one out. She said, 'You might ask the lady,' reached, took the case from him, examined it and selected a cigarette herself. 'Art deco. A mark of taste. Or perhaps a souvenir of the National Theatre?'

'You are well informed,' Dillon said. He flicked his Zippo and gave her a light as the champagne arrived. He lit his own cigarette. 'You know, there's coincidence, which could be this meeting, and then there's Carl Jung.'

'You mean synchronicity? A deeper motivation is intended?' He toasted her. 'So what are we interested in here?'

At that moment, George came down the steps into the bar and joined them, Frank Kelly following. Kate said, 'Ah, here come two freebooters, from One Para. Dillon, this one is my brother George.'

But it was Kelly that Dillon bothered with. 'I wouldn't wear a shoulder holster if I were you, so it's too difficult to dump your gun in a bad situation. It's better in your pocket, and don't say stuff you don't want or I'll say stuff you do.'

Kelly actually smiled, and Kate said, 'Sit at the next table, Frank, so you can hear.'

He smiled again at Dillon. 'Yes, ma'am, like a good dog I obey.'

Dillon laughed out loud. 'Well, this dog I like. Can he have a drink?'

'Not on duty,' Kelly said. 'And by the way, I'm from County Down, too, you Fenian bastard.'

'So we know where we are.' Dillon smiled. 'Go on, have one Bushmills, and sit down and hear what the lady wants.'

Her story was quite convincing. 'The thing is, Dillon, we, that is, Rashid Investments, are moving into Ulster in a big way because of the peace process, but we're experiencing roadblocks, if you know what I mean. Our developments would bring high employment, but we're being leaned on.'

'So?' Dillon asked.

'Well, we need what I suppose you would call protection. People who might help.'

'And who might that be?'

She waved to a waiter and paused until he'd poured more champagne. 'Have you heard of a man called Aidan Bell?'

Dillon almost fell over the table laughing. 'Jesus, girl, he's tried to shoot me more than once. Or Aidan was big with what you might call fringe organizations on the hard right of the IRA.'

'I heard he was possibly responsible for killing Lord Mountbatten.'

‘Well, I was accused of that myself.’

‘They also say you attacked Number Ten Downing Street in February ninety-one with mortars and bombs.’

‘Never proved.’ He smiled. ‘Mind you, if we’d had a bit more time...’

‘All right,’ she said. ‘So you’re a bad boy, but I need to get to Aidan Bell to see if we can do a deal. A private investigator, call it what you want. He lives in a place called Drumcree in County Down.’

‘I know it well, I’m from Down myself, but then you know that.’

‘I’m supposed to meet him on Thursday. I’ll take George.’ She turned to Kelly. ‘Can I count on you too?’

‘Of course, ma’am.’

Dillon said to him, ‘Good man yourself,’ and turned to her. ‘And you’re asking for me? I work for Ferguson.’

‘So you’ll tell him. This isn’t an intelligence matter. I want back-up, that’s all, and in that damn place you’re the best. What’s the matter, doesn’t Ferguson ever let you work freelance?’

‘I’ll see what the good Brigadier thinks, and I’ll let you know.’

At Ferguson’s flat later that night, he gave the Brigadier a rundown of what had taken place. Hannah Bernstein heard it all, too. When Dillon was finished, Ferguson thought about it, then turned to her.

‘What do you think?’

‘On the surface, it makes sense. The Rashid outfit is definitely into Ulster these days, but so are a lot of people. On the other hand, it’s a good story. Too good.’

Ferguson turned to Dillon, who smiled and said, ‘I always believed in women coppers. She’s right.’

Ferguson nodded. ‘There’s a hidden agenda. See if you can find out what, Sean.’

‘There you go, calling me Sean again.’ Dillon smiled. ‘Still and all, things are quiet. I’ll take a look.’

‘And keep in touch,’ Ferguson told him.

The Rashid Gulfstream flew from RAF Northolt, a popular venue with executive jets that four pilots had problems with the congestion of Heathrow. Besides the two pilots, the other people on board were Kate, Dillon, George Rashid and Kelly. Dillon had arrived last, and once they were in flight, he opened the bar box and found a half bottle of Bushmills.

‘We still don’t know what’s happening,’ Kate said.

‘Well, it’s reasonably simple. Aidan Bell at Drumcree is expecting you sometime tomorrow to discover whatever you want to discuss with him. We land this afternoon at Aldergrove. My arrangements are that we go to a little fishing port called Magee, sail overnight to Drumcree and you can see Bell in the morning.’

There was silence. She said, ‘Are you sure about this?’

‘It’s a nice forty-foot boat called *Aran*. I could handle it myself, but these two can act as deckhands. It leaves Aidan Bell slightly left-footed, you arriving that way – he won’t expect it – so a bright girl should do rather well.’

‘Bastard,’ she told him. ‘Why is it I think of you like that?’

‘Because that’s what I am.’

‘Well, as long as you’re my bastard on this thing, all right?’

Not that she believed him, not for a moment, but she had her agenda and she was playing it through.

The flight was normal, the drive down to the coast just as uneventful. Magee was a small place, the

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