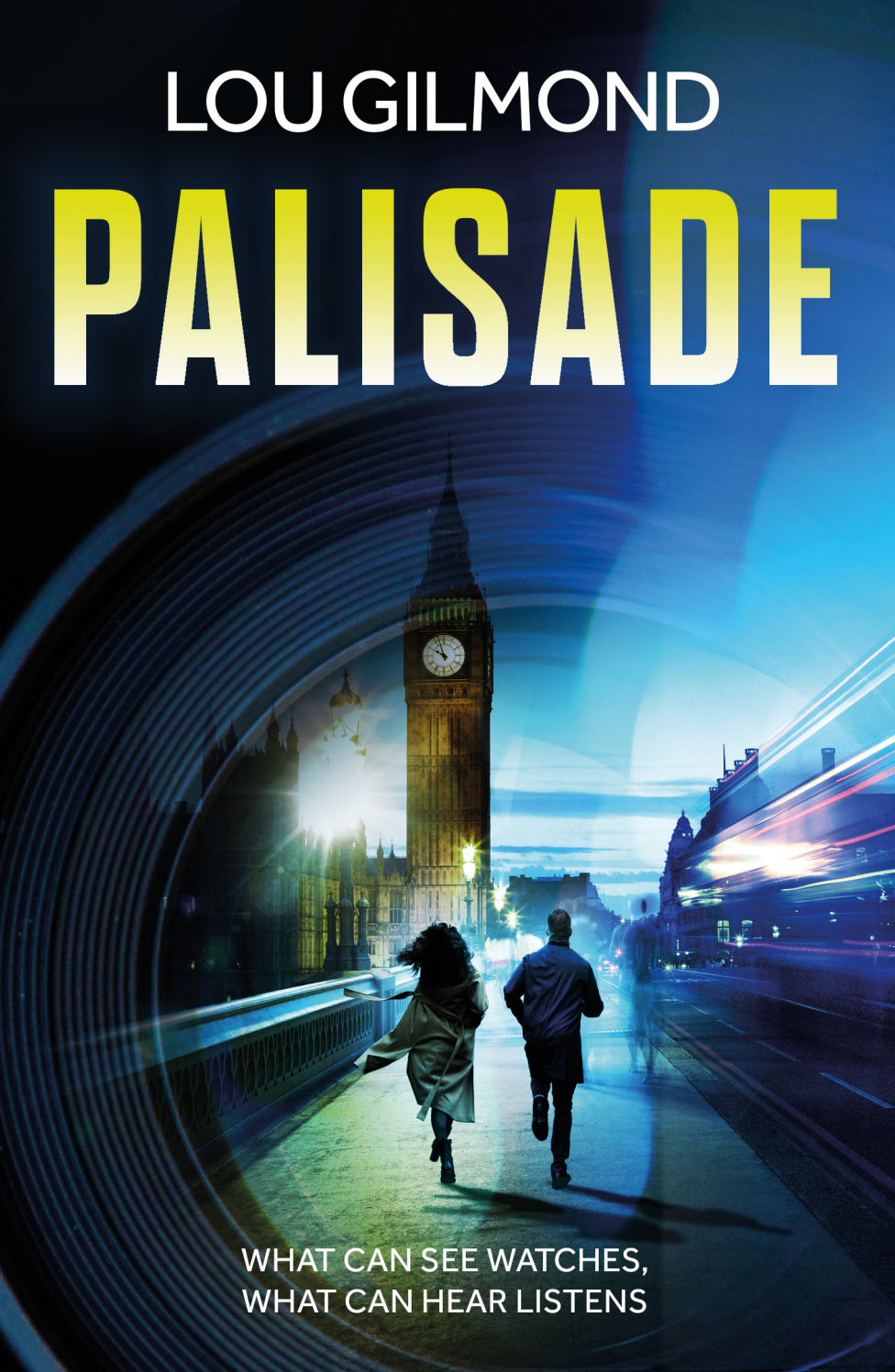


LOU GILMOND

PALISADE



WHAT CAN SEE WATCHES,
WHAT CAN HEAR LISTENS

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LOU GILMOND



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For my family

Monday 6 November

On the chalk downs west of Buckinghamshire, where farmers carve out a living between woodlands of ash, beech and yew, gamekeeper Tomo raised a gun to his shoulder and fired a single shot. His target, a drone fifty yards off, plummeted to the ground.

‘Got ya,’ he muttered. With the evening drawing in, he couldn’t see where it had fallen. Just outside the farm’s boundary, he thought, or near the lane beyond.

Skye and Millie, his two spaniels, parked their bums at his feet and waited for the command. ‘Go on, then,’ he said and off they set, noses to the ground and arses in the air. The sight of it made him laugh, and he forgot the anger he’d felt when the whine of the thing had seeped into the gatehouse and ruined his supper.

‘Reckon you’ll struggle to sniff out that bird,’ he said with a chuckle, but he headed off after them nonetheless, down to where they were nosing through the long grass. Finding no scent, the dogs widened their search in ever-increasing circles, and as Tomo approached, Millie dropped into the gully that ran between the lane and the far copse, and took up a furious barking. He frowned. That was not a call for a bird. Something had spooked her.

‘What is it, old girl?’ he said, walking over.

There was a line of flattened grass and burnt rubber running from the road straight across the verge, where it disappeared into the gully. He sniffed the air. There was a telltale mix of rubber and

burnt clutch, as if someone had been stamping on the brake of a car and its accelerator at the same time.

Tomo stepped towards the edge, then stiffened. At the bottom of the gully was a car, its front end embedded in the roots of a tree. Water from the brook sluiced through the arches of its front wheels and the driver door hung open. Now he knew what the dull thump had been that he'd heard just before the whine of the drone had sent him off to the gun cabinet in a fit of rage.

'Shit,' he muttered. There was someone in the driver seat. Tomo clambered down and waded into the water, but, as soon as he got close, he saw there was no hope – the steering wheel was embedded in the man's chest, his face partially staved in.

'Go on, out of the way,' he said to Millie, who had taken the dead man's sleeve in her mouth and was tugging at it. Skye, meanwhile, stayed on the bank, running back and forth, all the time whining anxiously. He bent down and noticed that the switch to open the airbag was on, yet it had not activated. Crap luck, he thought.

With the water sloshing about in his boots, Tomo clambered back up the bank with a shake of his head. Fancy car, fancy clothes. Probably some rich feekin' arse on his way home with drink on board.

For a moment, Tomo thought that as well as the burnt rubber he could smell the sweet, cloying odour of fear – but that must just be the dark rum he had slipped into his coffee. He was about to pull his phone out of his pocket to dial the emergency services when he caught sight of flashing red and blue lights in the distance. He put his hand over his eyes and squinted. The lights were too close and too high up to be a car. What the hell was it?

Then, once again, he heard the unmistakable whine of a drone. It was one of those new police models, approaching in what was now night, the last rays of the sun having moved on elsewhere. Typical, Tomo thought, that the car could dial for

emergency assistance but not even open an airbag. That's what you got these days.

He remembered the drone he had shot down. Shit. Had it also belonged to the police? Where the hell had that thing fallen? Surely it had been trespassing, invading his privacy, spying on him? Surely it was OK to have shot it down, in that case? Tomo muttered a curse. They wouldn't give a shit about any of that. He'd be in trouble again for using his gun when he shouldn't have. If they took his licence away he wouldn't be able to work. Fuck, he thought – but there wasn't time.

'Millie, Skye, to heel,' he said, and hurried away. With a bit of luck the drone would not be found until he could come and search for the damn thing tomorrow at first light.

PART ONE

Tuesday 7 November

I . I

Harry Colbey was wedged into a corner seat of the 6.43am service from Worcester to Paddington, with his hat pulled low. He was trying to recapture the delicious slumber that had enveloped him since boarding the train at Charlbury but which had been lost somewhere around Slough. Outside, a soft autumn sun rose over the horizon and flashed its gibberish SOS onto the fabric of the worn blue seats.

The carriage was empty. Just one other passenger sat a few seats away, tapping furiously on a laptop and throwing the snoring MP an occasional glare of disapproval. When the train reached Paddington, the lone commuter gathered her belongings together, shrugged on her coat and came over to give the MP a nudge.

‘What is it?’ Colbey said in a panic, but, seeing the station signs ticking to a halt outside, he murmured a thank you.

‘Big day for you lot,’ the woman said, and Colbey admitted it was true. Today was the state opening of parliament. The King would arrive and read out a speech to the House of Lords outlining the new government’s plans for the year. Colbey had not seen the speech yet. Theoretically because his party was in opposition, but primarily because he was a bit of a nobody.

He folded his paper and put it into his briefcase, taking care to put its edges neatly together and press it flat. As he did so, the woman lingered, and he knew what she was going to say.

‘I voted for you, you know.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Only—’

‘Be assured,’ said Colbey, hoping to cut her short, ‘I will represent your interests with all my best endeavours, despite rumours to the contrary.’

The woman nodded.

‘Right,’ she said, and then added, ‘But it was you, wasn’t it? It was you with those... girls in that hotel?’

Colbey thought about correcting her, but sighed instead.

‘I beg you to remember that I am only human.’

The woman made a small harrumphing nose. ‘You’re all the same, you lot.’

And with that, she turned and hurried off down the aisle. By the time Colbey stepped down onto the platform, she was away at the far end, disappearing into the main concourse. Usually a fellow traveller would have been swallowed up by the crowds, but the station, like the train, was unusually quiet that morning.

Without its commuter bustle it had an eerie atmosphere. The banging of a barista’s spoon was echoing through Brunel’s lofty steelwork and the lone beep of a wagon could be heard ferrying cleaners from one train to the next. Here in London the weather was not as pleasant as it had been when he had started his journey. A steady drumming of rain fell onto the York-stone slabs outside the open archway of Praed Street, and Colbey looked at it with raised eyebrows. He needed to cycle on to the Houses of Parliament, but the rain would not dampen his spirits today, so excited was he about the new parliamentary term starting.

It was his habit to keep his bike in the racks between platforms ten and eleven. As he hurried over, he resisted an impulse to look up at the array of listening cameras that hung on impossibly long struts from the vaulted ceiling. These days they could identify

someone from so little as a glimpse of their face, perhaps even from the way they walked. He suspected that somewhere his gait had been recorded and allotted to his unique ID along with everything else about him known by the station's security system: his face, his retina, his name, the pitch of his voice, his date of birth, his address, his phone number, the names of his children, wife, lover... No, not his lover, he hoped. And his wife, Clarissa, was his ex-wife now, he reminded himself.

At the edge of the bicycle racks, a woman was mopping a puddle of water that had seeped out from the bottom of a cleaning robot.

'Quiet today,' Colbey said, as he struggled to locate his bike with so many still in the racks.

'That train derailment in Nottingham.' She opened a flap in the cleaning machine and poured the bucket of water back into it. 'Got people scared. What with all the rumours.'

'Rumours?' said Colbey.

'That it was terrorists what done it.'

Colbey located his bike and pushed its neighbours aside. 'There's not a shred of proof for that theory, you know,' he said, but the woman just shrugged and switched the robot back on. It slid slowly off and got trapped in a corner between two pillars. After watching it with some disinterest, she stood up, pulled her shoulders back stiffly and said, 'Don't want to take the risk though, do they? Not unless they have to, like us, eh?'

'Indeed,' Colbey said, not really sure what else to say. He didn't want to prolong the conversation, because there was something he had to do that needed a little privacy.

Finally, she ambled off with a 'Right, then,' and a little trout-face of farewell.

As soon as she was out of sight, Colbey shielded his hands with his body and felt inside the rainproof covering of his bike chain. There was something hard and small wedged inside it. He pulled

it loose and, without looking down, slipped it into his trouser pocket. From its size, he guessed it was a memory stick.

Trying to look nonchalant, he locked and fixed his bicycle's chain back onto the empty rail. This was always a problem for him. How did one look nonchalant? Surely the act of trying to look nonchalant tensed all the muscles in the body and sent off those little signs that the cameras were well versed in spotting: the nonchalant shoplifter, the nonchalant terrorist, the nonchalant rebel MP who has been given God knows what by God knows who.

Minutes later, Colbey was cycling – nonchalantly, of course – into what he was relieved to find had eased into a light drizzle, his briefcase juddering in the basket in front of him. Bloody rain, he thought, as it dripped from the rim of his hat and onto his fingers.

Colbey preferred to cycle through the parks to get away from the delivery drones that now plied their incessant trade a foot or two above the cars and buses. Since the success of their trial last spring, the drones had multiplied to such numbers they had become a problem in themselves.

He understood why people were keen on them. Before their arrival, the streets of London had ground to a halt, clogged up with the daily battle between delivery drivers, black cabbies and Ubers. Now the streets were clearer and the air cleaner. Even Colbey had to admit that, as he cycled behind Buckingham Palace, trying to avoid the routes that were closed for the King's passage. But those benefits had come at a price. The city now vibrated with their hum. It got into one's bones. It put people on edge. Even in buildings, workers would turn to one another and ask whether the noise was still there. They would close windows, search for gaps under doors, but still the hum would find its way in. Only in the parks, where the things were banned, was there some limited peace.

As Colbey turned onto Birdcage Walk, he saw that the police had shut the street to cars but were allowing pedestrians and cyclists through.

An armed officer stepped forward and held out a hand to him.
'Stop, sir.'

Colbey looked behind him, wondering if the King and his entourage were about to pass. Possibly the King was sitting in his car at that very moment, speech in hand, running through it one last time as he made his own slightly more glamorous journey to Westminster.

'Stop!'

Colbey realised he had only half paid attention to the officer, and as he pulled onto the pavement beside St James's Park he turned with surprise to see that a number of the officers were bearing down on him. There was something in their steady pace, their faces half covered by visors pulled down from their helmets, that struck a sudden fear into him.

They looked like a pride of lions circling their intended target and moving in for the kill. And Colbey suddenly realised he was nothing more than dead meat walking. He thought of the memory stick in his pocket.

A wild impulse seized him: to drag his bike across the pavement and flee into the park. He thought of the safety of his office in parliament. For some reason, he pictured his desk, his swivel chair, the odd assortment of personal items he kept there, the stack of papers he had meant to tidy, but had not had time to the previous evening.

Then they were upon him, the black nozzle of a gun against his cheek, his bike falling to the ground and his briefcase tumbling out of the basket as he raised his hands into the air, complying with their barked commands.

He could only think that he would miss the King's Speech. Not that he was worried about seeing the King, but he loved the state

opening of parliament. The pomp, the ceremony, the importance of it, the fact that it meant democracy was strong. He loved the traditions – a door slammed in the face of the King’s representative, symbolising that it was the members of the House of Commons who determined the rule of the land – not those who owned the land but those who had been elected by its people. Colbey had not missed a state opening of parliament for fifteen years.

From where he lay spreadeagled, he could see his briefcase a few feet away. The hard block of the memory stick was poking into his hip, and he wondered what might be on it.