

Holly Watt

A *TIMES* BOOK
OF THE YEAR

THE
DEAD
LINE

'Casey Benedict is fierce,
obsessive and brilliant'

OBSERVER

'A rip-roarer of a
thriller that sucked me
in and wouldn't let go'

GYTHA LODGE

A CASEY
BENEDICT
INVESTIGATION

RAVEN BOOKS

HOLLY WATT is an award-winning investigative journalist who worked at the *Sunday Times*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Guardian*. Her first novel, *To The Lions*, won the CWA Ian Fleming Steel Dagger. *The Dead Line* is her second novel.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

To the Lions

THE DEAD LINE

HOLLY WATT

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To Jonny



1

The junior reporter was losing the battle with the news editor.

‘But Ross,’ Tillie was shouting as Casey walked past the newsdesk, ‘it might actually kill you.’

A couple of desks away, the home affairs editor looked up. ‘How?’ he asked hopefully.

‘You know how Ross takes his coffee?’ Tillie was holding the newsdesk phone, finger on the mute button.

‘Half and half.’ Casey paused. ‘Granules and hot water. It’ll kill him one day.’

‘With any luck’ – a mutter from the home affairs editor.

Ross was ignoring them all, head down over his newslist.

‘Ross’s wife is on the line.’ Tillie turned to Casey.

‘A brave woman,’ the home affairs editor said thoughtfully.

‘I do not,’ Ross snarled, ‘have time to speak to anyone right now.’

‘Mrs Warman says’ – unconsciously, Tillie put on a perfect imitation of Ross’s wife – “‘I put descaler in the kettle overnight, Tillie, and he’s boiled it up and made coffee this morning. I think he might actually die.’”

‘Didn’t he notice when he was drinking it?’

‘Apparently, no.’

‘Will the descender finish him off altogether?’ Casey asked. She couldn’t remember the home affairs editor smiling before.

‘I had to look it up,’ said Tillie. ‘Quite possibly, yes. I’ve told Ross he has to go to A&E.’

‘Ross.’ Casey tried to sound firm.

The news editor looked up. ‘Listen.’ Ross spoke with unusual patience. ‘If I’m dead in an hour, I’ll go to the doctor.’

Over Ross’s head, Casey was distracted by most of the fashion team clattering down the glass staircase in the middle of the *Post’s* open-plan office. For a moment, they reminded Casey of racehorses – long legs, glossy manes, jewel silks.

Casey sighed at her jeans. But that might mean ...

She left Ross and Tillie to it and headed up the stairs.

‘Hello, Casey.’ Cressida, the fashion editor, blocked her path, sunny and knowing all at once. ‘What are you after?’

Casey’s eyes flickered. ‘I saw a navy top in the fashion spread this morning. It would be perfect for ...’

‘The Juniper one? No.’

‘I just want to borrow it.’

‘And put a few holes in it for your secret cameras? Absolutely not.’

Week after week, the fashion team called in outfits from designers, photographed them in unlikely scenarios and couriered them back. Occasionally, Casey, the *Post’s* investigations reporter, diverted them.

‘Please.’ Casey extended the syllable. ‘I have to be a suave businesswoman.’

‘And that’ – Cressida looked her up and down – ‘is going to be quite the stretch, is it?’

‘How come you’re not out with the rest of your team?’ Casey tried distraction. ‘I just saw them all leaving.’

‘I’m following them. Running late. We’re off to do a feature on that big new shopping centre out in west London. Each member of the team is trying to track down a certain look in ... Oh,’ Cressida flicked her hand. ‘I know you’re not really interested, Casey. Just take the wretched top.’

A quick smile. ‘You’re a star.’

‘I’ll tell Juniper that I must be buried in it, or something.’ Cressida smiled beatifically. ‘Now, do bugger off, Casey. I simply must go and shop.’

Casey sauntered back to the little investigations room, chucking the navy top on the sofa and throwing herself into her chair.

‘Here.’ She passed one coffee to Miranda and another to Hessa, and stared unenthusiastically at her own computer screen. ‘Has it ever occurred to you that shopping professionally might be more fun than this?’

‘You’d get bored.’ Miranda glanced up.

Miranda was Casey’s boss, technically, but they had forgotten about that a long time ago.

‘Bet I wouldn’t.’

Hessa passed Casey some notes. ‘I got what you wanted on that Manchester project. And I’ll drop that navy top off with Sagah in a bit.’

Sagah – a grumbling genius – would bury an unnoticeable camera in the folds of that beautiful navy top. A tiny microphone would be sewn into place close to the collar.

‘Thanks, Hessa,’ Casey grinned at her, taking an unenthusiastic sip of her coffee. ‘This actually does taste like descaler.’

‘What?’ Hessa glanced up.

‘Nothing.’ Casey waved the words away, and they all turned back to their work; three investigative journalists: a quiet conspiracy.

A few years earlier, Miranda had been poached from the *Argus*, the *Post*’s deadly rival.

‘You can set up your own team at the *Post*,’ Dash, the head of news, had promised. ‘Hand-picked. Whoever you want. And we’ll give you a free rein on whatever you want to investigate.’

‘But I’m in a good place at the *Argus*,’ Miranda had said. And she was: running their investigations team with a ruthless efficiency. She had just brought down a cabinet minister, for having both his wife and his mistress on the public payroll. The public was indifferent to the infidelity, but furious about the waste-of-taxpayers’-money. It was the cartoonists who destroyed him, in the end.

‘We’ll make you even better, here.’

Miranda caught sight of Casey the first day she arrived in the post. The young reporter was swearing fluently as she rushed to print out Ross’s story list for conference. A flame of energy, grey eyes missing nothing. Casey had glanced across at Miranda, just for a second, scepticism in every line.

But Casey had pounced on Dash later, as he was showing Miranda around the newsroom.

Me. Casey had insisted. *I can do it. Please.*

‘And this is Casey.’ Dash had waved a careless hand.

‘I can be invisible,’ Casey said. ‘I promise. I can do investigations. I’d be good.’

‘You can’t cross the room without starting a riot.’ Dash was smiling at the junior reporter.

‘I could serve you breakfast, and you wouldn’t notice’ – insisting, half-joking.

‘Casey,’ the news editor had bawled just then. ‘I need that bloody research for PMQs right fucking now.’

And Dash and Miranda had smiled at Casey, and her nerve.

The next morning, Dash had taken Miranda to the Wolseley. Introducing her to the newspaper’s owners, over smoked salmon and scrambled eggs. Their new trophy, all polished up.

At the end of the meal, the owners swept off to another meeting. Dash and Miranda had been waiting for the receipt, because journalists always get the receipt.

‘Hope you enjoyed your breakfast, sir’ – a laugh in the voice.

They’d looked up, startled, and it was Casey, in the black and white Wolseley uniform. With the smart tie, and half the staff grinning across the restaurant.

Afterwards, Miranda had laughed aloud, walking through the early morning, down Piccadilly. And after that, she had believed in her. Put her faith, such as it was, in Casey.

And then a few months ago, Hessa had joined the team. One of the most junior reporters at the *Post*. Shy, at first. But that same determination they both recognised.

Miranda looked round the little room, and smiled.

They worked into the early evening, and finally Miranda looked at her watch.

‘I have to leave,’ she said, although she often worked until midnight, a modern Cinderella.

‘Go home,’ said Casey. ‘And you too, Hessa. I know you were on an early shift today.’

‘A little bit longer. I’ve just got a couple more things to do.’

‘Fine,’ Casey sighed. ‘I’ll go and get us another coffee.’

‘It’s my turn.’ Hessa made to stand.

‘I need the walk.’

‘How is the Manchester project coming along?’ asked Miranda as she packed up her bag.

‘Slowly,’ said Casey. ‘Not the most exciting to be honest.’

‘Keep plugging at it.’

‘Course.’

Waving at the room, Miranda headed out. A few minutes later, Casey stood, stretched and began to walk across the office. It was mostly empty now, the night news editor alone at his desk. The light on the coffee machine was flashing: empty.

Casey wandered through the doors, down the escalator, past the security barrier: out to the coffee shop, those familiar steps, day after day.

But this time, a surprise.

Cressida, standing in the bright lights of the foyer, hesitating in her high heels. The sleek fashion editor looked oddly unsure of herself, wavering to and fro. In one hand, she was clutching a carrier bag: black with long silk ribbons. When she saw Casey, she made as if to move towards the exit, heels clicking on the grey marble floor.

‘Cressida?’

‘Casey! You’re here ...’ Cressida’s voice trailed away to a silence as she jerked to a halt.

‘What’s the matter?’

A hesitation, then Cressida smoothed down her purple silk dress firmly. ‘You’re going to think I’m an idiot.’

‘I won’t.’

‘Promise?’

‘Yes.’

Cressida shoved her hand into the carrier bag. She scrambled for a second, and pulled out a tangle of material. It was a skirt, Casey saw. Scarlet taffeta over layers of ivory tulle, fit for a fantasy ballerina.

‘Here.’ Cressida held the skirt awkwardly, as if she couldn’t stand to touch it.

Casey reached out. She could see something folded among the petticoats: a piece of white silk, with a pattern of pale blue. It was only when Casey looked closely that she saw the fabric was stitched with lines of words.

‘What ...’

‘Just take it.’

Cressida almost threw the skirt at Casey, and backed away, her usual glamour cracked like a glass.

The piece of silk was hard to read, some of the embroidery torn into meaningless threads. Casey peered at it, and turned it sideways. Looked closer, held it up to the light.

A jolt.

They take the girls.

Casey bent closer, the entrance hall around her disappearing. She read it again. *They take ...*

Part of the embroidery was snarled on a layer of ballet-girl tulle. Slowly, Casey tried to pick it apart without tearing the material.

‘I’ve got to go.’ Casey realised Cressida was still standing there, uncertain. ‘I’m late. And I’ve got a lot to do ...’

‘We can talk tomorrow anyway.’

‘It was just there, in the middle of the shop.’ Cressida sounded shocked. ‘In part of Rhapso’s diffusion range, right in the middle

of that big new shopping centre. I was looking through all the skirts – they’ve got some really lovely ones at the moment – and I picked up that skirt, and it just ...’

‘It fell out?’

‘The piece of silk was stitched into the petticoats very loosely,’ said Cressida. ‘You wouldn’t have seen it unless ... I was checking the seams’ – Cressida, the consummate professional under all the sparkle. ‘I’ve been to hundreds of shops, Casey. Thousands, probably. Tried on a million outfits. You never think ...’

‘Were there any other notes? In any of the other clothes?’

‘I don’t know.’ Cressida sounded hopeless. ‘I didn’t look. Didn’t want to.’

‘I’ll go and check,’ said Casey. ‘Now.’

‘The shopping centre is open until ten.’

‘Thank you for bringing me this, Cressida.’

‘I’ve got to go now,’ Cressida said more firmly, tugging her coat around her.

‘Sure.’

They said an awkward goodbye. Casey watched Cressida disappear out through the doors, before whirling back to the escalator.

‘Where’s my coffee?’ Mock outrage from Hessa as Casey walked back into their office.

‘Hessa, look at this.’ Casey gestured her over to her desk. ‘Can you read this?’

Hessa leaned over. ‘Where did ...’

‘Just read it,’ said Casey.

Hessa picked up the skirt, and concentrated on it, her fingers careful, her face taut with concentration.

'*The Rohingya*,' Hessa struggled with the blue embroidered letters. 'They're the refugees in Bangladesh. I don't understand ...'

'What do you think that bit there says?'

'It's all tangled.'

'I know.'

'It doesn't make sense.'

'Try.'

Hessa peered closer, and Casey saw her flinch.

'It says "factory".' Hessa's voice shook. 'It says they take them to a baby factory.'

The shop's music was a shield of noise, drowning out the scramble of the shopping centre.

'You have a nice evening.' A beaming smile from a beautiful girl handing out diamante-studded baskets at the entrance. A security guard stood vigil.

Rhapso's lightning-flash logo was everywhere. The neon letters shouted on the wall, and the music pounded. Two girls, killing time. Beside them a shop assistant folded jerseys, as women queued up to change.

Hessa and Casey paced through the shop, stroking the silks and the satins and the lace. The changing rooms were hidden behind theatrical red velvet curtains. The shop assistant, spiky hair and ripped jeans, smiled at them indulgently.

'Let me know if you need anything, yeah?'

'Thank you.'

They walked on, then drifted apart.

As Hessa marched down serried ranks of clothes, Casey checked the piles of skirts. Scarlet taffeta, folded fun, nothing else to find in dozens of identical skirts.

Casey began unfolding a different pile of skirts, then shirts, then trousers, then cardigans. A shop assistant followed her, refolding as she went.

‘Sorry.’

A snap of gum. ‘S’fine.’

Until finally Hessa caught Casey’s eye, and Casey headed over to a quiet corner, breath shortening. Hessa was carrying a grey velvet jacket, beautifully cut, and thrust a piece of silk into Casey’s hands. ‘Look.’

It was the same white silk, the words embroidered in a pale blue thread. Casey turned the piece of material cautiously.

‘They take the babies,’ she read aloud. ‘They take the babies for the women.’

‘Do you think it’s possible?’ Miranda was prodding at the red skirt. The three of them were in the little investigations office early the next morning. Casey was sprawled at her desk, chin in her hands. Hessa was leaning against the scuffed cream wall, the shiny black shop bag at her feet.

From some odd sense of propriety, Hessa and Casey had queued up to buy the grey jacket just before Rhapsody closed the night before. They had watched like hawks as the assistant folded it into a bag, tying the ribbon with a professional smile.

‘The shop assistants would never have noticed a piece of silk among the petticoats on that skirt,’ said Casey. ‘Or fastened into that velvet sleeve.’

Casey was playing with a little silver bird that hung around her neck. It dangled there to give her something to fidget with.

‘But isn’t it such a strange way of getting a message out?’

‘This sort of thing happened a few years ago.’ Hessa was flicking through her notepad. ‘There were stories about labels being added into clothes in shops on the high street. Someone inserted a label into a Primark dress in Swansea: “Forced to work exhausting hours.” Then there was: “I made this item you are going to buy, but I didn’t get paid for it.” That label was

found in something from Zara. The Swansea labels were a hoax, probably, but people obviously know that it might be a way of getting a message from the factories to London.'

'Isn't it a bit scattergun?' asked Miranda. 'Anyone could have picked up that skirt or that jacket. Or that little piece of silk could have fallen out, and just been swept away. Or it could have been found long before it reached the shopfloor.'

'Sure,' Casey shrugged. 'It's not the most obvious way of doing it. Cressida said the piece of silk in the skirt was very loosely stitched into place. Same for Hessa's jacket. I'd guess that only a customer trying it on would have noticed.'

'So it's a risk,' Miranda went on, 'packing it like that. If that piece of material had been found by the retailer, presumably the jacket and skirt could be traced to whichever factory it came from. Maybe even the shift.'

'But I suppose,' Casey continued, glancing sideways, 'that whoever put it there might have inserted messages into more than two pieces of clothing.'

Miranda stood up. Beside Casey, Miranda was blonde and confident. A few years older than Casey, in her mid-thirties. She had a slow smile, and a knowing laugh. Chic, Cressida admitted once, crossly. Really elegant.

Hessa and Casey watched as Miranda walked out of the little room, towards the newsdesk.

'Ross,' they heard her saying to the news editor. 'I need someone to go the branch of this shop, Rhapsody, the one just off Bishopsgate, and turn it upside down ...'

'Fine' – the quick Scottish accent.

Hessa and Casey smiled at each other.

Miranda walked back into the office.

‘So where was that skirt made then?’

‘It doesn’t say on the label,’ said Hessa. ‘But probably Bangladesh, especially given that this is their diffusion line. Loads of the high street clothes come from there anyway. And Bangladesh would tie in with the Rohingya.’

‘And even with Rhapso’s premium brand,’ said Casey thoughtfully. ‘They’re just as likely to make the clothes in Bangladesh, fly them to Italy, stitch on a couple of buttons and stick on a “Made in Italy” label.’

‘You ever been?’ Miranda was looking at Hessa.

‘A few times. When I was younger.’

Hessa had grown up just off Brick Lane, by the mosque that had been a synagogue and a church before that. All her life in a neat little flat, too small for her family now. Inside it was a quiet home, despite the graffiti on the door and the street noise outside. Sometimes, to escape her family’s questions, she wandered the beautiful Huguenot streets nearby, peering in through the wide windows where the silk weavers once worked.

But Casey knew that Hessa’s mother had been born in Sylhet, up near the Indian border. And that her mother told stories of tea gardens in the mist rolling for miles, green on green. But Hessa had shied away from those old stories, and fought her way to the *Post* instead.

‘That skirt was most probably made in Chittagong, in fact,’ Hessa went on. ‘That’s where a lot of the big garment factories are. The whole industry began there, really. From nothing.’

Miranda turned to Casey.

‘You went out there last year. To the Rohingya camps.’

‘Yes. Down in the south, next to the border with Myanmar.’

Casey didn’t want to think about those camps.

The yellow dust, that was what she remembered. Yellow dust, and two little girls laughing.

They were prancing, giggling, in the strip of sunlight between two grey-patched tents.

So tightly packed, the tents in those camps. Miles of them, just a shoulder width apart, and far too low for anyone to stand up. Row after row, so it looked as if the whole hillside wore a carapace of canvas. Each tiny space, for a whole family.

And in the middle of it all, two little girls twirling.

All the rest was hell.

Those creaking bamboo bridges, over slow trickles of shit. A water pump, spitting brown drops over a crying toddler. A little boy with a badly burned face, trying so hard to smile.

One day, Casey had watched a puppy scramble down one of the narrow paths. There were only paths in these camps, not roads. The puppy snuffled, here and there.

And Casey realised: he was trying to find a place to die.

One place of stillness, that was all. To lay down his head and give up. And she glanced around, and saw the camp children watching too. Because there was nothing else to watch, not today.

Bored faces, and yellow dust, and a desperate, dying puppy.

And everywhere, the signs, handwritten: 'Don't go outside at night, not on your own.'

In the cartoon red letters: 'You will never be asked for favours, not for food. Not ever.'

And, underlined, again and again: 'Never be on your own.' 'Never be alone.'

'Could it happen there?' Miranda was asking. 'In Bangladesh. This sort of farm.'

‘I don’t know,’ said Casey. Then: ‘Maybe.’

Because there had been rumours, all over the camps.

A child disappeared in the night. They want the eyes, went the whisper. And the girls, so young, watched for every minute of every day.

There were stories about Kunming, too, not far over the border, in China. The transplant capital of the world, Kunming, a city where no one asked questions. Not the doctors, and certainly not the patients. Not when your kidneys are shutting down, a bit worse every day, and every other fragment of hope is gone.

‘The area around Cox’s Bazar has always been known for trafficking,’ said Hessa baldly. ‘For decades. The girls get moved on everywhere from that region. To India, mainly. But all across Asia, too. Europe, even, some of them.’

Although there were thousands of eastern European girls in London already.

‘Would the Rohingya women be working in the garment factories?’ asked Miranda. ‘Is that how the message could have been packed into the skirt?’

It was mostly the women who worked in the factories in Bangladesh. Hour after hour, piece after piece, on the pretty little dresses they would never ever wear.

‘I don’t know how many work in the factories,’ said Casey. ‘The Bangladeshi government doesn’t want the Rohingyas to assimilate with the locals. So the refugees are banned from learning Bengali, quite deliberately, to keep them isolated from the rest of the population. And then there are the checkpoints along the roads outside the camp. The camps aren’t fenced, but the refugees can’t move about the country freely either. Bangladesh won’t give them passports, of course.’

Again, Casey felt that flare of anger. They had moved around for decades, the Rohingya. From Myanmar to Bangladesh, and back again. Never settling: always hunted.

‘So could they be in the factories?’ Miranda asked.

‘They might be,’ said Casey. ‘The men certainly get work outside the camps, although legally they aren’t supposed to. Day labourers. Salt farming. That sort of thing.’

Back-breaking work, all of it.

Dash appeared at the door.

‘Ross has packed Tillie off to Liverpool Street,’ he said, rumpling his dark hair as he spoke. ‘What’s going on?’

Dash always raked at his hair when he was thinking. Ross managed the day-to-day of the newsroom. Dash – more cautiously, gaming out every step first – was in charge of strategy for the *Post*.

Dash was quiet, compared with his news editor. Watchful, and instinctively secretive. He could be very funny, inconspicuously, and he had an uncanny ability to predict where a story might go next. He spent all day negotiating. ‘The Tories’ll give us a good interview with the pensions minister if . . .’

When the newsroom was chasing the biggest stories – a bomb ripping apart a Tube station, a cabinet minister on the brink – it was Ross who dispatched reporters, screamed at recalcitrant subs, blitzed through copy. Dash, a few steps away, would assess, calculate, anticipate the next move.

They worked well together, Dash averting his eyes from the worst of Ross’s temper, and sometimes exploiting it when a reporter slipped up.

The structure meant Dash managed the investigations team, and their long-running inquiries. Or just kept out of their way, more often.

Miranda explained, Hessa and Casey listening carefully.

‘They take the girls,’ Miranda finished crisply. ‘They take the girls to a baby factory.’

‘Haven’t I heard about that sort of thing?’ said Dash. ‘Don’t they do surrogacy stuff out in India?’

Dash was glancing across at Casey. He worried about her, she knew, ever since that journey to the Sahara.

‘That sort of surrogacy has been banned in India.’ Casey ignored Dash’s concern. ‘And those women had a choice in the matter.’

‘Or as much of a choice,’ said Miranda, ‘as you have, when you have almost nothing.’

‘And children to feed,’ Hessa added.

‘But couldn’t it be straightforward surrogacy?’ asked Dash. ‘Bangladesh taking over where the Indians left off. I know they don’t allow it in the UK, paying for surrogacy. You only get expenses, don’t you? But it wouldn’t surprise me if someone found a way round the rules. People always do.’

‘We know surrogacy happens in countries all over the world,’ said Miranda evenly. ‘With variations in the rules. They pay a fortune in America.’

‘So it may be something like that,’ said Casey. ‘But from what we have seen in the embroidered notes I don’t think these women have any choice. At least in America, there are rules. A factory, this says. A baby factory.’

Casey paused, fiddling with the skirt, crumpling the scarlet taffeta.

Dash looked across at Casey. Next to her, Miranda shrugged at him.

‘Do you really,’ Dash asked, almost gentle, ‘want to get stuck into this now, Casey? You could do something else, for a while. Defence or politics, or something. You can come back to investigations in a bit.’

‘I’m fine.’ Casey was staring past him at a faded print tacked quite incongruously to the wall. *The Fighting Temeraire*, a grand old warship off to be pulled apart in the sludge of Rotherhithe.

In the silence, they could all hear one of the reporters, walking past the investigations office. ‘Got sent on a bloody doorstep in sodding Shropshire yesterday.’ Casey could hear that it was Eric, one of the junior reporters. ‘And the bugger pulled a fucking gun on me. I rang the newsdesk, and Ross just said, “Give him an hour to calm down and knock again.” God, I hate him. And then I got marooned in twatting Newport for hours. Drink?’

Casey and Miranda tried to suppress their grins.

‘Why would anyone bother snatching refugee girls?’ Dash asked. ‘There must be thousands of very poor women in Bangladesh. Surely whoever is behind this could pay them a pittance. Wouldn’t this just create an unnecessary risk?’

Hessa managed to keep her face expressionless. ‘It might be partly because of the perception of the Rohingya in Bangladesh,’ she said lightly. ‘They’ve been denied everything – education, basic human rights, homes – for decades. In the last few years, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya have been trafficked into slavery. Certain Bengalis would find it odd, the idea of negotiating with them.’

‘Fine,’ Dash shrugged. ‘Easier to snatch than to pay.’

Hessa stared at him. ‘Something like that.’

‘OK,’ said Dash, after a pause. ‘Spend some time working on it if you want. But you haven’t got much to go on, you know.’

Dash’s mobile rang. It rang every few minutes, all day, all night. He ignored it.

Casey glanced across at him. ‘We’d have to find the clients in the West,’ she said slowly. ‘Find out who is coordinating it all. And where they are.’

Her eyes were hazy now, the calculations almost blurring her sight.

‘And none of that,’ said Dash, ‘will be easy.’

He stepped out of the room, leaving a silence behind him.

‘He’s worried about you, you know,’ Miranda said to Casey.

‘I know,’ Casey shrugged. ‘I know. But I am fine.’

They sat in the small office for hours.

‘Right,’ Miranda began. ‘Let’s work out how we would do it.’

One of the old reporters at the *Sunday Times* had explained that trick to Miranda after the fourth bottle. *Put yourself in their head. Work out what you would do, and then flip it.*

And he – half crook himself – had tracked down rogue after rogue.

‘Where would you find the clients in the first place?’ Miranda asked. ‘In London?’

‘Wimpole Street?’ said Casey. ‘Harley Street?’

Patients flew from all around the world to those elegant Georgian roads cutting through the heart of Marylebone. Where Elizabeth Barrett searched for a cure, and only ever found love.

Rhinoplasty and ophthalmology, dermatology and podiatry. There was no part of the body that couldn't be tweaked, so carefully, with a soothing smile. Hundreds of doctors worked along those streets, most expensively.

Most discreetly, too, behind their little brass nameplates.

'But where would we start?' said Casey. 'There must be dozens of places that offer fertility treatment on Harley Street alone. How could we guess the right one?'

'You'd probably have to go through all sorts of hurdles first too,' Miranda thought aloud. 'It's not the sort of thing you'd be offered on your first appointment, surely? Unless, maybe, if we asked the right questions ...'

'We could ask about surrogacy,' suggested Casey. 'And just see where that led.'

'Or perhaps someone in India is referring clients on to Bangladesh?' suggested Hessa. 'After the surrogacy programmes got shut down in India?'

'Because we're not even sure if the scheme only operates in London,' said Miranda, drawing doodles. 'Whoever put that message in the skirt might be sending others to Germany, Australia, wherever.'

Casey turned back to her computer again. The afternoon had worn away. Miranda glanced at her watch, and looked up, worried. 'Tom will go spare if I'm late again.'

Miranda and Tom lived together, just, in a pretty house in Queen's Park. In a three-wishes life that Miranda never wanted.

'Don't stay on too late, Casey,' said Miranda.

She knew Casey would stay for hours.

'I won't,' Casey lied. 'You go too, Hessa.'

Hessa and Miranda left Casey there, in the glow of the investigations room, head bent over her notepad, as she raced through all the possibilities.

The start of an investigation: Casey had been here before. Within just a few years of joining the *Post*, she had been all over the world.

Beijing. Nairobi. Lisbon. Los Angeles.

Kandahar: just another army base. Dusty rows of tents, sprawling to the horizon. Ugly prefab blocks, fading into the sky. The quickstep of the military, at every turn. The strangeness of English snacks and American candy, out in a dusty desert. McDonald's and Starbucks and Burger King. The Afghans, who belonged here, looking as if they were wrong here. And beyond the fence, that unknown enemy. They didn't know, then, that he would never really fade.

Delhi. São Paulo. Madrid. Singapore.

The Promenade des Anglais: that familiar stretch of beauty, torn apart. The blue of the Mediterranean, sparkling to the horizon, and the patches of blood, black in the sun. The families, searching. That's the worst part, really. Because the families don't give up. Not when the phones – out beyond the police tape – stop ringing, one by one. Not when they're told, kindly meant: *there is no hope*. It's when they see the bodies. That's when they break.

Montreal. Jakarta. Geneva. Dar es Salaam.

Minsk. Rome. Shanghai. Amman. A meat thermometer, plunged into flesh, the red digital flicker viewed coolly through heatproof glass.

Interlaced with boredom, of course. The coroner's court in Surrey, just round the corner from Woking station, for some pointless, careless, thoughtless death.

Three days outside a redbrick house in Hertfordshire, hoping to talk to a murderer's wife. Who didn't want to talk to anyone, not ever again.

And the endless nights in hotel rooms, all designed to look just the same.

When Miranda had joined the *Post*, Casey knew at once: *this*.

It suited her, this job. Dissolving into roles, day after day. A flick of eyeshadow, and a touch of lipstick: then she drew the eye. Other days, she was nothing; forgettable and forgotten.

And an answer, at last, to the question: *Who am I today?*

Casey bent over her notes, biting into a stolen apple because it was all she could find to eat in the newsroom. Years ago, she remembered some distant aunt warning her, *Don't eat the seeds or they'll grow in your head*. She imagined the rustling leaves, the rosy apples, filling her brain like a story. And her head drifted down to the desk.

'Casey.' It was the night editor, shaking her arm. 'Time for you to go home. Have this.'

Blearily, Casey looked up. Cory was smiling down at her, a horrible coffee from the machine in his hand. Behind him, the newsdesk was a pool of light in a dark room.

If a big story broke after hours, it was Cory's job was to assess the importance of the story. He decided who should be kicked out of bed: the reporter, or the specialist, or the head of news.

A dead MP meant the political editor got the call. If a plane crashed, the transport correspondent was jerked awake. 'But only if it's filled with Brits,' the transport correspondent had bawled once. 'If it's thirty-five Indonesians into the South China Sea, leave me to fucking sleep.'

For the biggest stories, Cory called the editor himself. No one wanted to be the editor who got a call at 2 a.m. to say that Princess Diana had been in a car crash in Paris, and shouted, 'So what?' and crashed the phone down. That episode had taken years to live down.

'Sorry, Cory,' said Casey. 'Must have drifted off.'

The night editor pulled her to her feet.

'Passports,' Casey said.

'What?' Cory looked at her. 'Are you all right?'

'They would need passports, to get the babies back.' Casey was speaking almost to herself.

Cory stared at her, and almost laughed. 'Go home, Casey.'

'I will.' She was scribbling herself a note, on her keyboard for the next morning. 'I will, now.'

3

The first daffodils were bobbing in the park as Casey walked towards the office, the snowdrops shy beneath the trees. There was a shimmer of frost on the grass, fading as the sun crept over the skyline.

‘Casey.’ Tillie leaped up as she walked into the newsroom.

‘Hello,’ Casey started.

‘I went all over that Rhapsody near Liverpool Street last night.’ Tillie’s voice was breathless, as if she had been rehearsing the words. ‘And finally, just as they were chucking us all out at ten ... Anyway, here.’

It was the same white silk, the words embroidered in the same pale blue thread. Casey stroked it flat.

They take the babies for the English women.

Well, at least that meant it was happening in London. Probably. Someone must have smuggled them into a whole consignment of clothes, destined for London, or who knew where?

‘What does it mean?’ Tillie’s brown eyes were worried. Behind her, the newsroom was unfurling. Ross was bawling at the education correspondent, some missed story about university access. The newish editor of the *Post*, who regarded

the investigations team with deep suspicion, was arriving in the office. Flunkies trailed him, seagulls following a tractor.

Archie, the *Post's* avuncular political editor, was leaning against the newsdesk. 'How shall I quote you on this?' he was saying. 'Are you "sources close to"? Or "good friend of"?'

Those odd friendships, based only on favours.

'It's probably nothing,' Casey said reassuringly, her pulse leaping. 'Thank you though, Tillie.'

Casey walked towards the beige of the investigations room. Past the Business desk, past Sport and past the rows of news reporters' desks. Tillie was half-following her, hesitating, and then quickstepping to catch up.

'The shop assistants hated me. I unfolded so many things. I tried to put them back right, but they must still have been so annoyed with me,' Tillie faltered. 'I'd love to work with you on any project ...'

They were just outside the investigations room now.

'Thanks, Tillie,' Casey said. 'I'll check with Ross. Maybe you can go to another branch today.'

'Great!' said Tillie. 'Brilliant. Amazing.'

Casey smiled at the enthusiasm as she unlocked the office. Miranda and Hessa arrived minutes later.

'Right.' Casey didn't waste time on hello. 'Surrogacy. It's a business.'

Casey had her notes from the night before in front of her. Her first call had been to the *Post's* health editor, a quick-tongued blonde who had three-year-old twins, and no time for Ross's moods.

'I'm right up against it,' Heather had bawled down the phone. 'But, yes, international surrogacy is a whole can of worms.'

Heather had sprinted Casey round the industry at high speed, as she spooned Calpol into one of her children.

Back around 2004, Heather said, the whole industry got started in India. Well, we outsource everything else, don't we? Who do you speak to when you call up your bank to scream about a lost credit card? You might as well do the same with kids, I suppose. Maybe. Anyway. So surrogacy in India became a massive business: 25,000 children a year was a low-end estimate, which made it an industry worth billions. Well, you can't put a price on hope, can you? But gradually, the Indian government went off the idea. A few big stories about problems. Kids not being handed over by the surrogates. Dodgy parents, all that. Cold feet about the whole thing. Gradually, India brought in more rules, more regulations. They banned gay couples, who are a big part of the market. So the industry moved over to Thailand, and Nepal too. Then those countries changed the law. The industry moved to Cambodia, which was especially popular with the Chinese. That got shut down too. Then on to Laos. Ukraine's a big market too. It's meant to be more regulated, these days. But is it? Fuck knows.

You should talk to Alicia Dalglish, Heather went on. You know, the chair of the Foreign Affairs select committee. She's very hot on it all. Believes in a woman's right to do whatever she wants with her body. And that sort of makes sense too, if you think about it. But who knows really?

'Thanks so much, Heather.' Casey had rung off, before digging back into her research again.

Now Casey spun her laptop round towards Hessa and Miranda. A website smiled back, swirly pink writing over a pretty couple on a beach, strolling hand in hand with a toddler.

No problems: your journey. No hassles: your dream. Come as a couple, leave as a family.

Hessa and Miranda studied the computer.

‘This was an old website I found in Thailand.’ Casey clicked around the photographs.

‘What’s an IP?’ asked Miranda.

‘An intended parent,’ said Casey. ‘At that place, they threw in bonus sex selection too.’

‘Some of these families use surrogates because of serious health problems, you know,’ said Hessa. ‘Ovarian cancer, uterine cancer, hysterectomies. I read about it at home last night.’

Miranda looked at Hessa thoughtfully. ‘And now the industry has migrated to Bangladesh?’ She turned back to Casey.

‘Maybe. Who knows? Thailand cracked down after baby Gammy,’ Casey explained. ‘That was when an Australian couple hired a Thai woman to carry a child. Then they found out she was having twins, and one of them had Down’s. The surrogate claimed she was told to abort the Down’s baby, but wouldn’t, and she ended up keeping the Down’s baby and handing over the other one. Then the Thai surrogate found out that the Australian father had been done for child abuse, and things really went downhill. The IPs kept their child though.’

Miranda tipped her chair back, sipping her coffee.

‘I rang Savannah too,’ Casey said.

Savannah was an aid worker who had guided Casey around the Rohingya camps the year before, down in the south of Bangladesh. Red-haired and tough-eyed, she strode around the camps, her rage flickering about her. In Lambasia, one of the sprawling encampments, Savannah had pointed out a child with a horribly swollen throat. ‘Diphtheria,’ Savannah had

shouted in her broad New Zealand accent, flinging her hands in the air. 'We had beaten fucking diphtheria right the way around the world. It was basically gone, for Christ's sake. Rammed into history, where it belonged. And now it's back, for fuck's sake. Who does this? Who does this to people?'

'Does Savannah know anything about it?' Miranda asked now.

Casey hesitated.

You know how fucking dark things are here, babe. You know what it's like. But I'll ask, course I will. I'll talk to the women I know well. And I think they'll tell me, if they know anything.

'Savannah doesn't know much,' said Casey. 'Not yet.'

There was a light tap on the doorframe. It was Audrey, the *Post's* legal affairs correspondent, with a tired smile on her face.

'Casey,' she said. 'You were looking at the legalities around getting surrogate babies back to the UK?'

'Yes.' Miranda pulled out a chair for her. 'It seems so complicated.'

Audrey slumped into the chair. 'Long day yesterday,' she apologised. 'Old Bailey for a murder, and then out to Woolwich for more of that grisly terror trial.'

Audrey ran her hands over her neatly braided hair, visibly pulling herself together.

'Right. The legalities of surrogacy are a nightmare.' Audrey handed round copies of a Foreign Office document, reading aloud random sentences. 'International surrogacy is a complex area ... The process for getting your child back to the UK can be very long and complicated, and can take several months to complete. Strongly recommend specialist legal advice ...'

Audrey looked at Miranda. ‘Basically, it’s fiendishly complicated, takes ages and varies from country to country. You need to get the child a passport, and separately you need to get something called a parental order to transfer various legal rights from the surrogate to you. There are different rules depending on whether the surrogate is married or not, and whether the British father is actually genetically linked to the child or not.’

‘So, for example, if you use a surrogate in the US . . .?’

‘If a child is born to an US citizen, they get American citizenship. That means you can apply for a US passport and you can usually bring the baby back quite soon. Then you go through the other hoops back in England.’

‘Why wouldn’t everyone just go to the US?’

‘California is the centre of the industry,’ said Audrey. ‘It’s very expensive though. I’ve heard quotes of £50,000 just for the legal side, and that’s before you even start paying the surrogate or any of the medical costs. On top of that, British couples are meant to ensure that their international surrogacy agreement complies with UK law. Clearly, because of the big payments made to US surrogates, that isn’t the case. So it’s a grey area, and potentially vulnerable.’

‘And, say, the Ukraine?’

‘That depends. In most countries, the baby doesn’t get automatic citizenship. So a baby born to a surrogate doesn’t get Ukrainian citizenship. If the father is British, and the surrogate isn’t married, you have to apply for a British passport, which takes four or five months. But if not, it gets much more complicated. Anything to do with the Home Office is always a nightmare, anyway. It’s a Byzantine system.’

Audrey sighed to herself. Casey remembered that Audrey's parents had been part of the Windrush generation: dropped into a bureaucratic chaos after decades of happy life in London.

'And commercial surrogacy is only legal in a very few countries?' said Casey.

'Yes,' said Audrey. 'It started up in several places around the world, but then each of those countries quickly realises that there is a reason why there is a lot of regulation around surrogacy. I can't see any record of legal surrogacy in Bangladesh. It never really got started there. Certainly, if someone found a way to fast-track the other routes, they could make a chunky profit from it.'

'What if they had someone out there who could provide them with Bangladeshi birth certificates?' asked Casey. 'If it had just the intended parents' names on it, rather than the actual birth mother, might it be much easier to get the British passport?'

'Possibly,' said Audrey. 'And that may be easier to achieve in Bangladesh. I don't know.'

'If they did that,' Casey was thinking aloud, 'it might be quite straightforward for someone to issue the passport from the High Commission.'

Audrey stood up, giving them a glint of a smile.

'Good luck,' she said. 'I must get going.' She disappeared. There was a momentary hush.

'OK,' said Miranda. 'Then what's the approach?'

‘Passports,’ said Casey firmly. ‘If the babies are being born illegally in Bangladesh, the organisers of this scheme must be finding a way of getting them back into this country. A baby’s no use unless you can bring it back to the UK for the IPs. And as Audrey says, that process usually takes months, and there are a lot of legal hoops. To make any sense of operating in Bangladesh, there may well be someone manipulating the system in Bangladesh somehow, possibly with the emergency passports.’

Miranda was playing with her scarf.

‘The High Commission in Dhaka,’ Miranda agreed. ‘There must be someone there who at least has some idea about how the parents are getting British passports. Or are issuing the passports themselves. It would be very hard to traffic a newborn into the UK without a passport, even using a private jet. Then there would have to be a legitimate doctor in the UK who can sign off all the standard documentation.’

‘Whoever is organising the passports would probably have the names of everyone who has ever been out there,’ Hessa followed. ‘And they might know who is coordinating the whole thing.’

‘So I rang Luke,’ said Casey. ‘In Delhi, last night.’

Currently the *Post’s* India correspondent, Luke Armitage had had to leave London for Delhi quite abruptly after a misunderstanding over the Home Secretary’s phone bill during the last general election. Following that eruption, Dash had decided Luke should spend a bit of time as the *Post’s* Delhi correspondent.

Out of sight, out of mind, just for a year or so. You’ll like Delhi, Luke.

I bloody won’t.

Get on the sodding plane, Armitage.

Luke and Casey got on well.

‘I need a list of anyone dodgy in the Dhaka High Commission,’ Casey had said to Luke the night before. ‘Someone who could get people passports, when they’re not supposed to.’

Bangladesh, part of the old Commonwealth, had a High Commission, not an embassy.

‘Passports are a nightmare when you’re travelling with babies,’ Heather had agreed. ‘Haven’t taken my husband’s name, have I? And the kids have his surname. I had to show a border guard my flaming C-section scar to get the twins past one joker when I was travelling on my own. Tell you what, they let me through pretty quick when I started taking my top off. Sodding patriarchy.’

They were tough, border controls, with an eye out for a trafficked child all the way around the world. They still got through, of course.

‘When’ – Luke rarely wasted words – ‘did this passport lark get started?’

‘Let’s say some time in the last five years,’ said Casey. ‘They may not be there any more.’

Diplomatic staff moved on to a new posting every few years, skimming around the globe, oh so politely.

‘It would probably have to be someone quite senior,’ Luke thought aloud. ‘Without many people checking above.’

‘Yes,’ said Casey. ‘It takes months to get passports in normal surrogacy cases.’

‘For cash or blackmail?’

‘Could be either.’

‘You’ – there was amusement in Luke’s voice – ‘don’t ask for much.’

‘I know,’ said Casey. ‘Sorry.’

‘Any time.’

This morning, Casey had arrived in the office to an encrypted email from Luke. *Call me when you get in. Doesn’t matter what time.*

Luke had answered the phone immediately.

‘I trod carefully, I promise,’ he said. ‘But I’ve got a mate who has a good line into the Dhaka High Commission. He won’t say a word to anyone, I guarantee it.’

Casey didn’t ask, didn’t need to know.

‘Anyway, my pal said they had a changeover of high commissioners, just a few months ago,’ Luke went on. ‘Sir William Cavendish, the old high commissioner, was a peach, by all accounts. Much loved by all. He’s retired to a Greek island, or something. The newly arrived ambo is most correct. Very much believes in dotting the Is and crossing the Ts, and everything else by the book.’

‘Doesn’t sound like your mate likes him.’

‘You guess right. But my buddy also reckons the new high commissioner is clean. Too saintly for words. Dull as ditch-water, were his precise words.’

‘How about the deputies?’

‘That’s what my mate suggested. He says the new high commissioner is running things on such a tight rein that it would be hard to get anything past him. But he said all sorts of alarm bells were ringing about the last deputy out there. Gabriel Bantham.’

‘Never heard of him.’

‘You know how low-profile they are, the Foreign Office lot. You never hear about them until they’re right at the top of the tree. But apparently Bantham had been flagged up quietly as being a bit too sharp for his own good.’

‘How?’

‘Nothing too dodgy,’ Luke said. ‘Getting swept off for very ritzy weekends by a company that wanted an introduction to, say, a Foreign Office minister. A lifestyle that was just a bit too grand for a Foreign Office salary.’

Casey felt her interest flare, a shiver in her spine.

‘Might be family money?’

‘Not, apparently.’

‘He get caught?’

‘Not quite,’ said Luke. ‘My mate reckons the old high commissioner, Sir William, didn’t want to drop him in it. Cavendish just wanted a quiet life, towards the end of his career. So Bantham’s next move was a step sideways to Washington. That’s where he is now.’

The huge British embassy on Massachusetts Avenue, thought Casey. A long way from the backwaters of Dhaka.

‘Could there have been anyone else organising passports through the Dhaka outpost?’

‘It’s not a big mission, the Bangladeshi operation,’ said Luke. ‘Not exactly a focus for the Foreign Office, is it, Dhaka? But I

don't think you could hand out several passports in a row without one of the main officials knowing.'

'And your friend hadn't heard of passports being doled out?'

'I didn't get that specific. Do you want me to go back to him?'

'No,' said Casey slowly. 'Not yet. But he's sure Bantham is the guy?'

'He said that he would put his house on it.'

'OK,' said Casey thoughtfully.

Now she summarised the conversation quickly.

'Right,' Miranda decided. 'It looks like you and Hessa are going to DC.'

Casey waited until Hessa was out of the room.

‘You’re not coming to DC?’

‘You can do it without me, Casey. Take Hessa.’

Why? Casey didn’t need to ask.

Two weeks earlier, Miranda had found messages on her husband’s mobile.

What sort of an idiot thinks about cheating on an investigative journalist? Miranda had spat in their little office the next day, trying to laugh. Casey had put an awkward arm around her shoulders, not knowing what to say.

‘There’s nothing too incriminating on his phone,’ Miranda had said. ‘Nothing conclusive. I don’t even know if anything has happened.’

Not yet.

‘Who is she?’

‘He met her at work.’ Tom was a corporate lawyer. In-house now: better hours, less stress. ‘Some girl in business development. Whatever the fuck that is.’

‘Do you want me to find out about her?’

‘No. Yes. I don’t know.’

And it was so unlike Miranda, that uncertainty.

Tom and Miranda had met at university. Back when everything was possible. They laughed their way into marriage, soon after, too early. And realised, too late, that their dreams were so very different.

They had moved to a pretty house in Queen's Park, all the same. With patterned tiles cold underfoot in the hallway, and roses round the door. Surrounded by prams, and smiles, and school fetes.

This is what I want, he whispered.

I know, she said. *I know*.

And he'd waited, a kind man, as she fled to Nigeria and Russia, Libya and Iraq.

When will you be home? he would ask, calling from a back garden just right for a Wendy house. Again and again, until the pretty house became a prison.

I wish your dreams were enough.

'Rebecca, she's called.' Miranda snarled the name. 'Becky.'

'And what do you want?' Casey bit a fingernail.

'I don't know. I think Tom might have finally had enough. And I don't know that I can blame him.'

Miranda turned away.

I'm going to save my marriage, Miranda had said to Casey a few days later, knowing the words were ridiculous. As if her marriage were a drowning damsel, caught in a rip tide.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes.' A pause. 'No. Let's talk about something else.'

Casey looked across the bustling restaurant. Le Diplomate, appropriately enough; Washington's interpretation of a French

bistro. Casey stared at the mosaic-tiled floors disapprovingly, as the noise rose around them. Tiles were the worst for undercover work.

They were in the heart of America's capital, just off the thoroughly gentrified Logan Circle. All around them, gossip ebbed and flowed. The lobbyists, the politicians, the journalists: they all came here.

Hessa was sitting across the table from Casey, awkward in a big wicker chair.

'Relax,' said Casey. 'You've got to look like you belong here.'

'Sorry.' Hessa tried to adjust.

'And never apologise.'

From her red leather banquette, Casey was watching the entrance. Anyone walking in would only see the back of Hessa's head, anyway. It didn't matter that she was nervous.

After landing in Washington, it hadn't taken Casey long to find out where Bantham would be for lunch today.

There was a delegation of British MPs in DC, over to discuss trade relations. A jolly, they all knew. Cross-party, very cosy. A Labour MP had happily handed over the delegation's schedule to the *Post's* political editor, hoping he was dropping his Tory colleagues in the soup. It would never occur to an MP that Bantham was the target.

Lunch, today's schedule read. DC restaurant tbc.

It had taken ten minutes to ring round; only a few restaurants fitted the bill.

A smart English accent and a mumbled title never failed: I'm calling from Lord Gidleigh's office. Just ringing about the VIP party today. The British parliamentarians, yes. The Foreign Affairs select committee. Just checking you knew two of the guests were gluten-free?

There was confusion at Cafe Milano. Polite bemusement at Fiola Mare. And a casual, oh sure, I'll make a note about that, from Le Diplomate.

'You have a good day now.'

'You too.'

And here they were.

Casey watched the MPs crowding through the entrance, full of noise and importance. They wouldn't recognise her face, she knew. She kept away from Parliament for exactly that reason. She identified several MPs, pontificating loudly. In the heart of the throng, she could see Alicia Dalglish, the bright young thing of British politics, with an interest in surrogacy, smiling and chatting. She was talking to a pretty blonde woman, probably some backbench MP.

Now Casey waited for the group to settle, in a flurry of menus and water, still or sparkling, and would-you-like-some-bread?

She had spotted Bantham in his smart suit and green silk tie as he walked through the doors. Light brown hair was smoothed back from a neat parting, above a sharp, pale face. It had been hard to find a photograph of him; diplomats were careful. Casey had trawled his university archive in the end. Oxford, of course. Sepia pose, distant eyes.

The consummate diplomat, Bantham's eyes darted around the restaurant, noting all the Washington players. Casey felt his eyes on her for a second, before they flicked on. When the Tory MP sitting next to Bantham dripped a spot of olive oil on her shirt, he whisked out a silk handkerchief.

Hessa's nervousness had disappeared, Casey noticed, as soon the MPs arrived in the restaurant. The actress, on her stage. Now

Hessa was an elegant young executive, graceful in a navy suit, her shiny dark bob gleaming in the light. Casey smiled at her.

A few tables beyond Hessa and Casey, an up-and-coming Texan congressman was holding court. Casey knew that Bantham would not be able to resist a quick hello.

She waited.

It didn't take long. Just after the starter, she saw Bantham push back his chair. At once, Casey was on her feet, strolling down the restaurant, smoothing her expensive suit, with its charcoal pencil skirt.

'Gabriel Bantham?' As they passed, Casey held out her hand with a smile. She watched him fumble for her name. 'Katie Faraday. We met in London, a few years ago now.'

Katie was a favourite name. Same first syllable, enough to make Casey's head turn. But it could be Catherine or Catrina, Katherine or Kathryn. Katja, even, at a push. Katie turned an easy research trawl into a lengthy challenge.

'Of course,' he said smoothly. 'How lovely to see you again, Katie.'

'And I see you're here with Ali Dalglish,' Casey glanced across at the table of MPs. 'I bumped into her at Congress yesterday.'

Because Alicia Dalglish, tipped for promotion in the next reshuffle, would have met a hundred people in a couple of hours, and would nod automatically at the mention of a Katie.

'She enjoyed her day there,' agreed Bantham, a flex of American in his voice.

'And now you're based at the embassy in DC?' Casey spoke with a smile, halfway between business and flirtation. He reflected it.

‘Yes.’ Bantham was unsuspecting. ‘I’ve been there for a few months now. It’s a fantastic city.’

‘You know’ – a careful pause – ‘that could be interesting to my client. He’s having a slight problem with his UK citizenship at the moment.’ A brief smile. ‘We like to get things right for the client.’

The client. Definite article. One man, anonymous, who could monopolise a whole team. The family office, the private office: those were for the truly astronomical fortunes, and everybody knew it.

‘Might you be free for lunch soon?’ Casey went on. ‘It could be so helpful to have a chat.’

As she spoke, she handed over the business card. Heavy cream card, embossed in gold.

Bantham handed over his own card, without even thinking about it.

‘Great,’ she said: always be the one to break the contact. ‘I’ll be in touch.’

And he watched her strut away across the restaurant.

The next day, she was waiting in the palatial restaurant of the Four Seasons, poised in one of the big comfortable chairs.

‘The Four Seasons?’ Dash had asked. ‘Really? The editor is kicking up about expenses already.’

‘It’s what Bantham would expect.’ Casey was firm. ‘And it’s got carpet to blot out noise, and nice big gaps between the tables so no one else can overhear anything. It’s perfect.’

I’m so sorry to bother you with such a bizarre request about carpets of all the wretched things, she had summoned the same voice from Lord Gidleigh’s office, but I am trying to find

a restaurant to take my mother for lunch. She's very deaf these days, and I was worrying about the sound levels.

Oh, sure, don't you worry. Yes, ma'am, it's all carpeted in our restaurant. We look forward to hosting you. You have a nice day now.

'Well, write a sodding review of it for the paper, at least,' Dash grumbled. 'We can publish it after the story runs.'

If it runs, he didn't say. Casey knew Dash didn't quite believe in this story. Not yet.

Now Casey straightened a fork, twitched a napkin and moved a vase of white irises an inch to the left. She glanced in a mirror to her left, checking the camera, and that all the wires were carefully hidden. In the mirror, she looked like any other glossy businesswoman. *Mirrors reflect the soul*, she'd read once. *And vampires have no soul, and no reflection.*

Sitting to Casey's right was a polite Indonesian man, in a very expensive suit. He turned to Casey, and adjusted his Rolex.

'I'm good to go,' Ibrahim said, in a strong New York accent.

'All Bahasa from now,' she warned, with a grin. 'Mr Halim.'

'Sure,' he said. 'My granny would be proud.'

Gabriel Bantham didn't speak Bahasa, Casey knew.

She knew that because the day before, she had called the embassy, and asked to be put through to Bantham. While the call was transferred, she passed the phone to Ibrahim. When Bantham answered from his office, Ibrahim had spoken in the Bahasa language of millions of Indonesians.

'I'm terribly sorry,' Bantham had apologised, so politely. 'I don't speak ... Do you speak any other languages? I'm so sorry about this.'