

‘Reasonable Doubt’

A Novel

By

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When investigative journalist Amélie Lagarde learns that her brother has been killed whilst diving on the wreck of a WW2 submarine, she doesn't share the police's view that it was an accident. Enlisting the help of Harry Parker, adventurer and ex-Gurkha officer, she sets out to prove her point. Together, they get drawn into a desperate battle between the intelligence agencies and the world's most elusive terrorist. With the death toll mounting and the Government reluctant to act, Harry and Amélie have little option but to take matters into their own hands. From the streets of London and the island of Malta to Kathmandu and the mountains of Afghanistan, the story that unfolds will grip you from the first page!

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CHAPTER 1**Day 1, Friday****17 Days until the UK General Election**

Malik left the flat and descended the stairs to the street below. He was in Valetta, the capital of Malta. A beautiful city steeped in history, it had been home to the Knights Hospitaller for over two hundred and fifty years. The building he'd just left had been their headquarters until, in 1798, Napoleon had expelled them from the island. Malik smiled as he emerged into the late August sun; the irony of plotting against the west in a building that had once housed the protectors of Christian pilgrims was not lost on him

He walked slowly through the streets until he came to a small square. Of average height and build, his dark suit, crisp white shirt and slim black briefcase suggested that he worked in one of the many shipping offices that characterised this part of the city. His fine features and dark hair implied Arab or Maltese descent but the reality was that he was an Afghan. His most notable feature, at least when he wasn't wearing sunglasses, was his eyes. Blue and clear, they were also cold, a legacy, perhaps, of the violence they had witnessed, much of it inflicted by their owner.

It was midday and the square was full of people from nearby offices heading to the restaurants and bars that lined its sides and it took Malik a while to find an empty table. He ordered a coffee, lit a cigarette and sat back, scanning the crowd for anything unusual. He'd spent years avoiding highly trained people who'd been sent to kill him. The secret to his longevity was his ability to blend into his surroundings and his constant vigilance. His phone rang. He'd been expecting the call and he answered it immediately. 'Good,' said Malik when the caller eventually finished his report, 'now be ready, it will be soon.' As he walked out of the square, he dropped the phone through a drain, pausing briefly until he heard the reassuring 'plop' as it hit the water several feet below. Mobile phones were invaluable but they were easy to track and he had no intention of making it easy for his many enemies.

Malik was pleased with the call. It confirmed that everything was now in place, bringing months of detailed planning to a close. If all went well, the man he had just spoken to would soon be responsible for the deaths of hundreds of people, their only crime being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Before then, Malik had one loose end to deal with. That it required him to kill with his own hands neither worried nor excited him – it was just something that had to be done as quickly and efficiently as possible.

CHAPTER 2

Harry Parker was irritated, not because his arm was bleeding but because he suspected his pride was about to take a severe pounding. A hundred feet above him on the most difficult part of the climb, Lucy Masters, his girlfriend of the last six months, edged her way under the overhang. He let out more rope, leaning back as far as his climbing harness would allow so he could watch as Lucy moved slowly up towards where the roof of the overhang jutted out from the rock face. 'Nearly there!' she shouted down to him.

'I hope you fall!' Harry shouted back, smiling as Lucy laughed at his comment. He'd tried the same move less than half an hour ago. Coiling himself up, he'd jumped for the lip of the overhang but missed the large hold that the guidebook said was there. Lucy had been belaying him and, although she'd tightened the rope as soon as she'd realised that he wasn't going to make it, he'd still fallen a good ten feet before swinging into the side of the cliff and cutting his arm on the rock. He watched as Lucy reached behind her and dipped her hand into the chalk bag at her waist before bringing her feet up so that she was in a sort of vertical crouch. The hold she was aiming for was right on the lip. She just needed to get one hand on it and then she'd be able to pull herself over the protruding brow and onto the relatively straightforward pitch above. Harry gave her more rope, conscious that if she didn't make it, she would fall a fair distance before swinging into the cliff face just as he'd done. But then Harry noticed that the top runner had almost worked itself out of the crack they were following, probably as a result of his fall. The rope connecting the two of them ran through a karabiner clipped onto the runner. The theory was that if Lucy fell, the rope would pivot around the runner and she would be left hanging below it. The problem was that because it was now loose, the runner would most likely come flying out of the crack the moment it had to bear Lucy's weight. The next runner was a good fifteen feet below which meant that if Lucy didn't reach the hold, she'd fall about thirty feet before smashing into the rock face. Even though she was wearing a helmet, she'd be lucky to escape without breaking something. Harry needed to warn her but it was too late. As he opened his mouth to speak, Lucy launched herself. The next few seconds seemed to pass in slow motion. One moment she was crouching under the overhang like a cat about to pounce and the next she was flying through the air with her arms outstretched. Harry held his breath.

'Thank God!' shouted Lucy as the fingers of her right hand closed around the knobble of rock. She waited until she'd stopped swinging and then reached up to try and find the other hold that was supposed to be there, scrabbling with her fingers until she found what she was looking for. With both hands now on bomb proof holds, she whooped aloud.

Harry wiped his brow with the back of his arm and then let out more rope. 'Well done!' he shouted up to her, 'I owe you a beer.'

‘That you do,’ replied Lucy, ‘and I’m going to hold you to it when we get back to the hotel as that was really quite scary.’

‘It would have been even more scary if you’d known that your last runner was about to come out.’

‘No way!’ exclaimed Lucy, pulling herself up. She made it look easy. Harry hoped that he’d be able to copy her but, at six feet two and weighing just over two hundred pounds, he was better suited to the sustained physical demands of soldiering than he was to the gymnastics of extreme cliff climbing. ‘Come on up whenever you’re ready,’ Lucy called down a few minutes later. Harry flexed his damaged arm. It still hurt but it would have to do. He unclipped himself from the rock and started to climb.

‘I’m there,’ shouted Harry when he reached the place where the overhang jutted out from the face.

‘For what it’s worth,’ Lucy shouted down, ‘it’s not as bad as it seems. Just aim for the chalk.’

‘Thank you,’ replied Harry sarcastically, ‘that’s very helpful.’

‘Sorry,’ she shouted back, ‘just trying to help!’

His heart was racing and he could feel the sweat trickling down his spine. He had complete confidence in Lucy’s ability to hold him if he fell but this was probably the most difficult climb he’d ever done and he was, after all, nearly three hundred feet above the ground. ‘After three,’ shouted Harry.

‘OK,’ replied Lucy. Harry counted aloud and then, aiming for the chalk marks, leapt. Lucy felt the rope go slack and pulled it in quickly. A moment later one of Harry’s hands appeared on the lip of the overhang. It was quickly followed by the other. He’d made it. All he had to do now was to pull himself up. When, after a few seconds, nothing had happened, Lucy started to get concerned.

‘Are you OK?’ she shouted.

‘Yes,’ replied Harry, ‘but my arm’s killing me.’ Lucy started to laugh.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘I want to say “man-up cupcake and get on with it” but I won’t.’

‘It’s a good job,’ replied Harry, ‘because if you did, I’d tell you to fuck off!’

Lucy continued laughing. ‘You’ve done the hard bit.’ Harry gritted his teeth, took a few deep breaths and then started to heave himself up. It was a struggle because his arm was definitely not working properly but eventually he made it. A few minutes later, he joined Lucy on yet another precarious ledge.

‘Well done partner!’ she said, holding up her hand for him to ‘high five.’

‘Thank you,’ replied Harry, slapping the palm of his hand against hers.

‘It wasn’t that bad was it?’ she asked, her blue eyes glistening mischievously.

Harry smiled at her but resisted the temptation to respond, lighting a cigarette instead. He inhaled deeply and looked out over the trees in front of them. They were near the top of the cliff and the view up the Loire Valley was stunning. 'It's worth it for the view,' he said, turning to face Lucy. 'And at the risk of inflating your already giant-sized ego, that was a hell of a climb. I honestly don't know how you did it.'

'Great looks and sheer talent?' ventured Lucy, raising her eyebrows.

'Something like that,' replied Harry, smiling as she leaned forward to kiss him.

They decided to play 'rock, paper, scissors' to determine who would lead the last section. Lucy lost. 'Off you go,' said Harry, laughing as he sorted out the ropes. 'I'll just stand here and continue admiring the view whilst you push the limits of human endurance.'

'Don't take the piss,' replied Lucy, punching him on his bad arm. He winced and reached out to try and grab her with his other hand but she jumped nimbly aside and quickly started to climb, stopping after a few minutes to make sure that the rope was running free below her. She looked at Harry. He was watching her but his eyes weren't focused on her face. 'Stop it,' she shouted at him. His eyes met hers.

'I was admiring the view.'

Lucy started to laugh. 'No you weren't, you were watching my ass!'

'As I said, I was admiring the view!' Lucy laughed again.

Harry watched her climb, thinking about their relationship. At times like this, there was nowhere else he'd rather be. Lucy was funny, attractive and deliciously free-spirited but, despite this, their relationship had started to feel less right, at least in his view. He didn't know how else to describe it. They just didn't seem to fit together as well as they had. The problem was that he didn't know why or what to do about it.

CHAPTER 3

Amélie Lagarde stood on the platform in the Gare St Lazare waiting for her train. It was early Friday afternoon and Paris' second busiest station was already teeming with people keen to escape the city. Tall with long dark hair, her tight black jeans and short leather jacket accentuated her figure. Ordinarily, she would have enjoyed the admiring glances of the men as they rushed passed her to catch their trains but today she was distracted. Her dark glasses hid the tears that kept welling up in her eyes. Her mother had phoned earlier in the week with the news that her younger brother had been killed in a diving accident. She and Simon had always been close and the news of his death was having a profound effect on her, knocking her confidence and replacing it with a fragility that was quite alien to her usual character. As an investigative journalist, she'd been exposed to violence and death many times but this was different; this was personal and it hurt.

From what she'd been told, it appeared that her brother had been diving on an old German submarine just off the coast of a town called Calpe on Spain's Costa Blanca. According to the Police, he'd apparently got himself stuck inside the wreck and had run out of air before he could escape. What a dreadful way to die, Amélie kept thinking to herself. She imagined the panic that must have gripped him as Simon fought to free himself. She started to cry again as her train pulled into the station. The doors opened and she climbed on board, lugging her suitcase behind her. She was on her way to see Jean-Paul, an old friend who'd invited her to spend a few days with him before they flew to London for Simon's funeral. He lived in an old farmhouse on the Normandy coast which looked out over one of the beaches that the Allies had landed on during the invasion of France in June 1944. It was a great place and Jean-Paul was always good company. French Canadian by birth, he'd left Canada at the age of eighteen to join the French Foreign Legion, resigning after five years to become a journalist on the same paper as Amélie. Although he still did occasional newspaper assignments, he was now working on a book about his time in the Legion.

Amélie's alarm woke her just as the train was pulling into Bayeux station. She'd slept right through. She could see Jean-Paul on the platform as she opened the door. Dressed in his usual t-shirt and old Levi's, his hair was shorter than usual and he obviously hadn't shaved for a few days but she had to admit that he looked good.

'I'm sorry about Simon,' said Jean-Paul, wrapping his arms around her.

'It's all so awful,' said Amélie returning his hug. 'I spoke to him on the phone a few days before and he seemed so alive.'

'It must have been a hell of a shock. How's your Mum coping?' asked Jean-Paul picking up her suitcase as he linked his arm through hers and led the way out of the station.

'Stoic as usual,' replied Amélie. 'Nothing ever seems to shake her. Since Dad died, she's become harder and less emotional about everything.'

Although her father's death had hit her hard, he'd been well into his eighties and had died of a heart attack whilst playing golf with some of his banking buddies. It had, according to her mother, been a natural death at the end of a long and well lived life. But there was nothing natural about her brother's death and Amélie suspected that it would take her a very long time to come to terms with it.

As they came out of the station, Amélie could see Jean-Paul's battered old Land Cruiser at the far end of the car park. She spotted the boards tied to the roof and decided to change the subject. 'Still surfing?'

'Yes,' he replied. 'There's a great beach on the way here and it was just too good an opportunity to miss. The waves were great.'

Amélie smiled sadly. Her brother and Jean-Paul had got on well. A shared love of the outdoors, and of the sea in particular, had given them a lot of common ground.

'I thought we'd stop for a late lunch on the way home,' said Jean-Paul, casting a sideways glance at Amélie as he eased the car onto the main road. 'I've found this neat cafe which does a great steak.'

Amélie smiled again. Although he'd lived in France for over ten years now, his North American roots occasionally showed through. No native European would describe a restaurant as 'neat'. 'Say 'out and about',' she asked him.

'Oot and about,' replied Jean-Paul laughing. It was a private joke. Like most Canadians, he pronounced 'out' with a long 'o'. This was the first time she'd laughed since she'd heard about her brother's death and she squeezed Jean-Paul's arm affectionately, already pleased that she'd come to see him.

'Thank you for inviting me to stay.'

'That's OK,' replied Jean-Paul, 'I could sense you needed a break. And besides, I've finished the book, well, the final draft at least.'

Amélie leaned closer to Jean-Paul and rested her head on his shoulder, closing her eyes as he told her about his struggle to finish the book. She wasn't really listening but his humorous take on the challenges of the last few weeks was comforting. She could feel herself starting to unwind.

An hour later they arrived in the centre of a small market town. Jean-Paul parked the car and they walked over to the restaurant arm in arm. The waitress greeted him affectionately. In her mid-twenties with a trim figure and a ready smile, she showed them to an outdoor table overlooking the town square and then went to get menus.

'Have you?' asked Amélie, noticing the relaxed ease with which Jean-Paul and the waitress spoke to each other, as well as the admiring way he watched her retreating figure.

'Certainly not,' he replied with fake indignation.

The waitress returned with the menus, cutting short their conversation. They both ordered steak and fries, a house speciality, and a bottle of the local red.

‘And to be honest, I haven’t had the time,’ continued Jean-Paul when the waitress had gone. ‘The book’s been all consuming. All I seem to have done for the last few months is write. I’ve rarely left the house, except to shop for essentials and do the odd bit of surfing to clear the mind.’

‘But now it’s finished, you can relax,’ said Amélie, taking his hand and squeezing it. They continued chatting as lunch was served, avoiding any mention of Simon’s death. They had a lot of mutual friends from their time on the paper together in Paris and it took a while for them to catch up on them all. As Jean-Paul had promised, the steaks were outstanding and it was early evening by the time they eventually left the restaurant. Twenty minutes later, Jean-Paul pulled up outside his front door. He carried Amélie’s bags up to her bedroom and then tried to persuade her to have a final drink.

‘No thanks,’ she replied. ‘If you don’t mind, I’ll just go to bed. I haven’t slept well since I heard about Simon and I think the journey’s taken it out of me.’

‘That’s fine,’ said Jean-Paul. ‘If the weather’s good tomorrow morning, I’ll wake you up and we can go for an early swim.’

‘Swim?’ questioned Amélie. ‘But I haven’t bought my swimsuit.’

‘No problem,’ replied Jean-Paul. ‘I’ve got a wetsuit that’ll fit you if you want to borrow it. See how you feel tomorrow.’

‘Thanks Jean-Paul, thanks for everything.’ He kissed her on the cheek and left her to it, going down the corridor to his own room. The circumstances were far from ideal but he fell asleep with a smile on his face thinking about how good it was to see Amélie again.