

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

---



# Hunter Killer

Patrick Robinson

# Contents

About the Book  
About the Author  
Also by Patrick Robinson  
Title Page  
Cast of Principal Characters  
Prologue

Chapter One  
Chapter Two  
Chapter Three  
Chapter Four  
Chapter Five  
Chapter Six  
Chapter Seven  
Chapter Eight  
Chapter Nine  
Chapter Ten  
Chapter Eleven  
Chapter Twelve  
Chapter Thirteen

Epilogue  
Author's Note  
Copyright

## About the Book

Saudi Arabia, the world's leading oil nation, is on the brink of revolution. While the Royal Family is ransacking the dwindling coffers, the country seethes with unrest. Vowing to end the destructive rule, Crown Prince Mohammed sets in motion a top-secret operation to destroy the Saudi oil industry. In search of an ally, a nation with a naval power willing to help in return for a share of the oil wealth, he turns to France. Her lethal Hunter Killer submarines can inflict devastating damage to the country's massive oil installations and help shift the power structure of the world's oil giant.

On the other side of the globe, as the ferocious battle for the desert kingdom begins and the world's oil markets plunge into chaos, Admiral Morgan, former Security Advisor to the President, and Lt. Commander Ramshawe are summoned to the White House. Here, they discover the masterminds behind the evil plot: a mysterious French Colonel they call 'The Hunter,' and none other than Morgan's arch enemy, HAMAS General Ravi Rashood ...

## About the Author

Patrick Robinson is the author of seven previous international bestselling thrillers: *Nimitz Class*, *Kilo Class*, *H.M.S. Unseen*, *Seawolf*, *The Shark Mutiny*, *Barracuda 945* and *Scimitar SL-2* and, most recently, *Ghost Force*. He is also the author of several non-fiction bestsellers including *True Blue* (with Dan Topolski) and *Born to Win*. He is the co-author with Admiral Sir Sandy Woodward of *One Hundred Days*.

*Also by Patrick Robinson*

Fiction

*Ghost Force*

*Scimitar SL-2*

*Nimitz Class*

*Kilo Class*

*H.M.S. Unseen*

*Seawolf*

*The Shark Mutiny*

Non-fiction

*Classic Lines*

*Decade of Champions*

*The Golden Post*

*Born to Win*

*True Blue*

*One Hundred Days*

*Horsetrader*

**PATRICK ROBINSON**  
**HUNTER**  
**KILLER**



arrow books

## CAST OF PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

### **United States Senior Command**

Paul Bedford (President of the United States)

Admiral Arnold Morgan (Supreme Commander Operation Tanker)

General Tim Scannell (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs)

Admiral Alan Dickson (Chief of Naval Operations)

Admiral Frank Doran (C-in-C Atlantic Fleet)

Admiral George Morris (Director National Security Agency)

Colonel Commander Jimmy Ramshawe (Personal Assistant Director NSA)

Admiral John Bergstrom (SPECWARCOM)

### **United States Foreign Services**

Charlie Brooks (Envoy US Embassy, Riyadh)

Agent Tom Kelly (CIA Field Officer, Marseilles)

Agent Ray Sharpe (CIA Brazzaville, Congo)

Agent Andy Campese (CIA Chief, Toulouse)

Agent Guy Roland (CIA, Toulouse)

Agent Jack Mitchell (CIA Field Officer North Africa, Rabat, Morocco)

### **United States Navy**

Captain Bat Stimpson (Submarine Commanding Officer, USS *North Carolina*)

Captain David Schnider (Submarine Commanding Officer, USS *Hawaii*)

Captain Tony Pickard (Commanding Officer, USS *Shiloh*)

PO1 Billy Fallon (Helicopter aircrew, USS *Shiloh*)

PO1 Commander Brad Taylor (SEAL Team Leader)

## **French Senior Command**

le President of France

erre St Martin (Foreign Minister)

iston Savary (Head of the Secret Service, DGSE)

eneral Michel Jobert (C-in-C Special Operations)

## **French Navy**

lmiral Georges Pires (Commandement des Fusiliers Marine  
Commandos COMFUSCO)

lmiral Marc Romanet (Flag Officer Submarines)

aptain Alain Roudy (CO hunter killer submarine *Perle*)

ommander Louis Dreyfus (CO hunter killer submarine  
*Améthyste*)

. Garth Dupont (Commander Frogmen *Améthyste*)

ommander Jules Ventura (Commander Special Forces in Gulf,  
*Perle*)

. Remé Doumen (Leader Assault Team Two, Saudi Loading  
Docks)

aman Vincent Lefèvre (Assistant to Commander Ventura)

## **French Special Force Commanders Saudi Arabia**

ajor Etienne Marot (2/IC Troop Three, Khamis Mushayt)

ajor Paul Spanier (CO Troop One, Airbase Assault)

ajor Henri Gilbert (Troop Two, Airbase Assault)

## **French-Appointed Military Commanders Saudi Arabia**

olonel Jacques Gamoudi (Ex-Foreign Legion. C-in-C Saudi  
Revolutionary Army in Riyadh)

ajor Ray Kerman (aka General Ravi Rashood, C-in-C  
HAMAS, C-in-C Southern Assault Force, Saudi Arabia)

## **French Foreign Services**

gent Yves Zilber (DGSE, Toulouse)

ichel Phillippes (DGSE, Field Chief, Riyadh)

ajor Raul Foy (DGSE, Riyadh)

ivoy Claude Chopin (French Embassy, Brazzaville, Congo)



## **Members of the Kingdom's Royal Family**

Prince Khalid bin Mohammed al-Saud (Playboy)

the King of Saudi Arabia

Prince Nasir Ibn Mohammed al-Saud (Crown Prince)

## **Saudi Military Personnel**

Colonel Sa'ad Kabeer (Commander 8th Armored Brigade, Diversionary Assault Airbase)

Captain Faisal Rahman (al-Qaeda battalion, Riyadh)

Major Abdul Majeed (Tank Commander Airport Assault)

Colonel Bandar (Tank Commander Revolutionary Army, Riyadh)

## **The Israeli Connection**

Ambassador David Gavron (Washington)

Agent David Schwab (Mossad, Marseilles)

Agent Robert Jazy (Mossad, Marseilles)

Abraham Mostel (*Sayanim*, Air Traffic Control, Damascus)

## **Key International Personnel**

Sergeant Shane Collins (British Army electronic intercept operator, JSSU, Cyprus)

Mr David Norris (Chairman International Petroleum Exchange, London)

Abdul Gamoudi (Father of Colonel Jacques Gamoudi)

## **Lives**

Mrs Kathy Morgan

Mrs Shakira Rashood

## **European 'Royalty'**

Princess Adele (South London) (deceased).

## PROLOGUE

PRINCE KHALID BIN MOHAMMED AL-SAUD, aged twenty-six, was enduring a night of fluctuating fortunes. On the credit side, he had just befriended a spectacular looking Gucci-clad blonde named Adele who claimed she was a European princess and was just now clinging on to his left arm. On the debit side, he had just dropped \$247,000 playing blackjack in one of the private gaming rooms.

The Casino in Monte Carlo was currently costing Khalid's great-great uncle, the King, around the same amount every month as the first-line combat air strength of the Royal Saudi Air Force. There were currently almost 35,000 Saudi royal princes giving new meaning to the word hedonism.

Like young Prince Khalid, many of them loved Monte Carlo, especially the Casino. And blackjack. And baccarat. And craps. And roulette. And expensive women. And champagne. And caviar. And high-speed motor yachts. Oh, boy; did those princes ever love motor yachts?

Prince Khalid pushed another \$10,000-worth of chips towards his new princess and contemplated the sexual pleasures which most certainly awaited him. Plus the fact that, like him, Adele was of royal birth. The King would approve of that. Khalid was so inflamed by her beauty he never even considered the fact that European royalty did not usually come with what sounded suspiciously like a south London accent.

Adele played on, laughing gleefully, fuelled by vintage Krug champagne. She played blackjack with all the subtlety of a train crash. It took her precisely nine minutes and 43

seconds to lose the \$10,000, and even Prince Khalid, a young man with no financial brakes whatsoever, found himself groping as much for the anchors as for Adele's superbly turned backside.

'I think we shall seek further pleasures elsewhere,' he smiled. He caught the eye of a champagne waitress and requested a floor manager to settle his evening's account.

Adele's laughter carried across the room but no one turned a hair as the young Saudi prince blithely signed a gambling chit for something in excess of \$260,000. It was a bill he would never see. It would simply be added to the losses he had already accumulated that month, totalling more than a million dollars. And then it would be forwarded directly to the King of Saudi Arabia, whose office would send a cheque, sooner or later. These days it was later rather than sooner.

Prince Khalid was a direct descendant of the mighty Bedouin warrior Abdul Aziz, 'Ibn Saud', founder of modern Saudi Arabia, progenitor of more than 40 sons and God knows how many daughters before his death in 1953. The young Prince Khalid was of the ruling line of the House of Saud, but there were thousands of cousins, uncles, brothers and close relatives. The King treated them all with unquestioning generosity.

With such generosity, in fact, that now, towards the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century the great oil kingdom of the Arabian Peninsula stood teetering on the brink of a financial precipice, because millions and millions of barrels of oil needed to be pumped out of the desert every day purely to feed the colossal financial requirements of young spendthrifts like Khalid bin Mohammed al-Saud.

He was one of dozens who owned huge motor yachts moored in the harbours the length of the French Riviera. His boat, *Shades of Arabia*, a growling 107-foot long, sleek white Godzilla of a powerboat, could not make up its mind whether to remain on the water or to become a guided

missile. Built in Florida by the renowned West Bay SonShip Corporation, it boasted five staterooms and for its size was just about the last word in luxury yachts.

The captain of *Shades of Arabia*, Hank Reynolds, out of Seattle, Washington, nearly had a heart attack every time Prince Khalid insisted on taking the helm. It made no difference if the yacht was on a calm open sea, either. Prince Khalid had two speeds. Flat out or stopped.

He had been arrested five times for speeding in various French harbours along the Riviera. Each time he had been fined heavily, twice he had ended up in jail for a few hours, and each time the King's lawyers had bailed him out, on the last occasion stumping up a fine of \$100,000. By any standards, Prince Khalid was an expensive luxury for any family, but he could not have cared less. And he was certainly no different from all the other young scions of the House of Saud.

Slipping his hand deftly around Adele's waist, he nodded to the other 10 members of his entourage who were crowded around the roulette wheel, playing for rather smaller stakes. They included his two minders Rashid and Ahmed, both Saudis, three friends from Riyadh, and five young women, two of them Arabian from Dubai and wearing Western dress, three of them of European royal lineage similar to that of Adele.

Outside the imposing white portals of the Casino, three automobiles – two Rolls-Royces and a Bentley – slid into the forecourt attended by a uniformed doorman from the world's most venerable gaming house. Prince Khalid handed him a \$100 bill – the equivalent of more than two barrels of oil on the world market – and slipped into the back seat of the lead car with Adele. Rashid and Ahmed, each of them highly paid servants of the King himself, also boarded the gleaming dark-blue Silver Cloud, both of them in the wide front seat.

The other eight were spread evenly between the other two cars and Prince Khalid instructed his driver. 'Sultan, we will not be returning to the Hermitage for a while - please take us down to the boat.'

'Of course, Your Highness,' replied Sultan, and moved off towards the harbour, followed, line astern, by the other two cars. Three minutes later they pulled alongside *Shades of Arabia*, which rode gently on her lines in a flat calm harbour.

'Good evening, Your Highness,' called the watchman, turning on the gangway light. 'Will we be sailing tonight?'

'Just a short trip, two or three miles offshore, to see the lights of Monaco, then back in by 1 a.m.,' replied the Prince.

'Very good, sir,' said the watchman, a young Saudi naval officer who had navigated one of the King's Corvettes in the Gulf Fleet headquarters in Al Jubayl. His name was Bandar and he had been specifically selected by the C-in-C to serve as first officer on *Shades of Arabia* with special responsibilities for the wellbeing of Prince Khalid.

Captain Reynolds liked Bandar and they worked well together, which was just as well for Captain Hank because one word of criticism from young Bandar would have ended his career. The Saudis paid exorbitantly for top personnel from the West, but tolerated no insubordination directed at the royal presence.

Gathered in the magnificent stateroom which contained a bar and a dining area for at least 12, Prince Khalid's party drank more vintage Krug from dewy magnums which cost around \$250 each. On the dining-room table there were two large crystal bowls, one containing prime Beluga caviar from Iran, about three pounds of it, never mind \$100 an ounce.

The other contained white powder in a similar quantity and was placed next to a polished teak stand upon which were set a dozen small, hand-blown crystal tubes, four and

a half inches long, each one exquisitely turned. The content of the second bowl was approximately twice as expensive as the Beluga. It was also in equal demand among the party.

Including the cost of the two stewards in attendance, the refreshments in the stateroom represented the sale of around 600 barrels of Saudi crude on the International Petroleum Exchange in London. That's 6,600 gallons. Prince Khalid's lifestyle swallowed up gas faster than the late lamented Concorde had in its day.

Right now he was blasting the white powder up his nostrils with his regular abandon. He really liked cocaine. It made him feel that he was the right-hand man of the King of Saudi Arabia, the only country in the world that bore the name of the family which ruled it. His name.

Prince Khalid did his best not to confront the undeniable truth that he was as close to useless as made no difference. His Bachelor of Arts degree from a vastly expensive California university was, so far, his only true achievement. But in order for that degree to be awarded his father had had to persuade the King to build a huge new library for the university *and* stock it with thousands of books.

These days, as he wandered the glorious seaports of the Mediterranean all summer, reclining in the opulence of *Shades of Arabia*, it was only when he took his nightly snort of cocaine that he felt he could face the world on equal terms. Indeed, on some evenings, with exactly the right combination of Krug and coke, Prince Khalid felt he could do anything. Tonight was one of those evenings.

The moment his head cleared from the initial rush he ordered Bandar to the bridge to inform Captain Hank that he, Khalid, would be taking the helm as soon as the great motor yacht had cast her lines and was facing more or less in the right direction. 'Have the Captain call me as soon as we're ready,' he added, making absolutely certain that Adele could hear his stern words of command.

Ten minutes later he took Adele up to the enclosed bridge area with its panoramic views of the harbour and assumed command of the yacht. Captain Hank, a burly north-westerner who had spent most of his life on freighters on Puget Sound, moved over to the raised chair of First Officer Bandar, who stood directly behind him. Adele slipped into the navigator's spot next to Prince Khalid.

'She's ready, sir,' said Hank, a worried frown already on his face. 'Steer zero-eight-five, straight past the harbour wall up ahead, then come right to one-three-five for the run offshore ... and watch your speed, *please*, Your Highness ... that's a harbourmaster's patrol boat right off your starboard bow ...'

'No problem, Hank,' replied the prince. 'I feel good tonight; we'll have a nice run.'

And with that he rammed open both throttles, driving the twin 1800hp DDC-MTU 16V2000s to maximum revs, and thundered off the starting blocks. Adele, whose only previous experience of ocean transport was a cheap day trip on the ferry from Gravesend to Tilbury in south-east London, squealed with delight. Hank Reynolds, as usual, nearly went into cardiac arrest.

*Shades of Arabia*, now with a great white bow wave nearly five feet above the calm surface, charged through Monte Carlo harbour at a speed building to 25 knots. Her powerful surge shot both crystal bowls clean off the dining-room table, and the white dust from the billowing cloud of cocaine caused even the ship's pure-bred Persian cat to believe that at that moment he could probably achieve anything. His purring could be heard in the galley, 50 feet away, like a third diesel engine.

Meanwhile, ships and yachts moored in the harbour rocked violently as the heavy wake from *Shades of Arabia* rolled into them, caused glasses and crockery to crash to the floor, and even people to lose their footing and bounce

into walls. For a brief moment the whole point of the Draconian French laws about speeding, which are enforced in every Riviera harbour, became clear to everyone.

Prince Khalid never gave them a thought. He hurtled past the harbour walls, missing the flashing light on his port side by about 10 feet, and roared out into the open sea. With all care cast aside by the Krug-coke combination, he hammered those big diesels straight towards the deep water, less than a mile offshore.

And out here, with more than 60 fathoms beneath his keel, the prince began a long swerving course through the light swell, to the delight of his guests, all of whom were by now on the top-deck aft viewing area, marvelling at the speed and smoothness of this fabulous ocean-going masterpiece.

No one took the slightest notice of the big searchlight a mile astern which belonged to the coastguard patrol launch, summoned by the harbourmaster and now in hot pursuit, making almost 40 knots through the water.

The night was warm but there was heavy rain cloud overhead and it was extremely dark. Too dark to see the massive shape of the ocean liner which rode her gigantic anchor one mile up ahead. In fact, there was a light sea mist, not quite fog, lying in waxen banks over the surface of the sea.

One way and another the 150,000-ton Cunarder, the *Queen Mary 2*, was extremely difficult to see tonight, even with all her night lights blazing. Any approaching vessel might not lock on to her, even 500 yards out, unless the afterguard was watching the radar sweeps very carefully, which Prince Khalid was most certainly not doing. Captain Hank was so busy staring at the blackness ahead that he too was neglecting the screen. But at least he had an excuse, mainly that he was frozen in fear for his life.

At length he snapped to the prince, 'Steady, sir. Come off 15 knots. We just can't see well enough out here ... this is



too fast ...'

'Don't worry, Hank,' replied Prince Khalid. 'I'm feeling very good. This is fun ... just for a few minutes I can cast aside the cares of my country and my responsibilities.'

Captain Hank's eyes rolled heavenwards as his boss tried to coax every last ounce of speed out of the yacht, despite the fact they were in another fog bank and visibility at sea level was very poor.

The watchmen on the largest, longest, tallest and widest passenger ship ever built did, however, spot the fast-approaching *Shades of Arabia* from a height close to that of a 21-storey building. They sounded a deafening blast on the horn which could be heard for 10 miles and at the last minute ordered a starboard side reverse thrust in order to swing around and present their sharp bow to the oncoming motor yacht rather than the 1,132-foot hull. But it was too late. Much too late.

*Shades of Arabia* came knifing through the mist, throttles wide open, everyone laughing and drinking up on the aft deck, Prince Khalid tenderly kissing Adele, one hand on the controls, the other caressing her. Hank Reynolds, who had heard the *Queen Mary's* horn echo across the water, yelled at the last moment, 'JESUS CHRIST!!' He dived for the throttles but not in time.

The 107-foot motor yacht smashed into the great ocean liner, fine on her port bow. The pointed bow of *Shades of Arabia* buried itself 20 feet into the steel plating. The colossal impact caused a huge explosion in the engine room of the prince's pride and joy and the entire ship burst into flames. No one got out but bodyguard Rashid, who had seen the oncoming steel cliff and hurled himself off the top deck 20 feet into the water. Like Ishmael in *Moby Dick*, he alone lived to tell the tale.

Two days later in a palatial private residence in the northern suburbs of the city of Riyadh, Prince Nasir Ibn

Mohammed al-Saud, a devout fifty-six-year-old Sunni Muslim, and the heir apparent to the King, was sipping Turkish coffee and staring with horror at the front page of the London *Daily Telegraph*.

Beneath a picture of the badly listing *Queen Mary 2*, spanning six columns was the headline:

DRUNKEN SAUDI PRINCE ALMOST SINKS  
THE WORLD'S LARGEST OCEAN LINER  
*High-speed motor yacht rams the QM 2  
causing mass evacuation in  
100 fathoms off Monaco*

The picture showed what was left of *Shades of Arabia* jutting out from the bow of the ship. It clearly showed the heavy list to port on the for'ard half of the mighty ship. But more alarming were the French coastguard helicopters swarming above the stricken liner, evacuating some of the 2,620 passengers and 1,250 crew.

The lifeboats were also being lowered, even though there was no immediate danger of the great ship sinking. But it could not propel itself and would have to be towed into port to be pumped out and temporarily repaired, in preparation for the 2,000-mile journey to the mouth of the Loire, to the shipyards of Alstom Chantiers de l'Atlantique in St-Nazaire where she had been built.

Prince Nasir was appalled. An inset picture of young Prince Khalid was captioned:

*He died in a fireball precisely as  
he lived - reckless to the end*

The story named the prince's dead companions, chronicled the consumption of champagne in the Casino. It told of Prince Khalid's losses at the tables, his womanising, his love of cocaine, his incredible wealth. It quoted Lloyd's

insurance brokers ranting and raving about their losses, bracing themselves for a huge payout to the Cunard shipping line for collision damage to the \$800 million ship, loss of income, law suits from passengers, compensation to the French Government for the costs of the evacuation.

Prince Nasir knew perfectly well this was the biggest story in the world, one which would sweep the television and radio stations of the United States and Europe, as well as every newspaper in the world. And it would go on doing so for several days yet.

The prince loathed everything about it. He hated the humiliation it brought upon his country. He detested the flagrant defiance of the Koran. And he abhorred the sheer self-indulgence of Prince Khalid and the irreparable damage to Saudi Arabia's image caused by this lunatic spending of petro-dollars by young men in their twenties.

Prince Nasir would one day be king. And the only obstruction standing between him and the throne of Saudi Arabia was his well-publicised and vehement disapproval of the lifestyles of the royal family. For the moment, however, he was the nominated Crown Prince, a wise and devout Muslim who had made it quite clear that when he ascended the throne it was all going to end.

Nasir was the outstanding political and business mind in the Kingdom, at home in the corridors of power in London, Paris, Brussels and the Middle East. The King valued his counsel in a wary and cautious way, but, of course, Prince Nasir had countless enemies: sons, brothers and grandsons of the King.

There had been three attempts to assassinate him. But the Saudi populace loved him. He alone stood up for them, gave interviews revealing the real reason for the drop in their state incomes from \$30,000 to \$7,000 over 15 years: the astronomical cost of the royal family.

Nasir was a tall, bearded man, descended like most of the royal family from the great Ibn Saud. For him the call of

the desert was never far away. Most evenings he would be driven out to the cooling, lonely sands north of the city, and there he would rendezvous with friends, and his servants could spread upon the desert floor a vast near-priceless rug from Iran. A three-sided tent would be erected, and there they would dine and talk of the great revolution to come, a revolution which would surely one day topple the ruling branch of the House of Saud.

Today the prince rose to his feet muttering, as he had done many times before, 'This country is like France before the Revolution. One family bleeding the state to death. In eighteenth-century Paris, it was the Bourbon kings. In twenty-first-century Riyadh, it's the al-Saud family.'

And then, louder now, as he hurled the newspaper aside, *'THIS HAS TO STOP!'*

## 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.

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 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 ...'

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?'

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?'

'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 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 proprietors 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