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Opening Extract from...

First Response

Written by Stephen Leather

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STEPHEN LEATHER

FIRST RESPONSE



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cleanskin *n.*

1. an unbranded animal;
2. a terrorist with no obvious links to terrorist groups, and who therefore does not appear on any watch lists.

Sarah Khan sat down in the last free seat in the carriage and took a deep breath. She looked at her watch. She had plenty of time before her interview. She never enjoyed interviews, probably because she didn't like being judged. They would look at her and ask probing questions and on the basis of that would decide whether or not she was suitable to work for them. If she said the wrong thing, if she made a joke that was taken the wrong way, her CPS career would be dead before it had even started.

Sarah knew she had a tendency to be flippant when she was nervous. It was a defence mechanism, an attempt to defuse a moment of tension. She was going to have to be careful, but not too careful because her interviewers might mistake hesitance for duplicity. She knew that she had to smile, but not smile too much. She had to maintain eye contact but not stare. She closed her eyes and tried to think calm thoughts.

She had spent the last week running through every possible question she might be asked. Why the CPS? Why not join one of the big law firms? Why criminal and not corporate? How would she cope with the long hours, the stress, the responsibility? She had all her answers prepared. She wanted to make a difference. She wanted to make her

city a safer place to live. She wanted to protect its citizens. She wanted to be a superhero. She smiled to herself and opened her eyes. Maybe that was going too far. But she had never spent all those hours studying law to spend her time in a corporate environment helping to make rich people richer.

She sighed and looked around her, wondering how many of the people sitting in the carriage she might come across when the CPS hired her. How many were planning criminal acts? How many had already committed offences and had yet to face justice? The businessman with his metal briefcase perched on his lap: had he defrauded his employer? The teenage girl in an army-surplus jacket with the sleeves rolled up: had she killed her cheating boyfriend and buried him underneath the patio at the back of her house? The young Asian man standing by the door with a backpack slung over one shoulder: was he carrying cannabis in his bag? Or cocaine? On the way to a drugs deal?

She realised he was staring at her and looked away, feeling guilty and wondering if he'd read her mind. She gave it a few seconds, then looked back. He was still staring at her with his deep-set eyes. They reminded her of a bird of prey she'd once seen on a school trip. A peregrine falcon. She'd been only eight years old but she'd never forgotten the way the bird had seemed to stare at her with cold, unfeeling eyes, as if it had not the slightest interest in her. She smiled at him, but that seemed only to intensify his stare.

The train picked up speed. Sarah looked away from the man with the baleful stare and tried to concentrate on the

interview ahead of her. She had to show all the qualities they would be looking for. Intelligence. Diligence. Honesty. And a desire to work long hours for a lot less money than she would earn in the private sector.

She found herself staring at the man again. He wasn't looking at her any more: now he was staring at a woman with a young daughter. The girl was three or four years old, holding a small Paddington Bear. She smiled at Sarah and Sarah smiled back.

The man straightened and raised his right arm. He was holding something in his hand, something metallic. He took a deep breath, threw back his head and screamed at the top of his voice, '*Allahu Akbar!*'

There was a blinding flash, then everything went dark.

BRIXTON (10 a.m.)

Father Morrison was getting towards the end of the mass and had to consciously focus to stop his mind wandering. How many masses had he taken during his thirty-seven years as a priest? Thirteen thousand? Fourteen thousand? Was it any wonder that he had a tendency to switch onto autopilot and say the words without connecting with their meaning? He forced himself to concentrate, knowing that his congregation deserved his full attention.

There were two dozen worshippers, and Father Morrison knew them all by name. It was mid-week, when only the most devout of his parishioners came to mass. Sunday was a different matter. There were four Sunday masses

at the Corpus Christi Church in Brixton Hill. Sunday was an easy day to go to church, but mid-week required more of an effort. Most of the men and women in the pews were old, and Father Morrison couldn't help but think that in some cases it was loneliness rather than devotion that had brought them to the church. But there were some eager young faces, mainly recent immigrants from West Africa, who seemed to be hanging on every word of his homily.

The door to the church opened with a groan, and Father Morrison frowned as a latecomer stepped inside. He was an Asian, bearded with a hooked nose, and even from where he stood at the altar Father Morrison could see that he was in some distress. He was sweating and his eyes were darting from side to side. He was wearing a long coat buttoned up to the neck and he shuffled from side to side as if he wasn't sure what to do next. Father Morrison continued to talk, but his attention was focused on the newcomer. The man turned and pushed the door closed, then reached up and slid the bolt across.

Father Morrison wasn't sure what to do. He didn't want to interrupt the mass but there was no doubt that the man was behaving strangely. People with mental-health issues weren't an unusual sight in Brixton, and the area had more than its fair share of dirty and unkempt citizens wandering around, muttering to themselves. Beggars weren't unusual either, and many would drop by the church. Father Morrison never gave them money but he kept a cupboard full of biscuits and snacks that he would offer, along with a blessing. But the Asian man didn't look as if he wanted a handout. He turned and started walking purposefully towards the

altar. He was in his late forties, with skin the colour and texture of old leather.

One by one the heads of the parishioners turned to check out the new arrival but he ignored them as he strode down the nave, his boots squeaking on the stone flags. Father Morrison moved towards him, holding his hands out at his sides. 'Can I help you?' he asked. 'We're in the middle of mass. Please, take a seat.'

The man's lips tightened as he continued to walk towards the priest. He held out his hand and Father Morrison extended his own as a reflex. The man took the priest's hand, gripping it tightly, his nails digging into the flesh. The priest gasped and tried to pull free but the Asian was too strong. Then the man's left hand lashed out and something fastened around the priest's wrist. He released his grip and stepped back. Father Morrison stared in amazement at the steel handcuff locked around his wrist. As the man stepped away, the priest realised there was a matching handcuff on the man's left wrist and they were joined by just over two feet of steel chain.

'What are you doing?' asked Father Morrison. 'What's this about?'

The man didn't reply, just walked back to the door, yanking the chain so that the priest was forced to follow him. The man unbuttoned his coat with his right hand, then reached into his pocket. As he and the priest reached the door he turned and held up his hands. His coat fell open, revealing a jacket containing more than a dozen pockets, each filled with a block of grey material. Red and black wires ran from block to block, and as the priest stared in horror, he saw that the man had some sort of

trigger in his right hand, held in place by a strip of black Velcro.

'*Allahu Akbar!*' shouted the man at the top of his voice. 'Everybody must do exactly as I say if they don't want to die!'

WANDSWORTH (10.20 a.m.)

'Do you have this in a ten?' asked the girl, holding up a black and white dress. She was in her twenties, with dyed blonde hair pulled back in a tight bun that only served to emphasise the crop of old acne scars across both cheeks. She had a twin buggy with identical toddlers, who were eating Mars bars and smearing chocolate over their little fat faces.

Zoe flashed the girl her most professional smile. If she was a size ten, then Zoe was a Dutchman, a flying one at that. Zoe was an eight and the girl with chocolate-smeared twins was at least twice her size. 'I can have a look in the back,' she said. 'What size is that one?'

The girl squinted at the label. 'Fourteen.'

'Why don't you try that on and see how you go?'

The girl's eyes hardened. 'Are you taking the piss?' she said. 'You saying I'm fat?'

'Of course not. I just mean that you'd get a better idea of what it looks like if you try it on first. They can be a little tight. That's all.' She widened her smile and nodded enthusiastically, always the professional. In fact, she thought the girl was more than fat: she was bordering on

clinically obese. To be honest, a high percentage of the customers who came into the shop could do with losing a few pounds. There were four other women browsing and Zoe doubted that any of them would be able to fit into a size ten. She worked hard to keep her figure – she was careful with what she ate and three times a week she worked out at the Virgin Active gym upstairs in the Southside shopping centre.

She liked working in Southside. When it had opened in 1971, more than twenty years before Zoe was born, it had been the largest indoor shopping centre in Europe. There were plenty of larger ones now, but it was still among the biggest in London, with more than half a million square feet of retail space taking up much of Wandsworth town centre. Zoe lived half a mile away and ever since she had left school she'd worked at the centre. The boutique was her fifth sales job in the complex and she was starting to think about moving again. She'd already dropped her CV into Gap, Next and River Island.

The woman was still trying to decide whether or not Zoe had insulted her. Another customer walked in and Zoe used his arrival as an excuse to turn away from the overweight mother. It was a man, an Asian, and he looked lost. He was tall and thin and wearing a raincoat. He looked around as if expecting to see someone. 'Can I help you?' asked Zoe.

The man flinched as if he had been struck.

'Are you okay?' asked Zoe. The man's forehead was bathed in sweat and he was breathing quickly, as if he'd just been running.

The man nodded and forced a smile. He was in his

twenties, with glossy black hair, a close-cropped beard and dark brown eyes that reminded Zoe of a puppy she'd had when she was a kid. It had disappeared when she was ten. Her mother said it had run away but Zoe had always suspected it had been run over and her mother hadn't wanted to tell her.

The man walked towards her and she realised something was wrong. She took a step backwards and banged into a rack of jeans. She yelped in surprise and tried to slip to the side but he was already in front of her, blocking her way. His hand clamped around her wrist and she felt something click, then cold metal. She looked down. He'd handcuffed her.

He grinned in triumph and stepped back, unbuttoning his coat. Zoe's blood ran cold as she saw what was beneath it. She'd seen enough photographs of bombers to recognise a suicide vest when she saw one – blocks of explosives, detonators and wires all bundled onto a canvas waistcoat. And in the man's right hand, a trigger that he held high in the air above his head.

'*Allahu Akbar!*' the man screamed. 'Stay where you are or everybody will die!'

BRIXTON (10.25 a.m.)

Father Morrison smiled at the man in the suicide vest, the same sort of smile he used at funerals when consoling the recently bereaved and assuring them that their loved one

was in a better place, basking in God's glory. 'What is your name, sir?' he asked.

'Why do you care?' snapped the man.

'We are both human beings in a stressful situation,' said the priest. He raised his right hand and jiggled the chain that connected them to emphasise his point. 'Surely I should know the name of the man I've been chained to.'

'You talk too much.'

'That's my job,' said the priest. 'Anyway, I'm Father Morrison, but you can call me Sean. Or Father Sean.'

'I don't have to call you anything.' The man turned to face the parishioners, who had followed his instructions and sat together in the front two rows of pews, close to the altar. 'How many of you have phones? If you have a phone, hold it up in the air.'

Several held up their phones immediately. The rest fumbled in their pockets and bags and after a minute or so most of them had their hands in the air.

'Now, listen to me and listen carefully,' said the man. 'You are to use your phones to text your friends, and to post on Facebook and Twitter and anywhere else you want. You are to tell the world that you are now prisoners of ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. You are to explain that ISIS demands the release of its six warriors who are being held in Belmarsh Prison. You are to say that if the six warriors are not released, you will be executed.'

A middle-aged woman in the front pew began to weep and her husband put a protective arm around her.

'When the prisoners are released we'll all be going home.