

## The Scorpion's Gate — Excerpt

The Diploma Hotel  
Manama, Bahrain

The Waiter flew through the lobby café.

Behind him came a blizzard of glass shards, embedding ragged-edge daggers of shattered windows in arms, eyeballs, legs, brains. The concussion wave bounced off the marble walls with a mule-kick punch he felt in his stomach. Then there was the deafening sound of the explosion, so loud it surrounded him with a physical force, shaking every bone and organ in his body.

Brian Douglas dove for the floor, behind a tipped table. His response was automatic, as if muscle memory had told him what to do, innate reflexes from those terrible years in Baghdad when this had happened so many times. As he flattened his body on the plush carpet, he felt the floor of the Diplomat Hotel shake. He feared the fourteen-story building would collapse on top of him. He thought of New York.

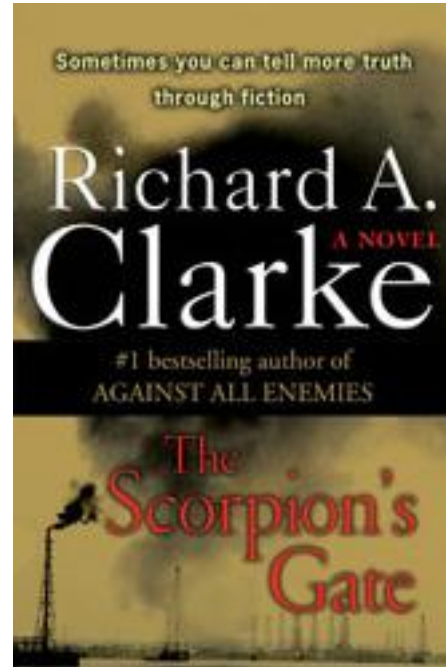
Now there were long seconds of silence before the screams began, cries to Allah and God's other names, in Arabic and English. Once again there were the shrieking voices of women, painfully high-pitched and piercingly loud. Once again there were men moaning in pain and crying out as glass continued to shatter onto the floor around them. An alarm rang needlessly above it all. Just a few feet away from Brian, an old man wailed as the blood streamed down from his forehead and spilled across the front of his white robe, "Help, please! Help me, please! Oh God, please, over here, help . . ."

Although Brian had been through bombings, it chilled his bones, knotted his stomach, made his head throb, blurred his vision, and caused him to choke, gasping for air. His eardrums were ringing and he had a sense that he was somehow disconnected from the reality around him. As he tried to focus, he sensed something was moving inches to the left of his head. With a chill shudder, he realized it was the twitching fingers of a hand severed from a body. Rivulets of blood ran down the upended tabletop to his right, as though someone had thrown a bottle of red wine against it.

Sofas, chairs, carpets, the palm plants in giant ceramic pots were burning in the rubble of what had been the elegant, soaring lobby of a five-star hotel. Then Brian focused on the overpowering scent, a smell that made him gag again as he struggled to roll over. He coughed and spit as he inhaled the vile, heavy stench of ammonia, nitrate, and blood. It was a retching smell he hated but knew all too well. It was the stench of senseless death that brought back painful days of friends lost in Iraq.

Through the shattered glass that opened onto the driveway in front of the hotel came another sound he recognized as automatic gunfire. "Brrrt, brrrt . . ." Seconds later a cacophony of sirens blared, the European-made ones going up and down in singsong, the American sirens wailing their imitation of space aliens landing.

Suddenly, Alec, one of Brian Douglas's bodyguards, was over him. He wondered how long he had been down. Had he been out? "Does it hurt anywhere, sir?" Alec asked.



Brian now noticed that blood was dripping down from his scalp, matting his sandy hair. “No, Alec, somehow my luck has held once again,” he said, getting up on one knee, grabbing the overturned table for support. Brian’s head spun like a carnival ride. He tried to wipe away some of the blood and dust and rubble from his face. “Where’s Ian?” For the three years that Brian Douglas had been Bahrain station chief of SIS, British intelligence, the staff at the station had insisted that he take two bodyguards with him wherever he went, driving to and from his house on Manama’s northern beach, going on trips elsewhere in the little country, or visiting the subordinate posts in the other Gulf states. For the last year it had almost always been Alec and Ian, two former Scots Guards sergeants. They had watched over him with a mix of professional polish and personal attention, as if he were a favorite nephew.

“Ian was standing watch by the door, sir,” the big man replied, helping Brian as he managed finally to stand up. “Ian is no longer with us.” Alec said it with a slow sadness, in his soft Aberdeen lilt, accepting what he could not change, that their friend had been murdered. “There’ll be time for that later, sir, but right now we have to get you the hell out of here.”

“But there are people here who need help,” Brian stammered as Alec grabbed him firmly by the arm and moved him expertly through the mounds of wreckage and out the door to the pool deck.

“Aye, and there are experts coming to help them, sir, and besides, you’re in no shape to be helpin’ anyone.” Alec had found the service stairwell next to the pool and was steering Brian toward it. “Hear all of that shootin’ out front? This is not yet over.”

The two men moved through the smoldering debris, trying not to step into the pools of blood or onto the pieces of pink and white and gray that had so recently been living flesh and bone and brain. Glass crunched under their weight as they moved to the stair and down to the exit door. An emergency lighting box provided a pale beam as the men headed down the darkened stairs. At the bottom, Alec tried the door.

“She would be locked tight, of course,” said Alec as he motioned Brian to stand back. Pulling his Browning Hi-Power .40-caliber gun out of the holster beneath his left arm, Alec blasted three shots at the doorknob and lock. The roar of the shooting in the concrete stairwell brought the throbbing in Brian’s head to a peak of pain. Kicking the door open, Alec smiled as he turned back to Brian. “Don’t worry,” he said as he reholstered the pistol, “there are nine more in that clip.”

Brian followed Alec through a long service tunnel. At its end, he saw two other station men, standing by a door to the alley behind the hotel. “The station has had this route on the list for four years, since that foreign ministers’ conference here,” he heard Alec say through the ringing. The two big men by the door, folding Belgian machine guns slung under their windbreakers, rushed Brian to an unmarked white Bedford van blocking the alley. In seconds, the van was moving quickly down the streets of Manama, away from the burning tower of devastation that had been the Diplomat Hotel, from the fires, from the dead, and from those who wished through their pain that they were dead.

The van barreled past the Hilton and Sheraton hotels, where police officers and security guards scurried about the entrances erecting barricades in case they were the next to be hit. The van sped past Number 21 Government Avenue, site of the Kutty, the British diplomatic compound in Bahrain since 1902.

Alec and Brian nodded with appreciation as they saw the Gurkha guards, with their foot-long kukri knives and the Belgian folding automatic weapons, ready for action, lining the street in front of the embassy. They were members of the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Gurkha Rifles, headquartered in Brunei. These short soldiers were some of the few Nepalese left who still served as part of the British army, a tradition that dated back almost two centuries. Alec had helped train the 2nd Battalion when Whitehall

had decided the Gurkhas would protect British embassies in the Gulf. “Silent, ruthless, dangerous little men,” said Alec as the van continued down Government Avenue past the embassy. “They’d give their lives if they had to, to protect the Kutty.”

As soon as they heard the bomb blast, the Station began implementing the response plan for a terrorist action, bypassing the British Embassy, a possible target for a follow-on attack, and moving senior station staff to a clandestine facility off-site.

The Bedford slowed as it turned left onto Isa al Kabeer Avenue, just past the embassy, and headed to a compound two blocks down on the right. As it made the turn, Brian looked out the slit in the backdoor window and saw three Bahraini Army Warrior armored vehicles lumbering, black smoke snorting up from their exhaust pipes. The Warriors moved to the front of the Foreign Ministry building across Government Avenue. At the precise second that the Bedford reached the gray metal gate of the Al Mudynah Machine Works compound, the covert home of the backup station, a 15-foot-high gate moved aside. The van dashed forward into the courtyard and then braked hard. Armed men rushed around the vehicle. Seconds behind them, a British army medic in civilian clothes slid open the side door of the van and scrambled inside. He tended to Brian Douglas’s head wound before the station chief got out.

Brian’s number two, Nancy Weldon-Jones, was standing next to the van as he emerged. She flinched as she saw the bandage on his head. “No need to worry, Nance. I’m going to live.” He paused and looked at the asphalt. “Unfortunately, Ian isn’t.” Then he looked up again. “Now, then, what’s the report?”

“I got on to Admiral Adams over at the Navy base,” Nancy said. “There’s dead Brits and Americans, maybe a dozen each. Three times that many in local staff and guest workers. We think it was a truck bomb, probably an RDX mix over ammonium perchlorate.” She offered her arm to Douglas, but he shook his head and stepped forward. She continued her report: “A drive-by shooting followed, just as the rescue workers showed up. Word is that the drive-by shooter was in a Red Crescent wagon. An American Under Secretary for something-or-other was on an upper floor. Of course, the lucky bastard was unharmed. He wasn’t in the lobby café because he had them open up the al Fanar Club on the roof for a private little breakfast with somebody.”

With Alec urging them forward, gun in hand, the station chief and his deputy crossed the yard and went inside the white concrete-block building. “Okay, Nance, but we know first reports are usually wrong. Any claims of responsibility?”

“Not yet. No need, really. There’s no question it’s Bahraini Hezbollah, otherwise known as your friendly Iranian Rev Guards and their lovely Qods Force boys.” Qods Force, or Jerusalem Force, was the covert action arm of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps. “Is London up on secure-vid yet?” Douglas asked as he forced himself slowly up the stairs to the station’s backup communications center.

“Up and waiting. You should have the Big Four: the director, her deputy, chief of staff, and . . .” She smiled. “The ME division chief.”

“Ah, good, what could we do without the ME division chief?” Douglas asked sarcastically. Robby Touraine, nominally his immediate supervisor, seemed to delight in making Brian’s professional life miserable.

Brian and Nancy made their way through two vault doors to a room within a room, its walls, floor, and ceiling made of heavy see-through plastic. Exhaust fans buzzed loudly in the walls. The “boy in a bubble” room was just large enough for the plastic conference table that filled it. Attached to the far wall was a 42-

inch flat screen showing the crisp image of a far more elegant conference room, complete with wood paneling and a china tea service. Just sitting down in her pale blue chair at the head of that table in Vauxhall Cross was Barbara Currier, director of the British Secret Intelligence Service.

As soon as she sat down, the director began the meeting. "Douglas, you look an awful mess. My deepest sympathies about Ian Martin. I will ring up his wife as soon as we are done here. We will, of course, take care of her." Currier took a cup of tea being offered to her by the ME Division Chief Touraine. "Do we understand, Brian, that this is the beginning of an overt destabilization effort directed against Bahrain by the new rulers in Riyadh?"

"I agree it's unlikely a one-off, Director," the station chief said as he looked into the camera above the monitor, "unless they had it out for someone specific, perhaps that visiting American dig. No, I would advise Whitehall that this is the start of something, but not in our view inspired by Riyadh. More likely Iranian-inspired and intended to get the little king here to kick out the Americans from their Navy base."

"Will King Hamad fall for that, Brian?" asked Currier's chief of staff, Pamela Braithwaite, who had been chief of staff for three directors of SIS.

"Not bloody likely, Pam. They're a savvy group here. They may be close to the Americans, but they can and do think for themselves." Douglas leaned back, running his fingers through his unkempt hair and adjusting the bandage. "I think what we have here is the opening of a new terror wave in Bahrain, controlled by Tehran. And remember," Douglas continued as he glanced at some papers that his deputy slid in front of him, "the Shi'a are in the majority here, even though the king's government is largely Sunni. Iran has seen that as a potential weakness here for years. Failed every time they tried to exploit it, but haven't given up."

Douglas saw his nemesis, SIS Middle East Division Chief Roddy Touraine, lean into the camera's frame of view. "With all deference to our heroic and, I see, bloodied station chief, I think in the thick of it, as it were, Director, that he overlooks the obvious. This is not an Iranian attack. It comes from across the causeway from Saudi. The Riyadh crowd wants to make sure King Hamad doesn't let the Yanks use this little island as a base for operations against their fledging caliphate."

"Whoever it is, Director," Douglas responded, his face reddening, "we will give all assistance to the king here, but we shall not be alone in that. The Americans won't abandon this place. The little Gulf states are all that they have left after the fall of the House of Saud and the creation of Islamyah, coming right after their pullout from Iraq. The Yanks are like sandwich meat spread thin onto the Gulfies between two very big hunks of hostile bread, Iran and Islamyah."

In London, Barbara Currier shook her head in sadness. "Kicked out of Iran in '79, politely pushed out of Saudi in '03, invited to leave Iraq by their Frankenstein in '06. Then the fall of the al Sauds last year. Now they are just hanging on in the region, with only the little guys to help them: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the Emirates, Oman. And how long can they hang on there? Sic transit Gloria imperi. Just ask us." She paused at a noise coming from the Bahrain end of the conference call. "What was that?"

A long, low rumble shook the bubble room in Bahrain. The exhaust fans seemed to cough. From London, Currier could see on her flat screen that someone who had just entered the room in Bahrain was bending over Brian Douglas, whispering something. Douglas had his hand over the microphone. He spoke briefly to those around him, and then he looked back up at the camera.

“The attack on the Diplomat was not a one-off, Director. The noise that you just heard was the sound of the Crowne Plaza, down the street from the Diplomat, pancaking.”