

The Black Fox

Run for your life...

Gordon Bickerstaff

Gavin Shawlens Thriller #3

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Zoe Tampsin is resourceful, smart and Special Forces-trained, but she has been given an impossible mission.

She has to protect scientist, Gavin Shawlens, from assassination by the CIA, and discover the secret trapped in Gavin's mind that the CIA want destroyed.

As the pressure to find Shawlens escalates, the CIA send Zoe's former mentor to track her down and her fate seems sealed when he surrounds Zoe and Gavin with a ring of steel. With each hour that passes, the ring is tightened, and the window for discovering Gavin's secret will shut.

Zoe is faced with a decision that goes against all of her survival instincts. If she is wrong, they both die. If she is right, she will discover the secret and become the next target for assassination.

Also by the same author

Deadly Secrets *The truth will out ...*

Everything To Lose *The chase is on ...*

Toxic Minds *The damage is done ...*

Tabula Rasa *The end is nigh ...*

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*

'If you are going through hell, keep going.'

Winston Churchill

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One

Marysville, St Clair County, Michigan, USA

Joe Koswalski's fingers squeezed the black leather armrests of his swivel chair. He felt angry with the high-handed attitude of the CIA agent leaning over him and invading his personal space. They had waltzed right into the operations control room, waving their creds in the air, and assumed command as if they owned the place.

When had the CIA leapt to the top of the pile of government agencies? Arrogantly expecting everyone to run after them, like good little government employees.

The CIA agent scanned the surveillance screens at Joe's workstation while a noisy face-to-face argument raged behind them. His long neck pushed close to Joe's face for the perfume in his extra triple hydration deodorant to sting Joe's nose like a hot needle. Joe didn't need to listen carefully to find out what the CIA wanted.

'All you need to know is there is an imminent threat to our national security. I have orders from the President. You'll do exactly what I tell you or you'll stand aside and I'll find someone who will,' Ertha Odeele shouted.

'I will not,' Marty Candose shouted back.

'Damn you!' Ertha screamed and pulled a handgun from inside her coat.

'Listen, lady, you have no idea what you're asking. If we have a border incident with Canada, we will catch a barrel load of shit,' Marty argued.

'Do as I say or I will charge you with treason,' Ertha lashed back.

'Get outta here, lady. You have no business being here.'

'Do what I tell you to do.'

'No way, lady. I'll not provoke an international incident with Canada. Not without written orders. No way in hell,' Marty replied, and stared down the gun pointing at his head.

The CIA had arrived just after six-thirty in the morning just when the shift had moved into its final hour in the operations room of the US Customs and Border Protection Station at Marysville near the border with Canada.

Border patrol supervisor, Joe Koswalski, had worked for CBP since 1998. A portly figure bulged out of his oversize uniform with chubby cheeks and a shiny bald head. Like his waistband, his mind bulged with big ideas.

At the start of his shift, his boss Marty had given him good news. He'd chosen Joe to organise the celebrations, to mark ninety years since the border station opened in the summer

of 1924 at Port Huron. Its role back then had been to catch rumrunners smuggling contraband liquor into the United States. Its role ninety years later had changed markedly.

Initially, the station had been located at the railroad terminal near the mouth of the Sarnia-Port Huron railroad tunnel. In 2007, the station moved to a high tech surveillance complex in Marysville as part of the air and maritime domain awareness project.

As unofficial historian and curator, Joe managed all the journals passed down through the decades, detailing stories of border incidents over the years. Some real humdingers he felt sure people would like to hear about.

He'd not long started to tell Marty about some of his grand ideas for the celebrations when the three CIA people burst into the operations control room.

Ertha Odeele led the CIA team and immediately ordered all other CBP agents out of the room, leaving only Joe and Marty to control the surveillance equipment. The argument behind Joe escalated and the swearing got more intense. Joe glanced back to see Marty and Ertha standing toe-to-toe, finger pointing and posturing.

Still wrapped in her outdoor clothes, gloves and hat, Ertha wore a black trouser suit with the jacket buttoned over her potbelly. Long collars from her white blouse lay on the lapels of her jacket.

A forty-six-year-old African-American from Texas, Ertha's accent had long since been smoothed out during her time in Washington. She kept her hair short and wore small gold earrings that matched a gold crucifix pendant. She'd been in New York visiting her sister, when she got an urgent call from her boss, ordering her to report to the CIA office in New York.

Although a whole head shorter than six-foot Marty, she postured aggressively and argued vociferously with the uniformed Marysville Operations Supervisor. She demanded total surveillance blackout on her command.

Marty refused, and argued that the Canadian Border Services Agency would react to any incursion across the border.

Just when Marty thought she'd backed down, a call came through from Border Patrol Headquarters in Washington. Marty's Division Chief lectured Marty about the need for cooperation in matters of national security.

After a few short but intense words, Marty received assurance that any border incident would not be his responsibility, and not on his record. Reluctantly, Marty ordered Joe to prepare for the blackout. They stood ready to respond to calls from border patrols in the area.

The matter now settled, Ertha raised her radio to her head and said, 'Nighthawk-5, this is Nighthawk-2. You have a green light. Get it done quickly and quietly.'

*

Garristone Gate in Sarnia, a quiet residential cul-de-sac of twelve detached houses, looked idyllic with perfectly manicured lawns and white concrete drives. At ten minutes before seven, two black Chevrolet SUVs with all round darkened windows drove onto the lot, heading for house 2089.

The lead SUV carrying the first team moved fast up the sweeping concrete drive and screeched to a halt at the front door. The following vehicle carrying the second team stopped at the bottom of the drive.

Two men, Peters and Modamo, and two women, Heskan and Amster, quickly piled out of the first vehicle and ran over to the house. They all wore black leather gloves, boots and dark winter coats with collars pulled up to keep out the cold. The men were over six-foot tall, clean-shaven with short hair and muscular builds. Modamo carried a door battering ram.

Heskan, the Nighthawk team leader, looked confident and determined. A trim, red-haired, fresh-faced twenty-seven-year-old, confident and bossy, and aiming for the next big tick on her résumé.

Amster had tucked her shoulder-length blonde hair into a brown fur and suede trapper hat. She carried six more years and ten more kilos than Heskan. Although more experienced, she had less ambition than Heskan.

Two other similarly dressed men, Coleman and Miles, slipped out of the second SUV and took positions facing the road. Coleman appeared to be a clone of the other two heavies except he wore a black beanie over his bald head. Miles had a medium build with short hair and a thin neat beard. He wore a flat cap and stood a little shorter than the others at five-seven.

Coleman had worked with Peters, Modamo and Amster on previous operations. They knew and trusted each other. Heskan had joined them fresh out of Langley with lots of theory and simulation training, but not much field experience.

Coleman had criticised Heskan's plan and warned her that it needed more preparation. He had wanted the front door or the back door. They had argued and Heskan ordered Coleman to guard the driveway. He stood ready to block interference from passers-by although he didn't expect any.

The sun would soon start to rise on this crisp but dry mid-November morning. Rain had fallen overnight, and the ground proved slippery underfoot where crunchy ice had formed. The temperature had dropped below zero but not low enough for hard ice.

In the late spring, Garristone Gate had welcomed new neighbours when two women moved in to number 2089. They soon discovered the women preferred to keep themselves to themselves. They weren't Canadians and didn't appear to have jobs or any kind of work.

For the first month or so, a Canadian cousin or friend helped them settle into the area. Brought groceries and chauffeured them around in a Toyota Highlander with blackened windows.

Some neighbours found the younger woman friendly and approachable, and she often played alone in the back garden with their white West Highland terrier dog. The older woman seemed nervous, and wary of talking to strangers.

It took five hard bangs with the battering ram for Peters and Modamo to smash through the front door. Normally two or three from these two heavies would have been enough. The door had been well secured.

They didn't announce who they were, and the only sounds heard in the house were their frustrated curses at not entering the house quickly. Modamo ran upstairs to the bedrooms followed by Heskan and Amster. Peters covered the front door.

The young woman, dressed in pyjamas and slippers, had been in the kitchen feeding her dog, Whiskers. When the door banging started, she switched off the light in the kitchen, and stumbled over the dog's food bowl as she hurried to the hall.

She did exactly what she'd been told to do if the house came under attack. She ran into the hall and hit the silent alarm button on the wall at the bottom of the stairs. She darted back to the kitchen, emptied the cutlery drawer onto the floor, and then ran out of the kitchen back door. Whiskers ran after her. Everything seemed like a game to Whiskers.

Anyone else attacked in their home would be in shock, but the young woman appeared calm and focused, just as she'd been in rehearsals. She knew the plan, run fast to first base, and stop for nothing. In the back yard, she ran past their swimming pool to the Howard Watson Nature Trail.

She planned to turn east on the trail, run to Telfer Road, and then over to first base, Sarnia Fire Station 5. An escape plan she'd rehearsed every week for the first six weeks since she arrived in the house.

Coleman paced impatiently beside the second SUV. He looked up the drive to the house and watched the first team struggle to break the front door. He clapped his gloved hands together and puffed out warm breaths into the cold air, like cigarette smoke.

Just after the first team crashed into the house, he caught a glimpse of a woman in light-coloured clothes running to the wooded trail at the back of the house.

'We have a runner. I said we should cover the back door,' Coleman said to Miles.

'What will I tell Heskan?' Miles asked.

'Nothing is going to happen here. Tell her I've gone after the runner.'

Coleman grabbed a flashlight and ran after her. He took off his gloves and stuffed them inside his jacket pockets.

The woman had turned too sharply onto the trail, skidded on light grey compacted gravel and fallen down onto her knees. She rested for a moment as Whiskers sneaked under her arms and licked her face. She knew he wanted to be picked up as usual but it wasn't going to happen this time.

She pulled the leg of her pyjamas up past her knee to see blood oozing from small cuts. She heard someone running and saw a flashlight pointing in her direction. Like a sprinter taking off from a starting block, she launched her body down the track.

Coleman lit her body with his flashlight and shouted, '*Stop. Stand still.*'

Whiskers ran back to the man and barked. The woman stopped and looked behind. She saw the man standing with a gun and flashlight clasped between his hands. She put her hands in the air to surrender, bowed her body and inhaled deeply to catch her breath.

She looked at a blood patch on her pyjamas then at her foot and confirmed what she already knew, she'd lost a slipper. She smiled when she saw Whiskers walking behind the man. Her slipper in his mouth, flopping back and forth as Whiskers shook his head from side to side.

'I'm not going to hurt you, just relax. You need to come with us. For your safety, that's all. Everything will be good,' Coleman said to her.

The man walked toward her, holstered his gun and drew a pair of handcuffs from his belt. Whiskers ran back to the woman, her slipper still in his mouth, and then circled her before he ran back and dropped the slipper at the man's feet.

*

A Sarnia police cruiser had responded to the silent alarm. Headlights and roof lights flashed but no siren. Miles ran over to the police cruiser waving what looked like a badge in a pocket wallet. Short hair, flat cap, good coat, expensive scarf, shirt and tie, he looked official.

The Sarnia officer lowered his door window and saw two official-looking SUVs at the house. He expected to hear that first responders had everything under control. His eyes focused on the badge, and he didn't see a handgun moving to his head until too late. The Sig

handgun pushed so close to his face, he could see scratches and dints on the black nitron finish.

'Call it in as a false alarm. *Do it.*' Miles demanded.

The officer looked back at the house and tried to grasp the whole scene as fast as he could. Then he stared at the man to get a good look at his face.

'Okay, buddy, easy. Control, this is Adam one-niner, responding to silent alarm B-37. Show me at Garristone Gate. *Abduction in progress!*'

Miles smashed the butt of his handgun into the side of the officer's head to knock him unconscious. The radio operator shouted back for more information.

Miles ran back to his vehicle to grab his radio from the driver's seat. He reported loudly into his radio, 'Nighthawk, be advised, LEOs have been alerted. I repeat LEOs are rolling.'

Coleman walked toward the woman on the trail. A dozen more steps and he could grab her. He stopped and looked down at the dog at his feet, and said, 'Hey there, little guy. I ain't gonna hurt you.'

He leaned down to stroke the dog. He didn't see the woman allow a kitchen knife to drop down her sleeve into her hand. She threw it straight at him. It buried in his chest and cut his aorta. In less than a minute, he would bleed out. He grasped for his radio, but passed out and died before he could speak. He slumped backwards onto the ground.

If Coleman had been given the file on the women, he would have found out that the younger woman had been classified as highly dangerous. She had killed on impulse twice before. Once when a burglar planned to attack her sister, and once when her own friend tried to kill her sister. Both of them killed with a two-pronged fork, the type used for carving meat.

Neither the blood nor her knife in the man's chest bothered the woman as she collected her slipper and put it on her foot. Without another thought, she turned and ran down the trail. Whiskers stood beside the man and started to sniff around his body. The woman stopped and slapped her hand on her thigh for Whiskers to follow.

Two

Sarnia, Canada

At the house, Modamo pushed the woman from behind while Heskan dragged her through the front door. Local law enforcement officers were *en route* so there wasn't time for the woman to dress. They hauled her out in her pyjamas, large baggy dressing gown and slippers.

Amster got into the driver's seat and fired up the engine. Peters informed Heskan that he'd cleared the house and Miles told Heskan that Coleman had gone after the other woman.

'Move your butt,' Heskan said to the woman.

Frightened, the woman screamed, 'Who are you? What do you want?'

'Shut her up,' Modamo said to Heskan.

The woman saw that her sister wasn't in their vehicle. She panicked and said, 'Wait. Where's my sister? I can't leave her here.'

'Get inside,' Heskan ordered and pushed.

The woman resisted Heskan and pleaded, 'PLEASE. Not without my sister. You don't understand. She can't cope.'

'Move,' Heskan said.

'I haven't done anything wrong,' the woman pleaded.

They ignored her protest that the handcuffs were too tight. Heskan hurriedly slapped a piece of duct tape over the woman's mouth. The edge of the tape covered more than half of her nostrils, making it strenuous for the woman to breathe.

Approaching sirens in the distance raised Heskan's blood pressure. She didn't want her team, or her first extraction to end up with a shoot-out involving Canadian police. She dragged the side door open. The woman struggled to take steps for fear of slipping on ice. Modamo pushed the woman hard in the back. She tripped over her slippers and fell into the vehicle.

Her belly crashed onto the sill of the SUV and her head banged on the metal floor panel. She lay unconscious when Modamo heaved her inside. He bundled her onto the back seat as Peters closed the side door.

Heskan leaned out of the passenger door window and told Peters to go and help Coleman find the other woman. She turned her head inside, threw an anxious look at Amster, and said, 'What are you waiting for? Get moving.'

Heskan said into her radio, 'Nighthawk-2, this is Nighthawk-5. I'm rolling with parcel-one.'

Amster grunted as she spun the steering wheel and reversed violently onto the adjacent lawn. The SUV slipped around on the frosted grass, tearing up the lawn. She gunned down the lawn, past the police cruiser at the bottom of the drive, and out of the cul-de-sac.

Peters hurried down the drive to join Miles and slipped off his feet when he tried to stop at the second SUV. Miles told Peters that he couldn't raise Coleman on the radio.

Peters tried, 'Nighthawk-9, come in. Nighthawk-9, respond.'

No reply.

'Hang tight, we're on our way,' Miles said into the radio as Peters revved the engine and made a fast three-point turn to push onto the road.

He drove to the point where the trail opened onto Telfer Road. Peters parked three car lengths back from the opening. Tall trees and large bushes lined the opening, so his vehicle wasn't visible from inside the trail. Both men got out, looked around and waited.

When the woman came running out of the trail, she stopped when she saw the two men standing at their vehicle. They watched her walk backwards into the trail. She beckoned her dog Whiskers to follow her. Both men saw puffs of moist air around her face as she panted heavily into the cold air.

Miles fetched a twelve-gauge shotgun from the back of the SUV. He settled it in his arms and took aim. He waited a few seconds for her to react.

When she saw the shotgun, she turned and started back into the trail. He fired and the shell pounded into her back, knocking her off her feet. She fell forward onto the ground.

Miles ran to her with his shotgun ready to fire again. Peters followed and they watched her try to crawl forward, but her arms and legs jerked in an uncontrolled spasm. Miles hadn't fired pellets or a slug at the woman.

He fired a wireless Taser shotgun shell. When the shell slammed into her back, four electrodes penetrated her skin and delivered an electric charge that scrambled her muscle coordination. The sharp noise from the shotgun frightened Whiskers, and he ran back to the house.

Miles lifted the woman up in a firefighter's lift and took her to his vehicle. Peters reported that he had the second parcel. He ran along the trail until suddenly he stopped short. Shocked to see a knife sticking out of Coleman's chest.

'Geez. Fuck. Coleman is *dead!*' he shouted into his radio.

'No names.' Heskan fired back.

Sirens announced the arrival of Sarnia police at Garristone Gate as Miles and Peters carried Coleman out of the Howard Watson Nature Trail. Just before they drove off, Miles called in to report the recovery of Nighthawk-9. Peters drove to the rendezvous point.

The first team had raced toward Lake Huron along Huron Shores Drive to Old Lakeshores Road. A speedboat called Nighthawk waited with its engine revving, ready to whisk the captured women six miles south to Lakeside Park on the US side of Lake Huron.

The driver of the speedboat spoke to Ertha Odeele, and told her one of the parcels had arrived. Ertha told Joe Koswalski to prepare for surveillance blackout.

The woman appeared to be semiconscious when Modamo and Amster manhandled her out of their vehicle. They saw a lot of blood on the seat, and on her clothes and legs. She had a gash on the side of her head, and blood had run down her neck but not enough to explain the blood on her lower body.

They laid her on her back on the ground beside the vehicle, and quickly realised she wasn't obese as they'd thought. She was pregnant. They looked at each other, confused. No-one had told them to expect a pregnant woman.

The fall onto the vehicle's sill had ruptured her womb. She had lost a lot of blood, and they had no idea whether the bleeding would stop or get worse.

Amster fetched a first aid kit from the vehicle. Heskan ran back from the speedboat to the vehicle to find out why the woman lay on the ground.

'This is a fuck-up. She's in a bad way,' Modamo said to Heskan.

Amster said to Heskan, 'She's pregnant. Why didn't you tell us?'

Heskan knelt down and checked the woman's pulse.

'She's still strong. Get her up,' she said.

Modamo threw up his arms in frustration and said, 'We can't take her on the boat like this. She'll die for sure.'

'We need to take her to a hospital,' Amster added.

Heskan ordered, 'This asset can neutralise a risk to our national security. Get her on the boat.'

'Bullshit, she won't neutralise anything if she's dead,' Modamo said.

'What are we going to do?' Amster asked.

Heskan walked away from the vehicle, raised her radio to her chin and spoke to Ertha Odeele. Her voice edged with concern as she explained the asset's condition. She confirmed that Nighthawk-9 had fallen and that LEOs were closing on her position.

'I need that asset alive,' Ertha said.

The captain of the speedboat stepped out of his cabin and shouted to Heskan, 'Canadian patrol boat on the lake has turned around. Heading our way. ETA six minutes. We need to leave now.'

'Can you outrun it?' Heskan asked.

'If we go *now*,' the captain replied.

'I think she's losing her baby,' Amster called to Heskan.

Heskan called into her radio, 'Team two, ETA?'

'Three minutes,' Miles replied.

'One minute or you remain here to face the Canadians,' Heskan said.

'Go faster for Christ's sake,' Miles said to Peters.

'Nighthawk-2, the main parcel is damaged, transport could break it. What do you want me to do?' Heskan asked.

After a long pause, Ertha replied, 'Stick to the plan.'

Three

Darlington, County Durham, England

Zoe Tampsin sat at her kitchen table with a mug of black coffee between her hands. She ran her hand over her head, sighed loudly and looked longingly at the clock. Ten minutes past four in the morning. The room felt cold and dull with a stale smell. Yellow light from the street streamed through a grey net curtain and lit up one side of the room. The other side remained dark.

She sat in the middle of the room facing the dark side. She clasped her hands around the coffee mug for warmth while she reflected on the call she received from the head of the Security Service, the previous night.

He gave her new last-minute orders. He ordered her to abandon her current operation, take Dr Gavin Shawlens with her, and go dark. He warned her to hide deep because an intensive search would be launched to find Shawlens. He had organised an unmarked Astra car for her and she drove through the night to her doghouse in Darlington.

If she stuck strictly to the go dark protocol, she would not contact anyone and keep off the grid until he contacted her again, but she felt riled. She had serious unanswered questions about the previous operation, called SLIPFIRE, and she wanted them resolved.

Now, she had unexpected orders to go dark and prepare to be hunted like a fox who'd stolen the farmer's prize lamb. It felt unreal, out of control and suspicious. Preparation, planning and organisation were her trademarks. Her new orders unsettled her to say the least.

She took her coffee and went through to the living room. Very little street light penetrated the old dark brown curtains. Her eyes had adjusted to the dark and she stared at the picture on the wall opposite her sofa. Darkness and silence were old friends she knew well.

She put her coffee on the floor near her feet, and opened her mobile phone. She had drunk too much coffee while she deliberated and agonised over the past five hours. Finally, she made up her mind, and decided to break the go dark protocol.

*

Michael Tampsin's mobile rang and woke him up from a pleasant dream. It took him a few moments to engage his brain. He noticed his wife Stella's perfume. Her indirect way of telling him she would like to make love, but he'd got into bed forty-five minutes after her.

Stella groaned a groan. *Too late, mate*, she meant as she pulled on the duvet and turned over. He switched on the bedside light beside his cabinet, and turned his head to the bedroom

door when he heard the heating boiler cycling. The central heating prepared itself for another cold November morning.

His mobile phone lay on top of the bedside cabinet, still fast asleep. He reached inside the cabinet drawer for an old prepaid Nokia phone. It flashed with new importance. He sat up and sharpened up. Only three people in the world knew his Nokia phone number.

'Michael,' Zoe whispered.

'Zoe. What? Are you overseas?' Michael asked as he looked at the time.

'No. I'm at the doghouse.'

'It's four in the morning. I thought you must be overseas. Why are you at the doghouse?'

'How's Mum and Dad?'

'Fine, they're fine.'

'Stella?'

'Everyone's fine,' he said.

'How's my baby?'

'Amy is fine. She had a great time in Disneyland Paris with Alec. They just got back the other day. She's brought you back a lovely present. It's a gold-coloured—'

'Good. I'm glad she had a good time,' she interrupted and he heard tension in her voice.

'I truly love you, sis, but what are you doing at the doghouse, and why have you pulled me out of a perfectly lovely dream?'

'Michael, I'm stuck between a bullet and a bomb.'

'Oh, that sounds like a bugger of a job.'

'Yes, it is. It's been sprung on me. You know how much I hate that.'

He picked up strained concern in her voice, and he knew she'd landed in a bad place. She thrived on danger and faced fear head-on. Combat-hardened and Special Forces-trained, she had faced death many times. Her confidence weakened only when she faced something she couldn't control with smart planning and preparation. She could hide her concern from others but not from her brother.

'What can I do?'

'Nothing.'

'Do you need new rings?'

'Rings are good. Michael, if this job goes tits up, I want you to tell Dad not to believe anything the top brass say about me.'

'That sounds really bad,' he replied, and became concerned.

'No matter what they say about me, tell him to keep his powder dry. You know he thinks he has more clout than he does. He'll try to rattle the brass,' she added.

'I don't know ... he's still got powerful friends in the army.'

'This isn't an army job, it's a spooks job.'

Michael shook his head and sighed as he arranged the duvet around Stella's shoulders. He thought, *oh no, here we go again. What has she done now?* Many times, when they were at school, their teachers had called him to the staff room to tell him he needed to deal with his sister. As if he had any control over her.

She wasn't a bad child but she didn't like restrictions. Her teachers didn't like pupils who vaulted over the boundaries. Not that Michael had ever been a teacher's pet. In a fight, he got his fists out just as quick, but he had the nonce to step away from trouble at the right moment.

'Zoe, you asked me twice what they were like. I told you not to work for those clowns. It's always a chess game to them and you are nothing but a pawn in their wicked playground games.'

'Michael, when do I ever do what you tell me? Maybe you should've ordered me to go and work for them.'

'Copy that.'

The sound of her husky voice, saying his name, brought comfort to his thoughts. From her lips it sounded more personal. He loved how she always called him Michael and not Mike, Micky, Mikey or Mick as others did. He replied to those names but didn't like them. His mother called him Mikey from day one, and ever since aged two, his father called him Captain. Zoe always called him Michael.

'I'm still on the good side. It's just that people will tell Dad, I'm a traitor.'

'A traitor? Shit. Zoe. What have you done?' He forced the words out under his breath.

'I'm babysitting a boffin until my boss can figure out what to do with the baby. In the meantime I have to go dark and get the blame for kidnapping the baby.'

'What's the game plan?'

'I keep the baby in my doghouse. I'll be hunted like a wild fox. It's likely you and Dad will attract surveillance, so be on your guard. Better not warn Dad in case he kicks off.'

'Do you have backup?'

With a low sad voice she replied, 'Nada. Lonesome fox here, hiding in the blind.'

'Get some backup. That's an order.'

'I have few options on that score. When I'm branded a traitor, there will be an all-out alert on me. I can't trust anyone in Special Forces. People who know me will not believe it but they'll follow orders.'

'What about OTRs?'

'Do you know of any?'

'I'll see what I can find out from the On The Run unit. I'll let you know.'

'Phones will be risky when this kicks off.'

'Okay, if we can't talk, we'll just have to use Aunt Mary,' he said.

'Gosh. Is Mary still working?'

'Of course, I always keep her ticking over. Do you remember the protocol?'

'I'm not going to forget that in a hurry. Okay, when I've got Aunt Mary operational, I'll send a text,' she replied, and her voice lifted a few notches.

When she worked deep undercover for Special Forces, she kept in contact with her brother via a fictitious aunt.

Michael had used friends in army intelligence to create Aunt Mary with a full life history, including her current location in a large government-run retirement home.

Anyone who searched a database would find Mary Blundell allocated to room C225. In fact, she'd been double-booked with the real occupant of room C225, but since Mary remained invisible, it didn't matter for computer-based checks.

'How long will you be stuck in your doghouse?'

'Don't know for sure, maybe a week. With any luck my boss will get what he's after, and I can return the baby.'

'When is the kick-off?'

'Probably within a day, two at most,' she replied.

'Okay, I'll think of something to tell Dad and stop him going ape-shit.'

'Maybe he should go ape-shit. The spooks will be expecting it,' she said.

'I'll see how it plays. Look after yourself. You're the only sister I've got. I love you.'

'I love you more,' she replied.

'No, you don't.'

'Yes, I do. Look, Michael, thanks for this little chat. I needed it badly. Now go back to your dream, big boy.'

Zoe picked up her coffee and relaxed on her old sofa. Speaking to her brother and knowing she could open a line of communication through Aunt Mary, had eased her concerns. Even though she oozed confidence, she still touched base with her brother to recharge her

self-belief. A ritual they had done for each other since they were young kids when they had to look out for each other in unfamiliar schools in foreign parts of the world.

Their father had dragged the family around the world from one military base to another, until finally their mother put her foot down. When Zoe reached her mid-teens, she insisted on a stable home in the UK.

They had been baptised in the army, brought up on base camps, and taught to be fearless. So with a feeling of inevitability, they'd followed their father into an army career. The Tampsin family could trace their military history back more than 180 years.

Zoe's career had been hard on her marriage, and she'd divorced Alec Haymarket after ten years. In their dysfunctional family, Alec had taken the role of parenting their daughter Amy while Zoe went away on active duty. For Amy's first ten months, Zoe had been a good mother, and then the parental roles were reversed.

Her career took off, and she spent long periods away on duty. Alec looked after Amy and became an expert in baby and toddler training. The inevitable downside meant Amy became a daddy's girl and always sided with her father, which Zoe found hard to accept.

Zoe took another sip of her extra strong coffee and remembered the night she said she wanted a divorce. Alec had tried desperately to talk her out of it but she remained determined to set herself free. The conversation echoed loudly in her mind.

'Why won't you give me more time?' Alec had said.

'Time waits for no woman,' she had replied harshly.

'This is so unfair. I've loved you since the first day we met. I don't know what else you want from me. It's unfair on Amy.'

'Leave Amy out of this. We move on, and she'll be the better for it.'

'You know that's not true. She wants us both, together. I want us to stay together. We're a wonderful family. You've said that.'

'Amy wants what you tell her. I'm not blind. She'll understand my reasons when she becomes a woman. End of,' she had said, and then stormed off.

Looking back, it had been a horrible chapter in Zoe's life. Now, one year on, the intense fireworks she'd wanted in her personal life hadn't materialised. Slowly, as if reluctant to admit defeat, she allowed Amy to bring them closer together. She and Alec had remained close friends after all. They both knew her plan. Amy didn't hide her motive and they played along to keep Amy believing in her dream.

Amy wanted them to get over their personal problems and re-marry. Others in the family believed they would reconcile, especially with head bridesmaid, Amy, actively planning their second wedding and their second honeymoon.

Zoe believed she would be the lead parent when Amy started to develop into a woman. Zoe had plans for Amy's teenage years and she looked forward to the challenges. After all, she'd been a rough-tough, knife-throwing, tree-climbing, harum-scarum nightmare. Who better to understand the trauma of adolescence and show Amy the ropes?

*

Zoe's doghouse, a small two-bedroom mid-terraced house stood inconspicuously in a quiet part of Darlington. It had a light red brick face and had a dark green front door. The front door opened into a narrow hall where doors on the right led to the living room and the dining room. At the end of the hall, stairs led to the bedrooms and the bathroom.

A door in the dining room led to the kitchen at the back of the house and the back yard. The house appeared dowdy, dull and had been furnished with old second-hand furniture. Perfect for making the house unattractive to house burglars.

Enclosed with high walls on all sides, the back yard had a bottle-green wood gate that led to a narrow service lane behind the houses. A secret doghouse didn't need to be pretty, it just needed to be safe. A simple place no-one knew about, where she could disappear to when necessary. In her doghouse, she had the company of a safe old friend.

She climbed the stairs to look in on Gavin Shawlens. She found him still fast asleep on the bed in her spare room. She fetched two old army blankets from a cupboard, placed one over Gavin, and one around her shoulders as she returned to her sofa in the living room.

She couldn't sleep. She opened the backpack her boss had left for her in the Astra car. The conversation she'd with her boss, Sir Milton Johnson, not more than seven hours ago, still rang in her ears.

An image of Johnson popped into her mind. She had seen Johnson a few times at briefings. A sixty-four-year-old, medium height at five-six and carrying thirty kilos overweight. He had a round doughy-looking white face.

He'd spent too many years stuck in an office chair. His hair had receded and he persisted in combing the remaining thin strands of side hair back over his bald head. She remembered thinking, *if he'd been my dad, I would wait until he fell asleep, and then cut off those stupid looking strands of hair on his head.*

When he called, he'd told her that Dr Gavin Shawlens would soon be in grave danger. She already had Shawlens under her protection, so he ordered Zoe to take him and go dark.

He told her the Prime Minister had informed a meeting of COBRA that Shawlens had something, probably knowledge, worth tens of billions of dollars to the US.

He'd said the Americans wanted to buy Shawlens 'as if he was a bloody pizza pie' and that the PM had agreed to sell him to the CIA. Johnson told her to hide Shawlens, to allow him more time to find out why Shawlens had such a high price on his head.

Johnson had said she couldn't have a safe house so she had used her own doghouse. He'd organised an untracked car and a basic field pack plus cash. He alone would be her contact. He'd put a ghost phone in the pack for direct contact and told her to deactivate her standard issue secure encrypted mobile (SEM) satellite phone.

Johnson warned her that when the shit hit the fan, all the security sisters and cousins would hunt for her and Shawlens. He told her not to trust anyone in the Security Services, not even her friends.

He'd said she would be labelled a traitor, an enemy of the country, to be killed on sight. Unusually for a covert operation, he'd given her formal written orders. He wanted to assure her that her backside and her exemplary career were covered when she completed the job.

Johnson had insisted she should avoid a confrontation. He told her to go dark and deep until he told her she could reappear. She'd discovered to her shock why he insisted on no confrontation. He hadn't supplied any weapons.

The only weapons she had were her own Browning 9mm she carried with her and another Browning she had hidden in her doghouse. In total she had six rounds of ammunition.

Johnson had foisted the operation on her without an opportunity to re-equip. In her book, meticulous planning and preparation were essential for any operation. Poor preparation made her feel cautious, and no preparation made her feel vulnerable.

Michael told her to get support and she knew he'd made the right call. If she did find people to help her, what could she give them to defend themselves? Not much more than swear words and threatening behaviour. Unacceptable in her book.

She checked the empty clip in her second Browning, hoping it had somehow re-filled since the last time she looked at it. Still not full. She imagined her doghouse surrounded by CIA agents. Windows smashing, door crashing, flash bangs, an intense firefight to protect Shawlens, and then those awful four words. 'I'm out of ammo.'

Four

Later that morning, Gavin Shawlens woke and felt disorientated. They had arrived in the middle of a murky night after a long drive from Cosham, Hampshire. He didn't do any driving but he went to bed and straight to sleep.

Still half-asleep, he trundled down the stairs with heavy footsteps, through the dining room to the small narrow kitchen.

Zoe had made fresh black coffee. He discovered the damp, dusty smell of a cold and unloved that hadn't had a visitors for five months.

Zoe hadn't slept and although she didn't look fresh and bright, her mind still a sharp razor edge. His clothes had creased and curled at the edges because he'd slept in the ones he wore the day before.

Light brown cord trousers, blue shirt under a crew neck sweater and soft brown boots. His hair on one side stood up because of the way he'd lay his head on the pillow. She greeted him with a smile.

'Good morning, sleepyhead.'

'Morning, Zoe. You've got thirty-six messages on your machine.'

'I know, I've checked the caller IDs, they're just the usual spalls.'

'Spalls?'

'Spam calls, solar panels, surveys and the like.'

She noticed him staring. 'What?'

'Nothing, I'm still not fully awake.'

She had changed out of the rugged, dark blue military-type clothes, and looked more like a woman than a soldier. She had changed into a short skirt and long sleeve grey turtleneck top. She wore her black hair in a smart tousled pageboy style.

She ran her hand over her head and most of her fringe stayed up, revealing more of her face than he'd seen when her hair sat neatly set around her face.

He liked her new domestic look, especially her bare legs. It wasn't as if he hadn't seen her legs before. He'd seen them many times in the Cosham flat when she wore her pyjama shorts in the evening.

He could even point out the scars from her war injuries. But he had never seen those sculptured legs under a sexy tan-coloured suede skirt.

The suede looked stiff, and probably hadn't been worn for a long time as it stood an inch off her legs. Each time she moved or turned her body, his heart skipped a beat.

Zoe Tamsin stood five-eight in a slender and athletic-looking body. During the short time he'd known her, she had proved her intelligence and determination. That much Gavin knew. He didn't know that the forty-three-year-old had joined the OTC at her university and went on to receive the coveted Sword of Honour as the best officer cadet during the Sovereign's Parade at Sandhurst. A glorious day for Zoe and her military family as the first ever Tamsin to receive the Sword of Honour.

It wouldn't have surprised Gavin because he'd seen the sharp end of her power during the SLIPFIRE operation. Like a highly driven blue-chip businesswoman, she had an intense field of awareness and unquestionable self-confidence. In the last week alone, she had saved his life twice.

'Why did we have to bail out of Cosham?' he asked.

'While you were having your shower last night, I received word that the people who had us under surveillance were planning to attack the flat. So, I've brought you to my doghouse. It's a safe place I keep in case I need to disappear for a few days.'

'I thought Toni and the Special Forces guys were waiting outside the flat to deal with any trouble.'

'I received new orders from the head of the Security Service to move you to safety,' she said.

'Why me?'

'If a fire broke out at the flat, he didn't want you in the middle of it.'

She lied convincingly but remained conscious of his childlike tendency to unleash a barrage of questions when he felt out of the loop.

'Where are we?'

'Darlington, County Durham.'

'I've never been in Darlington. Is it a nice town?'

'Afraid you won't see much. We need to remain invisible.'

'Why?'

'Johnson has ordered us to go dark.'

'For how long?'

'Not long.'

'Why go dark?'

'Orders. Johnson has taken direct control of our situation. I have direct contact with him. When he says it's safe, we will surface. No more than a few days, a week at most. By the way, I've deactivated your SEM phone.'

'What about Alan Cairn? Does he know where we are?'

'No-one knows about my doghouse. That's the point. It's secure from enemy peekers and friendly leakers.'

'What about our debriefing in London?'

'The SLIPFIRE operation is over for the moment. We are in a different situation. Johnson is in control of this one. We have to trust him. We have to sit tight and wait until he issues further orders.'

'Is that normal? I mean for the head of the Security Service to take operational control. I don't wish to speak ill of him but is he any good? Wasn't he a career civil servant? Is he a safe pair of hands?'

'Yes,' she said, loudly enough to let him know she felt annoyed with the questions.

Her voice and expression were clear. Enough questions. But he didn't allow that to hold him back. He paused only for a few minutes to stare at his coffee. The aroma had gone six months ago when the jar had first been opened.

Gavin stood the same height as Zoe and he kept his body lean and in good shape with jogging and occasional visits to his university judo club.

Zoe liked his laid back and unthreatening manner, and she found his boyish looks and occasional incredulous gaze or huge grin pleasing to watch.

When they first met, she'd been jealous of the extraordinary blue-green gems he had for eyes. His hair had changed from a light straw colour in summer months to a darker colour in November. She liked men's hair to be short and neat, and since his hair had grown an inch over his collar, she reminded him almost every day that he needed a haircut.

She also told him to stop trying to look like a student. She had marked him down as a hopeless academic whose apparent naivety of basic things had proved unhelpful and irritating. She hadn't decided whether his naivety appeared genuine or put on for effect.

'When did we arrive last night?'

'Just before four this morning. You've slept for five hours,' she said.

'God, it feels so much longer,' he said as he stretched his arms in front of his body.

'You had a noisy nightmare but you settled down so I didn't wake you.'

'Thanks. I had a really bad dream, that's all. Any milk?' he said as he stirred his coffee.

'The cupboard is bare. I'll pick up some supplies later. How long have you been having nightmares?'

'Since I went on meds after my transplant,' he replied.

'I read about your scrap with James Barscadden. You're lucky to be alive.'

'They gave me a new stomach and put me on anti-rejection meds. The nightmares started soon after I left hospital.'

'The drugs have probably loosened your brain. We'll just have to wait and see if that provides an improvement or not,' she said, and smiled.

'Any chance of a hot shower?'

'Any chance you know how to service a central heating boiler?'

They both went through to the dining room and she finished ironing her jeans while he watched. He sat at an old square dining room table that had lost its shine decades ago. None of the four dining chairs matched each other or the table. His hands gripped around the cup for heat.

He'd had a few nightmares during their stay in Cosham and Zoe thought they were nothing more than a nuisance, until Johnson told her they could be significant.

Zoe recalled the instruction given by Johnson when she told him about Gavin's nightmares. He had said, 'Zoe, this could be very important. Tease out his nightmare. It might be the key we need.'

'Is it the same nightmare when you're freezing cold and you don't know where you are?' she asked.

His voice quivered as he replied, 'Yes. It's dark and I can't see anything. I have a terrible feeling of being lost. I think I'm inside the cabin of a boat, there's not much room to move about. I'm stuck and sinking fast. Water is flooding in everywhere. There's a door I keep reaching for but I can't get to it. I know if I can only reach the door, I'll be able to get out. I can't reach it; the water covers my head. I panic and wake up.'

'What else can you remember before you wake up?'

'The boat hits the bottom with an almighty bang of metal. It sort of bounces up and I bang my head on the roof. I feel I'm going to pass out and swallow freezing water. I panic when the water covers my head, and then I pass out,' he said.

She saw that just telling her the story had freaked him out. For him, the experience had become too real and too frightening. For her, something significant lurked in there, something worth billions of dollars according to Johnson, but she couldn't see it.

'I know it's painful for you, but rewind the images and look around to see if there is anything else that might explain what happened. Do you know how you got into the cabin?'

He looked as though he held something back when he said, 'No, I don't know. I don't want to think about it.'

She moved closer to him and said, 'Gavin, you need to concentrate and spit it out. Trust me, you'll feel tremendous relief and the nightmare will dissipate. It won't bother you anymore.'

She put her hand on his shoulder to reassure him. He took a deep breath as if about to plunge his head into water, and then he let it out slowly.

'It doesn't make any sense to me,' he said.

'Of course it doesn't make sense. It won't until you let each piece of the jigsaw rise to the surface. When you have all the pieces, you'll have a picture. Tell me what you have.'

'In previous nightmares I've heard voices. I'm underwater so I thought it to be nonsense. Last night, after the water covered my head and I passed out, I woke up with bright lights on my face. I can't see anything but I can hear people talking. I think they are the same voices as before. They sound relaxed and casual but I sense they're talking about me, not to me. I can feel someone has a hold of my arm then I feel a cold needle lifting the skin on my arm. Then I pass out again.'

'The voices, are they familiar or foreign? Are they English? Do you recognise the accent?'

'They're faint but not Scottish or English. Canadian maybe?'

'American?'

'I'm not sure. It's as if I'm just waking up and hear the voices in the distance. It's difficult to focus on them. It's only a dream so it could be anything.'

Zoe felt a rush of exhilaration. At last, she had something to tell Johnson. Something that sounded significant. Maybe, the key Johnson wanted to find. She saw Gavin's face light up as though he'd remembered something important.

'What else?' she asked.

'Nothing else,' he said, but she saw in his eyes he had lied.

'What have I told you about nothing ever being nothing?'

'It's probably more nonsense.'

'I'll be the judge.'

'It's the first time I've ever had this happen in the nightmare.'

'Come on, Gavin, spit it out.'

'I opened my eyes and I'm on my back. I felt extremely sad, heartbroken, like I did when my mother died. I don't think I've ever had that feeling in a dream before.'

'Are you in an ambulance?'

'Not an ambulance. I don't think ... it doesn't move but then maybe an ambulance doesn't move in a dream. I don't know. Uugggh, I hate this nightmare. I don't want to think about it.'

'For God's sake, man, get a grip of yourself.' She raised her voice aggressively.

Gavin got up and went into the living room to be alone. He stood at the window and looked at the rain falling in sheets outside. He watched a woman across the road pushing a baby buggy with one hand and dragging her young child along the street with the other. Her long hair soaking wet and clumped together like rat's tails. He'd seen the look before and his eyes welled up.

She sighed loudly. He wasn't one of her obedient soldiers so she couldn't boss him around so easily. He'd recently lost the love of his life, Emma Patersun, and his grief still felt raw, which made him fragile.

Zoe brought him a fresh cup of black coffee. He hadn't touched the first cup. Zoe's coffee looked like liquid tar. She stood beside him and saw water in his eyes as he watched the woman outside.

'Does she remind you of Emma?' Zoe asked.

'Yes. It's as if I'm still walking around with a gaping hole in my body. It won't heal. I can't make the grief go away. I met her when I turned sixteen and I always believed we would grow old together. It's just terrible to know she's not here.'

'It's a mixture of anger and sadness. They don't go away quickly but you'll come through it. You know she wants you to come through it, don't you?'

Emotion strained his voice as he said, 'I'm living in a terrible blank space. I don't know how to get her back.'

'You can't get her back. You need to accept that before you can move on,' she said.

'I can't, if I see someone with her look, memories flood back. I fall back and I feel worse than before.'

He looked ready to burst into tears. She drew him close and gave him a hug. He wasn't a tough soldier. She couldn't snap a soft academic out of his thoughts by getting in his face and shouting the odds.

'In the army, we have bereavement counselling. They tell you that crying can help the recovery. Have you cried for Emma?' she said as she released her hug and held his wrists in her hands.

His head remained down while he shook it gently. He looked distraught as he confessed, 'I can't cry. I want to cry. I can't do it.'

'You shouldn't bottle it up, you must let her go. Emma wouldn't want you to be trapped like this. I believe if you don't let them go, they cannot find rest.'

Her grip on his wrists tightened. For a moment, it felt like she wanted to shake some sense into him, but she released her grip and let him go.

'I know, but I can't help it,' he said, and gave her a watery smile.

'I wish I could help you move on quickly, but it takes time. You'll never get over her death, but you must learn to live again. Come on, get yourself straightened up.'

She boiled two kettles for hot water, and he headed upstairs to the bathroom. Thirty minutes later, he emerged, washed, shaved and with his hair neatly combed. He found Zoe in the living room. His state of mind as near to normal as possible.

Five

Zoe headed through to the kitchen. Gavin followed then turned back to sit at the dining room table. He sat with his fingers steepled on the table, looking like a humbled schoolboy, waiting for his breakfast. She fetched a can of pineapple chunks, two plates, a can of peach halves, a can opener, and plonked them on the table.

'Make yourself busy,' she said.

He feigned a struggle with the can opener, then shook the can of pineapple in his hand.

'What?'

'Both of these are past their sell by date,' he said.

'So?'

'Nothing, they're okay, they haven't blown.'

'I may not be a top scientist, but I do know about botulism.'

'Sorry, of course. I'm cautious because I've worked with the botulism toxin and it made me wary of out-of-date tinned food.'

'You've worked with botulism toxin?'

'Yes, I've used it as an enzyme inhibitor.'

'Now, you see, that's interesting. One day you'll need to tell me about that work. I'd like to know more about botulism toxin.'

'Do you mean the Botox stuff?'

'Cheeky beggar. Never mind my face. I'll Botox your tongue for you.'

They both laughed and their tension eased for a few minutes. The back of her mind had been working on a plan to deal with their situation.

While she paced back and forth across the room, she wrote out a list of the equipment that she needed.

'Won't Alan Cairn be worried that we've just dropped off the grid?'

'Johnson will tell Cairn we're off-line. The SLIPFIRE debriefing will be rescheduled for a later date. So don't worry about it,' she said, and her tone told him to be quiet while she concentrated on her list.

Zoe and Gavin had completed an investigation for the Lambeth Group into illegal research at the University of South England.

Their controller in the Security Service (formerly MI5), Alan Cairn, Head of the Centre for Protection of National Infrastructure (CNPI), had headed back to London.

At the end of their operation, Zoe had discovered the flat they shared in Cosham had been under covert surveillance.

To discover who lay behind the surveillance, Zoe had set a trap with Gavin Shawlens as bait. Before the trap had been sprung, Sir Milton Johnson called Zoe at the flat and ordered her to take Gavin, go dark and wait for further instructions.

'Okay, I guess my job is not to reason why.'

'That's correct. Good man, and for God's sake stop staring at my arse, unless you want a clout across your face,' she said when she saw a reflection of his head and shoulders on the glass panel of a wall cabinet.

Zoe felt disengaged by the strange circumstances. One minute, she'd been the team leader at the centre of an important operation, and then as if a switch had been flicked, she'd been sent to a dark corner with orders to hide and remain hidden. Her discomfort made worse by the fact she had six bullets for her handgun. She felt totally unprepared for any action.

She hated lack of preparation because in military operations it put people at risk. In a surge of determination, she decided to trust her instinct and work around her orders. She thought, *things go wrong in this business and I'm not going to be the one unable to save our skins if the job goes pear-shaped.*

Gavin dispensed tinned fruit onto dinner plates for their breakfast. After they'd eaten, Zoe used her landline phone to call an ex-soldier she knew well and trusted.

William Carrhage owned a garage in Faverdale, an industrial area on the outskirts of Darlington. Known as 'Spock', on account of his pointy Vulcan-like ears, he'd helped Zoe out with equipment and transport on previous occasions.

In fact, she chose to locate her doghouse in Darlington to be close to Spock's garage. Zoe had saved Spock's life twice, and he would do anything for her including give up his own life if she asked. They shared a soldier's secret that would bind them together until death parted them.

Zoe and Spock had served together in Afghanistan. Spock had been on patrol and as he returned to Camp Bastion, he came under a mortar attack that hit a building near his position. The building blew out and covered him with rubble.

Other members of his patrol returned fire. Zoe and two American Special Forces soldiers out of Camp Leatherhead rushed to the building. They found Spock and started heaving lumps of rubble to the side with their bare hands. They worked in total darkness to avoid giving their position to the enemy.

Spock's groans guided them, and after what felt like ages, they found his face and wiped the dust out of his mouth and nose. When they pulled him out, covered in blood, he had crush injuries and a piece of metal rod from the building embedded in his back. He suffered a stroke as they stretchered him to the Camp Bastion medical room.

It had been the second time Zoe had saved his life, but this time his injuries were so severe he'd been medically discharged out of the army. Whenever they talked together, or with other people, they would never talk about the first time she'd saved his life. Zoe didn't want to remember it, let alone talk about it.

She had bleached it out of her mind but Spock remembered every second as if it happened yesterday. Spock should have talked it out with a therapist to help him recover from post-traumatic stress disorder. Zoe made him promise never to discuss it with anyone and he'd kept his word.

Gavin went upstairs to stretch out on his bed and be alone with thoughts of his childhood sweetheart, Emma Patersun.

Zoe called up to the bedroom, 'Make yourself at home. I'm going out to get supplies. I'll be back in an hour. I might have a little job for you to do.'

'What job? I thought we had to stay dark,' he called back.

He got up and walked to the top of the stairs to find out more, but arrived just in time to see the front door closing behind Zoe.

'What job?' he said to the door.

Gavin stared at the door for a minute, and then sighed with frustration as he went down the stairs and into the living room. He strayed over to the television in the corner, an old cabinet box at least twenty years old with a portable analogue aerial on top. TV signals were digital, so the analogue television wouldn't work. Still, he switched it on and off several times but it didn't produce a picture or sound.

In the living room, the furniture comprised a three-seat sofa, one armchair, one dining room chair and one small coffee table with a rack underneath for newspapers. Some of the newspapers were five years old. In all of the rooms, the original floorboards were stained dark brown.

No chance of anyone sneaking around the house without the floorboards making an announcement. He creaked over to the coffee table and lifted an old newspaper then returned to the sofa. He stared through the newspaper and brought back memories of Emma Patersun.

*

Zoe drove the black and silver Astra to Spock's garage. She handed the keys to Spock and told him it needed a new identity. Johnson had provided the Astra for her escape from Cosham but it wouldn't be long before it became too hot to drive in the streets.

Zoe sat in Spock's garage office as they discussed how to source her list of equipment. She explained to him why she had moved to her doghouse and that she would be the subject of a massive hunt.

'My boss has dropped me into a hole. I'm not equipped,' she complained.

'Let me cover your back. I'm still good. I won't let you down.'

'No, Spock. I need to know I have a safe port here if the weather becomes murderous,' she replied.

'Sure?'

'Yes,' she said, and handed him her list. 'How much of this can you get for me?'

'Most of this I can get easily but weapons and ammo are tricky at the moment. What about your own contacts?'

'Normally, I could access black market equipment, but when the word goes out that I'm rogue, I'll be exposed.'

'If the word is out on you then I can't use the black market either. The black market network can provide anything for a price but loyalty is thin. For a better price, a seller will give you up in a heartbeat. I could try—'

'Don't sweat it, Spock. I have another plan for weapons and ammo. I know of a private stash hidden in Morpeth.'

'Can I help?'

'I know the layout like the back of my hand. I'll be able to slip in and out before anyone has time to think,' she said.

Zoe had a lot of time and patience for Spock. Although a man in his early fifties, army service had taken its toll, so he looked older and more infirm than he should for his age. He stood a few inches shorter than Zoe, and he'd become twenty kilos overweight since his medical discharge.

He kept his white and downy hair short, and he had a white moustache to hide a horrible looking shrapnel scar over his top lip. His nose had been smashed and his nostrils had flattened out.

Spock gave Zoe the keys to a dark-red, ten-year-old, Ford Transit van. He said the van would get her to hell and back. They laughed when she asked him how he knew her travel plans. While Zoe finished her coffee, Spock applied a coat of special clear lacquer to the

windscreen. He said the lacquer contained special nanoparticles to produce light reflection defects to distort images taken by facial recognition cameras.

Before she left, they went through their little ritual that only they knew about. They hugged and he held on to her for dear life. While she held him, his body shook and he apologised repeatedly for his tears and his weakness. She hugged him tightly.

For a few minutes, he would relive the night in Bosnia when she saved his life for the first time. Water filled his eyes, ran down his cheeks and he sniffed to stop it running down his nose.

Holding Zoe as he'd done that night brought him great comfort and reassurance. When a bout of depression gripped him, he felt trapped in the darkest corner of hell, surrounded by the enemy as they prepared to tear his body apart, organ by organ.

In Bosnia, she had reached down like a giant angel, grabbed his collar and pulled him out. His vivid memory would never let him forget where he'd been, but a hug from Zoe reminded him what she'd done that night. He owed her a debt he could never repay, but he would die trying, if only she would just ask him to do it.

At her insistence, they made a pact never to talk about that night to each other or to anyone. His pact with Zoe meant he refused treatment for severe post-traumatic stress disorder.

When she felt his body ease, she kissed him gently on the side of his face and relaxed her hug. This hug gave him emotional release, and peace of mind.

'I wish I had your strength.'

'Spock, you're still alive. You have Pat and she's a wonderful wife. Start from there and don't look back.'

'How do you deal with what we went through?'

'I just do, Spock. What else can I do? I know that it's hard for you but you must never speak of that night. You understand, don't you?'

'Of course. Watch your back,' he said as she got into the red van.

Six

White House, Washington, USA

General George Schumantle, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), waited patiently in the Oval Office in the White House. He sat in civilian clothes with Director CIA Katherine Kaplentsky. He didn't know how much President Cranstoun had told Katherine about the POINT-K issue, so he didn't speak of it.

Instead, they discussed Bill Maverack, a former CIA Director of the National Clandestine Service who had crossed swords with George Schumantle, and came off much the worse.

Katherine had removed Maverack from office, and had his memory redacted to clear his mind of national secrets he had no right to possess. With that awkward discussion out of the way, she picked up some of her paperwork and started reading.

George watched her as she flicked through a briefing paper. He would never say it, but he admired her greatly. She had a strong self-confidence that came from her rapid rise through the ranks to the top of the CIA. She had striking and disarming good looks.

Tall with long slender legs, Katherine had flawless lightly tanned skin, sparkling sea-green eyes and strong dark red hair that any model would be proud to have. She kept her hair long and free. But at work, she wore her hair in a neat chignon, so her full face remained visible for those pointed facial expressions to make their mark.

In another life, she could have been a successful model or a great lawyer. Her work suits were expensive, tailored and decorated her body with finesse. All of this and the IQ of a mastermind.

They both knew the President had taken a call from the British Prime Minister, and they were anxious to find out the outcome.

A door opened, a Secret Service agent scanned the room, and then stepped aside for President Cranstoun to pass without altering his stride.

He walked straight to his desk and sat down. He slammed both palms on his desk in frustration. His face twisted with anger. The Secret Service agent closed the door.

Cranstoun blasted, 'These fucking useless Brits. They've not kept to the deadline because Shawlens and his minder have disappeared. Damn them.'

'Brits. Unreliable as ever,' George said.

'We need to take total control of this situation,' Cranstoun urged.

'Maybe they just need a bit more time,' Katherine said.

'Time has run *out*.'

'Yes, Mr President.'

'Katherine, I want you to go to London. Suspend all other European operations and focus on the capture or removal of this man. I need this done yesterday, please, for God's sake. Flood their island with your people and coordinate the manhunt. Find this man before—'

'Before what, Mr President?'

Cranstoun shook his head. 'All you need to know, Katherine, is this. If that man reveals a POINT-K secret then this administration and this country will drop straight into hell. Everything we have, everything we cherish, will be burned. That's not going to happen, Katherine, because *you're* going to do whatever it takes to eliminate this threat.'

Bill Maverack had lost his CIA job because he insisted that he as Head of NCS should know everything about POINT-K. Katherine had warned him that some secrets were beyond a security clearance. She understood POINT-K sat squarely in that category, and she wasn't going to ask questions. She wasn't going to follow Bill Maverack into the waste bin.

'Understood, Mr President.'

'George has forty-three military intelligence personnel in London, and another sixty-two arriving from Europe. The NSA has been re-tasked. They are waiting for your London station to feed them input. Resources are in place. Use all of them to get the job done quickly.'

'Can we access the British surveillance service at GCHQ?' she asked.

George answered the question. 'No need. They're already linked into Prism. They don't know that we've set Prism up as a one-way mirror with GCHQ. Everything the Brits get is already mirrored to NSA. We control what is reflected back to them.'

Cranstoun got up and came around to lean against the side of the desk. He looked solemn and determined.

'Listen to me carefully, both of you. I know the military and the CIA have serious issues dating back to Vietnam. You must put these to one side. I want both of you to impress upon your people that all US personnel will work as one body on this matter. Any inter-agency rivalry or non-cooperation, from any person at any level, will be dealt with severely. Gloves off. This is bare knuckle stuff,' Cranstoun emphasised.

They both nodded, and looked at each other for agreement.

'Tell your people this is a direct and potent threat from me,' Cranstoun said.

'This Shawlens disappearance can't be a coincidence. The Brits must be up to something,' Katherine said.

George said, 'Obviously, they want to know why we have put such a huge price on Shawlens. If the positions were reversed, I would be desperate to find out. They still want the deal. They're trying to interrogate Shawlens off-line. We just can't allow that to continue.'

'My contact in the Security Service has passed on details of an asset that could be very useful. Can I sanction an incursion into Canada to collect it?' Katherine asked.

'Do it. I'll speak to the Canadian PM if there are any ruffled feathers.'

'Okay, I'll move on it right away,' Katherine said, and stood up.

She looked sharp and focused as though she wanted to get into action as soon as possible. Cranstoun walked with her with his arm open to guide her to the door.

'Thanks, Katherine. Please keep me updated. Remember this is a tight ship. People only need to know that Shawlens is a threat to our national security. Nothing more, you understand.'

Cranstoun opened the door for her. They faced each other as they stood in the doorway. He patted her on the arm and said, 'You can go where others cannot. You can succeed where others have failed. Strength to your arms, Katherine. It's time for you to show me how great you are, and how smart I've been to appoint you Director CIA.'

Katherine bowed her head deferentially to Cranstoun, and then turned to face her deputy waiting outside. They walked hurriedly along the corridor.

Katherine asked, 'Where is Ertha Odeele at the moment?'

'She's in New York.'

'Good, get me her number, I have an urgent job for her.'

Cranstoun sat on a chair opposite George. The strain on his face seemed even more marked than when George first told him of the existence of POINT-K secrets.

George asked, 'How much have you told Katherine?'

'Not much. Don't forget she has a legal background. I don't want a debate about the legal ramifications of POINT-K. All I want Katherine to do is focus on Shawlens and resolve that issue. It's her job to keep the secrets secret, not to wrestle with their significance.'

'I do believe she understands the distinction clearly,' George replied.

'When she has done that job and POINT-K is secure. I want it to remain in place. It must again become totally secret. I've thought a lot about the original premise and I want to keep that option in reserve.'

'What do your Chief of Staff and the cabinet think about it?' George said.

'I haven't told them about the POINT-K secret. I told them we have a serious threat to national security. They need to know something is responsible for all of this activity in

England, but I've said nothing about the real reason. Apart from you, I'm the only one who is aware of the POINT-K problem.'

'Until the end of your presidency, then that knowledge will be redacted,' George said.

'I look forward to that. I certainly don't want to dwell on the circumstances that will necessitate the use of this resource. That's a nightmare I'm happy to leave for a future president.'

'You can envisage a future scenario when we'll need this POINT-K?'

'Yes, George, I'm certain it will save our country and our people. I want it to be waiting there, ready to come to our aid.'

'As you wish, Mr President.'

They both stood and shook hands then Cranstoun said, 'Shawlens cannot be permitted to set this country back a hundred years. Give Katherine anything she needs. No matter the cost or the collateral damage in England.'

'It won't happen, Mr President. The Brits are simply stalling to find out why we want Shawlens. I'll force them to hand him over sooner rather than later.'

'I hope so, George, because I spoke with Jack at the Treasury last night. What he told me kept me awake all night, and made me physically sick this morning. Hypothetically speaking, his current estimate is that people and banks in countries all over the world are holding over eight hundred billion dollars in banknotes. If a crisis precipitates a run on our currency, then he estimates he can cover no more than five hundred billion from the Federal Reserve.

'After that, the country will be bankrupt. If it runs to the full eight hundred billion then the country will never recover. You do realise, George, if that is allowed to happen, then every scrap of military hardware that can be sold, will be sold, to generate cash to keep the country afloat. Our military as we know it will be finished. There will be another president after me, but you, George, will go down in military history as the last Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Make sure that POINT-K does not end our way of life.'

'I hear you loud and clear, Mr President. Loud and *crystal* clear.'

'One more thing, George.'

'Yes, Mr President.'

'I don't want another of these damn POINT-K secrets popping out of the woodwork during the remainder of my presidency. One is quite sufficient for my nerves to cope with.'

*

George Schumantle came from a family with a long history in the military, and he fitted the picture perfectly. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he'd reached the highest position

possible in the US military and his family were immensely proud of his achievements. As a trim fifty-nine-year-old, George stood proudly at five-ten with short salt and pepper hair neatly parted on one side.

Only rarely did he venture out of his highly decorated uniform. But when he did shed his uniform, he liked to dress in expensive tailored clothes and designer shoes. Off duty, he liked to laugh and he travelled around the country to hear top comedians. He'd seen his favourite, Louis C.K., more than a dozen times over the past twenty years.

In his military version of the President's state limo, 'The Beast', George Schumantle relaxed and told his driver not to hurry back to the Pentagon. His PA read out a series of matters and communications that had arrived in the office while George met with Cranstoun.

While his PA talked, George thought about the desperate situation that had unfolded on his watch as Chairman of the JCS and guardian of the POINT-K secrets. He had always hoped that in his period of service as Chairman, he would not be called upon to deal with a POINT-K secret. Then Gavin Shawlens surfaced and his hopes crashed out.

The POINT-K scheme had been instigated in the 1950s to protect the most vital US secrets. A small group of powerful men had acknowledged that politicians came and went with the seasons, and some of them were little more than shallow attention seekers. Some were hollow weaklings, who couldn't keep a real secret even if their life depended on it. Good front men for voters to exercise their democratic rights, but not safe pairs of hands for the most critical state secrets.

Top military commanders and heads of intelligence services had worked with some politicians who were careless, indiscreet, and open to blackmail. While service personnel and security agents were more trustworthy, they were human beings who could be turned, blackmailed or fooled into revealing secrets.

So, the most vital of the USA's secrets were held securely by one person, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. The POINT-K secrets remained in the Chairman's vault until events unfolded that necessitated engagement with the President of the day and government agencies. George had informed Cranstoun of the existence of POINT-K secrets and explained that the acronym meant 'president only informed if needs to know'.

All of the POINT-K secrets had remained safely hidden with no chance of exposure except for POINT-K4. A single act of compassion eighteen years ago had created a loose end, Gavin Shawlens. For eighteen years, Shawlens had been loosely monitored by discreet surveillance, and until recently the POINT-K4 secret had remained secure.

Then Gavin Shawlens became involved in a fight for his life with the criminal James Barscadden. The fight had nearly ended Gavin's life, and he required emergency medical treatment. The treatment had altered his memory patterns.

Old memories started to drift back into his mind and became manifest as nightmares. In time, Gavin would recall his memory of POINT-K4 and the US would face a global threat to their national security.

When the special agent monitoring Shawlens reported her concerns about his nightmares, George Schumantle ordered preventative action to ensure POINT-K4 remained in his vault. George figured it would not be too long before Shawlens posed an unacceptable risk. Shawlens had to be sacrificed for the greater good.

An early attempt to capture, interrogate then execute Shawlens had failed. Then a second attempt to execute him in Prague also failed because Shawlens had been placed under the protection of a Special Forces team led by Zoe Tampsin. George believed another assassination attempt would have resulted in a massive firefight with UK Special Forces on the streets of England.

The two failures had eaten into the timescale, and increased the risk that Shawlens would recover his memory. George had no option but to confide in Cranstoun. He told Cranstoun about the existence of POINT-K secrets, and explained why he required the President's personal intervention with the British PM to head off exposure of POINT-K4.

George told Cranstoun that if his intervention proved successful then he would decide what happened to the POINT-K4 matter. He warned Cranstoun that if his intervention proved unsuccessful, then the country would face unprecedented anger and hostility on a scale never before known. A cataclysmic crisis that would bring the country to its knees.

In a private conference call with the British PM, Cranstoun requested the immediate surrender of Gavin Shawlens to the CIA. In exchange for replacement of the ageing British nuclear deterrent with newer existing US submarines, and resolution of the UK dispute with Argentina over the ownership of the Falkland Islands.

A package with an estimated loss of income to the US Treasury of forty billion dollars over twenty-five years. The British PM agreed the deal, negotiations were conducted, contracts were exchanged, and then the deadline passed without Shawlens being handed over to the CIA as promised.

Seven

Darlington

Zoe Tampsin stacked two bags of grocery supplies onto the passenger seat of the red Transit van Spock had given to her. She had fed and watered Gavin Shawlens while they shared a flat in Cosham, so she knew what he would eat and drink. She bought the groceries from a small supermarket store and paid cash.

During the drive back to her doghouse, Zoe's secure phone rang. Her mind raced around in circles and she pulled over to answer it. The secure phone Sir Milton Johnson gave her for direct communications. Her heart lifted with anticipation.

When the line connected and she heard him breathing heavily, her hopes rocketed. Might Johnson be excited because he'd found out why the Americans wanted Shawlens?

'Zoe.'

'Yes, sir, thanks for calling.'

'Have you found a safe place to hide?'

'Yes, sir, Shawlens is safe and secure.'

'Good, I'm relieved to hear that, Zoe. The deadline for handing over Shawlens has passed. The Americans are going ballistic and the PM is screeching like a four-year-old. Soon everyone will be searching for you. It won't be long before they find out what I've done. If this weren't serious, it would make great circus. It's such fun watching these politicians in a crisis.'

She listened to his voice. He seemed to enjoy his mischief and the antics of the headless chickens running around frantically wondering what to do. She became concerned and wanted to tell him someone would notice his bizarre attitude.

'Sir, are you any further forward?' she said with harshness to bring back his focus.

He took a deep breath, let it out slowly. 'I've pulled in every favour I can with friendly Americans, Russians and Germans. No-one knows anything about Shawlens or why the US is so desperate to have him. He's definitely not associated with any major security issues or secret developments. I've drawn a complete blank. Makes no sense.'

Damn, she thought, 'Sorry to hear that, sir.'

He said, 'I hoped you might have news of a development in his nightmares?'

'He's still having them. He had another one last night. It's the same story and places him under water. But dreams can use images to mean something else. He may not be under water,

it may be the opposite. Dreams are so bloody unreliable,' she said, and her frustration entangled her voice.

'I don't believe it's a dream. I believe he has recalled a memory,' Johnson said.

'That did occur to me, but Shawlens is certain they are dreams. He doesn't associate what he has remembered with any of his past or existing memories. There's no match.'

'Bugger, I hoped he would shed some light on what this is about,' he said.

'Sir, what do you want me to do with him?'

Her voice rang with urgency and she wanted to hear him say she should bring Shawlens back to London.

'We can't hold out for long, the pressure from the Americans and the PM is at bursting point. I'm waiting for a reply from the Israelis. They say they have an idea what this is about. Problem is, they want to bargain for something in return, and there is no time to mess about. If that doesn't tell me anything, I'll have to hand him over.'

'We lose Shawlens and whatever he knows, forever,' she said, and her voice signalled she didn't like that option.

'Yes, I'm afraid so. Look, Zoe, is there any way you could use drugs or mind manipulation techniques to loosen his mind and push his memories along?' he said, and made the request sound like his last hope.

'Sir, that's a job for a qualified MO. I don't have any drugs or facilities to conduct that type of process. Doing it too fast will kill him. We don't have time to do it slow. If you want to go down that route, sir, it will have to be done at a secure medical facility. I know where they are of course. I can deliver him if that's what you want.'

'No, probably not a good idea. Just a desperate thought in a desperate moment. We don't have enough time for anything, I suppose.'

'Understood, sir.'

He didn't disguise his feelings. She sensed his anxiety and she heard the strain in his voice. She sensed he wasn't thinking judiciously, and that meant he could easily make a bad decision. The hairs on the back of her neck sprang rigid.

She realised he really didn't know what to do. Typical of a civil servant trying to play hardball with people who didn't have rules.

'The Americans are on a deadline so whatever they are worried about should begin to surface. We just need to hold on a bit longer and give this issue a chance to show itself.'

'Yes, sir.'

'We are not going to be robbed again,' he said.

'Robbed?'

'Long story, Zoe. It dates back to the Second World War, and the movement of the British Empire's huge stock of diamonds and gold bullion to the USA and Canada for safekeeping. It didn't work out well for us. In today's money, hundreds of billions are missing.'

Silence hung while Zoe thought, *you're clutching at straws*.

'Sorry, sir, I've never heard anything about missing bullion.'

'The topic is taboo with the Yanks. They refuse to talk about it. I don't know how, but I think Shawlens may have stumbled on a secret that would lead us to the missing bullion.'

Silence again as he seemed to be disappearing down his own sinkhole.

She decided she would not follow him.

'In his dreams he is under water, terrified, facing death. Could we reproduce that scene and unlock this thing that's troubling his mind?' she asked.

'What do you suggest?'

'I could deliver him to a large safe house with a pool. Put him in the water. Force this dream into his conscious mind.'

'You may be right. This dream is the only thing in his life I can't interpret. Are you certain this water drowning episode is the only thing troubling him?'

'Yes, sir, certain. Tell me where to deliver him. You might have an answer by tonight,' she said, and then closed her eyes and hoped he would go for it.

'I don't know if there is enough time. Leave it with me, I'll look in to it.'

'I could deliver Shawlens to a safe house today, sir. Get things moving?'

'No, you must keep your head down for a few more days. Countless teams are preparing to scour the country for you. I can't protect you.'

Uggghh, she thought. 'Sir, I have a serious problem. I have very limited weapons and ammunition if it comes to a fight.'

He raised his voice. 'You'll just have to make do with what you've got. I told you to make sure it doesn't come to a fight.'

'I don't function well when I don't have sufficient equipment to do the job, sir.'

He raised his voice a notch further. 'I'm sorry, but we are where we are. Don't get in to a fight and you won't need to worry about weapons.'

Zoe cursed under her breath. Typical head civil servant response. Become invisible, hide in the dark and keep a low profile. Ignore the fact that determined people will find you, and when they do, you must be equipped to protect yourself.

'Easier said than done, sir. If everybody and their uncle are looking for me, and a team turn up at my doghouse. What am I supposed to do—tell them to go away?'

'*You* will do your duty without question. *You* will keep Shawlens safe. That's an order,' he said, loudly.

'I'm sorry, sir. I'm used to planning, organising, briefing my backup and getting my men in place before I kick off.'

In a softer voice he said, 'I wish things could be different, Zoe. But there we are. You are a clever and resourceful soldier who has demonstrated time and time again that you can deliver under great pressure and danger. You will do so once more. Understood?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You need to trust me, Zoe. When the crunch comes, I'll either know what Shawlens has and I'll have control of it or I won't and I'll take the fall. I'm on the firing line here in London, not you. I'm taking a huge risk to discover what Shawlens has to give up. I have taken steps to ensure you will be exonerated for your part. I assume you've read the written orders I gave you,' he said.

She closed her eyes tightly. He still had the gravitas to put her firmly back in line.

'Yes, sir, I'll keep him safe until you contact me again. If anything significant comes out of his dreams. I'll call you immediately.'

'No, I'll call you when it is safe to do so. Hopefully, that won't be too long.'

Disappointment and frustration filled her thoughts. She didn't believe Johnson would organise a safe house. She didn't believe Johnson even had a plan. He sounded like a stupid old man playing a dangerous game of chess. With her as his queen, and Shawlens as his pawn, but they were the only two pieces on his side of the board. The other side had all their pieces and all of his pieces as well.

Listening to Johnson had settled one thing in her mind. She wasn't going to cower in her doghouse like a sitting duck, waiting for a posse of CIA agents to track her down and kill her. She'd had an incompetent boss once before, and that didn't work out well—for him.

Eight

London, UK

In the large split-level CIA operations room in Grosvenor Square, a group of fifteen section heads and other senior members of staff had gathered on the upper level. Collectively the heads managed and supervised eighty UK-based CIA staff. They expected a briefing on the unfolding of a national security threat.

The much larger lower level had subdued lighting to reduce reflections on numerous flat panel screens on rows of desks, computer workstations and other communication consoles. Dozens of analysts, technicians and agents worked the desks. Others delivered files and updates to people around the room.

Director CIA, Katherine Kaplentsky, swept into the upper room followed by her deputy and two others. They stood in front of a large screen showing pictures of Gavin Shawlens and Zoe Tamsin. She stepped closer to the group to engage with them, and close enough to the people at the front to be in their faces. Katherine had always been a high-vis director who made time to visit every corner of her domain.

An only child, born in Chicago, in the prosperous middle-class suburb of Park Ridge, Illinois, she graduated from Yale Law School. Some of her contemporaries described her as brash and arrogant while others described her as too scary. Not long after graduation, the CIA recruited her into the CIA Office of General Counsel.

Within months, she not only gave legal advice to the CIA, but policy guidance to the Director. It didn't take long for the political executives and senior Washington bureaucrats to recognise that Katherine would become the sharpest and sleekest scalpel on the tray.

The CIA have a sound recording made during the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attack. A recording of a Langley office in panic with many people screaming and shouting in the background. In the foreground, a voice could be heard issuing instructions in a cool, confident and determined voice. In a period of chaos, Katherine Kaplentsky remained as cool as an ice cube fresh from the freezer.

'Quiet down. Listen up everyone. This is a special situation, national security imminent threat, category 1, priority alpha. All other work is suspended until this situation is resolved,' Katherine announced.

'We have thirty-two personnel locked in current operations,' one of the group said.

'I need everyone here. Bring your people in, if it's safe to do so,' Katherine replied.

She acknowledged the two men at her side. 'Let me introduce Len Park from NSA's National Security Operations Center, and Colonel Steve Hatcher from Military Intelligence.' The two men signalled their presence to the group.

'Steve has over one hundred military intelligence officers at his disposal in the UK. He will coordinate military support. Len has three thousand analysts at Fort Meade waiting to process every scrap of information you can find. They'll coordinate with an alpha task force of two hundred at Langley. They are ready right now to support your efforts here on the ground.'

A buzz of questions and comments flew around the group as they realised the sheer scale of the operation put in place to find two people.

Katherine continued loudly to quieten them down, 'Work effectively with everyone. This is not a competition to see which agency bags the prize. We'll all work as one body of Americans on this matter. Complete transparency across the board.'

She spotted looks of disapproval, smirks on some of the faces, and rumblings of dissent at the back of the group.

She looked stern when she said, 'Be warned and warn your staff. Any lack of cooperation from any desk will be reported to me and will be dealt with severely. We all have one priority. Find these people. Get a lead, pass it on, and the analysts will run it down for you. You'll have resources at your disposal to look into every crevice and every hole in this rain-sodden country. Trace and question every living person known by these two. If anyone has seen either of them recently, I want to know about it. Tell your people to squeeze their assets, and their assets' assets. They have my permission to throw money at them, *if* it will give us a lead.'

'This is going to take five minutes with all our resources in play,' someone said.

Katherine turned to look at the speaker. 'Do not underestimate Tampsin. She's an experienced Special Forces officer, one of their elite. Very smart and very driven. This is her home ground, and she'll be tough to track. Shawlens is an academic. He's her weak spot in this situation.'

She paused for a drink of water.

'Are we working with the British or against them?' a section head asked.

'Officially, they agreed to hand over these people. Unofficially, they have *misplaced* them.'

A loud roar of laughter erupted and many comments about British competence swirled around the room.

'Be careful to keep these comments to yourselves. British security is sending liaison officers to assist. We need to play them to find out what they know,' Katherine said.

'Would it be easier if we just shut them out?' another asked.

'Let them play along, but do not let them impede your search. I want the intelligence flow to be one-way. Get what you can from them. Give them nothing,' Katherine replied.

'What if we hit resistance? It's their country,' someone at the back asked.

'If it's low level, run over them. If it's high level, contact me. I'll deal with it.'

'This will cause a massive rift between us and them. Future cooperation will be difficult if not impossible,' said another.

'Tough bagels. By the by, all leave is cancelled. Order your people to tell their families they won't be home for a few days. In a few weeks, it will be Thanksgiving. I'm determined the President and all of us will celebrate Thanksgiving knowing we completed this job successfully, and protected our national security and our way of life.'

'Will you lead this operation from here?' someone at the front asked.

'Yes, I'll be riding shotgun on this task. Expect me or my deputy to be asking you for updates every twenty minutes. If anyone fails to put one hundred percent into this task, I'll personally ship them home in total disgrace. If we do not find these people in time, they'll damage irretrievably our country's national security. We will have failed. Every man, woman and child in our country will pay a heavy price for that failure. We are on the front line here, people. Get this job done. Get this job done. *Now.*'

Katherine's deputy looked at a message on her phone and then stepped up and whispered something into Katherine's ear.

'That's all for now. Updates please - every twenty minutes.'

Katherine and her deputy walked smartly around the people and down the steps to the lower level. They left the operations room and headed to an office on another floor.

Waiting in the office were Ertha Odeele and Division Chief Spencer 'Spence' MacAllisin. Spence had flown to a private airfield in southern England by company jet. Ertha Odeele met him as soon as he landed, and drove him straight to Grosvenor Square.

During the drive, Ertha told him she had arrived in England two days ago. She updated Spence on her new work at Langley. Work she had to drop when Katherine ordered her to supervise an incursion into Canada. Although Ertha and Spence were old friends, she said she couldn't brief him on the national security emergency that had unfolded. He knew her well enough to understand she meant she didn't know anything.

'Katherine is briefing key people personally,' she said.

'I guess that says it all,' he replied.

Katherine and her deputy entered the room and they all shook hands like long-lost friends at a funeral. They sat around a circular table and drank filtered coffee. Better quality coffee than the bitter tasting dark fluid flowing down throats in the operations room.

Spence had been pulled out of a major operation that he had developed meticulously for months. But when Katherine called him, he sensed something much more important had happened in London. He felt privileged that Katherine had selected him to lead the search, and so without hesitation he flew to her side.

Spence had become Katherine's most experienced hunter in Europe. With unlimited backup at his fingertips, she felt certain he would find the fugitives. He also brought a significant value to the hunt. He had worked with Zoe Tampsin in Bosnia when she supported American-led operations to capture war criminals.

Spence MacAllisin had made East European Division Chief before Katherine took control of the CIA. A well known character who'd served the CIA in various parts of the world for over thirty years. A man known for integrity and loyalty, he hadn't climbed over or backstabbed anybody to get up the ladder.

He waited a long time to get his position, but everyone working for him respected and trusted him. They viewed him more like a supportive father than a boss. His agents had often gone the extra mile for him.

Spence had the utmost respect for Katherine. He admired her meticulously planned climb to the top. He predicted she would make director. A fifty-five-year-old linguistics graduate, Spence could speak Russian, French and German comfortably, like a native. He stood five foot eight, clean-shaven with short neat hair and a good build.

He always dressed casual with an open shirt and no necktie. He preferred dark coloured jackets and light coloured chinos. Unmarried and not in a relationship, Spence had married the job and he loved his job. His family were the people in his office. His French housekeeper believed he earned a living as a political commentator. She kept his house neat, she taught him to cook, and she kept his body from wilting.

Katherine told them the official cover story. Gavin Shawlens had information that would cause catastrophic damage to US national security. Zoe Tampsin had kidnapped Shawlens and planned to deliver him to Russian agents.

Katherine asked, 'Ertha, is the Canadian asset on ice?'

Ertha nodded, 'Secured in a country house as you instructed. Ready to be interrogated when you specify the line of questions.'

'No interrogation. Just keep her on ice. What about her wild sister?' Katherine asked.

'I've left instructions to keep her sedated.'

'Good work, Ertha.'

'What happened with Canada?' Ertha asked.

'Cranstoun smoothed it over. No fall-out,' Katherine said.

'Anyone know why Tampsin has turned traitor?' Spence asked, because traitor wasn't a label he would attach to Zoe.

Katherine said, 'We believe Milton Johnson gave her direct orders. He's the traitor. She's carrying out his orders without fully understanding the consequences.'

Spence thought for a moment. 'Okay, that makes sense. Unfortunately, it doesn't make it any easier. She'll follow orders and complete her mission no matter what. Surrender is not in her vocabulary.'

Ertha asked Spence, 'How serious a threat does she pose to our field agents?'

'Very serious. Zoe is at the top of her game. She holds a black belt, expert grade two, in krav maga.'

Ertha said, 'Krav maga. Sounds like a type of goulash. What is it?'

'It's a system of close contact combat developed by Israeli Special Forces. Now used by elite Special Forces all over the world. In Bosnia, I saw first-hand what she can do. She's a lethal animal,' Spence said.

'Really?' Ertha said, and didn't sound convinced.

'Let me tell you about Zoe Tampsin. With the confidence of a tigress she sauntered unarmed into a fortified Bosnian safe house, protected by five heavily armed guards, posing as a battered drunken hooker. She lured three of them to a back bedroom where she killed them silently before they started on her. She dropped the other two before they knew what hit them. Then calmly opened the back door to let us take over. All without a single shot being fired.'

Katherine raised her eyebrows. 'Impressive.'

'I had told her before she went in that I wanted two for interrogation. When I got in the house, two were alive, barely. I don't know of anyone who could have done what she achieved. The woman has nerves of steel.'

'Thanks for that, Spence. We should post a warning to all team leaders,' Katherine said to her deputy.

'Can she stop a bullet?' Ertha asked.

'Of course not.'

'That's fine. We avoid close combat, and like any lethal animal, shoot it from a distance. We'll find her and we'll deal with her,' Ertha said.

She made a face to Katherine that showed she wasn't impressed with Tampsin.

Spence knew that Ertha didn't get on well with Special Forces people. She believed they were too full of themselves, and unbearably rude at times. Too often, they demanded unrealistic backup and intelligence gathering before they would lift a finger. A few years back, she'd lost four good agents when Special Forces progressed too cautiously into a hot zone.

Spence raised his voice a notch. 'Ertha, don't underestimate Zoe Tampsin. She's very good at blending and making herself invisible. When I said "battered hooker", her make-up looked fantastic, worthy of an Oscar. If she's hiding—'

'Tell me. Where can she hide in this tiny back end of beyond?' Ertha asked.

'This is her home ground. She'll know all the dark corners,' Katherine said.

'We'll never find her quickly if she's down a rabbit hole. We need something to flush her into the open. We need a carrot,' Spence said.

'I have a copy of her file. All the carrots you need are in there,' Katherine said, and handed the file to Ertha.

'We'll only get one chance at this. It will need to be the sweetest carrot in the bunch,' Spence said.

'Time is of the essence. I need this done now,' Katherine said with emphasis.

Spence sat back in his chair and held his gaze on Katherine's eyes. He realised the significance of this mission. Sometimes, CIA Directors used excessive hype to ram home their message.

Whatever had happened, it had Katherine by the throat. He had seen some of her predecessors distraught but he believed the queen of cool couldn't be rattled. Today proved him wrong, not only had she been rattled, she allowed others to see her distress.

Over the years, he'd witnessed several serious threats to national security. None of them produced this scale of response. If he'd been alone with Katherine, he would have asked her for details about the threat. He sensed she could say more, but now wasn't the right time to ask.

'No holds barred?' Spence asked.

Katherine nodded. 'None, whatsoever.'

'What about the laws of the land?' Ertha asked.

'For this mission, ignore them, they don't apply to us,' Katherine said without hesitation. Spence and Ertha looked at Katherine with astonishment on their faces.

'Are you saying we have a free pass to run around Britain and do whatever is necessary to eliminate this threat? Ride roughshod over law enforcement and Security Services?' Spence asked with incredulity in his voice.

'Yes,' Katherine replied.

'They won't just stand by and watch,' he added.

'Yes they will. Do not let them get in your way. If they do, inform me immediately and I'll deal with it.'

'Jesus, this must be the biggest threat we have ever faced in our entire history.'

'Yes, Spence, by a very large order of magnitude.'

'So—'

'The scale of the threat is all you need to know,' Katherine cut him off.

Ertha had skimmed through Zoe's file and picked out a photo. She looked at it carefully, twisted it in her fingertips then handed it to Spence.

'Sweet enough for you, Spence?' Ertha said.

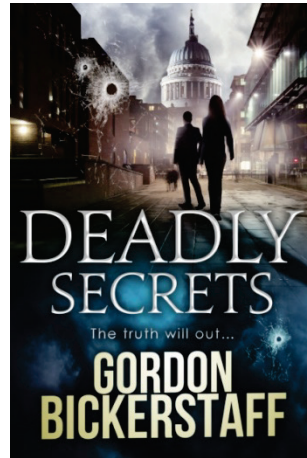
'Aww for God's sake. *No*,' Spence said.

Katherine said, '*Spence!* No holds barred. If you have a problem with that, you need to let me know, right now.'

'No problem,' he replied as he returned the photo to Ertha, and thought, *what on earth is at stake that needs us to stoop this low?*

Deadly Secrets

The truth will out...



Gavin's life will be turned upside down when he joins a company to work on a product that will revolutionise the food industry. His initial gut instinct is to walk away until he discovers one of the company directors is the former love of his teenage life.

The financial implications are global and incredible. Powerful individuals and countries are prepared to kill as they compete to seize control of the company. Corruption at high levels, a deadly flaw in the product, and the stakes jump higher and higher.

Against overwhelming odds, Gavin must rescue his former love from the hands of an evil cult as they prepare her for a living nightmare.

'... doesn't have twists - it has hairpin bends'

'... an intricate fast paced modern day thriller'

'... will appeal to readers who like intricate plots'

'... plot kept me guessing what will happen next'

'... weaved it all together masterfully'

Everything To Lose

The chase is on...



University researchers claim their new product will boost the performance of every athlete in the world. The Lambeth Group send Gavin Shawlens to investigate the claim.

The product is stolen, top athletes disappear and the research team are unaware that their product has a dangerous side effect. Gavin must stop the product launch before more people die horribly. When Gavin disappears, Zoe Tampsin, from the Lambeth Group, must find him before he becomes the next victim.

As if Zoe doesn't have enough on her plate. Past events in Gavin's life catch up with him. A powerful US general has decided that Gavin must die to prevent exposure of a 60-year-old secret capable of world-changing and power-shifting events.

Toxic Minds

The damage is done



'There's a special place in hell for women who don't help each other'

Madeleine Albright

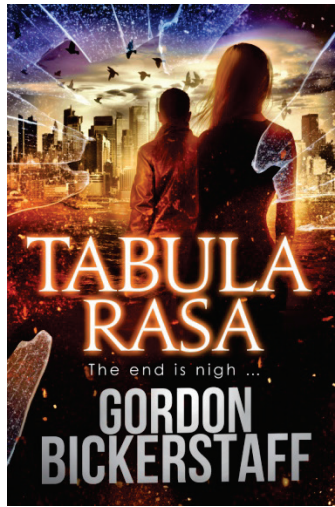
Alexa Sommer had it all - stellar career, beautiful home, successful children, and a devoted husband. Then came meltdown and divorce. Her children's love turned to hate. She is forced out of the job she loved. Desperately, she tries to rebuild her life around a new job, but her work is controversial. Her enemies want her work stopped, and a few of them prepare to take their protest to the ultimate level.

A handful of Alexa's new colleagues have a compelling reason to want her sacked. Only one colleague can help her. Gavin Shawlens has nothing to lose - his train has already crashed, and his career is finished. He is all Alexa has on her side as a perfect storm of dreadful nightmares bear down on her.

'Come on Alexa, don't give in - fight back.'

Tabula Rasa

The end is nigh ...



A thriller for fans of Michael Crichton, Lee Child, Tess Gerritsen and James Patterson.

A hundred years ago, a wealthy family of visionaries prophesied the devastation that global warming would bring to world food supplies in the 21st century. They decided to prepare for the worst, and embark on an ambitious plan of revolution.

Lambeth Group agents, Zoe Tamsin and Gavin Shawlens, prepare to investigate the unusual death of a government defence scientist. Someone is determined to stop their investigation before they get started. Zoe uncovers two unfamiliar words, Tabula Rasa. The only other clue is the curious behaviour of the dead scientist's son, Ramsey.

Posing as a couple, Gavin and Zoe enter the secret and dangerous world of Ramsey's aristocratic guardians, headed by philanthropist billionaire, Lord Zachary Silsden. What Gavin uncovers, shocks him to the bottom of his soul. Does he have the courage and the conviction to interfere in the greatest revolution the world has ever faced? What Zoe discovers about Gavin—words can't describe. Zoe is faced with an impossible choice, but one thing is certain, she will not hesitate to do her duty, no matter the cost.