



A **JACK ROGAN** MYSTERY

**THE HIDDEN
GENES**
OF PROFESSOR K

GABRIEL FARAGO

AWARD-WINNING & BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HIDDEN GENES OF PROFESSOR K

A dark, disturbing and nail biting medical thriller

Jack Rogan Mysteries Book 3

Gabriel Farago

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

‘We look for medicine to be an orderly field of knowledge and procedure. But it is not. It is an imperfect science, an enterprise of constantly changing knowledge, uncertain information, fallible individuals, and at the same time lives on the line. There is science in what we do, yes, but also habit, intuition, and sometimes plain old guessing. The gap between what we know and what we aim for persists. And this gap complicates everything we do.’

Atul Gawande, *Complications: A Surgeon's Notes and an Imperfect Science* New York: Metropolitan Books of Henry Holt and Company, 2002.

This book was inspired by, and is dedicated to, the many talented scientists who work at the Garvan Institute of Medical Research, in Sydney. In awe of nature, but not seduced by its beauty, or cowed by its terror, they are always on the lookout for inspired ideas to improve the journey of man.

To learn more about Garvan, what it stands for and what it does, please visit;

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Writing *The Hidden Genes of Professor K* was an ambitious project. For a layman, exploring subjects touching on cutting-edge medical research and complex science is never easy. The learning curve was both challenging and steep, and would not have been possible without the guiding hand of leading experts. A special thank you must therefore go to Professor Susan Clark, Head of the Genomics and Epigenetics Division at the Garvan Institute of Medical Research in Sydney, and Dr Peter Molloy, Senior Principal Research Scientist in CSIRO's Food and Nutrition Flagship, Sydney, for inducting me into the fascinating world of genomics and epigenetics. But this wasn't all. They patiently reviewed the relevant text to make sure I got the science right, didn't become lost in speculation, and kept at least one eye on what is realistic and achievable, based on what we know today.

Preparing a book for publication requires many skills; it is a team effort. I've been very fortunate to have a group of talented and dedicated specialists help me deal with the many challenges of a rapidly changing literary landscape. Without their professional support and advice, this book would not have seen the light of day. There are too many to mention, but a few definitely stand out.

First, Sally Asnicar, my editor. Her exceptional attention to detail and insights into the characters and the multi-layered storyline, have been invaluable in bringing this project to fruition.

Who says we don't judge a book by its cover? In a way we all do, especially when surfing the Net for inspiration of what to read. The talented Vivien Valk and Christopher Hammang have designed an imaginative cover that is true to the storyline, and captures the spirit of the book. Christopher is a scientific animation artist, creating visualisation of the microscopic inner space of life. He works as part of a multi-disciplinary research group, the Biological Data Visualisation team, led by Dr Sean O'Donoghue at CSIRO and the Garvan Institute.

And finally, it would be remiss of me not to mention my wife, Joan, literary critic, researcher, patient sounding board and cheerful travel companion—we visit all of the places mentioned in my books.

Thank you all for believing in me, and what I'm trying to achieve with my writing.

Gabriel Farago

Leura, Blue Mountains, Australia

FOREWORD

We all stare into the darkness. There are things, many things, that we do not know about the world, or about ourselves. What makes us different from other animals, and sets us apart from each other, is the genetic material we inherit from our ancestors. Amazingly, however, the number and repertoire of conventional protein coding genes is similar across the animal kingdom. The rest of our genome was once dismissed as junk – a graveyard of evolutionary debris for which scientists could not attribute any purpose. However, it now appears that this DNA is in fact alive, transmitting. It is the cryptic code that orchestrates human development, empowers our thoughts, and perhaps even holds memories of experiences from generations past.

The Hidden Genes of Professor K combines imagination, history, and knowledge of the leading edge of medical science to weave an epic tale of greed and intrigue. It takes the reader into the recesses of the human psyche, the hidden corners of history, and the dark matter of the human genome. The secrets are all there.

*Professor John Mattick AO FAA,
Director of the Garvan Institute of Medical Research,
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(<http://www.garvan.org.au>)*

The Hidden Genes of Professor K is a thrilling medical mystery that incorporates new advances in genetic and epigenetic research to decipher the secrets of the past extracted from human DNA. Readers who were spellbound by Gabriel Farago's previous novels *The Empress Holds the Key* and *The Disappearance of Anna Popov* will be equally enthralled and captivated as they journey through the secrets of the past, and share the dreams of a visionary scientist with the power to change the future of medicine.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Edwin Smith, a colourful character, is remembered for something he did one hot afternoon in a bazaar in Luxor, Egypt in 1862. He bought a papyrus that turned out to be one of the oldest medical texts in the world.

I first came across the Edwin Smith Papyrus some twenty years ago. I was studying Egyptology at the time, learning to read the hieroglyphs at night, because during the day I was a practising barrister and spent most of my days in court. Archaeology was my passion and has remained so to this very day.

Our professor used this unique text as an illustration of the extraordinary achievements of the Ancient Egyptians. The 4.6 metre long papyrus is written right to left in hieratic, a cursive form of hieroglyphs. Experts believe it was composed in about 1500 BC.

However, what is particularly fascinating about the papyrus is that it is now believed to be a copy of a much older text dating back to the Old Kingdom. And it doesn't stop there. Some scholars maintain that the true author of the text was none other than Imhotep, a remarkable renaissance man of the Old Kingdom who lived in around 2600 BC, and rose to high office under the pharaoh Djoser. Imhotep was a gifted architect, engineer, high priest and physician who, two thousand years after his death, was deified and became the god of medicine and healing. Centuries later, the ancient Greeks associated him with Asklepios, the god of medicine.

What makes this text so unique is the fact it describes forty-eight case histories based on rational anatomical, physiological and pathological observations, without looking at them through the eyes of magic, which was the accepted way to deal with disease, injury and trauma at the time.

Fascinated by the text, I immersed myself in the papyrus, which was translated by Breasted, an eminent Egyptologist, in 1930. That was how I came across case 46.

Case 46 deals with '*bulging tumours of the breast ... large, spreading and hard ...*' A more accurate description of breast cancer is difficult to imagine. For the first time in human history, the Emperor of Darkness – cancer – made its appearance in literature.

Every case study in the papyrus is followed by a discussion of its treatment except in

case 46 for which, according to Imhotep, there was none.

Cancer is an ancient disease. Progress in medical research, especially in recent years, has been breathtaking. We have come a long way, yet have we come any closer to conquering this powerful, malevolent disease, or do we have to agree with Imhotep's prognosis 4500 years ago – that in many cases, there is no cure?

This question has been asked countless times through the ages and has plagued the medical profession for centuries. The search for an answer became the inspiration for this book.

Gabriel Farago

Leura, Blue Mountains, Australia

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PART I

MEMENTO MORI

**GORDON INSTITUTE, SYDNEY:
SEPTEMBER 2011**

Professor Kasper Kozakiewicz – Professor K to colleagues because his name was almost impossible to pronounce – looked at the computer printout on his desk and smiled; the results were exactly as he had expected. A tremendous feeling of elation quickened his heartbeat, making his emaciated body tremble with excitement. Reaching for his chair to steady himself, he suddenly felt dizzy and weak. Stars began to dance in front of his eyes just before a bundle of sharp darts embedded in his brain. Moments later, his knees gave way and he collapsed to the floor.

Professor K had known for months he was dying. The cancer – a particularly aggressive one – had spread rapidly with relentless predictability. To an eminent research scientist, the prognosis was obvious: death was only a matter of time. Rather than subjecting himself to unpleasant and debilitating treatment to buy a few more feeble days, he had thrown himself deeper into his research, much to the dismay of his exasperated family, friends and colleagues. Only those who knew him well understood what he was doing, and why.

Ironically, the day he diagnosed his own cancer was the very day an unexpected breakthrough occurred in his research. From that day on, he knew he was getting close, very close. All he needed was a little more time – but time was running out.

Professor K opened his eyes. Darkness. He tried to move his fingers, but they wouldn't obey. Then slowly, a wave of excruciating pain reached his tortured brain as he regained consciousness and the darkness receded. Professor K knew exactly what was happening: death was standing at the door! Mustering the last of his remaining strength, he got unsteadily to his feet and fell into his chair. *My notes*, he thought, *where are my notes?* Trying not to panic, he searched his cluttered desktop for his research notes with shaking hands. Finding the little notebook under a pile of papers, he relaxed as a hint of a smile creased his wan face. Then, taking a deep breath, he reached for his pen and began to write like a man possessed.

On the other side of the globe, Dr Alexandra Delacroix was fast asleep in her Marseilles apartment, located next to the Université De La Méditerranée School of Medicine where she worked, when her mobile rang. She wasn't used to getting phone

calls in the middle of the night, and sensed it must be something important. Instantly awake, she reached for the phone on her bedside table, peered at the incoming number and pressed answer. ‘Do you know what time it is, Kasper?’ she said sleepily.

‘I do, Lexi,’ replied the professor calmly. ‘Please listen carefully, there isn’t much time. I’m talking to you as a man who is about to die, but more importantly, I’m talking to you as a fellow scientist.’

Silence. Dr Delacroix had known about her mentor’s illness for some time, but was unaware how far it had progressed. ‘How bad is it?’ she asked.

‘I won’t see tomorrow ...’

‘Go on.’

‘I would like you to be my successor, so to speak.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I think I’ve found a breakthrough in cancer diagnosis and treatment.’

Again, silence. Then, ‘Across the board?’

‘Quite possibly. It’s groundbreaking.’

‘Are you serious?’

‘Absolutely!’

‘My God, Kasper, *do you realise what you are saying?*’

‘I do. There’s still a long way to go with all the trials and such, but the proof is right here in front of me. But only you will understand my crazy notes and abbreviations, and how it all works.’

‘What about Cavendish; isn’t he next in line?’

‘Cavendish is a plodder. Too much ambition, not enough talent. He’s not in your league. This is far too important. I want *you*—’

‘Because we’ve worked together before, you mean?’ interrupted Dr Delacroix.

‘Yes, and because of *who you are*,’ said the professor, sounding weak.

‘Speak up, Kasper, I can barely hear you,’ said Dr Delacroix, raising her voice. For a while, all she could hear was heavy breathing on the other end of the line.

‘I can’t see any more,’ said the professor, gasping for breath.

‘Stay with me, Kasper!’ shrieked Dr Delacroix. ‘What do you want me to do?’

‘It’s all in my notes and the specimens. I’ve put everything into the safe here in the

lab. This is the combination. Write it down: 12 ... 48 ... 62. Got that?’

‘12, 48, 62,’ repeated Dr Delacroix.

‘Good,’ sighed the professor, suddenly calmer. ‘Will you be my intellectual heir, so to speak?’

‘Yes.’

‘Carry the torch; *promise?*’ whispered the professor.

‘I promise.’

‘As my friend?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then you must hurry! A position is waiting for you here at the Gordon. It’s all arranged.’

‘And Cavendish?’ Dr Delacroix asked again.

‘Don’t worry about him!’

Her mind racing, Dr Delacroix considered the implications. She would have to give up her position at the Institute for Structural Biology and Microbiology at the University and move to Sydney. The professor’s offer was the opportunity of a lifetime. Cavendish could be a problem, but there was really nothing to consider. ‘Can’t you get some help?’ she asked, concerned about her dying friend.

‘It’s Sunday morning; there’s no one here. *And besides,*’ whispered the professor, ‘*it’s too late for that now. At least it hasn’t been in vain ...*’

‘What did you say?’ shouted Dr Delacroix, her eyes misting over. There was no reply; all she could hear was silence.

OLYMPIC STADIUM, MOSCOW: SEPTEMBER 2011

The gigantic, semi-circular stage erected inside the Olympic Stadium had been transformed into a haunted cemetery, complete with cobwebbed tombstones flanked by crying angels, sad-looking willow trees, live crows in cages and a large, pale moon, suspended from a mobile crane. Set against a backdrop depicting frightening ghouls and hooded monks, clever props and light effects completed the illusion. In front of the stage, a hundred thousand eager fans waited excitedly to hear the band. They began to chant 'Isis, Isis, Isis' as their idols walked on stage. Whipping up the crowd, the drummer began the introduction to their signature number – 'It's Time; come with us' – before the throbbing bass joined in and the guitars screamed into life. The Russian leg of Isis and The Time Machine's *Echoes from the Grave* World Tour had begun.

Transformed into an Egyptian goddess in her white silk robe and golden crown, Isis lay motionless in a glass coffin six feet below the stage. The hydraulics engineer adjusted the switches and waited for the signal from the stage manager. As the band was about to finish 'It's Time', the stage manager gave the nod. Slowly, the coffin ascended.

On the stage above, a large tombstone made of plywood and papier-mâché also began to rise, while green, smoke-like fog oozed out of the other tombs and covered the stage. As the glass coffin emerged from the open grave, the crowd became hysterical. The security guards in front of the stage barely managed to hold back the howling fans as Isis came into view. The guitars fell silent, and only the drummer continued with a mesmerising, blood-boiling solo.

On cue, the engineer flicked another switch and the glass lid of the coffin slowly opened. Suddenly, Isis came to life. First, she raised her arms, then her head. The guitars were back, playing 'Resurrection', the first track of The Time Machine's new studio album, which had shot to number one in twenty-eight countries since its release a month earlier.

Isis now stood up in the open coffin, took off her serpent crown and tossed it towards the jubilant crowd. Then she let the white robe slip from her shoulders, exposing her stunning, tattooed body. Wearing only a tiny black bikini studded with diamonds, her

trademark black boots and fish-net stockings, Isis somersaulted out of the coffin – her acrobatic feats on stage were legendary – and began to sing.

Lola Rodriguez, Isis' fiery personal assistant, took the phone call and paled. Collecting her thoughts, she slipped the phone back into her pocket and began to look for the production manager. 'Where's Ed?' she asked, hurrying to the improvised change rooms behind the stage. The sound technician sitting in his booth pointed to some scaffolding supporting the five-storey high canvas backdrop. Ed Walker, the production manager, was keeping an eye on the stage through a small window cut into the canvas.

'Can I have a word?' shouted Lola, trying to make herself heard. The music was deafening.

'Not now, Lola, she's about to come off for a costume change,' replied the production manager, looking stressed.

'It's urgent.'

'Okay. What's up?' asked Ed. When Lola told him about the phone call, he was visibly shocked. 'Jesus, Lola, what are you going to do?'

'I have to tell her right now, what else?'

'Can't you wait until *after* the show?'

'Are you kidding? She'll eat me alive if she finds out I've held this back.'

'You're right. Good luck! Here she comes.'

Blowing kisses to her adoring fans, Isis strutted off the stage, her body covered in tiny beads of perspiration glistening like diamonds in the spotlight. Isis caught her breath, took a glass of iced tea from the waiting attendant and headed straight for her change room. The next five minutes were vital. During this short time, she would undergo a breathtaking transformation. Similar to a pit stop in a Formula One race, the costume team waiting for her knew exactly what had to be done. Every second counted.

Isis began her breathing exercises, swept into the tiny room and, standing in front of a large mirror, let her team go to work. Any interruption or distraction of any kind during this critical procedure was strictly forbidden.

Lola pushed past the frowning make-up artist and stood next to Isis. Isis watched her

in the mirror and shot her a disapproving look that would have sent a grown tiger packing. 'I must speak to you privately ...' began Lola haltingly, 'it's urgent.'

'What; now? *Are you out of your mind?*' hissed Isis. Lola insisted. Isis realised at once something was wrong. 'Everybody out,' she commanded curtly. 'Put my entry back three minutes and close the door.' Everybody stopped working and left the room. 'This better be good,' said Isis, carefully watching her personal assistant.

During the next sixty seconds, Lola recounted her earlier telephone conversation with the London police. Isis sat down on the make-up stool, her face ashen, and for a while didn't say anything. Her mind racing, she contemplated the consequences of what she'd just heard.

'What are you going to do?' asked Lola, conscious of precious seconds ticking by.

'I'll go back on and complete the show. As soon as it's over, you and I will fly to London. Get my plane ready—'

'What about Tokyo?' interjected Lola, 'The next concert is in three days.'

'Everything goes ahead as planned. I'll be there in time. Does anyone else know about this?'

'Only Ed.'

'Good. Now, send them all back in, and not a word of this to anyone; understood?' Lola nodded. Isis leant across to Lola and kissed her tenderly on the forehead. 'Thank you, Lola. I don't know what I'd do without you.'

Her cheeks glowing, Lola hurried out of the room. She lived for moments like this.

Pegasus – Isis' private jet – began its descent in preparation for landing. Lola walked to the back of the plane to wake her mistress. '*We're almost there,*' she whispered, gently touching Isis on the shoulder. Isis nodded, but didn't open her eyes. 'Your car will meet us on the tarmac. We should get to the hospital within the hour, London traffic permitting.'

Slumped into the back seat of her black Bentley, Isis was trying to prepare herself for what she sensed would be a life-changing ordeal. She hated hospitals with a passion, but worst of all was not knowing what had happened. They had been told so little. For

someone used to being in control, uncertainty was torture. All she knew was that her parents, Lord and Lady Elms, had been attacked in their London home. Her father was dead and her mother on life support, not expected to live.

Two policemen from the Metropolitan Police met them at the designated side entrance to the hospital's casualty section and ushered them discreetly inside. Standing in the lift behind Boris, her Ukrainian wrestling-champion turned bodyguard who followed her everywhere like a shadow, Isis reached for Lola's hand and squeezed it. Isis had always found looking at the huge man's massive frame and bulging neck muscles reassuring, but not so this time. Boris could protect her from many things, but not from what she was about to encounter.

As she followed the policemen down a dimly lit corridor smelling of cleaning fluids and disinfectant, Isis tried in vain to calm herself. She could confidently go on stage and face a hundred thousand adoring fans, yet with each step her anxiety grew, fear clawing at her throat.

The softly spoken surgeon waiting at the end of the corridor explained with clinical efficiency that Lady Elms was conscious, but could slip away at any moment. 'She's waiting for you,' he said. 'That is what's been keeping her alive. I don't think she'll be able to speak anymore, but she wants to see you ...' Opening the door he added, 'I must warn you, her injuries are horrific.'

Isis nodded and went into the room alone.

At first, Isis thought there had been a terrible mistake. The person lying on the bed in no way resembled her mother. The face – mutilated beyond recognition – looked as if it had been attacked with a meat cleaver. Head turned towards the door, the person was staring at her with unseeing eyes. Then something happened: sensing her son's presence, Lady Elms' dying brain produced a final moment of clarity. Her mouth opened and the lips began to move, but there was no sound. However, coming closer, Isis thought she could hear something.

'*Georgie?*' whispered the mangled piece of flesh on the pillow. The face may have been unrecognisable, but there was no mistaking the voice.

'Mama!' cried Isis, falling to her knees next to the bed.

‘I knew you would come. *Listen ...*’ said Lady Elms, her voice barely audible. Exhausted by the effort, she kept staring at Isis. Her lips kept moving, unable to form words.

‘Hush ... You must rest,’ cried Isis, reaching for her mother’s limp hand.

The touch of her son’s hand seemed to revive Lady Elms. ‘Great danger ... for you,’ she warned. With her eyesight gone and blood filling her lungs, Lady Elms began to choke. ‘*My ...*’ she whispered, her voice barely audible, ‘*our secret place ... hide and seek – remember?*’

‘I do. But what—’

‘Stars, hide your fires ...’ With her last breath fading, the unfinished sentence turned into a final farewell from a loving mother leaving an inconsolable son to mourn her tragic departure.

The surgeon’s trained ear heard it first: the alarm on the life support system had been activated. He burst into the room, followed by Boris and Lola. The furiously flashing lights on the monitors told him everything he needed to know: his patient was dead. Blood was still oozing out of Lady Elms’ open mouth. Kneeling on the floor next to the bed, her cheeks covered in blood, Isis was sobbing uncontrollably. Sadly shaking his head, the surgeon walked over to the machine and turned it off.

Calypso, a former Russian icebreaker, was leaving Hamilton Island. It had spent the past five days cruising along the Great Barrier Reef on its way south to Sydney. Purchased for a pittance by Blackburn Pharmaceuticals from the Russian navy in the nineteen nineties, the massive ship had undergone a major transformation. The dilapidated, discarded icebreaker had become a state-of-the-art research vessel, its bulky exterior a clever disguise for the sophistication within. Equipped with cutting-edge communications technology rivalling that of the US navy, and laboratories that would have been the envy of many a university or teaching hospital, it ploughed the high seas as the floating boardroom and proud flagship of Blackburn Pharmaceuticals.

Alistair Macbeth, founder, managing director and major shareholder of the international pharmaceutical giant, was an enigma. Because he gave no interviews, didn't mix with his peers, had no fixed address and reported to no one, the press didn't know what to make of him. Shunning the limelight that went with his self-made billionaire status, he lived like a recluse on *Calypso* and ruled his massive pharmaceutical empire from his luxurious stateroom on board the vessel. Because so little was known about him personally – apart from the fact he was a paraplegic – speculation and rumour had filled the frustrating gaps left by missing facts. The press didn't mind; speculation and rumour were the grist of the insatiable tabloid mill, and the elusive Alistair Macbeth was a steady source of both. Annoyingly, the only thing missing was scandal.

His staggering wealth, power, influence and rugged good looks, periodically tempted hungry newshounds to pry into his affairs – usually with little success. Some had even tried to uncover his murky past, only to find smoke and mirrors thwarting their efforts at every turn. Macbeth fiercely guarded his privacy and knew how to protect it. If a curious journalist came too close to something he wasn't supposed to know, or in some way stepped over the line, Macbeth made sure he never did it again. This well-known cat and mouse game had gone on for years.

Macbeth surrounded himself with only the best. With several languages and a Harvard MBA on her impressive CV, Carlotta O'Brien was very good at what she did. As

Macbeth's personal assistant, she had to be. Macbeth's demands and expectations were legendary. Confined to a wheelchair, he had become a man who rarely slept and never rested. His useless body had turned him into a cerebral creature with an extraordinary mind and a voracious appetite for work.

Carlotta knocked softly, and entered the stateroom. Macbeth was sitting in his wheelchair by the desk as usual. 'Adrian Cavendish for you,' she said, handing the satellite phone, which was encrypted with an untraceable number, to her boss. Macbeth waited until Carlotta had left the room before taking the call.

'You have something for me?' asked Macbeth.

'He's dead,' answered Adrian Cavendish, his voice sounding hollow.

'When?'

'The cleaner found him this morning in the lab.'

A hint of a smile creased Macbeth's face; so far, everything was going according to plan. 'When are you taking over?' he asked.

'There's a problem ...'

'Oh?'

'I will not be replacing him—'

'What?' interrupted Macbeth impatiently, 'Why not?'

'Apparently, he appointed someone else ...'

'You can't be serious! Who?'

'A French scientist. A former colleague of his. She's a leading expert in genomics. The CEO just told me.'

'Do you know who she is?'

'Yes. Dr Alexandra Delacroix.'

'But you assured me—'

'I'm just as disappointed as you are,' Cavendish cut in curtly.

That's an understatement, thought Macbeth, considering his options. Losing Cavendish at such a critical phase in this groundbreaking research project was a major blow. A breakthrough in cancer treatment could mean billions to Blackburn Pharmaceuticals. However, if it fell into the wrong hands – competitors, for example – it could cost the company a fortune. Blackburn Pharmaceuticals was the sole producer of a

recently discovered drug that significantly slowed down the advance of the dreadful disease. It had taken years and many millions to develop, and was without doubt the company's top earner. If there were a breakthrough in prevention or reversal, the drug could become obsolete overnight. Macbeth had made his fortune by staying ahead of his competitors – at any cost – and silencing his critics. 'Do you have any idea how far he got?' he asked.

'Very close, that's all I know. He barely left his lab during the past few days. He worked like a madman. Alone, as usual.'

'He must have recorded his findings, surely.'

'He always kept meticulous records of everything he did.'

'Do you know where they are?'

'Usually, he kept his notes in a safe in the lab.'

'Well?'

'It's risky ...'

'I pay very well; you know that!'

'I'll see what I can do.'

'You'll have to do better do that, Adrian, before it's too late,' said Macbeth, steel in his voice, *'for all of us,'* he added quietly, and hung up.

The veiled threat wasn't lost on Cavendish. Macbeth was a master when it came to formulating an effective threat. He was also a master when the time came to carry it out. With so much at stake, there was no room for error.

Moments after Macbeth had hung up, Carlotta re-entered the room. 'I want you to find out everything you can about a Dr Alexandra Delacroix,' said Macbeth, holding up the satellite phone.

Nodding, Carlotta walked over to the wheelchair, took the phone from her boss' hand and left the room without saying a word.

2

The discovery of the dead professor in his lab that morning had sent the whole institute into a spin. The cafeteria was empty, young PhD students and researchers were walking around in a daze, and the corridors were eerily silent. The CEO had called an urgent

board meeting and had locked himself in his office. The undertakers had removed the body and taken it to the morgue in the hospital next door. Professor K's personal physician had been notified and was on his way to examine the body and issue a death certificate.

Pacing nervously up and down in his lab, Cavendish was considering what to do. Making a copy and putting the notebook back in the safe wasn't an option. If the material was as valuable as he suspected, it was critical it disappear without a trace. The material could then safely resurface elsewhere, disguised as a new 'discovery' without arousing suspicion or being linked to Professor K's work in any way.

Macbeth's last words had triggered alarm bells that refused to stop ringing. Because Cavendish had always dealt with faceless intermediaries, he had no idea who he was doing business with. Neither Macbeth, nor Blackburn Pharmaceuticals had ever been mentioned. However, because the stakes were so high, and the money involved outrageous, he realised that serious pharmaceutical interests had to be present. Industrial espionage in scientific circles was not uncommon. He also realised he was playing a dangerous game that could not only cost him his career, but also send him to jail. In a strange way, however, he found the danger exciting, and the secrecy and cloak and dagger meetings in gay clubs exhilarating and empowering. And on top of all that, was the money ...

The first approach had seemed harmless enough. Cavendish had met a young American in one of the gay bars he frequented. They had a brief affair, and his new lover introduced him to a friend – a South African – who appeared to know a lot about Professor K's work. All of this happened shortly after an article by Professor K describing his groundbreaking work was published in *Nature* two years earlier. After that, one thing led to another. Lavish dinners in gay clubs and an all-expenses paid holiday for himself and his lover in an exclusive Fijian resort prepared the way.

At first, Cavendish supplied only little snippets of information about Professor K's research. The payments in return – always in cash – were outlandish and quickly had a significant impact on his lifestyle. After a while, Cavendish was put on a monthly 'retainer', which was more than double his salary at the institute.

After that, there was no turning back. Any significant piece of information attracted a

six-figure 'bonus'. Scientists aren't well paid. The new car, a Bondi beach apartment, expensive clothes and holidays were all very easy to get used to. Cavendish's status and reputation in the gay community soared. Corruption had become a way of life.

Dr Delacroix's unexpected appointment came as a major blow. Professor K's illness was no secret and his death not unexpected. However, Cavendish had been certain he would be the one to succeed him. The French interloper had changed all that. His cash flow and lavish lifestyle were now both under threat. Cavendish realised there was one last opportunity to make some serious money: he had to secure Professor K's notes and demand a big payment. He also knew that if he wanted to succeed in this, he had to act swiftly before things returned to normal. Confusion was always a good cover.

As a senior staff member, Cavendish had ready access to all the labs and offices in the institute. He used to visit Professor K's lab frequently, as they had worked together on many projects over the years and shared information. His presence in Professor K's lab, even on this tragic day, would therefore appear perfectly normal.

Carrying his notepad and a computer printout, Cavendish walked down the deserted corridor leading to Professor K's lab and stepped inside. A quick look around told him that the professor's notebook wasn't in its usual place on the workbench. It seemed unlikely he would have taken it home – which he used to do occasionally – because he had barely left his lab during the past week. *It has to be in the safe*, thought Cavendish, running his fingers nervously through his hair, *unless someone has already secured it!* He had watched the professor open his safe on many occasions and made a mental note of the combination. From time to time, the professor would change the combination according to institute policy. Cavendish had even helped him do it. They had often laughed about this. 'Who on earth could possibly be interested in a few notes?' the professor used to joke. 'I can hardly understand them myself.'

Cavendish walked over to the small wall safe, put on a pair of latex gloves and punched in the combination. The door opened with a beep. That's when he heard it: footsteps outside, approaching! Alarmed, he spun around and tried to busy himself with a few papers lying on the desk. *The gloves*, he thought, his heart beating like a drum, but it was already too late. The door, which he had left ajar, opened slowly.

‘Good morning, Doctor Cavendish,’ said the late professor’s assistant, a young scientist named Akhil from Sri Lanka. ‘Shall I come back later?’

‘Give me a couple of minutes, I won’t be long,’ replied Cavendish, trying to appear calm. Smiling, Akhil withdrew. Taking a deep breath, Cavendish reached into the safe and pulled out Professor K’s familiar notebook. Relieved, he slipped it into the pocket of his gown, closed the safe, took off the gloves and quickly left the lab. The fact he had just betrayed a dead colleague and stolen from his employer didn’t cross his mind.

Jack Rogan looked at the army of waiting drivers holding up signs and was trying to find one with his name on it. Having experienced hair-raising trips to the Kuragin Chateau from Paris' Charles de Gaulle airport in the past, he had taken his publicist's advice and arranged a hire car to take him there this time. *Don't be silly, Jack, you're a celebrity now*, he remembered Rebecca Armstrong tell him sternly. *You can afford it; trust me*.

Remembering Rebecca's words brought a smile to his face. Not only was she his publicist and literary agent, she had taken over managing his entire life. Then again, he had to admit he did need some managing, especially after the Wizards of Oz – a notorious outlaw bikie gang – had burnt down his house and he had lost all his personal belongings. *Almost all*, he thought, smiling. Because his house didn't have a garage, his beloved MG was parked in the street at the time and had escaped the inferno. The material link with the past was all but gone and Rebecca had done a sterling job rebuilding his future. Jack didn't mind. In fact, he was looking forward to seeing his new penthouse on the harbour, which Rebecca had bought – sight unseen – and had furnished for him, for the first time.

Jack had spent the past year in New York rewriting his book, *The Disappearance of Anna Popov*, in preparation for publication. After the tragic events that led to Anna Popov's spectacular rescue in the Australian outback, Jack had discovered certain secrets of the past during his research which, had they been made public, could have destroyed the lives of people he held dear.

Torn between what was right and what would sell, Jack had made a courageous decision. The book would not be published. Anna's grateful parents were relieved. However, Jack's New York publishers were outraged and threatened to sue. Jack stood his ground. Then, unexpectedly, Countess Kuragin and Professor Popov – Anna's parents – changed their minds. They encouraged Jack to publish his book after all, provided he was prepared to leave certain sensitive parts out of it to protect the privacy of those most exposed. Jack accepted the compromise and threw himself into the task of rewriting the book. He had spent the past year in New York under the watchful eye of Rebecca, desperately trying to repair the damage to his reputation and his relationship

with the hostile publishers.

Fortunately, success heals all. The much-awaited book was an overnight sensation and all was forgiven. Somehow, even the delay had worked in his favour. His reputation intact, Jack was once again the celebrated author and darling of the New York literary set.

With the exhausting book launch behind him, Jack had pleaded for a little time off and was on his way back to Australia. *You want to go for a month? Are you out of your mind?* he heard Rebecca complain after he had finished all the interviews. *Two weeks, that's it! I need you here!* They had settled for three and Jack was enjoying the freedom of being able to do his own thing for once. *No more book signings, no more TV shows, no dressing up*, he thought, *no shaving, no Rebecca! Bliss!*

Jack had decided to interrupt his trip back home to Australia to visit Anna and the countess. He wanted to deliver signed copies of his book to them personally; they deserved that courtesy. After all, it was *their* story. And besides, Jack was curious to see how Tristan was growing up. He hadn't seen any of them for almost a year. Emails and skyping just wasn't the same.

It was almost dark by the time the black hire car pulled up in front of the chateau. The countess had reopened her chateau as an exclusive boutique hotel, which had always been immensely popular with the super-rich looking for privacy and style and an opportunity to rub shoulders with a blue-blooded Russian countess.

As he got out of the car, Jack remembered the first time he and Rebecca had visited the Kuragin Chateau. The intimidating, liveried doorman had taken the two first-timers under his wing and inducted them into chateau etiquette. That was two years ago, Jack reminded himself. It had been the beginning of an extraordinary adventure leading to the sensational rescue of the countess' daughter, Anna. The recent publication of his book, which finally told the curious public what really happened after Anna disappeared from Alice Springs all those years ago, was the culmination of a long, exhausting journey.

The countess heard the car pull up and rushed outside. 'Here you are at last!' she said excitedly, kissing Jack on both cheeks, 'The famous author returns. Let me have a look at

you. A little thinner than I remember,’ she teased, linking arms with Jack. ‘We’ll do something about that! Dinner’s waiting – come.’

‘Why is it women always want to fatten me up?’ remarked Jack.

‘Because we are fond of you.’

‘How’s Anna, and Tristan?’ asked Jack, following the countess into the foyer.

‘Anna is in Paris; specialists ...’ replied the countess with a hint of sadness in her voice. ‘She’s slowly improving, but Tristan hasn’t stopped talking about you all week. And there’s someone else here who wants to meet you ...’

‘Oh? Who?’

‘You’ll see.’

As soon as Jack stepped into the grand foyer, he sensed something. Jack stopped and looked up. Tristan was watching him from the gallery above. Their eyes locked. *He has grown quite a bit*, thought Jack, watching the boy. *Quite tall for fifteen*. Then slowly – one step at a time – Tristan came down the stairs. Jack didn’t move, nor did the countess. Reaching the bottom of the stairs, Tristan stopped without taking his eyes off Jack. Then suddenly, he ran towards him, threw his arms around him and hugged him tightly. ‘*I knew you would come*,’ he whispered. ‘*You’ve stayed away far too long*.’

‘You’re right,’ said Jack, gently stroking the boy’s head. ‘I had to finish the book. You know that.’ Tristan nodded. ‘Here, I have something for you.’ Jack opened his duffel bag and pulled out two copies of his book. ‘Fresh off the press and hand delivered. The first two copies in France, I believe. The French translation will be released next month.’ With that, Jack took a bow and presented one copy to the countess, and the other to Tristan. Anna’s striking painting, which had become the cover of the book, brought tears to the countess’ eyes.

‘That’s quite a welcome,’ said a voice from the other end of the foyer. Jack turned around and looked at the young woman slowly walking towards him out of the shadows. Her luxurious red hair shone like a beacon as she stepped into the circle of light.

‘I’m not always this popular,’ replied Jack, watching the woman with interest.

‘That’s not what I heard.’

‘Oh?’

‘Jack, I want you to meet my niece,’ said the countess, turning to the young woman,

‘Dr Alexandra Delacroix.’

After dinner in her private dining room, the countess excused herself and joined the ‘paying guests’, as she called them, for coffee and liqueurs in the music room. ‘It’s expected,’ she explained. ‘It won’t take long.’ Tristan had reluctantly gone back upstairs to finish his homework and Jack had to promise to come to his room later for a chat, man to man. This left Jack and Dr Delacroix momentarily alone at the dinner table.

‘So, you are coming to Sydney,’ said Jack, leaning back in the beautiful eighteenth-century dining chair. Jack had a good eye for antiques and lamented the loss of his own collection in the fire with a pang of regret. ‘A bit unexpected?’

‘Yes, Professor Kozakievicz – Professor K, as we used to call him – died suddenly and I’m to replace him,’ she replied, a melancholy look clouding her eyes. ‘He was a wonderful colleague and a true friend.’

She’s so young, thought Jack, enjoying the closeness of the fascinating young scientist. ‘And what exactly is it that you do?’ he asked.

‘I’m exploring the mysteries of the human genome.’

‘Wow! Is that what Professor K was working on?’

‘Sort of ... He was on the cusp of an important discovery relating to cancer when he died.’

‘What kind of discovery?’

‘The professor’s last words to me were that he had actually discovered a breakthrough in cancer diagnosis and treatment.’

‘But that’s extraordinary!’ exclaimed Jack. ‘And you are to carry on his work?’

‘Yes.’

‘You must be very good.’

Dr Delacroix didn’t reply. Instead, she was watching the intriguing man she had heard so much about with interest. *He has green eyes*, she thought. *How unusual*. Jack’s casual, self-effacing manner had put her instantly at ease and she enjoyed talking to him. In her line of work, meeting attractive men was rather difficult.

‘Have you got somewhere to stay?’ asked Jack, lowering his voice.

‘Not yet.’

‘Well then, why don’t you help me explore my new penthouse, which incidentally, I’ve never seen. My literary agent – minder would be more accurate, I suppose – assures me it’s very spacious. I’m returning to New York in three weeks, but you can stay as long as you like.’

Dr Delacroix burst out laughing. ‘You’re joking, surely.’

‘No, I’m perfectly serious. I always wanted a research scientist as a flatmate.’

‘Do you always invite women you’ve just met to share your apartment?’

‘Only attractive ones,’ bantered Jack.

‘They warned me about you!’

‘What, the incorrigible rascal bit? Surely, as a true scientist you wouldn’t believe such scurrilous rumours?’

‘Certainly not!’

‘It’s all settled then.’

‘Let me think about it.’

‘All right. Why don’t we coordinate our flights Down Under and you can think about it along the way. How about that?’

Dr Delacroix held out her hand. ‘Okay,’ she said, a sparkle in her eye.

‘Deal,’ said Jack and shook her hand.

Isis had only one thing on her mind; to get out of the hospital as fast as possible. The horror of witnessing her mother's appalling death was taking its toll. She almost threw up in the lift and couldn't stop shaking. Afraid she might collapse, Boris held her tightly and Lola tried to wipe the blood from her pale cheeks with her handkerchief. Her mind racing, Isis was trying to come to terms with her mother's dying words, 'Stars, hide your fires.'

As soon as they stepped outside, Isis felt better. *Calm down and think*, she told herself as they hurried towards the waiting car. Boris opened the door and helped her get in.

'You okay?' asked Lola, handing Isis a bottle of water.

'I will be ... in a moment.'

'What do we do now?'

Isis took a deep breath and looked at Lola sitting next to her. 'Ring my lawyer.'

'But it's four in the morning.'

'We are going straight to my parents' house. Tell him to meet us there.'

The quiet Chelsea street was cordoned off, the flashing blue lights of a dozen police vehicles casting crazy shadows across the wet pavement. Police officers wearing flak jackets and armed with machine guns patrolled the barricades, and commandoes dressed all in black guarded the entrance of the elegant Georgian mansion at the end of the street. Men in white overalls were examining a vehicle – all four doors wide open – parked in front of the house.

Before Lola could stop her, Isis hurried across to one of the police officers standing at the barricade. 'Who's in charge here?' she demanded curtly, her voice hoarse. 'I want to see the officer in charge!'

The police officer looked suspiciously at the breathless woman with dishevelled hair standing in front of him. 'He's a bit busy right now, luv,' he said. 'This place is off limits; better push off.'

'Don't patronise me! That's my parents' house over there. I am George Elms.'

'And I am Mickey Mouse. For the last time, get lost!'

Isis was about to vent her frustration and anger by hurling a barrage of abuse at the infuriating officer, when a man grabbed her from behind. ‘Don’t! Let me handle this, Georgie, please,’ he said. ‘I’m Sir Charles Huntley, solicitor,’ continued the man, addressing the police officer. ‘And this is my client, George Elms, son of Lord and Lady Elms ... Am I making myself clear?’

‘Yes Sir,’ replied the perplexed officer, sizing up the strange little man in front of him.

Shortish, overweight, in his middle sixties, Sir Charles had looked after George Elms’ business affairs since his client’s Eton days some twenty years ago. As Isis’ solicitor, he was used to the unusual and the unexpected. ‘I would like to speak to the officer in charge, please,’ he said calmly.

‘Wait here.’

Sir Charles turned to his client. ‘What do you think you’re doing, Georgie? Do you want to end up in the back of a police van under arrest? The press would have a ball! You look terrible, by the way.’

‘Thanks, Charles,’ said Isis, relieved to see her friend and confidant.

‘What on earth has happened?’ asked Sir Charles.

‘My father was shot dead in the house and my mother died in hospital less than an hour ago.’

‘Jesus! I’m so sorry! Anything else?’

‘That’s about all I know.’

‘Then, let’s fill in the gaps, shall we?’ Isis nodded. ‘And please let me do the talking – okay?’

‘Okay.’

‘And one more thing, George; you are *legally* a man – clear?’ said Sir Charles.

‘Yes, yes ... we’ve been through this before; it’s tedious.’

‘It may be tedious to you, but people do get a little confused,’ Sir Charles prattled on, trying to distract his obviously distressed client. ‘You may be one of the highest paid rock stars on the planet, but you still have to live in the real world occasionally.’

‘Yes, Charles.’

‘This is one of those occasions; are you with me?’ Isis nodded. ‘Let’s try and stick to

the facts – okay? Isis is your stage name. You dress like a woman, you look like a woman, you *consider* yourself a woman, but you are George, Edward, Elms, *a man*. You do understand that, don't you?'

'I'm a woman trapped in a man's body, that's all. I can't help it if I was born with a dick ...'

Sir Charles tried hard not to show his exasperation. 'Please, Georgie, not now! Do it for me?'

'Sure.'

'My God, you do lead a complicated life!'

'That's why I have chaps like you – to simplify things for me,' said Isis.

'I thought you were in Russia on tour.'

'Flew in last night, as soon as I heard.'

'Well, the private jet does come in handy after all ... isn't that right, Lola?'

'It does come in handy at times,' Lola agreed.

'Tell me this is all a bad dream, Charles,' interrupted Isis.

'I wish I could. *Shush; here comes the officer in charge now,*' whispered Sir Charles, holding up his hand. '*Remember what I just told you.*'

'Daniel Cross, MI5,' said the man in the immaculate dark suit, holding out his hand.

'MI5? I thought this was a matter for the Metropolitan Police,' said Sir Charles, carefully watching the man.

'It is, but when a member of Her Majesty's Government is involved, as is the case here, we like to keep an eye on things – especially in these unsettled times. I'm sure you understand. Please follow me. Just you and your client, if you don't mind.'

'Sorry, Lola,' said Isis, following the man to an unmarked black van parked in a side street.

The man slid the door open and spoke to someone inside. Two men in suits jumped out and walked away. *Spooks*, thought Sir Charles. The inside of the van was full of electronic equipment, computer screens and wires.

Sir Charles and Isis sat down on a bench seat facing Cross. 'Allow me to introduce my client,' began Sir Charles.

'I know who your client is,' interrupted Cross. He reached for a slim manila folder,

put it on his lap and opened it. 'I know you prefer to call yourself Isis, but I would prefer to address you by your real name, George Elms,' said Cross, looking at Isis. 'Do you mind?'

'Not at all.'

'Your personal assistant received a phone call from the London Metropolitan Police during your Moscow concert last night, informing her that your father had been killed, and your mother was dying.' Cross paused and turned a page. 'Your private plane landed five hours later in London, and you went straight to the hospital where you arrived at two-thirty in the morning. Your mother passed away at three-forty six—'

'I'm sure you have your reasons,' interrupted Sir Charles, the tone of his voice icy, 'but we already know all this.'

'I appreciate that; please bear with me. Lord Elms attended a cabinet meeting at three yesterday afternoon and then met with the PM in his office for about an hour,' Cross continued, undeterred. 'He was due to chair a committee meeting after that, and then give a speech at the French Embassy, followed by dinner.' Cross paused again – Sir Charles thought for effect – turned a page in his file and then continued. 'Apparently, Lord Elms felt unwell and asked his driver to take him home after the committee meeting. He arrived at his house at seven fifty-five. Lady Elms was at home alone last night; it was the maid's night off and the cook had left at around six after preparing dinner. We understand that the intruders entered the house from the back a few minutes later.'

'Are you suggesting that by coming home unexpectedly, Lord Elms *surprised* the intruders?' asked Sir Charles.

'It would appear so. We don't know exactly what happened in the house, except for this: at twelve minutes past nine precisely, the alarm went off inside the house. The security detail consisting of two officers sitting in an unmarked vehicle got out of the car and ran towards the house. They were both gunned down as they approached the front door. We believe the gunman fired from a window on the first floor.'

'And then?' asked Sir Charles.

'The getaway vehicle pulled up; a stolen courier van. Two men dressed in black wearing balaclavas got in, and the van sped off. It was found two hours later, burnt out just outside London.'

‘What happened to my parents?’ asked Isis quietly.

‘Two security guards sent by the alarm company to investigate arrived at the scene first,’ replied Cross, looking through the file. ‘They were in the vicinity when the alarm went off. I have their statements right here. This is what they found: Two men with multiple gunshot wounds were lying on the stairs leading to the front door – dead. The front door was open.’ Cross paused, letting the tension grow.

‘Yes,’ prompted Sir Charles, losing patience.

‘Lord Elms was lying in the foyer, shot in the head at point blank range—’

‘And my mother?’ interrupted Isis, close to tears. ‘What happened to my mother?’

‘George, please,’ said Sir Charles, placing a restraining hand on Isis’ arm. ‘Let’s hear what Mr Cross has to tell us; all right?’

‘She was tied to a chair in the study on the ground floor; alive, but badly injured.’

‘*Badly injured?*’ Isis almost shouted. ‘Half her face was missing when I saw her in hospital.’

‘That’s right. Part of her face had been removed.’

‘*Removed?* What on earth do you mean by that?’ shrieked Isis.

‘I understand how you must feel,’ said Cross calmly, sidestepping the question, ‘but these are the facts.’

‘So far, all you’ve given us is a clinical account of what you *think* happened, but not a word about why, or who the perpetrators might be,’ Sir Charles stepped in. ‘Would you care to elaborate on this?’

‘I was hoping your client might be able to throw some light on this question,’ replied Cross, closing the file. ‘Can you think of anything that could explain these events?’ asked Cross, looking directly at Isis. ‘Any threats against your parents; any enemies you can think of; anything out of the ordinary you may have observed recently? Anything at all that could be relevant, however far-fetched it may seem at the moment?’

‘I don’t know what to think right now,’ replied Isis. ‘I haven’t seen my parents in months.’

Cross nodded. Isis didn’t mention the fact that her mother had briefly regained consciousness just before she died and had spoken to her. This would remain a much treasured secret, not to be divulged to anyone. Isis realised that as matters stood, what her

mother had told her with her last breath may well turn out to be the only clue to throw some light on the horror. Isis promised herself to leave no stone unturned to find out if that was so.

‘You can see my client is upset,’ interjected Sir Charles, not at all pleased by the change of tone. The ‘briefing’ was turning into an interrogation. As every experienced lawyer knows, the best thing to do in that situation is to say nothing.

‘Is anything missing from the house?’ asked Isis.

‘Interesting you should ask that,’ answered Cross. ‘As far as we know at this early stage, no. The housekeeper has already confirmed this.’

‘I think we should leave it there,’ said Sir Charles, standing up. ‘My client needs to rest.’

‘Quite,’ Cross stood up as well. ‘You will be returning to Moscow?’ he asked, turning to Isis.

‘I’m in the middle of a sold-out world tour. We are giving a concert in Tokyo in two days; I intend to be there.’

‘Grief must wait?’ said Cross, the sarcasm in his voice obvious.

Anticipating an outburst, Sir Charles gripped Isis by the arm. ‘Perhaps in your line of work you may not have noticed, but there are many shades of grief,’ he said to Cross. ‘You can reach my client through me, any time.’ With that, Sir Charles handed Cross a business card, and opened the door.

‘What an arrogant little prick,’ said Isis, hurrying back to her car.

‘The world is full of arrogant little pricks,’ replied Sir Charles, trying to keep up. ‘The secret is to know when and how to cut off their little balls. And this was certainly not the time, or the place to do it.’

For reasons she couldn’t quite explain, Isis felt suddenly a lot better.

Jack knocked softly on Tristan's door, unsure if he was still awake.

'Come in, Jack,' Tristan called out from inside. Tristan was sitting at his desk, his copy of *The Disappearance of Anna Popov* open in front of him. 'I'm mentioned in the acknowledgements,' Tristan said excitedly.

'Well deserved. You've helped me with the book in more ways than you know,' said Jack. 'And you were very brave in allowing everything to go in; even the scary personal bits.'

'Thanks, Jack. I have something for you too. Here, have a look.' Tristan switched on his computer and turned the screen towards Jack. 'Watch.'

'What on earth is *that*?' asked Jack. Five half-naked, heavily tattooed men and a woman – obviously the singer, looking like a bird in a crazy costume – were performing on a huge stage. The music was deafening. 'Turn it down before the paying guests complain and leave.' As the camera swung around, a stadium filled with thousands of adoring fans – hands held up high – came into view.

'You mean you don't recognise them?' asked Tristan, shaking his head.

'I'm afraid this isn't exactly my ...'

'That's Isis and The Time Machine, the greatest rock band of our time, and you don't know ...?'

Jack shrugged. 'I have heard of them, of course ...' he lied. 'Why are you showing me this?'

'Because you and Isis are destined to meet. Your fate lines are intersecting,' said Tristan, turning off the computer. 'You have to prepare yourself.' Tristan took the DVD out of the slot and handed it to Jack. 'Listen to the music and try to understand it before it's too late,' he said, turning serious.

'All right,' said Jack, slipping the DVD into his pocket. 'And when will this meeting take place?' he asked, smiling incredulously.

'Soon; very soon. You don't believe me, do you?'

'It seems a little far-fetched, don't you think?'

'It's not what I think that matters; it's what I *see* ...' retorted Tristan, looking at Jack

with his large, dark, almond-shaped eyes.

The Maori in him is becoming more prominent as he gets older, thought Jack. *He's very good looking.*

Jack felt something ice-cold move slowly down his spine. Tristan's words reminded him of Cassandra, Tristan's Maori mother, a gifted psychic. *He's much better than I,* he remembered her saying. *He can glimpse eternity.* 'It's getting late,' said Jack, trying to shake off the disturbing memories.

'Be careful, Jack. There's real danger here,' warned Tristan. 'And remember, I can help you when the time comes. I always will.'

'I know that. Thanks,' said Jack, giving the boy a hug. 'Good night, mate. I'll see you in the morning before I leave.'

Despite being very tired, Jack couldn't go to sleep. He kept turning restlessly in his bed, unable to relax. Every time he drifted towards the sleep his exhausted body craved, Tristan's disturbing words would pull him back. Finally, bathed in sweat, Jack sat up, turned on the light and got out of bed. Slipping on a bathrobe, he opened the door of his room and peered outside. Silence.

Remembering a similar occasion during his first visit to the chateau, he decided to walk downstairs and visit the little chapel at the back. With that visit, the circle would be complete, he thought. However, one more thing remained to be done; he had to return something that belonged to the countess. Jack unzipped his duffel bag and took out Anna's photo the countess had kept on the altar in the chapel during all those lonely, painful years. She had given it to Jack, sealing the promise he had made that fateful night two years ago. It had accompanied him every step of the way along the dangerous and rocky path that had eventually led him to Anna.

'I knew I would find you here,' whispered the countess, standing in the shadows. Jack spun around, surprised.

'Katerina? You startled me. How long have you been here?'

'I've been watching you for a little while; I didn't want to intrude ...'

'I was just thinking how much has happened since the last time we stood here.'

‘I was thinking the same thing,’ said the countess, coming closer. ‘You brought Anna back and gave me a family. I now have a beautiful grandson as well, and Tristan is like the son I never had. I’m forever in your debt.’ Staring at Anna’s photo Jack had put back on the altar, the countess was unable to hold back the tears any longer and began to sob. Overcome by a whirlwind of emotions, relief and gratitude merged with love and admiration for this rough diamond of a man who had brought back her only child from the dead. It was God’s work, she knew that, and Jack was but an instrument of fate. ‘You know Tristan is an extraordinary child with extraordinary powers ...’ Jack nodded. ‘He’s worried about you. He’s seen something ... frightening that concerns you.’

‘He told me.’

‘Don’t dismiss it as adolescent fantasy; that would be a mistake.’

‘I agree.’

The countess reached for Jack’s hand and looked at him through teary eyes. ‘Promise?’

‘Promise.’

‘Be careful, Jack. You are now part of this family. I hope you know that.’

‘Thanks, Katerina. I will always remember that.’

‘Love makes us vulnerable; I worry about you.’

For a while, they stood there in silence, watching the candles burning on the altar next to Anna’s photo. ‘How’s Anna,’ asked Jack, breaking the silence, ‘*really*?’

‘She’s a damaged human being trying to repair herself. Progress is slow,’ replied the countess sadly. ‘I don’t think we can even try to imagine what she’s been through. Despite all this, she’s an excellent mother; she’s very good with her little boy ...’

‘But?’

‘She lives in her own world ... However, her painting has flourished. Her work is in great demand, especially in Paris. Several prominent galleries are pursuing her with promises of exhibitions.’

‘You must be very proud.’

‘Of course, I’m happy for her.’

‘Her treatment? How’s that going?’

‘She’s under the care of the best specialists. Alexandra’s mother has made sure of

that. She's a leading neurologist, as you know.'

'Prognosis?'

'Non-committal. They all agree on only one thing: time. We have to give it time, that's all they say. I don't think they really know.'

Jack sensed something deeper was troubling the countess. 'There's more, isn't there?' he asked, squeezing the countess' hand.

'Very perceptive, as usual. Anna is much closer to Tristan than anyone else. They spend hours together while she paints, in silence. They talk to each other without speaking. It's quite extraordinary. Tristan has found a way of communicating with her that is beyond us.'

'Perhaps it was meant to be,' said Jack. 'Two troubled souls bound together by extraordinary events. I often thought about this while writing the book.'

'Perhaps ... You have never thought about a family of your own, Jack?' asked the countess.

Jack looked at her, surprised by the unexpected question. 'You mean, find a nice girl, settle down, a house with a large backyard for the dog; kids? Katerina, I've tried marriage; it's not for everyone, and it certainly wasn't for me,' Jack said, laughing.

'Never say never,' said the countess, wagging her finger. 'You won't be in your forties forever, Jack.'

'Marriage is definitely not for an adventure junky, as Rebecca likes to call me; we both know that.' The countess burst out laughing, grateful for the humour.

'How's Nikolai?' asked Jack.

'We are certainly getting along better since Anna's come back to us. He visits regularly, but I think he's punishing himself for having given up hope. As you know, he was convinced she was dead and lost to us forever. He now believes, in hindsight, that as a father he should never have lost faith. I don't think he can get over this.'

'Time heals all,'

'I hope you're right, for his sake.'

'I think I should go back to bed,' said Jack. 'Off to Sydney tomorrow; it's a long flight.'

'With Alexandra. Thanks for keeping an eye on her.'

‘I don’t think she needs me to keep an eye on her,’ replied Jack. ‘She strikes me as an exceedingly capable young woman.’

‘Perhaps so. But it’s still a new country, new job, new people ... And you never know what’s around the corner, do you?’

‘I’ll have to agree with you there,’ said Jack, linking arms with the countess. ‘But I’ve had enough excitement for a while, I can tell you.’ Jack traced the little white scar on his temple with the tip of his finger. ‘I’m planning to take it easy. A little sailing on the harbour is about all the excitement I can cope with at the moment.’

‘Why is it that I don’t believe you?’ asked the countess, trying to sound serious. ‘I would like to; really, Jack, I would but ...’

‘Rebecca could answer that for you,’ replied Jack.

‘Oh?’

‘Because – according to her, at least – I’m an infuriating, incorrigible rascal. Could that perhaps be the reason? What do you think?’

‘I’m not going to answer that.’

As an entertainer used to gruelling schedules, Isis knew how to manage lack of sleep. However, the emotional strain of the past 24 hours was beginning to take its toll. Leaning against Lola in the back seat of the Bentley crawling towards the airport, Isis was trying to doze. London morning peak hour traffic was horrendous, as usual. Hovering in the foggy no-man's-land of an exhausted mind, she was unable to find the rest her body craved. Not quite asleep, but not entirely awake either, every time sleep beckoned, her mother's disfigured face would appear with alarming clarity. *Great danger*, Isis could hear her mother whisper ... *our secret place ... hide and seek – remember? What does it mean?* Isis wondered, over and over. Then suddenly, the disturbing image faded and Isis found herself back at Clarendon Hall, the Elms' family estate just outside Bath.

'Of course, that's it!' Isis cried out, suddenly wide awake. 'How stupid of me! *Hide and seek.*'

'Bad dream?' asked Lola, reaching for Isis' hand.

'No, a good one. We are going to Bath – now! Did you hear that?' Isis asked the driver. The driver nodded; Isis' moods and whims were legendary. 'Clarendon Hall; it's not that far. Ring the plane, Lola. We'll put our flight back.'

'What about Tokyo?' asked Lola, the scary spectre of a cancelled concert sending icy shivers down her spine.

'Don't worry, we'll make it, but only if we hurry.'

Clarendon Hall was built to impress. Over four hundred years old, it was constructed on a grand scale and set in magnificent grounds. The estate had served as the seat of the powerful Elms family for countless generations. Isis had spent most of her childhood there, until boarding school took her away and everything changed.

Isis hadn't been to Clarendon Hall for years. Staring dreamily out of the car window, she watched the familiar old oak trees lining the long driveway slip past as the car approached the huge manor house. Looking back, living at Clarendon Hall seemed like a distant fairytale. Grand staircases and long corridors filled with medieval armour, exotic hunting trophies and all kinds of weapons were the playground of a shy little boy

growing up in a cold place, where the only warmth was the love of a lonely mother.

Lord and Lady Elms had lived separate lives throughout their entire marriage. Ten years older than his wife, Lord Elms had preferred to live in London, leaving Lady Elms to bring up their only child on the estate. The boy was her life.

News of the tragedy had already reached Clarendon Hall. Most of the remaining staff had spent their entire working life on the estate. Teary-eyed and looking old, Albert, the butler and Kate, the cook were waiting at the entrance. Both had known Isis since childhood.

Isis left Boris and Lola in Kate's care in the kitchen and excused herself. She told them she wanted to be alone with her memories for a little while. 'Don't take too long,' Lola reminded her, pointing to her watch. 'Take-off is at eight – remember? Any later than that, we've got air traffic problems.'

Returning to Clarendon Hall after all these years felt like visiting a museum where all the exhibits were exactly in the same place, only a little smaller and less imposing. Childhood memories were like that. Isis stood at the bottom of the huge staircase and looked up at the portraits of her bewigged ancestors staring accusingly, she thought, down on her from above. Then slowly, she walked up the marble stairs to the first floor.

Every house has a soul, especially one this ancient and with so many secrets and stories to tell. The stories were all still there, but only for those who knew how to listen. Isis' fascination with the occult and things supernatural had begun in this very place a long time ago. The Egyptian room at the end of the corridor had been her favourite. Filled with antiquities a museum would have been proud of, it was a magical place full of mystery and wonder. As she walked down the corridor, Isis remembered sitting on her mother's lap at the foot of a life-sized statue of the god Osiris, lord of the Underworld, listening to stories of the goddess Isis and her unlucky brother.

Isis opened the gilded door leading to the Egyptian room and looked inside ... everything was exactly as she remembered. The massive pink granite sarcophagus dominated the centre of the chamber with promises of immortality and a blissful afterlife. Tall statues of lion-headed goddesses and falcon-beaked gods stood guard along the

walls, decorated with wonderful hieroglyphs – passages from *The Book of the Dead* – decipherable only by the initiated few. Rather than finding this place intimidating or frightening, Isis had found it a place of adventure and excitement, where the imagination of a young boy growing up on his own could run wild.

Over the years, the imposing stone gods had become friends, and the Egyptian room a place for a favourite game Isis used to play with her mother: hide and seek. However, this was not the conventional game where one player counted to thirty while the other hid somewhere. This was a game with a unique twist: it was played with a small golden ankh, a handled cross, the Egyptian symbol of life, which had to be hidden somewhere in the room while the other player stood outside in the corridor counting to thirty.

With so many exhibits to choose from, hiding the ankh was great fun. The art was to ‘hide’ it in plain view, but in such a way that it formed part of an exhibit and was therefore difficult to spot. The glass display cabinets containing jewellery and small ceremonial objects were favourite hiding places. Alternatively, it could be hidden inside one of the canopic jars, or wooden chests, or behind or on top of one of the statues. The more imaginative the hiding place, the better. During the game, clues were provided to guide the seeker. The more ingenious the clues and the longer it took one’s opponent to find the ankh, determined the winner. While this was often a matter of opinion, debating the outcome was almost as much fun as playing the game.

The little golden ankh had become one of Isis’ most treasured possessions. She had worn it around her neck since her childhood days and never took it off. The belt buckle of Isis, as some Egyptologists called the ankh, had become Isis’ trademark and the symbol of her record label. It featured on all the merchandise and promotional material associated with the band and was even painted on the tail of *Icarus*, the band’s customised Boeing 757, designed to fly the band around the world.

During one of these games, Isis had accidentally pressed one of the many eyes of Horus painted on the lid of a wooden chest shaped like a mummy. To the little boy’s surprise, the back of the head opened up, revealing a concealed compartment the size of a small shoebox. Isis hid the ankh in the compartment and closed it. It had taken his mother three days and countless clues to find the correct eye to press. This hidden compartment was pronounced the ultimate hiding place, and George the overall winner of the game.

The mummy's head became their 'secret place'. Occasionally, little presents would be waiting for George in there, or his mother would leave cryptic messages for him to decipher.

Once her eyes had become accustomed to the gloom, Isis walked slowly to the back of the room where the mummy-shaped chest stood in its usual place on a stone plinth. *This has to be it*, she thought, tracing one painted eye after another with the tip of her finger. Because all the eyes looked the same and she couldn't remember exactly which one activated the mechanism, she kept pressing each eye methodically, starting at the top of the head and working her way down to the chin with the false beard.

Perhaps it isn't working any more, she thought, becoming anxious. Then suddenly, the back of the mummy's head opened with a little shudder. Isis took a deep breath and looked inside. 'My God! *What is that?*' she whispered, surprise and disbelief clouding her face. Slowly, she reached inside and ran the tips of her shaking fingers along the smooth, gleaming surface of a strange object, its touch making the hairs on the back of her neck tingle with excitement. *It looks almost alive*, she thought. *Scary. And there's something underneath it ... Letters?*

Isis had discovered something that had been hidden a long time ago for her to find when the time was right. The game was over, but this time there was no opponent, and no winner. Only questions.

As soon as the plane reached cruising altitude and had levelled out, Isis began to relax and sat down on her comfortable bed at the back of the plane. Boris was already asleep in his usual seat at the front, and Lola was working on her computer. All was quiet.

Isis switched on the reading light, reached for her handbag and pulled out the small bundle of letters she had found under the strange artefact inside the chest. *Whispers from the grave?* she wondered, untying the blue ribbon with trembling fingers. Yellowish and brittle, the small, neatly folded sheets of paper were almost transparent. There were no envelopes. Isis held one of the sheets up to the light and began to read:

Dearest ...

After she had finished reading the letters, Isis turned off the light, closed her eyes and

for a while just lay there, quite still. *What does it all mean?* she asked herself, her mind racing. *Mamina! Mamina will know.* Feeling calmer, Isis reached for her satellite phone and dialled a familiar number.

Alexandra put down *The Disappearance of Anna Popov* and looked at Jack, asleep in his comfortable business class seat next to her. *Extraordinary*, she thought, closing the book. *He's without doubt the most exciting man I've met for a long time.* The chestnut brown hair – a little unkempt and a touch too long – and the five o'clock shadow on his relaxed face, gave the self-proclaimed incorrigible rascal a slightly roguish look. She had never come across anyone quite like him, although she had to admit that academic circles were not the ideal place to meet interesting men. Being attracted to someone has nothing to do with time, place or logic; it can happen in an instant, and for no apparent reason. All one needed was an opportunity, however fleeting. For a scientist who had spent most of her adult life in a research cocoon analysing data, this was a disconcerting realisation.

After a short, disastrous marriage to a Belgian biologist that had ended in an acrimonious divorce a year ago, Alexandra knew it was time to reassess her life. The offer she had received from her dying colleague and dear friend had come just at the right moment. She was ready for something new and, hopefully, exciting – not just professionally but personally.

As the only child of two eminent doctors, she had been destined for a medical career from an early age. Striving for excellence ran in the family. Her mother, as the younger sister of Professor Popov, a Nobel laureate, had become a leading neurologist. Her father, a brain surgeon, came from a long line of French doctors and was highly regarded for his work in pioneering new techniques in tumour removal.

Jack opened his eyes, looked at Alexandra and smiled. 'What did you think of it?' he asked, pointing to the book in her lap.

'I couldn't put it down.'

'That's what authors like to hear,' said Jack, sitting up. 'We always look for approval.'

'We all do. I particularly liked the – how do you say – “virtuosity” of your language.'

'Wow! I don't think I've ever had a compliment quite like that.' Jack looked at his watch. 'We must be almost there,' he said.

'Three more hours.'

‘Have you made a decision?’

‘About what?’

‘Becoming my flatmate.’

‘After what I’ve just read, I don’t know. You’re a dangerous man, Jack.’

‘You think so?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘The answer’s no, then?’

‘No, it isn’t. I accept.’

‘*You do?* But I’m a dangerous man; you just said so. Why the sudden change of heart?’

‘Because you are.’

‘What? Dangerous?’

‘Precisely.’

‘Women!’ said Jack, pulling the blanket over his head. ‘I’ll never work them out!’

‘I think we should drink to that,’ said Alexandra, laughing, ‘if you are prepared to come out of hiding, that is.’

The first thing Jack always noticed about flying into Sydney from overseas was the light: brilliant, deliriously bright. There was no other place quite like it, especially when you called it home. First, the plane circled the city, giving them a splendid view of the sparkling harbour and the blue Pacific, and then approached the runway from the south. It was a perfect morning for a homecoming.

‘I didn’t quite believe you when you said you hadn’t seen your apartment,’ said Alexandra, following Jack to the concierge. Jack introduced himself and collected the keys. A magnum of champagne was waiting for him at the desk with a note from Rebecca, his literary agent. *Welcome home, Jack*, it said, *enjoy! PS. I hope you like the little surprise in the lounge.*

‘Top floor,’ Jack said, holding up the keys. ‘Let’s go exploring.’

The penthouse occupied almost the entire floor, with a one hundred and eighty-degree

view of the city and Sydney's magnificent harbour. 'Not bad,' said Jack, opening the sliding doors leading to the huge roof terrace. 'Must have cost a bomb.'

'You mean you don't know?' asked Alexandra, shaking her head.

'No, I have no idea.'

'I thought things like this only happened in movies.'

'Choose your bedroom; you're the guest.' With three large bedrooms, each with its own en suite, splendid views and access to the terrace, there were plenty to choose from. Alexandra chose the smallest one and left the master bedroom suite for Jack.

'I don't need all this,' said Jack, walking through the huge walk-in wardrobe. 'I always get into trouble with my clothes,' he joked, holding up his modest duffel bag. 'I believe in travelling light. Much to the exasperation of my agent, who always insists on buying me stuff to wear,' he added. 'Champagne?'

'At ten in the morning?'

'Why not? You've just moved in with a dangerous bloke – remember?'

'A *bloke*?' What's that?' asked Alexandra, whose English, while perfect – with a charming French accent – wasn't quite up to the finer points of Aussie slang.

'Someone who would call you a good lookin' sheila.'

'Is that what you would call me? A good looking *sheila*?'

'You bet.'

'Funny language.'

'Welcome to Oz. Let's have a drink, and I'll show you the surprise in the lounge.'

'I do like surprises.'

'Most sheilas do.'

'Does that remind you of something?' asked Jack, pointing to a painting on the wall in the lounge room. He opened a bottle of champagne, poured two glasses and handed one to Alexandra.

'Of course, it's on the cover of your book. How extraordinary. Is that the surprise?'

'It is. It was painted by your niece. Anna gave it to me,' said Jack. 'And my agent, who appears to be managing my entire life, has somehow managed to get it here. That's the surprise.'

'What's it about?'

‘Well, you’ve just read the book. It’s actually mentioned towards the end, in the epilogue.’ Jack walked over to the painting and stood in front of it. ‘This is the inside of the cave where I found Anna. Sitting on the floor here are the two Aboriginal women who cared for her, and this is Anna lying next to them. She was almost dead when I found her. And this is me in the shorts, right here, on my knees in front of her.’

‘And what’s that behind you?’ asked Alexandra, pointing to a shadowy human skeleton floating through a shaft of light, away from the women.

‘That’s death leaving, as Anna put it.’

‘Amazing. She captured a near-death experience, and the very moment of her rescue?’

‘Yes.’ *But it still reminds me of the adoration of the Magi, thought Jack, with only one king, bringing the gift of life after banishing death.* ‘It’s signed “Lucrezia” – here, see?’

‘Her nom de plume of the paint brush, as I think you put it. Another example of your language virtuosity?’

‘You have an excellent memory. I can see I’ll have to watch what I say.’ Jack topped up their glasses. ‘Enough about me! Let’s sit down. I want to ask *you* something.’

‘What about?’

‘Your work.’

‘Oh? Fire away.’

‘How does a geneticist as young as you, end up at the top of her field? I ask myself. From what Katerina told me, you’re apparently one of the best. She’s incredibly proud of you.’

‘Don’t believe everything my aunt tells you,’ replied Alexandra, laughing.

‘And why cancer research? It all sounds very esoteric and complicated.’

‘Only to old blokes like you.’

‘Thanks. Then why don’t you enlighten this old codger? How did it all start?’

‘All right. Have you heard of the Human Genome Project?’

‘I have, actually.’

‘What do you know about it?’

‘It was a monumental international undertaking. It began in 1990, lasted thirteen

years and cost three billion dollars.’

‘And the aim was?’

‘To discover all of the twenty to twenty-five thousand human genes.’

‘And?’

‘To determine the complete sequence of the three billion DNA sub-units?’

‘You’re right,’ Alexandra replied, surprised. ‘You seem to know a lot about this. The project was a great success and resulted in the first full reading of a human genome. It was hailed as one of the greatest achievements in the history of science and a milestone in the history of mankind.’

‘And the results were announced jointly by President Clinton and the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, in 2000,’ Jack cut in.

‘Not bad for an old bloke,’ teased Alexandra, nodding appreciatively. ‘The human DNA code has three billion letters. As researchers began to take a closer look at these letters in 2003, they found to their surprise that only one point five per cent of them actually carried instructions for genes. And inside this modest bundle, they identified twenty-five thousand genes. This was an extraordinary finding. What this meant was that man had the same set of genes as a *Caenorhabditis elegans*.’

‘A what?’

‘A humble, millimetre long, one thousand-cell roundworm.’

‘I’m related to a roundworm? Great!’

‘Don’t despair. It soon became apparent that if this were so, then instructions for creating a human being must be encoded somewhere else within the DNA, which as you know is the physical substance that makes up a gene,’ said Alexandra, becoming quite excited. ‘Your genome is a code. It has three billion DNA letters, and there are two copies of that code, one from mum and one from dad; that’s the unique *you*. And this is when things become really interesting—’

‘Is that why you became involved in all this?’ interrupted Jack.

‘In a way, yes. I was a PhD student in Paris at the time. That’s when I became Professor K’s assistant. He was an extraordinary man and a close friend of my mother’s. He was an iconoclast; an intellectual rebel who took nothing for granted and thought the answer in science was often to be found in the weird and the outrageous. He was right.

To an impressionable, starry-eyed young student like me, he was like a god. He became my hero. He taught me how to think.'

'In what way?'

'Keep an open mind at all times, think laterally and don't be afraid to challenge dogma and be different. However, my interest in all this began well before I met Professor K.'

'Oh?'

'My father's hero was Aristotle, who – according to him at least – was one of the greatest thinkers of all time. I remember sitting on my dad's knee in our garden as a little girl, listening to stories about Aristotle, the acorn, and the egg.'

'Fascinating.'

'Don't laugh; it is. Did you know that Aristotle toyed with the idea of an acorn having within it a "plan" for an oak tree, and an egg containing the "concept" of a chicken?' Jack shook his head. 'When you step back from this and look at it carefully, what do you see?' asked Alexandra.

'The idea of a gene?'

'Exactly. It was the beginning of a two thousand three hundred-year journey, which reached its destination in 1953 with an epic discovery: the DNA double helix.'

'Compliments of Francis Crick.'

'Correct. Except that the "destination" was in fact just the beginning of a much bigger and more exciting journey – the search for the physical identity of the gene. Sitting there on my father's lap, I made up my mind then and there that I wanted to be part of that search,' said Alexandra.

'Amazing.'

'Another one of my father's favourite stories was about a monk and his peas—'

'Mendel,' interrupted Jack.

'Very good. And do you know why?'

'Obviously bored with monastic life, Gregor Mendel, a monk, turned to breeding peas, which was far more exciting. This was in the eighteen sixties. As you would expect, he was a man of iron discipline and great patience; you had to be if you wanted to be successful in breeding peas – right?'

‘Absolutely. So far, I find your story far more interesting than my father’s version. Go on,’ said Alexandra, laughing, ‘let’s hear the rest.’

‘After a lot of pea breeding, Mendel discovered that breeding was by no means arbitrary. On the contrary, he realised there were certain rules, quite precise ones that governed hereditary factors with mathematical precision. Mendel’s hereditary factors later became known as ...?’

‘Genes,’ answered Alexandra.

‘A term coined by Wilhelm Johannsen, a Danish botanist, in his book *Elemente der exacting Erbachkeitslehre*, published in 1909.’

Alexandra looked nonplussed. ‘Bravo!’ she said. ‘How do you know all this, Jack?’

‘I wrote a series of articles on the Human Genome Project back in 2003.’

‘You’re an amazing bloke, Jack Rogan,’ said Alexandra, holding up her empty glass. ‘More champagne please.’

‘And you are one clever little sheila,’ said Jack, reaching for the bottle, ‘whose chosen genomics. Why?’

‘To integrate genomics into patient diagnosis and treatment.’

‘Precision medicine?’

‘Another time, please! Enough science for one morning, don’t you think?’ Leaning back in her comfortable leather chair, Alexandra looked at Jack. ‘Are we going to have an affair?’ she asked, lowering her voice.

Jack put down the bottle and looked at Alexandra. Their eyes locked and for a while, he said nothing. ‘I hope so,’ he said, sounding hoarse.

‘I don’t believe it,’ said Alexandra.

‘What?’

‘You’re blushing!’

‘Nonsense.’

‘Yes, you are.’

‘It’s the reflection from the windows; the sun ...’

‘No, that’s ... how do you say it in Aussie English, bull ...?’

‘Bullshit?’

‘Yes; that’s it.’

Calypso sailed through the Heads into Sydney Harbour just after sunrise and dropped anchor in front of the famous Taronga Zoo. Because of the vessel's size, there was no suitable berth available, and the converted icebreaker was assigned a mooring in the harbour usually reserved for visiting warships. Macbeth liked it that way. Contact with the shore would be by tender, and would give *Calypso* some distance from the curious press and prying eyes of the public.

Sitting in his wheelchair on the deck outside his stateroom, Macbeth was drinking in the fresh morning air. Sailing into one of the most beautiful harbours in the world at first light should have been exhilarating, but Macbeth had other things on his mind. Cavendish was turning into a potential liability and Macbeth was contemplating what to do about it. His Sydney agent had just reported in: Cavendish was becoming difficult. But it wasn't all bad news. Cavendish had secured Professor Kozakiewicz's notes. However, realising his use-by date had arrived, he was behaving irrationally and had demanded an exorbitant payment for them.

Professor K's notes had to be obtained at any cost, so much was clear. But what to do about Cavendish? Macbeth pondered. It wasn't the money that troubled him; the problem was the man. Macbeth had used people like Cavendish before, many times. Being gay made Cavendish vulnerable, and it was his vulnerability that made him useful. Corrupting him had been easy. Distancing oneself from him could be difficult and risky. With the stakes so high, Macbeth couldn't afford any mistakes. Cavendish was a loose end who could very quickly turn into a loose cannon.

No loose ends, thought Macbeth, feeling better. He always felt better when he followed his instincts. 'Get Jan,' he said to Carlotta, who was standing behind him. Carlotta let go of the wheelchair and walked below deck. She knew exactly where to find Jan, and what he would be doing.

Completing his second set of two hundred sit-ups on the helicopter pad at the stern of the ship, Jan Van Cleef was going through his morning exercise routine. It was a gruelling program, which he had perfected many years ago. For a frontline commando in the British army, survival often depended on discipline and fitness. Decorated for bravery

under enemy fire, he had been one of the rising stars until something went terribly wrong. He had entered the house of a suspected insurgent during a covert mission in Afghanistan, and mistakenly shot two elderly women and a young boy. The incident turned into a serious embarrassment for the British Forces, and if all else fails, a serious embarrassment needs someone to blame. Van Cleef, the decorated hero, was the perfect candidate. After an inconclusive court martial that neither convicted, nor exonerated, Van Cleef was quietly discharged. The army told him his services were no longer required. Disgraced and disillusioned, he had nowhere to go. For two years, he worked as a mercenary in South Africa, where he had lived as a boy. A bullet in the shoulder during an assignment in Zimbabwe brought all that to an abrupt end.

Wounded and down on his luck, Macbeth found him in a bar in Johannesburg. The army may have considered Van Cleef an embarrassment to be disposed of, but Macbeth saw him as a man of immeasurable value. Not only did he offer him a job, he gave him respect and a future. He made him his personal bodyguard and chief of security. The army had spent hundreds of thousands of pounds training him. Van Cleef was a decorated soldier with combat experience money couldn't buy. Used to loyalty beyond question, the devotion that had once belonged to the army and his comrades, now belonged to Macbeth. Van Cleef would gladly give up his life for the only man who believed in him. Macbeth realised that loyalty like that was beyond price.

‘He wants to see you,’ said Carlotta, watching Van Cleef’s bulging neck muscles. Not many men can do fifty push-ups with only one hand. Van Cleef nodded, reached for his towel and wiped the sweat from his face.

‘Where is he?’

‘Outside; in front of his cabin.’

Tall and blond, with penetrating, cornflower-blue eyes and a powerful physique, Van Cleef looked more like a Dutch farmer from the Transvaal than the finely honed killing machine he really was. His school-boyish good looks were deceptive, disguising an extremely dangerous man in his early thirties. He reminded Macbeth of the beautifully engraved blade of a precious dagger: tempting to touch, but quick to draw blood from the

unwary.

‘We have a problem,’ began Macbeth quietly. ‘I have an important assignment for you I want you to handle personally. Don’t use outsiders.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Van Cleef insisted on calling Macbeth sir. To him, he was his commanding officer. He felt more comfortable that way. He also insisted that all five ‘security men’ under his command – all former brothers-in-arms carefully chosen by him – did the same. To Van Cleef, discipline was the fabric that held them all together. It was the one thing he could always count on when things got tough.

‘No weapons of any kind are to be used. If you can, make it look like an accident, but you don’t have much time to prepare. It must happen tomorrow. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘We have a reliable man on the ground; that should help. We’ll stay right here in Sydney until the assignment has been completed. *Calypso* will sail as soon as you let me know that it’s been done.’

‘Understood.’

‘Carlotta will brief you. That will be all.’

Without saying another word, Van Cleef turned and walked away. Macbeth watched him leave and smiled. *He almost saluted*, he thought, thanking his lucky stars he had such a man on his side.

Pegasus had begun its slow descent into Tokyo Narita Airport and was approaching the city in preparation for landing. Isis sat up in her bed at the back of the plane and looked around. 'What time is it?' she asked, massaging her stiff neck.

'You went out like a light and slept the whole way. We are almost there,' said Lola.

Isis felt calm and no longer so alone and lost in her grief. Just hearing Mamina's voice on the phone and speaking with her in Spanish had made her feel better. It had also helped her fall asleep and get the rest she so desperately needed. However, what she had been asked to do was puzzling, to say the least. It made no sense and only added to her confusion. Unconditional trust has always been Mamina's way, and this was certainly not the time to question her judgement. Isis reminded herself that somehow, in the end, everything Mamina suggested usually worked out for the best.

Isis got up and walked over to Lola. 'There's something I would like you to do for me,' she said, running her fingers playfully through Lola's short hair.

'Sure. How do you feel?' Lola savoured the caress and closeness of the one person on the planet she adored with every fibre of her being. Her love for Isis was unconditional; just to be near her was more than enough.

'Awful. Like a gutted fish. Somehow alive, but empty.'

'Are you sure you can do Tokyo tonight?' asked Lola, unable to hide her concern.

'Absolutely.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'Find out everything you can about this man.' Isis handed Lola a slip of paper she had torn out of her notebook.

'Who is he?'

'A famous writer.'

Lola knew better than to question Isis further. Instead, she turned to her computer and went to work.

Cavendish knew he was early. Sitting on a bar stool in the Blowhole, a bar popular with well-heeled, middle-aged gay men looking for adventure, he tried very hard to appear calm. The Blowhole had quite a reputation. It was one of the most unique establishments of its kind in the world. During the annual Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, the queue to get in just for a look around was a couple of hundred metres long. What made the Blowhole so popular was the fact it resembled a huge aquarium. All the walls, the bar and even the dance floor were made of thick plate glass. Large illuminated fish tanks concealed behind the glass opened up an underwater wonderland, with all kinds of exotic fish, coral, seashells, and even a wooden shipwreck with a skeleton and a treasure chest. Sitting at the bar, one had the feeling of being underwater. The couples embracing on the glass dance floor looked like ballet dancers floating on water, with menacing sharks cruising slowly past in a large pool beneath their feet. Danger was a powerful aphrodisiac.

‘Hello, Daniel,’ said a tall blond man standing next to Cavendish. He pulled up a barstool and sat down. ‘Has Kevin explained everything?’

Cavendish looked at the younger man with interest. Kevin, his usual contact, had indicated that due to the large amount of money involved, his ‘principals’ needed verification. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘you want to see the material before—’

‘You’ve got it with you?’ interrupted Van Cleef.

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Let’s have a drink first. There’s no rush. What are you drinking? Is that an icebreaker?’

Cavendish nodded, and Van Cleef ordered two.

The evening was hotting up. Suddenly, the place was crowded, with standing room only. Sitting atop what resembled a huge ice cube, a bare-breasted, she-male disc jockey dressed as a mermaid turned up the volume. The music was deafening and the atmosphere electric. On top of another ‘ice cube’, two voluptuous she-males wearing only diamond-studded jockstraps were performing a pole-dance with a difference. Leaving little to the imagination, *The Blowhole* – the signature dance of the

establishment – would have made a less jaded audience blush.

Van Cleef was enjoying himself; everything was going to plan – so far. The night before, he and one of his lieutenants had familiarised themselves with the unique layout and facilities of the club. The huge tanks and underwater feeding cages in the back, specially designed for sharks, suggested a unique plan. *Always let your surroundings dictate the approach, never the other way round*, was something Van Cleef never forgot. To make a hit look like an accident was an art, and Van Cleef was the Picasso of hit men.

There were a few basic rules: everything had to blend in and look logical and plausible – cause and effect. Ideally, the target should never be the only victim; confusion was the best cover. Suspicion and blame should always point *away* from the real perpetrator, to give the authorities someone or something else to seize upon. What Van Cleef had found in the club during the night ticked all the right boxes. All one had to have were nerves of steel and the courage to see it through. Van Cleef and his men had an abundant supply of both.

‘We’ll have to go out the back later, so I can have a closer look,’ said Van Cleef, lifting his glass. ‘Cheers.’

‘Are you a scientist?’

‘No.’

‘Then I must warn you, the material is rather technical.’

‘That won’t be a problem.’

‘Good.’ Cavendish was starting to relax. The exciting man sitting next to him was sending his hormones wild.

‘Do you come here often?’ asked Van Cleef, putting his hand on Cavendish’s thigh.

‘I’m a regular. What about you?’

‘My first time.’

‘Do you like it?’

‘Too early to tell.’

‘Then let me show you round. The loos are particularly interesting. Everything is made of glass, even the urinals ...’

‘All right. But first, can I have a quick look?’ asked Van Cleef, his face like a mask.

Cavendish unzipped his shoulder bag and let Van Cleef look inside.

‘The professor’s notebook?’

‘Yes.’ Van Cleef pulled out his iPhone, took a photo of two of the handwritten pages and sent the photo to the Blackburn lab in San Francisco. The scientists, who had been working on the Kozakievicz matter for over a year, would be able to confirm authenticity. Macbeth, a careful man, had insisted on this. Van Cleef was to wait for confirmation before going any further. ‘As soon as I get the okay, we can go ahead,’ said Van Cleef, holding up his phone.

‘Clever,’ said Cavendish. ‘You have the money?’ Van Cleef pointed to the backpack at his feet. ‘A quick peek?’

‘Sure.’ As he opened the backpack, Van Cleef knew this was the right moment. Reaching into his pocket, he searched for the little capsule. Holding it carefully between two fingers, he pulled out his hand and quickly dropped the capsule into Cavendish’s glass. The capsule dissolved instantly. *Five hundred thousand*, thought Cavendish, his heart beating like a drum. He had never seen so much cash before.

‘A dance, until I get the go ahead? What do you say?’ asked Van Cleef, handing Cavendish his glass.

‘Why not?’ Cavendish drained his glass and got up.

Van Cleef took Cavendish by the hand. ‘Let’s go.’

‘Are you just going to leave that there?’ asked Cavendish, pointing to the backpack on the floor.

‘It’s your money, unless the professor’s book is a fake,’ Van Cleef replied, laughing. ‘Don’t worry; no one’s going to steal an old backpack – come.’

What Cavendish couldn’t have known was the reason behind this cavalier approach: the man sitting to his right was one of Van Cleef’s men. The backpack was perfectly safe ...

Van Cleef didn’t find it easy to embrace another man like a lover and dance with him in a public place. However, if his work demanded it, he would play his part to perfection, and he did. In the unlikely event that the notebook was a fake, he would immediately withdraw. If not, everything would proceed as planned. Just before the music stopped, the

phone in his pocket began to vibrate. He pulled out the phone and looked at the text message. '*We're on,*' he whispered into Cavendish's ear. '*One more dance to seal the deal?*'

'Why not?' said Cavendish, slurring his words.

Van Cleef knew the drugs would kick in soon. He could already feel the change in Cavendish's demeanour; he was unsteady on his feet. It was time to leave the dance floor. 'Come, let's go out the back,' he said, holding Cavendish firmly around the waist.

The dark, labyrinthine engine room of the club behind the huge fish tanks and all the machinery required to keep them going, was popular with regulars looking for a place to do drugs, or just fool around. Although strictly off limits, the management knew about this and did little to stop it. The maintenance staff looking after the tanks were in on it and enjoyed generous tips for 'turning a blind eye'. There were no CCTV cameras in this part of the club.

No one gave the two men walking into the back a second look. Locked in an intimate embrace and a little unsteady on their feet, they looked like all the other couples moving around in the dark. Drugs were the norm, cocaine the preferred poison. Cavendish was already delirious and Van Cleef had to hold him up and drag him along. Access to the large shark tank was at the end of the corridor. Two of Van Cleef's men were already there – waiting. A sizeable tip ensured no one would disturb them for a while.

'Here, look after this,' said Van Cleef, handing his backpack and Cavendish's shoulder bag to one of his men. 'The lock?'

'Removed.'

Van Cleef dragged Cavendish over to the steel feeding cage. Out of sight of the dance floor below, it gave access to the top of the pool. The grate covering the pool was usually only opened after hours at feeding time, and was secured with a padlock and chain. Looking down into the illuminated pool, Van Cleef could see several large sharks circling slowly below. Leaning over the pool was very popular with gay couples looking for a perfect setting for an illicit adventure: danger above, and danger below.

'Open it, quickly!' said Van Cleef. 'There isn't much time.'

Using both hands, one of the men lifted up the heavy steel trapdoor. Sensing movement in the feeding area above, the sharks came closer. Van Cleef was about to

drop Cavendish into the tank, when he thought of something. 'Cut his hand,' he hissed. 'There, that rough edge will do.' The man standing next to him ran Cavendish's hand over the jagged steel until it began to bleed. Van Cleef knew at once that this was the masterstroke. Smiling, he watched the droplets of blood turn the water cloudy-pink.

The pain in his hand sent a warning signal to Cavendish's addled brain. He opened his eyes and stared at Van Cleef leaning over him. When he turned his head to look at his bleeding hand, he saw the sharks cruising past below him. Cavendish began to panic. Just before Van Cleef dropped him headfirst into the tank, he lashed out with his right hand and dug his fingernails deep into Van Cleef's wrist.

'Let's go, guys!' said Van Cleef, and quickly closed the trapdoor. As he turned to leave, he saw through the grate that one of the sharks had already ripped off Cavendish's right arm. The feeding frenzy had begun.

The couple nearest the bar on the dance floor saw it first; a human head floated into view under their feet. Eyes wide open, and with the contorted mouth frozen in a silent scream, it looked like something out of a horror movie or a ghost train ride. At first, the couple thought it was part of the setting, but when a shark shot out of the shadows and began to rip away the cheeks, they began to scream. Things turned ugly after that. Panic is like wildfire; once it starts, it's difficult to stop.

Several people died and many were injured during the stampede caused by the subsequent fire. To cover their tracks and create confusion, Van Cleef's men had started an electrical fire in the engine room on their way out. By the time the first police car arrived at the scene, hundreds of screaming patrons had already spilled out into the street with only one thought on their mind: to get away as far, and as quickly as possible. By the time the ambulances made it to the scene to treat the injured, and the fire brigade went inside to put out the fire and secure the building, Van Cleef and his men were already on board *Calypso*, preparing to leave the harbour.

Determined, unstoppable and like a human tsunami, the first wave of excited fans began streaming through the gates of the huge Makuhari Messe Arena. Isis and The Time Machine's Tokyo concert was due to start in one hour.

Isis sat at her dressing table, unable to hold still, which made it difficult for her make-up artist to apply the finishing touches. Lola was watching Isis in the mirror. 'Are you okay?' she asked, a worried look on her face.

'No, I'm not,' replied Isis, staring pensively into her own reflection. 'I'm getting too old for all this.'

'Nonsense!' Lola knew that the past forty-eight hours had put Isis under enormous strain. The horror of her mother's death, the long flights, the funeral arrangements, and the frustration of not knowing what really happened or why, was taking its toll.

However, what Lola couldn't have known was the real reason for Isis' disquiet was something quite different. Unable to get her mother's last words out of her mind, and haunted by what she had discovered at Clarendon Hall, Isis was nervously drumming her fingers against the top of her dressing table.

A prisoner of her enormous success, her every waking moment was planned and accounted for, yet she yearned to be somewhere else. She could hear the five musicians who made up The Time Machine warming up in their practice rooms, the familiar sounds momentarily bringing a smile to her weary face.

'See? That's better,' said Lola, putting her hand on Isis' shoulder. 'Now go out there and kick some ass!'

Isis lay in her glass coffin below the stage and listened to the roar of her Tokyo fans as The Time Machine finished the opening number. Usually, she would be going through her breathing exercises to help her focus on her imminent entry, but not so tonight. Suddenly it all became clear; Isis knew exactly what she had to do. Feeling calmer now, she felt the coffin begin to rise. *Resurrection*, she thought. *So be it. I'm ready.*

Concerned about Isis' state of mind, Lola watched anxiously as the lid of the glass coffin opened on stage. She needn't have worried. Somersaulting out of the casket to the

roar of her adoring fans, Isis turned into the consummate professional she was. Usually, she would choose a face in the anonymous crowd somewhere close to the stage, and then perform for just that one person. This helped her tame the confronting crowd-beast and turn it into a personal encounter. That night, however, Isis performed for someone else.

Remembering the hide and seek games in the Egyptian room a long time ago, Isis reached for the little gold ankh she wore around her neck. *There are many shades of grief*, she thought, recalling Sir Charles' words. '*This is for you, mother,*' she whispered, and then delivered a performance the cheering fans would tweet about for years to come.

'I don't know how you do it,' said Lola, handing Isis a hot towel. 'That was amazing!'

Looking drained and exhausted, Isis wiped her face. 'What's next?' she asked.

Lola glanced at her notes. 'A short news conference in front of the stadium in half an hour – great publicity – and then a reception at your hotel given by the Tokyo division of your record label.'

'I'll wear the Marilyn Monroe dress,' announced Isis, stripping off. 'Japanese men like big tits, and mine aren't too bad. Let their eyes pop, and the tongues wag. You know what they say; if you've got it, flaunt it.' Isis looked around for her masseuse, who usually organised her shower routine after the concert and gave her a neck and scalp massage. 'Where's that girl?' she called out. 'Shower!' Lola followed Isis into the bathroom to continue the briefing. 'What have you found out,' asked Isis, enjoying the hot needles of water relaxing her muscles, 'about the author?'

'He's a fascinating guy.'

'Tell me about him.'

'He grew up on a remote farm in Queensland, Australia. His parents divorced when he was little and the mother returned to England. Life on the farm was hard. Years of drought, financial troubles, loneliness. At sixteen, he ran away from home and went to live with an aunt in Brisbane. His first job was sweeping floors and running errands at the local newspaper. That's where he fell in love with words—'

'How did you find all this out so quickly?' interrupted Isis.

Lola reached for a towel and dried Isis' back. 'He has a terrific website; it's all there,' she said. 'And then there was the feature article in *TIME* magazine a couple of years ago,

“Man of the Year” ... I’ve got a copy for you right here.’

‘What about his writing?’

‘At nineteen, he moved to Sydney and became a cadet journalist. It all went from there ...’

‘Anything about the occult?’

Lola followed Isis to her dressing table and let her team go to work. ‘He wrote many articles about the occult, especially the Tarot,’ she said. ‘He’s considered a bit of an authority in that area. He also writes about the Catholic Church and the supernatural. He likes controversy and isn’t afraid to raise delicate topics and politically sensitive issues. He asks the big questions others are too scared to touch. He’s a bit of a rebel, and a fighter.’

‘Good.’ *Just the man I need*, thought Isis.

‘*The Disappearance of Anna Popov* is his second book. His first, *Dental Gold and Other Horrors*, was a great success. It even made it into the New York Times’ bestseller list, and stayed there for weeks.’

‘I remember. Wasn’t that all about the Swiss banks and Nazi gold? He accused the banks of having illegally appropriated mega sums of money belonging to Holocaust victims – right?’

‘Yes. It turned into a huge scandal with lots of red faces all the way to the top. He accused the Swiss government of trying to cover it up and pointed the finger at the Vatican for silent complicity. In the end, the pressure became too great and the banks capitulated. They opened their secret ledgers and offered compensation. And all of this because of a book, and a man brave enough to confront the establishment. It sold more copies than *The Da Vinci Code*. This guy’s words are stronger than the sword!’

‘Get it for me. I want to read it.’

‘We really have to hurry,’ said Lola, looking anxiously at her watch, ‘the cameras are waiting.’

Isis stood up. ‘How do I look?’ she asked, examining herself in the mirror.

‘Amazing!’

‘This should give them something to write about, don’t you think?’

‘You bet.’

‘You can never be too thin, or too rich. Now, who said that?’

‘Wallace Simpson.’

‘Or have too shapely an ass ...’ said Isis, adjusting her bra.

‘Enough! Go and dazzle the press!’ said Lola, rolling her eyes.

Lola knocked softly and then opened the door to the presidential suite. ‘You’re up already,’ she said. ‘I only wanted to drop in the papers. The whole of Japan seems to have fallen in love with you.’ Lola walked across the room and dropped the papers on the lounge. ‘You haven’t slept at all, have you?’ she chided, looking through the open bedroom door. The huge California king-sized bed had obviously not been slept in.

Sitting on the floor with her eyes closed, Isis was doing her morning meditation. The breakfast, prepared by her chef who always travelled with her, was waiting on a trolley beside the bed. ‘I was on the phone all night,’ said Isis, without opening her eyes.

‘Oh? I thought that was my job. Who to?’

‘Charles.’

‘Are you going to tell me what about?’ asked Lola, sounding miffed.

Isis opened her eyes and rose to her feet. ‘I will. In a moment,’ she said. ‘But first, let’s have some breakfast. I ordered for both of us as you can see.’ Isis pushed the trolley over to the dining table and turned around. ‘Come here,’ she said, reaching for the rose in the small crystal vase on the breakfast tray. Lola walked over to Isis and stood demurely in front of her like a schoolgirl standing in front of the headmistress. ‘This is for you,’ said Isis, handing Lola the flower. Then she bent slowly down and kissed her ever so tenderly on the mouth.

‘*What have I done to deserve this?*’ whispered Lola, tears sparkling in her eyes.

‘You deserve it; trust me. You are always there for me. You don’t question me, and you don’t lecture me. Your loyalty is unconditional. It is in times of great pain and distress that we appreciate the people who really matter,’ replied Isis, ‘and believe me, you matter to me. I’ve been to hell and back these past two days. I should know.’

‘*Thanks,*’ whispered Lola.

‘I asked Charles to make some inquiries for me. You know how well-connected he is.’

END OF THIS SAMPLE

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