

# **Everything To Lose**

*The chase is on ...*

**Gordon Bickerstaff**

## **Lambeth Group Thriller #2**

### **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.

Note to the reader. There is a list of organisations mentioned in the book under Story Notes.

#### **Also by the same author**

**Deadly Secrets** *The truth will out ...*

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

**Toxic Minds** *The damage is done ...*

**Tabula Rasa** *The end is night ...*

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First published in e-book format in Great Britain by Endeavour Press Ltd (2014).

This revised edition published by Gordon Bickerstaff (June 2017).

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## Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Alex, Clarissa, Julia and Harmony for their work on the production of this book.

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## Table of Contents

Prologue
One
Two
Three
Four
Five
Six
Seven
Eight
Nine
Ten
Eleven
Twelve
Thirteen
Fourteen
Fifteen
Sixteen
Seventeen
Eighteen
Nineteen
Twenty
Twenty-One
Twenty-Two
Twenty-Three
Twenty-Four
Twenty-Five
Twenty-Six
Twenty-Seven
Twenty-Eight
Twenty-Nine
Thirty
Thirty-One
Thirty-Two
Thirty-Three
Thirty-Four
Thirty-Five
Thirty-Six
Thirty-Seven
Thirty-Eight
Thirty-Nine
Forty
Forty-One
Forty-Two
Forty-Three
Forty-Four
Forty-Five
Forty-Six
Forty-Seven

Forty-Eight  
Forty-Nine  
Fifty  
Fifty-One  
Author  
Story Notes  
Deadly Secrets  
The Black Fox  
Toxic Minds  
Tabula Rasa

'The measure of a man is what he does with power'

Plato.

'Power was my weakness and my temptation'

Albus Dumbledore (JK Rowling).

## **Prologue**

*Berlin, Germany*

Preparations for the 1936 Summer Olympic Games in Berlin started decades earlier when Berlin had been selected to host the 1916 Games. Those Games were cancelled due to the First World War, but architect brothers Werner and Walter March had produced most of the plans including a grand Olympic stadium.

When the Nazi Party came to power in 1933, the IOC had already accepted a bid by Berlin to host the 1936 Games. The March brothers supervised the construction of a 100,000 seat Olympic stadium. It included for the first time in Olympic history, a closed-circuit television system that could broadcast to forty countries. The Reich Sports Field complex covered 325 acres with four stadiums draped extensively in Nazi banners and symbols.

Hitler saw the 1936 Games as a grand opportunity to promote his views on racial supremacy to the world. He wanted sporting success to strengthen the German spirit, bond the German youth, and weed out non-Aryans.

To ensure non-Aryans would not share Olympic glory, he issued a Nazi directive that barred Germans who were Roma or Jewish from participating in the Games. In the run-up to the Olympics, many athletes were expelled from their clubs. Strong medal contenders were barred, including Lilli Henoch, four-time world record holder in shot and discus.

Hitler liked rowing. He attended the Olympic rowing events at the Langer See Lake, southeast of Berlin. Germany had won five gold medals and one silver medal, and Hitler revelled in the rowing successes.

He expected the men's eight-man team final to be a formality, and confidently expected another success for his superior team. He invited dignitaries to bask in the magnificence of the German rowing team. Extensive celebrations had been prepared, and officials expected a close race between Germany and Italy.

On Friday, August 14, 1936, Hitler arrived for the final with top Nazi officials, Olympic Committee officials and other dignitaries. Hitler expected another resounding rendition of the Nazi Party anthem and Nazi salutes at the medal ceremony. A steel-helmeted military band blasted out a succession of Nazi music. Some sections in the stadium sang out the lyrics with loud fervour while others felt intimidated enough to mouth the lyrics.

Eva Braun sat two rows behind Hitler, excited by the spectacle. Their eyes met fleetingly when he glanced in her direction. He remained adamant they were not to be seen in public as

a couple. An accomplished gymnast, Eva would have become a champion like her sister if her life had taken a different path. She encouraged Hitler's interest in sports. He loved to watch her gymnast routines on the parallel bars but feared for her safety. At his request, she gave up competing in games.

With perfect weather for rowing, excitement and anticipation became electric. Germany and Italy led the race neck and neck. Hitler urged his team to go harder. For the entire six-and-a-half-minute race, the crowd screamed, 'Deutschland! Deutschland! Deutschland!'

Then in the final ten metres, the eight-man team from Washington University nudged in front by one metre to take the gold medal for the US. Not more than a second or two separated the three teams.

Furiously disappointed, Hitler along with most of the spectators gave the Nazi salute during the US national anthem.

Hitler ordered his advisors to his office. Repeatedly, he pounded his desk in anger. He paced back and forth, demanding explanations. His face grew red with rage, and veins in his neck throbbed. His shouting became fiercely intimidating.

They were too frightened to tell Hitler the truth, that on the day the Americans were better athletes. They created a suspicion, and hoped to divert Hitler's anger away from their faces. They told Hitler they suspected the Americans had taken fortified drinks to give them the additional energy needed to win the race.

They reminded Hitler he had watched and congratulated the American Louis Zamperini who lagged behind in the 5000-metre final, and then clocked fifty-six seconds in the final lap to finish eighth. They told him that in the 800-metre final, the American John Woodruff still won the gold medal after stopping in the middle of the race to extract himself from being boxed-in by other runners. Without any evidence, Hitler's advisors convinced him that the exceptional American performances had been achieved with a mysterious energy boost.

Hitler listened to their explanations. He walked around his office, deep in thought. The advisors nodded confidently to each other. They felt they'd averted Hitler's wrath. They had no evidence, no proof, so no basis for a complaint. They left his office with feelings of relief.

Later that evening, Hitler and Eva Braun retired to a sitting room after dinner. He drank tea and she drank wine. A keen photographer, Eva had many photographs and home movies of Hitler and his inner circle. They loved to watch movies, and they admired Clark Gable. With grand ceremony, she unveiled a surprise. She had obtained a copy of Clark Gable's recent movie, *San Francisco*.



They liked to role-play with her as leading woman and him as leading man. She felt certain he would be pleased with the movie. His gloom hadn't shifted. The disappointment of the rowing medals still raw in his mind.

Instead, he quizzed her about how she and her champion sister prepared for sport. How she managed to maintain energy during her strenuous gymnastic exertions, and how she could find the extra power for a final winning effort.

The following day, Hitler ordered his advisors back to his office. They expected his fury had abated, and he'd moved on to something else. They had backed themselves into a dark and dangerous corner. They had created a barbed rod for their own backs. Hitler understood the importance of an energy boost for German troops and German workers.

A boost from elite to supreme. Energy for his military to destroy the resolve of any opponent. Energy for his factory workers to break production records and demoralise inferior countries. He ordered his advisors to discover the mysterious energy boost and enhance its effect, twenty-fold.

# One

*Seventy-Eight Years Later*  
*Portsmouth, Hampshire, England*

The January weather in Hampshire, England had been cold and frosty, and an inch of snow had fallen. Aiden McSwann looked forward to his thirty-third birthday. His daughter, Jess, had made a special birthday card, and a birthday cup-cake. His wife, Laraine, had promised to cook his favourite fillet steak for dinner. He'd just left work at four in the afternoon. He had cleared snow off his car windscreen when a police car pulled up.

At first, Aiden thought they'd made a mistake when the police officers arrested him for not making a loan payment on time. The uniformed officers were understanding and pleasant as they took him into custody. They told him not to worry, and that he would be able to sort the problem back at the station.

They locked Aiden in cell five. He hadn't been in a police cell before, and the strong smell of stale body odour didn't impress him. The white-walled cell became dull, lit only by fading daylight streaming through three rows of six glass blocks, high up on the back wall. He waited patiently for someone to come and apologise for their mistake.

The cell door flew open, and two huge men rushed into his cell. Men in black nylon bomber jackets who looked like nightclub bouncers. They were so large, it seemed there wasn't enough space in the cell for them to move around. They started with aggressive threats. Demands for immediate payment. More threats followed, and then a session of relentless punching.

When they stopped, he cowered in a corner of the cell. The cell door slammed shut, and they were gone as quickly as they had arrived. He wept and wiped a stream of blood from his nose onto his sleeve. This day he didn't have a handkerchief in his pocket as he expected a new set of birthday handkerchiefs from Jess.

Hard knuckle punches had pounded his head and body. His face felt numb. His tongue probed gashes inside his cheek where his teeth had ripped the flesh. Fear and pain produced a stream of pitiful tears down his cheeks.

Aiden guessed the thugs were gym freaks. Their fists were hard, and they never tired. He closed his eyes. Gently, he palpated his chest to confirm his fears, at least two cracked ribs. His stomach felt as if it had been tied in a dozen knots.

The room swirled, and he knew that if he tried to stand up, he would fall over. His legs felt like jelly. Even if the door lay open, he couldn't run. His body refused to move.

During the beating, the men told him why they were hitting him. They worked for the moneylender who'd given Aiden a large cash loan. Payments had fallen overdue. They stopped when they were sure they wouldn't get any money from him.

Aiden had used what remained of the loan to pay the weekly interest. Now, with the capital gone, he had no more money. He'd borrowed the money to pay a specialist consultant who promised a cure for Jess.

With hindsight, he'd been stupid taking money from a moneylender, but he believed the consultant who said Jess could be cured if the treatment started before she got much older.

From his own horrible childhood, he knew how bad it would be for her when she started school. He wanted to spare her that pain. School kids can be very cruel at times. A powerful sense of guilt drove Aiden. He knew he'd passed a dreadful curse onto Jess.

He thought about his happy, friendly and beautiful Jess. A clever girl with a great life in front of her. More than anything else in the world, he wanted to spare her the pain that the curse had inflicted on him as a boy.

When Aiden had signed the loan document, the woman clerk said the interest would be one grand. He assumed she meant in total or per year. No-one charges that amount of interest per week, no-one who is legit anyway. As he waited in their plush loan office to collect the cash, he assumed they were legit.

The loan company had been recommended by a close friend. Aiden went there because his own bank wouldn't lend him sixteen grand for private medical care. Not when he had already extended his mortgage to buy a car.

The cell light switched on and the cell door opened. A tall, short-sleeved, bald-headed, uniformed police officer entered the cell, keys jangling from his chain. A smartly dressed man waited at the door.

The uniformed officer looked around the cell. *Okay, some blood in the corner there, few specks on the wall, clean that up later, nothing on the mattress, good*, he thought. He nodded to the man as he walked out of the cell.

The man sat on the edge of the bed and faced Aiden. He had a heavy intimidating build just like the men who'd beat him. The man looked unconcerned at the bleeding and shivering wreck cowering in front of him.

Aiden opened his eyes onto the man's black silk socks. His shoes were so well polished, they could have been taken off a shelf. He wore a dark grey suit. A rich thread from a

designer house. Even his tailored shirt and tie were quality. Aiden didn't need to wonder if the gold cufflinks were real gold.

'I'm Detective Inspector Jim McVickin. My boys tell me you won't pay my family back what you owe. Is that correct?'

Aiden wiped blood from his face onto his sleeve and nodded.

Jim McVickin jabbed the toe of his shoe into Aiden's shin. '*Is that correct?*'

Aiden focused his blood-shot eyes on McVickin's face. 'Yes.'

'Sixteen grand plus interest is a lot of money. A serious insult to my family. The punishment for default is sixteen years. Do you understand what I'm saying?'

Aiden nodded. 'They told me.'

The men had told him that if he didn't pay, he would work off the debt. He would work in a factory to pay off the loan. He would become a slave.

'Or, if you want to keep your feet on the streets. You can trade in your wife,' McVickin offered.

Aiden sniffed the stream of fluid back up his nose. 'I'll do the time.'

'Sure? You've got a decent job. With you earning money, and her working for us; you could pay off your debt in ten years. I'm told your wife does a decent massage. She can make good money and pay off your loan.'

'No. I'll do the time.'

'Sure?'

'I'll do the time.'

McVickin pointed to the blood dripping onto the floor. 'Okay, work starts now. Get this mess cleaned up.'

'Please, Inspector. Can I see my wife and daughter before I start my sentence?'

McVickin rubbed his chin and thought for a moment. 'Hmm, well, just remember this fact, McSwann. Just like the bed fixed to this wall. You are property bought and paid for. I'm not a heartless bastard. You won't see them for a long time. Say nothing, or your next beating will be your last and your wife and daughter will do your time plus ten.'

'I understand.'

'Be here tomorrow morning at seven sharp.'

Jim McVickin handed Aiden a small piece of paper with an address and the name of a contact. Aiden caught a whiff of McVickin's expensive aftershave.

'I'll be there.'

'You'd bloody well better. Because if you damn well run, my boys will hunt you down and beat you senseless. The sentence for hunting you down will be life, for your wife and kid. Understood?'

'I'll be there.'

'In fact, the more I think on, why don't you just leg it up north? That wife of yours would be good for business. Seriously, I'll give you a couple of weeks before I let the ferrets loose. You might find a rabbit hole deep enough to hide.'

'I'll be there at seven.'

'I think you will. More is the pity. He can go when he's cleaned up his mess,' McVickin shouted along the corridor to the uniformed officer.

Jim McVickin strolled out of the police station and over to the car park. He got into a silver-coloured Range Rover Sport with darkened windows. He joined his sister, Lisa, and the two men who'd beaten Aiden.

Lisa looked annoyed. 'Where's my property?'

'He'll turn up at the factory tomorrow morning,' Jim said.

'Are you stupid or just being an arse? Go and get him,' Lisa demanded.

'He's dripping blood everywhere!'

Lisa shouted at her brother, 'Pillock! I want him here now.'

Jim raised his voice, 'I'm giving him a chance to run. If he runs, we get his wife and kid.'

Lisa slapped Jim's face. 'Since when do you start deciding what happens to my property?'

Jim nursed the sting on his cheek. 'Okay,' he said, and then turned to leave the car.

Lisa pulled on his jacket to stop him. 'It's done now, let it play. I'll wait and see what I get. But don't you *dare* forget that I'm the head of the family.'

## Two

*Nine Months Later*

*Hampshire*

Jack and Sam struggled to deal with their anger. They were the hot favourites, defeated at the last moment by a stupid fluke. It should never have happened. All that pain and sweat put into training—wasted. It had been a great achievement to reach the final. The winner's medals within their grasp, then thrown away in a reckless moment by a careless idiot.

Team captain, Mohammed, stormed off in disgust but not before he blasted their ears for losing what should have been an easy final. Steven followed. He told them he would rather be alone than with a team of losers. They had nothing to celebrate.

Jack, Oliver, Sam, Steven and Mohammed lost the team final of the South England Universities Open Judo Team Championships, hosted this year at the Student Union, Waterlooville Campus, Hampshire.

They had home advantage. Their preparation had been rigorous, they lost 3-2 because Oliver had decided to show off his exhibition judo to a rapturous home crowd. The draw had matched Oliver against the opposition's weakest team member. The result should have been a formality. An experienced black belt pitched against a recently graded brown belt, no contest.

Like a full-sized rag doll, Oliver dragged and pulled his opponent over every inch of the mat. He pranced around with fancy ballet-dancing footwork until his opponent saw an opportunity. He put Oliver flat on his back for an *ippon* (full and conclusive point) to win the match and the Championship.

Sam felt the loss particularly badly. He would graduate this year and wouldn't return next year for another try at the medals. Consolation cuddles from Sam's girlfriend, Wisper, didn't lift his spirits. For punishment, he locked Oliver in the shower room while he drowned his sorrows in the student union bar.

'I'm thinking like, maybe we should let him out now,' Jack said.

'No way, man. Wait 'til we're ready to go,' Sam said.

Jack knew Olly had a fierce temper. 'He'll be blazing mad.'

Sam said, 'Honestly, do I look like I give a shit?'

Wisper pointed to Jack's phone sitting on the table. 'Has he sent you a grovelling text?'

Jack checked. 'Not yet.'

'When he does, then he's had enough,' Wisper said.

Jack nodded reluctantly. 'Okay, cool.'

Although late in the evening, the large student union bar still served a good crowd of students. The PA system played Boney M's 1976 hit *Daddy Cool*. The hall lights were dim except for a few small spotlights on some walls and fluorescent lights over the bar.

The whole room had a strong stale smell from beer spillages and poor air circulation. The entrance door made a loud clatter that echoed in the room when people came through. It served as an unofficial announcer of arrivals and departures. Instinctively, people looked over when the door clattered.

Two guys and a girl played strip pool at one of the four tables in the room. She had most of her clothes on, but the two guys were down to underpants and one sock. The girl remained sober, giggly and good at pool. The two guys had drunk too much, and would soon be naked as the day they were born. Two other girls gathered near the pool table to catch the final undressing, mobile phones at the ready. YouTube, here we go!

Beside the stage, a tearful comedienne and her anxious roadie boyfriend argued as they packed their gear and cursed the disaster they had just experienced. It had been her second gig on the university circuit, and it had bombed. Even the warm-up belly dancers got more applause.

She didn't know the only things that get a laugh from students are poos, vomits, bums, willies and tits. Her material on marriage, tax, kids, impotence and real work didn't connect with them because the bodies in the audience looked adult-like, but their brains had remained child-like.

She tried bravely to find a workable connection and lambasted the uselessness of a degree in media and cultural studies in the grand scheme of the big society—serious mistake.

She didn't appreciate that subtle communication with young drunks would be harder than show jumping on a horse with severe learning difficulties. Spilt beer puddles everywhere, and students passed out on the floor before eight in the evening, should have given her a huge clue. It started to go wrong when a noisy group of students got bored. Started a drinking competition with volunteers guzzling a yard of ale while others shouted and pranced around like Zulu warriors.

Finally, half-way through her act, the bar staff switched on the TV screens. Some students wanted to watch an episode of *The Big Bang Theory*. Still, she persevered, hoping for a big laugh that might settle them down. Comedy acts who conquer the university circuit deserve an honorary degree.

Jack held out his hand to Sam. 'I'm gonna let him out, now. Gimme the key.'

Sam whined as he finished off his pint of *Old Speckled Hen*. He retrieved the shower-room key from his pocket. 'Jack. You're like, as much fun as that stupid comedienne.'

Jack got up. No-one else moved. 'Come on! He'll be mad as hell. I'm not doing this on my own.'

Sam and Wisper moaned, cursed and dragged their feet. They were in no hurry to face Olly.

They ambled along the corridor to the shower room. They'd all had too much to drink, and their sorrows were well drowned. All the judo teams had disappeared after the championships. The corridors were quiet and deserted.

Jack unlocked the shower room and expected Olly to start shouting and bawling. The others waited in the corridor.

A thick pall of cloudy steam escaped when Jack opened the door. Jack called out to Olly. The noisy showers and extraction fans drowned his voice. Jack waved his arms in the steam to clear a path to the showers. The steam caught his breath and made him cough.

No response from Olly. It didn't sound like Jack had any trouble so Sam and Wisper decided to leave.

Jack darted to the shower room in case Olly had had an accident. He slipped on the greasy floor and almost fell down. He wondered why Olly had left the showers running. The shower room had no windows, and everything in the room seemed exactly as they'd left it earlier.

Jack switched the showers off, and the fans started to clear the room. He became concerned when he saw Olly's judo kit on the bench, and Olly's clothes still in his locker. In the corridor, Sam heard Jack shout again for Olly. His voice sounded worried. Sam and Wisper headed back to the shower room.

Sam stood in the doorway, and Jack appeared through a cloud of steam. He'd come out of the toilets and into the changing room. Wisper waited outside.

'What?' Sam asked.

'Olly isn't here.'

'He's mucking you about. You sure the door was locked?'

Jack pointed to the door. 'Yeah, hinges are broken. If it's not locked, it hangs wide open.'

Wisper stretched her head to look around the room. 'What's up?'

'Someone let the bastard out,' Sam said to Wisper.

Jack said, 'He's not here.'

'Have you checked the toilets?' she said.



Jack nodded. 'Yeah, just now.'

'Where did you get the key?' Wisper asked Sam.

'The barman, Justin.'

Wisper frowned at the two boys. 'So, Laraine went to Justin and told him you locked Olly in the showers. He came down and let him out with a spare key.'

Jack shook his head. 'Hmm, I'm not sure.'

'Why not?'

Jack pointed to Olly's locker. 'Olly hasn't gone anywhere. His clothes, his wallet, his judo kit. Still here.'

Wisper shook her head. 'He's pissing on you two. He's got someone to loan him a tracksuit. He took off to make you feel like shit. When it should be him.'

Sam asked, 'Wisper, when did Laraine go home?'

Wisper thought for a moment. 'Don't know. I didn't see her after Olly's first match. I saw her and Olly arguing. I think Laraine went home soon after.'

Jack looked concerned. 'Laraine McSwann? Is Olly seeing Laraine McSwann?'

Wisper nodded. 'Has been for a couple of months, why?'

'She's married with a kid. I know Aiden McSwann, he's a mate. What the hell does Olly think he's doing with Aiden's wife?'

'That's their business,' Sam said.

Wisper looked around. Her face repulsed at the mess in the room. 'This changing room is disgusting. You guys are like, pigs—total pigs.'

'What?' Jack defended.

'You spray lotion like, on your body, not all over the benches. The ceiling tiles aren't bloody Frisbees. A bunch of mindless gorillas.'

Wisper drew her finger over a bench seat. She showed them the heavy yellow residue on her finger. Only one ceiling tile had remained intact. All that remained of the other tiles were scattered fragments on the dressing room floor. Or crumbled piles of soggy, wet, matted material on the shower-room floor.

The boys seemed unconcerned. Worse things can happen during championships when other teams use the facilities.

Jack picked up Olly's mobile and entered his password. He'd seen Olly do it many times.

'He hasn't phoned or texted anybody. Only text from me.'

Sam said, 'Well, he's not bloody Houdini. You said the room was locked. There's no window in here. He didn't climb out through the bloody extractor fan. He must have organised something. Screw him, I've had enough, we're off.'

Jack opened his arms for more support. 'We can't just leave his stuff here.'

'Call his bluff!' Sam said.

'I'm not doing that,' Jack replied.

Jack pulled Olly's sports bag from his locker and started to pack his bag.

Sam watched and then picked something out of Olly's bag. 'What's this?'

'Wow! Is that like, heroin?' Wisper asked.

Sam held up a silver foil blister pack containing two sealed vials of amber liquid. The foil had space for six vials. Four were missing.

Jack said, 'That's the energy stuff. Gives him a boost.'

Sam looked alarmed. 'Are you saying Olly's a drugs cheat?'

Jack didn't seem concerned. 'It's not like a mega banned drug or anything. It's a natural energy booster for muscle. Olly's taking part in a test programme to evaluate its effectiveness.'

'Whaaat?' Sam said, and sounded suspicious.

'It's up front, like. The uni is conducting trials on it. I tell you, it works. Olly used to run a mile in thirteen minutes. Last week, he did it in eight minutes. Fucking awesome if you ask me,' Jack said as he took the blister back and put it back in the bag.

Sam looked into the bag. 'How do I get on this programme?'

'You can't. I've already tried. They told me it's full but Olly said there will be a larger trial when this one is done.'

Wisper picked up a black spectacle case and looked inside. She knew Olly didn't wear spectacles. The case contained a needle and syringe with a small amount of amber fluid in the syringe.

Wisper showed the open case to the boys. 'Do you think he would leave his stuff?'

'Where's his towel?' Sam asked.

'There's a towel in the showers. It's been thrown onto a big pile of filthy muck from the ceiling tiles,' Jack said.

'Leave it. He thinks he's smart, but he'll have to come crawling to us to get his stuff back,' Sam said.

Sam ushered everyone out of the shower room. He locked the door. Olly had somehow outsmarted them and he would have to tell them how he did it. Otherwise, he'd need to sing for his wallet and drugs and all his other stuff.

\*

Four hours later, in the early morning, the whole building stood dark and quiet, locked up for the night. A dozen brown rats scampered through ducts, under floorboards, and over joists, following a trail of urine that led to the men's shower room.

As they got closer, they heard the distinct ultrasound chirps of excitement. To human ears, rats seem very quiet because they communicate using ultrasound that humans can't hear. The rats in the shower room were excited. Some were tooth grinding with delight. Some were so excited, they eye-boggled as they waited for the pack leader to arrive and assume control of their prize

## Three

### *Southsea, Hampshire*

Laraine McSwann stretched out on the sofa in her living room. She stared through the television. She wasn't taking in the scenes or watching Russell Crowe give a powerful performance as Cal McCaffrey in the movie *State of Play*. She couldn't keep her mind on the plot.

She wore a low-necked, sleeveless beige cotton top with tapered hemline and skinny jeans. Always trying to hold onto her youth, she looked like a teenager but didn't sound or behave like one. Well, it's tricky when you get past thirty. Her two-bedroom terraced house in Stansted Road had seen better times. It had become cluttered, muddled, and unloved, but clean in essential places.

Just after nine in the evening, she flicked her eyes to the living room window. The rain outside fell in relentless sheets. She plucked and fidgeted with the neckband of her top.

Upstairs, Laraine's six-year-old daughter, Jessica, crept out of her bed. She'd heard a car draw up outside their house. She ran to her window. *It's Daddy*, she thought as she pushed the curtains apart. She watched two men get out of their car. One of the men looked up at the bedroom window, and Jess saw his face.

'Muumm!' Jess shouted with a squeal that frightened her mother.

Laraine leapt up from the sofa. 'What?'

'The men in the red car,' Jess shouted from the top of the stairs.

Laraine rushed to the front door. Pushed the lock bolt, and slammed her back against the door. *Keep calm; they'll go away; they won't stand long in that rain*, she thought. Her breathing picked up pace, her heart raced, and her hands trembled.

Jess started down the stairs. 'Mum. Call the police.'

'Go to your room. Close the door.'

Laraine hadn't told Jess that their landline phone had been disconnected. Her mobile had only recently been put on the charger for a few minutes.

The banging on the front door stopped after two minutes. Laraine heard refuse bins crash against the back of the house. Then, harder banging started on the kitchen-door glass panel.

Laraine darted to the connecting door between the hall and the kitchen. She grabbed a bath towel from the hall radiator and tried to wedge it under the door. She didn't really expect it to keep the door closed. Panic blinded her thinking.

Yordan Letchikova kicked the kitchen door hard and split the doorframe. The door flew open, and he got inside. He brushed rainwater from his hair and jacket onto the kitchen floor. One strong shove and he pushed through the connecting door to the hall.

Laraine retreated to the first two steps of the stair. She glared at the stranger in her house. Unsure what to do. Run to Jess's bedroom and barricade the door. Stand and fight. She tried to lash out at the man as he walked past her.

Yordan hit her with a vicious backhander to the side of her head. She collapsed onto the stairs. The second man, Ivan Phillipovar waited outside in the rain. Yordan let him inside and closed the door. Ivan shrugged the rainwater off his coat. He wiped his head with his hand and flicked the surplus water onto the floor. He removed a scarf from his neck.

A man in his mid-forties, Ivan stood tall at five-ten with a bald head and thick eyebrows. He wore a dark grey collarless 'granddad' shirt, black soft leather coat and black trousers both of which were now wet through.

Laraine stayed down with her body lying across the first four steps of the stairs. Ivan walked past and went into her living room. Still shaking water off his coat. Yordan grabbed Laraine's hair and forced her to follow.

'Sit down,' Ivan said.

Ivan and Yordan were the two foreign men who turned up at Jess's school yesterday. They'd asked confusing questions in fragmented English. When she tried to get away from them, they tried to drag her and Jess into their car. Jess's piercing scream brought a teacher and two parents to their rescue.

Laraine thought they had the wrong person because she didn't understand what they wanted. She didn't understand their East European truncated English.

Yordan pulled Laraine into her living room and pushed her into the armchair nearest the door. He stood behind her.

Ivan walked casually into her kitchen. He dried his hands on a kitchen towel before he selected a long kitchen knife from a drawer. He threw a towel to Yordan then stood in front of the armchair. He ran the knife through the palm of his left hand. The blunt knife-edge barely left a mark on his palm.

She stared at her kitchen knife. 'What do you want with me?'

Never had she seen someone handle a knife in a threatening way. He stepped closer to her. His feet pushed between her feet. She edged her feet apart while trying to keep her knees together.

He pointed the sharp end of the knife at her chest. Her eyes switched away from his face to the knife. His fingers looked puffy and smelled of nicotine.

Laraine tried to re-position her body in the chair. Ivan eased the knife slowly toward her sternum. He pressed the knife into her skin just above the neckband of her top. She felt the cold metal. A fraction more would break her skin.

She shifted her gaze to his face. He leant close enough for her to smell the garlic on his breath. His face and bald head still wet from the rainwater. The strain in her legs became unbearable. She moved her feet and knees to a more relaxed position.

He pressed the knife harder against her sternum. Her pain intensified, and anguish defined her face. A little push further and the tip would break through the skin.

She agitated her hands as if she might grab his hand to make him stop.

Yordan clamped his huge hands on the sides of her head.

She clawed the arms of the armchair. She closed her eyes and expected the knife to puncture her skin.

Ivan raised the knife to her face. He set the tip on her top lip, just under her nose. He turned the knife so it became perpendicular to her nose.

Then he levered the knife upwards against her nose. She opened her eyes on his face. She arched her back up in the armchair. Frightened, she began to pant and sweat. He levered the knife up more. Her eyes glared with terror.

Ivan decided he had done enough to make her talk. He turned rapidly, and like a circus performer, he threw the knife into a sideboard on the opposite side of the room.

He turned back to face her. 'Oliver Mansole. Where is he?'

Laraine shook her head. 'Olly? I don't know where he is.'

Yordan threatened. 'She lies. I kill her. I take her child.'

Ivan said, 'People say you're his woman.'

Surprised and insulted, she said, 'No, I'm not. He's a friend, that's all.'

'You were last with him at judo contest. Where is he hiding?'

'I don't know. I haven't seen him since that night in the student union.'

Ivan stood at the sideboard. He looked at the knife stuck in the door. He looked at family photos of Laraine and her family. He turned back and showed her a silver foil blister pack containing sealed vials of amber liquid.

'He leave more of this here?' Ivan asked.

She shook her head. 'He didn't leave anything here. I don't allow drugs in my home.'

Ivan walked over to the door, and looked upstairs. 'Tell truth, or I get truth from your child.'

Laraine's heart raced faster. 'He didn't leave anything here. I swear on my daughter's life.'

Ivan leant closer to her face. 'I'll find him. If he says my gear is here, I come back. I rip your house to pieces.' He pointed to the room upstairs where he'd seen Jess through the window. 'I take your child. You *never* see her again.'

Laraine's face looked desperate. 'If I had anything, I'd give it to you.'

'Search the child,' Ivan said to Yordan.

Laraine jerked her body and raised her voice, 'I swear to God. He left nothing in this house.' Trembling and panicking, she looked pitiful.

Yordan paused at the foot of the stairs. Ivan believed her and shook his head to bring Yordan back. He knew it had been a long shot, but others had said she and Oliver were involved, so he had to check her out.

Yordan Letchikova stood two inches shorter than Ivan but with broader shoulders. He had just reached his thirties. He wore an oversized leather jacket that made his body look obese, a black shirt and dark trousers. He kept his brown hair close cropped and it looked as though he'd put oil or cream on it to make it lie flat.

Yordan followed Ivan out of the house. As they sat in their car waiting for a pause in traffic, Yordan reverted to his native Bulgarian tongue.

'Her child is perfect. I want her.'

Ivan looked quizzical. 'Do you mean a replacement for Galina?'

'She's a strong girl, good age.'

'Maybe.'

'I want to take her now.'

'Not now, Yordan. We must find this pig Mansole. We can deal with your business later. You tell Margarita you found her new daughter, but she need to wait a little longer.'

Six weeks ago, Yordan's ten-year-old niece, Galina, had disappeared as she walked home from school along the outskirts of Yuzhen Park, south of Sofia. His sister, Margarita, became relentlessly melancholic over the loss of her daughter.

Galina had been snatched by a child traffic gang who put her to work as a street beggar in Amsterdam. Yordan decided Jess would fill the gap left by Galina. Jess wouldn't work the streets begging, but she would take over Galina's chores in Margarita's large and violent family.

In Yordan's mind, an eye for an eye means, if someone steals your child, you steal someone else's child. Galina had become one of two hundred and fifty thousand children who disappear in Europe every year. Five percent of them abducted by strangers.

The rain had eased and Laraine's house seemed uncannily silent. Jess sat with Laraine at the top of the stairs, cuddling each other. *Why is the world shitting on me?* Laraine thought.

'Mummy, I'm scared.'

'Shush, darling, they've gone.'

'Why do they want Uncle Olly?'

'I don't know, darling.'

'I want Daddy to come home. When is Daddy coming back?'

Her voice quivered with nerves. 'I don't know ... sweetheart.'

'If I promise to be really good, will Daddy come back tomorrow?'

'He knows we love him. He needs time to think about things.'

'He doesn't need to think. I'll be a good girl. Tell him, please, I'll be really good,' Jess pleaded, and then ran to her room in a flood of tears.

'It's not your fault, sweetheart,' Laraine called after Jess.

'It's not your fault,' she repeated quietly.

*It's his fault,* she thought.

Jess lay on her bed. She hugged her pillow and sobbed painfully. She missed her dad.

Laraine stared through the front door at the bottom of the stairs. Fear had made her feel she'd faced a near death moment when everything seemed to flash past. She retired to her bedroom and lay down on her bed.

She recalled images of her wedding day, so happy and wonderful. The proud day her husband Aiden told her about his new job as a personal trainer. The special day her baby Jessica arrived. Seven wonderful years followed, and then without warning, everything changed. Just after her fourth birthday, Jess started to misbehave in a bizarre way.

Aiden's parents seemed to know about the curse, and they offered understanding and advice. Then they insisted on specialist treatment. At first, Aiden supported Laraine when she refused the treatment his parents suggested. His parents insisted they knew best. As if they had the right to make a decision for Jess.

That's when the thundering arguments started. His parents forced him into an impossible choice, them or her. Aiden found himself torn between his wife and his parents over what to do about Jess. Her in-laws became outlaws and she grew to hate them.



She felt betrayed and abandoned when Aiden walked out of their home. Nine long months without one word from him. Nine painful months without his salary to pay the bills. She had no idea where he'd gone or when he would return. No-one had seen him, and it seemed like he'd disappeared into thin air.

Aidan had left her to put food on the table with no income. He left her alone to cope with Jess's curse. He left her with a mortgage and a car she couldn't pay. Eviction and the ensuing pain were making their way straight to her door.

Even her friendship with Oliver Mansole had turned sour. He had always been a good friend. He had access to a van and offered to do the removal when the time came to give up the house. Now, even he had abandoned her, and thugs looking for him had invaded her home had threatened her.

A dreadful feeling of panic writhed in her throat. The beginning of a scream surged from the pit of her lungs. She smothered it, and instead, it came out as a loud gasp.

## Four

### *Ardwell Point, South-West Scotland*

Sir James Barscadden had been a respected billionaire, pillar of the city of London, and an exceptional larger-than-life figure who'd made his fortune in the food industry. Then his evil empire backed by a ruthless gang of thugs came to light, and he quickly fell from grace.

Behind closed doors, the megalomaniac had built his empire using criminal intimidation, theft and cold-blooded takeovers. His demise caused shock-waves in London's political circles when it seemed certain his illegal dealings and secrets would become public.

One person in Downing Street had deep anxiety about exposure of his close relationship with Barscadden. The Prime Minister felt intensely betrayed by his once trusted friend. Now, he worried about the confidences he'd shared with Barscadden and disclosure of personal favours he'd done for Barscadden.

The PM ordered the Head of MI5 to take charge of an operation to find Barscadden. The PM warned him that if Barscadden faced a trial, the Government would fall, and the country would suffer. The Head of MI5 consulted with his opposite number in MI6, and together they agreed the SAS would need to deal with Barscadden's private gang of thugs, known as WRATH.

Intelligence indicated that Barscadden and his gang of bodyguards were hunting for a safe exit point. Nationwide surveillance, including spy satellites on permanent geo-station over the UK, concentrated on the search for Barscadden. The surveillance agency, GCHQ, used the satellites to monitor the coastline for potential points of extraction.

Satellite G19, scanning the west coast of Scotland, yielded one object of interest. A large super-yacht had anchored off Ardwell Point near the village of Portpatrick. A picturesque harbour village, but hardly on a par with the fleshpots of the Cote d'Azur normally frequented by such grand vessels.

Just after eight in the evening, a clear sky with occasional slow-moving cloud revealed a bright waning gibbous moon. The unlit countryside around Portpatrick looked as black as the inside of an ink well. On the calm sea, the yacht stood out like a beacon.

Almost eighteen hours after the yacht had dropped anchor, a removal van and two large SUVs arrived at a space near the beach at Ardwell Bay. The satellite's thermal image provided a clear picture of what appeared to be happening on the ground.

Senior MI5 officer, Alan Cairn, examined the satellite images and assessed the fast-moving situation. Cairn decided on a fastball operation to hit Barscadden in the middle of his escape. Fastball ops are good for surprise but less good for people who prefer to plan and prepare.

Twenty minutes after Cairn issued the 'go' command, SAS troopers sat in two rows of eight facing each other in a thundering Chinook HC3 helicopter from Special Forces Flight. As the Chinook transported them to Dumfries near the border with England, they meticulously checked their equipment and comms.

Cairn had deployed one troop of sixteen troopers, consisting of two teams, designated Alpha and Bravo. Ten men and four women. In overall command, and leading the Alpha team, Captain Zoe Tampsin.

Known for rapid thinking under extreme pressure, Zoe had worked with the SAS in Bosnia to support specialist covert operations and round up Bosnian war criminals. Using gender and guile, she penetrated fortified strongholds and arrested 'untouchable' criminals.

The Chinook dropped Zoe and her troopers off in a farmer's field. They transferred to a waiting convoy of five, matte black, Land Rover Defender hard-top vehicles. The troopers and their gear transferred quickly, and then the convoy raced west along the A75.

At eleven-fifteen, the convoy left the A75 at Whitecrock, joined the B7084, and then followed a series of minor roads that led to the west coast. After the convoy passed through Clachanmore, they arrived at a fork in the road, at Low Ardwell. They chose the left-hand fork.

The convoy stopped at High Ardwell. The troopers quickly deployed in a circle around the vehicles. Zoe gave the order to 'go green'. Helmet-mounted night-vision goggles locked into place. Zoe climbed on top of her Land Rover. With night binoculars, she spotted the super-yacht anchored off Ardwell Point.

Close to the beach, the road adopted a forward sloping S-shape. The convoy had stopped at the top bend of the road. Zoe decided on an attack from two sides.

Her Alpha team would follow the S-shaped road down to the beach. A four-hundred-metre trot along the road and down to the south end of Ardwell Bay. Four minutes, easy peasy. Her team would approach the beach from the east.

She ordered Bravo team to head southwest over fields to Base Hole, and then north up to Doon Hill. Their approach to the beach would be from the south. Zoe allowed them eight minutes for the seven-hundred-metre trot. Bravo team would have the advantage of high

ground, over-looking the beach. To ensure the troopers didn't fire on each other, they wore 'high vis' patches that were bright in night-vision goggles.

When Zoe's team arrived at Ardwell Bay, they came across a removal van and two SUVs. Abandoned, with all the doors wide open. The inside of the van appeared kitted out for living quarters. From live feed cameras on trooper helmets, Alan Cairn saw where Barscadden had been hiding since his disappearance.

The head-cam feeds were relayed by GCHQ to an operations room in MI5 headquarters at Thames House, a Grade II listed building on the corner of Millbank and Horseferry Road in central London.

A lookout spotted the SAS troopers at the removal van. He engaged them briefly before he retreated to the beach. Barscadden's men on the beach took cover in rocky outcrops, known locally as Mary Wilson's Slunk.

An intense firefight on the Slunk lasted eleven minutes. Barscadden's men retreated through the Slunk toward the sea, and then south toward Doon Castle Broch, where they were met and pinned down by Bravo team approaching from Base Hole.

The rocks were treacherous in the dark. Many of them as high as chest height, with jutting angles, slippery surfaces and awkward gullies between them. Perfect for tripping and trapping anxiously moving boots.

The forensic and the medical people would find cuts and bruises on the legs and feet of the bodies to show where the rocks had taken part in the fight. It wasn't the first time, but it had been a long time since so much blood had spilled on Mary Wilson's Slunk. None of the fighters knew that the large pile of stones they used for cover were the remains of Doon Castle Broch. A Scottish castle dating back to 100BC.

Three of Barscadden's men were killed in the Slunk. Two were killed at Ardwell Point, and one captured. A further two were killed at Doon Castle Broch. One SAS trooper had sustained a serious but not a life-threatening injury. Three others were slightly injured, including Zoe Tampsin.

Zoe's team had flushed Barscadden's men out of the Slunk and caught up with three of them among the rocks at Ardwell Point. Zoe and her sergeant, Antonia (Toni) Bornadetti, crashed into their position from behind.

The first of the three lay dead because his right foot got stuck between two rocks. He couldn't move to cover and chose not to surrender.

Toni got to the second man and knocked him unconscious when she drove the retracted butt-stock of her silenced MP5SD Heckler & Koch into the side of his head.

Zoe rushed to the third man who fired a burst at her before he ran off. Zoe dropped to her knees and killed him with a headshot before he reached cover. One of his nine-millimetre rounds had ripped three inches of flesh from her upper left arm.

Toni joined Zoe and together they lay low while Toni applied a field dressing to stem the flow of blood from Zoe's arm.

When it had kicked off, Zoe had cried 'weapons hot' into the comm headsets. When it ended, she called for the IRC (inflatable raiding craft). The van towing the IRC raced down to Ardwell Bay. Zoe and five troopers took the IRC out to the yacht.

As the IRC approached, the crew lined up with their hands in the air: Captain, first officer, engineer, three deckhands, housekeeper, chef and two stewards. When the fighting had started, the crew switched on all the deck lights so their surrender could be seen.

*'Do not fire,'* they shouted repeatedly.

The SAS troopers boarded the yacht and began a search. Zoe found three of Barscadden's inner circle, sprawled out in the lounge, seemingly executed by single headshots. For some reason, Barscadden couldn't take them. To ensure their silence, he killed them.

Beside them lay two large, silver alloy trunks, but no sign of Barscadden or his personal bodyguard, Peter Bromlee. The trunks were empty.

Zoe grabbed the captain by the throat and demanded an explanation. Quickly, he pointed his arm out to sea. Zoe and Toni ran around to the other side of the yacht, just in time to see a speedboat. It floated aimlessly in the wake of a submarine moving forward into a dive.

The crew confirmed Barscadden and Bromlee had taken seven trunks on board the submarine. They had left when the shooting started.

Zoe tapped her communications module. 'Control, you watching this?'

Alan Cairn replied, 'Yes. We didn't spot that sub on the satellite image. It must have been hiding under the keel of the yacht.'

'How far can a small thing like that go?'

'We think it's an old Soviet, Quebec class, coastal submarine. Range not more than two thousand miles. It won't get him across the pond. Best guess, he'll make landfall in Europe.'

'Unless he organised a refuel at sea,' Zoe added.

Cairn conceded, 'Of course, that's possible.'

Sergeant Toni Bornadetti cursed loudly, 'Shit. Can we scramble air support to bomb the bastard?'

'He's too close to fishing and ferry lanes,' Cairn said.

Zoe shook her head slowly. 'Good planning. Smart decoy. You've got to give him that.'

She watched the submarine conning tower disappear into the sea through her night-enhancement goggles.

Toni inspected the expanding bloodstain on Zoe's arm bandage. 'Well done, boss. It's still a good result for us. Back to the regiment?'

Zoe turned, and then curled her lip at Toni. 'Not yet.'

'Your order is my command, boss. What's next?'

'Fancy a bit of R and R in Hampshire?'

'Oh yeah. That would be good. I've got mates in Portsmouth. What's going down in Hampshire?'

'We'll soon find out. First stop, London, Thames House.'

'Negative, boss,' Toni said. 'First stop is the MO's surgery. You'll want a neat row of stitches on this one for sure. You know my stitching is lousy.'

## Five

*Home Office, Whitehall, London*

The head of the Lambeth Group, Sir Christopher Aden-Brown, got up from his desk and welcomed Alan Cairn. Aden-Brown had an office on the third floor of Peel Building at the Home Office in Marsham Street. He liked a traditional office with period furniture, and they sat facing each other in brown-leather-covered Queen Anne high-back wing-chairs.

Spread out on a coffee table between them, lay a pile of files, and for the next three hours they prepared a briefing for a team who were making their way to the Peel Building.

Aden-Brown had retired as a university vice-chancellor to take charge of the Lambeth Group. He had a shock of short white hair, befitting his seventy years of age. A thin and gaunt-looking man, he stood six foot tall with pronounced jowls and sagging bags under his eyes. His hands had prominent liver spots, and he wore glasses with thick lenses for severe myopia. He served as expert liaison and counsel between the Home Office and all the university vice-chancellors in the UK and Commonwealth.

'How are you coping with the new name?' Aden-Brown asked.

'MI5 has served us for a long time. Hopefully, the Security Service will serve us for an equally long time.'

'Very diplomatic, Alan.'

'Is Shawlens well enough for this operation?'

'As I've said, he's walking and talking like a normal adult, but he's not all there in terms of full mental capacity.'

'Maybe we should consider an alternative,' Alan suggested.

Aden-Brown shook his head. 'The Lambeth Group only have two experienced biochemists. Shawlens is the only one with the research expertise to fit the department you want to investigate. We have plenty of physicists and chemists, but their research is not relevant.'

'Well, he'll have to snap out of it,' Alan said more harshly than he intended.

'Are you sure Tampsin is fit for this duty? I read the mission report on the Barscadden business at Ardwell Point. Bloody impressive stuff taking out the WRATH people. Just a tad unlucky she didn't get Barscadden. I would have allowed a bit more time for her wound to heal.'

'You insisted I had to find someone from the top drawer to look after Shawlens in case Barscadden tries to take revenge. Well, Sir Christopher—she's the one!'

Aden-Brown looked unconvinced and said, 'I see.'

'If Barscadden's people come after Shawlens. She'll spot them and take them out long before they ever spot her. Trust me, Sir Christopher, Zoe is perfect for this close protection work. This type of babysitting is her speciality. She's the very best.'

Aden-Brown pressed the intercom. 'Irene. Have the team arrived?'

'Yes, sir. All present and correct. I've put them in briefing room A.'

'Thank you, Irene. Okay, Alan, let's get this briefing done.'

Alan Cairn had celebrated his fifty-sixth birthday four days ago, and had almost certainly added to his four stones of overweight. He had a portly silhouette that had become instantly recognisable in the corridors of the Home Office.

He didn't represent the stereotypical Oxbridge-educated civil servant. He'd attended Edinburgh University, and he put many people on edge with his harsh take-me-as-you-find-me manner. With a talent for identifying threats and formulating counter-strategies to deal with them, he had advanced through the ranks to head of department level.

In a small room or a large hall, his voice always sounded loudest and grandest. His oval face appeared pointy as his goatee beard merged with a thick moustache and complemented a set of bushy eyebrows over his dark-blue eyes. He kept his hair combed back from the hairline, and it curled up over his collar.

\*

Gavin Shawlens had attended previous meetings in briefing room A. The room had no windows and ineffective air conditioning so he recognised the smell. A complex mixture of human odour, eau de toilette and dust in the air from a recent flick-over. Gavin also noted an orange smell from the leather seats. Residue from a fluid used to clean the leather.

The room easily accommodated a long conference table in the centre and seating for sixteen. The table and matching wall panelling were built with distinctive hard rock maple, similar to that used to floor bowling alleys. Concealed ceiling lighting over the table added an overly harsh brightness to the room.

Gavin stared into the burls, leaf figures and bird's-eye figures that he could see in the grain. Spread out around the table sat four others, two men and two women.

None of them knew each other, so they sat in silence. They exchanged polite hellos and smiles but none of them had introduced themselves.



Gavin fought with his mind to keep his focus. He didn't want to be there. He pleaded to deaf ears for more time to deal with his grief. He still felt suicidal, and thoughts of Emma Patersun ebbed and flowed during the day then flooded his mind at night.

He had vivid images of her funeral and people reflecting on her life. Every part of his loss still raw in his thoughts. No-one knew what she meant to him. He spent endless days studying methods of euthanasia. He wanted to be with Emma again, but he wanted something fast and painless, like flicking off a switch.

He'd taken a few chemicals from the lab that would do the job. He hadn't done the deed because he worried that if he took his own life, there might be some divine rule that would prevent him from being reunited with Emma.

Aden-Brown and Alan Cairn entered the room, and Aden-Brown immediately took command.

'Good afternoon and welcome back to the Home Office. Thank you for coming at such short notice. Can we quickly go around the table, please,' Aden-Brown said, as he looked at Gavin.

'Dr Gavin Shawlens, biochemist, University of Kinmalcolm. I manage an enzyme technology group. This will be my eighth investigation for the Lambeth Group.'

Gavin placed his secure encrypted mobile (SEM) phone on the table in front of him, and then turned to the person on his left. He nodded to indicate he'd finished.

His voice sounded distant, lacking purpose, making it obvious to others that he didn't want to be there. Aden-Brown and Alan Cairn exchanged eye contact. They knew why Shawlens felt particularly low.

'Zoe Tampsin, Senior Field Officer with the Security Service. On temporary secondment to the Lambeth Group. Based here in London. This will be my second investigation,' she said confidently like a commander.

'Hello, everyone, I'm Dr Rolley James Morgan. I'm a team leader at the Central Institute of Advanced Physics, Oxford. I'm a specialist in complex energy systems. I lead a team of four postdocs and six technicians. My team has published groundbreaking research in Nature and Scientific American. This is my first time here so I'm not sure what I'll be doing.'

Alan nodded to Rolley then explained, 'The Lambeth Group investigate research projects that have gone rogue or illegal. Most research projects start with good intentions. But for one reason or another, a few go wrong and backfire. We investigate, and if necessary, we clean up the mess.'

Rolley wasn't sure of the significance, but he followed Gavin's lead and placed his SEM phone on the table in front of him. He nodded to the lady next to him.

'Elaine Hodderman. I'm a Head of Section with the Security Service. I'm based in this building. I'm a specialist in rapid analysis. Like Rolley, I'm new to the Lambeth Group.'

Elaine put her SEM phone down in front of her.

'Welcome. Thank you all. Now, would anyone like more tea or coffee before we begin?' Aden-Brown said.

Alan Cairn looked puzzled at the phones on the table. He saw Zoe searching her bag and said, 'We won't be using the SEM phones. Please, put them away.'

Shawlens joined Morgan at the coffee trolley. With their eyes and facial expressions, they formed a tenuous academic clique as they refilled their coffee cups.

Zoe watched Gavin and matched the face with the information she'd read in his file. The thirty-six-year-old stood five-eight and weighed sixty-five kilos. From file photos, he looked a little bit cocky but unthreatening with soft-features. He had a warm beauty about his face.

His deep blue eyes twinkled with mischief. He seemed more gentle and passive than rugged and macho. His hair had a dark straw colour and needed grooming. Appearance obviously not his highest priority. Not unlike academics she'd met before, no surprises.

In the flesh, he hadn't shaved for some time, so a short and untidy beard covered his face. She returned her gaze to the table, smiled and decided that the untidy beard would have to go. Alan Cairn had briefed her on his problems, so she understood why he looked troubled.

Aden-Brown said, 'I've called you here today because we have discovered a research project that may have backfired. The expertise around this table is best suited to deal with the issues involved. The designation for this investigation is SLIPFIRE. Alan, will you please introduce SLIPFIRE.'

Alan handed out buff-coloured folders to each team member, the words 'strictly confidential' emboldened on the front cover above the word SLIPFIRE.

Alan picked up a remote control unit and pressed a button. A large interactive computer screen flickered into life. He dimmed the room lights as the screen settled down. A red banner across the screen displayed SLIPFIRE. He dragged a strip of photos from a side bar onto the screen.

He touched the first photo. It enlarged and revealed the entrance to the University of South England, Hampshire. He touched another photo, and it revealed the website of the Department of Sports Biology.

'This university is one of the most highly respected in the country. In the past six years, it has received over three hundred million in research funding. The Department of Sports Biology has received over fifty million over the same period. For twenty years, research in the Department has been rated excellent,' Alan said while reading from a document.

'In fact, they are recognised as world class,' Gavin added.

Alan continued, 'Senior researchers at CASTER have identified a particular set of research papers from the Department of Sports Biology, which are causing serious concern. Serious irregularities. We suspect that research in Sports Biology has backfired.'

Rolley looked confused. 'Sorry to be a new boy nuisance. CASTER? I don't believe I know them.'

Alan said, 'To help the Home Office identify rogue research, we have a specialist group called the Committee for Accountable Science and Technology Ethical Research.'

A cynical look formed on Gavin's face. 'It's similar to the US Office of Research Integrity, except they'll publicly jump on your head while ours is rather more gentlemanly. We keep CASTER in a cupboard, under the stairs, in this building.'

Gavin had made his point several times in the past. As a researcher, he preferred the American method of policing research and technology.

'What irregularities have they found?' Zoe asked.

'Ghost-writing. Unreal results are indicated. Various issues are noted in your folder,' Alan said.

'Ghost-writing?' Elaine repeated.

Aden-Brown fielded her query to Gavin.

He explained, 'They might have published results they didn't generate; in effect, published something for someone else. Someone could have given them false results and used them to pass the results off as genuine. Unrealistic results could be results obtained from equipment or methods that are not capable of generating said results. Like saying, you got two hundred miles out of a gallon of petrol when the maximum you could possibly get in a perfect world is ninety.'

The long explanation drained Gavin. His face looked peaky, and he felt light-headed.

Elaine nodded to him. 'Thanks for that, Gavin.'

'How did CASTER become aware of these problems?' Rolley asked.

Aden-Brown said, 'Editors of key research journals are required to notify CASTER of any research they think is suspicious.'

'If an editor thinks research is suspicious, why not refuse to publish?' Elaine asked.

Gavin looked agitated and impatient. 'For God's sake! Innocent until proven guilty. Some idiot would need to repeat the research and show that it's faulty. I don't have time to waste on that kind of stupid work, do you?'

Suddenly, Gavin felt very anxious as if he would pass out. His face turned white and perspiration formed on his forehead. He got up from his chair and almost fell back into it. He stumbled back from the table, and heard someone ask, *are you okay?*

'Excuse me,' he said when he reached the door.

Gavin hurried out of the room in a state of distress and headed for the men's room along the corridor.

Everyone had heard the anguish in his voice. Zoe moved to go after him, but Alan Cairn shook his head at Zoe and motioned with his hand for her to sit down.

## Six

In the men's room, Gavin held onto the wash-hand basin while his body shook. He felt dizzy. He'd broken out in a cold sweat and grabbed some paper towels to mop his face. His hands trembled, and he felt intense hunger pangs. Nervously, he ran his hand through his hair.

He knew his blood sugar had dropped because he'd skipped breakfast and lunch. He'd depleted the carb stores in his body. His body had switched to a backup metabolic system called gluconeogenesis that converted fat to sugar. He'd arrived late and had ran up and down stairs and along corridors before he reached the meeting room. He'd depleted his blood glucose to the base level.

Raised anxiety in the room had dropped his blood glucose below the safe threshold, the point of no return. The human brain needs six grams of glucose each hour, every hour of every day to supply energy for continuous brain activity. His brain created the unpleasant symptoms to let him know it wasn't happy.

The brain continuously checks blood glucose, and if it detects falling levels, it shocks the body as a reminder that it has needs. Gavin's body had been well and truly shocked. He had slipped into hypoglycaemia but he knew what to do.

\*

'We are tasked to find out if research in the Department of Sports Biology has backfired. We need to find out who is involved, close it down and deal with any consequences,' Alan said.

Aden-Brown raised his voice. 'Serious damage will be inflicted on all UK research if it becomes public that a world-class UK University is cheating at research. This could cause a collapse of confidence in UK research. The stakes are very high. In the last financial year, the UK attracted twenty billion pounds in research income.'

'Are they aware of the CASTER investigation?' Rolley asked.

'No, it's confidential. That, of course, gives us an investigative edge,' Alan said.

Gavin slipped back into the room and over to the tea trolley. He gathered a handful of sugar sachets to pour into his coffee. He downed the sweet coffee quickly. The colour returned to his face, and he smiled to each person in turn to confirm he felt okay.

Alan dragged a new set of two photos onto the centre of the screen. 'The CASTER team have identified two researchers associated with the suspicious research. Professor Buzzwall and Dr Griffan.'

Alan pointed to each one in turn and ran through their backgrounds.

Buzzwall's photo showed a middle-aged man with receding hair and an intimidating expression. Griffan's photo showed a young woman with a face and smile similar to the actress Emma Watson from the Harry Potter films.

Alan said, 'The CASTER group have produced a briefing paper that explains their concerns. These two are named on the research papers that the CASTER group are worried about.'

'Have there been any consequences?' Gavin asked.

In his experience, a team wasn't assembled until a backfired project had produced one or more unfortunate consequences.

'There are two that we know about,' Alan said.

Alan Cairn pulled another photo onto the screen. He dragged and enlarged the photo. 'This is Jemard Patrick Edmond, a Jamaican national, aged twenty-five. He's a top athlete and an Olympic medal winner. He's also a postgraduate student in the Department of Sports Biology.'

'Is he named on the suspect research papers?' Zoe asked.

'Edmond is a named contributor on a few of the suspicious papers,' Alan replied.

'What brought him to your attention?' Rolley asked.

Alan turned to Aden-Brown and he replied, 'All registry offices in UK universities are required to notify the Home Office of all foreign student dropouts and disappearances as part of an anti-terrorist and illegal immigrant-tracking programme. Edmond has been reported absent from his research studies. He's missing.'

Elaine opened her folder and said, 'The Home Office have followed this up, and the Department replied to say Jemard has taken time off in Europe to take part in racing trials. I checked with the Department, and they maintain that Jemard is in regular contact with his supervisor, Professor Buzzwall.'

'So, he's gone walkabout. As students do,' Zoe said.

Alan shifted his gaze to Zoe. 'The Home Office have no passport record of him leaving the country. Interpol has no record of any passport appearances anywhere in Europe. He's off the grid, and we can't find him.'

Aden-Brown said, 'Where is Jemard Edmond? Why is Buzzwall lying to the Home Office about his movements? We need answers.'

'You said there were two consequences,' Zoe said to Alan.

Alan pulled another photo onto the screen and identified Oliver Mansole.

Alan said, 'Three weeks ago, Professor Wood informed HR that one of his technicians, Oliver Mansole, had left his job without notice. He has vanished and can't be contacted.'

Elaine read from her file. 'Oliver Mansole is one of Professor Buzzwall's research technicians.'

'Very peculiar coincidences or the pigeons are getting scared,' Zoe said.

Alan Cairn shook his head, 'I don't believe in coincidence, never have. A research team suspected of publishing false research. A top athlete involved in this research is missing. A technician involved in this research has gone into hiding. Come on!'

Aden-Brown said, 'Buzzwall is our central person of interest, but we need to look at everyone involved.'

Zoe had noticed no police representative around the table. 'What is the status of the police in this investigation?'

Alan smiled and said, 'Good point, Zoe. Local police had opened a mispers file for Oliver Mansole. I've told the head of the Missing Persons Taskforce that he's under investigation so mispers enquiries are on hold. Jemard Edmond isn't officially missing yet, so there is no police interest. Interpol will continue to look out for him in Europe.'

'What's our cover?' Zoe asked.

Aden-Brown explained, 'The RAE. The government uses a research assessment exercise to determine where government funding will go to support research excellence. As part of their preparations for the next RAE, I have arranged for Dr Shawlens to visit Sports Biology on the pretext of developing new research collaborations.'

Alan said, 'Gavin's personal research is a good match for the research in Sports Biology, so he will go in as himself. Look for links to Jemard Edmond and Oliver Mansole. Oliver Mansole is a member of the university judo team so Gavin will join the judo club.'

Rolley looked disappointed and said, 'What do you want me to do? This is not my research area.'

Alan said, 'You'll go in as yourself as a visiting lecturer to the Department of Physics. Look for any issues outside of Sports Biology that might shed some light. Jemard Edmond is an Olympic cyclist, so I want you to join the cycling club and find out what you can about Jemard.'

Rolley nodded. 'Now I understand why I'm here, thanks.'

Aden-Brown said, 'Elaine is already in place in the HR Department. She will ensure that your legends stand up to any scrutiny. Elaine will have full access to all personnel and backroom files. Any questions?'

Alan said, 'Zoe will be team leader for this investigation. Zoe will go in as Christine Willsening. Christine is Gavin's technician. She's named on many of Gavin's research papers. Her credibility as research support is good.'

Gavin's face reflected concern. 'What's this about Christine?'

Zoe spotted Gavin's concern. 'It'll be fun. I haven't played with test tubes since school.'

Gavin glared at Alan Cairn. 'I'll need to double-check with Christine and make sure she doesn't have friends or colleagues at this university.'

Alan nodded to accept Gavin's point and said, 'Elaine has already prepared the ground for your arrival.'

Elaine said, 'I've joined HR as Ruth Winters, deputy director, with a fully backstopped twenty-year legend of experience in academic human resources. If you run into any trouble, just call HR and ask for Ruth. In your folder, you'll find a legend for each member of the team. Familiarise yourselves with each other. Please, let's not have any identity slip-ups.'

Zoe knew Elaine addressed her comments to the two academics who had less experience with the use of clandestine identities.

Alan asked, 'You'll find allocated accommodations in your folders, plus credit cards and the usual contact details. Any questions at this point?'

Rolley said, 'Given these disappearances, are there any risks I should be aware of?'

Zoe shook her head. 'Unlikely, Rolley, but keep to your check-in protocols, and I'll know when anything is wrong. Keep sharp and you'll be fine.'

Aden-Brown gathered his paperwork and closed his folder. 'Well, ladies and gentlemen, we kick off next week. I suggest you return to home ground and prepare for a visit to Hampshire. It's a lovely part of the world. Please keep your SEM phone glued to your hip, so we can track you at all times.'



## Seven

Gavin followed Zoe out of the room and noticed she had similar height to him at five-eight. She looked slender, athletic-looking, intelligent and ambitious. That much Gavin had deduced during the briefing. He didn't know that the forty-three-year-old ex-army captain had joined the OTC at her university, and went on to receive the coveted Sword of Honour at Sandhurst as the best officer cadet.

With ease, she could dead lift eighty kilos, or roughly the weight of a soldier minus kit. Her favourite pastime, a 5K Colour Run, where runners start off wearing all white. As they run past, onlookers throw small flimsy bags of coloured powder to produce multi-coloured runners at the finish.

Captain Tampsin had served with the SAS in Bosnia, and more recently on Special Forces operations for MI5 and MI6 at home and abroad. Her CO wrote into her record, 'Zoe Tampsin protects her troop like a lioness protecting her cubs, powerful, determined and completely ruthless.'

Zoe had proved herself in combat and her peers accepted her as combat hardened. With powerful determination, she dealt with the hard stress of imminent danger. Her concentration over long periods proved second to none. Many times, her troop had faced the white of the opposition's eyes as she led them through hell and back.

More than three hundred soldiers told their mates they were alive and in one piece because of Zoe Tampsin's leadership under fire. Men and women under her command call her DP, which stands for Diana Prince (aka Wonder Woman).

Zoe had smashed the toughest glass ceiling. She showed pencil generals the unique skill set that women have to offer in the multi-dimensional fight against modern terrorism.

She formed and led a specialist unit of women, W Troop. Still a small attachment compared to the number of men in Special Forces, but against a strict background of no drop in standards, her select group of female troopers had proved themselves worthy of the cap and badge.

Zoe hung back at the end of the briefing to speak privately with Gavin Shawlens.

'Are you okay? You looked a bit peaky in there.'

'I'm fine, just low on glucose.'

'So, Dr Shawlens, how did the Lambeth Group lure you into this business?'

'Research funding. In return for my time and expertise, the Lambeth Group give me continuous funding for my research group at the University of Kinmalcolm.'

Zoe cocked her head and looked impressed. 'We don't get paid extra, but I can appreciate how useful research funding is for you.'

'I avoid the brain-crushing, time-draining need to compete with the herd of top researchers for a succession of short-term research grants.'

'Wow! I guess that isn't easy then?'

'It's a nightmare. You spend three solid months writing a grant application. They tell you it has great potential and they'd like to fund the work, but there are no funds available.'

Gavin's recruitment to the Lambeth Group had been facilitated by Aden-Brown when he discovered that Gavin fitted the basic profile: loner, single, strong research, international expert, single-minded and determined.

'Tell me about your technician, Christine Wilson. What's she like?'

'Her name is Will-sen-ing.'

'Unusual name.'

'She's a good technician and a very close friend.'

Zoe shook her head. 'I meant, are you two an item?'

'We often eat together. Sometimes we go to—'

'Does she wear short bikini knickers or big baggy knickers?'

'I don't know. Why?'

'Just trying to find out if she tucks you in at night.'

'It's not like that. She has a boyfriend.'

'I'm not judging, just thinking how best to play the part.'

'She's very good at her job. A key member of my team.'

She smiled. 'Just like you, except you're the key member of *my* team.'

'Do I call you sir, ma'am or boss?' he asked, flippantly.

'Zoe will do fine. Except when we're in play, then you must call me Christine.'

She saw a faraway look in his eyes again. She'd noticed it during the briefing. His attention had wandered, and he looked spaced out for a few moments. Alan Cairn had briefed her on his recent trauma. She knew she had to tread softly around his feelings. *But not too softly*, she thought.

'So, it wouldn't be out of character for you two to share a flat?'

'No, we've done that before when I ran a training course at Aberdeen.'

'Good, because you're sharing my flat. Do you want the top bunk or the bottom?' she asked, playfully.

'What?' he retorted with a look of shock.

'Only kidding, Shawlens,' she reassured and patted his shoulder.

He shook his head. 'I don't like bunk beds.'

'Can you cook?' she asked.

He shook his head again. 'I don't cook. I do supermarket ready-made.'

She frowned. 'I don't do ready-made. I do QET, quick, easy, tasty.'

'If you say so.'

'What *can* you do for your domestic share?'

He looked surprised. 'Erm ... I suppose I could try to help with—'

'Don't worry, Shawlens, I'll work something out for you.'

She gave him a big smile. She had warmed to him, and felt confident he wouldn't cause her any problems.

'Fine, just tell me what needs to be done.'

Her voice deepened, 'You know Barscadden has fled the country, but we believe the threat level is still high.'

He nodded. 'Yes. Mr Cairn told me I had to be careful in case he sends someone to kill me.'

Zoe looked him straight in the eye. 'I'll make sure no-one tries to kill you. By the way, I'm very sorry for your loss. I know you loved her. But what happened to Emma Patersun is not going to happen to you. Any time you feel threatened, press the alarm icon on your SEM phone. Either I or one of my people will run to your side, clear?'

He looked confused. 'I thought you were on board to lead the investigation.'

'We're not expecting any rough stuff. If Buzzwall does kick off, he'll get more than he bargained for, believe me. I'm here primarily to cover your back. If Barscadden does try anything against you—he'll have me to deal with.'

'Thanks. I already feel safe in your company,' he said, appreciatively.

'Do me a favour, will you. When you've digested the CASTER report, I'd appreciate your view on what went wrong. Quick and dirty version, please.'

'Of course.'

'Are you heading back to Scotland?'

'Yes, I'll fly back tonight.'

'Security is still in place, back home?'

'Yes. I have three panic alarms. There's an armed response unit on call plus a unit parked near my flat in Clarkston.'

'Good lad. I think you and I will get on just fine.'

As they walked along the corridor, she concluded that he matched his personnel profile very well. She knew what to expect from him, how much she could rely on him, how to manage him, and how far she could trust him.

She'd had weak troopers under her wing before. Some of them burdened with heavy baggage, and still she got the best out of them when required.

She saw no reason why Shawlens would be any different. The weak ones always get into trouble they can't handle. At least the flat sharing would keep him close to her. Give her a chance to intercept Barscadden's men before they got close enough to hit him. With luck, catch one alive and find out where Barscadden had established a new base.

'Oh, by the way,' she said.

'What?'

'The beard. Makes you look bloody ridiculous. It'll have to go.'

\*

In a separate anteroom, others had covertly monitored the briefing. Two Special Forces troopers, Sergeant Toni Bornadetti and Corporal Scott Bradwood. They had served before with Zoe and were well aware of her expectations. The covert monitoring allowed eyeball and voice-check on the other team members.

An attractive and rugged thirty-six-year-old, Toni still looked as fit and youthful as she did when she joined up at eighteen. She looked like the twin sister of Michelle Rodriguez, who plays Letty in the *Fast and Furious* films. Some of her SAS mates called her Trood after Trudy Chacón, the combat pilot from the James Cameron film *Avatar*.

She often wore her shoulder-length black hair tied up in a knot at the back of her head. Muscular and sturdy, she'd grown to five-seven, and her Mediterranean skin retained a light tan that appeared blemish-free.

Six years younger than Toni, Scott stood two inches shorter and carried more weight than her. His six-pack had morphed into a two-pack. His movements more sluggish than Toni because he spent much less time keeping fit and toned. Scott excelled on the tech side of operations, and that involved a lot of time sitting down with computer equipment.

He struggled with his weight and regularly went through cycles of painful exercise to shed the pounds. The MO had told him that his body had little space to store carbs, and that when he overindulged in his favourite carbs, the surplus energy would be converted to and

stored as fat. Scott had listened, but the advice went in one ear and out the other, so he still ate too many carbs.

When the Lambeth Group briefing ended, they relaxed and waited in the anteroom for Zoe Tamsin to join them and finish their briefing.

'So, did you ask her out?' Toni asked.

'Who?' Scott replied.

'You know who. The Colonel's daughter, Moira.'

'Yes.'

'Don't be frightened of her old man.'

'I'm not.'

Toni smiled. 'I'll expect a full and detailed report.'

'In your dreams, mate.'

Toni smirked and said, 'Come on, Scott. I introduced you to Moira—you owe me.'

'No chance.'

'She'll sink her nails right into these thick love handles,' she said as she jabbed her finger into his side.

'Leave it out.'

'Where are you taking her?'

Scott raised his voice, 'Come on, Sarge. Let's talk about something else.'

She shook her head. 'If I had a date, I'd tell you all about it, in glorious detail.'

'I'm not talking about her,' Scott said.

'Why not?'

'It's private, all right?'

Scott fired a menacing look at Toni. He'd had enough badgering about his date with Moira. He returned his eyes to the monitor screen showing the empty room.

Toni smiled at him. 'Which one of the academics will get into trouble first?'

'Morgan. He's the newbie.'

'I think it'll be Shawlens. Want to bet?'

'What do I get if I win?'

'I'll buy two tickets for a Man United European game. If you lose, you tell me all about your date.'

The door opened. 'Boss,' Scott said, as he stood to attention.

Zoe marched into the room and sat beside the two soldiers. Zoe opened a folder and discussed communications, logistics and other resources needed for the job. Then they talked about the Lambeth Group investigations they had worked on in the past.

None of them knew Shawlens or Morgan. Zoe re-stated their primary task to shadow-protect Shawlens.

Scott looked frustrated. 'I hate this bloody babysitting crap, it's a waste—'

'Shut it,' Toni snapped before Zoe could react.

Zoe threw a sharp sideways look at Scott. He felt it like a laser piercing his brain.

In her unmistakable severe voice, she said, 'I think you'll find babysitting in Hampshire is a whole lot better than sprawled out in a filthy hell-hole with a bullet in your belly.'

Scott lowered his eyes and nodded. 'Right, boss. Sorry.'

'I hope so, Scott. Because if Shawlens gets barbequed under your nose, I'll personally rip out your liver and serve it with egg and onions in the mess. AM I CLEAR?' she bellowed.

Scott's expression conceded his error. 'YES, BOSS!'

Zoe reminded them of the recent job at Ardwell Bay when Barscadden had escaped in a coastal submarine. 'Barscadden built his whole empire on intimidation, murder and theft. Gavin Shawlens and Emma Patersun cut the legs off the high and mighty billionaire. Patersun is dead. Shawlens is a dead man walking. He knows this but his death will not happen on our watch.'

Toni asked, 'Boss, why did Shawlens bail out of the room?'

Zoe opened Gavin's file. 'Emma Patersun was pregnant. She and her sister Donna were murdered in their home. Emma and Shawlens were childhood sweethearts and the violent loss of her and probably his child has put him in a state of melancholic limbo.'

Toni said, 'Barscadden's revenge is not complete while Shawlens is still alive.'

Scott shook his head and said to Toni, 'It's not babysitting, it's close protection.'

Zoe closed Gavin's file. 'Be prepared. Shawlens is not thinking straight. His mind lapses back to the past so he can be with Patersun. Expect him to make mistakes.'

Toni looked concerned. 'Boss. Should he be operational in that troubled state of mind?'

'No, but it's not our call. The Lambeth Group needs his research expertise for this investigation.'

They discussed how Barscadden might attempt to kill Gavin, and how Toni and Scott would respond to an attack. They agreed that a professional attempt would be preceded by a period of surveillance. Zoe tasked Toni and Scott to shadow Gavin when he moved out of her sight, and at the same time, scan the horizon for anyone following or watching him.

Zoe gave her Lambeth Group SEM phone to Scott. 'Link this into our comms system.'

While he inspected the phone, he noted all the apps and functions that made it much more than a standard satellite phone.

'Do you have the electronics you requested?' Zoe asked Scott.

'Yes. I've managed to procure an E4 surveillance van. If anyone puts Shawlens under electronic surveillance, I'll pick it up very quickly.'

'Good. Okay, you two. That's all for now. Next stop, Hampshire.'

While they gathered their briefing papers, Zoe frowned and pointed an accusing finger at Toni. 'By the way, Sergeant, we're not done by a long chalk.'

'Any time, any place, boss. You name it, I'll deal with it,' Toni replied with a smirk.

Zoe and Toni behaved like two big girl guides. Always trying to outdo each other. In their last personal challenge, they tried river sledging in the Scottish Highlands. Raced against each other on a plastic sledge down a rapid, white-water, river course.

Toni won because Zoe caught a 'play wave'. A section of water where the rock formation forced the current to turn upstream. Stuck in a pool of dead water, Zoe had to paddle out by hand. The whole of the Highlands heard Toni's WOOHOO! YEEHAH echo, when she reached the end of the course first. That win put the score at seven-five in Toni's favour, with first to reach ten the winner.

Loser chose the next contest, and Zoe had made her choice. She said the next event would take place at the Warcop Tank Training Area in Cumbria. Zoe had chosen parallel parking a sixty-two-tonne Challenger battle tank, against the clock, best of three. Both of them had ridden in a Challenger battle tank before, but parallel parking would bring on a whole new experience.

## Eight

*University of Kinmalcolm, Central Scotland*

The annual October start of the academic year is a time for fun and excitement. New student faces looking exhilarated with thoughts that they have somehow found a new freedom. Despite the rising atmosphere of fresher fun, the mood in Gavin's enzyme research group felt distinctly anxious.

More tense than normal, they hurried along the corridors to a seminar room in the Alexander Fleming building. At four-thirty, the student rush hour had reached its peak. Break time for some, going home time for most. Typical of Gavin Shawlens to call a meeting at the end of the day.

The group met a crowd of students spilling out of a large lecture room. The corridor filled with noisy students, hurrying to catch buses, trains and lifts home. It rained heavily outside and lots of umbrellas were drawn like swords from their scabbards.

Gavin had called the meeting at short notice. It wasn't one of the regular catch-up meetings. The group chatted and guessed what Gavin Shawlens had to say. There were three postdoctoral researchers and four postgraduate research students. All of them wore white lab coats, except for Sharon Bonny.

The rumour mill ran red-hot with suspicions. The university needed space and planned to reduce the number of laboratories. Had Shawlens run out of funding? Had Shawlens given up research because of his recent stomach transplant? Some worried they would be made redundant. Sharon Bonny remained unconcerned about money. Her wealthy American family paid all her costs.

Gavin and research technician, Christine Willsening, arrived last. While walking to the room, they'd had a heated discussion.

'I'm sorry, Christine. I just didn't think,' he said.

Christine looked furious. 'What? That I should have a boyfriend?'

'No. Not that, okay. I shouldn't have turned up at your door, but I was worried.'

Her jaw dropped. 'Am I not allowed *a life* outside your lab?'

He shook his head. 'I'm sorry ... I'm sorry. It won't happen again. If you want, I'll apologise to John.'

'No.'

'Let me speak to him. I'll explain. I'll apologise to him.'



'Forget it. He won't speak to you.'

'You can still go. God knows, you've got plenty of holiday leave outstanding.'

'It's done now. Leave it alone now, please.'

'Good news about your brother, Simon. Eh?' Gavin said, but she didn't answer.

A few days ago, Christine had done something completely out of character. She had phoned the HR office, told them she had an infection, and she would be off work for two weeks. Christine never took sick leave, and never took time off work. Gavin became concerned and drove straight over to her flat in Paisley.

He discovered Christine and her new boyfriend, John, preparing for a secret romantic holiday. A blazing argument took place on her doorstep. Gavin instantly disliked John. She saw Gavin's disapproval. She reacted angrily, and a shouting match kicked off.

She felt guilty she'd been found out. Her boyfriend, John, had become furious that his planned romantic holiday had been discovered. The following day, today, Christine reported for work as usual. Her secret holiday cancelled.

Christine and Gavin had worked together for six years and had become a close-knit team. He enjoyed working with her, and she in turn enjoyed his company.

Christine had a stocky build and stood the same height as Gavin Shawlens. She had long, gloriously frizzy light-brown hair that looked like a Davy Crockett hat when she tied it back. She had a round face with large green eyes. Her wonderfully broad smile sprang into place with such precision, it seemed to be pinned to each ear with an elastic band.

Gavin followed Christine into the seminar room. She sat at the back with the postgraduate students. He took a seat at the front to face his research team. He didn't like awkward meetings. He didn't like telling them lies. He didn't like leaving them to their own devices.

He wanted to tell them the Lambeth Group bought all of their equipment, paid their salaries, and funded their research. He wanted to tell them he had to go away and do some work for the Lambeth Group so they could all stay in a job, but he couldn't. He'd signed the Official Secrets Act, and the Lambeth Group remained an official secret.

'OKAY. Let's get started,' Gavin said, and then waited a moment for the chattering to subside. 'First, the new ultracentrifuge. It will be installed next week, so there will be some disruption as a new power supply is installed. The engineer will commission the machine and give driving instructions. Everyone must attend.'

Christine said, 'Power will be off to all the lab benches for at least half a day. We need to avoid opening the minus-eighty freezer to protect the samples.'

Gavin continued, 'As you know, the university is pushed for space. I have some bad news,' Gavin said as he opened a folder and picked out a piece of paper to read.

Each member of the group felt trepidation. They were expecting bad news. Would the whole group fold? If one or two had to go, who?

Gavin said, 'I've had to give up some office space. All the postdocs must give up their offices and share a desk in a large new postdoctoral open office.'

'What open office?' Sharon asked.

'The university has converted an old dining hall into an open plan office.'

'Hang on, bud. Don't we get a say in these moves?' Sharon demanded in her downtown New York drawl. Her eyes scanned the other researchers for support.

Gavin shook his head. 'Afraid not. All space belongs to the university. The space management group have reduced my office allocation.'

'No offence, Gavin, but I want to make representation to these outer space managers. I need my own room,' Sharon said.

'You can do that if you wish, but if it were me, I'd keep quiet,' Gavin replied.

'Well you see, bud, Americans don't do quiet. We do a war dance in your face.'

'The offices are going back to the university. If you convince them you need your own office, they'll put you in one of the portable offices in the old car park. Where the rain beats on the flat roof like a drum. The wind howls through the windows like a banshee, and the floor bounces like a trampoline. In winter, the windows steam-up like a sauna, the—'

'Okay, enough already. I hear you,' Sharon growled, and then addressed the others, 'This is crap, they're treating us like kids.'

A noisy discussion immediately took hold, as Sharon orchestrated annoyance and reaction to the space proposal. Gavin let them vent out for five minutes, then he raised his voice over them, 'One other piece of news.'

Shaking her head in disapproval, Sharon said, 'Haven't you done enough?'

Gavin took in a deep breath and let it out with a sigh. 'I'm going on a research sabbatical. I'll be in Hampshire at the University of South England for up to two months.'

'When?' Christine asked.

'Next week.'

'*Next week!*' Several of them exclaimed at once and looked stunned at each other.

'Gavin, that's really short notice,' Christine said.

'I'll be contactable. I'll try to get back for a few days, once a month.'

'Is this a new line of research?' Sharon asked.

'Yes. Enzyme applications for sport. I'll be based in the Department of Sports Biology. This isn't a holiday for you or me. I expect all of you to meet the research targets I have set. Any questions?'

No response from the stunned faces. 'Okay, boys and girls. Let's get back on the trail of ground-breaking research,' Gavin said.

Sharon Bonny hung back for a private talk. Gavin prepared himself for more aggravation about office space. She hailed from Buffalo. She had a husky voice and an abundance of attitude.

A thirty-three-year-old with an attractive Latina face and shoulder-length dark auburn hair, Sharon annoyed Gavin at every opportunity. He regretted taking her on, but she had her own funding from her family brewing company in the USA.

He understood she needed research experience before taking up a position as head of R&D for the brewery. She worked on a project using protease enzymes to eliminate chill-haze effect in beer. Her research had faltered, and for some reason that Gavin didn't understand, she hadn't produced any viable research results.

When they were alone, Sharon looked closely at his face. 'I'll be going back to the States at the end of the year. I've been appointed head of research and development.'

'Great! I mean, congratulations. I hope we can keep our collaboration going,' he enthused, and a silent sigh of relief eased his mind.

'I'd like to send some of my staff over for research training.'

'Brilliant. Happy to have them.'

'If you think you can cope,' she said, mysteriously.

'What do you mean?'

'Are you well enough to be running around Hampshire?'

'It's not the back end of beyond. Just a seventy-five-minute flight from Glasgow to Southampton.'

Sharon looked concerned. 'You've just had a transplant operation, and you are still in mourning for Emma.'

He dismissed her concern with a wave of his hand. 'I'm fine. A stomach transplant isn't life-threatening. If I'd had a choice at the time, I would have told them to cut out the damaged parts and stitch up the good parts, instead of putting in a transplant. I could do without the anti-rejection meds.'

Gavin thought back to the outcome of his deadly clash with James Barscadden. Emma had died horribly, and he suffered damage to his stomach. Luckily, the stomach of one of the other casualties had proved a reasonable match, and he'd received an emergency transplant.

More than any other, Sharon Bonny had visited Gavin during his recovery. She had spent long hours at his bedside. She had insisted in moving him to a private hospital for recuperation. Her family company had paid all the hospital bills.

'What about your nightmares?' she asked.

He shook his head. 'Less frequent but a bit more intense.'

She examined his face and asked, 'Is it still the same nightmare each time?'

'Look, Sharon, it's nothing really.'

'I'd like to know. I've always had this theory that nightmares are reflections of a past life. Maybe you were a famous Scot, like William Wallace or Rob Roy.'

'I don't think so.'

She stood in front of him, face to face, and stared into his eyes. 'Indulge me for one minute. Are you a living descendant of William Wallace?' she asked, theatrically.

'No. I'm not.'

'Do you see tartan, swords, lochs, mountains, castles or anything like that in your dream?'

'It's nothing like that. I just find myself in what I think is a small boat. It's in the sea and sinking. Water is flooding the boat, and then I wake up. I'm not frightened. It's not really a nightmare.'

'Did you have a fear of water when you were a child?'

He shook his head. 'No. My primary school had a swimming pool. I learned to swim very young. I was top of the class for holding my breath under water,' he said, and his voice revealed increasing annoyance.

'Then, this could be an experience from a previous life. Please, tell me when you have the next one. There may be another hint. Maybe a word or sentence in ancient tongue. Now, if you suddenly find you can speak fluently in old Gaelic language, that would be significant.'

'Do you mean like *Ghlaschu*?' he asked.

Her voice raised a notch. 'Did you hear that in your nightmare?'

Gavin Shawlens reached for the door, held it open and waved her through.

'No. I heard it on the radio. It means Glasgow.'

She looked disappointed. 'What's the rush?'

'I have to tell someone else that I'm going away for a while.'

'Emma?'

'Yes.'

Sharon watched him walk along the corridor. She thought, *you've returned to work far too soon. You're not ready.*

## Author



I hope you enjoyed this book.

If you did enjoy it, I'd be thrilled if you could post a review.

Reviews are helpful for indie writers, and the 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 book.

*Gordon Bickerstaff*

## Story Notes

The Lambeth Group, a secret organisation originally formed by a group of twenty-six University Vice-Chancellors to manage research and technology disasters. They have a core team of nine leading researchers from across UK Universities who are seconded to investigate research and technology disasters.

SEM (secure encrypted module), connects to a secure satellite for secure communications.

CASTER (Committee for Accountable Science and Technology Ethical Research), a covert group that scan UK research institutes for fraud, corruption and unethical research.

Official Secrets Act, used in the UK to protect state secrets and official information.

COBRA, Cabinet Office Briefing Room A.

CDS, Chief of Defence Staff.

CNPI, Centre for Protection of National Infrastructure.

MI5, Security Service.

MI6, Secret Intelligence Service.

ACPO, Association of Chief Police Officers.

JIC, Joint Intelligence Committee.

HMG, Her Majesty's Government.

GCHQ, Government Communications Headquarters.

CIA, Central Intelligence Agency.

NCS, National Clandestine Service.

## **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'



## **The Black Fox**

*Run for your life ...*



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 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.

## Toxic Minds

*The damage is done*



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

Madeleine Albright

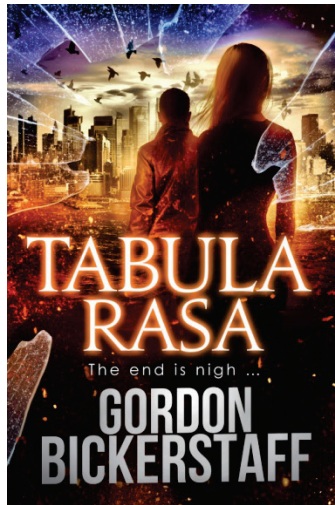
Alexa Sommer had it all - stellar career, beautiful home, successful children, and a devoted husband. Then came meltdown and divorce. Her children's love turned to hate. She is forced out of the job she loved. Desperately, she tries to rebuild her life around a new job, but her work is controversial.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