

Deadly Secrets

The truth will out ...

Gordon Bickerstaff

A Lambeth Group Thriller

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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'

Also by the same author:

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

The Black Fox *Run for your life ...*

Toxic Minds *The damage is done ...*

Tabula Rasa *The end is nigh ...*

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One

East Kilbride, Scotland

When his death throes fired crescendos of searing pain into his body, every nerve screamed pain and he didn't understand. Instinct told him that death loomed close. His brave heart craved for the love and safety he knew from his brother.

Exhausted from searching and too petrified to stand, he lay on his side and shook uncontrollably. Traumatized by relentless pain, his brain finally abandoned his body. The suffering subsided and calm descended with a false sense of well-being.

This pain felt much worse than he'd ever known. Many times, his brother had beaten him for running off, but the pain lasted moments. He wanted to get up and run to his brother, and kill more rats for him. His brother hated rats and screamed at them madly. Together, they'd killed many rats and he loved killing them.

A vision appeared in his mind. Rats sneaked through a hole in the wall close to the bed they shared. His brother lay there alone, calling for help. Terror filled his mind when the vision showed hordes of rats streaming through the hole and attacking his brother.

His brother fought them, but they swarmed over him, biting, tearing and squealing. The vision drained his heart. He tried to call out but his muscles refused to move. While he panted long puffs of moist air into the night, he stared ahead. Traumatic visions raced through his mind.

The woman stepped out of her warm office and rubbed her arms on her jacket against the cold night air. His razor-sharp senses had dulled, so he didn't hear her footsteps crunch the fine gravel as she approached his cage.

The woman knelt down beside him. Their eyes met and the woman flinched with concern. His fragile spirit reached out, *help me*, his dark eyes pleaded. A few strands of the woman's chestnut-brown hair worked loose and she pushed them back behind her ear.

Concern twisted new lines around the woman's mouth. She sighed loudly. Slowly, she shook her head from side to side as she stood up. The woman closed the cage door quietly to avoid disturbing the others. She went back into her office and flicked the light switch, which brought cold darkness back to the yard.

Fluid filled his stomach, his gullet and lungs. Then, crushing feelings brought panic and helplessness. Painful coughing expelled a thick fluid, and each cough became a hurdle that

strangled his will to live. He gasped and gurgled while pockets of gas escaped from his lungs. White fluid from his mouth spilled onto the ground, where it formed a pool beside his head.

*

Colin Blunt listened to the breakfast news on a portable radio in his bathroom. He showered away the remaining cobwebs of his dreams. His wife, Annabel, had spread out over their bed like a sad old walrus. She screwed up her eyes as she tried to focus on a telephone call. Hungover from a drinking binge.

In the bedroom, while he towelled himself dry, she told him what she could remember. He dressed quickly, finished his coffee and bid his wife a curt goodbye. She responded with her usual groan, and then buried her head in her duvet to hide from the daylight that had arrived too soon.

Outside, Colin glanced up at the sky and then got into his Land Rover Discovery. The first week of March had arrived and remnants of a cold and blustery winter had started to fade. Spring lurked just around the corner and west-of-Scotland flora prepared for a new year.

Overnight, the temperature had dropped to a single figure. A normal occurrence for early March in Glasgow. The dull morning sky looked miserable but rain had held off. If asked, Colin would have said the morning was 'right dreich'.

Reginald C. Blunt, a senior partner at Fairfells Pet Centre, hated his first name and insisted people call him Colin. Annabel called him 'Reg-ann-old', and he loathed her for it.

Tall brick walls surrounded the back yard at Fairfells Pet Centre. More to keep wild animals out than keep boarders inside. The concrete cubicles and wire mesh kennels had few comforts other than a large plastic tub bed in one corner, and a stainless steel water bowl in the opposite one. Some boarders had toys and blankets provided by thoughtful owners.

Carol Donginger, the night duty veterinary nurse, had finished her paperwork in the small office attached to the kennels. An attractive and well-spoken woman in her mid-twenties, she wore her chestnut-brown hair tied in a ponytail. A few strands had worked loose and she pushed them back behind her ear. She wore the Centre's dark-blue safari-type uniform.

Carol knelt down in the centre of a ring of twelve metal bowls laid out in a circle. Wielding a wooden spoon, she dispensed dog food into each bowl.

Colin stormed into the yard and searched side-to-side for a clue. The self-closing door slammed shut. The noise startled Carol, and the dogs began pounding against their kennel doors, barking and squealing.

The familiar strong odour braced Colin's nose. He cleared his throat. 'Where is it?'

Carol looked at his grumpy morning face and said, 'Morning, Colin, he's over here.' She led him to an isolation kennel set against the back wall.

On the floor, lay an adult black-and-white mongrel dog with long matted hair, speckled white ears and two white front paws. It lay on its side opposite the cage door. Carol tucked her wooden spoon under her armpit and moved over to the door.

'This poor soul arrived last night in a police van. I've called him Lonely. Apparently, he attacked a man in the street but didn't bite. The police dog handler brought him to me.'

Colin glanced at the dog. Annoyed, he prepared to tear a strip off her for giving sedation without permission. 'Why did you sedate it?'

'I didn't. He's dead.'

'Dead?'

Carol looked puzzled at his surprise. 'Yes. I told your wife what happened.'

He grunted loudly, lifted his case and turned to walk away. Carol raised her voice, 'He barked for ages and wouldn't settle.'

He turned back. 'Look, Carol, I'm not angry with you, but you mustn't make an emergency call to my home unless it's essential. Have you got that?' Finished, he stormed off and made his way to the door that led to the surgeries.

'Something you should see before I clean up,' Carol said.

He stopped in his tracks, hunched his shoulders and rolled his eyes skyward.

She slipped the bolt on the cage door and edged, hesitantly, inside the kennel.

His eyes narrowed. *You little witch.* He retraced his steps, crashed his case down and followed her inside.

She looked down at the dog and said, 'I've never seen rabies, but—'

'*Rabies?* Don't be silly, girl.'

Colin stood at the kennel door, facing the dog. White fluid had seeped from its anus and spread out in a small pool on the ground. Similar material formed a larger pool around its mouth.

'Look at this damp patch under his body. As if he's been sweating, I can't understand it.' Carol looked at him for an answer. Dogs don't have sweat glands.

He shrugged. 'Probably vomited.'

Colin moved around to the back of the dog for another view. Something crushed under his shoe. He knelt down on one knee, and shifted a sheet of newspaper for a closer look. He raised his voice in concern, 'What the hell's this—teeth?'

Carol sprang to her feet and turned her back on the dog. She covered her mouth with the palm of her hand. 'Oh, that poor baby must have been ... in terrible pain.'

Colin leant over the dog and with his right hand, he pressed on the body.

He shook his head. 'This isn't right. Its abdomen has collapsed.'

The dog gave out a loud burp.

'*Christ,*' Colin shouted.

His prodding had disturbed the lay of the chest, which collapsed and forced trapped air to expel like a deflating balloon. Carol composed herself and squatted down beside him.

Colin snapped with his fingers for her to pass the wooden spoon. Then he poked the handle end into the dog's mouth. He pressed hard to prise open its mouth but its gums had stuck together.

'The jaws are ... aargh!'

His stick slipped off its gum and brushed the dog's eye, causing fluid to spurt out of its eyeball. Splashes of vitreous fluid landed on the back of his hand. He stared at the dog's head while fluid oozed out of its eyeball, rolled down and dropped onto newspaper.

Carol's voice trembled as she said, 'How could he decompose so quickly?'

Gently, Colin drew the stick across the back of its body. Clumps of dark hair stuck to the end. The stick rippled and tore the dog's skin, exposing a white gel-like tissue underneath. They looked on in disbelief.

Colin's anxiety peaked when a surge of adrenaline flushed through his blood and made his heart thump. Beads of perspiration formed on his hairline. His thoughts became turbulent. *What the bloody hell happened here?*

Ready to burst into tears, Carol sounded like a worried pet owner, 'What happened to him? Why did his teeth fall out?'

Colin searched and analysed but he didn't reply. Carol broke the silence. 'His body can't be rotting. Haven't you noticed it?'

A pang of irritation sprang in his mind. He gave her a sharp sideways look.

Carol pointed to the pool of material expelled from the dog's mouth. 'There's no smell. He doesn't smell of anything.'

Colin remained silent. He retrieved a handkerchief from his trouser pocket, dabbed perspiration from his forehead and wiped his palms. When he saw the splash of vitreous fluid on the back of his hand, he jumped to attention and wiped it vigorously.

Perplexed, he tried to recall events immediately following the death of an animal. Then he thought back to his student days at vet school. They'd taught him little about death, but he

remembered something from the biochemistry class. Post mortem, resident bacteria consume simple molecules to grow and produce more bacteria.

When simple biochemicals are exhausted, bacteria would secrete suites of digestive enzymes to demolish organs and tissues and reduce them to simple building blocks. The characteristic smell of death would develop slowly as a complex cocktail of small odour-bearing biochemicals accumulate beside rapidly-growing numbers of bacteria.

Confidence returned, and he said, 'Okay, what we have is a massive bacterial infection.'
'Bacteria?'

He ushered Carol out of the cage. 'I don't know how, but bacteria have decomposed the dog without producing the usual smell.'

'Shall I clean up now?'

He shook his head. 'No, fetch protective clothing and wait. I'll come back in a few minutes. I need to make a call.'

Colin headed to the door that led from the kennels to the main building. In the foyer, a receptionist sorted the morning mail.

'Morning,' Colin said as he hurried into his surgery.

As usual, staff had his surgery open, brightly lit, sparkling clean and ready for business. Tall and thin-faced, Colin spoke with a confident voice much appreciated by worried pet owners. The receptionist followed Colin to his surgery.

'Morning, Colin. It's a bit miserable again today. At least the rain is holding off,' she said.

Colin said nothing.

She noted his distraction. It wasn't unusual for him. With an eye-roll, she turned to walk back to the reception desk.

Colin slipped his suit jacket onto a coat hanger and put on his white coat. Smartly, he moved around the examination table in the centre of his surgery and followed her to the reception desk.

'Coffee?' she asked.

He took hold of the her arm and pulled her into the office behind the reception desk before he closed the door behind them. Concern crinkled her face as she stared at his hand on her arm.

Colin said, 'I want you to dig out the hotline number for the Health and Safety Executive. We have a RIDDOR.'

'RIDDOR?' she replied, although she knew it meant reporting injuries, diseases and dangerous occurrences regulations.'

She took a deep breath and looked alarmed. She rubbed her arm where his fingers had pressed and then found the number.

With a piece of paper bearing the number, he retreated into his surgery and closed the door behind him.

When he got through to the HSE, he sounded calm and confident, 'Good morning. My name is Colin Blunt. I'm a senior vet at Fairfells Pet Centre near Glasgow. I have a dead animal here. I think it's been infected with a super bug. No, it's not natural death. I think it may have escaped from a research lab. I want you to send someone over here now. It is urgent. Yes, now, good. Yes, I will, thanks. Yes, of course, bye.'

Colin felt rattled but relieved as he stepped back into the foyer. The receptionist stared with concern and waited for an explanation.

He half-smiled and said, 'Someone will be over from the HSE. Let me know when he arrives. I'll be down at the kennels.'

Alarmed and flustered, she replied, 'What happened? Is there a problem? Should I close the surgery?'

'No, absolutely not. Carry on as normal. I have everything under control.'

He strode back to the kennels.

Two

At his flat in Clarkston, on the south side of Glasgow, Dr Gavin Shawlens had just prepared his breakfast when he received a call from the head of the Lambeth Group, Sir Christopher Aden-Brown.

'Dr Shawlens, good morning. I hope I didn't wake you?'

'No, sir, I'm having breakfast.'

'I've just taken a call from the HSE. A vet in your area has reported a RIDDOR incident. Apparently, an animal with a super-bug infection. The vet believes the animal may have escaped from a research facility. I'm sending details to your phone. Can you pop over there and make a preliminary assessment? If he *is* on to something, let me know and I'll make this an official investigation.'

Gavin checked the time. 'Now?'

'Yes, now.' Aden-Brown sounded annoyed. 'If the vet is correct, we need a lid on this as soon as possible.'

'Fine, sir, I'm on my way.'

'By the way, I read the final report on your last investigation. A fine piece of work. Congratulations.'

'Thank you, sir. I'll be in touch after I've visited the vet.'

In his sitting room, Gavin looked out of the bay window. Busy traffic on the Busby Road headed through the Clarkston Toll toward Glasgow. He would need to head in the opposite direction, toward East Kilbride.

His apartment occupied the top floor of a traditional four-storey, yellow sandstone tenement building. A comfortable living space, it had two bedrooms with a kitchen/dining room, bathroom and sitting room. He looked up at the dull grey sky. The changeable Scottish weather meant that he'd still need his winter jacket. Roll on warmer days and less heavy clothes.

In a prosperous part of Glasgow, the communal entrance (or close) to the flats and the stairwell were well maintained and tidy. Brown resin covered the stone floor and steps for easy cleaning. A dark terracotta-red resin decorated the walls to dado height and magnolia paint coated the remainder, including the ceiling.

Each landing boasted a pair of long rectangular sash windows in matching red paint. The banister, with its original hard wooden top, maintained authentic wrought iron railings, painted black.

The Lambeth Group, a covert government department, had been formed when a group of twenty-six university vice-chancellors from elite universities met secretly with Home Office mandarins at the Imperial War Museum, Lambeth Road, London.

They agreed on the need for a doomwatch strategy to police research and technology disasters, which sometimes occur when top researchers pushed past boundaries farther and faster than they should.

Working with the Centre for Protection of National Infrastructure, a branch of MI5, and the Home Office, the Lambeth Group had successfully prevented the most damaging university and private research disasters from becoming public knowledge.

Gavin had gained a great deal of experience over the past six years as an investigator for the Lambeth Group. In fact, he had a UK security clearance of Top Secret Level D, which meant he had knowledge of the highest category of Official State Secrets. He knew where some of the nastiest skeletons lay buried. He'd been present at the burial of one of them.

A thirty-six-year-old academic, Gavin stood at five-eight in his socks and occupied a lean and muscular frame. Occasional visits to the university judo club kept him fit. Regularly, he jogged up the three flights of stairs to his top-floor flat. His neighbours pegged him as an oddball.

Fifty-two minutes after taking the call, he stood with Colin Blunt and Carol Donginger as they faced the dead dog. Colin hadn't disturbed the body. The three of them wore protective head visors, disposable coats, over-trousers, latex gloves, and disposable plastic booties. It didn't occur to any of them that their strange attire had set most of the boarders into a frenzy of barking and jumping.

'It's been dead for less than six hours, yet it shows this massive decomposition,' Colin said while Gavin examined the body.

'The cold last night should have slowed any decomposition. Something has sped it up even against the cold. Interesting,' Gavin said.

Colin gesticulated nervously. 'This white matter has seeped from both ends. All its teeth are out and its hair is loose. Tissue and skin are ... well ... white jelly.'

Gavin circled the dog and took photographs with his Lambeth Group secure encrypted mobile (SEM) phone. He didn't tell them that the photos were simultaneously transmitted to the Lambeth Group office or that his phone also transmitted their conversation.

Gavin asked, 'How did the dog come into your possession?'

'Police rounded him up and brought him to me,' Carol said.

'Obviously, this isn't a typical infection. I think it might have escaped by accident or design from a university research laboratory,' Colin said.

'Really?' Gavin raised his eyebrows.

'Animal rights people or students—probably set this dog loose,' Colin said.

Gavin nodded but sounded unconvinced, 'It wouldn't be the first time that's happened.'

Research laboratories didn't use mongrel dogs because they didn't have the defined genetic profile needed for provenance. *You're a vet, you know this*, Gavin thought.

Colin said, 'I want full microbiological and viral screens done on this animal. I want to know what I'm dealing with here.'

Gavin stepped back and frowned at the dog. 'Full screens are a lot of work. What do you think you have?'

Impatient, Colin paced and said, 'Looks to me like strep. The flesh-eating one.'

Gavin nodded. 'Streptococcus pyogenes.'

'That's the nasty one, isn't it?' Carol said.

Gavin had to rummage through a corner of his memory for a moment. 'Yes, it can be. It occurs naturally in humans. Occasionally, it causes sore throats. Rarely, it causes necrotising fasciitis or flesh-eating.'

'How does the flesh-eating business work?' Colin asked.

'... Erm. Strep bacteria secrete enzymes to digest tissues. Blood vessels in skin are so thin they're digested quickly. Exposed skin tissue is destroyed.'

Colin's eyes widened. 'Killer enzymes?'

Gavin explained, 'Not intentionally. Imagine if I gave you a giant loaf of bread the size of Edinburgh Castle. Before you could eat it, you would need to break it down to mouth-sized chunks. Bacteria are too small to consume our organs directly. They need to use enzymes to demolish huge structures down to small building blocks, which they can use to make new bacteria.'

Colin argued, 'The dog is dead—is it not?'

Gavin walked out of the kennel to join Carol. He'd had enough of Blunt's aggression. Carol's face looked more interesting and they exchanged smiles.

Gavin said, 'This type of infection is rare. Probably less than ten people in the country each year.'

Carol nodded to Gavin, 'They say large doses of antibiotics are useless.'

Gavin engaged her oval eyes. 'That's almost true. Antibiotics do kill the bacteria but not its enzymes. If the bugs secrete large quantities of enzymes into the blood, then antibiotics won't stop the ensuing tissue destruction. Death can follow rapidly.'

Through their visors, Gavin and Carol examined the fine detail on each other's faces. Colin paced around the kennel, evaluating his options.

Carol pointed at Gavin and said, 'You're not convinced it's strep—are you?'

She had read Gavin's facial tell correctly.

Gavin nodded. 'Strep doesn't occur naturally in dogs. They have immunity.'

Colin raised his voice, 'What? Are you certain?'

'A strep infection is unlikely in a dog,' Gavin said, and sounded sympathetic.

Colin thought for a moment. 'It must be a genetically modified strain.'

Gavin nodded half-heartedly. 'That's ... one possibility.'

'Get the screens done,' Colin said as he pressed his hands downward against his thighs, causing the latex gloves to tighten around his fingers. Perspiration beaded on his forehead, and a mist of condensation formed on the top of his visor.

Gavin said, 'Okay, I'll take samples and send them off. We'll find out soon enough.'

Without another word, Colin went to the kennel office, changed out of his protective clothes, marched back to the main building and into his surgery.

Carol fetched a sample transit box and helped Gavin collect specimens. He helped Carol move the dog into a body bag. In the small office that faced the kennels, they removed their protective clothing. Gavin put his SEM phone back on standby.

'I'm sorry we had to haul you out of your bed to come here,' she said in a quiet voice.

'I was having breakfast. I'm an early morning man.'

She smiled. 'I like the morning.'

He nodded. 'Best time of the day for me. No distractions—well, not usually.'

'Sorry about Colin. He's quite upset about this thing.'

'I got that message loud and clear, but why?'

Her voice dropped a notch, 'We've never seen anything like this before. It must be bad.'

'There's nothing to worry about.' He pointed to the protective clothing. 'This is good quality.'

She didn't respond. Light tremors made her head shake. Silent, she sat with her head bowed.

He sensed he didn't have the full picture. 'Okay, now I feel like I've missed something.' He leant forward to look at her face, now pale and drawn.

When she turned her head to him, she looked terrified. 'I touched the dog without protection. Colin got a splash of fluids on his hand.'

'Shit.'

Gavin wanted to point out their stupidity, but he knew it wouldn't do any good. She looked into his eyes for support and then turned her gaze to the floor.

He shook his head. If she'd been exposed to something, should he be sitting so close to her? Or breathing the same air?

He thought hard. Streptococcus wasn't responsible, and no official research laboratory would experiment on a mongrel dog with an unknown genetic profile. However, he couldn't rule out a rogue company experimenting with genetically modified strains.

His mind swung back and forth, trying to decide whether he should advise Carol to seek a course of antibiotics. Hospital treatment would draw attention and create a problem for the Lambeth Group if a secret research project had backfired.

Hairs on the back of his neck pricked his skin while he looked at Carol's fearful face.

Her left hand fidgeted with the seam of her trousers. She placed her trembling, damp, sweaty right hand on the back of his. He wanted to—but didn't pull his hand away.

'Dr Shawlens, please, tell me what I should do. I don't want to die like that poor dog.'
Tears ran down her cheeks, and she squeezed his hand.

Three

University of Kinmalcolm, Scotland

With the deftness of a Persian cat, a last-minute student snuck through the upper rear door of the Watt Lecture Theatre. She scanned the rows of heads and spotted her friend near the end of a middle row. Two minutes later, she slipped onto the seat beside him.

'What's Shawlens on about today?' she whispered.

'Collagen diseases,' he whispered back.

The student eased back in her seat and listened to the last few minutes of Gavin's lecture. She would ask her friend for a copy of his lecture notes.

Gavin's thick mop of hair had a light straw-colour in summer that darkened in winter. A tousled fringe covered his forehead. His voice resounded with a strong Scottish accent, although years of lectures and public speaking had smoothed out his Glaswegian dialect.

'... and patients with this syndrome can bend their hands backward to touch their arm. Their skin is loose and translucent, which is particularly noticeable in the skin between the fingers. Also, the fingers tend to be long and spidery,' he said.

He held his left hand high with the fingers spread open. A sea of hands floated into the air for self and near neighbour examination. None of the students found translucent skin in their friends. One girl received close examination for spidery fingers, but it turned out to be long false nails.

'Last one I need to mention, briefly, is scurvy. It's characterised by skin sores, spongy gums, loose teeth, and painful joints,' he said.

His next slide showed a list of scurvy symptoms. 'These symptoms are caused by another fault in the foundation matrix of tissues. This time, the fault lies within the collagen structure itself.'

He paused for them to catch up, and then said, 'Collagen synthesis requires an enzyme to make the bonds that hold collagen proteins together in a fibre. This enzyme is prolyl hydroxylase, and it requires vitamin C as an agent or cofactor. Lack of vitamin C produces poor prolyl hydroxylase activity. Just like a pop group without an agent doesn't make good records, this enzyme without vitamin C doesn't make good collagen. The fibres unwind like split ends in your hair.'

He showed a slide with a diagram of a collagen fibre unwound at the ends. 'This weakens the foundation matrix and causes symptoms we associate with scurvy. Now, you know why your mum wants you to eat your greens and drink your OJ.'

A rapid succession of beeb-beeb from Gavin's phone announced the end of his lecture. He concluded quickly, 'All of the diseases I've talked about today arise because of faulty or missing enzymes, causing defective collagen and poor tissue foundation. Make sure you understand the link between disease, collagen structure, and enzymes.'

He paused to gather his notes and look around at the faces. 'Any questions?' he shouted above the rising noise level.

'Will collagen be in the exam?' an unknown voice called out.

'Everything is examinable. Any problems, you'll find me in the enzyme technology lab,' he said.

Gavin powered down the lecture hall computer and projector. One student and her friend hung back to ask about possible research projects.

'Yes, I have a project on protease enzymes,' he told them.

'Protease enzymes. I don't think we've done them yet,' she said.

'They break protein down to its amino acid building blocks. A bit like demolition of a house to a large pile of bricks,' Gavin said.

'What makes them interesting?'

'The ones I'm looking at have the potential to destroy blood clots. Think about eradicating heart attacks and strokes with a simple self-medicated protease.'

'Thanks, Dr Shawlens—I'll think about it.'

Gavin didn't say that his interest in clot-busting proteases was personal, or that his father had died suddenly of a heart attack caused by a massive blood clot. A death that could have been prevented if a clot-busting drug had been more widely available.

As a student, Gavin had studied biochemistry and developed a passion for enzymes while completing postgraduate research for his PhD. He enjoyed teaching but research dominated his life, and he had built up an international reputation for research on protease enzymes.

He spent most of his time with his enzyme technology research group, comprised of two postdoctoral biochemists and one research technician. They worked in a standard laboratory with enough bench spaces for eight research workers. Naturally, he worked in the best space in the lab. A corner site beside a large picture window, which looked onto a green field with three large oak trees.

He had insulated his corner with a desk, fridge-freezer, overflowing bookcases and filing cabinets stacked with books and chemical catalogues. Along the far wall, he had a glass-partitioned office that he used as a repository for papers, box files, piles of reports, exam scripts, essays and stacks of lab notebooks.

His two postdocs were best described as an odd bunch working on odd projects. Dr Sharon Bonny, a large girl, came from Buffalo, New York. She collaborated with a brewery on the use of protease enzymes to eliminate chill-haze in beer. Every month, the brewery sent a barrel of beer for her 'research' studies. Not surprisingly, she became popular with staff and students.

Dr Brian Herding, a cocky Londoner, had a roving eye. He collaborated with medics from a local hospital on an artificial pancreas project. This gave him access to impressionable nurses, and together, they generated much heat but very little light.

Christine Willsening provided technical support for the three researchers. She prepared their reagents and maintained fresh stocks of chemicals and consumables. She kept their laboratory equipment operational, calibrated and accurate.

Christine's dependable work kept the research projects moving along simultaneously. The least qualified academically, she had by far the most important qualifications—keen observation and sharp common sense.

*

Strong sunlight streamed into the laboratory and danced a dance of many reflections on assorted glass beakers and bottles on benches and shelves. Gavin strode into the lab, wearing a big smile. He dumped his lecture notes on Christine Willsening's bench.

'All done?' she asked, and greeted him with a matching smile.

Christine had a wonderfully broad smile. It sprang into place with such precision that it seemed to be pinned to each ear with an elastic band. In photographs, she always looked happy.

'Yep. And it feels good.'

Gavin resumed his experiments on pineapple protease enzymes while Christine ran tests on protease inhibitors that she'd extracted from raw pineapple juice.

She asked, 'What are we doing for our anniversary? Next Tuesday.'

Gavin and Christine had worked together for six years and become a close-knit team. He enjoyed working with her and she enjoyed his company. They'd agreed at the start that his work and their friendship were too special to spoil by having an affair. It didn't stop them

tantalising and flirting with each other like two sixteen-year-olds. Like Gavin, she was a dark horse. The person people saw on the outside wasn't the person hiding inside.

'Dinner, on me. How does that sound?'

'Great. I'll book a table for two. Glasgow?' she said.

'Okay.'

She lived in Paisley, and he lived in Clarkston, so Glasgow made for a good compromise for both of them to return home by train.

Christine mothered him like a protective sister. At times, she contrived to fracture relationships with women she thought would hurt him. Sometimes, she forgot to pass messages on time, or a little incorrectly. She knew someone in his past had left him in a lot of pain, and she believed she had to stand guard until he found the right person.

Brian Herding propped the door open with his foot, and announced, 'Right, I'm off down to the pub. See you all later.'

'What if someone wants you?' Christine called over.

'If it's important, I'm in a meeting. If she's gorgeous, tell her I'm down the pub panting like mad. Otherwise, tell them to bugger off and get a life.'

'Will do.'

Gavin thought to remind Brian he'd fallen behind with his targets but, too late, he'd gone. Christine retrieved a piece of notepaper from her pocket. She'd taken a call from Carol Donginger at Fairfells Pet Centre.

She handed it to Gavin. 'She sounded worried. She'd like you to call her back.'

Gavin retreated to his office and closed the door. The Lambeth Group and his government work were secret. From a cabinet, he fetched a report of the results of the samples taken from the Fairfells' dog. Three weeks had passed since he'd collected the samples.

He called Carol. 'How are you?'

'Fine. It's been three weeks. If I had anything, I'd know by now. I'm just wondering what happened to the dog.'

'I've sent a report to Colin Blunt.'

Sounding deflated, she said, 'He hasn't told me anything.'

'I see. Well, good news. The tests were all negative. No bacteria or viruses of any kind.'

'I don't understand. What killed the dog?'

'I have no idea. Certainly not a bacterial or viral infection.'

Carol raised her voice, 'I don't understand.'

'Sorry, I meant no viable bacteria and no functional viruses. Everything in the samples was dead and destroyed. No living material.'

She pressed further, and he fobbed her off with a suggestion that it might have been a type of super-aggressive cancer. He lied because not only had they found no viable viruses or living bacteria in the samples, but no functional cells from the dog either.

The samples of white fluid should have contained millions of cells from the dog as well as bacteria and viruses. They were there, or rather, the remains showed that they had been there, but they had all been destroyed.

He replaced the receiver and before he closed the report, he looked closely at a photograph of the black-and-white mongrel dog with its speckled white ears and two white front paws.

He tapped his finger of the photo. 'What happened to you?'

Whatever had decimated the dog had not passed to Blunt or Carol, and for that mercy he felt a great relief as he returned the report to the cabinet.

Lambeth Group technicians assumed the samples had been wrongly collected or damaged in transit. The dog had been cremated, so no further samples were possible. They had searched widely for unusual animal reports, and for unexplained or unnatural deaths. They found nothing and closed the case as an unknown, unsolved, nil-threat.

Four

Gavin came out of his office when he heard raised voices. The atmosphere in the laboratory had become supercharged. Sharon Bonny argued face-to-face with Christine. Sharon had produced a set of erroneous results in recent experiments and she cast doubt on the lab equipment. With determination, Christine defended the accuracy of her equipment.

Just as Gavin moved to intervene, the head of department's elderly secretary popped her head around the door and interrupted them.

Sharon appreciated the intervention and walked away. Although a forceful and strong-minded woman, Sharon had been losing the argument. She'd hoped Christine would side with her to help another female under pressure.

The secretary stood at the open door and said, 'Gavin, the boss would like you in his office.'

Gavin shared an alarmed look with Christine and said, 'Shit.'

The secretary spied his concern. All the academics were on edge because the University needed to make space reductions. She smiled to suggest good news rather than bad. 'He has visitors looking for help with enzymes. That's all.'

'Thanks, I'll be along in two minutes.'

On his way to the door, Gavin stopped at Sharon's space and returned her notebook. 'You need to repeat these. I won't accept them.'

She felt indignant and looked unconcerned. 'No way, Jose. They're good.'

'Your duplicates are all over the place,' Christine said.

Sharon turned to Christine. 'Your damn machine is all over the place!'

Gavin shook his head. 'Sharon, just do them or—'

'Or *what?*' She glared back at him.

'Just do them,' he said.

Sharon turned away and mumbled curses under her breath as she hurried out of the laboratory.

Gavin said to Christine, 'Her work is worse than a first-year biologist. I don't understand what she's playing at because her references said her lab work was brilliant.'

'I think she's having man trouble,' Christine said.

Gavin nodded and then headed for the Head of Department's office

Professor Crawford's office occupied a substantial corner position in the building. A warm room with a dark-red carpet, royal-blue leather chairs and a long mahogany desk. Academic books and journals filled matching floor-to-ceiling glass-fronted bookcases.

When Gavin arrived, Professor Crawford introduced two businessmen who swapped business cards with Gavin. He glanced at their cards. James Patersun and Walter MacDougill.

Crawford explained that his visitors ran a small biotechnology business in the town of Greenock. He handed over to Jim Patersun, who said that he wanted an enzymologist to help with a new process. Crawford shepherded the three to his door and urged Gavin to show the visitors around the lab.

Back at the lab, Gavin introduced Christine. She showed them the range of equipment the team had for their research. Walter MacDougill paid scant attention to Christine or Gavin. Instead, he wandered around with his hands behind his back like an inspector. He paused to peer over Sharon Bonny's shoulder while she worked. Postcards from home, a US flag and other personal items from New York adorned Sharon's bench.

Jim Patersun listened to Christine. He stood a little taller than her. Apart from patches of grey hair behind his ears, he'd gone bald, which made his jug ears more prominent. Distinctive high cheekbones dominated his face, and he looked smart in a dark-brown three-piece suit.

'What can I do for you?' Gavin asked.

'I'm developing a new food ingredient,' Patersun said.

Out of the corner of his eye, Gavin watched MacDougill as he picked up and inspected bottles of chemicals on a shelf. A pessimistic cloud settled in Gavin's mind.

Patersun said, 'My wife and I created this project. Walter built our pilot plant and I have financial backing to see us through a pilot stage.'

Gavin nodded. 'Sounds good.'

'Emma, my wife, is our business brain. I make all the important decisions and she makes all the routine ones. So she negotiates contracts and I buy coffee machines,' he said, and then guffawed.

Patersun spoke with a pleasant Lancastrian accent, mostly unchanged, although he said he'd lived in Scotland for over thirty years.

Walter MacDougill called from the opposite end of the lab, 'We need an enzyme man. How well do you know your stuff?'

MacDougill wore his hair in a crew-cut style, and a grubby six o'clock shadow defined his face. He reminded Gavin of Humphrey Bogart in *The African Queen*. He wore a badly

fitted, un-pressed, off-the-peg, dark-blue suit, which looked the worse for wear. His scuffed shoes looked as if they hadn't seen polish for many months. He spoke with a distinct Aberdeen accent that became difficult to follow when he spoke quickly.

Gavin turned to face him. 'I've worked with enzymes for sixteen years and—'

MacDougill walked toward Gavin. 'We know all that CV stuff.'

Christine engaged Jim Patersun, 'Have you been in the biotech business long?'

'No. My business is spices and condiments, wholesale and distribution,' he said.

Patersun showed the palm of his hand to MacDougal in a 'shut up' gesture, and then said, 'This is my first venture into biotech. Walter is an engineer who's worked on great projects on the Clyde. Redundancy forced a career rethink and their loss is my gain.'

MacDougill said, 'I know all I need to know about enzymes. I only need some practical work done for our patent.'

Gavin recoiled, and a worried expression settled on his face. He imagined that working with MacDougill would entail a series of unpleasant confrontations.

Jim Patersun tried to set Gavin at ease and spoke to Walter, 'Dr Shawlens will provide technical support. He won't make changes to our process.' Then, turning to Gavin, he said, 'We have a successful process. Your job will be to characterise our system and generate data for the patent. Completely separate from Walter's process development.'

'What sort of process?' Gavin asked.

No one replied. Christine watched them all carefully. Patersun cleared his throat. MacDougill stared straight through Gavin.

Then Patersun said, 'If I take you on, and you sign our confidentiality contract, I'll be able to say more.'

Gavin nodded. 'Of course.'

'Good. I suggest you visit our pilot plant in Greenock. We're having a board meeting at lunchtime tomorrow. It would be useful if you met our financial backers,' Patersun said.

Gavin agreed and they shook hands. Then he escorted them to their car and returned to his lab.

'What do you think?' he asked Christine.

She'd watched while they jostled Gavin between them. 'The old guy, MacDougill, will be a serious pain. He doesn't want you to interfere in his process. If you do, you'll lose your legs.'

Gavin said, 'Yes. I'm not sure if MacDougill plays with a full pack. They were too vague about their process.'

'I don't like either of them. I feel something odd about their behaviour. And, well, I don't think all the cards are on the table. By the way, I've put your mail on your desk. This came from the health clinic.'

Christine handed him a small, plain brown envelope with 'University of Kinmalcolm Health Clinic' printed on the top and addressed to Dr G F Shawlens (Strictly Private & Confidential).

'Thanks.'

She smiled. 'I hope you've got the all clear.'

'I've not got an STI—cheeky. It's my donor card. Stick it in the drawer for me, please.'

It looked like a plastic credit card with a black strip on the back and contained details of his tissue types so precious time could be saved when harvesting his donated organs.

'You have to put this in your wallet,' she said.

'There's no room. Stick it in the drawer.'

'No. Give me your wallet.'

Christine replaced an old Biochemical Society membership card with the donor card. She extracted Jim Patersun's business card and read it aloud, 'SeaPro Limited.'

'That explains it,' Gavin said.

'What?'

'The fish smell from MacDougill's clothes almost choked me.'

Christine smiled awkwardly when she remembered a recurring bad dream she'd had over the past few months. A sudden nervousness gripped her while elements of the dream fused to show more of the picture. Her feeling of déjà vu intensified. She stared at the back of Gavin's head, and felt sheer panic like a mother who'd lost her child on a busy street.

'That's why old Crawford hustled us out of his office. He was scared the fish smell would take root in his good chairs,' Gavin said, and then he saw her face. 'Are you all right? You're white as a sheet.'

With a concerned voice, she said, 'I'll ... help you ... with this SeaPro work.'

'That would be great, thanks.'

Christine turned away, folded her arms and gripped them with her fingers as she gazed at the wind-blown trees outside. She sensed Gavin in trouble, surrounded by darkness and danger. The word SeaPro echoed in her mind. Her eyes narrowed. *Those two creeps are up to something. I can feel it.*

Five

Doncaster City University, England

In his red and gold ceremonial robes, black mortar and gold tassel, the Chancellor of Doncaster City University looked regal. He rose from his chair to address the audience of invited guests assembled in the foyer of the new library building.

The Chancellor raised his voice to overcome background chatter. 'Vice-chancellor, chairman of Court, members of Court and Senate, Lord Provost, distinguished guests, ladies, and gentlemen. Please, show your appreciation, as I ask Sir James Barscadden of the Barscadden Foundation to join me for the opening dedication.'

Applause followed Sir James Barscadden when he joined the Chancellor at the lectern. They gave each other a salutary nod and smile. Barscadden waited, and with an air of superiority, he scanned the audience. Although a confident and articulate speaker, he felt apprehensive like an accused waiting for a verdict. It made him anxious.

The Chancellor nodded toward Barscadden. 'Sir James Barscadden is a world-renowned businessman. He is the driving force of the Barscadden Corporation, known to all of us as BARSCO. A successful company that provides employment for over eight thousand people throughout Britain.'

The Chancellor heaped loads of praise on the Barscadden Foundation programmes for disadvantaged people, underprivileged children, and women returners, and special initiatives designed to help people without formal qualifications to receive a university education. Finally, the Chancellor praised the Barscadden Foundation for supporting the construction of the new high-tech library.

He didn't say that the library computer system had been custom designed and installed by BARSCO engineers. As the guests fidgeted (probably wishing he would sit down), he turned to face Sir James Barscadden.

'It is with great pleasure that I ask the chairman of the Barscadden Foundation, Sir James Barscadden, to say a few words.'

He smiled, stood to attention and nodded to Barscadden. The two men exchanged places. Barscadden surveyed his audience while he switched on his Samsung tablet, which he placed on the lectern and then he adjusted his stance from stiff-backed to relaxed and leaning forward. The background chatter subsided and he launched into his speech.

'Chancellor, Vice-chancellor, Chairman of Court, members of Court and Senate, Lord Provost, distinguished guests, ladies, and gentlemen. The library is the heart and soul of a university. A place where students study and researchers keep up with new developments. As we move through this new century, we find libraries are undergoing vast changes.

'No longer is a library a simple repository for dusty journals and books. Computer-based information technology is reshaping library services. Academic libraries must adapt to ensure future students and researchers have access to all available information. A sea change is well underway from traditional book holdings to electronic storage and retrieval.

'At the Barscadden Foundation, we are delighted that Doncaster City University seeks to be at the forefront of this information superhighway, and we are keen to help you. Already, the joint academic networks JANET and superJANET enable electronic transfer of documents and articles all over the country, and indeed, worldwide.

'I've seen research papers containing video clips, sound, 3D digital images and animation sequences, which conveyed a thousand times more understanding than a traditional written research paper. The future is digital.'

To emphasise his point, he waved his tablet in the air for all to see.

'No doubt, some will mourn the passing of dimly-lit storage rooms and endless rows of shelf stacks. I understand that a few of our eminent academics are addicted to the smell of accumulated dust on old books. Or is it the glue used in bookbinding?' He paused for the audience to appreciate his humour.

'This magnificent library has been designed for the future, and I am confident it will take full advantage of new technology. So, without further ado, it is with the greatest pleasure that I declare this library open. I wish success and prosperity to all who pass through these doors.'

To applause, Barscadden stepped down from the lectern and over to a nearby wall where he paused and took hold of a golden cord while cameras clicked and flashed.

When he pulled the cord, two royal-blue curtains parted to reveal a golden metal plate mounted on a dark-mahogany board. The lettering, engraved and coloured with dark-blue wax, revealed that Sir James Barscadden had opened The Barscadden Library on that date.

While all eyes focused on the plate, a young woman with short black hair, scampered away from a group of students. She wore a short denim jacket and faded tight-fitting jeans that had frayed at the knees. Distressed, she threw a handful of tomatoes up toward the golden plate. They splashed hard on the floor two metres away from where Barscadden and the Chancellor stood.

She turned to face the onlookers, and shouted, 'Murderers! Bloody evil murderers!'

Then she pointed toward the lectern, 'He kills sweet innocents for blood money. You fucking carnivores keep his evil trade in business.'

As the woman raised her arms in an accusing manner, three police officers pounced on her.

In stunned silence, the audience watched the spectacle. She didn't attempt to run, but as they bundled her away, she struggled until they locked her arms. While they marched her out of the foyer, a loud bustle of background chatter filled the hall when people asked each other what had happened.

*

For someone in his mid-fifties, Barscadden looked good and could pass for someone ten years younger. At five foot six, he appeared sturdy and powerful. His lightly-tanned face appeared rugged and his grey hairline had started to recede.

Originally a child of Peckham, London, records revealed that both his parents died during his young teens. An aunt on his mother's side had raised him. He spoke with a pronounced 'BBC London' accent.

A young and determined entrepreneur, he had set himself up in business selling goods from an old brown suitcase in London's street markets. He learned business skills the hard way and just after his nineteenth birthday, he started Barscadden Traders.

His company supplied fine quality meat to hotels and restaurants, and he made his first million before his twenty-third birthday. From then onward, he expanded with precision and resolve to establish a massive food manufacturing company, and he remained sole owner.

Cheerfully, all of Barscadden's employees referred to him as 'King James'. He had involved himself in every single appointment of his eight thousand employees over the past thirty years. One of his most important management secrets lay hidden in the personal tablet computer that he always had with him.

On a database, he stored ID photographs of all his employees, and associated with each person, he kept pages of essential personal and professional details. With search and grouping facilities, he could locate an individual or a team of employees.

On scheduled visits to a part of his business, he examined the relevant files to study faces and information. A ritual he'd developed when travelling around the country, which he did in his Rolls Royce, Lear jet, or Bell helicopter. He remembered faces and linked them with details.

Nothing proved more potent for creating loyalty in BARSCO than the head of the company using someone's first name and knowing exactly what job that person did in his company.

'Excellent speech, Sir James,' the chancellor said to Barscadden.

Barscadden forced a false smile onto his face. 'Thanks. I'm impressed with your new library.'

A round of verbal back-clapping took place for twenty minutes or more as the Chancellor introduced Barscadden to various VIPs. The University Secretary walked with Barscadden to a nearby table to deposit their empty glasses.

The Secretary appeared to be no more than one or two years away from retirement. He wanted to apologise for the disturbance. While nodding, he said, 'Sorry about the commotion. She was probably drunk.'

Barscadden said, 'It's nothing. Animal liberation people attack my farms and slaughterhouses regularly. If the country becomes vegetarian; I'll be happy to adapt my businesses. At the moment, people want meat and my companies supply the people.'

The Secretary mused, 'I don't know what she hoped to achieve. A world full of vegans will spawn plant liberation people. I'm told the plants don't believe they were put here to provide food for animals.'

'Truth be told. I believe they have a point,' Barscadden said.

The Secretary wore a puzzled frown. 'Surely not?'

'On my pig farm in Yorkshire, we used to have a pet sow, a large beauty called Alice. She had one ear much bigger than the other and she had a gigantic snout. The silliest looking pig I ever saw. My cook kept her as a pet.'

Barscadden smiled as he recollected a picture of Alice in his mind. 'Alice had a straw bed in an outhouse off the kitchen and she sat in a corner every day. Anyway, cook retired, and my slaughterhouse men came for Alice. For the first time ever, she ran off into the fields, and it took five farmhands a whole day to deliver Alice to the slaughterhouse. Until that day, I assumed animals were dumb.'

'I guess it's convenient for us humans to believe that animals have no feelings and no emotions,' the Secretary said.

Barscadden caught sight of someone he wanted. 'Yes. Sorry, excuse me. I must speak to this man.'

When Barscadden walked away from the Secretary, a man stepped directly into his path. Professor Henry Steadman, Head of the Business School, looked agitated and Barscadden saw venom in his eyes when they faced each other.

'You've been exceedingly generous to this pothole,' Steadman said.

Barscadden narrowed his eyes and looked disapprovingly at Steadman's nicotine-stained fingers, which he wrapped around his wine glass.

'And, your point is *what*, Mr Steadman?'

In an aggressive voice, Steadman said, 'What's your payback on this deal? I'll find out. With God as my witness, I'll bloody well find out.'

The Chancellor made a timely interruption and ushered Barscadden away. He knew Steadman disliked Barscadden and disagreed with BARSCO business methods. At Senate meetings, Steadman had questioned Barscadden's motives.

Steadman retreated to a small clique of like-minded cronies while Barscadden gave him a cold sideways stare.

Outwardly, Barscadden smiled at the academics fussing around him, but inwardly, he sneered at them. He despised academics, their ivory towers and their pointless traditions. He thought only of the great benefits the library would give to him. Secretly, he looked down on them as if they were pigs milling around in a field, waiting to go to the slaughterhouse, his slaughterhouse. Food for his thoughts.

Six

With his hand, Barscadden beckoned Andrew Portcairn to join him. Together, they walked away from the main throng of people. Andrew Portcairn worked for BARSCO as Deputy Head of Computing. A tall, thin, man, he had a gaunt face, dark-brown hair and he wore loose fitting clothes. He wore John Lennon style round-rim spectacles and a well-trimmed, beatnik-style, goatee beard. Like his idol, he spoke with a Liverpool accent.

Barscadden looked thoughtfully at Andrew Portcairn, and whispered, 'Are we done here?'

Andrew appeared animated and excited. 'Yes, Sir James, everything is good. I have everything fully operational.'

Barscadden placed his hand on Portcairn's arm, partly to subdue him and partly to turn him away from being observed.

'Any critical issues?'

Andrew shook his head. 'No, sir, none. Their IT people nose around of course, but their head of IT is ten bits short of a megabyte. The only trouble I'm having is that pest, Steadman. Why is he such a nuisance?'

Slowly, Barscadden turned his head to sneak a quick look at Steadman, still in a huddle with his cronies. 'How serious is it?'

'He doesn't know system RAM from strawberry jam, but he's running around with a badger in his bonnet. If he asked their IT staff the right questions then I suppose they might find out what I've done.'

Barscadden acknowledged Portcairn's concern with a glance and nod. 'I am sick of this highbrow shit and these three-faced hypocrites. Mind you, if they had half a brain between them, we wouldn't be here.'

'No, sir. Way too risky with a top-notch IT department.'

Barscadden winked as he cocked his head and said, 'Good work. By the way, there will be a meeting of Gyge's Ring quite soon. It is time for you to join the Ring and brief them on your work here.'

'May I speak personally?' Andrew asked.

'Of course.'

Andrew's voice sounded fragile when he said, 'On behalf of the people in my department, probably everyone in the company, I'd like to thank you for what the company has done for

Jenny Doyle. Jenny cleans our offices and mothers all of us to bits. We love her, we are heartbroken for her and I know she is deeply grateful.'

Barscadden nodded and said, 'No way were those murdering thieves going to walk after what they did to our Jenny's husband.'

'It's a small comfort that they're in jail but it's important for Jenny to have this kind of closure,' Andrew said.

All the head office staff in BARSCO knew larger-than-life, Jenny Doyle. She had lost her husband on an overseas holiday when thieves stabbed and killed him. Barscadden sent two people from personnel to accompany Jenny's eldest son and take care of arrangements. They supported Jenny, dealt with authorities and arranged to bring the body home for burial.

Barscadden learned early that his success depended on people committed, loyal, and trustworthy. His high profile attention to welfare generated a solid bond between him and his people. Barscadden often said hearts and minds were more valuable than stocks and shares. BARSCO provided good employment, and when required, a refuge from the occasional vulgarity thrown up by normal life.

In return, his loyal people gave him absolute power. In a ring-fenced sanctuary, he addressed his secret agenda. A quest for absolution for his deeply damaged spirit. When James Barscadden created BARSCO, he'd embedded in its core a secret organisation called Gyge's Ring. With himself as Ring master, he recruited a group of handpicked Ring leaders to do his bidding.

His oldest and trusted friend, Peter Bromlee, joined him as the first Ring leader and commander of WRATH. A team of ruthless ex-military men and women. With WRATH on hand to remove anything or anyone from his path, Barscadden took what he wanted, when he wanted it, from whoever was unfortunate enough to have it.

Peter Bromlee received a sleeve-tug from Barscadden's driver, Duncan. Barscadden wanted to leave. By the time Peter Bromlee reached Barscadden's side, he had finished speaking to Portcairn. Barscadden gave his apologies to the Chancellor. Duncan brought the midnight-blue Rolls Royce Phantom to the library entrance. He opened the car door just as Barscadden left the building.

Barscadden closed his eyes and welcomed a feeling of tranquillity. His body sank into the deeply-couched, cream-coloured hide seat. As if to remove the scum from numerous handshakes, he rubbed the palm of his right hand on the armrest. Peter handed him some wet-wipes and a small towel. The magnificent V12 engine purred while they glided away from the new building.

Barscadden let out a sigh of relief as he settled in his seat. Air conditioning and environmental control kept the cabin interior in perfect comfort while he released his stress by playing with the silky-smooth gold, wonderfully tactile, clunk and clack of his air vent control knobs.

'A whisky, please,' he said as he glanced back for a full view of the library.

Peter Bromlee opened the drinks cabinet and poured a large glass of Glenmorangie fifty-year-old malt. Barscadden took a sip, allowed the whisky to roll down his throat and then watched the light reflecting sparkles on the crystal glass.

'I had rather hoped that Julie would be here to keep that academic dirt out of my hair,' Barscadden said.

Professor Julie Blackhest, his director of R&D, had given her apologies at the last minute. Bromlee raised his eyebrows to indicate he would need to reveal a confidence. Barscadden acknowledged with his eyes.

'Julie is attending to an urgent development on a major new project,' Peter said.

'What new project?'

'You know her; she keeps her cards well hidden, but she's planning to discuss new business at the next meeting of Gyge's Ring. A new process with mega potential is all that I know.'

Barscadden patted Peter on the wrist. His expression conveyed his thanks. 'But WRATH is covering her back?'

'Erm ... actually, not yet,' Peter said.

Barscadden shook his head. He disapproved of her operating in the field without backup.

'Ah. That woman. Brilliant she is, but Lara Croft—she's not.'

Barscadden's expression informed Peter that he'd done well to reveal this information.

'Shall I organise backup for her?'

'Yes, please. Get eyeballs on her backside.'

'Done.' Peter opened his laptop and typed a communication.

'Make a note. Andrew Portcairn is ready to join Gyge's Ring.'

Peter examined his calendar. 'The next meeting of the Ring is scheduled to follow the Board meeting of the seventeenth.'

Barscadden took another sip of whisky. 'That's fine.' He furrowed his brow, sighed, and said, 'Peter, that horrible man, Steadman. I don't think he's a happy hobbit.'

'I did notice.'

Barscadden handed his empty glass to Peter and said, 'He's blowing soapy bubbles at me. My eyes are beginning to sting.'

Duncan caught Barscadden's eye in the rear-view mirror and said, 'Give me the nod. I'll stuff him down the toilet like any other lump of shit.'

Barscadden glared back at the mirror. 'No, Duncan. There is enough pollution on the beaches.'

'How much of a problem is he?' Peter asked.

'Portcain believes he's a serious risk to my new business at Doncaster.'

'Maybe he moonlights as a bus inspector,' Duncan said.

Peter raised his voice a notch, 'He's an academic. He'll look out of place under a bus.'

Sounding like a harassed referee, Barscadden said, 'Gentlemen, please, I want a less violent solution.'

'Maybe, drink driver meets his match when he tries to run down an oak tree,' Peter said.

Barscadden recalled Steadman's nicotine-stained fingers. 'Hmm, he pollutes the air with his carcinogenic smoke. I think he should have lung cancer.'

'Lung cancer is fine. Would you prefer that in the short or medium term?' Peter asked.

Barscadden looked at Peter with surprise. 'Is that an option?'

'It's simply a question of amount and location. Professor Blackhest has done all the calculations,' he said.

With satisfaction in his voice, Barscadden said, 'So be it, and the sooner the better. We can all benefit from less pollution.'

Duncan said, 'I thought WRATH had decided that radioactive stuff was far too risky.'

Barscadden looked to Bromlee for an answer. 'We stopped using plutonium six months ago. The new stuff is called iodine-131. It has a short half-life,' Peter said.

'Half-life?'

'Radioactive iodine has a half-life of just one week. It will degrade and disappear completely after a couple of months.'

'Excellent. Clean, environmentally friendly. Just the job.'

'Okay, I'll instruct WRATH to put Professor Steadman on the critical list for go away therapy.'

*

Henry Steadman didn't notice anything different or unusual in his home. Two WRATH agents had entered his house covertly during the day. They examined personal effects on

bedside cabinets and discovered his side of the bed. They exposed his side of the mattress, and sprinkled a small volume of water containing radioactive iodine.

Within a week, Steadman experienced persistent nausea. By the end of two weeks, he suffered incapacitating flu symptoms as body fluids leaked into his radiation-damaged lungs. By the end of three weeks, he coughed up blood at night as he lay in bed.

His doctors found transformed cells in his blood. As far as they were concerned, another heavy smoker had developed lung cancer. The secret that Barscadden had embedded in the library would remain hidden.

Seven

Victoria Harbour, Greenock

When shipbuilding dominated its people, Greenock played a major part in Scottish life. With strong engineering traditions, the town gave birth to James Watt and his steam engine. Times move on, and with the demise of heavy engineering, Greenock town fathers encouraged new light industry to fill the gap.

Greenock SeaPro Ltd had emerged from the ashes of past factories. One of many fledgling companies the town fathers hoped would build success in an former warehouse near Greenock harbour. In SeaPro's boardroom, Jim and Emma Paterson welcomed board members as they arrived. Loudly, they debated Government plans to increase indirect tax, and they all pontificated on how the additional tax would affect their respective businesses.

Emma served coffee and biscuits, and then retired to her office at the end of a narrow corridor. She brushed her silky, straw-blonde hair as she rallied her thoughts for what she expected would be an awkward meeting. Her hair lay on her shoulders with the ends curled into her neck. Parted in the middle, long wisps covered her forehead to form a fringe on her eyebrows.

When she walked, airflow lifted her hair away from her face to reveal a firm and slender neck. As always, she dressed in expensive designer clothes. She wore a dark-blue jacket and skirt suit with a pearl-white silk blouse. Around her neck, she wore a thick diamond cut gold rope chain with the distinct softness and deep colour of solid gold.

Normally, Emma chatted with other board members. On this occasion, she preferred to be alone with her thoughts. Excitement gripped her mind, and she tried to temper her anticipation with thoughts of a possible sharp disappointment.

A bell above the front door tinkled loudly. Emma's pulse raced when she heard the sound of shoes walking on the gritty linoleum floor in the corridor.

'Hello, Dr Shawlens, in you come,' Jim Paterson said, and beckoned.

Jim escorted him back along the corridor and into the main processing hall. When Gavin surveyed SeaPro's impressive and expensive-looking pilot plant equipment, he looked pleasantly surprised. It reminded him of a brewery he'd visited as a student.

In the centre of the hall, six gleaming stainless steel storage tanks dominated the space. They looked like small grain silos with conical bottoms.

'Very impressive kit you have here.'

Jim Paterson strutted like a proud father. 'All designed and installed by Walter with help from a business enterprise grant.'

'What are you using it for?' Gavin asked.

'We're producing a high-quality food ingredient.'

Jim seemed thrilled to see that his pilot plant had impressed Gavin Shawlens. A sharp seawater and fish smell pervaded the whole hall. Not obnoxious but dominant.

'From fish?'

'Yes, Dr Shawlens—good guess.'

'Please, call me Gavin.'

Jim led Gavin back to the office corridor and into an old storage room. 'I want our analytical work to be done on site. I want to equip a small laboratory in here. That's why we're having a board meeting today. I want to agree finance for your work and equipment.'

'That's good. I already have complaints from my boss about the waste fat project,' Gavin said.

'Our product is high quality with no smell or taste.'

'From by-catch?'

Gavin assumed they wouldn't use white fish. Already overfished and subject to government and EU quotas.

'Not quite,' Jim replied with a knowing smile, and then said, 'Have you ever heard of the black fiddle fish?'

'Sounds like something I should have in my tropical fish tank.'

'Not this one. It's a deep water fish, and it's not fished at all, so stocks are plentiful.'

'What's wrong with it?'

'It's an ugly brute with dark fillets that no-one will buy.'

Jim opened a fridge and picked up a bottle containing white fluid for Gavin to inspect. He unscrewed the top and sniffed. It glistened in the light and looked thick like syrup. Gavin agreed that it had no odour but declined to taste the product. Jim called the product GSP36, and said the pigment had changed from dark-grey to white.

'What market are you aiming for?'

With enthusiasm, Jim explained, 'As you know, the food industry adds ingredients to manufactured foodstuff to provide special functional properties. Like gelling agents to make gels, foaming agents to add foam, and so on. What do you think of a single ingredient with multi-functional properties?'

'The industry has single ingredients that do both gelling and foaming,' Gavin said.

'Correct, but what price for one ingredient that can emulsify, form a gel, produce a foam, bind a food dye, retain water and is also a damn good preservative?'

Gavin shook his head with disbelief. 'You're joking, right?'

Jim clapped his hands and said, 'Absolutely not. Because I've got it.'

'That would be the ultimate food ingredient. Every food manufacturer in the world could replace three or four ingredients with just one. They would save an absolute fortune.'

'Do you have a dog?' Jim asked.

'Yes.'

Jim placed the bottle of white fluid on a table for Gavin to collect later. 'Customer trial. Let me know if your dog likes it. I'm also looking at the pet food market.'

Walter joined Jim, and they discussed the whereabouts of their young helper, Davy.

Jim said, 'These tanks need to be cleaned out. Where is he now?'

'He's still searching for Boggin.'

'Still searching? I thought he'd given that up by now.'

'He won't give up until he finds the dog dead or alive. Don't worry; he knows he still has these tanks to clean out.'

Jim shook his head. 'It's a pity. I liked that mongrel.'

Gavin asked Jim, 'Is Davy your technician?'

Jim smiled. 'He was thrown out of school at fourteen with a reputation as a troublemaker. He's unskilled but hard working.'

Walter said, 'Davy does the dirty work around the pilot plant. He named his dog Boggin because he found him abandoned on a council rubbish tip.'

Gavin said, 'An abandoned pup?'

Jim said, 'Yes, Davy heard a squeal as he rummaged through the rubbish tip. From that day on, like brothers, they've been inseparable.'

Walter said, 'Boggin also works for us as rat-catcher general.'

Gavin looked alarmed. 'You've got a *rat* problem?'

Jim backtracked. 'Had. Not any longer. Boggin killed them all. Probably learned how to kill them in rubbish tip.'

Jim guided Gavin back into the corridor leading to the office. He called on Emma to put a kettle on for coffee, and then directed Gavin to walk down the corridor to the office.

A feeling of disappointment flushed through Gavin's mind while he thought about what Jim had told him. *An ill-conceived project, unskilled support and a mongrel dog in control of a vermin problem.*

It sounded like another crackpot idea destined to fail. He didn't want to waste his time trying to make it work. Only two weeks ago, he'd had to explain to another inventor why a vacuum fridge wouldn't work.

Before the vacuum fridge, he spent time with a woman who had an insect repellent formula that protected her but no-one else. Gavin wondered if Crawford deliberately channelled all the crackpots to him. As he walked, he considered his exit strategy. He decided he would make his fees unaffordable, so Paterson would look for someone else to do the work.

Gavin stepped into the office and stopped hard, stunned like a deer caught in headlights. Emma Baxter stood in front of him. His first serious teenage girlfriend. She radiated the beautiful smile that had captured his heart once before when she'd become the one and only love of his life.

Eight

Twenty years ago, sixteen-year-old Gavin became the envy of all his school friends when he dated Emma Baxster for all of twenty-four glorious months. Four years older, Emma worked in a bank near his school. Their relationship flourished until a bank training course at head office resulted in a more mature man in Emma's life. His bliss ended abruptly and they hadn't met since.

His eyes absorbed every detail on her face while he uttered in a choked voice, 'Emma.' She stared past him, along the corridor, and said, 'Tea or coffee, Dr Shawlens?'

His heart leapt into his mouth, and he fought a stomach-churning tumult to force out a reply, 'Coffee.'

Jim breezed into the office and said, 'Coffee for me, too.'

'I'd like to introduce my wife. Emma—this is Dr Gavin Shawlens,' Jim said.

'Hello, nice to meet you,' she said as they shook hands.

Her palm felt cool and soft against his warm and trembling hand. Their eyes locked while Jim Patersun searched his desk for the board papers.

Gavin felt overwhelmed. Many times, he'd wondered if he would ever meet her again. He imagined he would notice her browsing in a shop, he would approach her casually and she would be startled. He'd rehearsed exactly what he would say. As it happened, he stood rooted to the ground in shock.

Jim gathered his papers for the meeting. 'Did you have time to go along to the grave?'

Emma's eyes flicked between the two of them. 'Yes. No-one seems to know anything.'

Gavin's looked puzzled as he accepted his coffee from Emma. Jim noticed his bewilderment and said, 'Someone has started leaving bunches of flowers at the grave of Emma's dad.'

Emma continued to give Gavin time to pull himself together. 'I've asked everybody I can think of. It's no-one we know.'

Jim tucked his papers under his arm, picked up his mug of coffee, and said teasingly, 'I think ... he had a secret admirer.'

Emma looked surprised. 'My father? You must be joking. I don't know anyone with a kind word for him, let alone visit his grave and leave flowers.'

Gavin hung onto every word to refresh his memory with the sound of her voice.

Jim asked, 'Is that scruffy drug addict still hanging around the cemetery?'

'Yes, she's always there watching to see if I'm watching her. I've told the caretaker that she is obviously dealing drugs,' Emma said.

Jim turned to Gavin. 'What do you think of our set-up?'

Gavin forced his facial expression back to normal. 'Excellent.'

Time had worked in her favour and she looked more attractive than he remembered. Like a battery re-charging, his mind filled up with new visions of Emma.

'Milk and sugar?' Emma asked Gavin.

'Milk, thanks.'

As Jim strode out of the office, he said, 'Bring your coffee to the boardroom.'

Gavin hesitated to follow. He looked at Emma for guidance. She shifted her head slightly from side to side, pressed her index finger against her closed lips and narrowed her eyes. He understood and nodded.

In the small boardroom, two large tables were surrounded by ten chairs of various design and size. Everyone stood while Jim Paterson introduced them, one-by-one.

Jim pointed. 'Walter, you already know.'

Six local businessmen had formed the SeaPro board. Gavin gave each one his business card but received only one in return, from accountant, Tony Mascarri. The gold embossed lettering on his card showed Mr Tony E Mascarri B.A. F.C.C.A.

Emma didn't attend the meeting. With eight astute businessmen skilled in reading faces, they would have noticed Gavin's reaction. She expected he would rake through their past, and she agonised over his response following the initial shock.

Discussions centred on how many hours per week Gavin could work on their project. They discussed the cost of specific equipment required for laboratory work. While Gavin listened to the others, he thought about Emma, past and present. He had loved her completely, and it had taken him a long time to displace the pain of losing her.

He started to establish new feelings for her. He didn't hate her and his melancholy had long since gone. He had strong residual feelings for her but he felt unsure as to what they meant to him.

Feelings of something misplaced—love, friendship, infatuation, or retribution? He couldn't decide. His mind battled with an emotional puzzle. He put up no resistance to their financial proposals and they concluded that he had no head for business.

Author



I hope that you enjoyed this book.

If you did enjoy it, I'd be thrilled if you could post a review. Reviews on sites such as Amazon and Goodreads are helpful for indie writers and feedback is most welcome.

My website can be found here: <http://gordonbickerstaff.blogspot.co.uk/> or you can find me on Twitter: @ADPase. Sample chapters of each book are available to download.

If you would like to comment on any of the characters or the stories then feel free to contact me. Characters, stories and writing are works in progress, and I would be delighted to hear of any suggestions that might make them better.

If you would like to know more about my writing then please visit my author page: <http://goo.gl/rLFrV9> or my website above.

Thank you for reading my story.

Gordon Bickerstaff

Other Books

Everything To Lose

The chase is on ...



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

A research team claim their new product will boost the performance of every athlete in the world. The claims cause alarm, and the Lambeth Group send Gavin Shawlens to investigate.

The product is stolen, top athletes disappear, and the research team are unaware that their product arose from the ashes of evil Second World War research. Gavin must stop the product launch before more people die horribly. When Gavin disappears, Zoe Tampsin, his associate from the Lambeth Group, must find him before he becomes the next victim to die.

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 Shawlens must die to prevent exposure of a 60-year-old secret capable of world-changing and power-shifting events.

The Black Fox

Run for your life ...



A thriller for fans of Lee Child, David Baldacci and James Patterson.

Zoe Tamsin 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 a 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's wrong, they both die. If she's right, she will discover the secret, and somehow avoid becoming the next target for assassination.

Toxic Minds

The damage is done ...



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

A thriller for fans of Lee Child, David Baldacci and James Patterson.

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 Tampsin 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 Zacchary 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.