



I spent a week reflecting on my learnings. That's unlike me. Normally, if the balance of probabilities says a thing is true, I act.

I mean, who likes a procrastinator?

Of course, I had sleepless nights when I started, back in the mists of time, thinking about the innocents who would die and the rosy futures that would be ruined. But that feeling passed. We grow older and wiser with it. I have no illusions about who I am now. Mine has been the path I chose. I am the person I trained to be – a brave-hearted woman in a man's world that few men have the strength to bear.

Someone once told me that I am the full stop that finishes a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter and a book, all in one. Flattering, I suppose, even if he was a patronising, sexist prig who got his just deserts soon after. But his assessment has turned out to be remarkably astute.

I mention this because today I have found a story that needs an end.

A very personal story indeed.

My own tale, even if another is at its centre.

And I am planning the mother of all full stops.

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Her eyelids drummed the tattoo of the dreaming sleeper. Lashes flickering, fluttering and squalling like a butterfly about to take flight. One last pulse of energy and on the count of twenty-four – her age, ironically – the lashes ceased moving.

Stillness spread across the room.

It was as if it had become suddenly quiet, though the truth was that the room had been filled with 2AM silence for the long minutes I had been here, ministering.

I glanced at the glass on the bedside table. Invisible fingerprints had been transferred to its surface using a technique developed by East German Stasi agents in the 1970s. Had the people responsible been working in Menlo Park or wherever the 3M research facility was back then, they might have come up with Post-It Notes instead and died rich. As it was, they had simply died. The DDR was unforgiving that way.

Digital pictures of the crime scene – routed through dark web forums hosted in Pyongyang – were already in the in-box of the *Daily Mail's* Editor. Gordon's hand-signed confession letter would be delivered in six hours' time, completing the stash of incriminating evidence. Separately, financial information about Naqâru Capital, Gordon's firm, was in transit to the Serious Fraud Office and the Financial Conduct Authority.

The letter was my favourite part, the *pièce de résistance*. He had actually signed it yesterday without realising, tucked in between a sheaf of charitable fundraising requests. It was a feat of logistics that made me glow inside.

I surveyed the broken down, tawdry room, committing it to memory.

My job here was done.

Even if I say so myself, no-one else could have pulled it off. A triumph that would echo down the ages. The only shame was that I would be the only person

ever to know of it.

White light flared momentarily and filled my vision. Blinding, swirling and chaotic. Devoid of landscape or feature. As it faded, a figure took shape, and that coalesced into the dark outline of Oates. Urbane, smart, professional. Sat beside me at the table in my office. Today, he had on tortoiseshell glasses and was wearing a dark blue flannel suit. Through the full height windows behind him, I could see the River Thames snaking away west past the Tower of London and towards Parliament in the far distance.

The flashback was over.

Oates, I realised, was staring at me, a troubled look on his face.

'Remind me, Oates,' I said. 'Where had we got to?'

He shifted awkwardly in his chair as I gazed at him.

'Seventeen point four billion pounds for the consideration,' he replied carefully. 'We were talking about the financing requirement.'

'Right. And payback is what?'

'Here,' he said.

Oates pointed at a cell in the Excel file on his tablet. Sunlight streamed through the windows to make a sharp yellow triangle on the table beside his hand.

'You're happy with that?' I said.

'I'd rather it was below four.'

'But you can live with it?'

'Of course.' He chewed the inside of his lip. 'I'd like it lower, but I can definitely live with it.'

'What about the jobs?'

'The company employs twenty-three thousand people now, across thirty-one sites in nineteen countries.'

'After?'

'Eighteen thousand seven hundred.'

'That's good.'

'I thought you'd say that.'

'Four thousand three hundred jobs gone and we make our margin. That's more than good.'

I stood and walked over to the world map on the far wall. Pins of different colours were dotted across it. Each had a paper ribbon attached on which a number was typed.

'Read out where the jobs are,' I said.

'Head office,' Oates read, 'one hundred and ninety people, here in London.'

'A drop in the ocean. After the recession we've had, no-one will notice that amongst the tens of thousands of jobs going each month.'

'Then ... four hundred and sixty people at a distribution centre in Corby. Which is ... somewhere between Northampton and Leicester.'

'I know where Corby is. We've been there before. It'll be a real kick in the stomach for a town like that.' I scrutinised a cluster of red pins on the map. 'You're sure that more aren't possible? Another thirty more and we'll be up to an even thousand there.'

Oates flicked through documents on his tablet, a picture of concentration.

'No,' he said at length. 'Four sixty is tops. Realistically, there might be fewer.'

'That's not a problem. The absolute number isn't the point. Just to keep making progress. That's why we do it.' I became briefly absorbed in the pins clustered near Corby, then Rochdale and Middlesbrough, like the needle marks in a junkie's arm. 'Where's next?'

'You'll like this.'

I turned to look at Oates' glowing face.

'Yes?'

'Fourteen hundred and ten positions in the research facility in Sophia-Antipolis.'

I quickly moved a thousand miles south on the map.

'Not a mark!' I exclaimed. 'We've never decommissioned a job within fifty miles. This will really piss the Frenchies off.'

'I thought you'd be pleased.'

'Outstanding work, Oates. Really ... *outstanding*. You've surpassed yourself.'

'Thank you, sir.' He paused, conflicting emotions flickering across his face. 'If you don't mind me asking, sir, why do you keep the map here?'

'Here?' I said absently, surveying the pin-studded swathes of western Europe and far beyond. 'Where else would I keep it?'

'Sorry,' Oates said, flushing. 'I didn't mean why keep it *here*? I meant why keep it *at all*?'

'Ah. I see your point.' I turned to him again. Framed in the panoramic window behind him was the London Eye on the left round to the arch of Wembley Stadium on the right. 'This really is a magnificent eagle's nest,' I said, 'perched eight hundred feet above the city. I sometimes forget the commanding heights we view the world from.'

'Yes, it is,' Oates said, twisting to look over his shoulder and out the window.

'I keep the map to remind myself how far we've come,' I said. 'When I grew up in the Eighties, television news would finish with a list of all the jobs lost that day. They showed them on a UK map, with a running total for jobs lost to date in the year.' Oates stared at me like a goldfish in a bag at the fair. 'That was the lowest point we fell to.'

'So why celebrate the same thing now?'

'This?' I said, waving my hand over the map. 'Oh, this is different. It's the opposite.'

'I don't see it.'

'Every one of the forty-two thousand five hundred and seventeen eliminated jobs here has been converted into money. Each was inefficiency on a failed company's balance sheet. We recycle that into cash. These firms still produce what they did, only better, with more money created per person employed each and every day.' I walked across and looked out the north window at Alexandra Palace. 'It's like rewriting the laws of physics. $E=MC^2$ and all that. We put the same money in and thirty per cent more profit appears at the other end. In the Middle Ages they would have called it alchemy.'

'They have words for it now, sir.'

I glanced at his earnest face.

'Yes, they do,' I said with a laugh. 'Some of them are even true.' I held his gaze. 'That doesn't change the fact that productivity is what keeps our planet turning.'

'But what about the people?'

'Who did the useless jobs? What about them?'

'They have families, and dependents. An engineer in Sophia-Antipolis might

get another job soon enough. But a fifty year old foreman in Corby might never work again.'

'So what?' I shrugged. 'No-one forced him to live in Corby.'

'Still, they are real people. These are real towns.'

'What an interesting definition of "real" you have!' I said. 'The sooner they stop dragging UK plc down, the better.'

A cough at the doorway announced that Celine had entered. She wore a black Chanel dress and an air of serene calm.

'Sophie Padmore is here without an appointment,' Celine said. 'She says it's urgent—'

'If Sophie says it's urgent, then it's urgent.' I turned back to Oates. 'We're done, aren't we.'

It wasn't a question.

'Yes, I have everything I need,' he said, rising quickly to his feet.

'Seventeen point four billion pounds,' I mused, 'and payback inside four years?'

'*Comfortably* inside four years.'

'Excellent,' I said. 'Updated financials on my desk by noon.'

Oates nodded and left.

'Sophie says that Bob Kenway is on his way too,' Celine continued.

'Bob? I haven't seen him in, ooh ... eighteen months. Not since the Marathon des Sables, in fact.' Brilliant sunlight and a red *keffiyeh* flashed through my mind. A knife out of its sheath, the smell of fresh blood. 'Sophie and Bob together isn't urgent. It's a crisis I don't know about yet.'

α

Celine went and Sophie swept into my office. She was sporting a charcoal grey suit from Kathryn Sargent. Trousers, sharply cut, but still acutely feminine. Her strawberry blonde hair was perfectly tousled. She carried a black lacquer tray in her left hand. A cream envelope and several small beads lay on it.

'Hello stranger,' I said, crossing the room to air-kiss her. 'Have they got you bringing the mail now?' I said, pointing at the tray.

'Greetings too,' she replied. 'You got it in one. I'm the new mail girl. For the really special deliveries. So, there's a thing we need to discuss.'

'I gather.'

'It may just be nothing and I'm over-reacting.'

'I doubt it, or you wouldn't be here. Not that I don't enjoy impromptu visits—',

'Yes, it *has* been too long. And we're on the same page, because this may just be something. Sit down and I'll explain.'

I sank down on to the Poltrona Frau Kennedee sofa. It absorbed my weight luxuriantly. Sophie positioned herself opposite me and put the tray on the table in between.

'What is it?' I said.

'Short version, an envelope and five discoloured orange pips.'

'That doesn't sound troubling.'

'Nope. It doesn't. Forensics were about to bin it with all the other garbage mail when they looked more closely.'

'And saw what?'

'Here, use my phone to zoom in on it.' She handed me her iPhone, set to maximum magnification. 'See it now?'

I was looking at a pale yellow seed, on which was a neatly drawn caricature of my own face, executed in henna. The distorted version of my face looked huge on the phone's screen.

'Each pip has a face on it.'

Sophie indicated the other pips beside the envelope. I turned one over with a pen and examined the likeness.

'If I didn't know better, I would say that was Tom Crean,' I said.

'It is. This one here' – she had picked up a pen as well and turned another pip face up – 'is Ted Atkinson. Next is Bob Kenway' – our eyes met – 'and here at the end, that's me.'

We looked at each other for a long moment. Sophie raised an eyebrow and pursed her lips, holding my gaze.

'Send me pictures of these,' I said. 'As in now.'

'Already done.' Sophie looked over my shoulder. 'Ah, Kenway's here.'

I turned to see the doorway filled by Bob Kenway. Standing there, in the tailored black clothes that I thought of as *business combat*, he seemed as wide as he was tall. His short dark hair and Action Man beard matched the colour of his clothes. Both contrasted with his absurdly intense blue eyes. And what eyes. They had seen terrible things in his Special Forces Support Group tours of Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia. Eyes that told you that the assassinations and beatings hadn't stopped the day he left Mogadishu. He just worked off the meter now.

'Bob,' I said. 'Good to see you. Take a seat.'

'Sorry I'm late, Jack,' he said. 'XR have blocked up London Bridge station.'

'Why London Bridge?' I asked, puzzled.

'Because there are so many people like us here.'

'Ah, that makes sense.'

'Not really. But it does make we wonder what the point of driving is these days. It's getting like I should feel bad for sitting behind the wheel of a car.'

'You should,' I said. 'It's killing the planet.'

Bob's eyes flicked to Sophie and back to me.

'I suppose so. But you drive?'

'Me?' I said. 'No, I gave it up eight years ago. Disgusting habit.'

'That's easier to say when you have a personal chauffeur,' Sophie said quietly.

'I suppose.' I wasn't really listening to what they said, but was absorbed

looking at the faces on the pips. 'These are really meant to represent us?'

Bob seated himself on the other end of the sofa to Sophie and leaned towards the pips.

'Yes, they are quite well done,' he said, 'but it takes imagination to recognise what they are.'

'The three of us have been tattooed on to orange pips. For fuck's sake.'

'Us and Atkinson and Crean,' Sophie said.

'That's exactly who they are,' I said. 'Where are the other two now?'

'Tom Crean is heading back from the video games and augmented reality unit in Dundee.'

'And it took us time to pin Atkinson down,' Bob said. 'He's in Pondicherry. India.'

'It's called Puducherry now,' Sophie added. 'He's seeing the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu.'

'Oh, that.'

'I just spoke with Atkinson,' Bob went on. 'He will head back as soon as he is able.'

'Good. What do these orange pips mean?'

'The obvious reference is the Sherlock Holmes story,' Sophie said. 'Although I feel ridiculous saying that.'

'What story?'

'It's literally called "The Five Orange Pips",' she said. 'Members of a conspiracy each get envelopes with five orange pips in. They either leave town or are murdered.'

'Charming. Have we five been involved in a conspiracy and it slipped my mind?'

'We've certainly done ... *unusual* things together,' Bob said with a smile.

'True. But *unusual* doesn't prompt literary death threats most weeks of my life. Why are we taking this seriously?'

'Because Atkinson is coming home in an air ambulance,' Bob continued. 'When I say he's coming home as soon as he is able, I mean *physically* able.'

Silence filled the room. My eyes met Sophie's, then Bob's, and found uncertainty where I wasn't used to seeing it.

'Go on, Bob,' I said. 'You aren't known for reticence.'

'Atkinson was visiting St Andrew's Church in Pondicherry with the Chief Minister. They were discussing the new project together on the balcony at the front of the church. Then Atkinson fell to the ground, thirty feet below. He swears he was pushed in the back as he leaned over the edge. No-one has verified his account, but he is adamant.'

'Is he alright?'

'Left leg broken in three places, torn ligaments in his right ankle. Otherwise cuts and scrapes. He's remarkably lucky, really. The doctors advise against him flying right now, DVT and all that. We have him under guard.'

'And when did this happen?'

Bob's eyes went to his Breitling Aviator watch.

'Four hours, twelve minutes, eighteen seconds ago,' he said.

'Which was when the envelope with the orange pips was opened,' Sophie added.

'To the minute,' Bob said.

'Which is coincidence,' I said. 'The timing is strange, I grant you. But let's not run ahead of ourselves. Give me something concrete. Fingerprints or DNA?'

'Forensics are undertaking deep investigation,' said Sophie. 'Initial tests found nothing.'

'Literally nothing?'

'*Nada*, not a speck.' Sophie looked at me. 'As if they were packed by a robot working in a zero gravity vacuum.'

'That for me is the ball game,' Bob added. 'An accident and a crank letter with an artistic approach, perfectly synchronised, that I can discount as improbable. Possible, but improbable. But add in that the letter has been processed by someone with a very high standard of fieldcraft and I am prepared to call this malign activity by an actor with sophisticated capabilities.'

'You mean that? It sounds so ludicrous.'

'This is real.'

'Okay,' I said. 'What level of risk are we talking about?'

'Protocol Five,' Bob said simply.

My eyebrows lifted.

'You're sure?' I said.

'Sure. I have authorised the team that lethal force is justified until further notice.'

'Right, Bob. This is your area. I trust you.'

'It is my area, yes. And this is Protocol Five.'

'Anything I should do differently?'

'No, Jack. Not now. The team are briefed. We will work around you, as per. Keep doing what you need to and we will accommodate.'

'Fine. So, these orange pips' – I pointed at the tray on the table – 'what links the five of us together?' I looked at Sophie and then Bob. 'Us plus Crean and Atkinson? I can think of nothing.'

'Us too,' Sophie said. 'We are cross-referencing projects and postings exhaustively, as you might imagine.'

'Fine. Is that everything we know?' I glanced at my Patek Philippe watch. 'It's just that I am about to be late for something.'

'You're fully briefed,' Sophie said.

'There is one more thing,' Bob said. 'A detail really.'

'What?'

'They aren't orange pips.'

'That messes up the Sherlock Holmes story thing.'

'Yes, and it's a loose end. You know how much I dislike loose ends.'

'I do,' I said. 'So what are they?'

'They're pips, that is true. But they come from a lime native to south-east Africa.'

'South Africa?'

'Actually, we believe that the varietal is from Zimbabwe.'

'An unlikely source.'

'Agreed.'

'We should assume that is meaningful until we have proof otherwise. Is that it?' I looked from one to the other and got blank expressions. 'Good. Thanks both for catching this quickly. Let's circle round tomorrow, and if anything breaks in between interrupt me, whatever I may be doing, whoever I'm with.'



I am no lawyer. Good thing too, as I would be terrible at it. I have no patience for the vanity of judges or the strutting of court room litigators. I lack the discipline to build a flawless case, brick by tedious brick. The witterings of a self-pitying client would drive me insane.

Action is my thing.

That at which I excel.

Assess the situation, decide, expedite.

Try that in an English law court and you'll be back a fortnight later, this time stood in the dock with plasticuffs on.

Fortunately, that only happens if they catch you. And I am very good at leaving no trace of where I have been. You could even say it was my calling card.

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I had played three games of speed chess online since the conversation with Bob and Sophie. That usually calmed my thoughts, however bleak a situation might be. But not today. True, my regular opponent, OlegD241, seemed to be cheating in some undefinable way and it had taken brutal improvisation in the final game to come out the 2-1 winner.

Even accounting for that, I was unsettled. Bob Kenway calling Protocol Five over a few dried orange pips and a Sherlock Holmes story. It was madness. Perhaps this is what it looked like when Bob lost his edge. I had always assumed that he would sign up for a reality television show when that happened or, more likely, head off to the Brecon Beacons with a commando knife between his teeth and a bivvy bag in his pocket, never to be seen again. The facts were turning out to be more mundane. Bob was just making bad calls, same as ordinary mortals did.

I stood up and walked across to the table by the west window. The table was big enough to play ping-pong on. Of course, you wouldn't get very far if you *tried* to play ping-pong on it, as the table housed the model for the redeveloped Craven Cottage football stadium that the architects had sent over last week. They had made the model from polished alabaster, instead of the usual acrylic or extruded plastic, so that it soared above the blue resin line of the Thames like the white cliffs of Dover.

It was, I found myself thinking, magnificent. The stadium when finished would seat 62,000 people, all coming to watch Champions League football in incomparable luxury alongside the world's glitterati. Best of all, we would buy the Barn Elms rowing club across the river and build a grand new bridge for fans to enter by, on the middle of which would stand the finest Michelin-starred restaurant in Europe. The stadium would be envied across the Continent, and would be the perfect place for a country's Prime Minister to entertain the most

prestigious guests.

That Prime Minister being me, naturally.

Yes, after Thursday's election I would be in Parliament and my political ascent would begin. If I couldn't make a better fist of running the country than the freakshow who had done the job in recent times, then I might as well give up and establish a think tank. The Hyde Institute for Creativity in Public Ethics. The Centre for Libertarian Regulation. Or perhaps the Entropy and Altruism Foundation. It would be what I deserved.

A tap at the door broke my train of thought. Celine was there, holding a pose straight off a 1940s *Vogue* front cover.

'Sir Gerard Soames has arrived to see you,' she said. 'And he doesn't have an appointment. He said you wouldn't mind.'

'No-one seems to have an appointment today,' I said.

'No, they don't,' she said with some heat. 'Your diary is becoming like a study in Brownian Motion.' I raised a questioning eyebrow. She reciprocated. 'Plus the Americans confirmed for dinner at seven-thirty,' she continued.

'That's good, thanks.' My gaze went out the window, looking eight hundred feet down on to Borough Market and west along the river as it snaked toward the centre of London. Sunshine danced on the water. 'Why would the Chairman of the party come here unannounced?' I said aloud, to the room in general more than to Celine. 'Sir Gerard Soames in person, and without even so much as a phone call first. He must have better places to be than my office.' I turned back to face Celine. 'Very well. Show him in.'

Celine stayed where she was.

'Also, a Kirsten Lockhart called,' she said.

'Who's she?'

'Not on my radar. Apparently Gordon King gave her your private number.'

'Well, if she's a friend of Gordon's, you know what you can do with her.'

Celine nodded assent. Then her back started disappearing through the door.

'Oh, Celine,' I said.

She paused mid-stride and her face re-appeared in the doorway.

'Yes.'

'Call up Peter Harrington's shop and get them to bike over a copy of

whichever book "The Five Orange Pips" is in.'

'The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes.'

'If that's the collection.'

'It is. Any particular edition?'

'No preference.' I reflected for a moment. 'Actually, something original. A first edition. I want to get the story from the horse's mouth, as it were.'

'On it. Now I'll bring Sir Gerard through.'

She disappeared through the door. In moments Gerard Soames' trademark black pin-stripe suit was heading the other way. The suit cost more than a month-long family holiday in Tahiti and came from the tailors who made the uniform that his great-grandfather marched off to the First World War in. His great-grandfather had spent the hostilities thirty miles behind the lines, drinking fine claret and sending the flower of a nation's youth off to meet their maker. Gerard crossed the room with hand outstretched and a smile on his face.

'Jack,' he said, 'good to see you'.

'And you too, Gerard.'

Our hands met and held together for several long seconds. I searched his eyes for clues, but found nothing there. I let his hand go.

'A football stadium?' he asked, his gaze running over the model of New Craven Cottage. 'Perhaps you are a man of the people after all.'

'More of a dream than a stadium,' I said.

'You dream bigger than most men, Jack.'

'Perhaps I do. But I'm guessing that you didn't come here to talk about football.'

'I didn't.'

'Then let's sit down and you can tell me why you did come.'

We sank into place on the sofa suite facing each other. Gerard crossed his legs and unbuttoned his suit jacket.

'Coffee?' I asked.

'Thanks, no. Your delightful assistant has already covered all that.' He adjusted his tie minutely. 'I am here on the instructions of the Prime Minister, but I should be clear that I am acting in a private capacity.'

'Understood. How is Robert?'

'Oh, you know. Skittish, frightened that his own shadow might be polling more strongly than he is himself and still trying to figure out whether his right profile *really* does photograph better than his left. The usual.' A thin smile formed on Gerard's lips. 'Downing Street does strange things to even the most level-headed person. And Robert ... well, level-headed wouldn't be my instinctive description of him.'

'I couldn't possibly comment.'

'So, look, Jack,' he went on. 'I won't beat around the bush. You're as busy as I am.'

'I always have time for you, Gerard,' I said.

'That's appreciated.' He cleared his throat inaudibly and adjusted his tie again. 'Robert has looked ahead at the composition of his Cabinet for the remainder of the administration. Short version, Jack. There is no berth in it for you. I know you had hopes that there might be an opening. Well, Robert wants me to explain that there won't be.'

'I'll bide my time until the next sex scandal claims its victim and take my chance then.'

'And the situation will be exactly the same.'

He held my gaze.

'It's like that, is it?' I said.

'Yes, it is.'

'I had understood that if I put in the hours, gifted wisely, pumped enough hands, was accessible to the media, then an *opportunity* might be possible.'

'It appears that is no longer the case.'

Gerard ran his hand backwards through his thick black hair.

'This is direct from Robert?' I said.

'Yes.'

'I can't help noticing that he has changed his tune.'

'He has, Jack, indeed.'

'And changed it since the donation I made to the party.'

'Indeed. Donations are, I always say, like birthday presents. Gloriously appreciated while the wrapping paper is shiny and new, then before you know it the months have flown by and it's time for another one. Yes, you're right.'

Robert's tune has changed since your very generous donation.'

'Well, now I know where I stand.'

'I was hoping you would take it like that. Politics is a fickle mistress.' A warm smile flickered across Gerard's face and light came into his eyes. This was the Gerard who sparkled over lunch at Franco's or the Wolseley, or dinner at Scott's. 'So, now we've covered that unpleasantness,' he continued, 'I want to talk about something else. I won't call it good news, because it isn't. But you will want to hear anyway. Take it as a gesture of goodwill.'

'Go on. Good news which is actually bad news is my favourite type.'

'A bird tells me that your deal with the Americans won't get off the blocks.'

For some reason the game of speed chess I lost to OlegD241 popped into my head.

'I think you will find that you are misinformed, Gerard,' I said evenly. 'We have the funding. Charlie Erskine has our backs. The French and Chinese dropped out in the last round. And I heard some very offkey noises about Naqâru Capital just this morning. We are in pole position.'

'Oh, I am sure you are all over the deal, Jack, and will sweet talk Charlie's board round. Strong men are putty in your hands. What I hear is that once you sort all those elements out, the acquisition will fail to get approval.'

'You'll need to give me more than that.'

'The FCA have received information that has ... *disturbed* them to an unusual degree.'

I leaned forward in my chair.

'What information?' I said. 'Is this from Robert too?' Gerard shook his head. 'Then who *is* it from?'

'It's a little hazy to me. I should say that between you, me and the bedpost, you have upset some highly influential people.'

'I always upset influential people. That's how I do business.'

'There I go slipping into British understatement, and with you of all people, Jack. When I say "upset", I mean that you could measure their anger on the Richter Scale.'

'Names, Gerard,' I said slowly. 'Give me names.'

'Don't rush me, Jack. I am simply passing on what I have heard from an

extremely well-placed source.’ He gazed at me with the eyes of a kindly uncle. ‘Look, are you coming to the Downing Street reception tomorrow?’

‘You know that I am.’

‘Let me ask around, and we can talk again then. You will make your own enquiries, naturally, so we will be able to compare notes. Now that’s settled’ – Gerard rose from his chair and glanced at his watch – ‘I am due at Clarence House in ten minutes’ time and you know how they hate to be kept waiting. Thank you so much for your time, Jack.’

With that, he was gone.

I stared at the doorway he had exited through and reflected that the world had been an altogether simpler place when I awoke this morning.

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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