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Gagged & Bound

Natasha Cooper

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Greater damage does there none
Than the body turned to self-destruction.

Anon

Prologue

10 February

He was writing his first big set-piece speech when the phone call came. All around him were signs of what he'd achieved. Even the memo pads presented by a paper manufacturer proclaimed that their contents would be 'From the office of Lord Tick of Southsea'. In the cupboard in his bedroom were his robes, scarlet and ermine, well shrouded against damage in a mothproof plastic bag and beautifully pressed. He'd been told by one of the last hereditary peers in the house that there was nothing worse than crumpled robes.

Not bad for little Simon Tick from Railway Cottages, who failed his eleven-plus and was no good to anyone. Sometimes that bare-kneed boy would seem so real that Simon could taste his greasy food and feel the cold all around him. At others, he was stranger than the most outlandish tribesman of the Ice Age.

Tonight was a good time. The work he was doing mattered, so it was no more than a handy extra that the speech would raise his profile even higher. He'd served his apprenticeship in the House of Lords over the last year, keeping his mouth shut except when he had something useful to say, and now he was to become the government's spokesman on housing and homelessness. In a couple of months' time, after the official announcement, he would open the debate on the new bill coming up from the Commons. That would get him on *Newsnight* again.

The phone began to ring. Still wrestling with the joke he was trying to compose to wake up their more somnolent lordships on the opposition benches, he decided to leave it.

'Mustn't be too available,' he muttered.

The ringing stopped. Over the speaker, he heard his own message first: 'You have reached the office of Lord Tick of Southsea. Please leave a message. Someone will get back to you as soon as possible.'

It sounded as though he had troops of staff, which of course he didn't. But it was pretty convincing.

Running beeps, followed by a single longer one. Any minute now. Who would it be? The prime minister's office? The BBC? *The Times*, wanting to do a profile?

'Daddy? Daddy? Are you there? It's me.' His daughter's voice was wobbling, as though she was on the edge of tears. He grabbed the phone.

'Camilla? Sweetheart, what's the matter?'

'Daddy, can I come and see you?'

'Of course. Where are you?'

'About two streets away. In a cab.'

'I'll meet you on the doorstep.' He wondered how far she'd come and grabbed two twenty-pound notes from his wallet, before racing downstairs. His mind was throwing up pictures of her with bruises all over her body. Worse. Car crash? New boyfriend turned violent?

He grabbed her shoulders as she emerged from the taxi and peered into her face in the yellow light of the street lamp. It was as radiantly beautiful as ever. And unmarked, thank God. She hugged him.

With one hand holding the back of her head, he peered past the cabbie towards the meter, then handed over one of the twenties.

'Keep the change.'

'Cheers, mate,' said the cabbie.

Simon waited until he'd driven off, then used both hands to lift his daughter's head gently away from his shoulder. She smiled, which helped, but there were dark shadows in her eyes.

'You scared me with that dramatic phone call, sweetheart. But you don't look too bad. Come on up, have a drink and tell me all about it.'

She swallowed and nodded. Upstairs, he settled her in the chair by the window. In daylight it gave the best view over St James's Park a man could want. The flat wasn't at all distinguished, part of a 1960s high-rise block in the least beautiful street in Westminster, but he'd picked it after the divorce because of the view. Looking one way, he could just make out the Buckingham Palace flagpole; the other, and the pointed fantasy roofs of Whitehall were in his sights. Dead ahead were the trees: bare now, but still beautiful whenever there was a morning frost.

Knowing Camilla's tastes, he poured her favourite mixture of vodka, grapefruit and cranberry juice.

'Get that down your neck,' he said tenderly, 'then talk. What is it? Love life? Work?'

'No.' She'd only wet her lips with the cocktail before she put the dewy glass down. 'Daddy, it's awful. I know it must be the most frightful mistake. Some kind of ghastly coincidence. But we've got to do something.'

He had to laugh. 'Camilla, come on. What's with all the doomy adjectives? Hmm?'

She licked her lips. Her grey eyes looked huge. 'Did you ever hear of a man called Jeremy Marton?'

He could feel his whole forehead tightening, as though someone had his head in a vice. He looked at his perfect daughter and hoped he hadn't lost her. Feeling as though he was walking along the very edge of a cliff, he made his voice as calm as possible.

'Camilla, tell me you haven't got involved in drugs.'

'What?' The shadows in her eyes were replaced by impatience. 'Don't make jokes, Daddy. This is too important.'

'Sweetheart, the only Jeremy Marton I've ever heard of was a drug dealer. He was all over the news a couple of years ago, just about the time I got my peerage, which is probably why I remember. Didn't you see the stuff? He killed himself before the police could arrest him.'

Tears spurted out of her eyes. 'Thank God.'

'I can't take this much longer,' he said. 'Put me out of my misery and tell me why you're worried about him.'

She sniffed with a horribly liquid sound, so he handed her the handkerchief from his breast pocket. No one would think to look at her that she was twenty-six and fighting to make her way into the cut-throat world of film directing. As she blew her nose, she smiled damply up at him over the white linen.

'It was just such a shock, you see.'

'What was? Drink up and tell me.'

'OK. But you'll be cross. It wasn't that I believed it. I promise. It's just that my boss put the book in front of me and said, "Your father'll have to do something about this. At the very least get some kind of gagging order."'

'Your boss?' he said, picking the one comprehensible bit out of the fountain of words. 'Dan Stamford?'

'Yes.' She dug into her sacklike leather bag and pulled out a small hardback with a forest of yellow Post-its poking out. There was no jacket on the book, so as he took it from her he turned it sideways to read the title on the spine.

'*Terrorist or Victim?*' he said. 'Never heard of it.'

'It's about this man Jeremy Marton, but there's a character in it who was part of a bomb plot in the early 1970s. He's called Baiborn. Daddy—'

Holding the book between his hands, he said the first thing that came into his head: 'How does Dan Stamford know my nickname? It's supposed to be only a family thing.'

Camilla blushed. He'd never seen anything like it. 'I took him to stay with Uncle Perry one weekend.'

'To impress him with your importance and the ancestral acres and make him promote you?' he said, already hating Dan Stamford. 'Or because you're in love with him?'

'I don't know yet. And it's not important anyway. But almost the first thing Uncle Perry said was, "How's Baiborn?". Don't look like that, Daddy. Uncle Perry likes you. He wanted to be sure you were OK,' she said, sitting forwards with her hands clasped between her knees.

He didn't believe her. The last thing his erstwhile brother-in-law had ever felt was affection for the man they'd all called 'Jemima's unsuitable husband'. It was a matter of some satisfaction that Peregrine had gone in the first cull of hereditary peers.

'And afterwards Dan said, "Who the hell's Baiborn?" so I told him the whole story. Then, later, he found the name in that book.'

'What was he doing reading something like this?' He waggled the book and one of the Post-its fell off. 'I'd have thought prize-winning literary stuff was more his bag.'

'We're working on a film about urban terrorism, so he's been trying to get his hands on everything that's been published about it in the last decade or so,' she said, sounding impatient as she bent to pick up the fallen yellow square. 'But that doesn't matter. *Look* at it, Daddy.'

He flipped the book open, riffling through the marked pages. Sentences leaped out at him.

Baiborn says it's not enough to care.
Baiborn says his people can provide a bomb big enough to make everyone notice.
Baiborn says he can have my parents killed.
Baiborn. Baiborn. Baiborn.

'What is this rubbish?' he said, looking up to see a much better smile on her quivering lips.

'Thank God. I mean, I knew it wasn't anything to do with you. Couldn't be. But Dan . . .' She got a grip on herself. 'Dan says you have to challenge it. Otherwise people will start to whisper, then the press will pick it up and we'll all suffer. And, Daddy, I know going to law is hellishly expensive, so . . . Please don't be cross with me. I talked to Uncle Perry. He agrees you've got to sue. And he says he'll underwrite it. It won't be a risk for you. Don't look like that, Daddy. It's only because he cares about you. It's not patronising. Please don't be cross. We'll all help.'

He let the book fall on the carpet and got out of his chair to take her head between his hands again, turning it up so he could dry her eyes for her.

'Camilla, you are the sweetest, most generous daughter a man could have. You mustn't worry so much. Or let that vivid imagination of yours run away with you. This is a bad dream, sweetheart. No more than that. I'll deal with it. And I don't need Perry's millions to protect myself. I can do that much on my own.'

Chapter 1

Monday 12 March

Trish's concentration slipped, as though one tooth of a cog had snapped off and let the wheel clunk past its stop. She was back in London after winning a two-week case in the Cayman Islands, and her usual pallor had turned faintly gold in the Caribbean sun.

The words on the page in front of her blended into a grey fuzz as her vision blurred. Once she would have been ashamed of the lapse. Now she gave herself permission to enjoy the moment and looked up to watch the shifting patterns of light and shade on the wall opposite her desk.

Last night's storm had died down, but there was still enough wind to agitate the trees outside in the Temple. It was their thrashing branches that broke the sunlight into these lemon-yellow lozenges, and sent them flickering across the walls of 1 Plough Court, the chambers of Antony Shelley, QC.

It was a good set, consisting of eight other Queen's Counsel and twenty-five junior barristers, a handful of pupils and three clerks. They specialised in company and commercial law, fraud, judicial review and family cases. Few straightforward criminal briefs came their way these days, although there were still one or two generalists in chambers to field those that did. Trish had arrived as an anxious but determined pupil seventeen years ago, and she'd never left. Now she was one of

the most senior juniors, with a rising reputation and an income to match.

Opposite her desk Nessa Fortway, her own pupil, was working diligently, inky fingers stuffed through her short fringe and full lower lip caught between her teeth. She'd been with Trish only three months, but already she was useful: hard-working, intelligent and apparently unfazed by any of the egos that competed so noisily around them at the English Bar.

She'll make a good lawyer, Trish thought, and a useful member of chambers if she's as good on her feet in court as she is at preparation and paperwork.

The only trouble was that her potential had not yet been recognised by some of the other barristers who would vote on her future at the end of the year. Looking back on her own struggle for acceptance, Trish couldn't decide whether to advise Nessa to leaven her most forthright opinions with a little humour and wash the ink from her fingers a bit more often, or whether to let her work it out for herself.

Without raising her eyes, Nessa fixed a purple Post-it to the side of the document in front of her and made a note. Her pen scraping against the paper added to the soft tapping of branch against branch and the birdsong that came clearly through the open windows. Trish was too much of a townie to know what kind of bird was trilling, but she liked the mixture of noises.

The sight of Nessa's industry should have made her get back to her own papers, but she was so filled with content that she couldn't. Here she was, working in one of the most beautiful areas of old London, with relatively clean air to breathe and knotty intellectual problems to solve, paid a small fortune, surrounded by interesting and articulate people, able to walk to and from home in little more than twenty minutes. If she hadn't had such a vivid memory of other times and other lives, she might have felt a little smug.

For the past seven years she had shared her life, though not her

flat, with George Henton, a powerful solicitor, whose ability to shed his power and his work once he left the office was increasing every month. Then there was David, her half-brother, who had come crashing into her life two years ago, after his mother was murdered. Twelve next birthday, he was revealing himself to be both like Trish and fascinatingly individual.

They had come through a lot together. There was still a long way to go, of course, before he would be able to . . .

'You OK?' Nessa's voice made the cogs in Trish's mind slip again.

She let her eyes focus on Nessa's chunky face and smiled. 'Yes. Why?'

'You looked a bit blah, and you were muttering.'

'Distracting myself with random thoughts. I do sometimes. Don't worry about it.'

'OK. Shall I get some coffee? It's just after eleven.'

'That would be great. Thanks. A large latte, please.' Trish bent to fish some money out of her bag. That was a sign of relaxation, too. In the old days she'd always drunk her coffee strong and black.

The door crashed open, revealing Antony Shelley himself, panting and madly beckoning.

'I need you, Trish. *Now*. Come on.'

'What's up?' she said, pushing back her chair. 'You look as if you were running away from a hostage-taking gunman or an avalanche or something.'

He glanced at Nessa, who took the hint and left for the nearest coffee shop.

'I've got a woman in my room,' he said, 'who's just burst into tears. Beatrice Bowman, of all people. I can't deal with it. I'll wait here till you've mopped her up. Go on. Don't waste time.'

'*Who?*'

'Come on, Trish. You're not a philistine. She's that biographer: my age; works on the boundary between scholar-

ship and commercial success; specialises in nineteenth-century literary figures. You must have heard of her.'

'Only dimly.'

'That'll do. She's not a client; just a friend in need of TLC. Go and apply some for me, will you? You're much better at that kind of thing than I am.'

That was true. Tender loving care was usually well outside his range: he could terrorise almost anyone, even when he didn't mean to.

'I'll love you for ever if you sort her out for me.'

Trish laughed, then had to straighten her face before she reached his large, book-lined room, where the distressed biographer was waiting.

'Ms Bowman?' she said, pushing open the door.

A tall woman dressed in dark-grey trousers and a loose terracotta-coloured jacket, with magnificently shiny grey hair, was standing at the window, staring out. She tightened her shoulders, then coughed and turned. Trish had an impression of dramatic cheekbones and big grey eyes before she was distracted by the redness of Beatrice's nose and the dampness of her lashes. They seemed all wrong for so dignified a woman.

'Hello. My name's Trish Maguire. Antony thought I might be useful. Is there anything I can get you? Would you like coffee, or mineral water or something?'

'No, thanks.' A faint smile firmed up Beatrice's trembling lips. 'Antony managed to point out his stock of water and tumblers before he fled. I've had some. I'm sorry you've been dragged in. I only needed a minute to get myself together. Is he all right?'

'He'll survive. It's good for him to be in a situation he can't control occasionally. He asked me to do whatever I can to help. Let's sit down.' Trish gestured towards the two-seater sofa that stood against the far wall. 'Or would you rather be left alone for a bit longer?'

Beatrice shook her head, making the grey hair swing like pleated silk. 'I came to talk. So I'd better do it. Good practice. I can't howl like a baby every time I try to explain. What if it happened in the witness box?'

'What's the case?' Trish asked, leaning against the striped cushions, ready to offer whatever advice or consolation was needed.

Beatrice tilted her head back, as though to search for dust in the corners of the ceiling. When she was sure the latest tears weren't going to leak out, she looked at Trish again.

'Libel. Antony doesn't think it'll ever come to court. He says if I do nothing, the claim will probably go to sleep. He thinks I should just wait and see. But how could I, never knowing whether I'm going to be free or not?'

'He's got pretty good judgement,' Trish said, 'but defamation isn't really his field.'

'I know. He was colourfully frank about that on the phone.' Beatrice managed a small laugh, which teetered on the edge of another sob. 'But he offered to help me get my story straight before I present it to my publishers. They're being sued too, you see, and they've summoned me to explain myself. I'm due there in about an hour. I only hope I won't go and cry again.' She blew her nose hard. 'It would be too embarrassing for words.'

'Why libel?' Trish asked, settling for the easiest of all the questions that were buzzing through her brain. 'I thought you wrote about the nineteenth century. Defamation may not be my speciality either, but I do know you can't libel the dead.'

Beatrice rubbed her forehead as though it ached, but there were no more tears.

'Except that this isn't anything to do with my real work. Last year, I wrote a one-off memoir of Jeremy Marton. He was more or less my age, so everyone else in the book is still alive. Unfortunately.'

'Marton?' Trish repeated, trying to work out whether she'd ever heard the name.

'He ran a refuge for the homeless in Soho. A couple of years ago the police discovered it was being used as a centre for drug-dealing, quite unbeknown to him. That didn't stop them accusing him of being involved, though, and he killed himself. There was a lot in the papers at the time.'

'Then I must have read about it.' Trish frowned for a moment, then pinned down the memory. 'It's coming back to me. There was more than just drugs, though, wasn't there? Hadn't there been some wickedness in his past? Murder or something?'

'That's what the press made out. But it *wasn't* murder. He never meant anyone to die.' The indignation that bristled in Beatrice's voice made her seem a lot tougher. More likeable too. 'It was an accident.'

'Why not tell me what really happened?' Trish said, sitting more comfortably on the sofa and happy to encourage the sense of outrage. If anything could help Beatrice put her case to her publishers convincingly it would be that.

'He got involved with a group of violent student activists while he was at university in the early 1970s,' she said. 'They persuaded him to plant a bomb. It was only supposed to make a bang and damage a symbolic bit of property. Unfortunately it went off just as a busload of schoolchildren were driven past.'

'And they were killed?'

'Twenty of them.' Beatrice swallowed, but her eyes were still dry. 'Along with the driver and two teachers. The other eight children were seriously injured. They're in their late thirties now: some still can't walk and two have such bad brain damage they've never been able to live independently.'

'Unspeakable!'

'That's exactly what Jeremy thought.' Beatrice's voice warmed up as her self-control returned. 'He was so shocked

that he went straight to the police to give himself up. He served more than twenty years in prison, which *ought* to have been enough to satisfy the most fervent admirer of retribution.'

'Didn't it?'

'He came out to face all the usual tub-thumping from the tabloids. There were plenty of cruel anonymous letters, too. And he once told his mother he never met anyone who didn't assume they knew what kind of man he was because of what he'd once done. Even then he didn't resent it; he just kept his head down and devoted himself to the homeless.'

'Thinking he could make up for all that suffering by doing good works?' Watching anger flash in the other woman's eyes, Trish was glad to see she could stand up to a hostile tone.

'*You* might not think it was enough,' Beatrice said more coldly, 'but what else could he have done? In any case, wasn't housing the homeless a lot more use than selling his story to the tabloids and becoming a low-rent celebrity on the strength of his past violence?'

'You're right, of course. But the thought of those children makes it hard to sympathise with him.'

'He'd have been the first to agree with you. He never thought he deserved kindness from anyone.'

'How did you become involved with him?' Trish asked, admiring Beatrice's determination to defend her man without making light of his crime.

'Through Jane, his mother. We live in the same village and we've been friends for years. But I never met him and she never mentioned his name until after he'd killed himself. Then she came to tell me he'd left her his diaries – they were all he had to leave – and that they'd made her understand him for the first time. She wanted help getting them published so other people would stop misjudging him too.'

Tears slid down Beatrice's cheeks again. She put up a hand to brush them away, looking impatient.

'She'd be appalled if she could see me now. She's far braver than I am. I've never seen *her* cry. But that day she looked as if she was bleeding to death. I couldn't have refused to help, even though I knew I'd have to write something myself to incorporate parts of the diaries. No one would have published them as they stood. Much too obscure. As it was I had to lean hard on my publishers to make them do anything.'

'It's very bad luck that your generosity has landed you in this mess,' Trish said, now full of sympathy. 'Who is it who's suing you?'

'Lord Tick of Southsea. Simon Tick.' Beatrice sniffed and forced a brisker tone into her voice. 'He used to be in local government until he got his peerage.'

'And what's the basis of his claim?'

'He's known to his family and close friends as Baiborn, which by a hideous coincidence also happens to be the codename used by the head of the terrorist cell Jeremy was working for when he planted the bomb.'

'I've heard of plenty of coincidences even odder than that, but how on earth does anyone called Simon come by a nickname like Baiborn? D'you know?'

'I do actually. It's quite a sweet story. When I got his Letter of Claim I was paralysed with horror, as you can imagine. Then, once I'd got a few of my wits back, I looked him up and asked around until I found someone connected with his family. She didn't want to say anything at first, but I got it out of her eventually. When he was six, or thereabouts, Simon Tick wrote a story set in the jungle. The main character was a baboon. He couldn't spell and turned it into baiborn.'

'And his family found that so funny they used it for his nickname?' Trish said, her sympathy for any mocked child distracting her. 'Pretty insensitive!'

'I don't know. If he hadn't liked it, he'd hardly allow them to

go on using it, would he? But he does, which is why I'm facing this appalling horror now.'

'I honestly don't think it's as bad as all that,' Trish said as she watched Beatrice's eyes redden again, 'even if Lord Tick doesn't let the claim drop. I'd have to check, but I think there's still a defence of unintentional defamation you could use if your barrister decides there's enough to make this claim stick.'

'What would I have to do?'

'Offer to have an apology read out in court and pay some fairly nominal sum in damages, I think. Probably not much more than a few thousand pounds.'

'Only I haven't *got* a few thousand pounds,' Beatrice said, in a voice that was all the more effective for being not much more than a whisper.

Trish stared at her expensive-looking clothes and hair.

'And because of this bloody book, for which I'm never going to earn anything,' she went on, sounding more ordinary, 'I'm six months late with the one I was contracted to write, which means I've got six months' worth of unpaid bills stacked up, and I'm up to my ears in debt as it is, and . . .' She put a hand over her mouth, coughing. 'Sorry. You don't need to hear this.'

Trish thought of the huge risks involved in letting any libel case go to court. Even if Beatrice successfully defended the claim and was awarded costs, which was the best possible outcome, she might never get anything out of Tick. She'd be left to pay her own legal fees, which could come to hundreds of thousands of pounds. If she lost . . .

'It's so unfair!' Beatrice rubbed both eyes with a handkerchief, leaving streaks of mascara all over her face. 'It's not even as though the book's been a success. None of the papers took any notice of it – they didn't even review it.'

'I'd have thought it was exactly the kind of thing that would catch an editor's eye.'

'We all thought so, but we were wrong. Unless they ignored

it because it would have shown them up as callous and lying for the stories they ran after Jeremy's suicide. But because there've been no reviews or features, hardly anyone's bought it. Booksellers are already sending copies back to the warehouse in pallet-loads. It's been a disaster all round.'

Trish had been wondering what she could possibly do to help. Here, at last, was something simple.

'I'll buy one, if you tell me the title. Or have your publishers withdrawn it?'

'Not yet. But you'll have trouble finding it in the shops. If you'd really like to read it, I'll lend you a copy. I've got one here.'

Beatrice took a slim hardback out of her bag. The glossy laminated cover showed a black-and-white photograph of a young man, not much more than a schoolboy. He was sitting on the edge of a table, looking down. He had a broad pale forehead under a shock of dark hair and big round spectacles. The impression given by the photograph was of shy, scholarly gentleness.

Trish looked up. 'You know, if you did stand up to Lord Tick and let him take the case to court, the press would have to pay attention. It might be possible to whip up such a scandal that it became a bestseller. You'd have to put up with a lot of flak, but people would definitely read it. You might even earn enough to clear your debts.'

Beatrice's nauseated expression made Trish like her even more. Her publishers weren't likely to be so squeamish. The forthcoming meeting could be a worse ordeal than she feared.

'Look, let me read it tonight,' Trish said. 'Then, I'll be a bit more clued-up if you'd like to talk again. If your publishers give you a hard time, I mean. We could discuss your options. Would that help?'

'It would be *wonderful*,' Beatrice said, winding the messy handkerchief round and round between her fingers. 'But I

couldn't afford you. Antony only saw me today as a favour. I haven't any money for legal bills.'

'So you said. But don't worry. We can put this down to friendship, too.'

Everyone in chambers did a bit of pro bono work here and there, and this wasn't really even work: just a few hours of reading and a phone call. Trish owed Antony a lot more than that. Without his support, she might still have been pigging away on the dreariest of commercial cases, earning peanuts and fighting to convince her clerk that she could hold her own in court when it mattered.

'While I'm at it,' she said, 'I'll find out who's really good at defamation, so that if the case does go ahead, I can recommend someone who knows what they're doing and won't cost you more than they should. How would that be?'

'It would be incredibly kind. I don't understand why you're taking so much trouble for me.'

'I'm intrigued by the whole story,' Trish said with the reassuring smile she used to offer her youngest clients in the days when she'd practised family law. 'And I think you've had a rotten deal.'

Beatrice smiled back. She was looking a little more like the distinguished writer and pundit she was. But there were still black streaks around her eyes.

'Shall I show you the washroom before I go and tell the great man it's safe to come back?' Trish said.

She found him drinking her latte and watching Nessa, who was getting on with her work as though she was quite alone. Good for her, Trish thought, remembering how easily the strongest could be reduced to dancing, flirting acolytes in his presence. She said his name and watched his expression change to a grin that showed he knew more or less what she was thinking.

'Have you sorted Beatrice?' he said.

'Only for the moment. If she's in this much of a state now, I don't know how she'll cope with the next few months. Whatever her publishers decide to do, the tension's going to get a lot higher. D'you think she'll hack it?'

'God knows. She's had a lot of practice at dealing with disaster: hellish family background; husband with MS; slightly hopeless son; dry rot in the roof timbers; unmarried daughter with a baby; huge debts. That sort of thing. And she's the only real earner in the whole outfit. This could be just one more thing she manages to bear, or the last straw. It all depends.'

'If she's that badly off, no one's going to expect her to pay vast damages. Why on earth is this man Tick going after her at all?'

'If I could see into the minds of people who go to law, I'd be . . .'

'Even richer than you already are?'

He laughed. 'How did you leave things with her?'

'I said I'd read the book.' Trish waved it at him. 'Then be available tomorrow if she wants to talk about whatever her publishers say in this meeting. Will that be enough to keep you . . . what was it you said? Loving me for ever?'

His brooding expression broke into another vivid smile. 'If you can get her off my back and my conscience, it will be. I'm completely swamped with work at the moment. If I'd realised how much reassurance she was going to need, I'd never have offered to see her in the first place. Weeping women have never been my thing. But I know you'll cope, Trish. You always do.'

'I wish I had a tape recorder running to replay that the next time you savage me for letting you down.'

'Would I?' Self-conscious amusement lightened his expression. He was probably remembering some of the insults he'd thrown at her in past moments of great stress. 'Oh, well, maybe I would. By the way, how were the Caymans? I've hardly seen you since you got back.'

'Great. I thought I might take David and George there next winter. The beaches are fantastic. Now that the two of them have decided that swimming is their greatest pleasure, it would—'

'What's Steve got you working on now?' said Antony quickly. He'd taken a dislike to hearing Trish talk about her partner.

'Apart from Clotwell v. Markham, which won't come to court until the autumn, nothing very much. My most immediate brief is a dreary contract case involving a garage and a car-leasing company. So far I can't see any particular problems – or excitements.'

'I'm glad to hear Bee and I aren't dragging you away from anything too thrilling.'