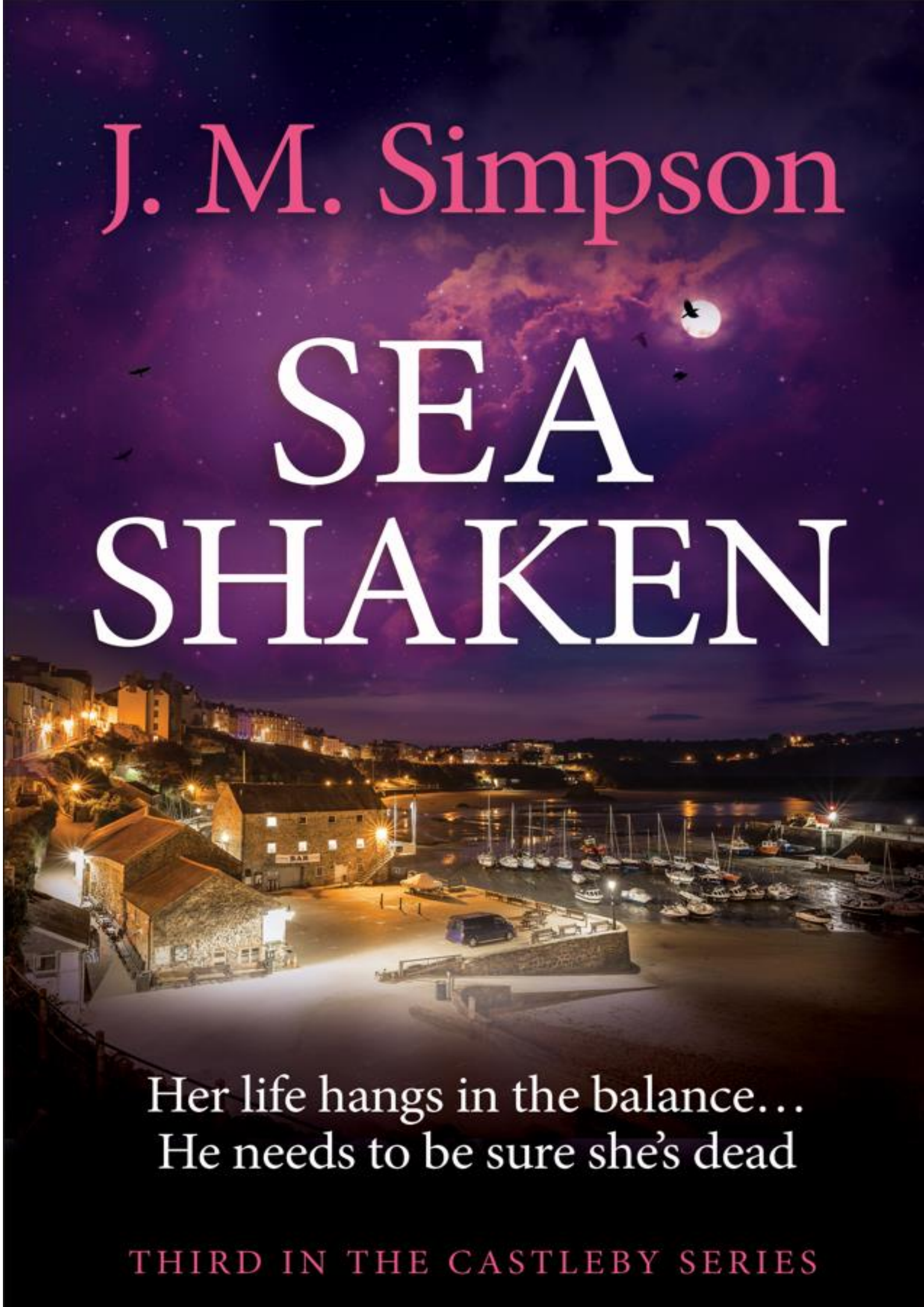




J. M. Simpson

SEA SHAKEN

Her life hangs in the balance...
He needs to be sure she's dead

THIRD IN THE CASTLEBY SERIES

SEA SHAKEN

J.M. Simpson

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Authors Note

I have taken a degree of literary licence when depicting the wonderful work and crew members of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI). I have embellished various aspects and fictionalised others to get the story right. So all mischaracterisations are fictional, and any procedural errors are entirely mine.

I have also taken a degree of literary licence regarding the practices of the military with respect to hospitalisation and recovery, following serious trauma and injury, for a serving soldier. For the purposes of the story I have embellished various aspects and fictionalised others to fit the storyline, so all mischaracterisations are fictional, and any procedural errors are entirely mine.

Protecting and healing the mental health of our serving soldiers and veterans is of paramount importance and there are now many organisations that exist solely for this purpose. These organisations do incredible work and are often a much-needed lifeline for those in need, providing guidance, support and a listening ear. Signposting those in need of these services could save a life and let them know they are not alone. Just a few of these amazing organisation are: Veterans Gateway; SSAFA; PTSD Resolution; The Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Service; Help for Heroes and Rock to Recovery.

Also by J.M. Simpson

The Castleby Series

Sea State

Sea Change

For my sister Sal. 'Love your work'

When a good man is hurt, all who would be called good must suffer with him.

Euripides

PROLOGUE

He lay, barely conscious, on the hard earth-packed floor. The heat in the dark room was oppressive; hot, heavy, stifling. Vaguely, he heard flies buzzing. He felt them dance lightly on his skin and face, feasting on his open wounds. He felt small rodents nip at his fingers. He had no strength to brush them away. They could have their fill.

Death beckoned seductively; she had been teasing him gently for days, drifting around his semi-conscious state, plucking at his senses. He would give in to her soon; he was resigned to it.

He had gone to a dark place in his mind. To escape. To be free of it. Nothing could get to him there. It had been the only way to cope. To get through the pain, the agonising, relentless, brutal torture.

Three of the eight had died; unable to cope with the extreme abuse to body and mind. He knew he would be next. His body was shutting down; unable to sustain. His mind – shutting down; unable to process the extreme horror.

He thought she had come, wearing the thick cloak of disguise. Tricking him. The welcome seductive arms of death playing one last trick. Through the slits of his swollen eyes, he saw bright flashes. Heard gunfire, voices shouting, familiar accents from home. He tried to speak, but no voice came from his dry throat and cracked lips.

He felt himself being lifted, carried into bright sunlight over rocky terrain. The pain of the brightness and movement was indescribable. He felt broken bones grinding; extreme agony as he was hefted about. He tried to call out for them to leave him alone; leave him in the dark. He felt safe there. He heard the whumping sounds of a helicopter, felt the intense hot wind on his face.

Death hovered closer, her tendrils beckoning. She wanted him and planned to have him. Cleverly, she showed him the things he wanted to see. The bright comforting light; his family. She showed him the beguiling

respite from the intense pain and the horror. He reached out a shaking hand to touch his wife's beautiful face and ruffle his son's hair. He dragged himself up and walked towards them.

Death drifted gently towards him, the consummate seductress. She showed him his family, stood with open arms, beckoning to him gently, smiling lovingly.

'Come on,' she whispered, reaching out her hand and gesturing to his family.

With a deep sigh of relief, he let go and stepped into their arms.

CHAPTER 1

Dr Kate Cooper wiped a shaking hand across her wet eyes and threw the last suitcase into the boot of her old Volvo XC60. She surveyed the contents of the boot and fresh tears came. So this was what five years of marriage amounted to when it was over. A boot full of half possessions that no one really wanted but felt obliged to take.

‘I’ll make sure your half of the house money gets transferred when it’s complete,’ Matt said, leaning casually against the front door jamb. It was the same position he’d been in for the last half an hour as he watched her carry heavy boxes and suitcases to her car.

‘Solicitor will do that,’ she said shortly.

He shrugged. ‘Whatever. That it?’

She closed the boot. ‘Uh huh.’

He walked towards her and stood close. She tensed, not knowing what to expect. He held out his hand.

‘Key, please,’ he said quietly.

Her eyes opened wide. ‘Seriously?’

He wagged his fingers. ‘Yup.’

She snapped the key off her fob and threw it at him as she marched towards the driver’s side of the car and wrenched the door open.

‘See you then,’ he said pleasantly. ‘Enjoy your new life in the arse end of nowhere.’

She slammed the door and started the car.

‘Fucking prick,’ she muttered, feeling better instantly. ‘Stupid. Mean. Fucking. Selfish. Prick.’

She drove out of the road where they had lived for the past five years and refused to look back. That was it. Over. Five years ended in a single night, in a conversation that had lasted half an hour. She replayed it in her head, still shocked.

‘Matt, look we need to talk. Dad’s called again, he’s really struggling since Jack left and just can’t find a permanent GP. He needs me and I think it’s time. I want to go and run the practice with him. You know it was always our plan.’

‘Yes, but it’s not *my* plan, is it? I’ve told you before, I don’t *want* to do it.’

‘This is why we need to have a proper discussion about it. I need to understand why.’

‘Kate. How many times? I am not moving to some dead-end town by the sea so you can become queen GP and be treated like royalty by everyone.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Last time we went down – it’s like your dad is the local fucking messiah or something. Oh hello, Dr Lawrence, let me find you a table, Dr Lawrence, anything for you, Dr Lawrence. Oh isn’t Dr Lawrence amazing, you must be so proud.’

‘It wasn’t like that.’

‘It was! I’m not going to do it. I don’t want to do it. People will treat me like I’m some fucking groupie to the great Dr Kate Cooper.’

‘Matt, you can work anywhere. Does it really matter?’

‘Of course it matters. I don’t want to leave here. I like it here.’

‘What about what I want? Perhaps a fresh start might be good for us.’

She remembered him sneering and topping up his wine glass for the fifth time that evening.

‘Do we want a fresh start? Really? Let’s be brutal, Kate. You still haven’t got over losing the baby, and it’s been what? Nearly nine months? I mean Jesus... get over it. You’re simply not the same person now and I’m not sure I want to be with you anymore.’

She remembered the crashing sense of disbelief that he could be so dismissive of something so huge and utterly devastating.

‘The baby... *our* baby had a name, you know. Or did you choose to forget?’

‘I didn’t forget. How could I forget with you weeping everywhere and not being able to get out of bed for an eternity? I mean Jesus. Move on. Get over it. I moved on. No one bothered about how I felt or how it had affected me. No one even asked me.’

‘How can you be so...’

‘So what? So practical? Yes. You lost the baby at, what was it, thirty-two weeks? Yes, it was awful. But do you know what? Better that happened than have to deal with one that wasn’t perfect, and he wasn’t, was he? That’s what the post-mortem said. He was far from perfect. So nature did us a favour. It all worked out.’

‘But Daniel was *our* son.’

She remembered sobbing, unable to understand how he could be so callous.

‘I think it’s all for the best anyway. He would have been even more of a burden than we thought. I wouldn’t have wanted that.’

‘How can you say that? You wanted a child...’

‘I wanted a *perfect* child, Kate, which you clearly are unable to give me.’

‘What? Are you saying Daniel was my fault?’

She remembered him shrugging and slurping his wine.

‘If the cap fits,’ he had said.

Kate remembered looking at this man who was her husband. She remembered seeing him clearly for the selfish, cruel, lazy man he was.

‘I’m going then. Without you.’ She had decided almost instantly. Anything to be away from him.

He had shrugged. ‘Whatever.’

‘We’ll put the house on the market.’

‘No need. I’ll buy you out.’

‘Is it that simple to you?’

‘Yes. And just so you know, Anna will probably move in pretty soon.’

Kate recalled a moment of wondering whether she was in a parallel universe.

‘My friend Anna? You’re telling me you’re having an affair with her?’

‘For ages now,’ he had said irritably. ‘You’re close to useless on the sex front since Daniel died and I have needs, you know. Anna’s always liked me.’

Kate remembered looking at him incredulously and realising that she had no idea who this man was. She remembered anger taking over.

‘Well, Anna’s welcome to you then. Perhaps *she’ll* provide you with a perfect child,’ she had shouted and stomped upstairs to start packing.

‘Here’s hoping!’ he had called after her.

Kate had lived in the spare room for three months, working out her notice, packing her things and largely ignoring Matt. Her plans were to stay with her parents in Castleby until she found a house to rent or buy, but the prospect of being under the same roof with her nitpicking mother had almost made her change her mind. Kate assured herself, however, it wouldn’t be for long and she could work long hours to avoid her.

They had a difficult, fractious relationship and the crux of it was that for some reason, Kate felt she had been a constant disappointment to her mother. She did, however, have a wonderful relationship with her father. When she thought about it, that was probably the root of many of the issues with her mother.

She tightened her fingers on the steering wheel. This was it. A new start. She felt a moment of pure freedom, turned up the radio, and floored the accelerator.

Six hours later, Kate pulled into the driveway of her parents’ house in Castleby. It was a large red-brick Edwardian detached house, built deep into the slope of the hillside and had far reaching views over the golf

course and Long Beach. She loved the house – always had. As a small child she had chosen her bedroom carefully so that she could sit on the broad window seat and watch the weather roll across the bay.

The ornate front door swung open spilling light onto the driveway. Her father's black Labrador, Otis, ran out barking and wagging his tail.

'Darling, you made it,' her father said with delight as he approached her with open arms.

'Hey, Dad,' Kate said, hugging him tightly. 'Good to see you.'

'Darling, I can't believe you're back for good to work in the practice. It's a dream come true.' He pushed her away from him so he could look at her face. 'You look tired, love. I'm sorry things went pear-shaped with Matt.'

'Let's just say I finally saw the light,' Kate said grimly. 'Hello, Mother.'

Kate's mother emerged from the house and proffered a powdered cheek for Kate to kiss. Hugging her was like hugging an ironing board, and Kate had learnt at a very early age, physical affection was not in her mother's repertoire.

'Hello, Kate dear. Oh it is so sad about lovely Matt. I did so utterly adore him, you know. Didn't you, Graham? Perhaps he'll still visit anyway.' She waved a hand vaguely. 'You know, when you aren't around, dear.'

'Hopefully not,' Kate said cheerfully, opening the boot and dragging out a bag. Her father offered to help but she waved him away. 'I'll get the rest tomorrow.'

She linked arms with her father as they walked into the house.

'Supper's nearly ready,' her mother said, drifting in the house towards the kitchen.

'Of course, I told your father, when Jack left the practice that he needed to get some help, but he would insist on using these dreadful locums all the time.' Kate's mother was in full swing at the dinner table, giving her opinion on everything with the assistance of a chilled Chardonnay.

'Did you? I don't recall that, Vanessa.' Kate's father winked cheerfully at her.

'How is Jack these days?' asked Kate innocently.

Graham sighed. 'Bless him. He's not good at all. Some days it's like there's nothing wrong at all, but other days the dementia presents as quite severe—'

'You know Sophie has come back to help out?' interrupted Vanessa. She pursed her lips. 'Not before time either in my opinion. The poor man was found in town in his pyjamas on more than one occasion.'

'Yes. She told me. It's been really difficult for her.' Kate and Sophie had been firm friends since school.

'Umm. Well not before time,' Kate's mother said waspishly, downing a glass of wine almost in one. 'Though quite how she can care for her father with that unruly boy and a missing husband I don't know.'

'I know Sam's still missing. That's what she said last time I spoke to her.' Kate looked at her father.

‘It’s been two years now, I think,’ he said sadly. ‘No sign of him at all. The MOD have told her he’s presumed dead, but she won’t have it.’

‘It’s so awful for her. I’ll see her as soon as I can.’

‘Of course he’s dead. There’s no way he could still be alive after all this time,’ Vanessa piped up, topping up her glass and ignoring everyone else’s.

‘You don’t know that, Vanny,’ chided Graham, pushing himself up from the table.

‘Of course I do,’ Vanessa retorted irritably.

He ignored Vanessa and disappeared for a moment.

‘I have a gift for you, my love.’

When he returned, he held a square wrapped in red tissue paper with a large bow. Vanessa clapped her hands and then her face fell when she realised the present wasn’t for her.

‘What’s this about?’ Kate said, taking the gift and looking lovingly at her dad.

‘Just a little something,’ he said, grinning.

‘I never get any gifts,’ Vanessa sniped.

Kate unwrapped it carefully. It was a new brass plaque that read *Dr Kate Cooper* and listed her qualifications.

‘Dad,’ she said, touched. ‘Thanks so much.’

‘I’m putting it up tomorrow,’ he said, smiling and squeezing her hand. ‘I’m so very happy to have you back. A practice with my daughter. I couldn’t be any prouder. We should have a toast!’

‘But I’ve run out of wine, Graham,’ complained Vanessa plaintively, ruining the moment. ‘Be a dear and fetch another bottle?’

Later Kate stood at her open bedroom window and felt the sea breeze on her face. She reflected on the evening, smiling at her father’s delight in her return and finding a level of amusement in her mother’s intermittent waspishness throughout the evening when the spotlight wasn’t on her. She would start looking for somewhere to rent or buy tomorrow. She genuinely couldn’t do any serious time in the house with her mother. They’d end up killing each other.