

# THE NURSERY

ASIA MACKAY

ZAFFRE

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by  
ZAFFRE  
80–81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE

Copyright © Asia Mackay, 2019

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic,  
mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the  
prior written permission of the publisher.

The right of Asia Mackay to be identified as the Author of this  
work has been asserted by her in accordance with the  
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

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

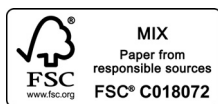
A CIP catalogue record for this book is  
available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978–1–78576–564–3

*Also available as an ebook*

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd  
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A



Zaffre is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK  
[www.bonnierbooks.co.uk](http://www.bonnierbooks.co.uk)

*For Trotts*

*You're fun, funny and mine  
I feel lucky, I really do  
But when you say I have PMT  
I really want to kill you  
X*

‘GET DOWN! GET DOWN!’ I shout at the man in front of a dilapidated warehouse, as I pull up opposite him in a black van. He ducks to the ground just as a stream of bullets tear up the wall where he had just been standing.

‘Your cover’s blown.’

Another shot rings out.

‘Lex? That you?’ comes the muffled shout from behind a four-foot-high carefully ordered pile of wooden planks. We are at an old deserted gasworks in East London. Building work had stalled last year due to a bankrupted building company and retracted permissions.

‘I’m here with Jake. We’re going to get you out,’ I shout back.

We’ve been ordered by Platform Eight to undertake an emergency extraction. As assassins in an elite underground branch of Her Majesty’s Secret Service it’s a slightly different remit to what we are used to. But the target under attack is one of our own. Simon Black has been undercover with a drug-dealing syndicate, tasked with taking out the newly appointed Head. This morning we’d intercepted communication that they knew about him.

I slide out of the driver’s door, keeping low. The gunfire continues. I hear it ricocheting off the roof. Why are they aiming so high? I look up just in time to see a plank of wood come crashing down, knocking Black off his feet.

There’s another burst of gunfire and in my earpiece is Jake Drummond. ‘Hostiles down.’

I run to Black and pull the plank off him. He's out cold. But there is still a pulse. I drag him the few feet to the van. Jake screeches up next to us on his motorbike. He jumps off and together we sling Black into the back of the van.

'I'll call in the Clean Team. You get him out of here.'

I get into the driver's seat and accelerate fast. I just need to get back to the relative safety of the industrial park. Witnesses and CCTV should halt a further attack. I speed along the ramshackle road. Two turns and I will be at the alleyway leading back to the main road.

My phone rings through the van's Bluetooth. I ignore it. A large black four-by-four roars around the corner.

They're coming for us.

I push into fifth gear as I accelerate further. I need to somehow outrun them.

'Hi, just a quick one.' Will's voice crackles through the hands-free.

What the hell?

I must've clipped the answer button on the steering wheel. Now is not the time for a chat with my husband who remains oblivious to what exactly being a data-analysar for the Government Communication and Data Specialisation Branch really entails. He thinks the biggest danger I face in my supposed desk-bound job is square eyes from staring at a computer screen all day long.

'Can you pick up my dry-cleaning on your way home?'

I reach for the hang-up button. Just as the four-by-four rams into the side of us and I'm flung against the driver side window.

'Hello, Lex? What was that bang? Are you OK?'

I peel myself off the window and grab hold of the steering wheel and slam my foot down on the accelerator, powering slightly ahead of the four-by-four. The collision has slowed them down more than me.

‘Dropped my phone. I can’t really talk now. I—’

‘Please, Lex, it’s not that hard a question. I’m going to be stuck here until late. I’m on my last shirt and I’m so swamped I’ll need to be back in the office early tomorrow.’

‘I . . . just, hang on.’

I jolt forward as the four-by-four hits the back of the van. A turning is coming up on my right, I pull down hard on the steering wheel, swerving round the corner at speed. The four-by-four can’t brake fast enough and overshoots it.

I speed down the road before taking another hard right. Having memorised the small network of roads back towards the motorway I know I’m close.

‘You there?’ Will sighs.

‘Yes. I’m here.’

There is still no sign of the four-by-four. They’re going to try to cut me off. But where?

‘Look, I get it. You have an important job, you’re busy, I’m busy, but come on, Lex.’ His voice is pleading.

If I keep on this road, I just need to pass two side streets before reaching the motorway. It’s worth the risk.

‘I . . . I’m thinking.’

I sail past the first side road. Nothing.

I check my side mirrors; maybe I’ve lost them.

‘Well?’

I approach the second side street just as the four-by-four roars out and slams against the van. I am again thrown against

the window. I don't let go of the wheel as I pull down hard to correct our path.

'Darling?'

I try to think of my schedule for the rest of the day.

I'm drawing a blank.

'OK, yes. Fine. I'll do it.'

'Hallelujah. See, it wasn't that—' I cut him off.

The four-by-four is now rammed right up against my van – together we are careering down the road towards the small alleyway.

Only one of us is going to get through and it's going to have to be me.

I must time this just right. My foot is already fully down on the accelerator. I need to jolt the car out the way with enough time to make it through the alleyway and not hit the wall. I take a deep breath and calculate the distance ahead.

Twenty feet, ten feet, six feet and I swing down hard and fast on the wheel. The force clips the four-by-four and sends it spinning to the side and crashing into a warehouse.

I pull down hard on the wheel again and hold my breath as we speed through the narrow opening. The wing mirror breaks off as we skim the side of the wall and go full pelt through the alleyway and out into a small slip road that joins the motorway.

We are clear.

'Lex, you copy?' Jake crackles into my earpiece.

'Black is secure. Entering the A1020 now. I'll take him back to the Platform.'

'No,' Jake's voice rises, 'meet me at the service station on junction six. You're the one that needs to make the pick-up, remember? You can take my bike.'

He's right.

It has to be me.

I check my watch. I have fifty-three minutes to get to the other side of London. The recriminations if I don't are not worth thinking about. I pull into the service station and fling open the van door, getting out just as Jake screeches up alongside us. He takes off his helmet and hands it to me as he gets off the bike.

'Go now.'

'Roger that. Look after him.' I nod over my shoulder to the still unconscious figure in the back of the van.

Speeding through the busy streets of London, weaving in and out of traffic, I grit my teeth. I have to make it. I just have to.

When I finally pull up outside the main gate, I jump off the bike and look around. The large green Portakabin is just up ahead. The whole area is deserted. Not a good sign. I check my watch. Fuck. Despite the full speed and the shortcut, I'm twelve minutes late. I pull off my helmet and tear up the metal steps, the rattling thuds announcing my presence to those inside.

The door opens and there is Yvonne. Ruler of this strange kingdom with the peeling walls and air with the faint smell of sewage. She's wearing all black and her curly hair is tied back in a tight bun. Her mouth is set in a thin line.

'Sorry I'm late – had a small setback. Hope everything is OK here.'

'We've had our own problems today. Come through. I need to show you.'

I follow her into the small hallway. She reaches for the iPad on the table by the door and shows me the screen. On it is a photo of an arm with two distinctive red marks. You can just make out indentations.



‘Who is this?’ I ask.

‘You know I can’t tell you that.’ She folds her arms. ‘This is meant to be a safe haven, not a place of violence. We were given no warning this could happen.’

‘I understand completely. You must accept our apologies. I’ll sort this out.’

She nods curtly and motions towards the double doors behind her. I open them and there sits the perpetrator in a red plastic chair, fidgeting with an empty plastic cup.

With just one look at my face she comes running at me.

And into my arms.

‘Mama! Mama!’

I pick Gigi up and give her a kiss on the head.

I had at least kept the promise I had made leaving the house this morning: that after weeks of hardly seeing her, I would be the one to pick her up from nursery today. The memory of her reaction – great big smile, lit-up eyes and cries of ‘Hurrah, Mama, hurrah, Mama’ as she jumped up and down – meant failing her would have undoubtedly traumatised me more than her.

Yvonne comes up behind me. ‘I told you Mummy was coming. That she hadn’t forgotten about you. She was just running a tiny bit late.’

I’m reminded that we are both in trouble.

‘Now listen, Gigi, you’ve been very naughty. You must never ever bite anyone. You know that.’ I look into her big blue eyes and silently implore her to not show me up further in front of her headteacher.

‘Gigi bite.’ She smiles up at me.

‘No, Gigi. NO bite.’ I look at Yvonne. ‘Are you sure you can’t tell me who it was? I’d like to apologise to their parents.’

She is already shaking her head. 'Our policy is very clear. Data protection. We never inform parents of the name of the victim or the abuser.'

I laugh. 'Abuser is a little harsh, don't you think? I mean, she's only two.'

Yvonne stares at me. 'Abuse is characterised as hurt or injury by maltreatment. And believe me, this individual was maltreated by your daughter.'

Gigi giggles. 'Bite. Aarumph.' She gnashes her teeth together.

It's very hard to not laugh. One look at Yvonne's frowning face helps.

'No, Gigi. Biting is bad. Very, very bad. And if you do it again you may not be allowed to come to this nursery. And you love it here, don't you?'

Gigi nods. 'Gigi like school.' Gigi had walked through the Portakabin door for the first time just a few weeks ago at the start of the school's autumn term. She had thankfully taken to it immediately. I was probably the only mother who had had to cart a crying toddler away from school. Looking around the rundown classroom, the grey partition walls brightened up with children's drawings and finger paintings, it was hard to comprehend just what exactly made it so magical.

I turn to Yvonne. 'So I'm hoping it's not a three strikes and you're out policy?' I try a smile.

Yvonne's face remains impassive. 'This should never happen again.'

'Of course, of course. We will make sure she understands. I really am very sorry, she's never done this before.'

'I should hope not.'

‘Bye bye, Eeeyvon.’ Gigi waves and grins at her. She seems immune to just how terrifying this woman is.

‘Bye bye, Gigi,’ says Yvonne. ‘Now you enjoy your special time with Mummy.’

Mother. Secret agent. Two roles. Two lives. There are days when it’s tough. Of course there are. But today is one of those winning days. Where I crammed it all in. Saved a colleague. Picked up my daughter. Whipped up some fish fingers for her dinner. Succeeded in getting her to eat three pieces of carrot. And got her to bed after only six bedtime stories and three threats of banning pudding for a week. Victorious days like this are few and far between and it’s important to revel in them.

Will arrives home as I’m sitting on the living room sofa, toasting myself with a large glass of red wine.

‘My dry-cleaning upstairs?’

Shit.

# Part One

## Bite

bite, *v.*

1. Use the teeth in order to inflict injury on.
2. Take the bait or lure.

# Chapter One

A BUSKER WITH A TOPKNOT was singing about ‘running’ in an enthusiastic falsetto at the bottom of the escalators at Holborn tube station. I recognised it as a Florence and the Machine song. A few commuters winced. It was a little too high-pitched for early Monday morning.

I gave him a nod as I walked past him and joined the escalators up into the daylight.

The weekend had been quiet. All active missions were on hold. My orders had been to not leave London, keep my head down and await a full update at today’s briefing. After two days of a husband still grumpy about ShirtGate and a daughter wielding a glue gun demanding craft time, I was ready for whatever the Platform could throw at me.

I walked up to the grey office building adjoining the tube station. I swiped my specially modified Oyster card against the double doors and entered. In the small reception area was a waiting lift. I walked in and pressed a combination of buttons that took me down to the hallowed halls of Platform Eight.

Our offices were situated in a disused underground network of rooms and tunnels coming off Platform Eight at Holborn tube station. It was a fitting location for our covert branch of the security services – we could roam all over London hidden from the

all-seeing CCTV, whilst the sounds of the trains helped mask the noise from uncooperative interviewees. Only we knew the dark truth behind the seemingly innocuous tube announcements. ‘Signal failures’ were often caused by over-enthusiastic interrogating shorting the electricity supply and affecting the whole underground grid. A ‘person on the tracks’ could be a person who would rather die than answer our questions – it was a particularly effective disposal method as ‘splatters’ were near impossible to do autopsies on.

I entered the lift an everyday commuter and exited an underground secret agent.

This was our world. Officially we were the Government Communication and Data Specialisation Branch used by MI5 and MI6 for specialist data analysis. Unofficially we went by the catchier Platform Eight and were a covert division tasked solely with missions that left no paper trail and no target alive.

We were Rats.

We scuttled around underground doing the unpalatable work necessary to keep everyone in Britain safe.

We were the Security Services’ dirty little secret.

I ran my hand against the concrete wall as I walked towards my meeting room. The division was a hive of activity. There were people hurrying up and down the corridors. Phones ringing. Shouts from office to office. Around sixty people work out of Platform Eight. Only half were Rats, the rest were Tech Support or working in departments like Surveillance, Special Projects and Research and Development. We may all have different skillsets, differing motivations, but all of us who worked at Eight shared the unfaltering belief that what we were doing was vital

to national – and international – security. Sanctioned assassinations for the greater good. Saving lives by taking lives.

This was our final morning before a full lockdown. Unit leaders were calling in all Rats abroad or undercover.

Platform Eight was on high alert and we needed everyone in our network to be told.

Throughout London buskers were singing their hearts out. Today certain carefully positioned performers were singing songs specially chosen by us. Songs that had a special meaning to our undercover operatives.

In certain spots around town new graffiti would be appearing on key street corners. The homeless begging in specific alleyways would be holding signs in red.

In the days where electronic correspondence was monitored and could no longer be trusted we relied on a wide network of more simple forms of communication.

Everything usually ignored we used to our advantage.

The public – or the Sheep, as we liked to call them – wouldn't notice these tweaks. These little changes. But all our people would know the symbols, the signs, the lyrics.

Run. Watch out. You're compromised. This was what London was screaming to our operatives, to our informants.

We had got to Agent Black in time. The others might not be so lucky. There was a Snake in our midst and no one was safe. Slithering around alongside us, using their inside knowledge to hurt us above ground. None of us would be safe until this traitor was found. Until they were eliminated.

As I walked past an open office door I heard, 'I'm worried. She hasn't liked my latest photo on Instagram and I know she's

been on it this morning as she liked a photo of a dog walking in snow boots.’

It may have sounded like typical office watercooler chit chat but this was important work. Tech Support were using social media to make sure Platform Eight operatives were getting the message all over the world. Key accounts posted photos of sunsets and planes in flight. Status updates like ‘Time for holibobs!’. Inspirational quotes along the vein of ‘Every ending is just a new beginning’. Every post was a call to get out, to get somewhere safe and hide out.

It was a flurry of activity now but soon the corridors would be quiet.

I’d been a Rat for twelve years and this was the first time we’d ever had a full lockdown.

I walked into the meeting room. The rest of my unit were already assembled around the large, grand mahogany dining table, which had been installed there for as long as anyone could remember. It had become so much a part of the fabric of Platform Eight that it was underneath this table we carved the names of all the Rats we’d lost over the years. Within London there are many memorials marking the names of those who had given their lives to serving this country. But for us – those who didn’t officially exist – this was as good as it got. It was our way of honouring our fallen comrades. A small reminder that even if no one else knew, we did.

Stationed in his usual seat at the corner of the dining table was Geraint ‘G-Force’ Callewaert, a small bespectacled IT expert, who was our Lead Tech Support. There was nothing he didn’t know about computers and he always seemed happiest plugged into his laptop, heavy metal on his headphones,



tapping away at defeating yet another sophisticated security system.

Opposite him was Robin Goh, a happy-go-lucky Chinese man with a strong Scottish accent, who was still paying his dues as a Rat-in-training. Recently he had been complaining about how it was time he branched out on his own. Got his own unit. Grew up and left the nest. It was down to Jake and me to decide if we thought he was ready.

Jake had been my partner since I started as a Rat. Our history had been complicated: a veritable mess of sex and slaughter and blurred lines. A certain clarity was reached when I married Will – I took my marriage vows seriously. But there was always a question mark. And then a couple of years ago everything came to a head when Sandy White, our long-time unit leader, betrayed us all. He turned out to be a Snake, a traitor of the highest order, a turncoat, a disloyal fuckwit. On the take from the Russians and hired to tank our latest mission, Sandy had enrolled Nicola Adams, our Tech Support, to help him and together they tried to frame me and then kill me. Jake helped me stop them and it only took nearly dying for me to finally confront what was between us. The lines were now crystal clear. Partner. Colleague. Friend. Godfather to Gigi.

Sandy and Nicola's traitorous actions could have torn our unit apart. But there was no in-fighting or finger-pointing for our combined failing to spot the signs. Their betrayal brought the remaining four of us closer together. We had all been subjected to a series of intense interrogations and prolonged close monitoring. Not to mention the whispers from colleagues we had worked alongside for years looking at us and wondering if we too were dirty. Together we had had the gratification of being

cleared of all wrongdoing and heralded as heroes for crushing a plot that would've given Russia an upper hand in cyberspace and beyond and taken decades to recover from.

Both Jake and I had been offered the vacated role of unit leader. Both of us had turned it down.

The broad six-foot-seven black man with the salt and pepper beard currently standing at the head of the dining table was the one who had said yes to the position. He was, as always, smartly attired in chinos and a shirt with a grandfatherly grey cardigan. The only nod to casual comfort were weathered size sixteen Nike trainers.

Hattie Goodswen had started out as a Rat thirty years ago, before moving into the army to an undisclosed position. I couldn't ever imagine he was the type of agent who would be able to simply melt unobtrusively into the background.

I had asked him about it once and he had shrugged and said how I'd be surprised how easy it was: 'I just wear a hoodie. Or look unwashed and bedraggled. People may spot me out the corner of their eye but they won't dare look at me. It's easy being invisible when no one wants to see you. All witnesses can ever remember is "big and black", all the CCTV ever shows is "big and black".' He brushed his cheek. 'This is a blessing.' Hattie was very dark – dark enough that grainy CCTV could never get a clear impression of his face. 'I was a Rat for ten years and seen walking away from the scene of a crime at least twenty times, but no one ever managed to put together an e-fit. Everyone gets so blinded by all this,' he gestured over his large bulk, 'that they never take the time to notice anything else.' Hattie always spoke softly. I often wondered about him. This misunderstood big man.

He was back at Platform Eight in his first desk job and he was proving to be an excellent Team Leader. He was a large, comforting presence. His voice had a deep, soothing tone – he never raised it. I trusted him, he was a good man and it was easy to get along with him. Although considering what I went through with Sandy, simply having a boss who didn't want me dead made for a happier working environment.

Pixie Nisbett was our other new arrival. A born and bred Londoner, she'd started with us last year as our unit's Tech Support to back up Geraint. As an expert hacker with a background in code-breaking, she was an invaluable addition. She also added a splash of colour to an otherwise grey office environment. Tall with frizzy blonde hair, she was today wearing sequined jeans and a pink jumper, which had 'Hot hot hot' emblazoned across it in red letters. Her large earrings, which jangled every time she moved her head, were fluorescent pineapples.

Pixie seemed incapable of talking to anyone without an endearment. I was pretty sure Hattie shuddered every time she called him 'sweetcheeks'. She seemed to have no internal filter – everything she thought she said aloud. It was both refreshing and worrying – I had to presume outside the office she managed to keep any work-related thoughts to herself or Special Projects would've recommended her dismissal long ago.

I took my seat at the table next to Jake. I noticed a splodge of porridge caked on the right thigh of my jeans. I scrubbed at it with a babywipe from my bag. Since having Gigi I'd never been more grateful for the Platform's relaxed dress code. Once, when Gigi had a bad chest infection and I'd been up with her throughout the night, I turned up at the Platform half-asleep wearing tracksuit bottoms, a stained top and a mum bun. Jake

had asked what the undercover homeless mission I was going out on was.

I didn't bother trying to explain to him there were many different definitions of mum chic.

Hattie cleared his throat as he looked down at us all. If he stretched I was sure he could easily place both hands on the meeting room's peeling ceiling. 'We're about to go on lock-down. There's a Snake in our midst and agents and informants are dying thanks to this traitor. For the first time in Eight's history the Committee have decreed that all active missions need to be shut down.'

The Committee ran the country. A group of unknown individuals who made the decisions. The Prime Minister and Parliament were a front to give the appearance of democratic control. But they were all just puppets acting out the Committee's orders.

'What you don't know is that we will be the only unit still in operation.'

'Oh no, darlin'. Really? I just booked tickets to ComicCon.' This was Pixie.

Hattie pressed a couple of buttons on his laptop and what looked like a website homepage was projected onto the whiteboard. Against a black background was 'The Tenebris Network' written in large red font. Underneath was the tagline, 'Discreet online recruitment services for all your personnel needs'.

'This is our newest threat. Because of them we have seven dead and counting. Whistle have been tasked with locating and eliminating the Snake working for Tenebris before they undertake further damage.'

Whistle was our unit name. Hattie had renamed us this upon his appointment as unit leader. He felt 'clean as a whistle' was a

fitting nod to a unit that had been tarred by our previous unit leader's traitorous actions. It was no surprise the Committee had chosen Whistle to find this latest Snake. After all they'd put us through the Committee could trust us to be clean. And we'd come up against a Snake before and won.

Robin frowned as he read the whiteboard. 'Online recruitment services? So Tenebris is a kind of LinkedIn? Although I don't get how a networking website can get any of us killed?'

'I wouldn't be so sure. Reading through CVs of people showing off about their management skills would bore me to bloody death.' Jake leaned back in his plastic chair and took a large gulp of coffee. He had dark circles under his eyes and was wearing the same shirt as yesterday. What Jake got up to on nights when he didn't get home could vary from acrobatics with one of the many willing doe-eyed, long-limbed twenty-somethings that flocked to his dark, brooding looks, to dabbling in activities that could be violent, illegal, immoral or even all three. One time we'd been called in in the middle of the night for an urgent mission, I'd had to pick him up bloodied, bruised and missing a shirt from some disused railway tracks. Jake needed to push it, he needed to be on the edge. Even being a Rat wasn't always enough. He'd go looking for the trouble he needed to get himself into and out of to feel alive. Today he looked exhausted, but there were no tell-tale specks of blood on shirt cuffs, no wincing as he leaned forward for another hit of caffeine. Maybe last night was just a particularly energetic young ingénue trying hard to convince him she was enough to give up the others.

'Don't be fooled by the bland recruitment talk. "Tenebris" is Latin for "dark" and this is without a doubt a dark force we're

dealing with,' said Hattie. He nodded at Geraint. 'Take us through it, G.'

Geraint tapped a couple of buttons and a screenshot of a website homepage was projected onto the whiteboard. 'The Tenebris Network is a major new threat to the security of not only all our assets and informants but all Security Service agents both here in the UK and abroad. It's an app that's a cross between Tinder and LinkedIn. On one side there are the profiles of Employees – for example, civil servants, agents, analysts, intelligence officers – while on the other are the Employers – foreign intelligence services, crime syndicates, drug kingpins and all manner of bad people. Tenebris confidentially connects Employers to Employees with a simple right swipe.'

A PowerPoint presentation flicked through example pages of the Tenebris website and finished on their Terms of Business. We were all quiet as we took everything in.

Geraint continued, 'Let's use our friend Black as an example. The international drug cartel he had infiltrated posted an ad on the Tenebris Network saying they wanted to know if there were any ongoing investigations into them. The Employees who replied to the ad would've included details on their position, security level clearance and their fee for finding out. The drug cartel would go through the Employee bids and swipe right on the one they wanted. Click. A match is made. The Employee supplies the info. The Employer gives them cash. All done through Tenebris and completely untraceable. I've spent some time on it and both the app and website appear to be impenetrable. They must have exceptional people on staff.' Geraint bowed his head. Admitting defeat was new for him.

‘Black was working on a joint operation with Six. How do we know the Snake isn’t a Rat? We’re relying on the new protocols to presume we’re all clean?’ asked Jake. Since Sandy’s betrayal, additional security protocols had been actioned. They added extra man-hours to all our admin as everything needed cross-unit approval, but we figured it was worth it if it meant limiting the chances of another unit leader going on a traitorous rampage.

‘The drug cartel was matched with King666,’ said Hattie. ‘That username has, to date, bid on four different jobs – all to do with intel related to Six. All four of those operations ended in failure for Six with dead agents and dead informants. It’s why we’re convinced that the Snake is a Pigeon.’

In Eight we called those from Five and Six ‘Pigeons’, as they were dotted all a round London and, in our opinion, would shit over everything. Whenever our paths crossed they seemed to add complications rather than solutions.

Pixie frowned. ‘How did you get the information on King666 if the website is so unhackable?’

‘A few days ago Tenebris approached a Six agent asking if he wanted to sign up as an Employee. He accepted but brought it to his superior. Tenebris gave him a working login for their website. Six was then able to use it to hack into the hidden doors and download information. It was twenty-four hours until Tenebris discovered the breach and disabled the agent’s username. The information Six gained from the hack is how we were able to get to Black in time. It is, however, now back to being completely impenetrable. And Tenebris now know that we’re onto them.’

I thought about everything Hattie was saying. ‘So it’s a head-hunting service for traitors. A recruitment agency for the international criminal underworld.’

Hattie nodded. ‘Tenebris is very much the facilitator in this whole operation. We’ve learned they act as guarantor and bank and take a forty per cent commission fee on every match. Once the deal is agreed they give the Employer and Employee a contact email address to set up a meet on and then bow out. It’s a very clever business plan. The Employee doesn’t dare rip off the Employer as they know Tenebris has all their personal information: name, home address, family members. If they don’t deliver, Tenebris passes it on to the Employer and they’re dead. Their family is dead.’ Hattie rubbed his beard as he spoke. ‘The Employer will always pay as before Tenebris take them on as a client, they are scrupulously vetted and have to hand over their bank details and statements to verify what level of funds they have access to. Tenebris will not put them in touch with the Employee until Tenebris have been paid the full amount. Tenebris then take their commission and pass the rest on to the Employee once the job is completed. Considering the type of information that is being sold on here and the vast database of Employers on there, Tenebris is without a doubt a multi-million-, if not billion-pound company.’

Hattie gripped the back of the chair in front of him. ‘And they’re going to do whatever it takes to protect it. They know we’re looking for them. We need to get to them before they come for us.’

‘Eight are all on leave until the lockdown is over – that means no Surveillance? No R & D?’ asked Jake.

‘And no one manning the canteen so no fry-ups?’ Robin looked more upset at that thought than the actual threat of Tenebris.



Hattie's mouth was set in a fine line. 'Correct. We're on our own on this. Until the Snake has been located and eliminated and the Tenebris Network is out of operation, the Committee are taking no risks.

'I've been speaking to our international counterparts. Tenebris operates across the world. All intelligence agencies are affected. Everyone is concerned. With King666 we have the strongest lead and we have confirmed proof Tenebris is a British-owned outfit. America have been able to offer up some assistance. One of their East Coast operatives is in London at present.'

America had its own branch of underground assassins.

On the East Coast they worked out of Track 101 in Grand Central Terminal in New York. They were a much larger operation than us and as such utilising disused tracks and tunnels under the largest train station in the world was a fitting home for them. We had worked alongside them before and 'Trackers', as they called themselves, were frighteningly efficient. We were the small, independent shop compared to their large micro-managed corporation.

'She will be here any minute.'

She?

Great.

There was only one East Coast 'she' Tracker at present.

She hated me.

But then she hated everyone.

Cameron Clarke had followed a similar career path to me. Recruited out of university and assigned straight into Track 101. The last time we had met it was crushing an international sex-trafficking ring. We had gone in undercover together and wreaked carnage on our would-be captors.

Despite spending a month together in some pretty gruesome circumstances, I still couldn't work out if she was over-compensating for being a woman by being extra ruthless and sadistic or if she was just like that naturally. I had started the mission naively hopeful that working alongside another female assassin meant we would become besties and spend downtime bonding over frappuccinos and how tough it was fitting a gun in our waistband when having a fat day.

'Why the hell do you guys work in such a dump?' asked the tall woman with cropped peroxided blonde hair who'd just stepped into the meeting room.

But she just wasn't a very nice person.

Hattie uncurling himself from his plastic chair and got to his feet. 'Everyone, please meet Cameron.'

Cameron was wearing a black polo neck, leather trousers and was vigorously chewing gum. 'Take it in turns to stand and state your name and job,' she barked.

Robin, Geraint and Pixie obliged. Jake and I remained seated.

Jake waved. 'Jake. Rat. Hello.'

'Lex. Rat. We've met.'

Cameron stared at me. 'You're still here then.' She had a nasal New York accent that grated. Or maybe it was just that I disliked her and everything about her grated. Cameron looked around the meeting room. 'I had no idea it was such a shithole down here. Track 101 just had another full renovation. Upgrades with under-floor heating, Sonos speakers in the canteen, the full works.'

'You let builders down there?' One of the many reasons why Platform Eight functioned on the bare essentials was that everything that needed doing to it we had to do ourselves. No outside contractors.

‘We killed them all,’ she deadpanned. ‘Just joking.’ Not a muscle moved in her face.

I made a mental note to check if there were any reported stories of an American contracting firm losing a vast percentage of their workforce.

Cameron looked at me again and cocked her head. ‘You look different.’

‘She’s a mama now!’ called out Robin. ‘You must be seeing the glow of motherhood.’

‘If by “glow” you mean older, more tired, and more badly dressed, then yes. She’s sooo glowing.’

‘Thanks, Cameron. You’re too kind.’ I tried to recall if there was anything in Cameron’s background that helped explain her being so awful. Something to give her a little humanity. But from what I remembered she’d had a nice upbringing and loving parents. I remembered her file included a photo of a teenage her on a pony. Maybe that’s what it was. She was a testament to how bad it was to spoil your kids.

‘What do you reckon?’ murmured Jake in my ear. ‘We pop her and call it a training accident.’

‘Well, Cameron, you’ve just met all of Whistle. Please take a seat.’ Hattie motioned to the chair next to him.

‘Why do you Brits have to be so twee?’ asked Cameron as she sat down. ‘Whistle? How the hell is that inspiring? Why not have names like ours – Independence, Liberty, Patriot – you know, names that mean something.’

Robin cleared his throat. ‘All our unit names mean something. “Megatron” is because their unit leader Dave is a big Transformers fan. Then there’s “Grinch”, which is another obvious one . . . Well, it would be if you met their unit leader, misery-guts Gavin.

“Jagger” is because Dennis has the “moves like Jagger”.’ Robin paused to chuckle to himself. ‘Whereas “Watermelon” is because Joe thought to do this job you needed balls as big as—’

‘That’s ridiculous. And sexist.’ She looked at me as she popped her gum.

‘Cameron, I think the only thing offensive about boys wanting to name something after their ball-size is having to work with people with such a lame sense of humour.’

Cameron turned to Hattie. ‘So is this really it?’ She gestured towards us all. ‘This is all the personnel you have working on this?’

‘Yes, Cameron, this is our team. And there are two others at Six. You all know Dugdale, I gather? As Department Head he was the one who the Six agent approached with information on Tenebris.’

Harry Dugdale. Duggers. If you had told me back in Oxford that the rugby-playing chin downing yards of ale on the other side of the college bar would end up being one of the only people who knew what my job really entailed, I wouldn’t have believed it.

‘Dugdale and the agent have been running their own off-the-books investigation but have now come to us to help them finish. They’ll be in for a meeting tomorrow. We need to get this resolved fast. The Tenebris Network threatens the very existence of Eight. Of all our Security Services. Tenebris is a terrifyingly efficient way of not only organising but recruiting Snakes. We’re going to be severely incapacitated if we start having to put additional security protocols in place to try and protect our intel from our own employees.’

Tenebris’s Terms of Business were still up on the whiteboard. From a business perspective it was impressive. Tenebris had seen a gap in the market and gone for it. Those working in the

Security Services who wanted to sell information could hardly offer it up on eBay or post an ad. Tenebris legitimised it. Snakes being able to absent-mindedly flick through an unhackable secure app deciding who to sell what to, at what price, took away the severity of what they were doing. There was no hovering in dark alleyways exchanging USB sticks and briefcases of cash. They didn't have to seek out criminals and dangle the carrot of information in front of them. These Snakes didn't even have to deal with the risk of associating with ruthless employers who could choose to kill them rather than pay them. Tenebris's Inappropriate Behaviour clause meant that if the Employee came to undue harm after the information exchange, Tenebris would be paid their share and the Employer would be struck off for future job postings. The Snakes were protected. Christ, they were one step away from having their own union.

## Chapter Two

‘WELCOME, EVERYONE.’ Yvonne clasped her hands together. ‘We are so delighted that you were able to make it here tonight to get a chance to meet each other and see some of the wonderful work your children have been doing.’ She gestured behind her to a wall covered in multicoloured paint splodges and an array of colourful card with pieces of pasta glued onto them in haphazard shapes. ‘Please do mingle and help yourself to refreshments.’

Next to Yvonne was a small table bearing plastic cups of tepid white wine and some wilted sandwiches.

An evening of attempting to make friends with Gigi’s new friends’ parents was the last thing I needed after a stressful day at work trying to come up with a plan to take down a business that was getting colleagues killed and threatening the way all our Security Services operated.

Long ago I had determined to avoid any event that required me to wear a name badge. No fun was ever had anywhere you needed to announce your name to anyone casting a glance at your left breast. Yet here I was, ‘Alexis Tyler, Gigi’s Proud Mum!’ stuck on the lapel of my leather jacket. I looked around the room wishing Will hadn’t got stuck at work. I needed an ally.

I walked over to the table and picked up a plastic cup of warm white wine, took a sip and winced. Right. Now to 'mingle'. Why did that sound about as appealing as 'torture'? The other parents seemed already deep in conversation with one another. I recognised one mother from the morning drop-offs; we had yet to break through the weather small-talk barrier.

I walked around the classroom, cup in hand. At the wall at the back there was a display titled 'My Family', so I looked for Gigi's. There we were. Somewhat creepily, mine, Will and Gigi's heads had been cut out of the family photo I had dutifully supplied one morning and stuck on stick figures made out of penne pasta pieces that were all holding hands.

'Jesus, this is terrifying. Why have we all been impaled by angry pasta?' A man in a suit had joined me and was staring at the wall, grimacing.

I smiled. 'Which happy family are you?'

'Here we are.' The man pointed to the one next to Gigi's. His wife was blonde, and with those jutting cheekbones I doubted her body was much more filled out than the pasta stick figure on which her photo was currently stuck. Her pasta body was holding hands with a round baby head of indeterminate sex and a frowning white-blond-haired girl I recognised from drop-offs.

'Oh right, so you're Florence's dad. Gigi talks about her a lot.' I remembered the anonymous bite victim and made a silent prayer that I wasn't about to be on the receiving end of a lecture on violent pre-schoolers.

'Yes, that's me. Florence's dad. Although my name outside of this Portakabin is Frederick.' He held out a hand. It felt strangely formal considering the setting. I shook it. Was it my imagination or did he hold it just a moment too long?

‘Alexis.’ I motioned to my name badge. ‘But everyone calls me Lex. Nice to meet you.’ I nodded my head towards their family portrait. ‘She has your eyes.’ I really thought it was just something people always said when they didn’t know what to say when admiring a baby or child. But in this case Florence really did have Frederick’s eyes. Piercing blue with a fleck of green. She didn’t share the rest of his features – strong jawline, coiffed dirty-blond hair. And thankfully the delicate little two-year-old did not have his build. He was broad shouldered, and his white shirt seemed to be straining to fit what looked like a very defined torso.

‘The photo doesn’t really look anything like me but I do look just like that under my clothes.’ He motioned towards the penne.

I laughed. ‘Now that’s something I’d like to see.’

‘I . . . Well . . .’ He looked surprised, then smirked.

Shit.

‘I mean . . . that would be funny, if you really were made of pasta. How could you be? I mean, where would the food go? I’d better check where my husband is. Yes, my husband. Right. Bye.’

Abort. Abort. Mission abandoned.

I headed for the door, nodding a few hellos along the way, downed the wine and dropped my plastic cup in the bin on the way out. What the hell was wrong with me? Could I not make it through a standard social evening without imploding? One encounter with a Hot Dad and I was simpering about wanting to see him naked. I was acting like a highly-sexed desperado. It’s not like I was deprived. Or was I? I tried to think of the last time Will and I had sex. It couldn’t have been that long ago. There was that time last week. Or was it last month? I had a vague recollection of Will murmuring a post-coital ‘I think we’ve got time



for one more' and the relief when I realised he meant another episode of *Game of Thrones*.

I just needed some perspective. Yes, I had embarrassed myself in front of a fellow parent at Gigi's nursery by implying I wanted to see him naked. But chances were I wouldn't see him again.

Apart from potentially every drop-off and pick-up.

And then just at any school event.

I thought back to the detailed school calendar we had been sent. There was an upcoming harvest festival, a Halloween party, fireworks night, nativity play, Easter bonnet parade, spring bake sale, summer concert, sports day.

How did a two-year-old have such a packed social schedule? And why couldn't I at least wait until the end of the school year to make a tit of myself?

Why did parenting never get easier?

Will and I had celebrated when we survived the first year: the constant waking in the night, teething, explosive nappies. And just when I felt like I was finally finding my way, a new set of challenges were catapulted at me: fussy eating, tantrumming, potty-training. Now it seemed biting was part of the repertoire too. And if all that wasn't enough, always in the background was the fear that I was screwing this up. Screwing her up.

Will always did what came naturally to him. Didn't over-think things. She worshipped him; whether it was being chased squealing round the house by the Tickle Monster, to weekday afternoons spent in the park, just the two of them, hunting conkers and holding hands. He'd sneak away early from the office, citing a meeting, and I'd come home to find them out there, kicking leaves and eating ice cream, no matter the weather. I'd

ask 'Aren't you worried you'll get in trouble?' and he'd shrug and say, 'Fuck 'em. I missed her.' He adored her and knowing that he was her father, that he therefore knew what was best for her, gave him all the confidence he needed.

But I felt the crushing responsibility of raising a daughter. I found myself poring over parenting articles. Reading the latest studies. Listening attentively when more knowledgeable mothers waxed lyrical about what was expected. I now overthought everything to a terrifying degree. I feared an offhand comment here, a simple observation there, would have the butterfly effect of determining the type of person she was going to become.

It meant any given everyday situation was suddenly a cause for concern.

At playgroup:

'Here you go, sweetheart.' I handed Gigi a doll. *There I was, gender stereotyping again.* 'You can have this too.' I quickly gave her a truck. 'Play with what you want. You can do anything you want.'

'I want doll.'

'OK, that's great. But remember you can have the truck too.'

A visit to my mother:

'Now go and give Granny a kiss.' *There I was, forcing her to be physical with someone against her will.*

A playground altercation:

'He doesn't mean it when he pulls your hair. He's doing it because he likes you.' *Now I was teaching her that it didn't matter if men hurt you as that was how they showed affection.*

A new dress:

'You look so pretty.' *Oh God, I mustn't focus on her looks.* 'I mean, you look so clever.' *I need to show her that intelligence*

*and personality are more important. But how can I celebrate her brains when she's only two and a half and can only scribble and count to seven? Maybe I big up every little achievement. A big HURRAH for zipping up her coat. But then won't that give her an inflated sense of self-worth? Will I be giving her a big ego and she will expect praise every time she wipes her own bum? Actually, I really would give her praise for that – when does that start?*

Doing up her Velcro trainers:

*'Let me do that.' I was teaching her not to be self-reliant. 'I mean, keep on trying, you're doing a great job.' She needs to learn how to solve her own problems. That perseverance is eventually rewarded with success. Even if it does take her twenty minutes to fasten up a Velcro strip . . . Even if it takes all day . . . Oh fuck it, we're late. 'Come on, I've done it, let's go.'*

Going to have her hair cut:

*'No, darling, we aren't going to keep the fringe – Daddy doesn't like it.' A man's opinion on your appearance is more important than your own. 'I mean, Mummy and Daddy don't like it.' We are in charge and we determine how you will look. 'I mean, you don't like it.' I am telling you your own opinion. 'You know what? Keep the fringe if you like it.' You're the boss and I have no control over you.*

This nagging internal monologue could take over any interaction.

Even telling her I loved her:

*'I love you, Gigi.' She carried on playing with her doll. I nudged her. 'I said I love you.'*

*'Love you, Mama.' I was forcing her to declare love. Teaching her that to be loved you have to love. There was no unconditional love.*

It was an absolute minefield. The demands, the worry, the all-encompassing need to keep her safe, the endless pressure to raise her right. To do the best job to give her the best start. The weight of expectation was exhausting. No wonder there were days when Rat felt more natural to me than Mother.

It was less pressure when the only life on the line was yours.