

I

As he walked up the stone stairway, Captain Harry Peterson had no idea that time was running out. In less than an hour, a bomb would rip this building apart.

He looked across the lawn. Everyone was peaceful, content. A hundred officers in full uniform were drinking champagne in front of a marquee. The buttons on their cropped jackets were shining in the sunlight. Their conversation, loud with laughter, mixed with music from the Royal Marines Band.

Harry smiled. He'd seen it all before, many times, but he knew he'd never grow tired of the glamour and decadence of a military ball.

Behind the officers' wardroom at Her Majesty's Naval Base, Devonport, a thin man in dark clothes waited patiently. He paced up and down, up and down. He checked the straps of his backpack and the trigger switch in his pocket.

Harry always thought it was a privilege to be in the Royal Navy, but never more so than when he was at Devonport. He smiled as he walked past the two miniature cannons housed on carved wooden lions on his way into the building. He had never wanted to do anything else

but this: as a child he'd dreamt of travelling the world on the ships he'd seen in Portsmouth and as a teenager he'd watched films about fighter pilots and tacked a poster of *The Dam Busters* to his bedroom wall. It wasn't that he wanted to fight but he liked the idea of being a hero. Who didn't? He wanted to be a good person.

The man on reception glanced at the rank insignia embroidered on Harry's jacket cuffs. 'Good evening, Captain,' he said.

Harry nodded. He squeezed past the photographer and collected a glass of champagne from a lady dressed in a red-tailed jacket and a gold waistcoat. The biannual balls were themed to separate them from the endless formal dinners and because, as the defender of the seas, the Navy felt it was not only the most senior service, but also the one with the best sense of humour and so *Night at the Circus* had been chosen for this evening's event. Which explained the juggler on the lawn and the man on stilts parading around the concourse.

The room overlooking the lawn had been converted into a complimentary gin bar. Its leather sofas and heavy oak tables had been moved aside and the staff were wearing glittery leotards and feathered headdresses. Harry searched for a familiar face, knowing he was unlikely to find one. He wasn't attached to this base. He'd been invited to attend the ball by Commodore Chris Waite who wanted to sound him out about a job. Harry had no intention of accepting – he didn't want to move back to Plymouth – but it was never a good idea to refuse a courtship flat out. You had to play the game; people in

the military had long memories and perhaps he'd be back here one day. But, for now, he needed to be in London and close to his children. He'd missed so much when they were young, and if he didn't take jobs stationed near his ex-wife now, he'd never see them at all.

He nodded to a young lieutenant whose girlfriend was wearing an off-the-shoulder peach dress decorated with diamanté. The dress code had been clear: ankle-length dresses, covered shoulders and minimal bling. No doubt there'd be a coven of military wives discussing the young woman's decision by the end of the evening.

'Lovely dress,' Harry said. He thought he'd put in a good word now, just in case she overheard something different later on. She blushed and thanked him with a delighted giggle.

'Thank you, Sir,' her boyfriend said.

Harry patted the man's shoulder.

The thin man continued to pace up and down outside the officers' wardroom. It wasn't time yet. But he could hear music and the laughter and he hated them for it. He wished he could see their faces when it went off. It was his only regret. But it was a small price to pay.

Harry turned to see Commodore Waite entering the room with his wife, who was wearing a smart black evening gown.

'Evening, Sir,' Harry said, shaking Waite's hand. 'Thank you for the invite.'

Mrs Waite kissed Harry on the cheek. 'When we were

out for dinner last month, you called him Chris all night,' she said. 'But now it's "Sir".'

'That was pleasure, Mrs Waite,' said Harry. 'This is work.' She was the Commodore's second wife and still new enough to the military world to be fascinated by its quirks.

She looked at the gin bar surrounded by well-dressed guests. 'You think *this* is work.'

Harry and Chris exchanged a smile.

'How's it feel to be back? I bet you've missed the old place,' Waite said. It was true that Harry had always had a fondness for Devonport.

'The place, yes. The people . . .' He scrunched up his face.

The Commodore laughed, a loud boom fitting for a man of his status. 'No doubt you'd whip 'em into shape.'

Waite held up his hand to greet a group of officers on the other side of the room. 'I better get over there,' he said. 'Let's catch up later, I want to talk about your next move.'

'Drinks first,' said Mrs Waite, looping her arm through her husband's and navigating them towards the gin bar.

'We better see what they have,' said Waite.

'Everything from black pepper to raspberries, I believe,' Harry replied. He was sticking to his one glass of champagne. He liked to stay in control at work events. He walked to the window and his eyes immediately fell on an elegant redhead in a floor-length dark green gown cinched tightly at the waist with a bronze bow. She was standing in the middle of the lawn. Her hair was tied up so that her face was framed by just a few loose curls. She'd

said that there was absolutely no way she'd make it, that work was crazy.

Harry rushed back towards the reception. He loved that she'd decided to surprise him. It's exactly what he'd have done.

At the door, a grey-haired, muscular officer blocked his way.

'Sir,' he said. 'Sub-Lieutenant Philips from Joint Forces Command. May I have a word in private, please?'

Dinner was announced and the other guests started moving out of the building and towards the marquee in typical military compliance.

'Now?' Harry said. He leaned to the side, trying to see Karene through the moving crowd. He wanted to find her, to kiss her.

The man stepped a little closer and spoke in a low voice. 'Yes, Sir,' he said. 'I've come here especially. I need to brief you in person.' The man turned and began walking back to the bar.

Harry knew he couldn't refuse Joint Forces. He was one of them and it would be impolite at best and dangerous at worst. Plus the sub-lieutenant wasn't in dress uniform – just his white shirt and his cap under one arm – so he'd been sent unexpectedly. The brief was clearly urgent.

Moving against the flow, Harry followed the man through the crowd. Commodore and Mrs Waite were lingering at the door of the bar as the final group of officers made their way outside.

The sub-lieutenant strode towards the window on the other side of the room so that they were out of earshot.

‘What’s so important?’ asked Harry. He checked the man’s rank and frowned. The epaulettes decorating his shoulders were upside down. That was a rookie mistake. Or perhaps he’d dressed in a hurry.

‘This will only take a minute, Sir.’

Harry peered through the window and back out to the lawn. He could see Karene on the concourse looking for him in the crowd. A man on stilts stomped past the window. Karene glanced up and her eyes met Harry’s. He raised his hand to wave and she smiled.

And then the room exploded.

The blast hit Karene with a violent thrust and she jolted backwards, landing hard on the concrete paving slabs. She instinctively raised her arm across her eyes as glass from the windows rained down on her. She was surrounded by hot air, rushing across her skin, and a thick grey cloud of choking dust. She heard the man on stilts fall, colliding with a table which then collapsed, spraying glassware across the floor.

She could see nothing, hear so little: the world dull and distant as though she was underwater. Should she run? Should she hide? She took a deep breath, trying to stay calm. Her mouth tasted of metal and something somewhere was burning.

She tried to focus. She was surrounded by fog. A figure in the distance was trying to stand. They stumbled and then righted themselves.

‘Hey,’ she called. ‘Hello?’ But although her lips were moving, there was no sound at all. She tried again, but the figure moved away from her and was swallowed by the grey.

She crawled towards the man on stilts.

‘Are you OK?’ she said, pressing her index finger and thumb into an ‘OK’ sign so that she might at least communicate something.

The man nodded. He sat up. He looked up at the building, just decipherable through the dust, and shook his head.

Karene followed his gaze.

Harry.

She needed to get in there.

She stood up and, staying crouched, ran towards the stone steps.

A strong hand grabbed her by the arm.

‘Get down,’ shouted the man. He had clumps of grey soot in his hair.

Karene shook her head.

‘Hey,’ yelled the man, pulling her down to the floor. He pressed his mouth against her ear so that she could hear him more clearly. ‘This place is full of military personnel. And none of them are running towards the blast area, are they?’

‘Why the hell not?’ she shouted. Her voice squeaked each word.

‘Because we don’t know what that was, if it’s finished or if there might be worse still to come. We need to wait.’

Karene looked at the man in disbelief. ‘How long will that take?’ she shouted, pulling her arm away. ‘People might be hurt. They might be bleeding.’

Harry.

She pushed the man aside and continued up the stairs. She could hear someone screaming. She knew that she was out of her depth but what choice did she have?

She stepped inside the reception. It was dark and thick with smoke. Harry had been in a room to the left. She

squinted, looking in that direction, hoping her eyes would adjust. The shapes made no sense. She blinked several times. Large slabs of burning wood blocked her path and the mangled remnants of something metal formed a barrier ahead.

A young officer rushed to her side and surveyed the destruction. His uniform was clean, with none of the dust. He must have been further out on the lawn, maybe even in the marquee when the explosion had happened.

‘Are you medical?’ he asked. His voice sounded muffled and distant.

‘I know basic first aid,’ she said. ‘But that’s it.’

‘Any idea how many people were in here?’

She shook her head.

The officer nodded. ‘We need to get inside. And then triage. Ignore anyone screaming and go to the quiet ones. If you’re screaming, you’re breathing. OK?’

Karene looked at the young man and wondered how he was so calm, what hell his eyes had seen.

‘Check if they can respond. Then airway, breathing . . . Shout if you find a problem. I’ll get to you as soon as I can.’

Karene pulled her dress up to her knees and tied a knot in the fabric to lift it from the floor. Then she stepped carefully around and over the debris. Harry had been near a window to the left of the reception. There were no doors before the smashed-up staircase so she kept moving along the corridor and beyond it until she found a door to the left.

She stepped through it. Thin shafts of sunlight broke through the blown windows and Karene made her way towards the light.

‘Help,’ said a voice. ‘Please help.’

A woman was sitting up against the wall.

If you’re screaming, you’re breathing. That went for talking too.

‘I’ll be back,’ Karene said. ‘I promise.’

She kept moving. There were no other shouts, no moans or screams. Which meant that Harry was silent.

She found him on his back by the window. He wasn’t moving. She dropped to her knees and did as the young officer had instructed.

‘Harry?’ she shouted. ‘Harry! Can you hear me?’

There was no response. She opened his mouth and checked his airway. It was clear. Then she placed her ear beside his lips. She couldn’t hear anything – the ringing in her head was far too loud – but she was sure she felt his breath warm and steady against her cheek. She lifted his wrist and felt for a pulse. It was strong. She checked for injuries but couldn’t find anything. There was a thick layer of dust on his face and she gently wiped it away from his nose and mouth. There was also a small graze on his forehead.

She ran her hands through his hair and down the sides of his head, praying that she wouldn’t feel any wetness. Then she did the same across his torso, feeling under his jacket and finally checking his arms and legs. He seemed OK. Unconscious, yes, but OK.

‘Ma’am, I need you over here.’ The young officer’s

voice sounded calm but assertive. This was not a request; it was an order.

‘You’re OK, Harry,’ she whispered. ‘Help is coming and I’m not going far.’ She kissed his head. ‘I love you.’

She crawled back to the doorway where the officer was kneeling next to the woman. She was in a sequined leotard and there was a large wound on her left arm that was pumping blood on to the navy carpet.

‘I need you to stem the bleeding,’ said the officer. He placed Karene’s hand around the woman’s bicep, just above the wound. ‘Hold her arm up and squeeze here. Harder than that. It’ll slow the bleeding.’

The sequined woman stared wide-eyed at her arm.

‘Got it,’ Karene said. ‘Squeeze tightly.’

‘And don’t let go until I come back. I need to check the others. Is that your husband?’ he asked looking over at Harry.

‘Yes,’ Karene replied. There was no point disputing relationship statuses in this environment. ‘He’s unconscious but breathing and his pulse is strong. I can’t see any major injuries, just a small wound to his head. He’s been lucky.’

The officer watched her carefully and then said, ‘It’s tempting to focus on the best-case scenario but you need to consider the worst. He’s been knocked unconscious so he may have spinal damage or internal injuries. Shout if you see him stir.’

Karene nodded.

Spinal damage. Internal injuries.

Oh God, Harry.

Karene was relieved when she saw the two paramedics move swiftly past her. Clearly the young officer had sent them Harry's way. They would take care of him. He was in safe hands now.

Marcus Jameson removed his cycling helmet, hung it over the handlebars and leaned his bike against a large boulder. The spectacular view more than compensated for the steep ascent, and, to be fair, uphill cycling was his favourite. He enjoyed the burn as much as the sense of achievement. He took a large swig of water from his bottle and perched on a smaller boulder to eat the slice of banana loaf he'd bought at a cafe near his campsite.

His weekend in Wales had turned into a week and then a fortnight. He knew he was being driven by denial. He cycled to the point of exhaustion every day so that he'd fall asleep quickly and deep enough to see him through until the morning. Keeping busy also made it easier to ignore his phone; to avoid contact with his sister or, God forbid, Augusta who was still leaving regular messages on his voicemail. You'd think after three months of being ignored she'd have got the message.

He knew he was prone to hermit-like behaviour. He'd been told it often enough during his regular psychological assessments while at MI6. The 'shadow' side of his outgoing, optimistic personality was a loner in denial. He'd been told to watch out for signs he was retreating from reality and, on leaving the service, he'd done just that. He'd focused on keeping himself busy, putting effort into his

social life, and he'd found a new purpose working as a private investigator with Dr Augusta Bloom. They had joined forces after he'd heard her speaking on the primary motives behind criminal exploits, and he'd joked that no one was better placed to investigate mysteries than an ex-spy and a criminal psychologist. Using his skills to help people had been satisfying. Until it all fell apart.

He'd spent the first few weeks after Bloom betrayed him hiding in his flat in London. But when it became clear that his sister, Claire, wasn't going to leave him alone, he changed tack. His trips looked like something productive – travelling, exercising – but he knew, deep down, it wasn't constructive at all. He was still alone, still hiding. The problem was he couldn't trust his own judgement any more. It had all started earlier in the year when he'd convinced Bloom to help a teenage girl find her wayward mother. In doing so, he'd inadvertently embroiled them in the scheming mind games of a psychopath who had ultimately tried to kill him. So how could he trust his own judgement any more?

Jameson's phone rang, interrupting the peace of the Welsh valley with Queen's 'Bicycle Race'. He checked the screen. He didn't recognize the number.

'Hello?' he said.

'Marcus Jameson?' It was a woman's voice.

'Uh-huh,' he replied throatily, swallowing a mouthful of banana loaf. 'Who's this?'

'My name is Karene Harper and I need your help. Did you hear about the bomb at Devonport Naval Base?'

'Sure,' Jameson replied. 'It was all over the news.'

‘Well, I was there. My partner – Captain Harry Peterson – was injured in the blast.’

Jameson placed his cake on top of its paper bag. ‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘But he never arrived at hospital.’

‘What? How do you mean?’

‘He was taken away in an ambulance but never arrived anywhere.’

‘But that explosion was two days ago. Have you checked all the hospitals?’

‘Of course I have.’ Her tone was clipped and irritated. ‘The police say he likely discharged himself, but he hasn’t been in touch with me or with his children.’ After a beat of silence, she said, ‘You’re thinking he’s probably dead?’

Jameson hadn’t been entirely sure how to phrase that statement and realized his silence may have been abrupt. ‘There can be a lot of chaos around these explosions,’ he continued. ‘It’s not always easy to identify . . .’

‘He was unconscious but breathing after the blast with no sign of serious injury.’

‘That doesn’t necessarily—’

‘I know,’ she interrupted. ‘And if he’s dead, then that’s one thing, but right now I just need to know if you’ll help us find him.’

‘Us?’

The line went quiet for a moment and then he heard a familiar voice.

‘I knew you’d screen my call,’ said his business partner Augusta Bloom.

Jameson's free hand curled into a fist. 'Oh, that is low.' They'd worked together for five years and that was plenty. He had no interest in working with her again. It had transpired during that last case that Bloom and Seraphine Walker – their unexpected psychopath – were old acquaintances. And they'd both played him. Seraphine had presented herself as Sarah, and he'd fallen hard for the intelligent, charming alter-ego. And Bloom had opted to keep him in the dark, keep him in danger. In the many hours he'd spent pondering her choice, he kept coming back to the same disturbing conclusion. And so he wanted nothing more to do with Bloom.

'Maybe, but I need you,' she said. 'Karene is an old friend and this has military written all over it. You once asked me for a favour and now I need one in return.'

'Yeah and look how that turned out.' That little favour had nearly resulted in his death.

'I don't know how many times I can say I'm sorry, Marcus, but I will continue to do so until you believe me. For now, this is not about me or you; it is about my friend and her missing partner. You know you can get access to the military in a way I cannot. You don't even need to see me if you don't want to. You can work directly with Karene. She's fine with that.'

Jameson clenched his jaw. She was making him sound like a petulant child. 'I'll think about it,' he said.

'You will?'

'Yes.' He hung up.

4

‘Will he help us?’ Karene asked. Her voice was softer now, much weaker than it had been on the phone.

‘He can’t resist a mystery,’ said Bloom, handing her friend a box of tissues from the desk. Her words sounded surprisingly convincing considering she didn’t really believe them. The events three months earlier had ruptured their relationship to such an extent she wasn’t sure it could be mended. She had left him in the dark. He’d seen it as a betrayal. But it had been tactical. He refused to see that she’d had no other choice. Her goal had been to stop Seraphine. Whatever the cost. ‘I hope he’ll come around,’ Bloom said and she really did.

It was late Monday afternoon. Bloom had caught the train to Plymouth where Karene had been staying in a hotel since the ball. They sat in her minimalist bedroom, Bloom on the desk chair and Karene on the small sofa.

‘So the last you saw of Harry, he was lying unconscious on the floor?’

Karene shook her head. ‘I saw the paramedics with him. I should have gone over; I wanted to but the medic said to stay put. He told me to hold on to this woman’s arm until he returned. So I did that. I watched as they took Harry away.’

‘And you’ve checked every hospital?’ asked Bloom. ‘All of them?’

Karene blew her nose and nodded. ‘In a thirty-mile radius.’

Bloom had known Karene Harper since their university days and had never seen her upset or tearful; she was a little taken aback by the emotion. Karene had always been one of those irrepressibly positive types, upbeat and comfortable using humour to bat away the bad times. It had made sense that Karene specialized in mental resilience: she clearly possessed it in abundance. She was the youngest of five siblings, with four older brothers and a father who had never expected his daughter to amount to much. But she was tough. Or at least she had been. It had been years since Bloom had seen Karene, so her call the previous evening had come as a bit of a surprise.

‘Where is he, Augusta?’ Karene said as fresh tears fell across her cheeks. ‘Why wasn’t he taken to Derriford Hospital like everyone else?’

‘You said he wasn’t badly injured. Maybe he did discharge himself?’

‘But Derriford has no record of admitting him. I’ve tried to get the police and the military to help, but they’re obsessed with the bomber. Harry isn’t a priority apparently.’ The bitterness in Karene’s tone matched her look of disgust.

‘How about the paramedics?’ asked Bloom. ‘Have you managed to speak to them?’

Karene shook her head.

Bloom made a note to track them down. ‘It was a terrorist attack. A suicide bomber. Is that what they’re thinking?’

Karene nodded.

‘Have you spoken to Harry’s colleagues in the Navy?’

‘Yes. I called Harry’s boss as soon as I realized what had happened. But no one’s heard from Harry at work. It’s been two days, Augusta. I’ve just got this horrible feeling . . .’

‘That he’s in the morgue somewhere?’

Karene blinked a few times.

‘Or . . .’ said Bloom.

‘Or what? What else could it be?’ Karene was clearly desperate for answers.

Bloom paused for a moment. The ambulance crew would have been obliged to deliver their patient to a hospital. But no hospital had received him. ‘I think the answer’s with the paramedics. If that’s what they were.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Karene.

‘I’m just wondering what it would take to get hold of a couple of jackets and a stretcher?’ she said, thinking out loud.

Karene’s eyes widened. ‘You think those people weren’t medical?’

‘I know from working with the police that incidents like this are carefully managed by the emergency services. There would have been a commander in charge making sure that the injured were taken to the nearest possible trauma centre. This feels like an unlikely

mistake. Which leaves us with conspiracy. He's missing for a reason.'

'What reason? What possible reason?' Karene looked scared now.

Bloom shook her head slowly. She had no idea.

Bloom was back at her desk on Tuesday morning in her rented office, located in the basement beneath a glossy PR firm in Russell Square. The office was small: just two desks, a white board and a couple of extra chairs for clients. Not that they had many visitors. The advantage of the underground space was anonymity; Bloom didn't want some of the characters she dealt with knowing where she spent her time.

Jameson arrived, carrying a bottle of water. He normally had a take-out coffee. He had let his dark hair grow so that the thick curls framed his face and brushed his shirt collar. He strolled to his desk casually, as though nothing had happened in the past few months, as though he'd been here every day. But his eyes, normally alert, looked dull and tired. And he wasn't smiling.

'All right?' he said, taking his seat and unpacking his laptop. There was no jovial accent: no 'G'day Bruce' or 'What's occurring?'

She'd been desperate for him to return ever since the events of the spring, but had doubted it would ever happen. He'd been so angry. And it hadn't eased, not at all. But now, here he was. And after just one phone call. All she'd needed to do was find the right problem. It was obvious. She was irritated that she hadn't worked it out sooner.

‘Welcome back,’ she said.

‘There are ground rules.’ He swivelled in his seat to face her. ‘I don’t want to hear any apologies. What’s done is done. My working on this case is to repay you, nothing more, nothing less. It doesn’t mean I’m back,’ he continued, ‘and I do not want to hear her name mentioned.’

Bloom knew he was referring to Seraphine. He’d liked her, maybe even loved her, and she’d hurt him pretty badly. She’d tricked him, and Jameson didn’t like being tricked. What he failed to understand was the superior skill a psychopath like Seraphine had when it came to manipulation. It was akin to a superpower. In order to fit in, Seraphine had learned to mimic normality. She’d had years of practice honing a mask of deception. But behind her beautiful face lurked a cold, calculating mind that felt nothing but disdain for the very people she copied. A disdain that made her very dangerous indeed.

‘How is Jane?’ Bloom asked, moving the subject into safer territory. Jane was the teenage girl whose mother had gone missing earlier in the year, the favour that Jameson had asked of her. And then Jane herself had disappeared, been taken by her mother at the behest of Seraphine. They had managed to secure Jane’s return, but her mother, Lana, still remained missing.

‘She’s fine.’

‘Is she seeing much of her father?’

‘Every other weekend.’

‘It must be nice for her to have stepbrothers.’

Jameson ignored her. ‘Where are we starting with this Peterson thing? Because I’ve made a few enquiries and

managed to sort a meeting with his boss this afternoon. Patrick Grey. Northwood Headquarters. We can take the Metropolitan Line. It's only forty-five minutes.'

'Yes, I read your email. Thank you for organizing that. Did you speak to him on the phone?'

'Only briefly. He said it was out of character. That Peterson's the conscientious, reliable type.'

'Interesting. So he's unlikely to have gone AWOL unless he had no choice.'

'Or he's dead.'

Bloom raised her eyebrows. 'So we go to Northwood this afternoon? Good. And we're interviewing Karene this morning. She's coming in at ten.'

'Haven't you spoken to her already?' He was frosty, dismissive. He was here, but it wasn't like before, not at all.

Bloom took a deep breath. 'I thought we should hear it together, properly, from the start: that's what we usually do.'

'Did.'

Bloom frowned.

'What we usually *did*,' he explained.

'So why upset a good system?'

He held her gaze for a moment then looked back at his computer screen.

Karene brought a pad full of notes that detailed her experience of the bombing and its aftermath, and the information she'd gathered from those she'd spoken to over the last two days.

She looked better, stronger. She was wearing loose

trousers with a vibrant green blouse fastened at the front by a large silk bow. Her burnt-orange flats perfectly matched her ginger hair, which was plaited neatly to one side. Karene had always worked in academia and had never felt the need to dress conventionally.

She sat down straightaway and it was immediately clear that she wanted to get on with things.

‘Go on,’ she said. ‘What do you need to know?’

‘How long was there between you arriving and the bomb going off?’ Jameson asked. His friendly tone and broad smile revealed that Karene’s flair and femininity had been duly acknowledged.

‘I arrived at Devonport at quarter to eight and the explosion happened fifteen minutes later, just after dinner was announced.’

‘Devonport is the naval base?’ said Bloom.

‘Yes,’ Karene replied. ‘In Plymouth.’

‘And that’s where Harry was based?’ asked Jameson.

‘No. He was based with Rear Admiral Grey at Northwood. But the Commodore at Plymouth was pursuing Harry about a role and the invite was part of that.’

‘Reports say the bomb was detonated in the building’s reception as people were making their way out,’ said Jameson.

‘That’s right. The bar was inside but dinner was in a marquee on the lawn.’

‘Do you know how many were hurt?’ he asked.

‘Two officers were killed and another two are still in Derriford Hospital. The Commodore lost a leg and his wife was also hurt. Then there were the events staff, two

men and two women, all still hospitalized. And another officer's wife is in a coma; she stayed back to text the babysitter.'

'Plus Harry, that's twelve people,' said Jameson. He frowned. 'That's not a lot.'

'It's enough,' said Karene, flashing him a look of utter contempt.

'How many people were there in total?' Jameson asked.

'Over three hundred.'

'So the explosion happened after most people had already left the building?' Jameson scribbled something on his notepad.

'That's a good thing, isn't it?' said Karene.

Jameson sat back in his chair and looked at Bloom. 'Don't you think it's odd?'

'Your average suicide bomber wants to wreak as much havoc as possible,' Bloom explained. 'So why wait until the majority of people are out of the room?'

'Maybe he didn't realize they'd move so quickly?' said Karene.

'I'd say if he's in the building with a bomb strapped to him and people start leaving, he flicks the switch straightaway,' said Jameson.

'So he arrived too late?' said Bloom.

'Or he didn't want to wreak havoc,' said Jameson. 'That wasn't his intention.'

'How do you mean?' asked Bloom.

'I'm not sure,' said Jameson. 'It's just strange. I'll see what I can dig up on the bomber.'

'And that's why you're here,' said Bloom, smiling.

She knew she couldn't do this without him. She'd managed a few cases in his absence, but this one would be impossible. Jameson's background was shadowy. He was very secretive but he'd spent time with MI6, secret service rather than military, but still under the Ministry of Defence. So this case was right up his street.

She only hoped he'd stick around long enough for her to convince him to stay permanently.

6

On the tube, Bloom found herself thinking of a similar trip they'd taken to Leeds earlier in the year. Marcus had chatted happily then. Now, he avoided eye contact and there was a scowl plastered across his face.

'How are you?' she said.

'I told you. I don't want to talk about it.'

'I'm not asking about *it*. I'm asking how you are here, now, today?'

Jameson glanced at her. 'Fine.'

She didn't think he looked fine – he was pale and his shirt hung too loosely over his shoulders – but this wasn't the time.

Jameson was staring at a spot on the carriage floor. He'd been gazing at it on and off since they sat down. 'What do you make of Karene?' he asked. 'Is she kosher?'

'I wouldn't have called you if she wasn't.'

His lip twitched. 'Yes, but *you* didn't call.'

Bloom ignored the jibe. 'What do you want to know? I trust her. She's one of the most unflappable people I've ever met.'

Jameson huffed a laugh. 'Is that so?'

'Not flat and unemotional like . . . you know . . .' She knew not to use Seraphine's name. 'She's simply very robust. All of her research into mental resilience? That

comes from somewhere personal. She knows everything there is to know about it. For her PhD, she interviewed hundreds of people: high achievers, people in high-risk professions, those suffering with chronic illnesses. They're all linked by the same qualities, things that keep them fighting.'

'Such as?' The tube pulled into Baker Street station.

'The right mindset: tenacity, optimism, sense of purpose. So it's odd to see her so . . .' Bloom struggled to find the right word.

'Devastated.'

'She does seem devastated, doesn't she? It's odd.'

'You've never been in love, have you, Augusta?'

'Well . . . I wouldn't say—'

'If you can't see it screaming out of every cell in that woman, then you've certainly never felt it.' There was a coldness to his tone that suggested judgement rather than teasing.

Bloom found her own speck to stare at on the floor.

The taxi dropped them at Northwood. Jameson introduced himself to the security guard and explained that their passes had been requested by Patrick Grey. They showed their passports and received red badges in return.

A guard escorted them to Building 410, where the Joint Forces Command was based. The boxy reception was a large white space furnished with black chairs and military photographs. Jameson introduced himself again at the reception desk and they were asked to take a seat.

‘This is where it all happens then?’ asked Bloom as she looked around. The windows above them were filled with Army, Navy and RAF flags.

‘These guys have been responsible for joint initiatives for decades.’

‘Which means?’

‘This is where all overseas military operations are planned and controlled. Before the mid-nineties, either the Army, Navy or RAF would be assigned overall command of a given operation, but that led to inconsistencies so it was decided a Joint Forces Command was needed, and this is HQ.’

‘So operations are planned here with all military assets in mind?’

‘Give or take a few exceptions, like our nuclear deterrent.’

‘Have you been here before?’

Jameson shrugged, which meant that he wasn’t willing to say.

‘Here he is,’ said Jameson, standing as a man in a blue jumper with gold epaulettes strode towards them with a younger female officer in a crisp white shirt and black skirt.

‘Rear Admiral Grey,’ said the man, holding out his hand. ‘And this is my Chief of Staff, Captain Tessa Morrisey.’ Instead of leading them through the glass security pods, Grey took a seat opposite them and Captain Morrisey stayed standing.

‘I’m afraid we’ll need to talk here.’ He turned to Jameson. ‘I appreciate your background but you should know

your security clearance expires the minute you leave, and your friend here has none.'

'I am well aware,' Jameson said. He sat up straighter, pulling his shoulders tight.

'You said you were with some of ours in Iraq?' Grey either hadn't noticed or didn't care about the change in Jameson's demeanour. Bloom suspected the latter.

'I was. Navy boats provide a nice enough taxi service.'

'Ships,' said Grey.

'Thank you for seeing us at such short notice,' said Bloom, keen to move the conversation on. 'May I ask how long you've known Henry Peterson?'

'Harry and I go way back,' he said. 'I was his commanding officer when he was a newly promoted lieutenant. We got on well. He stood out.'

'How so?' asked Bloom.

'Perhaps we might clarify your role and remit here first,' said Grey, looking from Bloom to Jameson and then back again.

'Mr Jameson and I are private investigators,' she said. 'We've been hired by Karene Harper, Captain Peterson's partner, to locate him.'

'And to do that we need to know about his current role,' said Jameson.

Grey raised an eyebrow but kept his focus on Bloom. 'I spoke to the regulators after Mr Jameson called. And we have this in hand.'

'Royal Navy Police,' said Jameson to Bloom. 'They're looking for Peterson, are they?'

'Investigations are underway, yes. And, of course, the

civilian police are working on this too. It's in the hands of the professionals. Perhaps you should leave it there.'

Bloom had been doing this job a while: she knew they were being dismissed and chose to ignore it. It was nothing more than a power play. She had experienced the same thing many times in her work with senior police officers. Leaders like Grey liked to be in control. It had nothing to do with organizational sensitivities and everything to do with personal ones. It was not insignificant, for instance, that his second in command remained standing. Here was a junior officer who knew exactly what her boss demanded, and Bloom suspected that was compliance.

'None of the hospitals in or around Plymouth have any record of admitting Captain Peterson,' she said, 'so it's unlikely that he discharged himself. A more plausible hypothesis is that he came to in the ambulance and somehow wandered off in a disorientated state. But if that were the case you'd expect the paramedics to file a report.'

'And they haven't?' said Grey, betraying his lack of research.

'We've not been able to locate them,' Jameson replied. Bloom knew he had made some initial enquiries to the ambulance service after they had spoken to Karene this morning. They had no record of a Harry Peterson but were looking into unidentified casualties matching his description.

'There are protocols for these things,' Captain Morrisey said. Her voice was deeper than Bloom had expected.