Hunter Killer

Patrick Robinson

CHAPTER ONE

King Khalid International Airport

Tuesday 6 May 2009

The black Cadillac stretch limousine moved swiftly around the public drop-off point to a wide double gate, already opened by the two armed guards. On each wing of the big American automobile fluttered two pennants, the green and blue ensigns of the Royal Saudi Naval Forces.

Both guards saluted as the instantly recognisable limo swept past and out towards the wide runway of Terminal Three, the exclusive enclave of Saudia, the national airline.

Inside the limousine was a solitary passenger in Arab dress: Crown Prince Nasir Ibn Mohammed, Deputy Minister of the Armed Forces. Both sentries saluted as Prince Nasir went by, heading straight for the runway where one of the King's newest Boeing 747s was awaiting him, engines idling preparatory to take off. Every other flight was on hold until the meticulously punctual Prince Nasir was in the air.

The prince was escorted to the steps of the aircraft by both the chief steward and a senior naval officer. Prince Nasir's own son, the twenty-six-year-old Commodore Fahad Ibn Nasir, served in a Red Sea frigate, and his father was always treated like an admiral wherever he travelled in the Kingdom.

He was also the only passenger on board, and the moment he was seated in the upstairs first-class section the door was tightly secured and the pilot opened the throttles. The royal passenger jet, revelling in its light load, roared off down the runway and screamed into the clear blue skies, directly into the hot south wind off the desert, before banking left towards the Gulf, and then north-west across Iraq, towards Syria.

It was almost unheard of for a senior member of the royal family to travel alone, without even a bodyguard, but this was different. The 747 was not going even halfway to Prince Nasir's final destination. He used it only to get out of Saudi Arabia, to another Arab country. His real destination was entirely another matter.

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A suitcase at the rear of the upstairs area contained his Western clothes and, as soon as the flight was airborne, Prince Nasir changed into a dark grey suit, blue shirt and a maroon-patterned silk Hermès tie, completed with a solid gold clip in the shape of a desert scimitar. He wore plain black loafers, hand-made in London, with dark grey socks.

The suitcase also contained a briefcase, containing several documents, which the Prince removed, and he then packed away his white Arabian thobe, red and white ghutra headdress with its double cord, the aghal. He had left King Khalid International Airport, named for his late great-uncle, as an Arab. He would arrive in Damascus every inch the international businessman.

When they touched down two hours later, a limousine from the Saudi Embassy met him and drove him directly to the regular midday Air France flight to Paris. The aircraft sat with its passengers in their seats; although none of them knew it, they were awaiting the arrival of the Arabian prince.

The aircraft had in fact pulled back from the jetway and a special flight of stairs had been placed against the forward entrance. Prince Nasir's car halted precisely at those stairs, where an Air France official waited to escort him to his seat. Four rows, eight seats that is, had been booked in the name of the Saudi Embassy on Al-Jala's Avenue. Prince Nasir sat in seat 1A.The rest of the seats in the row would remain empty all the way to Roissy-Charles de Gaulle Airport, 19 miles north of Paris.

The cabin crew served a special luncheon, prepared by the cooks at the embassy, of curried chicken with rice, cooked Indian-style, followed by fruit juice and sweet pastries. Prince Nasir, the most devout of Muslims, had never touched alcohol in his life and disapproved fiercely of those of his countrymen who did.The late Prince Khalid of Monte Carlo had had many failings.The great man knew, beyond any doubt, of the antics of that particular deceased member of his family.

They flew on across Turkey and the Balkan States, finally crossing the Alps and dropping down above the lush French farmland lying south of the forest of Ardenne, over the Seine, and into north-west Paris.

Once more, Prince Nasir endured no formalities or checks. He disembarked before anyone else, down a private flight of stairs, where a jet-black, unmarked French government car waited to drive him directly to the heavily guarded Elysée Palace on rue St-Honoré, the official residence of the Presidents of France since 1873.

It was a little after 4 p.m. in Paris, the flight from Damascus having taken five hours, with a two-hour time gain. Two officials were waiting at the President's private entrance and Prince Nasir was escorted immediately to the President's private apartment on the first floor overlooking rue de l'Elysée.

The President was awaiting him in a large modern drawing room, hung with a selection of six breathtaking Impressionist paintings - two by Renoir, two by Claude

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Monet and one each by Degas and Pissarro. One hundred million dollars would not have bought them.

The President greeted Prince Nasir in impeccable English, the language agreed for the forthcoming conversation. By previous arrangement, no one would listen in. No ministers. No private secretaries. No translators. The following two hours before dinner would bring a meaning to the word 'privacy' rarely, if ever, attained in international politics.

'Good afternoon,Your Highness,' said the President in greeting. 'I trust my country's travel arrangements have been satisfactory?'

'Quite perfect,' replied the prince, smiling. 'No one could have asked for more.' The two men knew each other vaguely, but could not be called friends, let alone blood brothers. Yet.

The door to the drawing room was closed and two uniformed military guards, summoned from the exterior security force, stood sentry in the outside corridor.The President of France himself poured coffee for his guest from a silver service laid out on a magnificent Napoleonic sideboard. Prince Nasir complimented the President on the beauty of the piece and was amused when the President replied, 'It probably belonged to Bonaparte himself - the Palais de l'Elysée was occupied by Napoleon's sister Caroline for much of the nineteenth century.'

Prince Nasir loved the traditions of France. A highly educated man, he not only had a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature from Harvard, but also a maîtrise (Master's degree) in European History from the University of Paris.The knowledge that Bonaparte himself might have been served from this very sideboard somehow made the coffee taste all the richer.

'Now,Your Highness,' said the President, 'you must tell me your story, and why you wished to have a talk with me in this most private manner, at such very short notice.' He was keenly aware of the way most high-born Arabs operated: talk about almost anything else for half an hour before tackling the main subject.

Prince Nasir knew time was precious at this level. The balding, burly politician who stood before him had, after all, an entire country to run. He decided to speak carefully, weighing his words appropriately.

'Sir,' he said. 'My country is in terminal decline. In the past 20 years the ruling family - my own - has managed to spend over $100 billion of our cash reserves.We are probably down to our last $15 billion. And soon that will be $10 billion and then $5 billion. Twenty years ago my people received a generous share of the oil wealth that Allah has bestowed upon us.Around $30,000 per capita. Today that figure is close to $7,000. Because we can afford no more.'

'But, of course,' replied the President of France, 'you do own 25 per cent of all the world's oil . . .'

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Prince Nasir smiled. 'Our problem, sir, is not the creation of wealth,' he said. 'I suppose we could close down modern Saudi Arabia and all go back to the desert and sit there allowing our vast oil revenues to accrue, and make us once more one of the richest nations on earth. However, that would plainly be impracticable.

'Our problem is the reckless spending of money by a ruling family which is now irredeemably corrupt. And a huge percentage of that expenditure goes on the family itself. Thousands and thousands of royal princes are being kept in a style probably not seen on this planet since . . . well, since the Bourbon royal family's domination of your own country. I have stated it often enough. Saudi Arabia is like France before the Revolution. Monsieur Le President, I intend to emulate your brave class warriors of the late eighteenth century. In my own country, I intend to re-enact that renunciation of the rights of the nobility.'

The President's early left-wing leanings were well documented. Indeed, he had risen to power from a base as the communist mayor of a small town in Brittany. In a previous incarnation, this particular French President would have stormed the gates of Paris in the vanguard of Revolution. Prince Nasir was aware that use of the word 'Bourbon' would elicit instant sympathy.

The President shrugged, a deep Gallic heave. Then he held out both hands, palms upwards. 'I knew of course some of the difficulties in Saudi Arabia . . . but I put it down mostly to your closeness to the Americans.'

'That too is a grave problem, sir,' replied Prince Nasir.'My people long for freedom from the Great Satan. But this King is a vigorous globally ambitious man, aged only forty-eight, and under him it would be impossible. We are bound up with the the infidels so tightly . . . even though the majority of Saudis wish devoutly that they could be once more a God-fearing nation of pure Muslims. Not terrorists, just a religious people in tune with the words of the Prophet, rather than the grasping material creeds of the United States.

'I tell you this, sir. If Osama bin Laden suddenly materialised in Riyadh and ran for President, or even King, he would win in a landslide.'

The President of France smiled uneasily. 'I imagine there are many Saudi princes who would not agree exactement with your views,' he said. 'I don't imagine that young man who almost sunk the Queen Mary last week would have been . . . er . . . too sympathétique.'

'He most certainly would not,' said Prince Nasir, frowning. 'He was a prime example of the endless corruption in my country. His type are wastrels, bleeding the country dry with their excesses. If they continue in this way, we will be in danger of becoming a godless Third World country.To stand in one of our royal palaces today is to watch something close to the fall of the Roman Empire!'

'Or the British,' countered the President, smiling more comfortably.' May I offer you more coffee from Napoleon Bonaparte's sideboard?'

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Although he barely knew him, Prince Nasir had always liked the French President, and he was extremely glad to have the opportunity to get to know him better.

'Thank you,' he said. And the two men walked across the room towards the silver coffee pot. They were already in step.

'Well,Your Highness, you are outlining to me a very regrettable state of affairs. And I agree; if I were the Crown Prince of such a nation I too would be extremely exercised by the situation. But, to the outside world, Saudi Arabia looks very much like the one constant in a turbulent Middle East.'

'That may have been the case 20 years ago, but it is most certainly not so today. It is my belief that this corrupt ruling family must be overthrown, its excesses removed, the lifestyles of the princes terminated. And the colossal spending on military hardware from the United States ceased forthwith. Everything has to change, if we are to survive as the prosperous nation we once were.'

The prince rose to his feet and paced the room. 'Remember, sir, as a nation we are not yet 80 years old. The active members of this family are just a generation, maybe two, from men who grew up in goat-hair tents and followed the rhythms of the desert, from oasis to oasis, subsisting on dates and camel's milk . . .'

'You are surely not advocating a return to those days?' asked the President.

'No, sir, I am not. But I know we must return part of the way to our Bedouin roots in the desert, to the written creeds of the Prophet Mohammed. I do not wish to see our sons spending millions of dollars on Western luxuries. 'Wallahi!' he exclaimed - By God - 'What could that boy Khalid possibly have been doing with those cheap women on a yacht fit for a President, out of his mind on drugs and alcohol?'

'Very probably having the most wonderful time,' smiled the French President, his mind slipping briefly away from matters of state. 'But I do of course understand. It plainly is not right that there should be thousands of these young men ransacking the Saudi Treasury every month, at the expense of the people. I think you are very probably correct. Something will soon need to be done. Otherwise the people will rise up against the King and you might be looking at a bloodbath . . . as we had in Paris in the eighteenth century. And, by the sound of it, equally as justified.'

Prince Nasir sipped his coffee.'The problem is,' he said,'our King is quite extraordinarily powerful. Not only does he pay all of the family's bills - none of the young princes ever sees a bill, for anything. Every charge they incur goes directly to the King, from all over the world.

'But he also controls the Army, the Air Force and the Navy, plus all of the security forces. Only he can pay them. And they are loyal to him alone.'

'How large is the Saudi Army these days?'

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'Almost 90,000 - nine brigades, three armoured, five mechanised and one airborne.They're supported by five artillery battalions, and a separate Royal Guard Regiment of three light-infantry battalions. The armoured brigades have almost 300 highly advanced tanks, the M1A2 Abrams from the United States. Of course, one of our armoured brigades is entirely French-equipped.'

Though well out of his depth, the President nodded sagely. 'And the Navy?'

'It's the smallest of our services. Just a few Corvettes in the Red Sea, and a few guided missile frigates, purchased, as you will be aware, from France. But the Navy is not our greatest strength.'

'And the Air Force?'

'This is our strongest force. We have more than 200 combat aircraft in the Royal Saudi Air Force, with 18,000 personnel. They are deployed at four key airfields. And their mission is very simply to keep the Kingdom safe, in particular to keep our oil installations safe.'

'Well,Your Highness, I would assess that is a magnifique amount of firepower to put down a revolution. If our Bourbon kings and princes had possessed half of that, they'd still be here, raping and pillaging the land.'

Prince Nasir laughed, despite himself. He sipped his coffee, and then said, 'Sir, the Achilles heel of the Saudi King is not the ability of the military to fight. It's his ability to pay them.'

'But he has all the money in the world, flowing in every month, to achieve that,' replied the President.

'But what if he didn't?' asked Prince Nasir Ibn Mohammed. 'What if he didn't have that money?'

'You mean, if someone took all the oil away from him?' said the President. 'That sounds most unlikely given all those armoured brigades and fighter jets.'

'No, sir. What if the oil was taken out of the equation? What if it simply no longer flowed, and the King had no income to pay the armed services? What then?'

'You mean, supposing someone destroyed the Saudi oil industry?'

'Only for a little while,' replied the Prince.'Only for a little while. Let me elaborate.'

Momentarily stunned by the enormous implications of what he was hearing, the President briefly stopped listening to the prince. When he heard his voice again, it was that of a man speaking a long way off.

'. . . the Red Sea terminals should be hit and destroyed. Another prime target is Safaniya, the largest offshore oilfield in the world, 160 miles north of Dhahran. The

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reserves out there number 30 billion barrels - that's around 500,000 barrels a day for about 165 years.

'The biggest terminal on the Gulf is Ra's Tannurah which has capacity for 4.3 million barrels of oil a day. The loading dock is offshore at the Sea Island terminal where Platform No. 4 pumps over two million barrels a day into the world's waiting tankers. A direct hit on that platform would effectively close down Ra's Tannurah, especially if the pipeline from Abqaiq were taken care of.

'The final, critical hit should be slightly north, at Ra's al Ju'aymah, which has the capacity for 4.2 million barrels a day. It is the principal loading bay for liquid petroleum, propane.' If that happened, the prince added wryly, the whole of Japan would find itself eating a great deal of sushi, accompanied by stone-cold sake.

He continued. 'The terminals of Ra's Tannurah and Ra's al Ju'aymah, plus the Red Sea ports, load Saudi Arabian oil products into 4,000 tankers a year.You will not be surprised to know that ARAMCO - the Arabian American Oil Company - owned 100 per cent by the Saudi Government since 1976, is the largest oil company on earth. Its headquarters are in the eastern province city of Dhahran, and its capability is approximately 10 million barrels a day, though since the year 2000 it has pumped considerably less.

'Twenty-six per cent of all the oil on the planet lies beneath the Saudi desert - that's around 262 billion barrels, which, at 5.5 million a day, ought to last for some 130 years. The Saudi royal family are the sole proprieters of ARAMCO, which owns every last drop . . .'

The President listened to Prince Nasir with a growing sense of excitement. What the prince was suggesting was enormously risky and startlingly audacious, but the payoff seemed worth it. All he needed now was someone to kickstart the operation and take care of the practicalities. And he knew exactly where to start.

5.00 a.m. the next morning
The Foreign Office
Quai d'Orsay, Paris

Pierre St Martin, the Foreign Minister of France, and a future presidential hopeful, stood beside a large portrait of Napoleon placed on an easel on the left-hand side of his lavish office. Before him stood M. Gaston Savary, the tall saturnine head of the French Secret Service - the Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure (DGSE), successor to the former, internationally feared SDECE, the counterespionage service.

The two men had never met before, and the elegant St Martin, was, quite frankly, amazed that he had been summoned to his office at this ungodly hour of the day, apparently to converse with this . . . this spy from La Piscine - the kind of man patrician politicians in London refer to as 'Johnny Raincoat'.

La Piscine was the government nickname for the DGSE, so-called because of the proximity of the bleak 10-storey Secret Service building to a municipal swimming

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pool in Caserne des Tourelles. M. Savary operated out of 128, boulevard Mortier over in the 20th arrondissement, about as far west as it is possible to go and still be in the City of Light. It was not the kind of neighbourhood in which you'd expect to find an urbane Foreign Minister. The suave and expensively tailored M. St Martin had never been to La Piscine before.

Nonethless, they had both been ordered to the sumptuous offices on the Quai d'Orsay by none other than the President of France himself. And the current incumbent of the Elysée Palace was due here in the next few minutes.

M. St Martin, who had spent the night at the apartment of an actress generally considered to be one of the most beautiful in France, was a great deal more irritated by the instrusion into his life than M. Savary.

Both men were around the same age, fiftyish, but the Secret Service chief was a lifelong career officer in undercover operations. For him the call in the middle of the night was routine. No matter the time, he was instantly operational, and he had for 10 years been responsible for the planning of black operations conducted on behalf of the Government of France, using both military forces or civilian agents.

A lithe, fit and slightly morose man, M. Savary had even taken part personally in various French adventures. He would, of course, admit nothing, but he was reputed to have been operational in the attack and subsequent sinking of the Greenpeace freighter the Rainbow Warrior in Auckland Harbour, New Zealand, in July 1985. Interference with the Pacific nuclear tests conducted by France? NON! JAMAIS! was M. Savary's response to that.

'Would you care to remove your raincoat?' asked the Foreign Minister. 'Since we are shortly to be in the presence of our President?' Without a word Savary took the coat off and slung it over the back of a near-priceless Louis XV chair.

St Martin stared at the spy's raincoat over the back of chair, and winced. He pressed a button to summon the butler to bring them coffee, but his main intention was to get rid of the offending garment owned by Jean-Claude Raincoat or whatever his damned name was. M. St Martin had always held a sneaking regard for the Bourbons and their excellent taste in furniture.

'I don't suppose you have slightest idea what this is all about?' he said.

'Absolutely none,' replied the intelligence chief. 'I just received a telephone call from the Palais de l'Elysée and was told the President wished to see me in your office at 5.15 a.m. Here I am, n'est-ce pas?'

'My summons was exactly the same. My mobile phone rang at 1.30 a.m. God knows what this is all about.'

'Maybe Le President is about to declare war?'

'There is always that possibility.'

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Savary smiled for the first time. But just then their coffee arrived, for three, as requested. And M. St Martin asked the butler to pour two cups before instructing him to hang the raincoat in the hall closet.

Almost immediately a phone bell rang on his enormous desk and a voice announced that the presidential car had arrived at the portals of the Foreign Office. Pierre St Martin poured the third cup of coffee himself.

Three minutes later he was astonished to see that the President was entirely alone: no secretary, no aides, no officials. He closed the door himself and said quietly, 'Pierre, Gaston, thank you for coming so early.Would you please ensure our discussion is conducted entirely in secret? Perhaps a guard outside the door?'

St Martin spoke briefly into the telephone, handed the President a cup of coffee and motioned for everyone to be seated, the President on a fine upright drawing-room chair, the Secret Service chief on the Louis XV piece lately occupied by his raincoat, while the Foreign Minister himself retreated behind his desk.

'Gentlemen,' said the President, 'approximately two hours ago one of the most important princes in the Saudi royal family left my residence to fly home in a French Air Force jet to Damascus, and then in his own aircraft to Riyadh. His visit with me was so private, so confidential, not even the most senior members of staff at the Saudi Embassy here in Paris were aware of his presence in the city.

'He came not only to inform me that the financial excesses of the Saudi ruling family would shortly bankrupt his country, but to propose a way to resolve the problem - to the very great advantage of himself, and, it must be said, for France.'

St Martin swiftly interjected. 'Doubtless inspired by that young Saudi prince who nearly sank the Queen Mary last week?'

'I think so,' replied the President. 'But the problem of 35,000 princes, all members of the same family, spending up to a million dollars a month on fast living, has been vexing the reformist element in the Saudi Government for several years. According to my visitor the time has come for that to cease.'

M. Savary spoke for the first time. 'I imagine he mentioned the Saudi King is heavily protected by a fiercely loyal Army, Air Force and Navy. So, if I follow your line of thinking correctly, an overthrow of that part of the family is more or less out of the question.'

'Indeed he did, Gaston. He mentioned it in great detail. And he pointed out that the only person in the entire Kingdom who could pay the armed services is the King, who receives all the oil revenues of the country and pays all the bills for his family.'

'So the armed services would be most unlikely to turn against him,' said M. Savary.

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'Most unlikely,' agreed the President. 'Unless for some reason the vast revenues from the oilfields ceased to exist . . .'

'And the King could no longer pay them, correct?' said M. Savary.

'Precisely,' replied the President.

'Sir, I have no doubt you are as aware as I am that those Saudi oilfields are guarded by a steel ring of personnel and armaments,' continued Savary.'They're virtually impregnable, understandably, since the whole country is 100 per cent dependent upon them, from the richest to the poorest.'

'Well, we have not reached that point in the conversation yet, Gaston. But I would like to inform you, in the broadest possible terms, what the prince was proposing.'

'I, for one, am paying keen attention,' said Pierre St Martin.

'Excellent,' replied the President. 'Because the information I am about to impart might be of critical importance to our nation. His Highness Prince Nasir proposes the following. Someone hits the oilfields and knocks out the main pumping station and the three or four biggest loading terminals on both the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf.

'Two days later, with Saudi Arabia's economy effectively laid to waste, a small, highly trained fighting force attacks the Saudi military city in the south-west of the country near the Yemen border, and, while the military is in disarray, another highly specialised force goes in and takes Riyadh.

'They knock out a couple of palaces, eliminate the royal family, take the television station and the radio station and sweep the Crown Prince to power. He then appears on nationwide television and announces he has taken control, and the corrupt regime of the present King has been summarily swept away.'

'And you are proposing we somehow take part in all this?' asked St Martin, incredulous.

The President paused. 'Certainly not. I am merely suggesting we examine the feasibility of it.'

'And if the military coup was carried out, with our assistance, and the prince takes over Saudi Arabia, what could be in it for us?' asked Gaston Savary.

'Well, as his best friends and closest allies, and a sworn opponent to the ambitions of the United States, France would be awarded every single contract to rebuild the oil installations, and we would become the sole marketing agents for all Saudi Arabian oil for the next 100 years. Anyone wishes to buy, they buy it from us. Which means we effectively control world oil prices.'

'And how long would it take us to rebuild the oil installations?'

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'Perhaps two years. Maybe less.'

'And what about that big Saudi Army and Air Force?'

The President shrugged. 'What about them? They would have no alternative but to switch their allegiance, to serve the new King. After all, they cannot serve a dead one, n'est-ce pas? And no one else could possibly pay them but the new ruler. And even then things would be rather tight for a few months, until some oil began to flow, probably in the Gulf terminals.'

'You really think this could be achieved, sir?' said Gaston.'Militarily, I mean?'

'I have no idea. But Prince Nasir does. And he says that if it is not achieved Saudi Arabia is doomed.'

'What kind of a premise will he campaign on?' asked St Martin.

'Well, he won't really need to campaign, will he? Not if he simply seizes power. But he will immediately assure the country that the massive financial stipends for the princes will end forthwith.Which will save his treasury maybe $250 billion a year.

'He will also advocate an immediate return to pure Muslim worship of the Wahaabi persuasion.You understand: strict rules of prayer, no alcohol, the unquestioned word of the Koran and the teachings of the Prophet. There will be no more cosying up to American politicians, and basically the country will return to its Bedouin roots, to the old ways of life.

'They will heed the call of the desert, and bring up their children according to the old traditions, as indeed Prince Nasir has brought up his own. And there will certainly be no more financing of terrorism. And no further need to pay vast sums of protection money to groups who might otherwise attack Saudi Arabia. I am referring, of course, to hundreds of millions of dollars directed to al-Qaeda.

'Once Prince Nasir has severed his ties with the United States, there will be no further danger from the fundamentalist groups. And of course we may also expect far greater Saudi support for the Palestinians.'

'But surely this will cause chaos on the world oil markets?' said St Martin. 'Absolute chaos.'

'I have no doubt it will. But this won't affect us, because we will rid ourselves of our Saudi contracts long before anything happens. We will sign new two-year agreements with other Middle Eastern countries for all of our oil and gas requirements. That way we will ensure the continuation of oil into France during Saudi Arabia's period of rebuilding, and procure new and better contracts more favourable to our country.'

'But what about the world oil shortages? This would just about bankrupt Japan, and cripple even the mighty economy of the United States. Our European partners will

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also be hurt. Gasoline could go to $150 a barrel.' St Martin was just beginning to look particularly distraught.

'I agree,' said the President. 'But if Prince Nasir is correct, all this will happen anyway, if the Saudi population takes to the streets in protest against the royal family. As for the oil prices going through the roof - well, can you imagine anything more appealing to the country which effectively controls world sales of Saudi oil?'

'But, sir,' said St Martin, 'the Saudi fields are the only stabiliser in the entire world's markets. Remember how they saved the day by producing millions of extra barrels in 1991, and then again after 9/11 when they pumped almost five million extra barrels to save the market? Petrol prices hardly went up by a single franc.

'Saudi Arabia is the world market, the saviour of the world's economy in times of crisis. It's the only nation which can produce extra oil. What are its reserves? Two to three million barrels a day, if necessary, at any one time? Can you imagine the reaction of the United States if anyone ever found out we were in any way implicated?'

'What if no one ever found out we were implicated?' replied the President. 'What if no one ever knew? What if it all appeared to be just an Arab matter - a military coup, by the people, against their corrupt rulers; a kind of insurrection which spread, most unfortunately, to the oil wells?'

'Sir, do you think it possible such a momentous action by France could ever be kept secret?'

'Again,' said the President, 'I cannot be certain. But the reason we are in this room, at this unearthly hour of the day, is because we have been asked for help by a senior representative of one of our major trading partners . . . a partner which would feel obliged, in future, to purchase all of its military hardware from France - warships, fighter aircraft and weaponry worth billions.

'Therefore, gentlemen, I ask you to please find out what we can do, how quietly we can do it, and whether we can stay sufficiently remote so as never to warrant suspicion of - how shall I put it? - any questionable dealings.

'Meanwhile as far as I am concerned this conversation never took place.You are the only two people in France who know anything of the prince's visit, and of the proposals he made. Perhaps you would be good enough to contact me when you have gathered your thoughts.'

And, with that, the man who considered himself to be the most powerful figure in the European Union stood up, replaced his coffee cup on the tray and walked to the door.

Neither Pierre St Martin nor Gaston Savary could recover swiftly enough even to open it for him. Both the French Foreign Minister and the head of France's Secret

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Service were in shock. They stood open-mouthed at the departing President, momentarily stunned by the enormity of the task he had set them.

'Sacré merde!' muttered Pierre St Martin.

* * *

Friday morning, 9 May
Paris

Gaston Savary was alone, driving his black Citroën staff car through heavy commuter traffic into the remotest outpost of the north-west suburbs of the city. He was going against the incoming traffic but it was still outlandishly busy, with queues of buses, vans and trucks all the way, as always, in both directions. More than three and a half million people fought their way into, and out of, Paris every working day.

He reached the outer suburb of Taverny and drove up to the guardhouse at the entrance to one of the most secretive compounds in Europe - the headquarters of France's Commandement des Opérations Spéciales (COS), the joint service establishment which controlled the worldwide special ops activities of all three French armed forces.

As head of the largely civilian French Secret Service, Pierre Savary was a regular visitor, and both duty guards wished him 'Bonjour' before waving him through to a waiting escort who stepped into the front seat of the Citroën.

They drove towards the offices of the 1st Marine Parachute Infantry Regiment, the prime special ops unit in France, the direct equivalent of Britain's SAS and the USA's Navy SEALs and Rangers. A formidable black ops outfit, it clandestinely provided special training and even assistance to foreign countries; in addition, it also provided offensive action, if called upon to, as it had been in West Africa in 2008. It also conducted its own military intelligence gathering and in recent years had been at the sharp end of most French counter-terrorist operations.Two heavily armed helicopter squadrons stood under its command.

Gaston Savary instructed his escort, a young Army lieutenant, to park the car. He let himself out at the main entrance, where another young officer greeted him and took him immediately to the special ops C-in-C, General Michel Jobert.

The two men were old acquaintances but nonethless Savary handed over a letter, certified by the office of the Foreign Minister of France, instructing the general to work carefully and in the strictest confidence with the bearer, examining the project scrupulously, before arriving at one of two conclusions: possible or impossible.

And so it was that, in the most clandestine manner imaginable, France's two most senior undercover operators began their feasibility test on behalf of their government; and in a sense, on behalf of Prince Nasir Ibn Mohammed of Saudi Arabia.

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