

Shadow of Doubt

By SL Beaumont

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Part I

Chapter 1

July 10

“For God’s sake, get one of the others to do it,” I said, exasperated, as I looked up from my computer at my boss who was leaning on the wall of my cubicle.

“No. It’s your turn,” Andrew replied turning away, signaling an end to the conversation.

I sighed and stood up, stretching my back. Three hours straight sitting at a desk wasn’t good. I had been hoping to squeeze in a trip to the gym after work to loosen everything up, but it looked like my evening was going in entirely another direction.

Hesitating only for a moment, I followed Andrew down the row to his cubicle, not willing to give in quite so easily. Andrew was a heavysset man in his mid-thirties. His thinning hair was cropped close to his head, but did nothing to detract from his good looks. He oozed charm and ruled his team of accountants and analysts in the derivatives division of the investment bank, Dobson Stone, with a mixture of fear and admiration. To be on Andrew’s good side was like being bathed in the warmth of sunshine, but do wrong by him and it felt like being exposed to the iciest of winters. Fortunately, I had only ever felt the heat of summer, which gave me the opportunity to push the boundaries. And now was when I needed one of those opportunities.

“Come on, Andrew. You know that you’re going to employ him anyway.” I flashed my most winning smile at him. “Let’s just skip this bit.”

‘This bit’ was the tradition in the team of finally vetting any new recruit by taking them out to a local watering hole and doing a ‘social’ interview. The derivatives team was a close knit, play hard, work hard group and Andrew was a big fan of team players. Ever since the disastrous recruitment of an accountant named Peter, who had been hired without the social interview, Andrew had deemed it mandatory. Peter had passed all of the other interview stages with flying colors, but once he joined the team his lack of humor, aversion to socializing with his colleagues and propensity to back stab had caused major problems.

“Need to make sure he’s not another Peter, Jess. And besides, William seems like the kind of guy who will appreciate a pretty face.” Andrew grinned, knowing full well that the latter comment would annoy me and distract me from my argument.

Putting my hands on my hips, I scowled at him and practically hissed, “I can’t believe you just said that. I will report you to the Diversity Committee. Maybe select me for my knowledge of the business or my social charm, but because of my looks? Give me a break.”

Andrew threw back his head and roared with laughter. He had one of those loud laughs which made people stop what they were doing and look in his direction, in case they were missing something really good. Jimmy looked up from the next cubicle, catching the end of my rant. He and fellow Antipodean Dave were always quick with a quip and up for anything. They were usually behind the many practical jokes that went on at the office and they never, ever, missed an opportunity to wind someone up.

“Watch out, Scotty is about to blow,” Jimmy called out to anyone in the team who was listening. Jimmy had an open, friendly face. At the tender age of twenty-four, he already had smile lines surrounding his mischievous eyes. He had the physique of the champion fighters in his family, but not the temperament. Andrew and I both

glared at him. Still grinning, he held his hands up as if to protect himself and sat down again.

“Machiavelli’s Wine Bar, seven pm,” Andrew instructed and turned to pick up his ringing phone. I was dismissed with a wave of his hand.

I returned to my cubicle muttering about the appropriateness of the venue, and picked up my mobile to call my husband Colin. He answered on the second ring.

“Make it quick, Jess. I’m having a crazy day.”

“I have to work late, a recruitment interview in a pub of all things,” I said.

“Which one?”

“Machiavelli’s.”

“Okay. Good. Gotta go.” He was gone. I wasn’t even sure that he had heard me.

Jimmy and Dave stopped by my desk as I was shutting down my computer at the end of the day. Dave was the opposite of Jimmy physically, short and slight with a mop of messy blond hair, but he shared his friend’s sense of fun.

“Where are you meeting him?” Dave asked, picking up my stapler and twirling it around.

“At Machiavelli’s up by St. Paul’s,” I replied, taking the stapler from his hands and replacing it on the desk, only to have him pick up my hole punch instead. “I will know which kleptomaniac to come after if I come in tomorrow and there are stationery items missing,” I warned him with a grin.

Dave simply laughed, putting the hole punch back in its place, and swiped my favorite pen instead. I shook my head at him. He was incorrigible.

“We’ll be at The Tower if you wanna meet after,” Jimmy said, naming the pub closest to the office as we walked towards the bank of lifts to take us down to the lobby entrance of the building.

“Okay, see you there in fifteen minutes,” I said, only half joking. Seriously, I was going to get this over and done with as quickly as possible.

The rain had stopped and the early evening sun bathed the city in a soft glow. The old fashioned wrought iron streetlamps that lined the road towards St. Paul’s Cathedral hadn’t yet turned on. Machiavelli’s was on a corner and had floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows wrapping around both street views. It was already busy for a Wednesday night, with groups of men and women dressed in business attire gathered around tables chatting and laughing.

I stepped off the street and entered through the open doors. The bar itself was brightly lit with strings of tiny lights draped from one corner of the room to the other and back again forming a crisscross pattern across the entire ceiling. The heels of my shoes beat out a loud rap on the polished wooden floor, as I walked towards the bar, my eyes scanning the room. Andrew had said that William Johnston was tall and dark-haired. “You should have made him wear a rose,” I had suggested to Andrew as I was leaving the office, which had only earned me a glare; at this rate summer would be turning into autumn.

Ah, that had to be him, leaning against the bar, fiddling with his mobile phone. He was tall, as Andrew had described, with thick dark hair, which curled over his collar and hung across his forehead. He was well dressed in a dark blue suit. As if aware of my scrutiny, he straightened up and looked towards me with a questioning

tilt of his head. Over-confident, I thought, deciding in that instant that I disliked him. I stopped in front of him.

“William?” I asked, returning his cool questioning gaze.

“You must be Jessica.” His accent was English, well-educated. I shook his hand. “Call me Will. Can I get you a drink?”

“I think it’s me that’s supposed to offer that. What can I get you?” I asked.

“A Becks then, please, Jessica,” he replied leaning back against the bar and studying me.

I signaled to the nearest barman. “A bottle of Becks and a skinny gin and tonic please.”

We found a couple of empty armchairs in one corner and Will turned on the charm. First, he helped me take my raincoat off and laid it over the back of my chair, then he waited until I had sat down before taking a seat himself. Old manners, unusual in the politically correct equal opportunity business world, but still, I refused to be charmed. I wasn’t here to make friends. Will adjusted the cuffs of his pale blue double-cuff shirt beneath his suit jacket. His cufflinks were gold dice; I noted the satirical choice for a career in investment banking, where so much was speculative.

“So, what’s this then? Get me drunk and see if I will spill all my deep, dark secrets?” He smiled.

“Actually, it would save me a lot of time and money, if we can skip the drunken bit and you just tell me your secrets,” I replied.

Will leaned forward and looked up at me with a glint in his blue eyes. “So, Jessica, what exactly *would* you like to know?”

I spluttered on my drink. Holy crap, this guy was super confident. Flirting with the interviewer didn’t usually get you a job.

I sat back in my chair and tried to adopt a neutral expression and ignore the fact that he had my attention. “Well, why don’t you tell me a bit about yourself?”

“Okay, I grew up in Sussex. Obtained my Maths degree from UCL and Chartered Accountancy with EY,” he answered. “But I’m sure you know all that.”

I had expected him to wax lyrical about himself, given that I had left him with such an open-ended question. The fact that he didn’t, showed he was clever. There was more to him than just the charm. I finished my drink as we chatted a little about the work he had done and who we both knew at EY.

“Anyway, enough about me. How did a nice Scottish girl like you end up working in the cut-throat world of investment banking?” Will asked.

Okay, so maybe I was wrong. There was that awful charm again.

“Who said anything about me being nice?” I growled.

Will, to his credit, laughed and raised his empty bottle. “Next round is definitely on me,” he said.

I looked at my watch and acquiesced. It would be rude to end the interview after just twenty minutes, even if I did consider it a farce. “Okay, but just one. I have to get going.”

Will nodded and made his way to the bar. I watched him go. He had broad shoulders and carried himself in a way that spoke of someone at ease in their own skin. He stopped and shook hands with a guy standing at a tall table and leaned over, kissing the cheek of the woman with him. As much as I hated to admit it, he would be a good fit in the team. Easy to get on with and charming enough to deal with the odd difficult trader. I didn’t have to like him. Hell, I didn’t really have to even work with him. My job here was done.

“So. What else are you supposed to glean from me tonight?” he asked with a grin as he placed my drink on the little table between our chairs.

I sat twisting my wedding and engagement rings around on my finger. “Nothing, I think I’m done. I guess you’ll be hearing from Andrew tomorrow. Do you have any questions for me?”

Will tilted his head, a little smile playing around his lips. “Just one.”

“Sure, fire away.”

“Will you have dinner with me?” he asked.

I wasn’t expecting that. “No,” I replied, trying not to sound prim. “You do realize that I am married?”

Will nodded and shrugged his shoulders. “Just thought I’d ask,” he replied.

I arrived at The Tower around eight pm. The doors of the old pub were wide open and Jimmy and Dave were holding court out front, surrounded by a group of people. From the peals of laughter coming from their audience, it sounded like they were trying to outdo each other with the funniest anecdotes; nothing new there. Jimmy caught my eye as I walked closer and broke away from the group to greet me.

“Hey, Jess, how did it go? William? Verdict?” he asked.

“He has the charm of a prince and the morals of an alley cat. He will be a perfect fit,” I answered.

Jimmy looked stunned for a moment, before a grin spread across his face.

“Did he try to hit on you?”

I must have looked uncomfortable because he slipped a friendly arm around my shoulders and turned me towards the doors leading into the bar.

“Didn’t you tell him about the strapping Scotsman that you have tucked away at home?”

I laughed. “No, it wasn’t like that.”

Jimmy signaled to the barman. “My friend here needs a G and T pronto.”

The barman obliged, upending a blue bottle into a measuring cup just as a loud boom sounded and the pub shook. The cup slipped from the barman’s fingers with a clatter. Bottles in the refrigerators behind the counter and those on the shelf against the wall behind the bar rattled. Empty glasses tipped over on an adjacent table and several bottles of spirits skidded off the end of the bar, splintering into shards as they hit the wooden floor. Clear liquid ran across the boards following the slope of the floor towards the door. With a shriek, I grabbed on to the edge of the bar for support.

There was an eerie silence for a moment as everyone looked at each other with a mixture of confusion and concern.

“What the hell was that?” Jimmy said. “An earthquake?”

“Jim,” Dave shouted from outside.

Jimmy and I looked at each other for a second before rushing through the door to join Dave.

“Look.” He pointed up the road to where an enormous cloud of smoke and dust rose into the dusky sky. The screech of brakes sounded as traffic pulled to an abrupt stop on the busy road. Then loud splintering crashes could be heard as brick, timber and metal returned to earth and the awful sound of human suffering rose above the din.

We started running up the road in the direction of the blast. Jimmy and Dave, not hampered by shoes with three inch heels, raced ahead of me, covering the two blocks in no time. By the time I joined them, the first survivors were staggering from what remained of the Kings Arms Hotel, covered in white powder from fractured concrete and plaster.

“What the—” began Dave.

We stood frozen to the spot and watched as two figures stepped from the rubble into the road, leaning on one another to stay upright. Both had blood running down their faces from cuts to their heads. Behind them a woman took a few lurching steps before collapsing beside a broken wooden bar stool with a feeble cry for help. A dazed man stepped over her, crossed the road and kept walking, his gaze unfocused. Two young women stumbled out of the wreckage, clinging to one another, their clothes torn and dusty, each missing a high-heeled shoe, so that they appeared to be engaged in an elaborate twisting dance routine. A man pushed past them calling for help, blood squirting from beneath the hand he pressed into his shoulder where his arm would once have been. Another man remained seated at an outdoor table, his hand still wrapped around a half-full pint of beer. On his lap sat one of the pub’s many colorful hanging baskets, the reds, blues and greens of the flowers and foliage in stark contrast to the chalky white powder which covered the man’s hair and clothes. What remained of his drinking companions lay scattered around him, like a macabre human jigsaw. The man stared into space with a blank expression.

“Oh my God,” I said, covering my mouth with my hand as I took in the horrific scene, struggling to comprehend the wreckage.

All around us people began rising from where they had taken cover moments earlier. There were desperate shouts as some hurried towards the wounded, whilst others held back, unsure what to do faced with such devastation. As I looked around, I noticed some people begin filming the carnage on their mobile phones.

Dave rushed forward and took the arm of one of the young women, while Jimmy went to the aid of her friend and helped them to sit down on the edge of the curb. They were shaking uncontrollably, so I took my raincoat off and draped it around the shoulders of the one nearest to me.

The wail of sirens from emergency responders racing to the scene began to get louder as they approached from all directions. A single police car pulled to a stop beside us and two young police officers alighted, donning their hats as they stepped out. Their faces displayed horrified expressions as they surveyed the chaos, but these were soon replaced by grim determination as they strode forward and took charge. One officer directed those of us helping the injured to lead them to an open outdoor square across the road from the scene, whilst the second officer tried to contain the spectators.

“Help is on the way,” he called. “We need to make certain that there isn’t a second device or a gas leak before going in.” Jimmy, who’d been climbing into the rubble to assist the injured, now stepped back and looked around with a helpless expression. “I know,” the officer said understanding his reaction. “But until we know what we are dealing with we don’t want any further casualties.”

“It was a car bomb,” a man in the growing crowd called out, pointing to the almost unrecognizable mangled remains of a vehicle lying on its side up against the broken windows of a neighboring building, which until a few minutes earlier had been a lunch-time sandwich bar. “I saw it light up seconds before the explosion.”

“Okay, sir. Don’t go anywhere. We’ll need a statement from you,” the officer replied before relaying the information through to headquarters on his shoulder-mounted radio.

“Jessica.” I turned towards the voice. Will jogged across the road to join me. “Are you okay?”

“These poor people, they were just having a drink like we were earlier,” I said, wringing my hands and watching as a team of fireman leapt from their truck, unwinding a hose to deal with a small blaze that smoldered at the rear of the site.

Will nodded. “I know.”

I looked up at him. His brow was furrowed and he looked as distraught as I felt.

“Who would do such a thing? In the heart of London?” I asked.

Jimmy and Dave returned from helping the two young women to an ambulance that had just arrived. Dave handed me back my raincoat.

“Will, this is Jimmy and Dave, two of your new colleagues,” I said.

“G’day, mate,” Jimmy said as he hurried past us and back towards the remains of the pub. “Can you give us a hand with this guy?” he called over his shoulder.

“Sure,” Will replied, following him and taking the other side of a solidly built injured man who had staggered from the pub. Between them, Jimmy and Will helped him across the road to the square where more ambulances and paramedics were beginning to arrive.

The smell of smoke and rotten wood intermingled with something sweet and sickly hit me as I helped an older woman away from the debris to relative safety. I wrinkled my nose and looked skywards; sunset was upon us. I noticed a police van arrive and several officers begin setting up spotlights on tripods pointed at what remained of the pub.

We were busy for the next twenty minutes, helping the walking wounded from the ruins across the road to the square to be triaged and assisting the small handful of police officers to set up barriers until more of their colleagues arrived. At one point I found myself moving odd shoes, bags, documents and other personal objects thrown by the blast into the street, to an area at the edge of the square. The bomb squad arrived and we were all moved back from the site. We were beginning to feel surplus to requirements when a police officer approached us.

“Anyone else is going to need either a stretcher or a body bag,” he said with a grim expression. “Thanks for your assistance, but I’ll need you back behind the barrier now. Leave your details with the officer over there as we’ll need statements from you all.”

We nodded and walked across to the officer holding a tablet, at the edge of police cordon, and gave our names and contact details. I looked down at my white shirt; it had a blood stain on the sleeve and black marks across the front. I went to pull my raincoat on but noticed that it had drops of blood across the shoulders. I shuddered. I looked at my hands, they were blackened too. I hiccupped, the beginnings of a sob.

“Come on,” Jimmy said, taking my arm. “Let’s head back to The Tower, I need a stiff drink after that. Will, mate, join us?”

As we ducked under the hastily erected police cordon, a block back from the scene we noticed Aditi Sharma, the petite dark-haired BBC reporter, standing alongside the

crews of a several other television networks, awaiting the signal from her cameraman as he counted her in. We paused to listen.

“I’m reporting live from the scene of a devastating terrorist attack in the heart of London tonight.” Aditi paused and looked behind her at the remains of the pub, a smoldering pile of brick and plaster, dotted with a number of white sheets, covering the bodies of the dead. “Eye witnesses tell me that a car bomb exploded outside the Kings Arms Hotel on Cheapside at 8.05 pm tonight. No one has yet claimed responsibility for the attack at one of the City’s popular after work venues. There is currently no official death toll, but I understand that there are already eighteen confirmed dead and many more injured.”

Aditi pressed her right hand to the earpiece in her ear as the news anchor in the studio asked her a question. A moment later she nodded.

“Another incidence of home grown terror? We’re hearing those rumors here too. This is the third attack since the outcome of the Brexit referendum, but as yet there’s been no official comment. Witnesses describe the two men who parked the van containing the bomb and walked away ten minutes before the explosion, as white and in their twenties. We understand that police teams are pulling the street CCTV footage as we speak.”

She paused, listening before continuing. “At this point no one has claimed responsibility, so we have no idea as to the motive behind the attack, but there is some speculation that this incident may be related to the recent Trafalgar Square and Windsor bombings. However, it does seem that this was a much larger device, so authorities will be desperately hoping that this isn’t an escalation of violence.”

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