

# **Canuck**

## **Book 1**

### **“The babysitting routine”**

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## The babysitting routine

### 1

Martin Colette eased back in his chair, taking a break from his computer screen, a glance at his secretary as she busied herself behind her own computer.

After twelve years with the service, Colette was now the Operations Manager for Department P2 within SIS – Britain’s overseas intelligence agency, formerly known as MI6. P2, responsible for the Club-Med countries of Europe, was a low priority department that had always been at the bottom of the pile of interesting departments to work for. It wasn’t as bad as Research, but it wasn’t far off.

At the end of the Cold War, the Russian Section – where the career people traditionally worked on interesting cases – had lost direction for a while. But, thanks to the rise of al-Qa’eda, the Russian Section’s best and brightest had something new to get into, and many switched to the Middle East section. Those who had learnt Russian and German were hurriedly retrained, and those who spoke Arabic suddenly found themselves in high regard and much needed.

Colette spoke French and Spanish, so would forever be assigned to P2 and the Club-Med countries. But, with the rise of al-Qa’eda and the problem of illegal immigrants from Afghanistan landing in Greece and Italy, his department had gained a little extra work, and a little extra respect around the canteen.

When his phone went, it was his boss. ‘Martin, got a minute?’

‘I’ll be right down, sir.’

Colette placed down the phone and stood. ‘Boss wants me,’ he told his secretary. ‘I’ll be in with him if you need me.’ She hadn’t even looked up from her screen.

Stepping out of his office on the fourth floor of the MOD building, central London, he headed along a bland internal corridor, fifty yards and to the last door, the small sign at eye-level declaring: "Dept. P2. Chambers, D.K." Knocking, then turning the handle, he opened the door just enough to show his face. Chambers was on the phone, finishing a call, but waved Colette in and to a seat.

Placing down the phone, Chambers said, 'Have a job for you, small job, but turning over rocks sometimes shows up a gem.' He handed over a file. 'You're familiar with Mohammad Sayeed?'

Colette's brow knitted. 'Yes, sir: Pakistani nuclear scientist who assisted the Iranians with their programme. Not our department...?'

'He has a brother, who's been to Europe before, and who's booked on a flight tomorrow to Malta, via Rome. Put a watcher on him, discreet surveillance, see if something turns up.'

Colette had already scanned the first page within the file. 'He's clean, sir, according to this.'

'Indeed, but was suspected of being a message gofer. It's probably a waste of time, but ... well, put tail on him.' Chambers face was already in a file. 'Thanks, Martin.'

Back in his office, Colette requested a courier for Malta. Thirty minutes later a lady appeared; mid forties, plump, glasses.

'This file, hand delivery tomorrow, secure hand-over to our man only,' Colette listed off. 'His mobile number is on the Post-It note, call him when you arrive there, I'll brief the agent now. Oh, have you met Canuck before? I did ask for someone who had.'

'Twice, sir. Michael J. Canuck, pronounced Can-ook. He dropped out of Oxford University after two years, he dropped out of military college after two years, he dropped out of Interpol after just under two years, joined us and ... dropped out after little more than two years.'

Colette eased back, regarding the courier coolly.

She continued, 'He's now a freelancer who likes to be called Mick because it makes him sound Irish and working class, when he's anything but that. Canadian diplomat father, English mother, Russian grandmother; speaks Russian, Arabic, and German fluently. And ... he holds the record for the most disciplinary hearings in a single year.'

Colette resisted a smile. 'And a good field agent, despite what people say.'

'They say he's a bit unstable, sir.'

'Unstable?' Colette took off his glasses and made a face. 'Now, how could someone who gets paid a modest fee to risk his life - or a lifetime of incarceration in a foreign hellhole - be called unstable?' He put his glasses back on and attended a file. 'Thank you. Off you go.'

\* \* \*

'Mick, it's me,' Colette said into his mobile. 'Can you talk?'

'Sure, just sat in a café surrounded by people within earshot. But at least it's sunny.'

'Where are you?'

'Somewhere warm, in a café. How about yourself?'

'The sky is as grey as my office wall. Listen, got a job for you: it's a simple surveillance job for a week or two, courier heading to Malta tomorrow morning, Wednesday. She'll call you when she gets there. Money and details with the courier.'

'And the job's particulars?'

'Low grade tail, a clean suspect with an interesting brother. He might be a message gofer of some sort.'

'I'll pack my case, clean my teeth and shine my shoes. What's the courier like?'

'I wouldn't, so you definitely wouldn't. Call me after you get the file.'

Colette's secretary was staring across as he ended the call.

‘What?’ he asked with a shrug. ‘When dealing with ... *the boys*, you have to be ... one of the boys, you know ... talk in their language.’

Her expression hadn’t altered.

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At Malta’s Luqa Airport, the courier stepped out to the busy taxi rank and into the sun, placing on her sunglasses. She dialled the number.

‘Universal Exports,’ Mick answered.

‘Ha bloody ha,’ the courier said. ‘Where are you?’

‘Get a taxi to the Hilton Hotel, St. Julian’s Bay.’

‘I know it.’

‘Don’t go in, go into the marina next door, down the steps all the way and meander around to the left till you can meander no more due to the ocean being in the way. It’s a lovely day, so ... take your time.’

‘See you soon.’ She grabbed the next taxi, her bag over her shoulder, and joined the traffic heading towards St. Julian’s Bay, just a few miles south of the airport. Paying the driver outside the Hilton Hotel, she walked away from the hotel, its reception at the end of a cul-de-sac, and found the steps leading down to the marina on the left.

‘Very nice,’ she said as she stepped down to the first landing, glancing at the upmarket open-air restaurants positioned either side, the establishments currently closed, the marina seemingly devoid of tourists at the moment. She checked menus posted to a board. ‘And suitably expensive.’

Holding onto a central metal railing, she negotiated steep concrete steps till she drew level with the pontoons and boats, stood in a small half-circle marina dominated by a cliff-like arrangement of tall apartments behind her, the apartments blocking the sun in this part of the marina. She scanned the beautiful, yet oddly quiet marina, the boats all similar white

cruisers with blue cloth covers. They varied in size, but hardly varied in design as they bobbed gently.

Turning left, she noted the closed offices of a marine engineering company that had seen better days, the rooms of the Hilton Hotel now above her head. A wooden bridge presented itself, a way for pedestrians to cross a small offshoot of the marina that didn't seem to go anywhere. Walking over, she stepped into the sun and warmed immediately, following the path, and the only path, around to the left.

She emerged onto a square dock that had obviously been a functional part of the local port at some point in history, noticing large anvil-shaped bollards that were once used to secure boats, many still dotted along the quayside, a few now painted white. The dock was empty, no boats and no one about, leaving her wondering if this was the right place.

A pleasant hundred-yard stroll took her past a scuba diving centre with a German sign, the centre now closed, and brought her to the far side of the square dock. She was now facing the way she had come, suddenly realising that it would have been impossible for anyone to follow her, and that that was probably the reason for her being here. The gentle roar of the ocean called to her from the other side of a breakwater, but she couldn't see over it, a little sea spray registering on her cheeks. Her phone trilled.

'Yes?'

'Enjoying the stroll?'

'It's lovely here, so you take your time.'

'I figured you could use a walk after the flight. Double back, up the stairs, cross the road and down, straight ahead and up the hill into Paceville, find a restaurant and have a cold drink. I'll be ten minutes.' The line went dead.

The courier slowly retraced her steps, ambling back around the dock in no particular hurry and staring down into the clear and inviting turquoise water. Back at the top of the steps she crossed the cul-de-sac, the Hilton entrance on the right, noticing now steps down to a road running almost parallel, the other side

of a tall tower. Reaching that road, she headed up the hill at a gentle pace till the shops and cafes began, choosing one with a large green awning.

‘Hello,’ the waitress offered.

‘Large orange juice, please, with ice. Oh, and do you have a sandwich?’

‘Cheese, tuna –’

‘Tuna. Thanks.’

With the drink and sandwich placed down she tucked in, watching the street and trying to remember what Canuck looked like. Six foot, athletic build, collar length medium brown hair, and not bad looking.

He pulled out a chair and sat beside her, placing down a half drunk beer. She glanced over her shoulder, Canuck having come from inside the café, her contact now wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses.

‘Nice day for it,’ he offered.

‘How did you know I’d choose this café?’

‘It’s the first suitable café up that road. So, you have something for me?’

She moved her sandwich and drink, opening her bag on her lap. ‘Five thousand Euros. Count and sign, please.’

Under the table, Mick flicked a thumb across the wad of Euros, placing it in a shoulder bag of his own. The courier presented a yellow pad, Mick signing and dating, stating the amount in words underneath. Next came a thin file, handed over without inspection and also placed into his bag, a second page of the pad signed and dated.

‘All done?’ he asked.

‘All done - *Mick*,’ she confirmed, a glint in her eye.

‘It’s been a pleasure,’ he said with a grin. Scraping back his chair, he stood and entered the café. Unknown to the courier, he exited via a door in the toilets. She slowly finished her drink and sandwich, but he didn’t reappear.

\* \* \*

Twenty minutes later, Mick stepped into a quiet back-street bar in St. Paul's Bay, populated now by just two old men sat drinking. He tossed a set of car keys to the barman, a stocky white-haired man in his sixties with a ruddy complexion.

'My car still in one piece?' the barman asked.

'Jim, that car is worth more as scrap. Pour a damn beer.'

'Did you ... get the job?'

'Yep,' Mick said as he sat in the corner and opened his shoulder bag.

The pint of beer was brought over, placed down as Jim sat. 'Any ... work for me?' Jim risked.

'This job is a babysitting routine, mate; the guy's clean, but his in-laws are dirty.'

'Hah! If the family is dirty, he's dirty,' Jim countered. 'Didn't I teach you anything?'

Mick sipped his beer. Placing down the glass, he said, 'The guy arrives on the three o'clock flight from Rome.' He checked his watch. 'Fancy closing up early?'

Jim took in the two old men near the door. 'This time of year the place is dead.' Loudly, he called, 'Time gentlemen, please!'

The pensioners glanced around, checking watches and wall clocks, before attempting to finish their drinks quickly in numerous small sips.

'Am I ... getting paid for this taxi service?' Jim nudged.

Mick handed over a crisp fifty Euro note. 'How do you manage to survive here anyway?'

'It's all paid for – no mortgage, the bills are low, and the summer is good enough to make up for the quiet winters. I go fishing a lot.'

'How long now since ... you know?'

Jim turned away, watching his two customers shuffle out. 'She'll be gone five years in May.'

'Your kids?'

‘Paul was out here with his wife and grandkids a few months back – first time in three years, Susan’s not one for flying. I have to go to her.’

Mick took in the run-down Irish theme bar, a bar that could be found in a thousand locations around the Med, run by a thousand retired Brits. ‘Is all of your retirement money tied up in this dump?’

Jim made a face. ‘Selling it now would lose money, but I might move on. The summer is a killer, being open from eleven in the morning till gone one at night. And I can’t afford the staff.’

Mick flicked through the notes on Sayeed. ‘I always fancied my own bar, but – you know – somewhere with a bit of a buzz, girls in bikinis.’

‘Yeah, well I’m a bit beyond all that.’ Jim gestured towards the file. ‘Anything interesting?’

‘Fifty-two year old Pakistani on a tour of Europe.’

‘Just wait outside the brothels for him,’ Jim scoffed.

‘He’ll have a hard time finding one of those around here,’ Mick pointed out as he flicked through pages. ‘You have lap dancers that aren’t allowed to be naked, and a street of curb crawlers that would turn the stomach of hardened sailors with one eye - after a long voyage. And drunk!’

‘Should see the hotels in winter, especially Christmas. An ambulance turns up each day to take a pensioner away. More fly home in coffins than on the damn planes.’

Mick took in the empty bar then faced his old mentor in SIS. Jim’s forehead was pink and sunburnt, his hair thin, his eyebrows a wild mess of white hair, his cheeks reddened, his Adam’s Apple covered in white hair, more white hair escaping the top of his shirt. He took a moment. ‘I’ll give you a couple days work *if* ... there’s work to be had. I can’t say more than that.’

‘Appreciate it, Mick. The last divorce case we did helped.’

Mick sighed. ‘Yeah, could do with a few more like that.’

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