

# **Toxic Minds**

*The damage is done ...*

**Gordon Bickerstaff**

Lambeth Group Thriller #4

TOXIC MINDS

The damage is done ...

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!'

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 ...*

**Tabula Rasa** *The end is nigh ...*

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Iain

Gone, but not forgotten

November 2015

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

Madeleine Albright

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## **Table of Contents**

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

Fifty-two

Fifty-three

Fifty-four

Fifty-five

Fifty-six

Fifty-seven

END

Author

Deadly Secrets

Everything To Lose

The Black Fox

Tabula Rasa

# One

January 20<sup>th</sup>

Alexa Sommer had driven through rain-sodden streets and the kind of cold wet night that made her glad to be returning to her warm home in Newton Mearns. She had attended a strategy meeting for senior oil and gas industry executives at the Central Hotel in Glasgow city centre.

It had been a long and tiring day. She felt bloated, overloaded with too much buffet food and coffee. The meeting had been challenging. She shut her front door, and dropped her keys on a silver tray on the hall table.

The house felt colder than she expected. The heating boiler had cut out at six, but her daughter Becky should have switched it back on to keep the house warm. Alexa checked her watch, eight-sixteen. *She'd better be home*, she thought.

She switched on a table lamp, and set the house perimeter alarm. A flat screen above the control panel revealed live video feeds from six perimeter cameras. Underneath the video streams were audio streams from concealed microphones. She switched the central heating on, and called out, 'Becky! Are you home?'

Becky replied from her room upstairs. Her quiet voice sounded far away. Alexa hadn't phoned home to check on her. She expected a sixteen-year-old girl should be able to look after herself for three hours. She had done it many times at that age, and younger.

In fact, Becky had arrived home two hours ago. In her room, she sat on the floor with her back against the wall, her legs pulled into her body, knees tight together. Hands clasped over her shins. Her head rested on her knees. She shivered with fear. For comfort, she repeated a rhyme over and over, *sticks and stones can break my bones, but demons will not find me*.

Alexa hung her coat in the walk-in cupboard under the stairs, and called up to Becky, 'Have you eaten?'

Becky's reply sounded barely audible, even in the still silence of the large house. 'I've had something.'

Alexa looked at the shape of her hair in the hall mirror. She looked shapely rather than slim, or womanly as she described her shape. Her grandmother had been an Italian beauty from the Sophia Loren era, and she had inherited natural earthy good looks. Her skin still lightly browned from the summer sun.

Alexa suspired loudly, and looked up the stairs. 'Is it too much for you to get off your backside, come down, and give me a hug?'

No reply.

'Did your father call?' Alexa asked before she took her briefcase to her study.

Silence hung in the air as Alexa waited for a reply. A complete silence, like being alone in outer space. Alexa felt goose bumps rising on her arms. There is no silence more alarming for a mother than a deathly silence from a sixteen-year-old daughter.

Alexa came back to the hall. Rested her hand on the baluster. 'Becky!'

Becky replied, 'The disgusting animals left more horrible things on the answer phone.'

'You didn't listen to them, did you?'

No reply.

Alexa looked at a small bundle of mail on the hall table. 'Anything in the mail for me?' Another long pause before Becky appeared at the top of the stairs. The hall light remained off, but in the partial light from the table lamp, Alexa saw Becky dressed in a loose-fitting dressing gown over her pyjamas.

'Two letters for Dad, nothing for you,' Becky said with a weak, almost exhausted voice.

Alexa wasn't concerned that Becky sounded more subdued than normal. There had been some fights recently over the usual teenage boundaries. Alexa guessed Becky had probably listened to the phone messages. She had listened to them before. More fool her. Alexa had told her many times not to listen to their vitriolic abuse. *If you're sitting up there fretting over nothing. Hell mend you,* Alexa thought.

A year ago, ten days after Becky's fifteenth birthday, a group of angry protestors fired a torrent of threats at Alexa's family. The intense intimidation had affected Becky more than anyone else in the house. Almost overnight, her friends saw her change from an outgoing and confident girl to a withdrawn and frightened soul.

In public, Becky supported her mother's right to work, but at night, on her own, she became terrified of protestor threats to invade the house, drag her out to the street, strip her naked, and set her on fire. The horrific thoughts created a recurring nightmare that Becky couldn't get out of her head.

In her study, Alexa emptied the contents of her briefcase onto her desk. She separated important papers from junk, and settled down to work on the final version of a mission statement required for tomorrow. She wanted to make sure she had counter arguments for opposing proposals.

Several of her colleagues pushed for a change in research strategy. They wanted a radical new research direction but it wasn't going to happen if Alexa had anything to do with it. She planned to snuff out their plans before they got started.

An hour later, Alexa's mind wrestled with research reports as she typed up her comments. Becky pushed open the study door. Her body shivered and twitched as she leaned one hand against the door frame. Quietly, she said, 'Muumm!'

Alexa flicked through the next page in the document. 'What *is it*, Becky?' Alexa replied. Her irritated tone meant, *can't you see I'm busy?*

'I ... don't feel well.'

A fearful sound in Becky's voice made Alexa look up, and turn her head. She saw a fragile figure hesitating to enter the room. At first glance, Becky seemed normal in her fluffy dressing gown and pink check pyjamas.

Alexa noticed something odd with Becky's slippers. They were not the bright pink ones she always wore. They were dark, almost black, and her ankles looked like they were covered in dark red treacle.

Then, Alexa saw Becky's pyjama bottoms looked as if they were stuck to her shins with wet blood. Becky's body trembled. Her shocked face looked like she'd been in a car crash.

'Becky! What's happened?' Alexa squealed as she rushed over. At first, she thought Becky had suffered some kind of heavy period. Then she saw the amount of blood.

Alexa scurried back and forth in panic, unsure what to do. Her heart sank when she saw streaks of blood on the carpet. She fetched a throw, and wrapped it around Becky's shivering shoulders. Shocked by the amount of blood on Becky's pyjamas, and the trail of blood in the hall.

Becky's eyes rolled as she lost consciousness. She dropped onto the floor.

'*Jesus. Becky!*' Alexa screamed.

Alexa stared at Becky's face for three seconds, though it seemed much longer, trying to decide what she should do. Then she sprang into action. Ran to the security control panel. She input the emergency exit code to shut off alarms, open the front door and the security gates. Grabbed her keys, and brought her car up to the front door.

She laid Becky out on the back seat, and set out to drive her to the emergency room at Hairmyres Hospital on the Eaglesham Road, East Kilbride. Still bleeding, and still dressed in her bloody pyjamas, Becky lay out on the back seat with the throw over her body.

Alexa stared through the windscreen and sobbed as she drove. The road appeared blurry as tears welled up in her eyes. She stared far into the distance as if looking for a road sign to



give her guidance. She came up fast on a slow-moving taxi, and braked hard. She glanced back at Becky, and her heart thumped.

Becky's arm had dropped off the back seat and flopped lifeless onto the car floor.

'BECKY. Are you all right?' *This can't happen to my family*, she thought.

While overtaking other cars, her mind produced a stream of wild thoughts. She thought a car accident would be the best thing to happen for both of them. The car veered toward the middle line. A horn blast from a car on the opposite side of the road brought her back to her senses.

Alexa arrived at the emergency room, and screeched to a halt behind an ambulance. She dashed around her car, and into the building. The ER appeared hectic with ill, injured and walking wounded, jostling for attention. The ambulance had brought a badly injured man from a road traffic accident.

With bloodstained hands waving anxiously, Alexa shouted into the room, '*Help!* Over here, *please!*' When she saw a nurse running toward her, she ran back to her car, and opened the rear passenger door.

An auxiliary nurse brought a green canvas wheelchair, and helped Alexa lift Becky out of the car. She wheeled Becky through the busy waiting room, past rows of waiting wounded to a corridor of curtained cubicles. The amount of blood on Becky meant she received immediate attention from a senior triage nurse.

A nurse pulled the curtains around an assessment bed. Becky had regained consciousness in the wheelchair, and the nurses lifted her out. Her young face looked as white as a sheet. She looked confused, and immediately started shivering. Becky clung to the throw Alexa had placed over her shoulders. A nurse gently eased Becky's fingers to take the throw.

'Let me take that, sweetheart,' the nurse said.

Alexa stood beside the bed, and watched another nurse begin to take Becky's clothes off. With scissors, the nurse cut as much as she could, but the fabric had stuck to Becky's legs with congealed blood. The nurse dampened the remaining pieces of fabric with water, and quickly pulled them from Becky's legs.

'Brave girl,' the nurse said.

Bleeding re-started, but Becky didn't utter a sound. On both legs, she had cut herself all the way from her groin down to her ankles. Her wounds looked painful, and the nurses saw old scars on her arms and legs.

Alexa stood at the bottom of the bed. She stared at the cuts, swallowed hard and swayed anxiously from side to side. One thought kept flashing through her mind, *what have you done?*

One nurse continued to treat the wounds while the other slipped away, and reported to the ER supervisor. The supervisor slipped in through the curtains, took one look at Becky, and then told the nurses to move her to a private room when they had finished treating the wounds.

As the supervisor turned to leave, Alexa blocked her path. 'Is she going to be all right?'

The supervisor glanced back at Becky. 'Yes. A separate room will give you more privacy.'

The nurses used alcohol wipes to clean and sterilise the wounds. Becky closed her eyes, but didn't flinch or complain about the stinging pain. They expected her to screech and whine, but she didn't make a sound. The two nurses exchanged looks of concern. When they were finished, they helped Becky into a hospital gown, and then moved her to a private room.

Alexa stood at Becky's bedside, and held her hand. Becky stared up at the ceiling. One of the nurses smiled at her, and said, 'You're going to be fine.'

A nurse checked that the intravenous line had been taped securely to her arm. They had put Becky on a saline volume expander to compensate her blood loss. The nurses fitted a cradle on the lower half of the bed to protect her legs, and then they helped Becky to stretch out on the bed.

One nurse left the room to fetch the forms that Alexa would need to complete. The other remained at Becky's side. 'Try and relax. The doctor will be along to see you in a little while.'

Alexa leaned closer to Becky, and said, 'What the hell happened?'

Becky turned away from her mother, ducked her head down, and pulled the blanket over her head. 'Go away. Leave me alone.'

Alexa sat down on a chair and groaned. She looked at the figure under the blanket, and her mind filled with questions. *Who are you? You're not my daughter. My Becky would never dream of harming herself,* she thought.

## Two

Forty minutes later, Trevor MacBlane, arrived in the room. He saw Becky hiding under the blanket. He nodded to the nurse then introduced himself to Alexa. She got up from her chair, and they stood in a huddle as Trevor asked her what had happened.

The nurse handed the completed paperwork to Trevor then went to the side of the bed, and moved the blanket away from Becky's head. She folded the blanket down, and then helped Becky to push herself up to a sitting position.

He smiled at Becky, checked her pulse, and waited another minute until she felt comfortable enough to exchange eye contact with him. He didn't ask to look at her wounds.

'Becky, my name is Trevor. May I ask you some questions? Please.'

She folded her lips into a tight line, and nodded her head gently.

He smiled and his eyes were sympathetic. 'Can you tell me why you're here?'

She lowered her head and murmured, 'I cut myself.'

'Can you tell me why you cut yourself?'

Becky shook her head quickly. Shifted her eyes to the bottom of the bed.

He made a note on his pad, and then asked, 'That's okay, Becky. Did you decide to cut yourself, or did someone else tell you to do it?'

Becky hesitated, and brought a shaking hand up to her forehead. 'Someone ... else.'

'Who?' Alexa shouted.

Trevor spun his head around to face Alexa. 'Mrs Sommer, please.'

His look and tone told her to keep quiet. The nurse took Alexa's arm, and guided her back to the chair in the corner of the room.

Becky clamped her eyes shut, clenched her fists tight, and held them in front of her face. Her fists shook as if she tried to keep hold of her mind.

He made more notes, and then he asked, 'Becky, can you tell me who told you to do it, please?'

No response.

Trevor raised his voice a notch. 'Becky, *please* allow me to help you.'

Becky's hands relaxed, and then snapped onto her face to cover her eyes. 'Nadira.'

He put his hand on her wrist, and gently pulled her hands away from her face. 'You're a brave girl. Thank you for sharing that with me. Who is Nadira?'

Her eyes locked onto his face. 'The voice in my head.'

He asked, 'Does Nadira come to you in a dream?'

With a hesitating nod, she said, 'Sometimes ... I have bad dreams.'

Trevor wrote more notes. 'How does Nadira appear to you in your dreams?'

Becky stared as if she had dropped back into her dream. 'She's always dressed in black. Her hair is long and raven-coloured. She grabs my hair, and pulls me out of my bed. I'm in my pyjamas. I float behind her as she drags me down the stairs, and out into the street. I can't put my feet down. I can't resist her.'

Becky's head jerked as her eyes scanned the room. Her face, anxious and fearful.

He ran his eyes around the room as if to check it for her. 'You're safe in here, Becky. What happens when you're out in the street?'

Her breathing raced. 'I'm surrounded ... by a pack of human wolves ... baying for my flesh. People with wolf heads ... claws. I scream ... but no-one can hear me. The lights in the house are bright, but ... ugh. No-one comes to help me.'

He saw her hyperventilating. 'Relax, try to breathe slowly. Are you standing beside Nadira?'

Her hands fluttered on the bed cover. 'I'm sitting on the ground with my knees pulled up to my face. My arms are around my legs, I can feel cold wetness on my pyjama bottoms.'

He noticed a smell of nervous sweat from her. 'Does Nadira speak to you?'

Her voice gained confidence as if she felt relieved to tell someone. 'The wolves are shouting at me. Calling me horrible names, a dirty whore, an evil witch, and they want to tear me to pieces. Nadira warns them to stay back. She has a flaming torch in her hand. She pushes it into my chest. I wake up screaming.'

Beads of sweat formed on her forehead, and the nurse handed a box of tissues to her. Trevor said, 'Take your time.' When he finished writing, he asked, 'How long have you known Nadira?'

With a bundle of tissues, Becky dabbed the sweat from her face. 'A year ... almost.'

He saw her confidence and thought her strong enough for his next question. 'Why does Nadira want you to cut yourself?'

Becky jerked her body as if she'd had an electric shock. 'Argh! I can't ... speak.'

She sucked in a large breath, her head jolted back, and her eyes snapped onto a black mark on the ceiling. Her body trembled violently. The nurse ran to her side, and held her hand and upper arm. Trevor stepped back, alarmed. He thought she might need sedation.

Alexa rushed to the other side of the bed. She took Becky's other hand in her own and tried to calm her down. Becky looked alarmed at her mother as if facing a stranger. A look of

anger filled her face. She snapped her hand back from her mother. She folded her arms tightly across her chest until her tension eased and she relaxed her arms.

Alexa's mouth fell open. She felt acutely embarrassed. Her cheeks flushed pink. The nurse put her hand on Alexa's arm, and led her away from the bedside.

Grim-faced, Alexa shuffled to the chair in the corner, and cupped her face with her hands. Although angry, she didn't shed any tears.

Trevor side-glanced Alexa, and then moved closer to Becky. He recognised a traumatised and frightened girl whose terrors had culminated in a suicide attempt.

Trevor offered his hand to Becky. 'Grip my hand, tightly, please.'

Slowly, Becky unfolded her arms. Trevor took her left hand, and gently closed his hands over her hand. She gripped his hand as hard as she could. Physical exertion helped calm her down. She relaxed, eased her grip on his hand, slipped her hand out, and then rested it on the bed.

He said, 'Becky, no-one can harm you here. What did Nadira say to you?'

She scraped the back of her hand across her face. 'Nadira told me ... I had to be punished.'

He felt concerned, but kept his face friendly and supportive. 'Did Nadira tell you why you had to be punished?'

Becky shook her head slowly, turned her body away from him. A tear ran down her face. Trevor wrote more comments on his notepad. Alexa got up and tried to approach the bed. The nurse raised a stop hand, and mouthed, *not yet, please*.

Trevor finished updating his notes. 'Becky, did Nadira tell you to buy razor blades?'

Slowly, Becky turned her body back. 'She sends them to me ... as gifts.'

'How many razor blades has she sent to you?'

Becky looked unsure. 'I don't know. A hundred ... maybe more.'

He lowered his voice to a whisper. 'Becky, did Nadira tell you to kill yourself?'

Becky's open hands rushed to cover her eyes. She swallowed hard, and squeezed out an almost inaudible. 'Yes.'

'Hugghh!' Alexa gasped.

She got up from her chair, spun around and stayed beside the chair. With her arms outstretched, Alexa put her palms on the wall. She pushed hard as if she wanted the wall down.

Trevor looked at Alexa, then back at Becky. 'Has Nadira ever told you to do that before tonight?'

Becky looked straight into Trevor's eyes. 'Yes.'

'How many times?'

Without hesitation, she replied, 'Many times. I can't remember how many.'

When Trevor stopped writing, he put his pen away. He put his soft hand on Becky's shoulder. She kept her gaze on his face.

'Listen closely, Becky. I'm here now. I'm in charge, not Nadira. When Nadira comes back, I want you to tell her, Trevor is in charge. Can you do that for me?'

Becky's face became fearful again. 'She'll be angry with me ... she'll say horrible things.'

He nodded to show he understood. 'I know she will, but that's fine. I can quell her anger. I'm on your side now. Together our voice will drown Nadira's voice. Soon, you won't hear her anymore. Will you trust me to do that?'

His smile reassured. Becky nodded her head gently. The tension in her body had eased as she kept her eyes on his face. She assessed him, wondering if he really had the power to quell Nadira.

He closed his notepad and tucked it under his arm. 'I want you to get some rest. Close your eyes. Remember you're safe in hospital. I'll call in on you later.'

Trevor gave instructions to the nurse then led Alexa out of the room. He walked with her along the corridor to a general purpose office. Alexa didn't know what felt more devastating—her daughter had already attempted suicide or she appeared under the control of a voice in her head.

An attractive fifty-one-year-old, Alexa had naturally straight, shoulder-length, ebony hair. Some close friends described her as sultry and untouchable with a mixture of sexuality and serenity.

Inside the office, he pulled over a chair for her. A theory had started to come together in Trevor's mind. He thought, *pretty mother and daughter, possible mother and daughter rivalry gone over the top.*

'Please, have a seat, Mrs Sommer. Can I get you anything?'

Alexa sat down. She shuddered as she shook her head. 'No thanks.'

'Is Becky's father on his way here? Do you want me to wait until he arrives?'

She shook her head. 'I haven't told him yet.'

Her reply surprised him. He scanned Becky's paperwork. 'I see you didn't put his contact details on the form.'

'We are in the process of separating.'

Trevor held his pen ready to add a note. 'Is there anything we should know about in terms of access?'

Reluctantly, she said, 'No. Sorry, Becky's father is a bit fragile at the moment. I don't think he could handle this right now. I'll tell him later. There are no access problems.'

He extracted the parent details sheet from the file, and placed it in front of her. He gave her a pen, and watched while she filled in the contact details for Milton Sommer. Her hand trembled as she wrote.

He smiled to reassure. 'Try not to worry. Becky is alive. We can help her to overcome her drive to self-harm.'

Alexa didn't hide her anguish. 'I feel really bad. These scars on her body, I didn't know she had those. I can't believe she kept this from me.'

He looked sympathetic. 'Becky will have done everything necessary to keep her secret from you. Tonight, she wanted you to know. That's good. At last, she wants your help.'

Alexa looked at his name badge. 'Thanks ... Doctor MacBlane.'

'Does your husband use thin double-edged razor blades?'

Alexa shook her head. 'No ... he uses an electric razor. Has always used an electric razor. We don't have those types of razors in the house. I don't think.'

He wrote some notes then looked up. 'I see ... and who is Nadira? Do you know?'

Alexa raised her eyebrows with confusion. 'I have no idea. None of her school friends are called Nadira. She has other friends in our local church. I don't know them. I've never heard her mention Nadira.'

'Is church important to her?'

'Yes. She's the only one in the family who attends regularly. Wait, isn't Nadira a figment of her imagination?'

Trevor leaned back in his chair, 'Maybe, but voices don't send razor blades. Have you ever found razor blades in her room?'

Alexa shook her head quickly. 'No. I didn't know she had them. She knows I use an electric razor for my legs. I assumed she used my electric razor when—'

'Normally, patients will acquire razor blades by their own means. It isn't difficult. It worries me she says Nadira sent them as gifts. Does she often receive gifts in the mail?'

Alexa seemed confused. 'I ... I don't know. She's always first home, she checks the mail.'

He flicked back through his notes. 'She said she had to be punished. Do you know why she would say that?'

Alexa looked to the side and sighed loudly. 'I can't understand where that is coming from.'

'Sorry to ask. Is she in any trouble at home?'

'No. She isn't in any trouble. Until tonight, I would say she'd been a perfect daughter.'

He made more notes on his pad. 'Are you aware of any other disruption in her life?'

'Well ... because of my work, we've had disruptive protestors at the gate. They're just a bunch of screaming loonies. My house security is top notch. They can't get near us. Mostly, we have a good laugh at them.'

'Protestors can be quite intimidating.'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'It's all focused on *me* because of my work. It's no more than an inconvenience. Water off my back. My family isn't bothered at all.'

'Have you noticed any recent change in Becky's behaviour?'

Alexa's eyes roamed slowly across the room, and then back to him. 'Recently, it seems she has been waiting for something. When the phone rings, she'd give an expectant look as if she thought it should be for her, but she would never pick up. I don't know why. I just thought it seemed odd.'

He looked up from his notepad. 'Becky is a pretty young woman. Any problems with boys or other girls?'

With a slight head shake, she said, 'She's always been a bubbly outgoing girl, until recently. Now, she's clingy. A bit of a loner. She had one really close friend for ten years. I don't know if they fell out, but I haven't seen her friend for more than a year.'

'Did they have a bad falling out? Maybe over a boy?'

Alexa became frustrated with her own lack of answers. 'I don't know. God! That sounds so terrible. What kind of mother am I? The thing is ... I've been busy, but we have always been able to talk. She's a born worrier, she worries about everything. I know she would tell me if something bad happened.'

He noticed hand fidgeting, and looks of irritation coming through. He assumed she felt guilt because she hadn't been aware of Becky's problems. 'Does she spend a lot of time on social media?'

Alexa reflected and mindfully restrained her irritation. 'She's sixteen, of course she does. I don't think she spends an excessive amount of time there.'

'Sometimes social media can be toxic. Has she made any special friends on the internet? Any problems with trolls or that sort of thing?'



'I don't know. She hasn't said anything to me. I'm sure she would tell me if she had that kind of trouble.'

*I'm not sure she would*, he thought. 'Often, the parents are the last to find out unless you actively screen her social media.'

Alexa sensed criticism in his tone. 'I don't look over her shoulder. She's a smart and responsible girl. I don't need to interfere.'

Trevor kept a concerned non-judgmental face as he talked, but he thought, *you don't know much about your daughter, Mrs Sommer. This is your wakeup call!*

He closed his folder. 'Not to worry, Mrs Sommer. We'll get to the bottom of what is troubling your daughter.'

## Three

Alexa perched on the edge of a green moulded plastic chair in the corridor outside Becky's room. She glanced up and down the corridor to look out for her son, Damian. A nurse brought her a cup of tea, and said, 'Becky has taken a sedative. She'll sleep right through the night. You should go home. Get some rest. Call first thing in the morning for an update.'

Alexa took the tea. 'Thanks. Will I be able to take her home tomorrow?'

'We'll see what the doctor thinks. I don't see why she couldn't go home tomorrow, if you have backup in place to look after her.'

Alexa drank her tea and stared at the wall opposite. Deep in thought, she tried to understand why her smart daughter had failed to live up to her potential. She searched her mind for clues. Seeking the point when things turned bad for Becky but nothing came to mind.

At this time of night, the corridor appeared quiet with fewer phones ringing, no visitors, and only a handful of people walking past. Two janitors pushed trolleys loaded with patient records and X-rays. They chatted and joked as they walked past. Alexa hadn't been in a hospital since Becky's birth, and for some reason she expected the atmosphere to be more solemn.

She lowered her head and moaned. Just because she felt pain, shouldn't mean everyone else must be miserable. She checked her mobile phone, deleted junk email, and deleted old texts. No new messages, so she played around with the settings for a while. When she had nothing else to do, she thought more about Becky.

With her eyes fixed on the beige vinyl floor, Alexa remembered the day of Becky's birth. A precious little angel had arrived, and seemingly five minutes later, Becky prepared for her last day at primary school. Her little girl had skipped into school with her scraped knees, scuffed shoes, and cockeyed school uniform.

Then, before Alexa could catch her breath, Becky stood at the threshold of her teenage years. Leaving primary school and joining high school seemed like such a profound moment for Becky. Frightening for some, but at that time, Becky had confidence and determination. She looked forward to the challenges of the 'big' school.

Milton shared Becky's excitement as she prepared to move to the high school. Alexa had been too busy, and too impatient. During Becky's childhood, Alexa had lurched from one milestone to the next, begging for Becky to sleep through the night, come off nappies sooner,

urging her to walk, talk, and let her and Milton have a long lie in. When school arrived, it felt like a relief to Alexa.

Alexa had wished her way through Becky's entire childhood. She wasn't ready for another hormonal teenager in the house. Becky's elder brother, Damian, had rattled Alexa with his life-changing issues. Alexa handled his transition from a confused boy to a gay man with insensitivity and indifference. She hoped he'd been going through a phase.

At Becky's primary school valediction ceremony, Milton wept because it signalled the end of a wonderful time of innocence and exploration. Becky had been a daddy's girl, and she would explore the world without him as a shield.

When she saw Milton's tears of pride, Becky rushed to his side. She put her arms around him. 'Daddy, don't worry. I'll be fine. It's only the big school.'

Alexa didn't attend Becky's valediction. She had missed all of Becky's milestones, and in many photographs of these events, she wasn't present. Now, as images of Becky's self-harming haunted her mind, she reflected on what she had missed when she rushed through Becky's childhood.

Alexa switched her gaze to the far end of the corridor, until her son, Damian, moved into her line of sight. He moved with the urgent speed of a young man searching the corridor.

When their eyes met, she saw a glazed look on his face. Her heart sank. She ran to him, her boots clipping on the floor, they hugged as she gently patted his back. People who walked past them, assumed they were dealing with bad news.

Three years older than Becky, Damian stood tall and thin with light brown hair cropped short. He had wonderfully expressive blue-green eyes to complement his infectious girly smile. He looked as though he should be hanging out at glitzy film premieres. He had recently left home to go to university, and had moved in with his boyfriend.

He had dressed in drainpipe jeans, with a pale pink tracksuit top, zipped one third of the way up to cover a lemon-coloured T-shirt. They were not the kind of clothes for Glasgow's cold January weather. Damian didn't dress to suit the weather, he dressed to impress the man in his life.

Holding onto each other, they walked over to the chairs outside Becky's room. He noticed the sharp smell of hand wash from her hands. Every corridor and every room in the hospital had gel hand wash dispensers.

He sat beside her. When their eyes met, he saw a fearfulness he had never seen before. It set his heart racing.

'Mum, what happened?'

Alexa hesitated before she replied in a low voice, 'Becky cut her legs with a razor. She tried to take her own life.'

Damian caught his breath. 'Hugggh! Oh, Mum. Not our little Becky.' He got up and started toward Becky's room. Alexa caught his arm. 'She's sleeping. Don't disturb her.'

The news stunned had him. 'I can't believe she would do that.'

He nudged his chair closer to her.

Alexa's face showed her concern. 'When did you last see her?'

'Last Wednesday, lunch time, we shared a meal deal. We talked about lots of things. Well, I talked. She seemed a bit quiet, I think ... now, I look back on it.'

Her voice sounded stressed. 'Becky has awful scars on her arms and legs. Did you know she tried to do this before?'

Damian gasped for breath. 'No! Of course not.'

He looked shocked. Probably the worst thing she could have said to him. Her look and tone made him feel guilty for not knowing. He welled up and tears streamed down his face.

As children, Becky and Damian were close. Although younger, she helped him through a difficult time in his life when he came out and announced he was gay.

Damian turned his body away from Alexa. He looked far away down the corridor. A powerful feeling of remorse gripped him for not spotting the warning signs. Becky had carefully hidden her feelings from her family. Shaking her head, sniffing loudly, Alexa fiddled with her phone.

Damian turned back. Rested his hand on her wrist. 'Have you told Gran and Grandpa?' His voice poised and mildly camp. A soothing voice honed over many years as a young teenager in defiance of his macho peers who thought him too 'girly'.

Her fingers brushed her open mouth. 'Not yet.'

Damian checked the time on his phone. 'When will Dad get here?'

With a slow head shake, Alexa said, 'I haven't called him. I need to make sense of this before I tell him. I can't understand why I didn't know she felt so unhappy. Why didn't she tell me?'

Damian searched his phone contacts. 'I'll do it. I'll call Dad and let him know.'

He got up to walk outside the building to make the call. Alexa beckoned him with her hand. 'Damian ... come back here. Your father has moved in with Uncle Jason.'

Damian sounded concerned. 'Uncle Jason, why?'

Alexa glanced away for a moment. 'Dad and I are working through our problems. We agreed to give ourselves space to think about the future.'

'When did this happen?'

Her attitude sharpened, and her eyebrows furrowed. 'It didn't just *happen*. It's been bubbling away for two years. We decided last weekend. Your father would move in with Jason until we sort things out.'

Damian rubbed the palms of his hands on his thighs. 'Does this have anything to do with me and my partner?'

'Of course not, your life is your own. It has nothing to do with you or Becky. I have come to a crossroad and I want to go in a different direction.'

His voice lowered to a whisper. 'When are you planning to divorce?'

'I'll be honest with you. I've done what I can to keep this family together, but it isn't working.'

Her bluntness upset him, but it wasn't a surprise. 'I know this is a busy time. You've been rushed off your feet with your new project. Maybe when the project has settled down, you'll have more time for the family.'

She took his comment as a sharp dig, but refused to argue back. In silence, they looked like two worried strangers uncertain what to say next.

He ground his teeth, and stared at the floor. When he came to terms with his sexuality, he had to find the courage to announce he was gay. Becky had stood at his side, holding his hand.

Now, Becky had heartache of her own. His mother seemed more concerned with her work. Guilt strangled his mind as he thought he should have known if Becky had been unhappy. He should have been at her side to comfort her.

Alexa saw mixed emotions on his face. She sensed Damian judging her for not knowing about Becky's problems, but she didn't want to kick off an argument in the hospital. When Damian got started, he could give as good as he got. He had a loud voice when raised in anger. She imagined him blaming her for everything wrong in the family. She bottled her anger. They sat in silence until Damian asked, 'What did the doctor say?'

Alexa took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. 'A paediatric psychiatrist has seen her. He will assess her again tomorrow morning. We'll see where we go from there.'

'Will she stay in here until she's better?' Damian asked.

She sounded clinical, almost uncaring. 'No. The doctor said the psychiatric wards are full. The best option is care at home. When we get her home, she'll need to be monitored around the clock. I've got to lock away all sharps and anything she could use to cut.'

Damian looked over to Becky's room. 'Oh Becky, I'll be there for you. I'll get you through this nightmare.'

His soft caring voice seemed to temper her sharpness. She said, 'I'll get Gran and Grandpa to come over. We'll share the watching time between us. We have to break her addiction.'

'What addiction?'

With sadness in her voice, she said, 'The psychiatrist said sharp pain from cutting her skin makes her brain produce morphine-like chemicals, called endorphins. Seems these chemicals made her feel good. She's addicted to these natural painkillers.'

He cupped his hand over his eyes, and sniffed loudly through his nose. 'God ... she must be hurting really bad for pain to make her feel better.'

'Well, I can't make sense of what she's done. I can't imagine what happened in her life to make her want to do this to her body. Really, she wants for nothing.'

Damian turned to look at his mother. His voice sounded determined. 'She'll tell me. We always talk about personal things. I'll find out why she's hurting.'

Alexa frowned, and sighed.

He saw her reaction. 'What?'

'Do you know if Becky has a church friend called Nadira?'

Damian gazed at the floor as he ran through names and faces. 'I haven't met all of her church friends. I know all her school friends. There is no Nadira, why?'

'I don't know yet. Nadira seems to be significant in Becky's life at the moment. There must be something.'

Damian thought hard. 'I wonder if the protestors have upset her again. She hates them blocking the gates to the house. Do you—'

Alexa snapped at him. 'It's not *that*. I've told her these people are cowards who would never dream of carrying out their threats. This Nadira, whoever she is, caused Becky to self-harm.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'Becky said Nadira had told her to commit suicide. At this point, we don't know if Nadira is real or imaginary.'

Damian sat back in his chair, and recalled. 'When I got called horrible names, Becky told me to create an imaginary friend. I created Basil, and when I felt sad, Basil and I used to sing the rhyme ... sticks and stones.'

'Whether Nadira is imaginary or real, she must be wicked and evil to tell Becky to self-harm.'

With an accusing tone, he said. 'We must find out if Nadira is real.'

Her eyes glared at him. 'You think I don't bloody know that?'

'Mum,' he squealed.

Alexa pulled him close for a hug. Reassured him with motherly pats on his back. She knew she'd upset him. Taking her anger out on Damian wasn't the right thing to do. And she didn't call her husband because a blazing three-way argument with harsh recriminations wouldn't help anybody.

'I'm sorry, Damian, this has come at a bad time for me. You're right, we will find out what caused Becky to self-harm. God help Nadira if she is real, because I won't hold back. For now, we have to be thankful Becky is safe. Care for her, and get her back on track.'

## Four

*January 21<sup>st</sup>*

The following morning, Alexa arrived early to sign the necessary forms. She brought fresh clothes for Becky. Trevor had agreed to release Becky when Alexa told him she had a support structure in place. She said her parents and her son would collect Becky, and take her home. She had not yet told Milton about what had happened to their daughter.

Damian and his grandparents arrived an hour after Alexa had left. They waited a further hour before the hospital released Becky. When Becky emerged, she clung to Damian as if she had been rescued from an earthquake. Strong painkillers and anti-inflammatory medication made it possible for her to walk slowly.

Their grandparents followed in confused silence. Alexa had told them almost nothing about what happened. They were sensitive enough not to ask Becky. During the drive to the hospital, Damian told them Becky had an accident at home.

\*

Alexa had returned home. Her mind had filled with other thoughts as she looked through her wardrobe. She had a meeting with her boss, Lord Sebastian Carluke, of Carluke Oil and Gas Exploration, at his palatial head office in the Merchant City district of Glasgow.

Alexa flipped through her wardrobe, trying to decide what to wear. Spoiled for choice thanks to Molly, her house nanny. Early in her working life, Alexa struggled to keep her home running smoothly while pursuing her career.

A friend offered a solution, Molly Dunn, a gregarious woman who cleaned the house, and more importantly, recycled the clothes for the whole family. She cut Alexa free from the rotating list of household demands.

Molly did all the washing, ironing and dry cleaning, and while the machines cleaned and dried the clothes, she did light cleaning around the house. Clothes magically returned to their wardrobes and drawers, washed and pressed. When Alexa opened her wardrobe, she had choices.

Outside, a cold dry day had settled, and she chose a dark grey business trouser suit, red blouse, red gloves, black cashmere coat, and a pair of low-heeled dark-red shoes. Alexa hurried like an excited teenager on a first date.

She walked out of Glasgow Central station, down Union Street, and into Argyll Street, heading for the Merchant City district.



In the afternoon brightness, she dodged and skirted around a throng of people walking in the opposite direction. At Marks & Spencer, she collided with a man walking out of the store and almost knocked him over.

With ten minutes to spare, she arrived at Lord Carluke's outer office. Her heart raced, but not for romance. Carluke had met senior civil servants and a government minister in London and Alexa felt anxious while she waited for news of the outcome.

Sebastian Carluke had lived Glasgow for all of his sixty-five years. His father, a Protestant Glaswegian from Paisley, had married an Irish Catholic from Cork, and they lived in a happy home of tolerance and love, despite religious bigotry on the streets where he grew up.

Sebastian went to all the weddings, funerals and functions on both sides of his family, and enjoyed a great diversity of belief and practice. He became a good diplomat, and kept a neutral position with both of the religions in his family.

He suffered from short-sightedness, and wore expensive designer spectacles. He had a square face with a jaw and dimple like the actor Kirk Douglas. His temples were grey, but he still had a thick head of hair. He wore expensive bespoke suits and handmade shoes.

Lord Carluke's PA, Georgina, welcomed Alexa with a smile. 'How are you?'

Alexa returned a weak smile. 'Fine, it's all good. How are you?'

'I'm fine. You look a bit peaky. Is everything all right?'

Alexa sighed, and looked away for a second. 'I didn't sleep much. There is so much hinging on this London meeting. Is he ready for me?'

Georgina flashed a look of disappointment. 'Unfortunately, he's running late. Delays out of Heathrow, he's not in the air yet.'

Alexa glanced over to his office door. 'Do you know if the news is good or bad?'

'He didn't say.'

Her excitement deflated, Alexa looked around Georgina's office. 'Okay. I'll wait in my office. Call me when you want me.'

Georgina nodded. 'I'll text you when he's landed at Glasgow. Buzz you when he's ready to see you.'

'Thanks, Georgina. Whose turn is it tomorrow?'

'Mine. I was thinking about the Rogano ... I fancy a bit of fish.'

'We haven't had lunch in the Rogano for ages, good choice.'

Georgina and Alexa became close friends when Alexa joined Carluke Oil more than twenty years ago. Until recently, the two families holidayed together. The husbands got on well, and their children became friends.

Desperate to find out the political and civil service reaction to her proposal, she pulled her phone from her bag. Her heart raced as she accessed her phonebook.

She wanted to call Carluke, but stopped and backed out of the phonebook. He wouldn't discuss confidential matters on a cell phone. Silly to think he would. *Relax, be patient*, she thought.

His flight from London to Glasgow had been further delayed, and late in the afternoon Georgina called Alexa to say Lord Carluke would become available for their meeting in ten minutes. She hurried upstairs to his office on the top floor of the building.

'Apologies for the delay, Alexa, congestion at Heathrow. We missed our slot,' he said as he welcomed her with open arms.

His eyes were bright, and he looked happy. Smiling eyes from Georgina confirmed what Alexa hoped. He led her to a corner of his office where he had two dark brown leather two-seater sofas facing each other with an antique coffee table between them. 'Would you like anything?'

She didn't. He told Georgina they were both fine. They sat opposite each other.

She spoke first. 'Thank you for seeing me.'

'How are the family, Alexa?'

She stared at the coffee table to gather her thoughts. 'Fine, they are doing well.'

'I hear Damian turned down Oxford to do architecture at Glasgow.'

'Yes. Thanks for writing references for him. He didn't want to move too far away from home.'

'At Glasgow, he should meet up with my grandson, Fraser Ashbourne. He's following the family footsteps into geology. I need to find some work for Fraser to do over the summer holidays.'

'Send Fraser to see me. I'll get him involved in research.'

'What about young Becky? Will she follow her mother's footsteps into science?'

Tension in her voice signalled impatience. 'Not sure yet, please forgive me. I'm bursting to find out how your meeting turned out.'

He smiled. 'Good, because I have excellent news for you. The politicians and their advisors will support our plans for shale gas exploration. Your brilliant report stunned them for six. They'll give us tax relief to assist with exploration costs.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Finally, they understand that windmills cannot produce cheap gas.'

He nodded to acknowledge her enthusiasm. 'They desperately need the fuel tax revenues. They need an energy policy to survive the dwindling output of North Sea oil.'

She rubbed her hands together, and let out a short excited laugh. 'Great. I couldn't ask for more.'

His relaxed smile showed deep laughter lines around his mouth. 'So it's full steam ahead with your project. I'm preparing an investment package. Financial institutions are keen to have a slice of the cake.'

She wriggled in her chair. Anxious to get out and pass on the good news. 'Brilliant. The country needs to secure these resources for the future.'

He held up a single finger. 'There is one caveat.'

She gaped with surprise. 'Good grief, only one? I thought there would be a hundred strings.'

'The politicians will not get involved in the public backlash against fracking technology. They've made it clear, it is up to the industry. We must convince the public that exploration and recovery of unconventional shale gas is safe. Head off the environmental sceptics.'

Alexa laughed softly. 'I knew this would happen. I've been dealing with protestors for more than a year. Extremist nutcases are not going to stop me. Don't be concerned. I'll deal with them.'

'You are the UK face of this technology. A great deal of the backlash burden has fallen on your shoulders. It will get worse, and more vitriolic. You must get the public on our side. We need to secure planning consent for exploration licences. Are you sure you can deal with more protest?'

Her eyes sharpened. Confidence oozed from her voice. 'I'm not intimidated by noise and placards. My house is secure. If the alarm goes off, the police response time is under three minutes. I'm perfectly well prepared to deal with more protest. Bring it on!'

'Good. We must get the strategy correct to minimise adverse publicity and resistance to our exploration work.'

'Everything will be fine. The protestors will fall off my back when the number of jobs in the industry hits the tens of thousands.'

His expression agreed. 'Yes, but we must get the project off the ground. This is when we are most vulnerable. A significant hostile response could frighten the politicians. Investors would disappear like snow off a car roof in spring.'

She smiled. 'I understand. What do you want me to do?'

'I want you to head up a PR office to handle those backlash protestors.'

She broke off eye contact. Sat back in the sofa, disappointed. 'I'm flattered, sir, but I'm a research scientist. PR is not my area of expertise.'

His features sharpened to show her he had already made up his mind. 'Let me be blunt, Alexa. You have the brains, and the appeal to win over the media. You have already convinced sceptical politicians and civil servants to support your project. You are the right person to head up the PR. Your office will have four PR specialists to do the legwork. All you need do is approve their plans, and be the public face of this project.'

She leaned forward. Faced him with an equally sharp expression. 'What about my research? I'm testing a new fracking fluid. It will overcome the environmental objections.'

He patted the air with his open hands, and conceded a little. 'I'm aware of your new fluid. I've heard great things about it. But if we don't win the PR battle with environmentalists, we won't have the opportunity to show it off.'

Her posture sagged. She looked disappointed. 'I can't give up my research.'

He looked sympathetic while he thought. 'You're already doing the PR job. Your idea to design new bespoke fluids tailor-made for UK soil is a brilliant PR move. It will take the sting out of the protestor claims about pollution.'

She pointed a downward index finger to the coffee table to press her point. 'That is exactly why I must keep my research going. I'm on the brink of a discovery that will transform our industry. I can't let go. I understand the PR situation is critical, but my research is too important to me. I can't get it out of my head.'

Carluke sat back. He gazed at the face of a large portrait of his father on the wall, behind her left shoulder. He suppressed a sigh. 'I hear you, Alexa. Okay, a compromise. I'll find a way for you to keep one hand on your research, and one hand on the PR office. But if I feel you're not keeping both balls in the air, I must insist you focus on the PR. Pick up your research once the environmental battle is won. Do you agree?'

Her expression perked up. 'If you give me good PR people. I'll manage them.'

'Done.'

He instinctively offered his hand to shake on their agreement. They both smiled as they shook hands on the deal. He said, 'I must have a powerful voice to defend our industry. The environmental movement in the UK is deeply opposed to fracking. You will convince them to think otherwise.'

A tight-lipped confident smile briefly split her face. 'I'll do my best to make it happen.'

'I expect you to succeed, Alexa. You know how much I believe in your ability.'

He admired her composure in a crisis. He envied her ability to look perfectly calm on the surface when he knew she paddled furiously underneath. In business meetings, she always exerted her authority, and always showed great confidence.

They both got up. He walked to his desk. She walked to the door. Before he sat down, he picked up a book from his desk. 'I hear your book on hydraulic fracking technology is being adopted as an academic textbook. How is your second book coming along?'

Alexa looked and sounded frustrated. 'After the success of the first book, I thought a second would be easy. The technical content is excellent, but I've spent a huge amount of time re-writing bad English. I'm glad it's done.'

Carluka smiled at her frustration. 'A compendium of fracking technology methods is a brilliant idea. It's going to be extremely well received. Gathering top-class international contributors to produce a keynote methods book would never be easy. You've done it. My friends in academia think you deserve an honorary doctorate for what you've done for our industry.'

She said, 'That would be a nice accolade for the company.'

He leaned back in his chair. 'Success in shale gas recovery will be good for the country and the company. You, my dear, will become the most important oil and gas executive in Western Europe.'

'I want Carluka to take its rightful place at the top table in our industry. I will take us there.'

He nodded his approval. 'I'm proud the board have endorsed you as the next chairman. You are the ideal person to take over when I retire in three years. No-one is in any doubt. My only worry is the Americans will tempt you away with a stupendous offer I can't match.'

With a smile, she shook her head. 'Nothing of the kind will divert me from my goal. Carluka Oil will become a FTSE 100 company under my chairmanship. I want to be the CEO of a FTSE 100 company more than anything else. It's the first thing on my mind when I wake every morning. It's what I've dreamt of since I joined the company. Nothing and no-one will stop me from making my dream a wonderful reality.'

'I'm glad to hear it. Russell did a wonderful job preparing you for a business career. I would be truly grateful if you could guide my grandson, Fraser.'

'I'm happy to embrace succession planning. I'll coach Fraser, and make sure he'll be ready to take over from me as chairman.'

'Perfect. Thank you, Alexa.'

Before he retired, Russell Lauderman owned and ran his own business. Rather than pay for Alexa to attend a pre-school kindergarten, he took her to work every day. By the time Alexa started high school, she loved working in her father's business.

She spent teenage school holidays working for her father. He paid her like any other employee, including performance bonuses. Lauderman Technical Service Ltd provided analytical geophysical survey for international oil companies. Alexa cut her teeth at the sharp end of the oil services industry.

## Five

Russell and Liz Lauderaman sat at a table in Alexa's square-shaped kitchen. Becky and Damian went to Becky's room to talk, taking tea and biscuits with them. They hadn't said much in front of their grandparents. Her clothes covered the bandages and scars, and she looked normal as if nothing serious had happened.

Russell, got up and looked out through the kitchen door to be sure Becky and Damian were upstairs before he sat down beside Liz. He whispered, 'What did Alexa tell you?'

Liz spoke quietly. 'Just that Becky had been taken to hospital. She had a meeting with Carluke—wanted us to pick her up.'

'I think Damian knows, but I couldn't get him alone to ask what happened.'

Liz pursed her lips, and pushed her glasses onto her nose. 'Obviously, she hasn't been in a car accident. So, I wonder ... a procedure, maybe?'

'What do you mean?'

Liz raised her eyebrows. 'An abortion?'

He shook his head to disagree. 'Can't be. She's far too religious.'

'Maybe, Alexa has forced her to go through with it.'

Russell slumped in his seat. 'Oh God, do you think that's why Alexa hasn't told us?'

Liz said, 'Has to be something. If she had a broken leg, she'd say "Becky broke her leg", wouldn't she? Another thing, she told me not to contact Milton.'

'Do you think Milton is against Becky having an abortion? Is that why he doesn't know?'

With a slow steady head shake, she said, 'Poor girl. I don't know. We'll have to wait until Alexa tells me what happened.'

\*

Upstairs, Becky sat up on her bed to keep her legs straight. Damian covered her legs and waist with her duvet. He sat on the edge of the bed, beside her, and handed her a cup of tea. She only took one sip before she handed it back to him. He put the cup down on her bedside table. They both stared down at the brightly coloured duvet. Neither of them wanted to speak first.

He cocked his head until she turned to look at him. They looked into each other's eyes, and he said, 'That was a bit hairy-scary, monster fairy, stealing cheese from Muggin's dairy.'

A small smile cracked her lips, brittle, but a smile none the less. She said nothing. They continued to look into each other's eyes. They played this game many times as children. First

to blink was a sissy. He always blinked first on purpose. He wanted to be the sissy. She broke off eye contact.

He thought about what he wanted to ask. He wanted to come straight out with it. Ask her why she self-harmed. But he saw her body tense up in anticipation of his questions. He didn't want her to burst into tears.

He said, 'Honey, tell me, how do you feel?' he asked in his smooth poised voice.

She shrugged half-heartedly. 'I don't know ... it's like my feelings are too massive to hold in my body. I needed to let them out.'

He tucked his fingers into her hand, and squeezed gently. With his other hand, he stroked her long hair. He had always called her Honey because of her soft honey-blonde hair.

Becky had grown into a beautiful young lady with sparkling blue eyes. She had her mother's good looks, a fresh face, and a nubile figure. She had taken her father's height at five six in her bare feet. She had a soft voice like a child.

'Do you remember when I landed in a bad place, trying to understand why I felt different? Why I wanted your toys and your things, why I liked boys?'

Becky nodded, and her eyes softened as she remembered. He put his arm around her, and said, 'You were so good to me, so understanding. Another girl would have fought me for her toys. I'll never know how I would have coped if you hadn't been there to tell me everything would be all right.'

She said, 'You would have made it.'

'All those Sundays we had to go to Sunday school. You gained strength from your faith. You have God, I don't, I couldn't find my place.'

She leaned forward. He moved his arm back. 'God loves all of his children. You are generous and kind. You have a loving soul. I know God loves you. The Sunday school teacher shouldn't have chastised you because of your feelings for boys.'

Tears pooled in his eyes. Becky wiped a tear track from his face. She had done that for him many times in the past.

Becky said, 'Don't cry. You're past all of that now.'

Deep emotions strained his voice. 'I wasn't here for you when you were hurting. I can't forgive myself. I should have stayed in this house to protect you.'

Her voice sounded stronger. 'You're free. I'm glad you escaped the house.'

He wiped tears from his eyes with his fingers. 'Let me be here for you now. Tell me what I need to do. I can't bear to think of you dealing with this on your own.'

With a pained expression, she said, 'I'll manage.'



He looked into her eyes. 'Please let me help. Is this about Mum? Has she done something?'

With a quick head shake, she said, 'She isn't around to do anything. You know that.'

He nodded his head to agree. 'I know. After my birth, she only hung around for six weeks before she went back to work. Dad told me. When you were born, she went back to work after only two weeks. Carrey always came before either of us.'

Becky patted his upper arm. Her eyes and posture looked much stronger. 'It dawned on me one afternoon when I visited Katelyn's house. Her mother always talked to the kids, helped with homework, did school runs, and fussed about the right clothes. I knew then I couldn't compete with Carrey. Where is Mum anyway?'

Damian sniggered with surprise. 'Where do you think? Carrey needs her. Carrey always needs her. She only has room for one child in her life. It's not you or me.'

When they were young, Damian and Becky discovered their mother had three children in her life. They gave their virtual sibling a secret name, Carrey, and often when they were alone, they berated Carrey for constantly taking their mother away from them.

She sighed. 'Mum knows how to make me feel empty and isolated. Why is Dad not here?'

'I don't think she's told him. What do you think about them getting a divorce?'

Her mood darkened, heartache and gloom took over. 'They've had horrible fights recently. When he moved out of the house, he didn't tell me he was leaving. He didn't say goodbye. The house has been so desolate since he moved out. I miss him. Maybe, he thinks I'm driving them apart.'

'Oh, Honey, don't think that. Their divorce and their problems have nothing to do with you or me.'

She looked uncertain. 'I don't know what to think.'

He said, 'They never argue about you or me. It's always about her work and his lack of ambition. She wants him to become something. He wants her to be the woman he married.'

She said, 'A divorce will mean even more time for Carrey. Less time for the family?'

He laughed out loud. 'Carrey will always come before us. Since Mum got her MBA, she's had only one thing on her mind, the top job. If she doesn't become the next CEO at Carluke, I'll eat my underpants.'

She laughed. 'Really? I'll remember you said that.'

Her laughter dissipated as quickly as it had come. She lowered her head. Her mind dealing with more negative thoughts.

With an index finger under her chin, he gently lifted her head until she looked at him. 'Why don't you come and stay with me for a while? You can stay in the guest room when it's free. Sleep on our futon when we have a house guest.'

She shook her head. 'Gooseberry again? No thanks.'

'It won't be like that. I promise. We'll give you plenty of space. It certainly won't be desolate in our house.'

Becky had stayed overnight at Damian's two weeks ago, and slept on the futon. She had been woken after midnight by his singing. She looked up to investigate, wiped sleep from her eyes to see Damian in the middle of the room, naked. He danced and pirouetted around his partner while singing 'I'm in the nude for love'. His antics were funny, and embarrassing in equal measure.

'I can't. I've got hospital appointments to attend, and I'll be on more of these meds,' she said, and nodded to the three bottles of tablets sitting on her bedside table.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. Squeezed his eyes shut for a second. 'What did the hospital say about the scars, will they fade eventually?'

She looked offended, defensive. 'The physical scars?'

'Yes, sorry—I meant—I mean.'

He immediately knew he'd said something stupid. Of course she would have mental scars. They would take a long time to go away. She saw regret on his face. She smiled to let him know she wasn't upset with him.

She said, 'It's all right. I know what you mean.'

He looked upset. 'If you want to talk, you know I'll listen. The only thing I'll say about what happened is—I believe you. I'll always understand you, no matter what.'

She patted his knee. 'Thanks, my amazing big brother. I've always felt safe with you, even when I was little. You always rushed over to pick me up when I fell down. I remember that just as if it happened yesterday.'

He smiled as he remembered. 'Well ... really, I had to run because you fell down a lot. Bumped into almost everything.'

She laughed softly. 'I remember the day you took all my toys into your room. We had a lot of fun playing together. We had fun, didn't we?'

'I remember you, in your sparkly little tutu forest fairy outfit, shuffling along in Mum's high-heel black patent sling-backs, with red lipstick smeared on your face instead of on your lips. You had all the toys I wanted, but they wouldn't buy them for me.'

She clasped her hands, rested them on her lap. Rubbed her thumb into the palm of the opposite hand. 'Well, they've all gone to a charity shop. Mum cleared all of them out. She didn't ask me. I'm lucky she didn't clear me out with them.'

A sneaky smile formed on his face. He side-glanced the door as if to check he wouldn't be overheard. 'Erm ... not all of them, I took some with me when I left.'

'Really?'

Her eyes lit up as she unclasped her hands, and clapped them together.

'I have Baby Jakey, and some of Baby Jakey's things. I have Ready Teddy Go, Princess Leia, and four of your other teddy bears.'

They burst out laughing. He kissed her gently on the cheek. 'I'm so glad to see you laughing. When I first saw you in the hospital, I felt so incredibly sad.'

She said, 'I know. I'm really happy you came to pick me up. Gran and Gramps are nice, but distant, like Mum and Dad.'

He looked keen to help. 'Please. Is there anything I can do to make sure you'll be all right?'

'What do you mean?'

His eyes enquired. 'Is there someone I could beat up or shut up? Is someone breaking your heart? If you need payback, I'll do it for you.'

She felt embarrassed as she switched her gaze to a corner in the room. 'No, don't ... just let me ... have my toys back.'

Normally, he read signals quickly but he felt confused. This time he didn't. 'Mum said someone called Nadira had upset you. Who is she? I've never met her.'

Becky immediately clammed up, her face fearful. She pushed him off the bed, slipped under the duvet. Pulled it over her head for darkness. Damian covered his mouth with his shaking hand. He sucked air in through his fingers as he looked at the figure under the duvet.

He sat down on a chair beside the window. She wasn't to be left alone. He decided not to try and talk to her. Whatever had driven her to self-harm, it had something to do with Nadira. He planned to speak to every one of her friends. Find Nadira. Find out what she did to Becky.

With sadness, he looked back at her body trembling under the duvet. The sister he loved had changed. He wasn't sure he would ever get her back.

\*

In the following months, Becky spent short periods in a psychiatric ward, whenever a bed became free, followed by periods at home with family monitoring her behaviour. After each hospital period, Alexa had met with the psychiatrist for an update on Becky's progress.

With an out-patient treatment regime in place for Becky, she attended a series of sessions with hospital psychiatrists. They gave her anti-depression drugs. Alexa believed Becky had started on a process of recovery.

Alexa had met six different doctors. None of them offered any hope. Instead, they increased Becky's medication. Each new psychiatrist gave Alexa the same prognosis, expect a long journey. They said there would be highs and lows. Becky would seem back to normal, and then without warning, she would descend rapidly into depression.

With each month that passed, Becky showed no significant improvement. Each new bout of depression seemed worse than the one before.

\*

When Damian questioned Becky's church friends, Nadira panicked, and fled Glasgow. She returned home to Harrogate, North Yorkshire.

Nadira's husband sounded angry. 'Woman, why are you here?'

She immediately threw her body at his feet. Begged for forgiveness. Terrified, she pleaded quietly to his feet. 'Please forgive me, my husband.'

He raised his enraged voice. 'Have you done this simple thing for me?'

Her voice trembled with fear. 'Please forgive me ... my husband. I tried hard ... to do your bidding.'

'*Why* have you returned?'

'The child's brother is trying to find me. I feared I would be discovered. I had to flee.'

'I *told* you not to return until you completed your work. You have disobeyed me. You have dishonoured me. I must punish you. Fetch my rule.'

She got up, hurried over to a drawer, and fetched his rule of thumb. She handed it to him as she got down on her hands and knees in front of him, like a dog.

For her disobedience, he struck her five times across her back with his rule of thumb. A hard cane, no longer than his forearm, and no thicker than his thumb as specified by law.

She didn't scream or cry. She knew from previous beatings that the stinging pain would ease. She got up, lowered her eyes to the floor, and withdrew her body into a submissive posture. She felt a trickle of blood run down her back. She whispered, 'May I spend a little time with the children?'

'No. You will go to my aunt and thank her for bringing up my children in your absence. You will tell her you failed to complete your work in Glasgow. You will apologise most profusely for imposing on more of her time.'

'When shall I leave?'

He wrote a name and address on a piece of paper. 'Obviously, I was wrong to think an imbecile woman could do this work alone. Go to this address. This woman will show you how to complete your work.'

'Thank you, my husband. I will go to this woman for help. I will return to Glasgow. I will finish my work with the girl.'

'Do this to earn my forgiveness. Do this, and you will once again be the mother of my children. Fail me, and you will face final punishment. Fail me, and I will take a more obedient wife.'

## Six

*TEN MONTHS LATER*

*November 24th*

While Alexa waited outside Glasgow Sheriff Court, she admired its sand-coloured Danish granite entablature and column facings. Milton had gone to the toilet when they came out of the court offices.

Alexa had submitted an initial writ to begin divorce proceedings. The court had granted a warrant to serve the writ on Milton Sommer. The two of them had attended court to dispense with the normal period of notice.

They provided affidavits confirming the reason for the divorce, confirmation that finances and property were uncontested, and there were no children under sixteen to accommodate. Milton had already moved out of the family home, and Becky continued to live with her mother.

Milton appeared from the building, shaking his head as he walked over to Alexa. His face pale and anxious. Milton looked older than his fifty years of age, with thin white hair, and a distinctive chubby face.

Over the past year, he put on forty pounds, and now looked overweight. He had a prominent Roman nose and blue eyes. He'd been an open and friendly person before they decided to divorce. Now, he stopped going out, stopped keeping fit, and he'd become a recluse.

He looked back at the court building. 'I didn't think it would be so simple to end a marriage. Sad, isn't it?'

Alexa's eyes were downcast. 'I made sure all the paperwork had been completed exactly as required. No hiccups. Now, at last, we are free to get on with our own lives.'

He cocked his head to try and engage her gaze. 'Did we really try hard enough to keep the family together?'

She sounded formal as if talking to a colleague. 'We did try. Now it's time to move on. At least we won't be arguing all the time. If you want to stay at the bottom of your pile ... so be it. It's no longer my concern.'

He shook his head with disappointment. 'People think we're mad. It's not as if we have money problems or one of us has had an affair.'

Unconcerned, she said, 'I don't care what people think. I do care about my future. If you can't get behind my career, then I'm better off alone.'

He said, 'I want to come over tonight to see Becky.'

'Okay, but you know she's no further forward.'

With a confused look, he ran his fingers through his hair. 'I don't understand why she can't tell us what caused her to self-harm.'

She frowned. 'The doctors say she's not yet ready to talk about the events that led to her self-harming. They say it comes down to toxic social media, peer pressure, adolescence or the usual teenage worries. I'm fed up with their lack of progress.'

He tried to sound upbeat. 'On the positive side, she has had almost one year without further self-harming.'

Alexa nodded to agree. 'True, but I still want to know why she did it.'

He said, 'I'll try to speak to her tonight.'

Alexa checked her watch. 'Okay, I need to go. I don't want to keep them waiting. See you later.'

Alexa walked briskly to a nearby car park. Milton watched her until she turned a corner.

Alexa drove to Hairmyres Hospital to collect Becky. She had spent four days on the ward for assessment and evaluation. Alexa sat in a general office, and listened to the same story she'd heard from previous psychiatrists. No significant change, no progress. Her own family doctor had told her that mental health care had become the Cinderella service of the health service because it had been neglected, and under-funded.

In frustration, Alexa turned her body away from facing the psychiatrist. She looked through a glass panel and saw Becky waiting in the corridor. She looked half asleep and lethargic. Drugged and subdued as usual. *That is why she hasn't self-harmed again*, Alexa thought. Alexa decided she'd heard enough medical platitudes.

'Thank you for your time, I'll take her home now.'

Alexa's tone implied the doctor had wasted her time. She slipped out of her seat, and walked to the door. Smiled and waved to Becky. When she put her hand on the door handle, the doctor said, 'Mrs Sommer.'

When Alexa looked back, his eyes pointed to a white paper bag sitting on his desk. It contained two months' supply of meds for Becky. With a grim face, she stepped back, and snatched the bag from his desk.

In the corridor, Alexa hid her frustration. She put her arm around Becky and guided her out of the hospital. They walked slowly. Alexa thought the psychiatrists were either too busy

or didn't want to know why she self-harmed. After ten months of no progress, Alexa believed the health professionals had failed Becky.

Alexa drove out of the hospital, and turned to face her daughter. 'Are you looking forward to your seventeenth birthday party? I've got—'

Becky looked sad and withdrawn. 'I don't want a party.'

She pushed slowly against her seat belt, until her head almost touched the dashboard. 'The drugs are killing me. I want off the drugs.'

Alexa frowned and glanced at Becky. 'I don't think that is a good idea.'

Becky rocked back and forward in her seat. 'I won't get better with drugs. I want to try another way.'

'What other way?'

Becky pleaded. 'I want to see a homeopath.'

'A homeopath? I don't think so.'

Becky stopped rocking her body. With fierce eyes, she faced her mother. 'The doctors don't want to help. They want to keep me drugged. I don't want their drugs.'

Alexa groaned loudly. Several times, she had asked when the drug treatment would stop. She'd been given various excuses, but no end date. Worryingly, they had twice increased the dosage because Becky became more tolerant.

With a tight-lipped smile, Alexa side-glanced Becky. 'I'll see what I can find out about homeopathy. How did you hear about it?'

Becky said, 'One of my friends came up to visit. We've been talking over the past couple of months. She knows a homeopath called Marsha Moonblood. Marsha has a practice in Kelvinside, near the Kelvin Hall.'

Alexa tried to keep her voice supportive. 'Okay, I'll look into it.'

Becky raised her voice. 'I *want* an appointment with Marsha. I want to get better. Drugs are poisoning my mind. Please, Mum, please ... help me.'

Alexa remained adamant. 'I *will* look into it. That's all I'm promising just now.'

Alexa wanted to research homeopathic mental health treatment, but with an escalation of her own work, she had no time. Becky became more anxious, more demanding, and stopped sleeping through the night. Alexa agreed to visit Marsha Moonblood and find out what she had to offer.

A week later, Alexa drove Becky to Marsha's home and place of business. When Marsha's door opened, Alexa saw a woman in her late fifties with long iron-grey hair. An



overweight and slow moving woman with a nicely reassuring smile and rose-tinted glasses. She appeared friendly and Becky liked her.

On first impressions, Alexa thought Marsha looked like a Romany Gypsy. Marsha had an East London accent, and her flat had a faint smell of mood-enhancing incense.

Marsha's weekly fees were modest, and Alexa agreed to a four-week treatment. By the end of the second week, Alexa saw a new brightness in Becky. At least, she no longer looked and behaved like a zombie.

\*

After three months of Marsha's support, Becky had responded well. Almost back to normal, she had reduced her medication, and she enjoyed a happy Christmas. As the end of February approached, Alexa met Marsha, and they discussed a new strategy of intensive therapy.

Alexa liked Marsha's plan for Becky to be free of drugs, and then confront the issue that had caused Becky to self-harm. Alexa agreed, and Becky moved into a spare room in Marsha's flat. Marsha began a deeper therapy to completely remove Becky's need for drug medication.

Alexa visited Becky at weekends, and became increasingly optimistic about her future. Marsha had stabilised Becky, and Alexa felt confident she had started on the road to recovery.

Then, in March, four weeks after Becky had moved into the flat, Marsha called Alexa at Carluke Oil. Georgina took the call as Alexa had been chairing a meeting. Georgina pulled her out of the meeting to take the call. Alexa and Georgina walked back to Georgina's office. Alexa asked, 'What does she want?'

With a quick head shake, Georgina said, 'I don't know. She said it was a private family matter. I know she's helping Becky, so I thought it best to pull you out of the meeting.'

Alexa sounded apologetic. 'Marsha, sorry to keep you waiting.'

'Mrs Sommer. I must speak with you today—without fail.'

Alarmed at Marsha's urgent tone, Alexa raised her voice. 'What's happened to Becky?'

Marsha dropped her voice a few notches. 'Nothing, Becky is fine. We need to talk.'

Alexa relaxed. 'I'm in the middle of an important business meeting. I'll drop by your flat on the way home.'

Marsha made her voice stronger. 'I don't think you understand. I've discovered the source of Becky's pain. The reason for her self-harming. You should be here for her.'

Alexa stared at Georgina with her eyebrows raised, and her mouth open slightly. 'Oh, right ... okay ... erm ... I'll be there as soon as I can.'

Marsha refused to say more on the phone. Alexa couldn't stop thinking she would soon discover why Becky self-harmed. Although in the middle of a critical meeting with her PR staff, she sent Georgina to close the meeting. Alexa gathered her things, and made her way to Marsha's tenement flat.

As she drove her car, she felt a great relief. Finding out why Becky had self-harmed would bring a sense of closure. She welcomed the peace it would bring to the family.

Marsha lived in the Kelvinside district of Glasgow. She had rented a third-floor flat of a four-storey building. It overlooked the magnificent Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum. Alexa knew the quickest route to the red sandstone Spanish Baroque-styled building in the West End of Glasgow.

As she drove past the building, she remembered the popular myth that the building had been built back to front by mistake. Years ago, on one of her visits to the museum, Alexa questioned a curator. He told her the front entrance had been purposely designed to face into Kelvingrove Park, and not the main road.

Alexa climbed the stairs, and then paused outside Marsha's door to regain her breath, organise her thoughts. When she felt ready, she rang the bell and waited. Marsha pulled the door open, and welcomed Alexa into her large three-bedroom flat.

In the dark living room, the walls were covered in red flock paper, and the furniture added a distinct sixties feel to the room. Dark curtains restricted the amount of light, and a smell of incense hung in the air.

Near the window, on a small carpet laid out on dark red laminate floor, Becky sat upright in a yoga siddhasana position. She stared straight ahead, and didn't look at her mother.

Marsha escorted Alexa to a chair in the opposite side of the room. 'Sit down here, Mrs Sommer.'

Alexa looked all over the room, and then looked at Becky. She expected Becky to be tearful, and distressed, after confronting the reason for her self-harming.

## Seven

*March 22<sup>nd</sup>*

Marsha shut the living room door, and stood between Becky and Alexa like a boxing referee. Marsha stood the same height as Alexa, but near enough twice her weight. Alexa looked closely at Becky who appeared to be in a trance.

Marsha stood in front of Alexa. 'Becky has written a statement. I'm going to read it to you. Please don't interrupt.'

Alexa leaned to the side to look past Marsha. 'Becky. What's going on?'

'Mrs Sommer. Please allow me to read this statement. You'll find out what's been going on.'

Marsha cleared her throat. 'I've been an unhappy child for as long as I can remember. I have been brought up in an evil home, and every week of my life has been traumatic and frightening. I thank Marsha Moonblood, from the bottom of my heart, for her understanding. Marsha helped me to strip away the toxic outer layers of my unhappy life, and allow the purity of my true inner self to shine through.'

Alexa shook her head quickly to disagree. 'Becky, that is complete nonsense.'

Marsha raised her voice. 'I have been abused by my father since I was ten years old. The abuse started six weeks after my tenth birthday. The first time it happened in the changing rooms of the swimming baths. It started with him touching me, and him making me touch him. It continued once or twice each week, then after many months, in my bedroom, he lost control, and raped me, then—'

Stunned and shocked, Alexa said, 'No!'

She covered her mouth with her hand, and couldn't believe what she'd heard. Marsha read out details of sexual abuse incidents Becky had recalled.

Marsha handed the statement to Alexa. Her hands trembled as she looked at the paper. She couldn't focus to read. She felt her head spinning, and she couldn't think straight. She felt she'd been in a car crash, and sat waiting for someone to tell her what happened.

Marsha said, 'Becky acquired these toxic layers as a direct result of years of painful manipulation. The abuse drove her to self-harm because she felt overwhelming guilt. Once I got rid of her guilt, Becky could detail the incidents she endured.'

Alexa's mind froze, numbed by the graphic descriptions including rape. Her body felt out of control. Nausea made her feel sick. She recognised Becky's handwriting and signature.

Staring at the statement, Alexa stumbled over her words. 'Whu ... whu why have you never told me any ... of this?'

Becky continued to look ahead, unmoved as Alexa became upset with the revelations. Anger and disgust took hold as Alexa's eyes locked on the word rape.

Marsha handed a typed paper to Alexa. 'Becky will need intensive therapy to heal her body and mind.'

The paper contained an itemised list of treatments and prices. The cost totalled more than thirty-five thousand each year for three years. Alexa held both pieces of paper in front of her face. Confusion racked her mind as her eyes fixed on the total cost. She flipped her wrist and let the typed paper fall from her hand.

Alexa moved her head into Becky's line of sight. 'Becky, talk to me, what the hell is this?'

Marsha looked insulted as her list landed on the floor. 'I hope you will put Becky's recovery first. Don't force her to sue you for money to repair the damage your family inflicted on her,' she said as she bent down to pick up her list.

For once in her life, Alexa struggled to find something to say, but she knew what she wanted to do. She wanted to drag Becky to see her father. Have him face her while she read out the accusations. She got up from the chair, and approached Becky. 'Get up, Becky. You're coming with *me*. Now.'

Marsha immediately pushed her imposing bulk between them. Stopped Alexa in her tracks. At first Becky didn't seem to react. Then, her eyes moved. She appeared to come out of her trance. She looked angrily at her mother. 'No. I'm *not* safe in your evil house. I'm safe *here*.'

Marsha took Alexa by the arm, led her to the hall, and then closed the living room door behind her. 'Look, Mrs Sommer, I know this is a shock. It shocked me too. The meditation and relaxation treatments have empowered Becky to discover the root of her self-harming. She now remembers long-repressed memories of sexual abuse. Horrible, horrible memories for that little girl. I haven't been able to sleep since she recounted the details to me.'

Alexa slowly shook her head with disbelief. 'It's impossible. How could this happen in my home, and I not know?'

'You need to believe your daughter or your rejection will send her deeper into the farthest corner of her mind. She will *never* come out.'

Alexa regained her thoughts. 'I don't understand. Milton, I mean, he's not a predator.'

'In my experience, those who expertly hide their true desire are the worst offenders. He abused your daughter. She has remembered the details.'

Alexa turned away from Marsha. 'I can't fathom this. How could he do this, and I didn't see it in Becky's behaviour?'

Marsha stepped around to face Alexa. 'He threatened to drag her out to the garden, strip her naked, and set her on fire. Every night, she feared for her life. She self-harmed by cutting her body to try and put him off. Each time he hurt her, she made a new cut on her leg. You saw those cuts and scars.'

Alexa remembered a vivid image of Becky's legs. 'Oh my God, I know ... I know!'

Marsha spoke with authority. 'I understand you've divorced her father, and he's not in the family home. I think that you made the right decision for your daughter, but she's frightened he will return and attack her again.'

Alexa felt anxious as terrible thoughts formed in her mind. She felt trapped in a dark corridor, with all the doors locked tight. Unable to think clearly about the things Marsha had said about Milton.

Marsha's voice remained calm and reassuring. 'I have a great deal of experience working with abused children, and sadly Becky is one of them. Becky's self-harming is consistent with her being a survivor of incest. Memory repression and self-harming are common coping mechanisms for abused children.'

Alexa looked confused. 'What will happen now? What can I do?'

'I understand you have an important job with Carluke Oil. Your time is under great pressure. I can give Becky as much time as it takes to heal her mind.'

Alexa understood, and nodded. 'I need to do more. I should be there for her. I should be helping her to heal.'

Marsha's eyes widened and she relaxed her posture. 'I have gained her trust, and I have unlimited time to support her. If you want to take over, you must commit unlimited time to Becky, otherwise she will collapse back into a safe corner of her mind where she has been all this time.'

Alexa sighed loudly. 'I understand what you mean. She's off the meds and she needs one-to-one.'

Marsha handed her list to Alexa. 'Your daughter will need a lot of support over the next three years. We can go to the police. There will be a destructive trial. Becky will be crushed. Your husband will go to jail, and bring devastation to your family. Becky will be returned to the psychiatrists who have failed her with their drugs.'

Alexa thought about the options. 'I don't want her to go back to the psychiatrists.'

Marsha held Alexa's arm with a soft grip. 'Or, you can do the right thing. Provide financial support to heal your daughter. Becky does not want to destroy her family in a public court. I can give her the time she needs to get better. I've done this kind of work many times, and each time with complete success. Your daughter has made the first difficult step.'

Alexa had been nodding along with everything Marsha said, and then she asked, 'How many times have you done this sort of thing?'

Marsha sensed doubt in Alexa. 'If the money is bothering you, for the sake of Becky, I could cut some corners.'

The offer broke Alexa's train of thought. 'It's not the money, look, I can cover the cost. It's just ... I don't know if this is the right way forward.'

Marsha stepped back, and looked insulted. 'Have you not seen a vast improvement in her? Believe me, it is a small price to pay for the safe return of your lovely daughter. I've seen glimpses of the real Becky, she's a wonderful girl. I thought you would be desperate to have her back.'

Alexa glanced at the papers in her hand, and her mind switched to Milton. Her anger surfaced. She clenched her fist. Her eyebrows furrowed when she pictured Milton in his flat. She decided she would confront him on her own.

'Okay, I'll leave Becky here with you, for now.'

Marsha opened the door for Alexa to step out. 'It's for the best. With these revelations she cannot face family or friends until she's much stronger.'

Alexa said, 'I'll call back tomorrow.'

Marsha had done in a few months what a stream of psychiatrists and their drugs had failed to do in ten months. She had opened Becky's mind, exposed sexual abuse as the cause of Becky's self-harm. The thought made Alexa shiver as she walked down the stairs from Marsha's flat.

Like a delayed reaction, the things Marsha had said came quickly into sharp focus. Becky had accused her father of sexual abuse. *Milton, an abuser, a rapist?* The thought and the words felt alien.

Of all the men she knew, Milton would be the last person she could imagine capable of child abuse. His sexual drive had always been weak. If he'd been married to a nun, he'd be quite happy. Then a cold sensation ran down her spine as she remembered the times they fought. Milton often got drunk, and then couldn't recall what happened the night before.

## Eight

Outside Marsha's tenement flat, Alexa sat in her car to read Becky's handwritten statement. She sighed loudly as she put it beside the list on the passenger's seat. While she stared through the windscreen, she shook the steering wheel as if trying to wrench it off the column.

Sadness and disappointment turned to piercing anger. On the road, she executed a series of aggressive manoeuvres as she drove to Milton Sommer's flat.

Although divorced, they still met up from time to time, and had an occasional meal together. When he moved out of the family home, he moved in with his brother, Jason, until he found his own flat in Govan, near Govan Cross, beside the River Clyde.

In Milton's flat, Alexa screamed and shouted at him before she gave him Becky's statement. He read it, ran to his bathroom, and vomited his dinner into the toilet. While he retched, Alexa paced back and forth in his living room.

After the shouting, the initial shock and the tears, he flatly denied abusing Becky or Damian. He raked over the past, searching for an incident that might explain the accusations. His legs felt like jelly, he wobbled and collapsed onto his sofa. He looked up at Alexa as she paced the room.

He pleaded. 'You must believe me. I couldn't do that to Becky. She's my daughter. You know I've loved her since the day she was born.'

Alexa pointed to the statement in her hand, and raised her voice. 'She's written down details of what you did to her. How can she be mistaken?'

He held his head in his hands. 'Please, Alexa. I don't understand what's happened. I swear to God ... I didn't do these things to Becky.'

'What about the nights you were drunk ... out of your mind?'

He looked up at her. 'Never, ever. I would bloody kill anyone who even thought about doing these things to her.'

Alexa raised her voice louder than his. 'Are you saying she made this up? Why would she? You must have done something. We both know Becky never told a lie in her life.'

Alexa stopped pacing, but remained on her feet. Milton stared at the floor, locked his ankles together, and gnawed on his thumb. The incredulity and shock had drained his mind and soul.

He sobbed the way he would if he'd been told of a death in his family. He didn't want to accuse Becky of lying. Of the two children, she always told the truth without question.

Truthfulness, like the colour of her eyes, had been built in to her DNA. Milton showed no outward sign of guilt, but the idea of Becky being raped had ravaged his mind.

Alexa looked down at the pitiful body sitting in front of her. To Alexa, his reaction seemed normal for a father, and not what she expected if he had abused Becky. She expected excuses, blame-shifting, accusations she had frustrated him, she had ignored his needs, she made him desperate. He offered no excuses.

Alexa's mind tracked back through time. She searched for feelings and suspicions, lurking in the past. She couldn't find one. Milton had never touched her or any of her friends or any of their children inappropriately or made anyone feel uncomfortable.

Becky had always been Milton's daughter. She could not recall one occasion when Becky shunned Milton or refused to go with him alone to the cinema or to the tennis club. Becky had to drag him to the baths to teach her how to swim. The more she thought about him, the less she could think of Milton as an abuser.

She knew some real creeps, men she wouldn't trust for a minute, but Milton wasn't that type of man. She went over to sit beside him on the sofa. His distress seemed palpable. He wept as he tried to understand why Becky had turned against him.

Alexa watched his reaction closely, and listened carefully. She believed Milton wasn't an abuser. Her thoughts turned to Becky. If Milton didn't molest Becky, then something or someone else had made her think her father had abused her. Why didn't the psychiatrists unearth these revelations? What did Marsha do to unlock Becky's memories? A stream of questions raced through Alexa's mind.

In a low voice, Milton asked, 'Where is Becky?'

She took Becky's statement from him, and scanned it once more. 'I've left her with Marsha for now. She's off her meds. She's fragile, and she can't face anybody. I think we all need time to understand what this means.'

He looked into Alexa's eyes. 'If I could speak to her for a minute.'

She rested her hand on top of his hand. 'Not right now. For what it's worth, I can't imagine you as an abuser.'

\*

The following day, Alexa collected Milton, and took him to her house. Milton's brother, Jason, arrived, and the three of them discussed Becky's statement. An experienced lawyer, Jason looked suspiciously on Marsha's list of treatments. He advised Milton to surrender himself to the police rather than wait for Becky to give them her statement.



Later that day, Alexa called Marsha, and told her Milton would make his own statement to the police. She also told Marsha the family would organise their own treatment. Marsha ended the call abruptly, and then she took Becky to Glasgow West End police station on Dumbarton Road.

In an interview, Becky told a woman police officer that her self-harming stemmed from abuse by her father, from age ten until eleven and a half when it stopped. She told them she blocked the memories after the abuse had stopped. She said Marsha had helped her to remember the incidents she had endured.

Later that day, in a police interview room, Detective Sergeant Hudson interviewed Milton for two hours. Jason sat with Milton, and advised him. When Hudson left the room, Alexa joined Milton and Jason.

Alexa sat in a chair opposite Milton. She reached over, and squeezed his hand. 'Are you all right?'

He looked frightened. 'I'm so sad Becky is going through all of this. It's her word against mine. I feel so low. They want me to admit it. Bring it to an end, and spare Becky any more grief. But I know in my heart I didn't do anything.'

Alexa turned to Jason. 'What do you think?'

Jason replied, 'If the family offers support. If Milton blames alcohol as the underlying cause. He might get five. Out in two years.'

Alexa seemed surprised. 'You want him to plead guilty?'

Milton said, 'I'm thinking about Becky's mental state. A trial will be horrendous for her. Who knows what else she might remember during questioning.'

Milton looked down at the table. 'I don't want her to face a trial.'

Alexa turned to face Jason. 'What are the police going to do?'

Jason looked concerned. 'They've placed him under arrest. They're getting a warrant to search his flat. We've given them the keys.'

After an hour, Hudson returned to the room. Alexa got up to leave. Hudson pulled an empty chair around, and placed it beside Milton.

Hudson pointed to the chair. 'Please sit down, Mrs Sommer. My colleague has been interviewing Becky. I have something I wish to put to the both of you.'

Looking relieved, Alexa sat down. 'Thank goodness. Have you got to the bottom of these accusations?'

Jason, Milton and Alexa were seated on one side of the table, and on the other side, Hudson sat opposite Alexa. He looked directly at Alexa's eyes. 'Becky has added new

accusations to her original statement. Accusations that you, Mrs Sommer, failed to protect her, and directly coerced her to commit sex acts with her father.'

Alexa recoiled in her chair. An electric shock ran from her head to her toes. 'That is not true. No way. Wait a minute, why didn't she mention this before?'

Jason leaned forward past Milton to address Alexa. 'You don't have to say anything. Wait until we have more detail about the accusation.'

Alexa's anxiety soared. 'Am I under arrest?'

Hudson shook his head. 'Not at this stage. You are helping us with our enquiries. We will need access to your home, and all of your IT equipment.'

## 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 the feedback is most welcome.

My website can be found here: <http://gordonbickerstaff.blogspot.co.uk/> or you can find me on Twitter: [@ADPase](https://twitter.com/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.

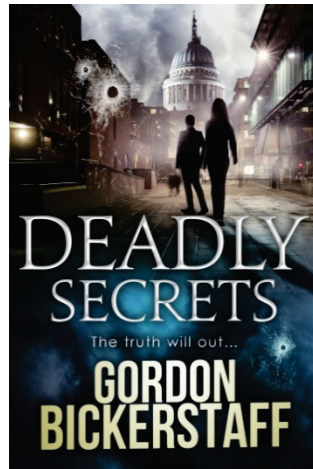
If you would like to know more about my writing then please visit my Amazon page: <http://goo.gl/rLFrV9> or my website above.

Thank you for reading my book.

*Gordon Bickerstaff*

## **Deadly Secrets**

*The truth will out ...*



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'... weaved it all together masterfully'

## Everything To Lose

*The chase is on ...*



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

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

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

## **The Black Fox**

*Run for your life ...*

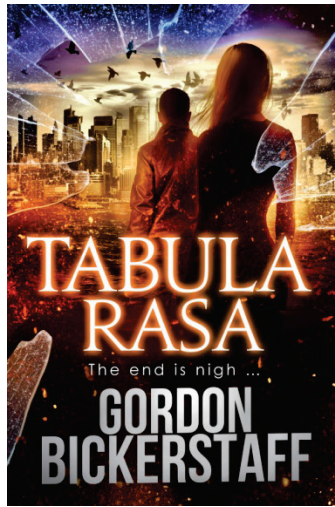


Zoe Tamsin is resourceful, smart and Special Forces-trained, but she has been given an impossible mission. She has to protect scientist, Gavin Shawlens, from assassination by the CIA, and discover the secret trapped in Gavin's mind that the CIA want destroyed.

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.

## **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.