

Tabula Rasa

The end is nigh

Gordon Bickerstaff



Lambeth Group Thriller #5

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 them 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, Ramsay.

Posing as a couple, Gavin and Zoe enter the secret and dangerous world of Ramsay'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 stop the greatest revolution in human history?

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.

Also by the same author

Deadly Secrets *The truth will out*

Everything To Lose *The chase is on*

The Black Fox *Run for your life*

Toxic Minds *The damage is done*

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*

'Life, although it may only be
an accumulation of anguish,
is dear to me, and I will defend it.'

Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein*)

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One

July 10, Peckham, London

While Bishell picked the door lock, Sarah's heart raced when she looked over her shoulder, and then up and down the street. She didn't want to spend her evening breaking into another woman's home. Needs must on this occasion, even if the woman residing in this flat had a fearsome reputation.

Although not the first time Sarah had eliminated a threat; as head of security, she wanted to deal with this particular breach in person.

With the imminent disclosure of the greatest revolution in human history weighing heavy on her shoulders, she didn't want even the remotest risk of a last-minute hitch. With a hundred years of planning about to bear fruit, she could leave nothing to chance.

Nelson spotted her anxiety, and said, 'Don't be concerned, My Lady. I've done this many times—it will go like clockwork.'

Bishell whispered, 'We're in.'

Zoe Tamsin occupied the ground floor flat in a three-storey Victorian building. Her London bolthole with two double bedrooms, a large living room, and a narrow kitchen.

If anything, loitering in the well-lit corridor outside Tamsin's flat made Sarah even more nervous. Bishell quickly overcame the old Yale lock to open the door to the flat. Now inside, tension escalated for the three of them. The two men drew their handguns.

They knew Tamsin had returned home, and sound from the TV filled the living room. They stood ready to attack or defend, but nothing happened. Bishell took the first tentative step forward.

After a warm July day, the build-up of heat and still air had produced a stuffy evening. Tamsin's cat, Amber, padded from the living room to the kitchen for a drink. He didn't like the News At Nine anchor woman. An excited newscaster's voice resonated in the room.

Throughout the evening, the news had centred on video reports showing thousands of protestors and rioters on the streets of a beleaguered Asian country. Angry protestors demanding food and water. Ugly scenes with uniformed officers attacking protestors to force them away from a government building.

A prolonged drought and a series of failed harvests had combined to force millions of impoverished adults and children into starvation. Wealthy countries promised humanitarian relief until civil servants intervened and reminded politicians that recent world harvests had failed.

Climate change had started to bite, and stocks of basic foods dwindled fast. As a result, all countries had introduced rationing. Politicians ranted loudly, *our country first, our people first*.

Amber paused before entering the kitchen, and then looked back at three figures waiting in the square entrance hall.

A strong smell of cat litter wafted into the hall from the kitchen. Nelson followed Amber, and the pungent aroma from cat litter stung his eyes. In two blinks, Amber leapt onto the stainless steel sink and out through the gap in the window. He stopped, looked back at the intruder, and then scampered over an adjoining wall.

To overcome her trembling hand, Sarah tightened her grip on an extended baton. Her mouth parched. When she'd read Zoe Tampsin's service file, her first reaction led her to consider immediate execution. On reflection, she'd decided to interrogate Tampsin.

Nelson and Bishell had raised their handguns. With one pointed finger, Sarah pushed the living room door open to its fullest extent. Framed in the entrance, she scanned the room before she led Bishell and Nelson inside.

Bishell took up position behind Tampsin who had sprawled out on her sofa, fast asleep. She lay alone with a single half-full glass of wine and an empty bottle nearby.

Nelson checked the room. Basic, in terms of furniture and home comforts. He closed two windows and pulled the curtains to reduce the noise of someone in a nearby flat practising on the piano. Privacy, more important than a light breeze in the room.

With her baton raised, Sarah pointed to the bedrooms. Bishell strode away and searched the two rooms. He rummaged through drawers, dumped clothes on the floor, moved furniture, and overturned the mattress on each bed. All this to create a burglary scene. Bishell returned to his position behind Tampsin.

Sarah regarded the TV screen for a few seconds. The sound had covered their break-in although they'd made hardly a sound. The room smelled of jasmine thanks to a reed diffuser sat on the coffee table. The sparse furnishings looked like second-hand uncoordinated pieces, but fit for purpose, for a bolt-hole.

Bishell removed his tailor-made navy-blue single-breasted blazer, and then hung it over the back of a chair. He rolled up his shirt sleeves to reveal solid, hairy arms. He often wore a double vented blazer and matching tie, buttoned shirts, neatly pressed grey slacks, and Italian shoes.

Bishell smiled to Nelson. None of them expected it would be easy to deal with Zoe Tampsin. Not if her service record and long list of edge-of-the-seat exploits were to be believed.

The lock on Tampsin's door, an old Yale double cylinder, had become so worn that a five-year-old with a toothpick could have unlocked it in five minutes. To find Tampsin fast asleep on her sofa with an empty bottle of red wine at her side could not have been more fortunate. The two men aimed their Glocks at Tampsin's head. They were ready.

Sarah switched off the TV before she sat in an armchair opposite the sofa. She straightened her shoulder-length dark-red hair, and then her jacket.

While she sat there, she held the handle of her police-issue collapsible baton upside down in her right hand. With her thumb on the bottom, she rocked it back and forth on the floor like a skiing stick.

Nelson stood at Sarah's side. Bishell stood behind the sofa and pointed his handgun at Tampsin's sleeping head. Sarah nodded to Bishell, who picked up the wine glass and poured the remains into Tampsin's eyes.

'Uugggh!' Her hands flew up to her face, and she struggled through a thick curtain of alcohol-induced sleep before she opened her eyes. Disorientated for a second, between awake and awakening, and then a woman's face came into focus. Tampsin sat up with a start and switched her eyes to the armed man standing at the woman's side. At the same time, she sensed the presence of a man behind the sofa.

A quick backward glance spotted a Glock in his right hand, a black horizontal shoulder holster under his left armpit, double magazine holder attached to the shoulder harness, and hands as thick as axe heads. Not burglars.

Still a little groggy, she said, 'What the hell is going on here?' Then she tried to get up. Bishell pounded the butt of his gun into Tampsin's shoulder and pushed her down into the cushions. She looked around at him. 'Who the hell are you?'

Sarah rapped her baton on the floor, and said, 'Sit tight, Captain Tampsin. I have a few questions. Answer truthfully. I'll be on my way. If not, my men will lift your pain barrier to a level you've yet to experience.'

'What do you want?'

'That's a good start. You're a pretty lady,' Sarah said with a touch of envy. 'I don't want these brutes to ruin such a fine picture.'

Nelson stepped closer to Tampsin when she leant forward on the sofa, rolled her eyes, and said. 'Yeah, whatever.'

Sarah said, 'You've been briefed on your next mission. I want to know everything they told you.'

Wiping red wine from her face, she thought about how she could gain control of the situation, and then said, 'Tell me *why* you want to know. I'll consider your request.'

A frown sprang onto Sarah's face. 'Oh, Tampsin, and they told me you were the smartest blade in the Regiment. That's not what I want to hear.'

They heard the outside door slam shut, someone talking in the corridor, and then trotting up the stairs.

Bishell raised his gun and banged the butt on the top of Tampsin's head. The sharp pain made her lose consciousness for a second. The darkness of a knockout came immediately, followed by a flash of bright light. A stream of blood trickled down the side of her face. He hit her again on the cheek.

She looked back at her attacker with fierce eyes. 'I've seen more death and endured more pain than you'll ever know. My body is already numb. Nothing you do will make any difference.'

For a moment, she thought she could block the next blow, but her position deep in the sofa provided too much handicap. The muzzle of his gun hovered not more than three inches from her head. If she tried to push the sofa back on him, he would get a head shot off before she could turn around.

Sarah rapped her baton on the floor again. 'Okay, I'll compromise. Name your mission targets. I'll spare your life.'

Still defiant, she wiped blood from her face with trembling fingers. 'I'd rather die. So, the sooner you understand my position, the sooner you reach your end point.'

Then she peered at the red-haired woman in the armchair, with her knees tight together, wearing black leather gloves, black skin-tight leggings and knee-length black leather boots. Straining her eyes, she tried to pick out fine facial details, but a standard lamp behind the armchair kept the woman's face in shadow.

Sarah turned to Nelson and said, 'Show her your party piece.'

Nelson accessed his phone and showed Tampsin a live video stream coming from inside a car with Tampsin's parents' house in the background. In the car, the driver moved his phone to reveal four Molotov cocktails lined up on the back seat.

With her baton, Sarah rapped Tampsin's leg to get her attention. 'If you don't give me what I want, my man will throw four petrol bombs through the windows. I understand that your daughter is living with your parents.'

Turning away from the phone to look at Sarah, Tampsin said, 'If they die tonight. Others will fight tooth and nail to avenge them. If you know anything about me, you know my family will leave no stone unturned until they kill you and your family.'

Sarah leant back in her chair. 'Of course, your brother, Michael. I understand he lost his legs to an IED and they invalidated him out. Tough break. Now, he's what—making bespoke jewellery for film stars and pop idols.'

Pushing blood-stained hair away from her eyes, she said, 'Know this—I do not buckle.'

Sarah looked curiously at Tampsin. 'They said you were fearless. I hoped you had more sense.'

Determination defined Tampsin's face. 'Get on with it. Nothing these two idiots can do will be worse than looking at you—bitch.'

Sarah startled when Tampsin pushed up from the sofa and reached out to grab. Quickly, Sarah stabbed the handle of her baton into Tampsin's sternum.

The force pushed Tampsin back into the sofa with both hands grasping the bottom of her neck. Sharp pain took control, and she needed a minute before she could raise her head. Bravely, she clamped her eyes shut to hold back tears.

Sarah leant forward, raised her baton high and struck Tampsin's outstretched leg with the metal handle of her baton. Hard enough for a blood stain to grow quickly on Tampsin's light-grey jogging pants.

Sarah raised an impatient voice, 'Let's get to the point. I know the Prime Minister ordered you to find John Armstrong's son, Ramsay.'

'Good for you ... bitch.'

Sarah struck Tampsin's thigh with her baton. 'What did the PM say about *Tabula Rasa*?'

While her shaking hand palpated her thigh to ease the pain, a half smile broke across her lips. Tampsin's eyes lit up as if someone had thrown her a lifeline. 'I don't know anything about *Tabula Rasa*. This is the first I've heard of it. Thanks for the info.'

Sarah watched relief spread over Tampsin's face as if she'd been let off the hook. The muddle in Tampsin's voice and confusion seemed genuine.

Sarah said, 'What are you telling me? The PM did *not* include *Tabula Rasa* in your mission brief?'

Strain left Tampsin's face. Her body relaxed, and she shook her head. 'I've never heard the name before. Now, I'm thinking, if you guys have the shit end of the stick; questioning the wrong person will never get you what you want. No matter how hard you hit me.'

Sarah knew a liar when she heard one. She rammed her baton into the floor to collapse it into the handle. Then she got up from the armchair and addressed Nelson, 'I believe her.'

Tampsin looked up at Sarah and wiped blood from her face. 'Your intel is bent. Kick your informant's arse. Get your story straight. You might get a result.'

Bishell raised his gun higher this time and brought it down harder on Tampsin's skull. At the same time, she moved her head to the side, and the butt of his gun gouged down the side of her face, tearing a strip off her cheek.

Nelson nodded. Bishell rained more punches onto Tampsin's head and upper body. Blood flowed from her mouth and streamed down her neck. After five hard hits, blood from multiple cuts and gashes covered her face. She slumped, barely conscious.

Sarah raised her hand for him to stop. Bishell grabbed Tampsin's hair and pulled her head up for Sarah to inspect the damage. One cut bled profusely. Sarah nodded, and Bishell let Tampsin's head fall against the sofa.

Her body slid along the back cushion and she lay on her side. Bishell pulled at her clothes, and dragged her from the sofa onto the floor. Motionless, she lay supine. Bishell flicked his police issue collapsible baton to extend it. Then he knelt to deliver a fatal blow that would crack Tampsin's skull.

'Don't kill her,' Sarah said.

'Why not, My Lady?' Bishell looked disappointed.

A Londoner, Bishell's local accent remained true to his working-class origins, except when addressing a member of the Silsden family.

Sarah said, 'She's SAS royalty. They'll send a company of ferrets to find her killer. I have what I came for. Tampsin knows nothing about us. By the time she recovers from this, it will be too late for her to do anything.'

Nelson raised his phone. 'Call off the Molotov?'

Sarah nodded.

Nelson sent a text and then said, 'She has some nerve. I'll say that for her.'

'I'm satisfied we're in the clear. Her reaction to the threat on her parents would have been different if she had anything to give up.'

Nelson said, 'Was she right? Is the source wrong?'

Sarah shook her head. 'No. Tonight, I sealed this breach before it got started.' Then, looking down at Tampsin's bloodied body, she said. 'She's in no fit state to uncover anything.'

Nelson followed her gaze. 'The source is certain she worked alone?'

Sarah nodded. 'The Prime Minister specified a sealed black-bag mission—a one man job. An official investigation would have generated a cyclone of trouble from my family.'

'They'll send another to take her place.'

Sarah shook her head, 'No. This beating will send a strong signal back to the PM. His mission isn't secret. Tampsin is the best of the best, and I stopped her. This note will make sure he gets the message.'

Sarah knelt down and tucked a folded A4 sheet of paper between the fingers of Tampsin's broken hand. It contained a typed message:

WARNING! The next intrusion will face execution without mercy AND deliver significant collateral damage to the door of No 10.

'The PM is stubborn. What if he doesn't heed your words?' Nelson said.

Sarah looked determined. 'I will not tolerate another attempt to breach our security. Our organisation will remain secure, no matter the cost.'

Bishell pushed two sofa cushions under Tampsin's buttocks to lift her limp body from the floor. Then he pulled her jogging pants off her motionless legs. With her jogging pants and knickers in his hands, he turned to face Sarah. 'You two should go. Leave me to finish up here.'

Sarah looked back at the half-naked body. She could have ordered Bishell not to rape Tampsin. Could have but didn't. Bishell behaved like a beast. Never stop an animal feeding after a kill.

'Clean up when you've done,' Sarah said and nodded to Nelson when she walked past him.

Nelson and Bishell had met in the military. Both of them were well built, and both of them hard men. Bishell was almost bald and Nelson had short hair. They'd been recruited from the armed forces to the London Met, and worked together for seven years before Nelson moved to work for Sarah's twin brother, Bryce Silsden, while Bishell stayed in the police.

Sarah pulled her smartphone from her bag. The screen showed 9:32 pm.

She called her PA. 'Yes, it did. It went smoothly. Bring the car to the door.'

Sarah finished the call and then said to Nelson, 'Such a disappointment. I expected more from Tampsin. She is supposed to be the best in the country.'

Nelson chuckled. 'More like the worst of the best.'

Once outside the flat, Nelson and Sarah waited at the kerb.

She returned the baton to Nelson. 'You were right. More effective than a hunting crop.'

Nelson said, 'Sorry, My Lady, about Bishell.'

'No need to apologise. I am well aware of his background.'

Nelson nodded. 'When his blood gets up, and a vulnerable female goes down, he can't stop himself. It's the reason he joined the police. Vulnerable females come ten a penny.'

Sarah looked concerned. 'If he leaves DNA on Tampsin's body, they'll find him. If he is arrested, you'll need to take care of him.'

Nelson shook his head. 'No, My Lady. They can't match his DNA. Six years ago, while investigating a complex murder case, they gave him access to the DNA database. He replaced his DNA profile with that of an unknown deceased.'

'Every time they lift his DNA from a victim, and run it for identification, they draw a blank. The deceased man's DNA profile isn't on any database.'

Sarah didn't seem impressed. 'If he kills her, you must make it look like she managed to kill him before she died. I don't want the SAS launching a massive effort to find her murderer. Not when we've come so close to completion of our work. No risks, whatsoever. Understood?'

'I'll take care of it, My Lady.'

Nelson looked taller than his five-ten, nearer six feet. Solidly built, he had rugged 'lived-in' features with leathery pockmarked cheeks and fierce dark eyes. His unruly hair wouldn't sit neatly unless gelled, so he kept it cut short.

Sarah said, 'Most important. Tonight, I've nipped Tampsin's mission in the bud. The note to the PM should give him pause for thought. By the time he finds the courage to launch another mission, it'll be too late. He'll be dead.'

Sarah's bodyguard and PA, Jayne, drew up in a racing-red Range Rover Autobiography. Nelson opened the door for Sarah and closed it when she settled inside.

'Where to, My Lady?' Jayne asked.

Sarah looked at her Rolex—9:38 pm. 'Take me back to the office.'

Sarah removed her black leather gloves and wiped nervous sweat from her hands with a wet wipe. Next, she replaced her rings. An engagement ring in a sunflower design with eight diamonds surrounding a large diamond in the centre, and a wedding band formed by a full circle of oval-shaped diamonds. Re-connecting with her rings signalled a return to her normal life.

Jayne started the Range Rover and said, 'Thank goodness, Tampsin didn't live up to her fearsome reputation.'

Sarah twirled her rings. 'Even a lioness has to nap. On this occasion, alcohol made the job much easier than expected.'

Jayne drove Sarah to her London office, located in the heart of the British establishment and overlooking the gentlemen's clubs of Pall Mall. The rear of her office offered a fine view of St James Park, The Mall, and Buckingham Palace.

In many ways, a perfect location for discreet meetings with World leaders, government ministers, prominent CEOs, and senior aristocracy.

In her palatial office, lit by two small desk lamps, Sarah retrieved a red-coloured folder containing Zoe Tampsin's file. The only copy provided by her source.

While Sarah sipped her favourite Tia Maria, she flicked through the pages and stopped occasionally to read some of Tampsin's achievements.

When Sarah drained her glass, she closed the folder and wrote TAMPSIN NEUTRALISED across the top of the document. She opened a drawer and dropped the file inside.

Relieved that the matter had been resolved to her satisfaction. Relieved, at last, of the intimidation she felt when she first read Zoe Tampsin's file.

As Sarah sat back in her black soft-leather chair, she relaxed and checked the messages on her phone. Unaware that she had made the most profound mistake of her entire life.

Unusual for her high standards, she omitted one vital piece of due diligence, a singular lapse of attention to detail. Unforgivable for the successful CEO of a large multi-national company. She hadn't studied the file photo of Zoe Tampsin.

Two

Just over an hour later, at 10:38 pm, when Zoe Tampsin returned to her flat, she quirked an eyebrow and smiled. Her door key didn't make the usual noise in the lock. The door had been left on the latch. Classic burglar ploy, fast exit. The door creaked quietly as it opened against her gentle push. The bedroom door at the end of the corridor lay open and she saw the room had been ransacked.

She breathed deeply and let it out quietly as her senses jumped to full alert. Combat training snapped into place. Her fighting mantra roared through her mind. The 3BFs—be first, be fast, be final.

Muscles flexed. Blood rushed to her hands. Her fingertips throbbed with anticipation. Visions played in her mind; attacking, disarming, and overcoming a red-handed burglar. She'd reached black belt instructor grade in krav maga, the system of close contact combat developed by Israeli Special Forces, and now used by elite Special Forces all over the world. She liked the training—she loved the real thing.

Inside the hall, her ears scanned for noises. Amber hadn't run to the door to greet her as usual. Silence brought a deflating disappointment. Had the burglar been and gone?

Her body hadn't relaxed fully when she found Toni Bornadetti spread-eagled and half-naked on the floor in her living room.

Toni fought hard to stay conscious, keep her body from closing down. One eye covered in blood had almost closed from the swelling. Swollen cheeks made the shape of her face hideous.

Zoe scanned the blood splatters on the carpet and mustard-coloured sofa. No blood on the wall behind the furniture. Her mind analysed, but emotion pushed those thoughts to one side.

'Who the hell did this?' Zoe shouted while she rushed to Toni's side.

In her mind, she screamed, but a Captain's job demands calm during the most traumatic moments. Toni needed calm confidence and reassurance, not hysterics.

Toni looked bad, but her pulse felt strong. Zoe eased away the cushions that had propped up Toni's body. The smell of urine stung Zoe's nose. The marks on Toni's thighs and the pool of red-stained fluid on a cushion explained what had been done to her.

Gently, Zoe ran her fingers over a large bruise at the bottom of Toni's neck. Then she pushed the sofa and chairs away to make a larger space around her. With care, she moved Toni's body into the recovery position.

Then she fetched a military first-aid kit from the kitchen. She noticed the open window and smiled before she ran back to Toni's side. Thankful that Amber had run for cover.

Zoe ripped open a Fentanyl lollipop, leant down over Toni's face, and said, 'All this bother so you can be first to have a morphy lolly.'

Toni half-grimaced, her voice strained in agony, and her eyes reached through the pain.

'Boss. Misshh ... onn ... compa ... mm ... mised.'

'Don't speak,' Zoe said while she eased the Fentanyl lollipop into Toni's mouth.

The lollipop delivered morphine more quickly than sticking a morphine syrette into Toni's muscle. More importantly, if Toni went into shock, Zoe could remove the lollipop. Zoe ripped open and applied coagulation patches to Toni's wounds.

Mission compromised; the words resonated in Zoe's mind.

Toni's broken wrist twitched nervously. A splinter of bone protruded from her lower arm. Zoe eased the blood-stained note from Toni's fractured fingers. She opened it, read it, folded it, and put it in her pocket.

Toni's attackers weren't opportunist burglars. Even with a bottle of wine inside her, burglars were no match for Toni, who'd been trained in krav maga by Zoe.

'If I get you a laptop with access to the databases, can you identify them?'

Toni raised her good left hand a little, thumb up.

Zoe pushed blood-stained hair strands away from Toni's eyes.

Then, holding back her rage, she said, 'Rest easy. When hell's fury catches up with these bastards—they'll wish their fathers had died at birth.'

With a gauze ball, Zoe dabbed at the torn flap of skin on Toni's face.

Zoe pinched her nose and clamped her eyes shut for a second. A sharp tingle at the top of her nose stung while tears formed. Zoe didn't cry easily. Bulletproof as far as tears were concerned, no matter what disaster got thrown at her, she handled it, and brushed it off. This time, tears welled in her eyes when Toni tried to squeeze her fingers.

Both Toni and Zoe had seen much worse injuries in Iraq and Afghanistan. Men under Zoe's command covered in blood, screaming in pain, and searching for missing body parts. Young men she'd tried to keep safe in a battle zone.

Violence in battle, she'd been trained to deal with. This kind of violence in her home brought emotions to the boil. Shivers ran down her arms and legs.

Toni pushed the lollipop out of her mouth.

With a strained voice, she managed to say, 'Ta ... tabu ... la. Ta ...bula.'

'Tabula,' Zoe nodded.

Again, Toni raised the thumb on her good hand.

'Got it,' Zoe said and slipped the lollipop back into Toni's mouth.

Then Zoe speed dialled her brother, Michael. He'd dropped her off at the flat. They'd spent the evening having dinner and catching up with family news. At the end of the evening, they'd parted awkwardly. She had family business she wanted to discuss but the right moment didn't present. She didn't want to fight with her brother just hours before going on a mission.

As she waited for Michael to arrive, she remembered the day Toni became her sergeant in W Troop. The first all-female Special Forces Unit in the Regiment. Toni had been a great asset to the troop, and Zoe had many good memories. Successful ops and competitive off-duty high jinks. Toni always gave as good as she got. Not tonight. Zoe fetched a throw from the bedroom and drew it over her friend's body.

Toni looked like the twin sister of Michelle Rodriguez who played Letty in the *Fast and Furious* films. Zoe hoped the medics would save her good looks.

Fourteen minutes later, Michael dropped onto his knees beside Toni.

With an angry look, Zoe slapped his arm. 'Is this what *you* call—"be there in ten minutes"?''

Michael absorbed her taunt and didn't respond. He lifted Toni's good hand in his two. Aghast, he looked at the damage to her face. Then he leant into her field of view, and said, 'We'll get you to the Regimental Hospital.' He turned to face Zoe, 'Have you called this in?'

The morphine had done its job. Toni relaxed, closed her eyes.

Zoe and Michael got to their feet and faced each other. Zoe's distressed eyes and trembling chin, showed Michael a side he'd not seen for a long time.

He reached a hand out to cup her elbow. 'Are you okay? You've seen much worse on the battlefield.'

'This is my home. My sanctuary. No-one can come into my home and violate my dearest friend.'

He nodded. 'Focus on the job. You'll get the bastard and give him a right good beating.'

Zoe felt much better, colour returned to her face. She pushed the anger to the back of her mind. Her brain switched to high gear. With the back of her hand, Zoe wiped the salty wetness from her face. 'I haven't called it in.'

Michael pointed to fluid on Toni's body. 'The bastard has left his DNA. Police will find him double quick.'

She shook her head. 'If I escalate this to a major incident. I put her attackers at risk. They'll reacquire Toni and finish the job. With no witness, he'll say she consented.'

'Rubbish. Call the police—let's get this done by the book.'

'No,' she said and gave him a look to show she would not be persuaded.

Michael had seen the ransacked bedroom when he entered the flat. He shrugged. 'I don't understand why Toni didn't beat the hell out of the burglar.'

Zoe nodded toward the blood spatters. 'Injuries on her head and blood on the sofa indicate that they kept her there while they beat her. At least two, possibly three.'

Michael inspected the blood stains on the sofa. 'What are you saying? They tortured and raped her before they burgled the flat?'

'I'm keeping my mind open.'

Michael turned his head toward the rifled bedroom. 'Did they take your diamonds?'

She blinked hard for a second and sounded impatient, 'I don't know.'

Michael went to her bedroom. He searched the drawers and wardrobes, and the clothes and bedding scattered on the floor. Looking for a box containing six diamonds worth eighteen grand. He returned with a heartened expression on his face.

'They're gone. I've got the colour, clarity, cut, and carat IDs. I'll send alerts tomorrow. If they surface in London, I'll have your thief.'

'Good.'

With a solid lead they could soon run down the thief, but he sensed that her mood hadn't lifted. Her mind had shifted elsewhere. He'd seen that look before, when he had to catch up without her help.

'Are you thinking this wasn't a robbery and rape by a couple of thugs?'

Zoe had sat on the armchair just beyond where Toni lay, to monitor Toni's breathing, which seemed strong and peaceful.

She shook her head as if coming out of intense concentration. 'Toni can deal with a couple of thugs with one arm behind her back. A team of burglars wouldn't work a flat of this size.'

He looked confused. 'What do you think happened?'

Ever since they were children, Michael could sense when she held back.

She looked reluctant. Not because she didn't trust him. She didn't want him beside her when she stood in the firing line.

He looked apologetic but slightly hurt. 'Look, if your mission is off-limits. No hassle. I'll stand off.'

She got up from the chair and went through to the kitchen. She brought out two small glasses and put them on the kitchen table. He followed her and sat down. He recognised her confession face.

From a cupboard, she brought out a bottle of Glenmorangie malt whisky. She sat opposite him. They both took one shot, and then she poured another glass before she put the top back on the bottle.

She folded her lips and then sucked her bottom lip. 'Before she passed out, Toni said my mission has been compromised. They interrogated her. They got nothing because she knows nothing. These injuries are designed to keep her, or rather, *me*, off the grid for at least a couple of months. They left a message.' She handed him the note.

His jaw dropped as he read the message. 'A threat to the PM? This is serious. You need to pass this on.'

She shook her head. 'No. Either, I'll be replaced or they'll abort the investigation. I'll not have the plug pulled. The bastards do not get what they want. They *will* get the thick end of my wrath when I catch them.'

He dropped the note onto the table. 'Don't be crass. This threat involves the PM, it's far too serious.'

She refolded it and returned it to her pocket. 'They think they've stopped my mission. That's good, very good, for *me*.'

Michael backed off, no point trying to reason with her when anger had set her mind like concrete. 'Understood.'

After another sip of whisky, she said, 'Are you still in contact with the medics who looked after you when you came back from Afghanistan?'

'Of course. Why?'

'I want you to organise an emergency admission into the Regimental private wing. She'll need a laptop with access to the databases.'

His eyes lit up. 'Can she identify them?'

Zoe nodded. 'Make sure she gets *everything* she needs. Admit her under my name. Treat her as if she were me. Keep her face heavily bandaged. When she comes around, tell her to keep up the pretence. Both of you need to dupe the medics.'

He drained his glass. 'Anyone looking will think you're out of commission.'

She finished her whisky and got up. 'Surprise moves into my corner.'

Zoe gathered medical wipes and cotton balls, and took them through to the living room. Michael followed. She knelt down beside Toni and carefully cleaned the fluids and blood from Toni's groin and upper legs.

'What are you doing?' Michael asked.

No reply.

When she finished, she put Toni's knickers and jogging pants back on her body.

He looked concerned. 'Zoe? What?'

She got up and faced him. 'Do *not* mention rape to the medics. We need to keep it off her medical record. Let Toni know. She'll think of something to explain her injuries. Can you fetch me the waste bin from the kitchen?'

He brought the bin and put it down beside her. 'I don't understand.'

Zoe gathered up the used cotton balls and wipes and put them in the waste bin. 'When Toni returns to duty, it must be as a fellow soldier, recovered from wounds sustained in the line of duty, *not* as a rape victim. Trust me; no woman in the military wants a rape victim label on her back. We keep her ordeal secret. Agreed?'

He looked far away for a second as he thought about her meaning. He nodded his agreement. 'What will you do about her attackers?'

She paused while she thought. 'I've done some awful things in the line of duty. Things that would embarrass the devil. All of it will pale in comparison when I get hold of these bastards.'

Michael shook his head. 'I *meant*, you don't know who they are. They'll see you coming. Maybe you should lay low and plan your response.'

Zoe glanced at Toni's face and then said, 'I'll burn their eyes out while the iron is red hot.'

Michael frowned but knew to wait until her anger had cooled. He stepped out into the hall and called the surgeon who'd operated on his legs. They'd become friends and their families had dinner at each other's houses.

The surgeon agreed to send a private ambulance and said it would arrive in twenty minutes. He would meet them in the private wing of the Regimental Hospital.

Michael stood in the doorway. 'Twenty minutes. I'll go with her and brief the surgeon. I'll wait with her until she comes around. Where will you go?'

'My next mission briefing with Alan Cairn is at the Pellman Hotel.'

Michael looked down at Toni's body. 'Why did Toni come to your flat?'

'When she became my sergeant, I gave her a key. She stays here when she's in London. In my absence, she's leading W Troop for the Regiment. She was scheduled to give me an update on FWITA. I expected her tomorrow morning for a breakfast briefing.'

For a minute, Michael tried to work out the acronym, but gave up. 'What's FWITA?'

'A new SAS protocol that W troop have been developing for a specific type of terrorist threat.'

'Toni will be missed at the Regiment. AWOL.'

Zoe nodded her agreement. 'I need you to square it off with the CO. Get him to cover her absence. He's like you—he doesn't like spooks. He won't ask questions if he thinks she's supporting me on a job for them.'

Major Michael Tampsin had become a promising officer in the Royal Engineers with a great career ahead of him when tragedy invalidated him out of the armed forces after the loss of the lower half of his legs to an IED.

Despite his early departure, he kept close to friends in the services. He told everyone that his artificial legs were the most important additions to his life because they made him an inch taller than Zoe.

Michael had a sharp and insightful mind equal to that of his sister. As children, they competed fiercely to finish crossword puzzles, solve mysteries, and create strategies for battle games.

All encouraged by their father who had dragged them around the world from one military base to another. They had attended nine difficult schools in as many years. They survived and thrived because they had each other.

Michael looked disappointed because he knew she'd made up her mind. 'So, you're going ahead with the mission?'

Her hackles were up. 'There are people out there having a drink and laughing up their sleeves at me. Describing how they raped me, battered me, and snuffed me off my mission. I'll bleach those thoughts when I take their balls.'

He raised his voice a notch, 'I want your brain in charge—not your emotions.'

'Whoever they are, they mistook Toni for me. I'll wear a disguise. They won't see me. I will not be pushed off my mission.'

Michael looked confused as if something bothered him. 'I don't understand why she's still alive.'

'What do you mean?'

'It's a vicious attack, but all blunt force. She'll get back on her feet in a few weeks. They must know she'll identify them. They can't attack an SAS officer and not expect serious retaliation within a week, two at most.'

Zoe looked frustrated. 'From her injuries and the note, it's obvious. They wanted me off the mission—nothing more.'

Michael shook his head. 'I don't think it's that simple.'

Three

A look of annoyance crept over Zoe's face. She loved her brother dearly, but when he latched onto something, he could be a pain in the backside. She could tell him to back off and mind his own business, but she needed his help with Toni.

In the space of a second, her emerald eyes turned to steel. She tempered her irritation with a flat-lip grimace. 'I'll *deal* with it.'

Sharp looks didn't bother Michael. He'd seen them all before. 'Can we think about this for a moment? These people knew they had to put you off your mission. Why doesn't it concern them that you'll lead a kill team straight to their door? Why leave a dangerous loose end?'

'Hmm. Okay, point taken. They must have a reason for not killing her.'

'When did you first find out about this mission?'

'Ten days ago. Preliminary briefing with Cairn. A government scientist died, and his only son has gone off the grid. Apparently, he's now absorbed into Zacchary Silsden's family, which has rather pissed off the scientist's actual family.'

With concern in his voice, Michael asked, 'The billionaire, Duke of Keighley, Silsden?'

'Yes.'

Michael shook his head. 'You need to tread with utmost care. The Silsdens are part of the country's bedrock—the super-rich establishment. For God's sake, don't you trample on their toes.'

Zoe uttered a petulant-sounding noise. Michael had used the same condescending tone her CO would use during a briefing. Always issuing orders, assuming control as if he were the boss. Ever since they were kids, Michael had to be the leader.

While Zoe checked on Toni, she said, 'Cairn ordered a sealed black-bag mission. I won't tread on any toes.'

Michael looked puzzled, and after a long, long pause, said, 'Over dinner, you said you've been back in London almost a week.'

'So?'

He rubbed the stubble on his chin. 'If they had this flat under surveillance, they would have seen me pick you up earlier. You made such a bloody fuss at my car because I wouldn't let you drive. When Toni arrived, they should have known it wasn't you.'

'What are you getting at?'

'They didn't do surveillance on the flat; someone *gave* them this address. They turned up late at night, saw the lights on. Assumed they had you. Same build, same hair colour.'

'You mean—a traitor gave me up?'

He nodded to the note in her pocket. 'That gives a very pointed warning. Someone who knows enough about your mission to want it stopped. Someone not worried about SAS retaliation.'

A shockwave flashed through Zoe's mind. She rubbed her forehead to dispel the discomfort. Then she nodded and smirked as she had done countless times in their youth when Michael's thinking got ahead of her.

Deep in thought, she took a large breath and eased it out through her nose. 'The loop for this special mission is tight. A handful of people.'

In a strong assertive voice, he said, 'First order of business, you must find the traitor. You're not safe until you eliminate that threat. Agreed?'

'I'll find out who it is tomorrow.' She nodded knowingly like she'd worked out something.

'What?'

'Them sending a team to take me out showed their hand. Makes me even more determined to run them down. Now, they think I'm off the grid, whatever they're doing will remain on schedule.'

'Pushing you off the scent before you got started—has to suggest something much more significant than some scientist's kid gone AWOL.'

'I'll get a better idea when I have a second briefing from Alan Cairn.'

'Closed black-bag is a lone operative, but *surely* you'll not do this alone?'

She turned away from him to check on Toni, so that he couldn't read her face. 'Not ... entirely alone.'

Michael looked puzzled once more. 'Sounds ominous. Who's got your back?'

'I had planned to ask Toni for shadow cover. Shawlens will have to double up.'

Michael's eyebrows jumped up with surprise. 'Shawlens? You're kidding. Why is he even on the mission?'

Michael had met Gavin Shawlens when the three of them had come together on a previous mission. Gavin's inexperience had created problems and put everyone in danger.

Zoe turned back to face him. 'Special circumstances.'

Michael shook his head. 'He's a walking land mine.'

She smiled. 'He keeps me sharp.'

'I'll *never* understand why spooks think it's acceptable to put a naive and ill-prepared academic in harm's way.'

Ever since Michael and Zoe were children on the rampage, her mission strategy had always been to kick the wasp's nest to draw out the enemy, and then deal with the aftermath. A strategy that carried a risk of collateral damage to onlookers like Shawlens. She'd had to pull Gavin out of the fire before, and Michael had told her a time would come when she would arrive too late to save him.

She said, 'Shawlens has indubitable credibility for this job. He's my ticket to access all areas.'

'He's a damn liability.'

'He's my pawn. He goes forward most of the time. On occasion, he wanders off to the side. I know what he's doing before he does it.'

Michael smiled. 'Like a well-trained Shetland pony?'

'That reminds me. He does need a haircut.'

'I don't like it, Sis. I don't like you working for spooks.'

'You'll have to lump it. I like the work.'

They'd had this discussion before. Ever since Zoe had won the Sword of Honour at Sandhurst, Michael and their father had wanted her to proceed through the ranks. Her father had made Colonel. Michael had made Major. They believed Zoe could make Major-General, the highest rank ever for a Tampsin.

In previous arguments, Michael had pointed out the difference. In the military, you leave home, fight, and return to the safety of your home. Working for ignominious spooks means your home and family isn't off limits. He decided not to say he'd already told her so.

Zoe and Michael, children of retired Colonel R. M. Tampsin, had been infamous army children. Their survival instincts were forged when their father dragged the family around the world from one military base to another.

Wolf children who quickly asserted themselves on each new base, so that they wouldn't be bullied, and wouldn't be intimidated by the resident gang of brats. Their mother put her foot down when Zoe turned seventeen, and insisted on a stable home in the UK. The die had been cast. Michael and Zoe were toughened, seasoned, and combat ready.

They'd been baptised into the military, brought up on harsh base camps, and taught to be fearless, cunning and determined. So, with a feeling of inevitability, they followed their father into the armed forces. The Tampsin family could trace their proud military history back more than 180 years.

Zoe had seen her fair share of soldiers damaged by war. She preferred the Security Service. In that milieu, she didn't have to send people into battle knowing some wouldn't

come back. Didn't have to explain to grieving parents how their son or daughter had died in her arms. With the spooks, she put herself in the firing line, and only she would die if she made a bad call.

With a look of determination, Michael said, 'No discussion. I'll cover your back.'

Zoe shook her head. 'You're not operational. Anyway, you've got too much on at the moment. I'll be fine.'

Michael's features were dark like his sister. Black shiny hair framed his chiselled cheekbones. Before he lost his legs, he'd stood an inch shorter than Zoe, but now stood an inch taller. A strong rower, he kept slim and athletic looking. He had a creamy-smooth tanned complexion and a spring-loaded smile.

'The good thing about being a bespoke jeweller for the rich and famous—my time is my own. Besides, some of my new designs need road-testing.'

Zoe raised and deepened her voice, 'I don't mean work. I mean Stella. You need to spend more time with her. I want you two to stay together. Don't let work ruin your marriage. Trust me—I know.'

Michael raised his voice higher, 'Stella is *my* business. Keep your nose out. You didn't listen to me when you and Alec divorced.'

Zoe raised her voice further to match, 'You took his *side*.'

'He loved you. You let your work break his heart. Now, he's dead, and it's too late.'

Michael had hit a nerve. A cutting but true remark from a sibling often proves as painful as any. In a softer conciliatory voice, she said, 'Enough. I'll do this on my own.'

He dropped his voice to normal level. 'I insist. Otherwise, I'll tell Dad that his bust of Churchill is cracked right through because you knocked it over.'

Her jaw dropped. '*You* bloody well pushed me into it.'

He pointed an accusing finger. 'I'll tell Mum that you fucking swore at me. I'll tell—'

She drew him into a hug. 'You're right. Shawlens can't provide proper backup. *But*, we must be clear about one thing.'

He pushed out of the hug. 'What?'

'Rules of engagement.'

'I'm fully aware of the operational requirements of a sealed black-bag job. If you can't trust your brother, who can you trust?'

'I don't mean security. Chain of command. This is *my* mission. I'm in charge. I make the decisions. No second guessing and no arguing the toss. Clear?'

With the faintest of nods, he said, 'Of course, boss. Understood and agreed.'

'Okay, big brother. I'm glad to have you on board.'

He swung his arm around the room. 'You can't use this flat as your base.'

'I already have a hotel suite organised as a base.'

Michael shook his head. 'Too public. I'll arrange a short-term rental property. I'll let you know when I've got it sorted.'

'Good. Expect me to pop in frequently. I'll need respite—from Shawlens.'

They laughed together.

'Have you checked on him? If he's been taken out, the game's a bogey.'

'*Shit.*'

*

Earlier in the day, Zoe had taken Gavin Shawlens to the Pellman Hotel and settled him into a luxury suite on the sixteenth floor. Now, he had stretched out on a large sofa in front of a 60-inch TV, with his third glass of wine, and a second packet of cashews, while he watched Tom Cruise running around in *Oblivion*. Then his mobile rang.

'Where are you?'

'In the hotel. Listen, Zoe, I've thought about this stuff all day. I've changed my mind. I won't do it. Bryce Silsden is my friend. I won't—'

'Shut up. *Code red*. I want you to leave the room. Go across the road. Take a room in the Premium Inn. I'll call you later.'

Gavin sat up and shook his head with confusion. He checked the time on his phone. 'Are you serious? I like this hotel. This suite is huge. Anyway, I've unpacked; I've had a bath, and ... a code red, what exactly is that one again?'

'Rhymes with *dead*. Leave the room, now.'

Four

Camden, London

The following morning, Michael called Zoe to say Toni had settled in the private wing of the Regimental Hospital. She'd had a good night, and Michael had explained the plan to her. He said the surgeon had confirmed Toni would make a full recovery.

Zoe had slept very little. Toni's warning, *mission compromised*, played on her mind. Not for her to pull out, but to find the people responsible and dispense her type of justice.

*

Zoe called Gavin and directed him to a small café on Euston Road. Five minutes' walk from the Premium Inn. Close to Kings Cross railway station, the noisy café served an endless queue of people buying food and coffee to go.

He sat at a window with a large plate of double poached eggs on toast with mushrooms and a few rashers of bacon. He'd just ordered his second cup of coffee.

He yawned and stretched as if he'd just gotten out of bed. Puzzled and apprehensive, he examined every face around him for a potential threat. More so when a trim blonde sat down beside him. Her shoulder-length hair partly covered her face.

Gavin put his hand on the back of her chair and said, 'Excuse me, this seat is ... *shit*.'

'Do you always greet your ladies with profanity?'

'I keep forgetting you are—'

'What? A woman?'

Gavin said, 'Feminine, when you want to be.'

Zoe noticed his tired eyes. 'Did you sleep?'

'You're kidding. This road is a rat run for emergency services. Two-tone sirens don't sing a lullaby. I mean, what's the point of blaring sirens in the early hours?'

'Obviously, they wanted to keep you alert.'

'Why did I have to bail out of the hotel? Is the mission scrapped?'

Zoe shook her head. 'No.'

Gavin pointed to her blonde wig. 'Why the disguise?'

'I've done a recce in and around the hotel for the past four hours. False alarm. Sorry for the panic but better to be safe than sorry.'

'What alarm?'

She frowned. If he were a soldier, she wouldn't need to explain or make up a story. When nervous, Gavin behaved worse than a five-year-old with twenty questions.

'GCHQ picked up chatter about the hotel. You know I don't like coincidences, so I decided to pull you out. No harm done. We can head back to your suite.'

With a confident explanation, Zoe had convinced him, and he didn't suspect a thing.

Zoe's phone rang. She said to Gavin, 'I need to deal with this call. When you finish your breakfast, check out of the Premium Inn. I'll meet you in the foyer of the Pellman.'

Michael's wife Stella had called. Her voice fragile and emotional as if she'd been sobbing. 'He didn't come home last night.'

Zoe hesitated. Her dinner with Michael had an ulterior motive. She hadn't found the right moment to start the discussion, and truth to be told, when the right moment had opened up, she bottled out.

'Stella, he stayed at my flat overnight. Something has come up, I need him to help me.'

'What did he say?'

'A military flap caught me by surprise. We're in the middle of dealing with it. I haven't talked to him about it yet. I just need a bit more time.'

Sounding as if she'd given up hope, Stella said, 'He's not coming home, then?'

'This thing will last a week, two at most. He'll be with me all the time.'

'Is there a phone call embargo?'

'No. There isn't an embargo. I'll get him to phone you.'

'Don't bother *getting* him to phone me.'

'Please, Stella, give me another week. I'll make him see sense.'

'I can't wait. Bye,' Stella replied and ended the call.

'Stella! ... Damn.'

Zoe felt awful. She should have called Stella to let her know why Michael had stayed over in London. She should have explained better why he wouldn't be home soon. Now, Stella had the wrong reason for why Michael had not returned home. Zoe wanted to save their marriage, but this turn of events had made things worse.

Gavin finished his breakfast in the café and then he checked out of the Premium Inn. Twenty minutes later, he met Zoe in the foyer of the Pellman Hotel. She looked annoyed.

'Are you okay?'

'Michael and Stella. They're going through a bad patch. Idiot me. I'm in the middle. Michael is behaving damn stupid.'

As they walked to the lifts, Gavin said, 'Males are frequently stupid in affairs of the heart.'

She side-glanced him. 'There goes the voice of one who knows.'

Gavin fired back, 'You're not exactly a good choice for marriage guidance.'

'Ouch! I guess I deserved that.'

They went to his suite on the sixteenth floor. It had taken Zoe five seconds to dismiss the idea that Gavin could have betrayed her. All of his tells appeared normal, and she knew from their past investigations that he couldn't hide anything from her.

At 10:12 am, a short rap on the door drew Gavin to open it. Alan Cairn entered the room. Gavin looked into the corridor for Alan's bodyguard.

Gavin followed Alan. 'What happened to Steve?'

'I'm not on duty,' Alan said while he scanned the room. 'A tad extravagant but comfortable.'

Gavin looked concerned. 'I thought you said I had to look the part.'

'No complaints, Dr Shawlens. The room will do fine.'

The whole outside wall of the suite had been glazed from waist height to the ceiling. Gavin led Alan over to the window to show him the view.

Alan continued walking into the bedroom area. He cocked his head and listened for any noise in the en-suite bathroom. Then he returned to the lounge and opened his hands in surprise.

'Where is Captain Tampsin?'

Zoe waited and listened in a separate toilet off the lounge. She stepped quietly into the room. Alan had his back to her while he and Gavin admired the sights. A clear bright day offered a spectacular panorama.

Standing in the doorway, she said, 'Looking for me?'

Alan turned around. 'For a second, I thought you might be in a state of undress.' He side-glanced Gavin, and shook his head. 'Stupid thought. Are we good to go?'

Zoe analysed every inch of Alan's face, every inflection in his voice, searching for one betraying sign. Zoe had a natural gift, possessed by fewer than one-in-two-hundred, an ability to spot a liar's tells.

She had read Alan previously. She knew all of his tells. He didn't seem surprised to see her. He expected her to be there. He hadn't betrayed her.

Gavin enthused, 'Isn't this view superb.'

'Why did you choose this hotel?' Zoe asked Alan.

'It has a small theatre attached. I entered through the theatre into the body of the hotel. I can use a service lift to access all floors. Hotel lobbies are too public. Besides, you two are engaged to be married. You need to look the part.'

Alan reached into his briefcase and pulled out a sheaf of documents. He handed them to Zoe. 'Nothing much has changed. These are your invitations and conference details. Any last-minute questions?'

Gavin said, 'Actually, I'm not sure about—'

Zoe raised her voice a notch, 'You're fine. I'll deal with it. I'm sure we could all do with a coffee,' she said, then pointed Gavin to the Nespresso machine in the far corner of the room.

Zoe turned her back on Gavin and crossed the room. Alan followed her lead.

She lowered her voice, 'Apart from you and the Prime Minister, who else is in the mission loop?'

Alan shook his head. 'No-one else. I told you at the prelim briefing, the PM wants this mission to be a sealed black-bag job. Only the PM, myself, and Shawlens. The PM doesn't even know I recruited Shawlens.'

'The PM contacted you directly?'

Alan narrowed his eyes with concern. 'No, not directly. Christian Leigh-Burton, his principal private secretary set up the meetings.'

'His PPS knows about the mission?'

Alan looked alarmed by her question. 'Certainly not. We didn't discuss it in front of him. Why do you ask?'

'Just checking. You're certain that no politician and no other government service have knowledge of my mission?'

Still looking troubled, Alan said, 'Correct.'

'That's all I need to know.'

Zoe turned to walk back when Alan put his hand on her arm to stop her. They faced each other. 'No, no, Zoe. You must tell me what concerns you.'

'In the lion's den, I'll run into high-level people. I need to be aware of anyone who has knowledge of my mission.'

'I assure you, no-one knows what the PM has asked you to do. No-one will.'

At the Nespresso, Gavin spilled a cup of coffee. When he said, '*Shit*,' they both watched as he cleaned up the mess.

Alan nodded in Gavin's direction. 'What's wrong with him?'

'Nerves. His social skills will need to improve by a factor of ten to pull this off. He's not keen, but I'll make sure he performs when required.'

Alan nodded. 'Sarah Silsden is a formidable gatekeeper. The only way you get within a hundred metres of the Silsden family is by direct invitation. I'm sorry, but Shawlens will have

to serve as your *Trojan Horse*. His friendship with Bryce Silsden provides a pass into the family circle.'

Zacchary Silsden, the 14th Duke of Keighley, headed the Silsden dynasty, a long-standing and prominent pillar of English nobility. An elderly gentleman, he remained in overall control but had begun the process of transferring operational power to his right hand, his daughter, Lady Sarah.

Her twin brother, Lord Bryce Silsden had, until recently, loitered and languished in the shadows of his father and sister. He had never measured up to his father's expectations for a future heir, and had paled in comparison to the great achievements of his sister.

Zoe whispered, 'Gavin feels unhappy at deceiving his friend. It's chewing him up. I'll keep an eye on him.'

'When you've penetrated the Silsden family, cut him loose. Send him back to Glasgow. You don't need him under your feet.'

Zoe said, flippantly, 'He'll be fine. I just need to keep him thinking he's doing the right thing and we are helping the Silsdens.'

Alan smoothed his hand over his beard. 'Zoe, when I came in, I felt upbeat about this mission. Should I be worried?'

'Nothing to worry about. I spun you around to make sure you haven't held anything back from me.'

'Everyone knows that I keep my cards close to my chest. Not with you. Not since Cosham when I discovered you can read me like a kiddie's book,' Alan said.

Gavin carried a tray bearing three Nespresso coffees to the table in front of the TV. While they drank their coffee, Gavin and Alan talked about London. Zoe ran all the information.

When Alan prepared to leave, he leant close to Zoe, and said, 'Obviously, I can't read you, but I'm not blind. Will you tell me why you're so concerned?'

'It's probably nothing. But if it becomes significant, I'll let you know.'

'I'm not a happy bunny in the dark,' Alan said when he opened the door.

When the door closed, Gavin said, 'What did he mean by that?'

She shook her head. 'Nothing. Come on; I'll ask my brother to loan you his tux, but these loafers you wear won't do. We need to shop and buy you a decent pair of black leather shoes.'

She fetched her jacket and put it on.

Gavin looked surprised. 'What? Now?'

'Yes. I have work to finish off tonight, and preparation to do this afternoon. Get your jacket.'

Gavin went to the bedroom to get ready to go with her to the shops.

Zoe felt confident that neither Gavin nor Cairn had betrayed her. She dismissed the PM because he wanted the job done. If the PM had changed his mind and wanted it stopped, he could abort mission. That left his PPS. The PM wouldn't discuss a mission in front of him, but eavesdropping is simple enough with the right equipment.

Zoe called Michael, 'I have a job for you.'

'What do you need?'

In a soft voice, she said, 'Chapter and verse on Christian Leigh-Burton.'

'The Prime Minister's PPS?'

'Yes. I need to pay him a visit.'

Five

Hoxton, London

That evening, just before seven-twenty, Zoe felt disappointed and angry as she searched the untidy office desk a second time. This time, without care to keep things in their place, she scattered them onto the floor.

Still, she'd found nothing. Then she received a text from Michael, *45 mins max, mark*. She took off a black silk glove to set a countdown timer on her watch, and then put the glove back on to keep her prints and DNA contained.

No time to hack into the desk computer. She glanced over to the red door for the fourth time in the past fifteen minutes. If she didn't leave before that door opened, there would be no going back.

Zoe switched off her pencil torch, leant back in the leather chair, and waited in darkness. Her mind rattled through the consequences if he'd betrayed her, and what story she would pitch if not. Either way, she had to confront him to find out.

*

Christian Leigh-Burton arrived home at seven-thirty as usual. He dismissed his police escort with a hand-flick rather than an appreciative smile, or a word of thanks. He hurried up the steps to the front door and imagined himself enjoying a glass of ten-year-old Madeira-Verdelho.

He'd had a particularly troublesome day at No 10 and longed for a glass of his favourite tippie. Fine wine and exotic cheese made for nightly pleasures he enjoyed.

'Hello! Malcolm, are you home? Malcolm?' he called out to his partner of six years. No reply. Christian entered the security code into the box near the red door. Then he switched on the wall lights for a cosy ambience. In the living room, he dropped his jacket and briefcase on the gold-coloured designer sofa.

He checked his mobile, and sure enough, he'd received a text from Malcolm: *Flat T. W8ing 4 RAC. Luv U xx*.

Christian grimaced. 'No chance of a back rub for me tonight,' he said out loud in a disappointed voice. He switched on his hi-fi. The system re-started from where it had stopped the previous night. It played track five, *Between The Sheets* by Fourplay, from *Smooth Jazz: The Essential Album*.

'Madeira. Where are you? I need you,' he said into the open drinks cabinet. Malcolm, the domestic one, kept all his cupboards neat and tidy.

Christian poured himself a glass, flicked off his brogues, found his soft slippers, and sat on the sofa. After two sips, he opened his briefcase and brought out a pile of papers. He didn't hear anyone come out of the bedroom where he had his office desk but did notice a change in the reflection of a glass door on the drinks cabinet. Excited, he turned around. Sometimes, Malcolm played silly games.

Not Malcolm, but a woman dressed in a black V-neck top, with neck-length black hair, short black jacket, and dark jeans stepped into his line of vision. He dropped his papers and the glass. Then he rushed a hand to cover his open mouth.

He squealed, 'Huugggh!' The look of shock on his face revealed more than he knew.

'Christian. You look like you've seen a ghost,' she said.

'Tampsin, how the hell ... did you get into my home?'

'You've read my file. I've installed more of these government security systems than I care to remember. I'm afraid this security system is very much like yourself—low ranking.'

He raised his mobile and said, 'Get out, or I'll press the panic button. You'll be up to your neck in armed police.'

Zoe raised her special secure encrypted mobile (SEM) and shook her head. 'Not going to happen. You see, my smartphone is way smarter than yours. You don't have a signal.'

Christian looked at the zero signal strength on his phone, threw it down on the sofa, and dashed to the landline. No connection. He backed away when she walked toward him.

Zoe stopped and picked up his mobile, activated Bluetooth on his phone, and then put her phone and his phone together. She checked the countdown on her watch, twenty minutes.

His hand shook while he pointed it at her. 'If you lay a hand on me, Tampsin, you and your family will regret it.'

She lifted her jacket up to her armpits. 'I'm unarmed. I didn't come here to do you any harm. You are the Prime Minister's PPS for God's sake. I'm not stupid. I just need some answers.'

He looked at the two phones, Bluetoothing his data. 'It's all personal. My work phone stays at work. What do you want?'

'Someone accessed the closed section of my personnel file. Gave me up to a group of thugs. What do you know about that?'

While his mouth said, 'Nothing,' his face and body language told her a different story.

'The PM read my file. It passed through your hands.'

With a nervous inflection in his voice, he said, 'Lots of confidential files pass through my hands. I didn't look at your file. You're a grunt. Why would I bore myself to tears?'

'Tell me who asked you for my details. If someone has blackmailed you—tell me—I'll deal with them. I'll keep you and sweet Malcolm out of it.'

'Blackmailed? You have no idea what you're talking about. People like you belong in the dark ages. Trust me—we'll send you there quite soon.'

Her mind logged that threat. Most empty threats, she dismissed. However, he spoke from a position of confidence.

'Two nights ago, your people tried to hit me and failed. You've sided with a bunch of bananas. Choose the winning side. I'll help you.'

Christian sniggered. 'Tampsin. My people are way out of your league. Take my advice—forget this mission. Have two months' leave of absence. Do nothing, and everything will work out in the end.'

Zoe shook her head and pursed her lips. 'I can't do that. It's my job to put an end to this Tabula business.'

Christian's eyes almost popped. His head dropped. He sucked up a huge breath and released it noisily. His face paled, and his eyes drilled a hole through his shoes. His hands made a tight fist.

Zoe had hit a main nerve. She glanced at her countdown—sixteen minutes. She thought about Toni and how much pain she'd gone through to give up that word.

'I'm ready to blow the lid on the Tabula business. The question for you is simple—sink or swim?'

With his head still dropped, he said, 'How could you possibly have breached our security? I don't understand. Who told you?'

She moved closer to him. 'Make up your mind. Tabula is going down. Sink or swim.'

He looked up and faced her. 'Tampsin. Speak about what's coming, and you'll die before you've finished one sentence. You cannot stop us. Neither will this government or any country.'

'Obviously, you've not read *all* of my file. I neutralise threats for breakfast.'

'You're insane if you think you can do anything to stop us. We're on the brink of the most important revolution in human history. Stand in our way, and we'll scythe through you like a white-hot knife through butter.'

'I take it the PM isn't part of your grand plan,' she said.

'If you try to expose us, you and your family will be executed.'

'That kind of threat does not encourage me to let you live.'

'Listen, Tampsin. I'll make a deal with you. Who told you about Tabula Rasa? Tell me who. I guarantee that only you will die. I'll vouch for your family. They need not suffer.'

Zoe looked at her watch—ten minutes. 'You guarantee not to touch my family,' she said, and offered her hand to shake on their agreement.

Christian raised quizzical brows. 'They know nothing about us?'

'Nothing.'

He shook her hand and said, 'My solemn promise. I may be many things, Tampsin, but I am an honourable man.'

She gripped his hand tight and pulled him to her. Then she slapped the back of his head with her other hand. She released him and he turned away.

'What have you done to me?' He rubbed the back of his head and looked at a tiny smear of blood on his fingertip.

'The woman your people battered is a dear friend. Give me the names of her attackers, and I'll give you the antidote.' Once more, she checked her watch, 'Need to be quick.'

'Fuck off. I give my life willingly. For all the future gardeners to come after me.'

'Gardeners?'

'My brothers and sisters.'

Gingerly, she eased a ring from her finger. It had a small needle protruding from the band.

'I need to be careful with this stuff. I've told the tech guy that if the needle can spring out, it should be able to spring back. You just can't get quality workmanship these days. I blame civil servants for cutbacks.'

'Agh!' Christian cried. 'What's happening to me?' His hands shook when his legs wobbled.

'Be a good sport. Tell me why my mission has to be stopped. I'm dying to know more.'

Shock took hold of his face. 'Uugggh ... you don't know anything. You played me ... you bitch. You have no idea what is coming. I'll have the last laugh.'

'How so?'

'While your daughter suffocates in your arms. I'll laugh at your pain.'

'Your people are amateurs. They didn't conceal their identity. I'll kill every one of them.'

'Ha, ha-ha-ha. In your dreams. Catch this newsflash. You're far too late, the train has already left the country. One way ... trip. Real soon, your kind will return to the deepest sewer, where ... you ... belong ... ugh.'

Zoe watched while nausea and confusion took a grip of his body. She supported and guided him back onto the sofa. His consciousness slipped away and his body lay still.

From a small box, she took a white folded paper containing cocaine and left it fully opened on the coffee table beside the sofa. Carefully, she wiped the blood from his finger and the back of his head. Then she rubbed cocaine on his hand and with a small straw she blew some into his nose.

Zoe examined the scene, and when satisfied, she retrieved a Walther P38 handgun from her back waistband. Then she placed it in his hand, his finger on the trigger. Meticulously, she aimed the shot through his mouth to obliterate the injection point on the back of his head. Finally, she backtracked her movements and removed all trace of her presence in the flat.

The countdown on Zoe's watch had stopped when she stepped onto the street just as Malcolm's car arrived. He passed her while she wrapped a scarf around her face and mouth. She hurried along the sidewalk.

In her car, she called Gavin, 'Tabula means tablets, pills, drugs. Correct?'

'Yes.'

'What do you understand by Rasa?'

Gavin replied, 'Race, breeding, pedigree, thoroughbred. Along those lines.'

'Your best guess for Tabula Rasa?'

Gavin racked his mind for a second or two. 'Tablets ... drugs to improve race ... produce a superior pedigree. I suppose. I'd need to know more about the context.'

Disappointed, Zoe said, 'A superior race? Not that supremacist shit again. Am I correct in thinking the Silsdens have a major interest in the drugs business?'

'They do. Silsden Pharmaceuticals is one of the largest in the world. I even thought of applying for a job. I'm glad I didn't.'

'Why?'

'Sarah Silsden is the CEO. She doesn't like me. When we were students, we disagreed. She believes drugs will cure all disease. I don't, I believe—'

'*Could* she have an interest in a drug to produce a superior race?'

'Since the 1930s, we've seen huge advances in our understanding of gene manipulation. Big pharma companies like Silsden have been at the forefront of these developments. They've registered hundreds of patents.'

'Bloody, meddling, stupid scientists.' She spoke as if she had a bad taste in her mouth. 'Will they *ever* learn?'

'Why do you think Tabula Rasa is connected to Silsden Pharmaceutical?'

She raised her voice a notch, 'I didn't say there was a connection. I met with an informant for background detail. The name came up in conversation—that's all. I have no idea if it's relevant or not.'

With a defensive dissuading tone, Gavin said, 'A supremacy drug wouldn't interest Sarah. What good would it do them? Her family is already supreme. Your informant is wrong. I know the Silsdens are not supremacists.'

'Did you meet up with Michael?'

'Yes. We met in the hotel this afternoon. He brought me his tux and gave me a small jewellery box for you—new rings,' Gavin said, and then to head off a sharp warning, he added, 'Don't worry. I haven't forgotten. I didn't touch them.'

On a previous mission, Zoe had warned Gavin about careless fiddling with her rings.

'I'm on my way back to the hotel,' she said, curtly.

Zoe groaned loudly as she drove off.

Six

12th July, Whitehall, London

The following evening, just before seven, Zoe and Gavin arrived by taxi at the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, Whitehall. They had invitations for a black-tie fund-raising dinner in the Churchill room on the ground floor. Tickets in hand, they joined a queue waiting to pass through body scanners. When they edged closer, Zoe said, 'You look quite dapper in a tux.'

'Thanks. It fits perfectly. Do you think Michael would mind if I keep it?'

'No problem. Any damage or stains and it's yours. You'll just have to pay the eight hundred he paid Hugo Boss.'

'Eight hundred? For a suit? Just what I need to settle my nerves.'

She dusted hair and flakes from his shoulder. 'Concentrate on the task at hand. Relax. Enjoy yourself.'

Gavin smiled. 'This is the first time I've seen you in an evening dress.'

'You've seen me naked. Now, you've seen me dressed up. There isn't much else.'

He shook his head. 'Totally different situation. We had to get out of diving wet suits in the freezing cold.'

'Different?'

Slightly embarrassed, he said, 'We didn't get naked for ... you know.'

Zoe smiled. 'Do hold onto that thought. We're supposed to be an engaged couple.'

He fidgeted and sighed while he looked around. A bead of sweat appeared on his hairline. He dabbed his forehead with a folded handkerchief.

A thirty-seven-year-old academic, Gavin stood five-eight in his socks and occupied a lean and muscular frame. Occasional visits to the university judo club kept his weight steady. Once, one of his students said he looked like the actor Ewan McGregor.

Throughout the day, Zoe had remained evasive and given him minimal information about the mission. A delicate balance given his position. Clearly, she had not done enough to put his mind at ease. He needed some balm to settle his mind.

'What's the matter?'

'I'm uncomfortable. I don't like deceiving Bryce.'

Though annoyed, she gave him a supportive look. 'I've told you, it's not deception. It's just a preamble. We have to find out why Bryce has taken Armstrong's son into the protective custody of the Silsden family. It's probably not sinister but we need to know why.'

With relief on his face, Gavin got out what bubbled in his mind, 'Bryce won't get involved in anything bad. I know him. Honour, dignity, and loyalty. The foundations of the Silsden family. They're super rich. They don't need to do criminal things.'

She nodded encouragement. 'I understand and agree. More than likely, Bryce is protecting Armstrong's son from someone or some organisation.'

Gavin agreed. 'That sounds possible given Armstrong worked in government defence research.'

'Bryce may have bitten off more than he can chew. For some reason, he cannot ask us for help. Tonight, with your support, I ease into his life undetected, and deal with whatever has threatened Armstrong's son. You want to help Bryce, don't you?'

'Of course.'

Almost immediately, Gavin seemed more at ease. Tension drained from his body. When he relaxed, she relaxed.

Zoe didn't know if Bryce Silsden had committed a crime or not. For this evening, she had to convince Gavin she wanted to help Bryce out of a problem.

Gavin said, 'I suppose Bryce might think he's doing the right thing, but it would be better if he got professional support to remove any threat to Armstrong's son.'

'Exactly.'

'When you've got your feet under the table, I can shove off back to Glasgow?'

Zoe nodded. 'Yes, of course. Now, tell me more about Bryce.'

'I met Bryce and Kendra when I joined the Biology Society in Edinburgh. He's a complete head-case but great fun. Being wealthy, he rented a huge house in Marchmont while the rest of us shared pokey student flats. Parties in his house were infamous. Free booze and enough food to fill up for a week.'

'Did his sister go to Edinburgh?'

'No, Sarah did pharmacy at UCL. She always had her sights on the family business. Bryce didn't want to work for his father, so he read biology.'

'And now, Sarah runs Silsden Pharmaceutical?'

'With an iron hand; she's CEO of one of the heavyweights in big pharma. The company started off in the 1920s selling cough mixtures and expectorants. Imported exotic fruits and condiments. One of the first companies to offer a vitamin C elixir when it became popular. They have offices and factories all over the world.'

'What does Bryce do?'

'Only latterly did he join the company. He heads up a department looking for plants with medicinal and pharmaceutical properties. He travels all over the world looking for special plants. Bryce got me involved in extracting bromelain from pineapple.'

'What kind of person is he?'

'Rich kid ... still a kid. His family is aristocratic with a capital A. He's the maverick who likes nothing better than to rough it with working-class lads in a pub. If men climbing social ladders are upstarts, then Bryce is a downstart.'

'He's not comfortable with the large golden spoon?'

'Bryce had his future mapped out before he left the womb. He would have preferred a middle-class life. A blank canvas to become whatever he wanted to become. Until a few years ago, he refused to work in the company. He rejected an arranged aristocratic marriage and wed a commoner.'

'Did that cause a schism in the family?'

'Not really. Kendra has fitted into the upper-class life. She comes from a family of middle-class professionals. Not a huge leap for her.'

On the other side of the body scanners, they mingled in the foyer outside the Churchill room. Gavin had just finished his second glass of champagne when Zoe spotted Bryce dragging Kendra in their direction. She recognised them from the file photos.

She said to Gavin, 'Heads up. Showtime. What's my name?'

'Anne with an E. I haven't forgotten.'

Behind his back, someone shouted, 'Gav! What on Earth are you doing here?'

Gavin turned and smiled at Bryce and Kendra. Bryce shook Gavin's hand, and then hugged him. 'I'm so glad Kenny spotted you at the scanner.'

'*Bryce*,' Kendra said with mock severity.

Gavin kissed Kendra on the cheek. 'You look lovely as usual.'

As Gavin stepped back from kissing Kendra, Zoe gripped his upper arm.

He turned, and Zoe smiled an awkward smile that said *introduce me*.

'Bryce and Kendra, this is my fiancée, Anne ... with an E.'

Zoe shook hands with Bryce and Kendra. 'Lord Silsden, Lady Silsden. Nice to meet you both.' Her face smiled, but her eyes remained steely.

Bryce said, 'Oh, please, Anne, no titles with our friends.'

Gavin turned to Zoe. 'Bryce and Kendra were in the same year as me at university.'

'Biochemists?' Zoe asked.

Zoe noticed Gavin couldn't move his eyes from Kendra's face. Kendra seemed schoolgirlishly excited by his attention. A light-red tinge appeared high on her cheeks.

When she laughed, her body shook with merriment. She had dressed in a black silk evening dress, wore bright lipstick, and an exquisite 'heart on fire' diamond necklace.

Bryce replied, 'No. Kenny and I majored in biology. What do you do?'

'I'm a military historian. At the National Archives.'

'Excellent. Look, you two, I want you to join us at our table.' He turned to face Kendra, 'I haven't seen Gav for almost a year.' He turned back to Gavin, 'I want to hear all about your bromelain research. Have they made you a professor?'

Gavin shook his head and pulled out his tickets. 'Bryce, we couldn't impose. We have seats reserved at table J.'

Bryce took the tickets, tore them in half, and handed them to Kendra. 'Not any longer. You've been upgraded to a top table.'

'Bryce!' Gavin said.

He pulled on Gavin's arm. 'Nonsense. I'll hear no more about it. Come along. I'll seat you at my table. Kenny will move a couple of her cronies to table J.'

Zoe spotted two bodyguards keeping an eye on Bryce and the people in his immediate vicinity. From the bulges in their jackets, they carried weapons.

Bryce and one bodyguard surged ahead, cutting a path through other mingling guests. Kendra followed behind. She glanced back at Gavin. Her magnetic dark eyes pulled Gavin to her side. His face lit up.

Zoe side-glanced Gavin and thought, *if I were your real fiancée, I'd be fizzing like mad.*

In the Churchill room, two top tables had already been seated with special guests before the main doors would open to allow other guests to find their tables.

Gavin and Zoe joined a table near the stage and waited while Bryce rearranged the seating. Kendra quietly escorted a couple to table J.

'Everyone, it's a small world. I found a dear old friend mingling with the guests. This is Gav and his lovely fiancée Anne with an E. Make them welcome.'

Gavin and Zoe returned smiles and hand waves to the guests around the table. Gavin scanned the place names and recognised several people.

Zoe recognised all the faces around the table. Several junior government ministers, and several members of the aristocracy. All of them mid to late thirties, similar in age to Kendra and Bryce.

Gavin didn't enjoy strained and stilted dinner chat with strangers. He remembered Zoe's advice in the taxi. She told him he could avoid periods of protracted silence by asking the person beside him lots of questions, and then he wouldn't need to say much about himself.

The main doors opened, and all the remaining guests searched for their seats. A team of waitresses and waiters arrived with trays of soft drinks, red wine, white wine, and champagne.

The Churchill room had a one-metre-high stage with a podium at either end for speaker and introducer. Behind the speakers hung three large screens lit with purple lights. Zoe counted twenty-five tables with twelve guests around each table. When all the guests were seated, the main lights switched off.

An overhead purple spotlight lit each table, and a stronger yellow glow lit a flower display in the centre. Guests had paid £240 to hear a government minister and three internationally known speakers call for more government support to tackle the escalation of disease and poverty in the poorest countries of the world.

The speakers illustrated their talks with harrowing videos of protestors battling with local law enforcement and demanding food and water. Bryce brought the evening to a close when he reiterated the key messages from each of the speakers.

After the meal, Bryce left their table, went to the top table to congratulate the speakers, and speak to his father. Zoe positioned her gaze so that she looked elsewhere, but the top table remained in her peripheral field of vision. Bryce's father turned his head and looked at Gavin. He nodded as if giving approval.

Like many others, Kendra had left the table to mingle and network with friends seated nearby. Gavin spotted an opportunity and got up. Kendra saw him coming and met him half-way.

Kendra didn't hide her delight. She'd always been attracted to his boyish vulnerability, she liked his humility, his all-buttoned-up seriousness. He didn't unwind easily, and she liked to pull his guard down, force him to relax. They hugged and slowly released each other.

Kendra said, 'I'm glad you came to Jack's birthday party. Thanks for coming.'

'I'm sorry we didn't get a chance to speak. I had to take Kirsty home.'

'Kirsty looks so much like her mother. How is Siobhan?'

Gavin smiled. 'Fine. Sends her regards. She's having a party for Kirsty. If you and Jack can make it, I'll see you there.'

Gavin's sister Siobhan had met Kendra in Edinburgh when Kendra and Gavin were students. They'd kept in touch over the years for birthday celebrations, and meet-up shopping

days in Edinburgh and London. Kendra's son Jack, aged nine, and Siobhan's daughter Kirsty aged seven, were a good match, or so the two mothers believed.

'Jack and Kirsty get on so well together,' Kendra said.

Gavin nodded his agreement. 'Yes, I saw Jack showing Kirsty his laptop. It's a much better one than I've got.'

'His grandfather got him hooked into computers. Though he's only nine, he writes computer code. Apparently, he has a talent for algorithms and encryption coding.'

'Fantastic. He'll become an IT wizard even before he goes to university.'

Kendra looked intensely at the soft features of his face. Almost as if she needed to capture the image one last time. She liked to think of him as if he were a chastened schoolboy. He had a warm beauty about his face.

His deep blue eyes twinkled with mischief. His attitude always seemed gentle and passive rather than rugged and macho. His hair had a dark straw colour, and on this occasion, it had been neatly groomed.

Gavin spotted her distraction. 'Only if you haven't got something else planned.'

Kendra recalled an old memory. 'It's not something else. It's ... well, what happened between you and Emma?'

'What do you mean?'

'Last year, I went shopping in Edinburgh. I met up with Siobhan for lunch. She said you hoped to get back with Emma. Now, suddenly, you're engaged to Anne with an E. I'm confused. Siobhan didn't mention Anne.'

'I ... didn't tell Siobhan.'

A wave of panic flushed through Gavin. He'd forgotten his sister had met Kendra. He'd been invited to catch up with the two of them, but he backed out. It might have seemed to Kendra that he didn't want to meet up with her.

Kendra looked confused. 'I'm sorry. I don't understand.'

Gavin's voice verged on aggressive. 'I didn't get back with Emma. She's moved on—I've done the same. Siobhan doesn't know about Anne. I don't have to tell my sister everything about my life.'

Kendra looked surprised. 'You're engaged, and you haven't told Siobhan? Why?'

Gavin shook his head. 'Em ...'

His hand covered his forehead as he flustered. Making up lies on the spot wasn't one of his core skills.

Kendra looked concerned. 'Are you sure you're not rushing into this on the rebound?'

She knew Gavin and Siobhan had always been close. She assumed he felt embarrassed about revealing his new relationship.

'I've got Emma out of my system. I'm moving on with my life.'

'Good. You deserve a lovely lady in your life. Anne is pretty with a beautiful figure. Is that her natural hair colour?'

'I ... em ... think it's disgusting that Bryce still calls you Kenny.'

'Ignore him. It's his little needle in my head. I don't care anymore. Come on; Anne looks abandoned.'

Kendra rescued Anne and introduced her to some of her friends. While they talked, Kendra listened to Anne and became increasingly convinced Anne wasn't the right woman for Gavin. More appropriate for him would be a sweet, wide-eyed, girl-next-door type. Anne seemed too feisty, too bossy, too gutsy, too blonde. The sort of woman about which his mother should have warned him.

Author



I hope that you enjoyed this book.

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

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

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

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

Thank you for reading my story.

Gordon Bickerstaff

Deadly Secrets

The truth will out



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

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.

With huge financial rewards on offer, powerful people are prepared to kill as they compete to seize control of the company. Corruption at high levels, and a deadly flaw in the product combine to push the stakes higher and higher.

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

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

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

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

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

'... weaved it all together masterfully'

Everything To Lose

The chase is on ...



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

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

The product is stolen, top athletes disappear, and the research team are unaware that their product arose from the ashes of evil Second World War research. Gavin must stop the product launch before more people die horribly.

When Gavin disappears, Zoe Tampsin, his associate from the Lambeth Group, must find him before he becomes the next victim to die.

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

The Black Fox

Run for your life ...



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

Zoe Tampsin is resourceful, smart and Special Forces-trained, but she has been given an impossible mission. She has to protect scientist, Gavin Shawlens, from assassination by the CIA, and discover a secret trapped in Gavin's mind that the CIA want destroyed.

As the pressure to find Shawlens escalates, the CIA send Zoe's former mentor to track her down and her fate seems sealed when he surrounds Zoe and Gavin with a ring of steel.

With each hour that passes, the ring is tightened, and the window for discovering Gavin's secret will shut. Zoe is faced with a decision that goes against all of her survival instincts.

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

Toxic Minds

The damage is done ...



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

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

Alexa Sommer had it all - stellar career, beautiful home, successful children, and a devoted husband. Then came meltdown and divorce. Her children's love turned to hate. She is forced out of the job she loved.

Desperately, she tries to rebuild her life around a new job, but her work is controversial. Her enemies want her work stopped, and a few of them prepare to take their protest to the ultimate level.

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

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